

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

## Closing the Last Loophole: Joining Forces with Vincent Descombes\*

John Haugeland  
University of Chicago

### I. Introduction

I will focus on the topic announced in the subtitle of Professor Descombes' profound and provocative work: *The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism*. In the end, I will agree with practically everything in his incisive 'critique' except its conclusion: that cognitivism is incoherent. What he shows instead, I think, is that cognitivism, as an account of human thought and understanding, is deeply false. The difference matters because incoherence is harder to prove and, *prima facie*, less plausible. But, if the same argument, slightly recast, shows falsehood with even more conviction, then the essential point is saved after all.

So, following a quick characterization of cognitivism, I will attempt to distill what I take to be the main grounds and themes of Descombes' critique, explain why I don't think they expose an incoherence, and then show how they might be recast in a way that is devastating all the same.

### II. Cognitivism

Any critical examination of cognitivism presupposes some understanding of what it is, and why anybody would believe it. I will begin with a brief, generic characterization that I am hoping will be acceptable on all sides. Cognitivism is a *theory* – or, at any rate, a framework for a certain *sort* of theory – of *cognition* (in other words, of thinking). Here 'thinking' includes perceiving, believing, desiring, reasoning, intending, acting, and so on, but *not* sensations, moods, emotions, imagery, and the like. To put it in another familiar way,

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\*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).

cognition basically includes those states and processes that are or involve what Russell called ‘propositional attitudes’.

This theory or framework has, I suggest, three main tenets, plus a powerful new inspiration. The first tenet is: thinking amounts to manipulations of inner representations. Second: these inner representations are complex, structured symbols. And, finally: both the symbols and the manipulations can be described both syntactically and semantically. So far, of course, these tenets mainly just articulate the venerable metaphor of thought as inner discourse (something like a conversation, or at least a soliloquy, without noise or interlocutors).

The inspiration that makes this idea newly powerful is three insights initially developed by Frege, Turing, and Simon. The fundamental Fregean contribution was the demonstration that a very broad class of semantically valid transformations – discursive inferences – can be delimited by purely formal syntactical rules. To this Turing then added the demonstration that any set of purely syntactical rules can be followed by a machine. And finally, Simon (in collaboration with Newell) showed that a much broader, if more amorphous, class of semantically ‘intelligent’ or ‘sensible’ transformations can also be characterized purely formally, hence executed by a machine.

But these together imply that a *physical mechanism* is capable of at least a great deal of what, according to cognitivism, *thought* amounts to – which is, after all, a *thrilling* realization. Its profound appeal is not so much the implicit prospect of intelligent artifacts, but the more fundamental suggestion that – and, not only that, but *how – our own* intelligence might likewise be implemented in matter.

And that, in turn, seems to solve at a stroke the classical paradox that intelligent *perception* and *action* are impossible, on pain of violating the laws of physics – for instance the conservation laws. Take just the case of performing an action, such as raising my hand: that certainly involves changing the momentum and energy of the matter in my hand. Therefore, if its causes are at any point non-physical, then at that point, momentum and energy are not conserved. Thus, in effect, the promise of the Frege-Turing-Simon inspiration is a solution to the classical mind/body problem.

In sum: this reinvigorated cognitivism offered the first really plausible hope of *seeing how* Cartesian dualism might actually be overcome. No wonder it took the philosophical and scientific worlds by storm.

### III. Anthropological Holism and Descombes’ Two Critical Themes

Having laid out that sketch of cognitivism (which I’m hoping is not too tendentious), I would now like to summarize Descombes’ critique of the whole idea, and explain why – despite its manifest subtlety and depth – I don’t

think it ultimately works. Though there is simply no prospect of doing justice in a few pages to the rich tapestry of this book's overall argument, it does seem to me that focussing on two of its central and recurring themes may afford some hope of homing in on what Descombes himself sees as the heart of the matter. The two themes are, of course, intimately related, and that reflects, in part, the fact that they both appeal to the profound principles that he calls 'narrative intelligibility' and 'anthropological holism'.

The principle of narrative intelligibility is, if I understand correctly, a *special case* of the principle of anthropological holism. The former is introduced this way: '[P]sychological attribution imposes a historical context: a particular past must have taken place, a particular future must be conceivable, barring which the present attribution is quite simply inconceivable' (p. 183). And, later, he similarly says: '[T]he entire argument of anthropological holism seeks precisely to remind us that the content of an act of thinking ... depends on a social and historical context' (p. 239). Thus, anthropological holism *subsumes* the *historical* context required for narrative intelligibility, and more besides – namely, *social* context. In fact, I think it would be in the spirit of the point to say that anthropological holism also includes the technological context, the environmental context, and even (in some cases) the natural-scientific context (in the sense of 'disenchanted nature').

Be that as it may, what we must now consider is why Descombes maintains that anthropological holism is incompatible with the cognitivist program in psychology. And this is where the two themes I mentioned above can begin to come into view. The first is, if I may give it a name, the *semantic externalism* theme; and the second I will call the *categorial monism* theme. (These names are admittedly imperfect, and are intended only as an expository convenience).

Both themes invoke and depend on anthropological holism, of course, but in different ways. The semantic externalism theme has to do with the character and location of *meanings*. The categorial monism theme concerns instead the metaphysical category of a *state* of something. Let me take them up in that order.

#### IV. The Semantic Externalism Theme

The crux of the semantic externalism theme within Descombes' critique is the thesis that human meanings are in fact primarily *external*, whereas cognitivism must claim that they are primarily *internal*. This external/internal dimension is why I said the issue has to do with *location*. The point of the claim that meanings are primarily external is that they are essentially *public* – that is, out in the world and shared by lots of people.

Thus, near the end of Chapter 8, Descombes writes:

Those who insist that intellectual activity is symbolic activity are right: to think, for a subject, is to use symbols. But whose symbols? Symbols in someone else's language or symbols in a language effectively used by the subject? The fact is that I am able to think using a system of symbols set up by others, and that is what most of us do most of the time, but only if we have *adopted* this system and made it our own. (p. 188)

In other words, when somebody engages in intellectual, symbolic activity – such as talking, writing, or calculating – she necessarily uses some *public* symbolic system that she has adopted from her community (thereby making them her own as well). But it isn't only symbols – such as words and signs – whose meanings are essentially public and external. Daily events, special objects, situations, projects, actions, games, and so on, are often rich with meanings in a way that is also fundamentally and irreducibly public.

The foregoing emphasizes the social aspect of anthropological holism. The historical aspect – narrative intelligibility – is emphasized a few pages later in a view Descombes approvingly attributes to Elizabeth Anscombe: '[T]he only way of determining the thoughts and desires of someone on a particular occasion is to draw up his biography' (p. 192). It's not that an intelligible biography could be drawn up without regard to its subject's social situation, or indeed, his broader *worldly* situation as well – surely it couldn't. The point is rather that even the subject's entire situation – social, worldly, physical, corporeal, and whatever – if considered at *only one time* (synchronically), still wouldn't suffice for intelligibility.

Understanding what a human being thinks and means requires, in general, placing her in her full situation both synchronically *and diachronically*. This is anthropological holism in full flower. And I want to ask: Who could disagree? (*Well ... actually, a few names do come to mind, but ... what can you do?*) Much more urgent, in the present context, is what any of this has to do with *cognitivism*.

Descombes, as we saw, maintains that cognitivism is committed to internalism and that certainly *sounds* incompatible with anthropological holism. But I think we need to proceed a little more slowly.

First, we need to keep in mind why Descombes is *right* that cognitivism *is* committed to internalism about meanings. The original Frege-Turing-Simon inspiration for cognitivism was that semantically valid and intelligent transformations can be delimited by syntactical rules, and syntactical rules can be followed by a mechanism. But no one could suppose that the *external*, public sphere of anthropological holism is anything like a Turing machine. So, if a cognitivist mechanism is going to play any role in explaining the semantic operations prerequisite to human intelligence, it's going to have to be *internal*.

But, second, we should also always bear in mind that, in order to be true

and important, cognitivism does not have to be the *whole* story about intelligence. By this I don't mean that cognitivism might be the right account of how, say, we do arithmetic, but have nothing to say about any other intelligent behavior. That would be amazing, no doubt, but otherwise not very significant.

Rather, I think something like the following is the right way to formulate the stakes: cognitivism, in order to live up to its promise – solving the mind-body problem, for instance – must at least provide a *sufficient* (thorough) account of everything *internal* that is prerequisite for explaining our intelligence. But, perhaps, that's *all* it has to do. That is, though it might well be that some *further* explanatory factors – external ones, perhaps – will *also* be required for a fully satisfactory account of intelligence overall, they won't fall within *cognitivism's* explanatory purview. Those further factors will have to be explained in some different way.

In other words, we can imagine something like a 'division of explanatory labor', such that cognitivism is responsible only for one part of it. But if the stakes are thought of in this way, then Descombes' charge that cognitivism is committed to internalism becomes ambiguous. If it means that, according to cognitivism, an internalist theory can provide an *overall* account of intelligence, then the accusation is grave, but may well be false. For, if the explanatory labor is divided as just described, then cognitivism *need have nothing to say* about any overall account but only about its own proper portion of it.

On the other hand, if the charge means only that cognitivism is committed to internalism *within its own explanatory sphere*, then it may be true but not threatening. For instance, that limited form of internalism is not obviously incompatible with anthropological holism, which, presumably, gets a grip only at the level of the *overall* account. What's more, anthropological holism itself clearly needs and presupposes *something* internal that explains how and why people can learn to talk, form elaborate societies, and draw up biographies, whereas dogs and trees cannot.

Now, cognitivism is not the *only* candidate for explaining the possibility of that prerequisite internal capability, but it is *one* candidate – a powerful one – and I can't see that it has been ruled out by semantic externalism.

## V. The Categorical Monism Theme

The second theme I find running through Descombes' critique of cognitivism – what I have dubbed the 'categorical monism' theme – may ultimately be the deeper one. But discussion of it can, I hope, be briefer, by drawing on certain points already made. Categorical monism is a version of metaphysical monism, and Descombes, in fact, uses the latter term for it. But, among

English-speaking philosophers anyway, ‘metaphysical monism’ almost always has to do with the ‘substance’ of things, in the sense of what they’re ‘made of’ or ‘instantiated in’. Thus, materialism is by far the most popular metaphysical monism *du jour*. And that’s precisely why I have substituted a different term – to emphasize that such ‘substance monism’ is *not at all* what Descartes is talking about.

Rather, *categorial* monism – and, more to the point, any rejection of it – is, so to speak, ‘up a level’. To deny *this* monism is not to deny – or, at any rate, not *merely* to deny – that everything is made of or instantiated in the same ‘substance’ or ‘stuff’ (for instance, matter). On the contrary, it is the much more fundamental denial that the very word ‘substance’ – and, along with it, words like ‘property’, ‘relation’, ‘event’, ‘state’, ‘process’, and so on – are univocal across the board. But these are all *category* words – hence, the term *categorial* monism.

As Descartes points out, following Castoriadis, this is a denial of the possibility of what Husserl called *formal* – that is, a completely general – *ontology*. He also notes that Heidegger is making a similar point when he denies that (traditional) categories apply to Dasein at all. Rather, Dasein must be understood in terms of *existentialia* – his existential alternatives for categories. Famously (or infamously), Heidegger even claims that the words ‘be’ and ‘possible’ are not univocal across regions.

Now, Descartes does not develop (in this book) a full ontology of the region he calls ‘the mental’ (as opposed to what he calls ‘the psychic’). Instead, he focusses his discussion on a single category word – namely, ‘state’ – but with the clear implication that the claims generalize. Thus, he distinguishes ordinary ‘states of mind’ (or ‘mental states’) from what might be called ‘psychic’ or ‘psychological states’ – namely, internal states of the cognitive machinery that cognitive psychology appeals to. And he argues that these cannot be the same – the terms are not only not synonymous but not even coreferential – because what the word ‘state’ means is profoundly different in the two cases. (And, indeed, it means something yet again in the phrase ‘physical state’).

The first sense (which is the new one) is clearly explained in the following passage:

States of mind [= *mental* states] are historical states and, one might say, civil states. ... If we know that someone is in a certain state of mind, we must accept that he has a history compatible with that state ... [and] we must accord him a civil state compatible with the content of his mind: this person has a status in civil society. (p. 231)

In other words, states of mind are *on a par* – belong in the same *category* – with being the captain of a team, falling behind on your taxes, or owning a house. Indeed, given the importance of the categorial distinction, and hence

the value of marking it verbally, it might be worthwhile to introduce the term: *status of mind*.

Now, I dare to predict that Professors Brandom and Rorty will both find this approach congenial – and so do I. It makes thinking, even when silent, a manifestation of Dasein's being-in-the-world. But it leaves us with the same question we were left with before: What does this imply for *cognitivism*? And I think the answer is essentially the same too. The division of explanatory labor, described above, can allow that there are perfectly legitimate explanatory roles for internal psychological *states*, and, *at the same time*, that there are different but equally legitimate explanatory roles for public mental *statuses*. These 'separate but equal' explanatory roles are not distinguishable *despite* the deep categorial difference between them but precisely *because* of it.

In these remarks, I have been, in a way, *defending* cognitivism against Descombes' critique. But I have certainly not been taking cognitivism's *side* against him. I think the critique is both powerful and compelling. The only issue between us is what exactly it shows.

In his final paragraph, Descombes says: 'I have attempted to show that a mentalist [that is, cognitivist] theory of mind is necessarily incoherent and that it is vulnerable to a decisive holist objection' (p. 247). But I think he can have shown that only with regard to a cognitivism that fundamentally misunderstands itself – in particular, misunderstands itself as a *complete* theory of the mind and human intelligence. To refute that misunderstanding, however, is not to refute cognitivism as such, but only, so to speak, to put it in its place – to cut it down to size. *This*, I believe, Descombes has achieved beautifully and convincingly.

All the same, I do *agree* with Descombes' conviction that cognitivism *is* false (though not incoherent) even when confined to its own proper domain. So I would like to spend my last few pages sketching two arguments, which, if spelled out and sound, might establish that more restricted claim, on which we both agree.

## VI. Epistemic Skills

In the foregoing I have, so to put it, 'saved cognitivism's neck from Descombes' glinting blade' *by* making it 'pull its head in' – *way* in. In particular, it can survive the charge of incoherence by – and only by – seriously restricting its own explanatory ambitions. The fact that many cognitive scientists, never mind their philosophical proselytizers, might resist this restriction is beside the point. Descombes has established beyond doubt that they have no choice. The only option now is to make the best of what's

left. And my aim in what follows is to show that, *even there*, the prospects are bleak.

To begin, let us remind ourselves what the restricted purview of cognitivism is, and what will be required to succeed within that domain. I said earlier that, in order to live up to its promise – solving the mind-body problem, for instance – cognitivism must be a *sufficient* (thorough) account of everything *internal* that is prerequisite for explaining our intelligence. The point at the time was that this might be *all* it had to do, in order to be true and important. The point now is that it *does* at least have to do *that*. For otherwise, there would still be *essential internal* processes that the Frege-Turing-Simon inspiration fails to rescue from the mind-body paradox – and, in that case, the promise is broken. So I'm going to describe two kinds of human phenomena, about each of which I make the following three claims: (i) they are prerequisite to our form of intelligence; (ii) they have an ineliminable inner component; and (iii) that inner component is not cognitive in the relevant sense.

The first of these two kinds of phenomena are what I will call 'epistemic skills'. By this, I don't mean reasoning or problem-solving skills (though it could be that the argument would apply to those as well). Rather, I mean the skills involved in actively investigating and finding out about things. The vast majority of adult human beings have many such skills, and the having of them is obviously prerequisite to at least some of their intelligent ability to get around in the world – both socially and otherwise. I also take it as obvious that skills have an ineliminable inner component. (There are often *outer* components *too*, of course, in the form of equipment, environmental settings, colleagues, and the like – but they won't matter for this argument.)

But why do I think such skills are non-cognitive (in the cognitivists' sense of 'cognitive')? Well, before anything else, let me make clear that I don't claim to have a proof, and that I doubt that any such proof is even possible. So I can only offer a series of plausibility – or, rather, *implausibility* – arguments.

The first of these is, of course, the phenomenology. When I use a measuring instrument (one with which I am familiar and adept), when I identify and catalog specimens (of kinds I know well), when I maintain protocol in a clean-room (as I have done for years), it doesn't *seem like* I have to *think* about it – at least not usually. And the point is even easier for more mundane investigations like checking whether the dishes have been washed or there's enough milk for breakfast. You may protest that none of this *proves* anything, and I've already agreed. Nevertheless, it's not nothing either.

Second, it's not possible to acquire – learn – non-trivial new skills simply by being *told* how to perform them. To be sure, explanation and advice can be very helpful, and sometimes even necessary – but, no matter how articulate and detailed, they *never suffice*. In other words, there's no substitute for being

*shown* how to do it, and practice, practice, practice (preferably with expert criticism). But showing and practice are not obviously cognitive.

Third, the long history of cognitivist attempts to implement skillful capacities, both perceptual and manipulative, is littered with clumsiness and failure. Granted, that may just mean that still more time and research are needed (there has been *some* progress over the years, after all). But in the meantime...

Fourth, more recent *non*-cognitivist attempts to implement such capacities have, in a notably shorter period, achieved conspicuously better results. Models built on neural-network or dynamical systems principles deserve particular mention. (Not that *anybody* has yet built – or even come close to building – a machine that can spot a suspicious-looking character in the back of the Mini-Mart, or drive safely in traffic.)

And, finally, there's never in fact been any reason to believe cognitivism *could* account for skillful capacities, other than the lame 'What else could it be?' argument. As Fodor once said, 'Cognitivism is the only game in town', or, in Neisser's nicer phrase, 'the only straw floating'. The difference now, as just noted, is that there actually are some other straws – and some of them are rather less soggy than cognitivism is getting to be.

I repeat, none of this is a knock-down refutation – cognitivism may yet pull a rabbit out of a hat. Even so, I think the evidence suggests it would not be prudent to hold one's breath.

## VII. Resolute Stands

The second kind of phenomenon I want to cite against cognitivism is the ability to be *resolute* or to *take a stand*.<sup>1</sup> While I do use the Heideggerian term deliberately, I will not be drawing on any of his specific doctrines, and what I mean by it may be broader than what he did. As with skills, I simply take it for granted that resolve includes an ineliminable inner component. But that it is prerequisite for intelligence will require some explanation.

Among the characteristic exercises of intelligence is discerning the true from the false. But neither ordinary perceptual observations, nor elaborate, technically assisted observations, wear their truth or falsity on their sleeves. So there must be some further way to choose among them which to accept. The obvious candidate is corroboration: testimony from others, repeating the observation, getting the same result a different way, and so on. But all of these standard procedures, and many others like them, presuppose a prior ability to distinguish the possible from the impossible in combinations of results. Without that, the various individual observations have no bearing on one another.

Suppose, for instance, you measure the speed of the Mississippi River at

Memphis on Tuesday, and I measure it at Minneapolis on Thursday – and we get *different* results. Given what we're measuring, there's not much to say but 'Gee, that's interesting'. By contrast, if you measure the speed of light in a vacuum at Memphis on Tuesday, I measure it at Minneapolis on Thursday, and we get different results, then we know at least one of us got it wrong. Why the difference? Because it's a law of nature that the speed of light in a vacuum is always and everywhere the same – which is to say: it's *impossible* for that speed to be different at different times or places.

Symmetrically, if we get the *same* answer, then our results corroborate one another – and for the same reason: given the law of nature, it's *impossible* that mine should be right and yours wrong. By contrast, those measurements of the speed of the Mississippi can't support one another any more than they can conflict, precisely because there's no constraint on how they *must* be related. Therefore, and quite generally, the ability to discern the true from the false *presupposes* the ability to distinguish the possible from the impossible.

But merely *distinguishing* them is not enough – as Lewis Carroll might have taught us. For, suppose we adapt his little story about the Tortoise and Achilles this way. The Tortoise agrees that A and B are not compossible, and then invites Achilles to *force* upon him, logically, the conclusion that at least one must be rejected. Achilles surmises that the Tortoise has yet to accept the *hypothetical* thesis that *if* A and B are not compossible *then* one must be rejected. But, with that, the trap has already sprung. The Tortoise calmly accepts the hypothetical, and still asks how he is *forced* – leaving Achilles with nothing but a hopeless regress of further hypotheticals.

The point, clearly, is not to get off the train early, but to refuse to get on in the first place. To deem A and B incompossible *just is* to be *unable* – in a certain way – to accept the two together. That's why merely *drawing* the distinction is not enough: the ability to discern the true from the false presupposes a distinction not in what one notices, but in what one is *able to* accept. What the Tortoise does not see (or at least pretends not to see) is that he is *already* 'forced': as long as he accepts the premises, he *cannot* reject the conclusion. But the 'unable' and 'cannot' here are of a very special sort. They are no restriction of human freedom, but derive, on the contrary, from its purest exercise.

When Luther concluded his theses with 'Here I stand, I can do no other', he was neither claiming nor exhibiting any lack of freedom, but rather manifesting it to the full. This is an instance – an extraordinary one, to be sure – of what I mean by taking a resolute stand. To take such a stand is *freely to impose upon oneself* binding requirements or standards. This is not to be confused with acknowledging or acquiescing in requirements imposed from elsewhere, nor with acquiring reliable dispositions. Rather, it is freely

*requiring* something of oneself – *binding* oneself – in a way that one wasn't before.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, to *understand* impossibility or entailment is neither to know any facts or rules nor to acquire any dispositions, but freely to make oneself *unable* to accept impossibles, or accept the premises of transparently valid inferences without accepting the conclusions. That is the only 'force' they have. Achilles' failing is not that he confused rules with moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons, but that he mistook reasoning for a game.

I began this section by urging that discerning the true from the false is a characteristic exercise of intelligence, and that it presupposes the understanding of impossibility. I have since argued that the latter presupposes freely taking a stand. Therefore, there can be no satisfactory account of human intelligence without an account of freedom and resoluteness. So it remains only to show that this is a prescription cognitivism cannot fill.

The Frege-Turing-Simon inspiration takes it for granted that cognitive states are roughly what Russell called 'propositional attitudes', that these attitudes are syntactically represented within the system, and that cognitive processes (thinking and reasoning, for instance) are formal operations on those representations. But neither the ability to take a resolute stand, nor any stand so taken, is anything like either a formal operation or a propositional attitude.

The ability to take a stand must be understood as the ability freely to bind oneself – subject oneself to laws or standards – and thereby perhaps form or transform who one is. For instance, in coming to understand the natural numbers and simple equations, one binds oneself to the basic principles of arithmetic. This is nothing like a change of beliefs and desires, but an alteration in what one can and must do. At the opposite extreme, a religious, political, or scientific conversion, whatever doctrinal content may be at stake, is also certainly not just a change of propositional attitudes. But here the stakes are more dramatic: such a transformation re-aligns how one can and must describe, value, and judge things; find them interesting, scary, promising, suspicious, surprising, boring, or appalling; and, in so doing, discover one's own loyalties, solace, and demons.

Neither is the stand so taken any combination of attitudes toward propositions, no matter how generalized. Rather, it's more like an acquired character trait, but distinctive among such traits in that it is the result of a self-forming of the individual in regard to how he or she can and cannot but relate to the world in general, or some part of it.

To bring the point and power of these modalities home, I would like to close with a little example. It's a rather personal example, involving *you*. I now invite – nay, challenge – *you*, right now, to *believe* the following thesis: The Earth's moon is, at this very moment, both full and new. I submit that you

*cannot* do it. Perhaps as a child you could have, but not anymore. The problem is not that the thesis is self-contradictory or otherwise ill-formed. No, the obstacle is *you*: you know perfectly well that the moon's being full now and new now are not compossible. And, in knowing and understanding that, you simply *cannot* – you will not *let* yourself – believe (or even seriously entertain) the impossible combination.

I have assumed that resolute stands involve an ineliminable inner component; I have argued that they are prerequisite for intelligence (because they are prerequisite to the ability to discern the true from the false); and I have argued that neither the ability to take such stands nor the stands so taken can be understood with the resources available to cognitivism. I therefore conclude again, and this time less tentatively, that, even within the restricted purview to which Descombes' powerful arguments have already confined it, cognitivism cannot keep its promises.

In other words, the division of explanatory labor does not suffice, after all, to save an important role for cognitivism.

## VIII. Conclusion

I have argued that Descombes' elegant treatise fails of its professed aim of showing that the cognitivist program is incoherent. But, in so doing, it brilliantly succeeds at another aim, an aim that is only slightly less ambitious, and no less important. Namely, it shows conclusively that cognitivism could not possibly be everything it pretends, but rather, in order not to be incoherent, must settle for something dramatically scaled-down and less grand. That argument leaves open the narrower question of whether cognitivism can succeed even within that small corner into which Descombes has so cleanly swept it. And I have tried to join forces with the overall endeavor – in a way that I hope is acceptable to Descombes – by doing my best to answer that last remaining question in the negative.

## NOTES

1 It is important to appreciate that what is meant here by 'taking a resolute stand' isn't at all what Brandom means by 'committing oneself' or 'taking a stand' – which is a way of entering into a *social* status or obligation (like accepting a job or taking out a loan). Specific details aside, the qualitative difference is the one Heidegger draws between 'owned' and 'fallen' senses of words like 'anxiety', 'death', 'conscience', and 'responsibility'. Brandom's 'social practice' sense of undertaking a commitment or taking a stand is what Heidegger would call a public or *das Man* sense.

2 Having resolute stands in our repertoire is presumably a cultural-historical achievement, passed down and refined through the generations. But it doesn't follow that the stands

themselves are in any way social institutions or statuses. The ability to dig holes with shovels is likewise part of our cultural heritage; but actually digging one need in no way be a social performance, nor, having done so, a social status.

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John Haugeland, Department of Philosophy, 122 Wiebold, University of Chicago, 1010 E. 59th Street, Chicago IL 60637, USA. E-mail: [j-haugeland@uchicago.edu](mailto:j-haugeland@uchicago.edu)