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Symposium: Vincent Descombes, *The Mind's Provisions**

From a Critique of Cognitive Internalism to a Conception of Objective Spirit: Reflections on Descombes' Anthropological Holism

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I. Beliefs as Inner States

Despite two hundred years of counter-Cartesian agitation, we are still gripped by a picture of cognition as the traversing of a boundary that separates our thought from what it is about. On the one hand, beliefs are all there within the mind. They are what they are, and can be known to be what they are, independently of how things actually are in the world outside that mind. They are in this sense essentially *inner* states. On the other hand, they are also essentially *cognitive* states. They are about, or at least purport to be about, the world without the mind – a world that is what it is independently of how it is thought to be. As Descartes has taught us to say, they are representations; the divide between thought and thing is that between a kind of representing and what it represents. The puzzle built into this image is to understand how what is wholly within the mind can so much as purport to represent, refer to, or be about what is wholly without it.

One can move beyond the details of Descartes' problematic in many ways without making this question less urgent. For instance, the problem is not obviated by moving beyond the concern with certainty, regarding either the subject's supposedly incorrigible, privileged access to the contents of thought or the grip those contents have on what they are about. As long as thoughts are still conceived as states that are at once inner and representational, and so as mediating between subject and object by somehow incorporating at least the mind's aspiration to cognitive access to the world, Cartesianism has not been

*Vincent Descombes, *The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism*, trans. Stephen Adam Schwartz (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), originally published *La Denrée Mentale* (Paris: Minuit, 1995).

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overcome. Nor, as we will see, is the difficulty evaded just by distinguishing between the wide representational content appealed to by assessments of representational success and the narrow representational content appealed to by attributions of mere representational purport. Nor again does it suffice to eschew the project of answering the radical sceptic by treating the possibility of wholesale representational failure as chimeric. For in each case the challenge remains of construing the representational purport of representings construed narrowly – the way in which, though all present in the mind (even if this is not taken to entail their complete transparence to us and so our complete omniscience about them) – they nonetheless point beyond themselves to something outside the mind that they answer to for their adequacy or correctness. The last vestige of Cartesianism is the idea that essentially cognitive states such as beliefs can also be essentially inner states – in the sense that while their *success* as representations depends on how it is with things that are not such states, their status as representings, as at least *purporting* to present ways external things could be, is independent of everything apart from features that are in a strong sense intrinsic to the states themselves.

Contemporary cognitive science in its most philosophically reflective forms thinks of itself as fully alive to twentieth century criticisms of Cartesianism. Inner representational states are to be conceived and investigated in a fully scientific manner, which stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from privileged access by introspection. The one who has inner states is understood to be in principle in no better a position to understand their content than anyone else. And the pre-Kantian setting of a philosophical agenda by the felt threat of *epistemological skepticism* has been succeeded by a post-Kantian setting of a philosophical agenda by the felt need for *semantic explanation*. Descartes took for granted the representational *purport* of penséesthat they at least seem to present or be about external objectsand focused his theoretical worries on the conditions under which such purport could be known to *succeed*. For he divided the world ontologically into those things that were by nature representings, and those that could by their nature only be represented. His epistemic identification of the former in terms of incorrigibility and transparency (immunity to error and ignorance, respectively) and his geometric identification of the latter in terms of extension and motion (metric locatability in space and time, respectively) were conceptually subsequent specifications of that original division. And contemporary philosophers of mind working in the tradition of cognitive science accept the fundamental Kantian insight (whether or not they identify it in these terms) that an a priori, more fundamental issue concerns what it is to have representational content at all.[1]

It is consequently a bold claim that such theories, which most pride themselves on offering a hard scientific philosophy of mind, have nonetheless

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FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 2**

so failed to disentangle their insights from residual Cartesian presuppositions, and further that those presuppositions affect the structure of those theories so deeply as irremediably to cripple them. That is the thesis that is patiently and imaginatively developed, and cogently and persuasively argued in Vincent Descombes' powerful, original, and important book *La denrée mentale*, recently translated as *The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism*. Some of the arguments he advances are recognizable as close relatives of ones that have been raised in the Anglophone philosophical literature. Others are not, arising as they do out of close and penetrating analyses of the work of important social scientists and French structuralists, who are little read and less understood by analytic philosophers of mind. His is an original voice, and the cumulative effect of the way considerations familiar from other contexts and quite novel insights are woven together in the service of a radical critique of contemporary philosophical practice is convincing and altogether impressive. One hopes that the discipline will never be the same. Rather than rehearse the trajectory of his careful researches, in this essay I will traverse a closely related terrain in an attempt to supplement his analysis with some further considerations that seem to me to point in the same direction as his.

Mindedness can be thought of as coming in two flavors: sentience and sapience. Sentience is a matter of being aware in the sense of being awake that we share at least with our vertebrate cousins. Feelings of pain and sensations of red are paradigmatic sentient episodes. Sapient states such as beliefs and intentions, and sapient episodes such as thinkings, by contrast, have propositional contents that are expressed in English by the use of 'that' clauses with declarative sentences as complements. They are responses to or registrations of environing situations that involve some sort of conceptual understanding. Descartes' invention of the modern conception of the mind depends in no small part on running together these disparate phenomena under the heading of '*pensée*' in a way that was and remained unintelligible to the neo-Aristotelean scholastic tradition he inherited. We are still attempting to see our way clear through the dust raised by this brilliant conflation, occasioned by his epistemological foundational fixation on what he took to be their common exhibition of the phenomenon of privileged access by the subject.

Descombes' principal focus is on mindedness in the sense of sapience, rather than sentience. For that is where the issue of whether and in what sense one might understand states as at once *inner* and *cognitive* arises. Sentience is no doubt important for our ability to stand in cognitive relations to the world around us, but believing and intending are what those cognitive relations consist in. One way to think about the large issues being raised is then to ask in what sense we ought to think of the intentional states that articulate our sapience as being *inner*. Some beliefs, desires, and the like can of course be

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said to be *mine* but so can my car, my friends, and the trajectory my body traces through space, none of which is in any interesting sense *in* me. One of Descartes' innovations, of course, was the *epistemic* sense he gave to 'inner', according to which what is in this distinctive sense 'in' me is what I have privileged access to in the sense of what is transparent to me (I cannot be in that state, that episode cannot occur, without my knowing that it does) and incorrigible about it (if I think I am in that state, or that that episode is occurring, then I am or it is). But Descombes reminds us of the many ways in which commitment to the items that articulate our sapience being 'inner' in ultimately objectionable (because unintelligible) ways can and does survive the rejection of this specifically epistemic model of the inner. So, for instance, the constellation of commitments that parades under the banner 'methodological individualism' – incorporating, as Descombes demonstrates, substantive theoretical commitments that go far beyond the merely methodological – requires that explanations of our sapience appeal only to states characterized in terms of properties *intrinsic* to the individual. Those are properties whose possession by an individual is independent of everything outside the boundaries of the current state of that individual, in the sense that arbitrarily varying the environment or history of the individual leaves the properties in question unaffected. The idea that in attributing to an individual states or properties that are intrinsic in this sense one can be attributing *cognitive* states – paradigmatically beliefs or thoughts about how things are, applications of *concepts* – is still a vestigially Cartesian idea that is, we are to see, deeply and radically mistaken. Thus we find Descombes saying:

> To announce that the representation of a she-goat is an idea is to maintain that the fact of being able to represent a she-goat must presuppose nothing about the world in which the subject who has this power lives. The question is whether human subjects have ideas in this sense.[2]

He goes on to suggest rather: 'Do they not instead have *concepts*?' – a Kantian suggestion to which I shall return below.

Like Sellars' *The Myth of the Given*, the sort of conceptual mistake that Descombes is concerned to diagnose is protean, showing up in many different forms whose similarities are not always apparent on the surface. Another way in, approaching it at an angle slightly different from that of methodological individualism, is to ask whether cognitive or intentional states have *vehicles*, and if so, of what kind. This issue concerns the applicability to intentional states of the model of a *symbol* such as a numeral or a written or spoken sentence. A symbol is a meaningful *sign* – or to use Sellars' useful phrase, sign-*design*. The idea of a sign-design is of a physically specifiable mark or noise, something that could be a meaningless squiggle or *flatus voci*, but whose use also might express a meaning or signify some object. *Phonology* (in the broadest sense), which was such an important model for many

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FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 4**

structuralists, studies sign-designs as such. To ask about vehicles of thought or belief is to ask whether anything stands to thoughts or beliefs as the noises or marks I produce when I make an assertion stand to what I have thereby claimed, or as an inscribed numeral stands to the number it picks out, and if so, what.

It has seemed obvious to some[3] that there *must* be some such vehicles in this sense, some 'language of thought', so that the only real question in the vicinity is whether it should be thought of as being a *public* language, such as English or French, or rather some sort of physiological 'brain writing'. It is salutary to be reminded at the outset that there are intelligible alternatives to this picture. Beliefs, desires, and intentions are states of whole persons, and not all such states consist in the presence in the body or the brain of that person of a distinguishable sort of item. For instance, being obliged to pay the bank a certain sum of money every month for twenty years because one has taken out a mortgage, being a citizen of the United States, and being of legal age, are all states of a person that consist in standing in certain social relations to other people and institutions, rather than in the presence in their bodies of anything corresponding to marks or noises expressing those obligations and statuses. Modeling beliefs on *commitments* is at least one alternative to thinking of them as consisting in the presence of some sort of inscription in a physiologically specifiable 'belief box' in the brain.[4] In a number of influential publications, Lynne Rudder Baker has argued forcefully that the only 'vehicles' associated with intentional states are the persons whose states they are.[5]

Another alternative is the measurement model Donald Davidson has employed as part of the development of his interpretivism. According to Davidson's theory, what it is to believe that *p* is just for that belief to be part of the overall best interpretation of one's behavior, verbal and nonverbal. An interpretation attributes to the target beliefs and desires labeled with the interpreter's sentences, and maps the noises the target utters onto the interpreter's sentences in such a way that the intentional states attributed give the target good reasons to act and speak as she does, given the environment in which she finds herself. Davidson likens the use of the interpreter's sentences to identify and individuate states and utterances of the interpretational target to our use of numbers to measure the weights of objects. Just as saying that the weight of an object is 10 makes sense only in the context of a whole system of practices and assignments of numbers to a variety of objects – say that corresponding to using a standard kilogram as a unit – so saying that someone believes that Paris is beautiful in the springtime makes sense only in the context of a whole interpretation assigning sentences to marks, noises, and states. And just as relative to another system of weight measurement – say that corresponding to using a standard pound as unit – the very same object may be assigned the number 22, so another interpreter might assign 'Paris est joli au printemps'.

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FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 5**

We need not go into the details of this measurement-by-sentences model in order to extract a lesson. Being in the state of having a weight of 10 (kilos) or 22 (pounds) is *not* the occurrence in the object of a *sign* (-design) that is a *numeral* for 10 or 22 – perhaps inscribed in some sort of 'weight-writing', or in the 'weight-box' of the object. To merit that label is just to stand in certain relations to other objects, including the standard kilogram or pound. And similarly, on Davidson's account, to believe that Paris is beautiful in the springtime need have nothing to do with the occurrence of a sign for that content in the interpretational target (though of course being in that state may *cause* one to produce such signs – but that is another issue). It is rather a matter of the relations the target's behavior and dispositions stand in to the interpreter's. The signs expressing the measurement that correspond to the state measured are not in any sense part of that state. They are rather part of the measurement process. Of course, it is deservedly controversial whether measurement-by-sentences is a good model of propositional attitude ascription. But its possibility shows that the language-of-thought picture of intentional states as consisting in the physiological 'inscription' of signs of a language of thought is at least not *obligatory*. There are a number of different ways we could conceive the relation between linguistic signs, the conceptual contents they express, and thoughts and beliefs having those conceptual contents.

Another way to raise the issue of vehicles of thought is to ask whether intentional states need have *any* specifications under which they are not intentional. This is to ask whether there are any specifications of these states that do not pick them out in terms of their content, or at least, *as* contentful. If not, then thoughts and beliefs, unlike, say, assertions, are 'vehicleless'. For if anything stood to them as uttered or inscribed sentential sign designs stand to spoken and written claims, we could specify the thoughts and beliefs non-intentionally. We could say things that would correspond to 'The belief is the one expressed by writing something of the form "Paris is pretty in the springtime"'. Perhaps: 'The belief is the one adopted by going into neurophysiological state (p. 1433).

II. Another Argument Against Beliefs Being Inner States

It can be doubted whether reports couched in such terms are coherently thought of as reports of *beliefs*. A decade or so ago Arthur Collins offered an interesting general argument for the incoherence of a view of mental states as things that could have non-intentional specifications.[6] His claim is that '…beliefs are not inner states of agents at all, or inner realities of any kind that might cause anything whatever'.[7] The telegraphic version of his reason is that 'There is no state of belief that the subject might report without asserting that

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FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 6**

p'.[8] For him, thinking of beliefs as inner states involves misassimilating expressions of belief to reports of inner states of belief. Beliefs can be expressed implicitly in ordinary assertions; the belief that Kant lived in Königsberg can be expressed by claiming that Kant lived in Königsberg, for instance by asserting the sentence 'Kant lived in Königsberg'. Beliefs can also be expressed explicitly in self-ascriptions: the belief that Kant lived in Königsberg can be expressed by claiming that one believes Kant lived in Königsberg, for instance by asserting the sentence 'I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg'. This latter claim looks like a report on an inner state, a specification or description of one of the beliefs I find myself with. Thought of this way, it is just the first person equivalent of the third person ascription of belief 'Brandom believes that Kant lived in Königsberg'. This latter claim is naturally understood as reporting the same belief that I can report by making the former claim. Each seems to say something about what state is to be found in me – or what state I am to be found in – namely, believing that Kant lived in Königsberg. Yet this way of understanding what is going on involves, Collins argues, a fundamental mistake.

> [A]n expression of belief is not a report in which the speaker tells others about himself.[9]

It cannot be. For claiming either that Kant lived in Königsberg or that I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg is taking a stand on the issue of where Kant lived. It is making an assertion, committing myself with respect to this objective matter of fact. This is doing something, altering my status with respect to the question of where Kant lived. Collins' claim is that no report of an inner state of mine can have the effect of committing me vis á vis this outer state of affairs. Expressing a belief involves undertaking a commitment, and no mere *description* I can give of *myself* can accomplish that.

Collins' master argument for this claim is that

> Belief that p cannot be an inner state because such an account would engender incoherent first-person belief statements that fail to express any stand on the belief itself.[10]

If saying what I believe were reporting on an inner state, then just as John can describe me as believing that Kant lived in Königsberg without taking a stand on where Kant lived – committing himself only to a description of me, one that does not entail anything about Kant – so I would be able to describe myself as believing that Kant lived in Königsberg without taking a stand on where Kant lived – committing myself only to a description of me, one that does not entail anything about Kant. But in fact I can do no such thing. My saying that I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg is taking a stand on where Kant lived. I cannot say what I believe without undertaking commitments regarding how things are outside me, so saying what I believe is not properly

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:06
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 7**

understood as the reporting of something inside me. This last way of putting the point is from Collins' point of view speaking with the vulgar, for it makes the argument seem to depend on drawing exactly the sort of boundary between the cognitive inside and the cognitive outside that Collins is concerned to dissolve. Once the point has been grasped, it appears as the claim that so long as one insists on such a boundary and thinks of my beliefs as a special class of representings in me pointing to represented states of affairs outside me, it will be unintelligible why I cannot, as John seems to be able to do, merely characterize the representings I find in my belief box, without thereby taking a stand on how things are with what they represent. It is not denied that just as in saying that Brandom believes that Kant lived in Königsberg, John is saying something about me, so in saying that I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg I am saying something about how it is with me (as well as about how it is with Kant). Rather, the argument turns on two claims. The first is that I cannot just say how it is with me with respect to my Kant beliefs, without also taking a stand on how it is with Kant; the idea of my giving such a mere report on or description of my beliefs is incoherent. The second is that if my expressing a belief were reporting on an inner state of mine, there could be no explanation of why I cannot, as others apparently can, take a stand on what is inside of me without thereby taking a stand also on what is outside of me.

Now a cognitivist will insist that from the fact that *some* purported *reports* of one's supposed inner belief state (explicit self-ascriptions) are also *expressions* of belief, in the sense that they essentially involve commitments as to how things are outside the believer, it does *not* follow that any report that is *not* an expression of belief is reporting something else (or nothing). Perhaps the very same object, an 'inner state', can be referred to in quite different ways. Deploying some senses to pick out what are in fact one's beliefs – picking them out *as* beliefs, say – *does* involve expressing those beliefs, and hence committing oneself as to how things are with Kant or Paris. But deploying other senses to refer to the very same inner states – picking them out in terms of their non-intentional vehicles, rather than the conceptual contents those vehicles carry – does *not* involve expressing the beliefs in the sense of committing oneself to their truth.

Although Collins' argument cannot be accepted as it stands, because it admits of this sort of rejoinder, I think it nonetheless points to an important feature of belief-talk that has immediate bearing on the issue of whether it is coherent to think of beliefs as states that are at once inner and conceptually contentful. Explicit first-person expressions of belief are Janus-faced.

On the one hand, some of their features assimilate them to third person ascriptions of believings, which concern the believer rather than what is believed.

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:06
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FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 8**

- For one thing, in an important sense John and I say the same thing when I assert 'I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg', and he asserts 'Brandom believes that Kant lived in Königsberg'. Both are entailed by the claim that everyone believes that Kant lived in Königsberg, and both entail the claim that someone believes that Kant lived in Königsberg.

- For another, unlike my claim that Kant lived in Königsberg, and like John's claim that Brandom believes that Kant lived in Königsberg, my claim that I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg can be true even if Kant did not live in Königsberg.

On the other hand, some features of explicit first-person expressions of belief assimilate them instead to assertions, and to claims about what is true.

- For if I assert 'I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg', as Collins emphasizes, this commits me to how things were with Kant and that city, just as asserting 'Kant lived in Königsberg', and 'It is true that Kant lived in Königsberg', do.

These all involve endorsing what is believ*ed*, rather than attributing a believ*ing*.

The lesson we should learn from Collins' argument is that the fan of inner mental states is focusing exclusively on the first sort of feature of belief. From that point of view one gets no explanation of why some event's befalling a non-intentionally specified vehicle – say, an inscription being placed in the 'belief box' – should *amount* to *endorsing* a claim about how things are, to *undertaking* a *commitment* to things outside the believer being thus-and-so. To take this question seriously is to ask in what sense of 'inner' beliefs can coherently be understood to be inner, given that believing includes adopting a normative stance or attitude toward the external world – in particular, a commitment to the truth of a proposition, paradigmatically, to the applicability of specific concepts to particular external objects. The question concerns how to conceive of inner states as *endorsements* of conceptual contents: how they can be understood as taking a propositionally contentful *stand* or undertaking a propositionally contentful *commitment*.

Collins' arguments show, I think, that there are at least three minimal conditions for making sense of the crucial dimension along which believing something is taking a stand on how things are.

- First, taking such a stand must be the sort of thing that can be expressed implicitly by making a claim or producing an assertion, expressed explicitly – where one not only does take such a stand but says that one does – by

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:06
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 9**

utterances of the form 'I believe that p', and attributed explicitly by ascriptions of the form 'S believes that p'.

- Second, explicitly expressing or ascribing the adoption of such a stance must be distinguished from describing oneself or another as being in a certain matter-of-factual state. (This is a point about what one is *doing* in explicitly taking up this sort of attitude. It does not immediately rule out that the stance one adopts *is* a matter-of-factual state i.e., that doing these two different sorts of thing is referring to one thing in two different ways.)

- Third, taking a propositionally contentful stand must be something that essentially is right or wrong depending on how things are outside the individual taking the stand.

III. Botanizing Possible Theory Forms

One way to think about the large issue Descombes has raised, then, is to ask what constraints are put on our conception of belief by these conditions on the *normative* significance of believing. (Similar conditions apply to other propositional attitudes such as intentions and desires.) Some such constraints stem from the requirement that intentional states must have descriptions or specifications under which they *are* intentionally contentful – whether or not they also have specifications in non-intentional terms. Here the issue is: what is a concept, what is it to apply a concept, what must one be able to do to count as grasping, deploying, or applying the concept?

There are three approaches to sapience that we have been considering. The pure, explicitly Cartesian theory appeals to *intrinsically intentional inner* states and episodes. Their interiority is understood in terms of their subject's privileged epistemic access to them. Their intentional content is understood as intrinsic in the sense that it is independent of everything that is not in that sense interior to the subject. Contemporary cognitivist theories that Descombes (and Collins) argue are *implicitly* Cartesian, seeing sapience as a matter of states and episodes that have *both* intentional and non-intentional specifications. 'Vehicleless' theories understand sapience in terms of the possibility of intentional attributions to persons of statuses that do not have non-intentional specifications. The fully and recognizably Cartesian approaches may be put to one side at this point, since all parties to the debate we are considering reject them. Then we can ask: how do considerations drawn from the fact that talk about what one believes (or what others believe) essentially involves taking a stand (or attributing such a stand to another) concerning how things are in the largely non-sapient world –

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:07
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 10**

hence, applying concepts – bear on the decision between vehicled and vehicleless approaches to sapience?

In the case of theories that start with states and episodes specified in a non-intentional vocabulary this takes the form of the question of what it is about those potential bearers of content in virtue of which they are contentful, and have the contents they do rather than some others. Once the option of treating them as intrinsically intentional has been rejected, there is really only one idea anyone has ever had about this: it must be in virtue of the *relations* those sign-designs stand in to other things. A structuralist approach, or a functionalism committed to methodological individualism, will restrict those relata to other sign-designs. A more relaxed approach that is still functionalist in a broad sense will allow also relations to things that are not more sign-designs – perhaps the things to which concepts are applied, about which one endorses claims, undertakes commitments, takes a stand. An *atomistic* theory of this sort will exclude relations to other sign-designs, restricting the content-conferring relations to external relata.

We can continue the botanization of theories of this general sort (seeing intentionality as neither intrinsic, transparent, and incorrigible nor vehicleless) along three further dimensions, depending on the character of the relations considered, which directions of relation are considered, and the scope of the system considered. By the '*character*' of the relations, I mean principally whether they are envisaged in the first instance as *natural* or *normative*. One species of theory looks to *causal* or *nomological regularities*, of the sort studied by the natural sciences. Dretske's informational theory and Fodor's asymmetric dependence theory are of this sort. Another species of theory looks rather to *normative* relations, where instead of some event's reliably occasioning the production or alteration of a sign-design, the earlier event merely makes the later one *appropriate*. Teleosemantic theories such as Millikan's and Papineau's are of this sort – even though their understanding of the normative relations is itself ultimately naturalistic and modal. A rationalist theory that looks to *inferential* or *justificatory* relations among (what are thereby intelligible as) sentence tokenings could serve as an example of a non-reductive normative approach. Descombes, of course, criticizes the French structuralists for having endorsed rather a 'causal holism' that mistakes rules for mental causes, and the normative structures of the mind for psychical mechanisms.[11]

By talking about the '*direction*' of the relations I mean whether one looks exclusively *up* stream, to the events that cause or are nomologically sufficient for the use of the sign-design whose contentfulness is being analyzed, or that make that use correct or appropriate, or whether one looks *downstream* to what that use occasions or licenses, or both. I have argued elsewhere[12] that neither assertibilist or verificationist theories nor theories of Dretske's and Fodor's sort, which are one-sided in looking only *up* stream, nor theories such

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FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 11**

as those of the classical pragmatists, which are one-sided in looking only *down* stream, will yield adequate semantics. Only approaches that are more fully functionalist (and so non-atomistic) in considering both what Dummett calls 'circumstances of application' and 'consequences of application' of conceptual contents can adequately account for the range of conceptual contents we actually deploy. But I won't rehearse these arguments here, contenting myself instead with pointing out the available alternatives.

Finally, by talk of the '*scope* of the *system*' I mean whether the sign-designs in question are thought of as deployed *covertly* within the physical confines of an *individual*, in a *language of thought*, or *overtly*, by a member of a linguistic *community,* in a *public language*. Here Dretske's and Fodor's approaches fall clearly on the first side, while it seems to me one of the great glories of Millikan's that she can use the very *same* conceptual apparatus to analyze contents at *both* levels. The distinction at issue is given a special point if we ask, with Dummett, whether we should treat assertion as the exteriorization of judgment, which is prior in the order of explanation, or judgment as the interiorization of assertion, which is prior in the order of explanation.[13] (Dummett, like Davidson and Sellars, endorses the latter alternative, which he takes also to be the later Wittgenstein's position.)

With this map of the alternatives in hand, we can return to our question: How can considerations concerning the nature of conceptual content, and what one is doing in applying concepts so as to take a stand on how things are, be brought to bear to help decide among these different possibilities?

IV. Kantian Considerations

The way into this topic that I find most helpful starts way back, with lessons that Kant taught, but that – as evidenced by the tradition that Descombes recounts and so tellingly criticizes – we have not fully absorbed. The first is a normative demarcational point. Perhaps Kant's most important idea is that what distinguishes us as sapients, as knowers and agents, is not to be understood in *ontological* terms, but in *deontological* ones. Judgments and actions are distinguished from the causally elicited responses of non-sapients in that they are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They express *commitments* of ours. One famous feature of Kant's theory is a direct consequence of this central normative demarcational point For he claims, against the whole of the logical tradition that he inherited, that the minimal unit of experience or sapient awareness is the *judgment*. And he claims that *because* judgments are the minimal unit for which we can be *responsible*. One of Descombes' central contentions is that the structure of the setting within which alone sapience is possible must be understood to be a *normative* structure of the sort we make explicit by stating *rules*.

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FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 12**

A second large, orienting theoretical commitment of Kant's is that judging and acting – indeed, *everything* that we sapients can do *as* sapients – should be understood as ways of applying concepts. The theoretical role played by the concept *concept* for Kant is to determine *what* we have made ourselves responsible *for*, what we have committed ourselves *to, by* applying those concepts in judgment and action. Thus, for Kant concepts are 'rules for judging'. A principal element in this conception is the great conceptual sea-change in our understanding of the nature of the application of concepts that constitutes sapient activity, from Cartesian categories of *certainty* to Kantian categories of *necessity*. For Descartes the application of concepts was to be understood in terms of our grip on their contents: do we grasp them clearly, distinctly? For Kant the application of concepts is a matter of their grip on us. In applying a concept we *bind* ourselves by it. The key thing to understand philosophically is how we can use concepts to commit ourselves, and in what their *bindingness* or *validity* (their '*Gültigkeit*') consists.

It is up to us which concept to apply, but once we have done so, it is not up to us, but is settled by the content of the concept we applied, *what* we have thereby committed ourselves to. Paradoxically, our freedom consists in our capacity to bind ourselves, to commit ourselves, to undertake responsibilities. From his hero Rousseau Kant draws the lesson that what distinguishes genuinely *normative* constraint from *natural* constraint (being bound by *conceptions* of rules, rather than just by rules – our *attitudes* towards the rules playing an essential mediating rule in their *status as* binding) is that in this sense we are only bound insofar as we bind ourselves. But what we are doing to be genuinely *binding* ourselves, yielding real *commitment* and *responsibility, what* we have committed ourselves to by applying a concept cannot in the same way be up to us. Auto-nomy must have two sides: being a *law* for *ourselves*. For, as Wittgenstein said, where 'whatever seems right to me is right, that only means that here we can't talk about "right"'.[14] So in order to engage in empirical sapient activities of judging and acting, determinately binding ourselves by applying concepts, we must already have available a stock of determinately contentful concepts *with* or *by* which to bind ourselves.

This normative conception of *freedom* as involved in the very concept of *concept application*, hence of *sapience*, is elaborated as well in terms of our *rationality*. For central among what we are responsible *for* is having *reasons* for the applications of concepts we take-true and make-true. The contents of the concepts we apply in committing ourselves in judgments and actions must settle what would count as a reason justifying those concept applications, and what other concept applications (in judgment and action) those concept applications give us reasons for or against.

Now I think all of these are good ideas and express genuine, fundamental insights into the nature of sapience. I am not in a position to argue for them in the compass of this essay. But taking them seriously puts in place a philo-

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:08
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 13**

sophical program: saying what consequences for our assessment of semantic theories of the various shapes canvassed above follow *if* one accepts Kant's basic orienting claims about normativity, the primacy of propositional content, the centrality of concepts to content, the bindingness of concepts, and the significance of the relation of being-a-reason-for in articulating conceptual contents. I think the answers are interesting and instructive, but pursuing them too, alas, is beyond the scope of this talk. I propose instead to close by considering how the Kantian considerations can be elaborated so as to generate an intelligible version of a 'vehicleless' theory that understands content in the sort of *social, normative* terms Descombes recommends, by contrast to the *individual, causal* terms employed by cognitivist inner-state approaches.

V. A Social, Normative, 'Vehicleless' Approach

As I understand him, Hegel accepted the fundamental Kantian claims just rehearsed. But he did not think that just because all empirical activity – concept application in judging and acting – presupposes conceptual norms, normativity cannot be understood entirely in terms of phenomenal, empirical activity. His idea is that normative statuses such as commitment and entitlement, authority and responsibility, are *social* statuses. *Geist*, the normative, conceptual dimension of sapient life, is synthesized by reciprocal recognition among particular organisms, who thereby constitute at once both a community or universal characterizing them all and themselves as individual self-conscious selves or normative loci of account. The conceptual norms their practice institutes, and which develop through their application, inferentially (and so rationally) articulate their judgments and actions. In this sense, Hegel's slogan could be – as John Haugeland has put it[15] – 'All transcendental constitution is social institution'.

The basic idea is that normative statuses such as commitment are products of social practical attitudes. There were no commitments, authority, or responsibilities until people started treating or responding to each other in practice as, practically taking each other to be, committed, authoritative, or responsible. It is our practice that institutes the conceptual norms, the acknowledgment of which constitutes us as sapients. Put this way, the thesis is recognizably of the sort explored by the later Wittgenstein. What is contentful is in the first place *acts*, and only derivatively the marks or noises whose production is the performance of the act.

A good model is playing a counter in a game. Once I count (am recognized) as a player in the game, I can play a counter that *has* a certain public, normative significance. It obliges me to make some further moves under various circumstances, precludes me from making others, entitles but does

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:08
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 14**

not oblige me to make others, and so on. It is important to notice that the facts about the normative significance of that move may significantly outrun what I *understand* that significance to be. I may not realize all, or even very many, of the aspects of the normative significance of my performance, for it nonetheless to have that significance. In the case where the counter I am playing is a sentence, and 'playing' it is asserting it, the inferential significance of my move may outrun my knowledge of it. I do not, for instance, need to *know* that the melting point of copper is 1083.4 °C in order to call something copper, and thereby to have committed myself to its not melting at 1083 °C, but melting at 1084 °C – in the sense of having said something that is true if and only if that condition obtains. Thus my remark or thought is subject to assessment according to that norm, even though I may not be aware of that fact. The conceptual norm I have bound myself by through my utterance is not something 'in my head'. It is up to me whether I play that counter – assert that sentence – rather than another, or none. But it is not up to me what I have thereby done. My dispositions to endorse further sentences, or to offer others as evidence, may track the actual inferential consequences and antecedents only *very* poorly, without that impugning my capacity to make assertions about copper, and so have *thoughts* about copper.

So a consequence of this way of thinking about talking – and about thinking – is *semantic externalism*. The principal determinants of the *content* of my claims, including those I endorse without announcing that fact, lie *outside* me: in the actual facts about copper, in the public associations that tie the word 'copper' to copper, and so make my assertional use of the *word* 'copper' bind me to the inferential norms that constitute the *concept copper*. Those norms are *administered* by the linguistic community – for instance by their deference to metallurgical experts in determining what I've committed myself to. But it is part of the language game of empirical claiming that we *all* take it that what I've *really* committed myself to is not *constituted* by what even the experts think. It also answers to what the *facts* are about what I am talking *about*: what *really* follows from something's being copper.

By way of analogy, we might, in the Wittgensteinean spirit of Descombes' 'anthropological holism',[16] consider *signatures*: an emblematic form of expression of the authority of authorship and the responsibility of ownedness so central that under the right circumstances it could stand for all that is *constitutive* of the self, who thereby acknowledges what is thereby its own. Think of a case in which a young man sits in the conference room of a bank, and inscribes marks on a piece of paper, on two occasions, one the day before achieving his legal majority at age 21, and the other the day after. We may suppose further that, considered as undated purely physically specifiable events, there is no difference between them: the pen moves in exactly similar trajectories relative to all its immediate surroundings. Nor need there be any difference discriminable to the young man in the thoughts that, as we say, 'go

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:08
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 15**

through his mind' during the ceremony, depending only on which day it takes place. (Perhaps in both cases he mistakenly believes that he is 22 years old.) Yet in the one case, his normative status changes radically: he is now committed to pay the bank $500 a month for 25 years. In the other case, his inscription of the marks on the page has no such significance. The change is momentous and real, and it is not magical. But it consists in a change in his *social* status – a change that happens *outside* the physical boundaries of his body. Nothing *inside* those boundaries, describable in non-normative terms, need be different in the two cases.

Now undertaking an obligation by inscribing a signature and making an assertion by uttering a free-standing sentence are paradigms of contentful performances that *do* have vehicles: the signature and the utterance. But thinking about the sort of change in normative status that they effect – from not being obliged to pay to having that obligation, from not being committed to the coin's being copper to being committed to that claim – offers a way of understanding contentful states that *need not* have vehicles. For the statuses of *being obliged to pay* and *being committed to the coin's being copper* are *not* vehicled. The difference between being committed to the claim that would be undertaken by asserting 'That coin is copper', and not being so committed need only consist in the difference between having made the assertion at some time in the past and not having done so. Not only need that sort of difference not be epistemically transparent to the subject of the commitment in question, there need be *no* non-intentionally characterizable *present* difference between one who is and who is not so committed. For it is a difference in social normative status, not in inner state. If we thought of our cognitive comportments in terms of *commitments* rather than *beliefs*, the model of inner states would not even be initially tempting. This is my gesture in the direction of a reading of what Descombes' means when he says things like:

> Objective mind, by which we measure the gap between the actor's intellectual abilities and his consciousness, consists in an *order of meaning*, one that is presupposed in every manifestation of intelligence on the part of a subject. …[M]ind 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 those practices and institutions.[17]

Thinking of our cognitive dealings with the world in terms of commitments construed as social normative statuses is an intelligible alternative to thinking of them in terms of inner states. Commitments can be undertaken oneself and attributed to others by the production of public performances. But the commitments themselves – what is undertaken or attributed – need have no non-intentionally specifiable vehicles, no bearers that stand to the committed ones as sentential sign-designs stand to propositional contents. I said at the

T&F :: Inquiry :: MS No. 2046 {Op. gb} {F2 pdf} Produced 1/4/2004 at 15:03:08
FILE: **J:/INQUIRY/2046/SINQ2046.3D**
FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 16**

end of the discussion of Collins' critique of the doctrine of mental states in Section II that there were three criteria of adequacy for making sense of the crucial dimension along which believing something is taking a stand on how things are.

- Taking such a stand must be the sort of thing that can be expressed implicitly by making a claim or producing an assertion, expressed explicitly by utterances of the form 'I believe that p', and attributed explicitly by ascriptions of the form 'S believes that p'.

- Explicitly expressing or ascribing the adoption of such a stance must be distinguished from describing oneself or another as being in a certain matter-of-factual state.

- Taking a propositionally contentful stand must be something that is essentially right or wrong depending on how things are outside the individual taking the stand.

Construing taking a stand in terms of inferentially articulated, and so conceptually contentful, commitments satisfies these requirements. Insofar as it can do the explanatory work which the notion of belief construed as an inner state has been called on to perform, it provides a viable successor conception to that residually Cartesian notion.

In this paper I have only sketched such a successor conception, and have not begun to do the work that would be needed to develop and argue for it. But given the cogency of the arguments Descombes has leveled against the inner state model, it is important to begin to think about the character of positive accounts that might be developed to replace those displaced by the negative criticisms. I am encouraged to think that I may be on the right track, that the direction I have suggested here may be consonant with Descombes' own conclusions, by the increasing focus in his subsequent work on the Hegelian social and normative notion of *objective spirit.*[18] The task of constructing fully and genuinely post-Cartesian concepts of concepts and their contents is one we have only begun.

Descombes' work is teaching us important lessons both about why that task is urgent and where we might look for raw materials. In my view, Hegel's social recognitive story about the nature and origins of conceptual normativity was the first thoroughly non-subjectivist theory of the subject, the first to understand consciousness as a social achievement taking place as much outside what is immediately present in the particular mind as it is to be found there. I think Descombes' work reinforces the impression that it is through thinking about the lessons common to Hegel and Wittgenstein that we will find our way forward.

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FULL TEXT SGML -:- PAGE RANGE: 1-18 :: 18 PAGES **PAGE NO: 17**

NOTES

1 To be fair, Descartes did also worry about this semantic issue, though it is seldom explicitly his topic. As John Haugeland has pointed out in the first chapter of *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea* (MIT Press, 1985), his reconceptualization of the relations between appearance and reality in terms of categories of representation rather than resemblance made urgent the development of a more abstract semantic account than that of mere shared formal properties. And Descartes should be counted as the originator of a more holistic isomorphism strategy in semantics. I discuss this development in the first chapter of *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*.
2 *The Mind's Provisions*, p. 223.
3 For instance, Fodor.
4 That is the model I elaborate in *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
5 *Saving Belief: a Critique of Physicalism* (Princeton University Press, 1987).
6 In *The Nature of Mental Things* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).
7 *The Nature of Mental Things,* p. 165.
8 *The Nature of Mental Things*, p. 167.
9 *The Nature of Mental Things*, p. 28.
10 *The Nature of Mental Things*, p. 169.
11 For instance, in 'esprit comme esprit des lois'.
12 In Chapter One of *Articulating Reasons*.
13 *Frege's Philosophy of Logic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 362.
14 *Philosophical Investigations* §258.
15 'Heidegger on Being a Person'. *Nous* 16 (1982, pp. 15–26). Rpt. in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (eds) *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
16 For instance, in *The Mind's Provisions*, at the end of Chapter Three.
17 *The Mind's Provisions*, p. 65.
18 Such as his challenging essay 'Is there an objective spirit?' in James Tully (ed.) with the assistance of Daniel M. Weinstock, *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 96–118.

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