Descombes' The Institutions of Meaning
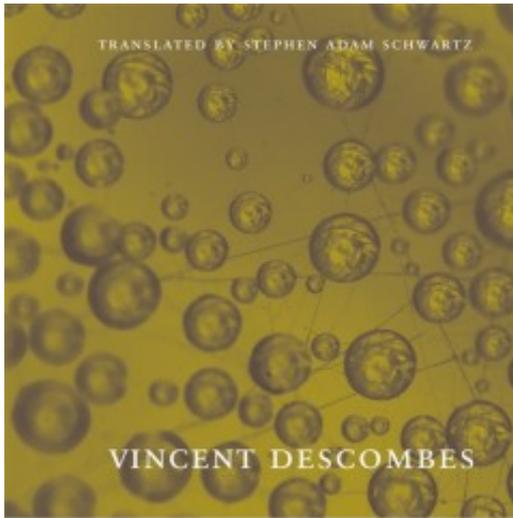
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[The Institutions of Meaning: A Defense of Anthropological Holism](#)

by [Vincent Descombes](#)

translated by Stephen Adam Schwartz. Harvard University Press, 2014. 392 pp.

How is what is "in" our minds, as thought, also something that we share, communicate, and can understand? This question, however posed, must be fundamental for any anthropological approach to mental life. In the course of our research we have to ask ourselves, at least implicitly, what we are doing—mentally—when we interact with others, and how on this basis we can claim to share, and know, another's experience. In relation to anthropological fieldwork, the cognitivist common sense that makes mental processes the outgrowth of an individual capacity to think (located in modules or states of the brain) raises more questions than it can

answer, rendering illegible both the shared worldly context of speech and thought, and the sense which we, collectively, can make not only of what is present to our immediate perception but also of times past and future, distant cultures with alien epistemologies, and even illusions, hallucinations, and compulsions. In his recently-translated *The Institutions of Meaning,* the French philosopher Vincent Descombes seeks to understand the mind, instead, through a linguistic and interactional account of intention, formulating a challenge to reductive, materialist accounts of mental mechanism and providing an original pathway to the mind through social institutions of shared meaning and exchanges of words and things (often highly unequal ones). In a significant way, this book returns "the mind" to anthropology as a proper object of social research—or, perhaps better, recovers the anthropological dimension integral to any conception of the mind.

The Institutions of Meaning (originally published in French in 2001 as *Les Institutions du sens*) is a kind of sequel to Descombes' earlier book, *The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism*, in which he argued on linguistic and phenomenological grounds that mental processes, whatever they are, neither happen inside "a" mind nor are they best described as "representations"—an argument which directly opposed the atomistic and additive language of contemporary cognitive philosophy.[1] In a clear and stylish translation by Stephen Adam Schwartz, *The Institutions of Meaning*, which is subtitled "A Defense of Anthropological Holism," sets out to provide a different philosophical account of mind, one that roots cognition in pre-existing contexts of exchange and interaction. This book does not directly address formulations developed in psychology or the natural sciences for understanding the mind—it speaks, instead, primarily to other philosophers' deployments of mentalistic and materialistic notions of cognitive processes, and challenges them with an expanded concept of mind and meaning built, innovatively, from French structuralist anthropology (which Descombes reminds us was always in part an investigation into *mental* structures). But if this book does not make a direct contribution to the "collaborative turn" that links the human and the natural sciences, as this was [defined recently here on *Somatosphere*](#), it still has much to say about scientific thought about the mind, insofar as that thought is conducted in terms that are *also* embedded in social institutions of meaning.

Descombes is a leading figure in philosophy in France—he is Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris—and he was trained in much the same tradition as the figures whom most Americans might associate with "French Philosophy," such as Derrida and Foucault. However, unlike these "Continental" thinkers, Descombes is equally influenced by, and contributes to, the philosophy of mind that has developed as part of the analytic tradition of Anglo-American philosophy.

In fact, Descombes practices philosophy in the analytic style, and explicitly aims to address the challenges posed by this philosophy, which expels as both non-empirical and non-philosophical much of the metaphysical baggage of the philosophical tradition, and attempts to rebuild philosophy starting from ordinary language and common sense.

Yet the thrust of Descombes' work as a whole is against the Cartesian presuppositions which remain internal, as "common sense," to much Western epistemology and ontology. He argues against any dogmatic adherence to principles that causes must come before effects, and parts before wholes, and matter before mind or spirit. Constructively, he seeks to find philosophical, and analytically-acceptable, means and terms for making sense of the anthropological dicta of the holism of social relations: that societies come before individuals; that meaning emerges from structured relations between signs and not from relations of resemblance between words and things; and that mind and meaning inhere in contexts and in interactions, and not "in" material objects, symbols, or even inside human brains. To defend such holistic propositions, he presents a sustained and excellent critique of the notion that breaking things down into elements clarifies their relations. Insofar as this cuts against our common, "scientific" common sense, and instead builds from conceptions of mind and spirit that owe much to Hegel and Husserl, Descombes' philosophy of mind can only be "semi-analytic." Indeed, he explicitly grants himself license to employ the resources that exist in French and German for speaking, in one breath, of mind, spirit, and idea (senses that coexist in the words *esprit* and *Geist*). He does not pun on these multiple senses, however, but rather aims to describe a real, human and social, totality to which "mind," in this expanded sense, may refer.

The first half of *The Institutions of Meaning* focuses on the notion of *intention,* which is in modern philosophy the defining attribute of mental phenomena. We say, Descombes stipulates, that something is mental when some thing is related to in a way which puts it "under a description"—when it is perceived, thought of, loved, sought—and this only *for* a particular subject. The definitional relation established here between subjective thought and its object raises the problem of how to bridge the mental act with the real world—how do language, and thought, *refer* to, and can they *affect*, their objects? In an aside relevant to anthropological concerns Descombes discusses, as unsatisfactory, various attempts to construct a wider "intentional history" which could, through the concepts of abstraction or discourse, account for the power of ideas in material and social life. He moves from Kojève's Hegelian thoughts on the power of abstraction to affect real individuals, to Lacan's aphorism that the "symbol is the murder of the thing," to, finally, a refreshing and skeptical take on Foucault's and Hacking's accounts of the power of discourse. All of these attempts at an "intentional history" have failed, for Descombes,

because their impersonal descriptions of an "order of discourse" (Foucault) require—but give only scant account of—a real context of people talking, acting, and behaving intentionally in order to become plausible as descriptions of interaction between the mental and the real (a condition that Hacking's work, with its doctors inciting speech from patients, in part meets). In order to bridge, and thus move beyond, the dichotomy between the world of instituted and abstracted meanings, on the one hand, and individual mental facts and real things, on the other, Descombes proceeds to pay close attention to the *social* as a realm of instituted roles and meanings, related systematically in such a way that some actions and descriptions depend on others and thus, in their instituted relation, link the linguistic context to the real one of thought, interaction, and reference.

That is, Descombes argues (following Pierce and Wittgenstein, among others) that there is always a real relation of reference and patterned interaction which comes with the intentional relation—in the intentional action of even the most private thought, something is intended in the worldly context, and this takes intention out of the realm of the purely mental into a world of social relations and conventional, *instituted* meanings which can bear upon subjects, personally or impersonally as the case may be. This assertion is clarified in his analysis of a concept from "philosophical grammar," the "intentional passive" (pp. 66*ff.*) Though not marked in natural grammar in either French or English, the intentional passive, once defined philosophically, helps explain how one can reverse the description of an intentional or mental act such as "Romeo loves Juliet" and yet still arrive at a properly constituted sentence in which the grammatical object Juliet has become the *subject* of an intentional predicate: Juliet *is loved* by Romeo. This perfectly normal linguistic feat, seen philosophically, demands some account of how a mental act can be said to bear on another subject as an "intentional passion": some state that, for that subject, truly *is*. Though it need not, of course, affect her at all *personally*, being loved must affect Juliet in some way insofar as she is known through the descriptions of her.

The intentional verb *to love*, like all words, is part of a system of verbs and nouns, with various functions, and is internally related to them; meanwhile, grammar is linked to social institutions that set apart certain words and make them refer in a special way. Take, for instance, the *institution* of proper names. That is, whatever the impact on Juliet, Romeo really loves a specifiable person who is called by that name. His thoughts have, potentially, a real effect in the world, but only in virtue of their prior connection to other words, which are connected institutionally to specifiable contexts, and, to continue the argument, also to a situation in which it is a meaningful thing for a young man to love and seek to be loved. This is what Descombes comes to mean by "institutions of meaning"—that there are conventions of which words and signs are the

vehicles, and these conventions are not only linguistic, but social and impersonal, albeit *lived* very personally. The two levels, of brute reality and mere meaning, which other philosophies might want to keep separate, are here united in a quite pragmatic and describable way, which becomes clearer as Descombes works through his examples.

Indeed, Descombes spends a great deal of time constructing examples that complicate and expand the notion of an intentional phenomenon. What does it mean to say that someone is looking for someone else—say a sheriff for a horse thief—and to describe that action as intentional, and therefore mental? "Looking for" seems like a very physical activity—you might look here, or there, or anywhere, but not inside your head! Yet for all its real-world physicality, the action of "looking" also comprehends a number of mental attitudes and suppositions, which problematize any direct notion of reference: you can look for a horse thief even if, in actual fact, one does not exist (a mistake has been made; or the horse is being hid by its owner for other reasons, in which case one "finds" the horse thief when one "understands" the owner's motives for hiding his own horse—note how densely mental the example becomes!). Moreover, whatever your mental intention at any one point in time, we say that you can *find* without *looking*. What, then, is the relation between these real and mental events, and how does intention bear upon its object, which may not even exist, or which may not be intended in the first place?

In another of Descombes' examples, "expecting" raises the related problem of the continuity of mental acts. What is it to say that I am *expecting* someone to show up at my house at a given hour? How do I describe that *mental* fact of "expecting" which may, in fact, not be an idea I am consciously entertaining at any particular moment during the time I am, in fact, doing just that? I may be avidly knitting, or entirely absorbed in a book, and all the while *expecting* my visitor. And did I not expect after all, if my visitor failed to show up?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Descombes' answers to all of these problems revolve on his specification of a holistic relation between the mental act and previously instituted conventions and shared meanings: the search for the horse thief presupposes the institution of property and the fact of a missing horse, and those make possible the mental act of intending to find a thief; the institution of the appointment explains the expectation of a visit, which is surely a mental act even if it is not a consciously or continuously held idea. Finally, the power of different words to refer to the same things or to different aspects of the same things, without disturbing their apparently real identity and separateness, allows us to evade the apparent "holistic paradox" of institutions and relations preceding their objects, and existing independently from the reality of the things related. For we can understand the parts of things which appear, really or irreally, in a given

description as the aspect of them which is relevant at that time, or "under that description". If the Sheriff thought that Mr. Smith was the horse thief and hence looked for him as such, the Sheriff and Mr. Smith are put in a real relation and transformed by it, even if Mr. Smith was in fact neither a thief nor findable—it is not necessary that he be a horse thief for this relation to hold, nor for him to be mistaken for one; it is only necessary that he be, in fact, Mr. Smith, a fact secured by the social institution of proper names.

Richard Rorty has highlighted this last aspect of Descombes' philosophy: he refuses the "general illusion of metaphysics" that things must have one, singular identity, and understands instead that we get at them only through their multiple descriptions (which change, as do the things themselves).[2] Action under a description admits the priority of relations while it also permits of change, discovery, and partiality. As Descombes puts it here, "We will say that looking for is necessarily 'under a description' (*secondum quid*) but that an encounter is necessarily an encounter with an object *tout court* (*simpliciter*). . . . What is at issue is the *aspect* under which what is looked for is looked for, and the aspect under which it is found. The found object is necessarily richer than the object sought. . . . Oedipus is looking for Laius's murderer. When he finds him, he also finds someone he was not looking for, namely Oedipus himself" (p. 85).

But what kind of holism does this understanding of intentions and institutions entail? In answer to this question, Descombes engages with structural anthropology in order to define and defend a notion of structure and differentiation which is far from analytic philosophy's previous accounts of wholes as sets, classes, and collections. What Descombes calls "collectivist holism" would hold—and he has examples of this point being made—that a whole can only be made up of parts which are similar in some logical way: in the way that all members of the same team make up the whole, any collection or set of things thus constitutes its own totality, logically (the paradigmatic logical statement of this position, "all bachelors are unmarried" describes a *collection*, and hence this position is "collectivist"). Instead, Descombes defines a whole as the interdependent totality of differentiated parts or roles. "Far from receiving from the system the same characteristic trait, they will receive *different* positions" (p. 117, italics his), he writes, and thus his holism demands a logic not of singular relations of identity, but rather *polyadic* relations.

Reciprocal but formally non-reversible relations between actors described in distinct social roles (e.g., murderer-victim; donor-donee; father-son) are key to the second half of this book, to the working out of the grammar of *anthropological* holism. Thus, the structural anthropology of the gift gets a chapter of its own (Ch. 9), where Descombes explores how key

anthropologists described such differentiated and reciprocal roles in exchange, kinship, and social order. Here, Descombes extends his core argument that both the object and the "regulative principle" (a term he takes from Lévi-Strauss) of mental life must be located in exterior, public realm of actual human actors and their social relations, adding that these relations must be (following Peirce) *at least* triadic. That is, a triadic relation is set up when you have a proposition in which someone accomplishes something bearing upon another subject via an object, such that I give you a thing, and I am a giver, you a receiver, the thing a thing given. This cannot be reduced into a purely dyadic relation (donor-donee) without evacuating the specificity of the relation: "in every proposition concerning a verb of giving, one will have a link to the thing and a link between people, and these two will be dissociable" (p. 251). Further, intentional statements are always, in principle, triadic, for "the description of an intentional action is a description of the *undertaking* of an action at a distance by means of a local action, with the result that its logical form must comprise a multiplicity equal to at least three" (p. 230, italics his).

Descombes' philosophical interest in description motivates his turn to anthropology, here, and he specifically seeks to reclaim the explanatory force of the ethnographic descriptiveness of Marcel Mauss, whose texts are densely involved in particulars and in the language of their formulation. For instance, Descombes returns to the complex, polyadic reality that is captured by Mauss's use of an untranslated "indigenous" term *hau*—the "spirit of the gift" or *esprit de la chose donée*—to describe how a *social* rule of reciprocity in Maori gift-exchange is more or less self-consciously expressed as an interpersonal force, as a *spirit* (*esprit*) or social *intention* which links separated, individual actions and projects others across space and time. Contrasted with Mauss's ethnographic description of the spirit of the gift, Lévi-Strauss's later attempt to mathematize and abstract gift-exchange into a balanced system of reciprocity, reducible to binary operations—a general symbolic logic of contrasts—is said here to be, in a curious way, entirely *unsocial*, because it evacuates the content of the thought, the sense of a *spirit* animating the exchange, the *tertium quid* which grants direction, meaning, and (potentially) completeness to the relations established via the gift. Ultimately, Descombes' effort to put intention back into structural accounts of exchange leads him to a useful, and quite faithful, reading of the later development of structural anthropology and in particular Louis Dumont's "holistic" emphasis on complementarity, differentiation, and hierarchy in exchange relations (I must pass over here the careful work which Descombes does to defend his own position both against charges of "structural causality" and "the myth of the collective individual").

In the course of his critique of Lévi-Strauss Descombes becomes, uniquely in this volume, ethnographic—that is, he writes about interactions and

exchanges which he himself has observed. He offers, in a skillful, writerly turn (pp. 265-66), a response to Lévi-Strauss's famous example of reciprocity in the exchange of wine in restaurants in the South of France. Rather than the silent and mutual ritual exchange of equivalent amounts of wine between strangers, in order to form the minimal kernel of a relation and make the anonymous context of a roadside hotel tolerable, Descombes describes anxious and risky negotiations over such exchanges, fraught with class content and uneven demands for return, in which the fact of exchange is subordinated to the uneasy question of *who should go first* (one settled in his example entirely contingently, but opening to questions of value and hierarchy more fully worked out by Dumont). All of this is pursued to buttress his philosophical argument that the only way to capture the reality of the mental is through examination of contexts of interlocution and sense-making, that these contexts are deeply intentional and intensely personal as well as being shaped by a prior world of established and conventional roles and meanings, and that rather than being logically contradictory these two aspects are mutually constitutive within a structure of unequal and differentiated positions.

This book concludes by returning to the individual mind, in its interiority and separateness, and to a philosophical version of the anthropological methodological quandary: how can we claim to know the intentions of others, widely separated from us by language, culture, and custom? Descombes' last question is, thus: is it possible to say that two separate minds can, in their interiority, think the *same* thought? If they are linked by social institutions, governed by rules, and situated in a world, he answers, it is. One of the last philosophical examples in the book has to do with the thought of "having an appointment," mediated by institutions as diverse as calendars and routines of mutual visiting. In this situation, Descombes argues, two people who are thinking about their mutual appointment are not, indeed, having identical thoughts—B is thinking that she must meet A, and A is thinking of her meeting with B—but "it is nevertheless acceptable to speak about *the same thought* if we take into account the fact that two *complementary* thoughts are involved" (p. 330, italics his). And this thought is a *social* one, possessed equally by two minds individually, which puts them in complementary—and likely hierarchical—relation as a function of their common thought. Thus Descombes manages to bring into communication two minds, without mechanism, and without determining in advance the content of their thought, and without the need to impose on their thoughts a given form or language. What is necessary here is simply the anthropological context in which any two people might have an appointment, which thus puts their separate thoughts in a complementary relation and makes them part of the same whole.

The "anthropological holism" of Descombes' subtitle, then, is a structural one, which he is at pains to remind us has always also meant, in France,

an anthropology of the mental, of *l'esprit* and *la pensée.* However, this comes with the important caveat that he seeks to preserve both the autonomy of the speaking subject, and the particularity and agonism of social interactions. Descombes cites, in passing, a "profound remark" made by Samuel Butler: "It takes two people to say a thing—a sayee as well as a sayer. . . . A may have spoken, but if B has not heard, there has been nothing said, and he must speak again" (quoted on p. 312). This mediated relation between what Descombes calls "two freedoms"—the freedom held by the sayer and sayee, individually, to speak, to listen, to repeat, to ignore, to insist, or to doubt—has a triadic structure in which the saying, the said, and the hearing or interpretation are each equally necessary, and none can, in advance, determine the outcome. Not only are the social institutions which give words sense important in this account, but so is the fact of their shared "mental" possession and their use in the thought and action through which linguistic and social *structures* are worked out.

All of this, of course, has implications which have more to do with matters of mutual understanding and interaction than they do with cognitive operations as such, in which latter much more than propositions are involved. And it could be seen as unnecessary to take this detour through an abstracted, philosophical and logical approach to the mind to find ourselves, simply, back at the scene of social interaction—where anthropologists were to begin with. But Descombes is not recommending a simple, common-sense turn to a "real" world of interactions—rather, it is the *institutions of meaning* that matter to him, and it is the insight into their systematic structuring as the "historical and social context of the human mind" (p. 261) which is most important here. Further, I think this idea of the mind is one which makes sense of some fundamental problems for any anthropology of mental life (which are also problems for the human sciences that take "the" mind as their object): how do we return from the separateness of individual minds to the common context in which we come to know them? It is Descombes' achievement to have shown that the reduction of mental processes to associations or assemblies of interacting parts is no answer to this question, which demands instead an account of the plurality and holism of the *meaningful* relations—including those of kinship, class, power—which are in already at play in any intentional context, any situation of human interaction.

Descombes ultimately allies himself with anthropological and philosophical writers who "want to maintain that the social cannot be reduced to the nonsocial" (p. 295). In this, his work stands at some remove from current epistemological and ontological debates in the anthropology of science and medicine and science and technology studies, debates which while not reductive are oriented more toward understanding associations and interactions than invested in describing institutions (or "total social

phenomena") which could give such relations order or form. But Descombes doesn't merely assert the priority of the social. Rather, he guides us back to the social in a way which renews classical anthropological holism and totality, using it to understand problems of intention and action (a faithful Maussian might add, "again"—and indeed, Descombes invokes "institutions, in Mauss's sense" on the very last page of this book). Descombes starts from systematic relations internal to language (and their use in thought), moves through their deployment in contexts of reference, to arrive at the world of interaction and "institutions of meaning" in which any human mind must be set, to be able to operate. This structural, holistic pathway necessities abandoning Cartesian notions of causality, reworking ontological claims about individuals, and interrogating the reality of social facts (historic and ongoing challenges for anthropological theory, too). Returning, by this pathway, to dynamic and unequal interactions, social norms and imperatives, and the structural contradictions to which these can give rise, might help us better understand the very real force of social institutions in the situations in which human beings, together, speak and act with consequences beyond themselves and beyond their immediate context—including mental consequences. It may not be a paradox but a finding that we end up needing a holistic conception of the social to get to the mind.

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[1] *The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism,* Stephen Adam Schwartz, trans., Princeton University Press 2001; originally published as *La Denrée Mentale*, Minuit, 1995).

[2] Richard Rorty, "The Brain as Hardware, Culture as Software," *Inquiry* 47:3 (2004), 235.

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