

INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT DESCOMBES

Vincent Descombes is a French philosopher. He has taught at the University of Montréal, Johns Hopkins University, and Emory University. Presently, he is director of studies at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris, and regular visiting professor at the University of Chicago in the Department of Romance. Descombes's main areas of research are in the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language and philosophy of literature. The following interview covers various aspects of his research in the philosophy of mind and language: semantic anti-realism, phenomenology, the content of mental states, description and transparency, the linguistic turn, metaphysics and linguistic analysis, fictional names and animal intentionality.

Vincent Descombes's Prologue

First, it might be a good idea to begin by clarifying my position in the answers I will give to your questions. *Objects of All Sorts* is a book I published in 1983. At that time, I was trying to extricate myself from the philosophical ways of thinking which were predominant at that time in French philosophy: on the one hand, phenomenology; on the other hand post-structuralist semiotics. Today, I no longer feel the same need. So today, on many points, I might express myself in a different way; but the content would be quite the same.

1. *Philosophy and Semantic Anti-Realism*

Praxis: In *Objects of All Sorts*, you appear to advocate the view that the task of philosophy is to state the 'conditions for the understanding of what is said in a certain "type of statement"' (p. 13). You explain this as a task of investigating the possibility of an 'object's *being* in one way or another way' (p. 13). A commitment to the truth of both of these claims seems to entail a commitment to the position that reality is inherently knowable through the use of language: a form of semantic anti-realism. Are you in fact committed to such a position? If so, on what basis do you defend the position?

VD: I am not sure about the import of “anti-realism”. I suppose it is just an equivalent for “idealism”, which comes, it seems to me, in two ways : either “phenomenalism”, or “constructivism”. I am certainly not an idealist on most topics, but this does not mean that there is no justification for idealism in some fields, such as, e.g., the existence of numbers or the existence of ideal objects (the North Pole, the Golden Rule, etc.).

But the important point to make here is that the concept of being, or existence, is not univocal. Therefore, we should pay attention to categorical differences between “entities” or “objects”. I like the way Wittgenstein explains it in the *Blue Book* (1969, p. 64): you can (if you want) say that a railway train, a railway incident and a railway law are ‘different kinds of objects’, but then you don’t construe ‘different kinds of objects’ as when you speak of three kinds of objects in the same category, as e.g. a railway train, a railway station and a railway car. There is more on ontology in my answer to question 9.

Praxis: Semantic anti-realism may be expressed as the thesis that there are no verification-transcendent truth-conditions, i.e. no propositions whose truth-value could not in principle be established. Such a position may also be expressed as the claim that being and intelligibility are co-extensive. Semantic anti-realism was attributed to Wittgenstein by the late Sir Michael Dummett. If you are committed to the position that every fact about the property of an object is necessarily expressible in language, then it would seem that your position does amount to semantic anti-realism. Is this not the case?

VD: I would be committed to such a “semantic anti-realism” if I was holding a verificationist theory of meaningful propositions. But I don’t, and I think Dummett was wrong to attribute such a position to Wittgenstein. (I have dealt more fully with that topic in my paper at the 2001 Wittgenstein Conference in Nice, cf. “Le Consensus Humain Décide-t-il du Vrai et du Faux?”).

2. Husserl, Heidegger, and the Phenomenological Reduction

Praxis: In *Objects of All Sorts*, you criticise Husserl for arguing from the justifiability of the phenomenological reduction to the dependence of objects upon the subject. To what extent do you believe that the same charge may be levelled at Heidegger? For Heidegger appears to argue from the fact that being is understood essentially by man to facts about the ways in which things have being. Do you believe that your own position on the relationship between language and the world escapes this criticism?

VD: It is true that Heidegger is supposed to have overcome Husserl's transcendental idealism. If we take seriously his notion of "being in the world", it seems that there is no longer any way we could perform the phenomenological reduction.

However, it is not clear to me whether Heidegger really wanted to get rid of idealism as such. When we turn to the various senses of "to be", we discover that Heidegger is distinguishing between the various ways we look at things: either in a disinterested and factual manner (*Vorhandenheit*) or as elements of our practical dealing with the world (*Zuhandenheit*). Of course, he is no longer reducing the being of objects to their way of being given in consciousness. Still, his distinction implies some kind of reduction of the *meaning* of the word "being" to various attitudes of the human subject.

Praxis: Your description of Heidegger's treatment of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* presents Heidegger as a philosopher concerned solely with describing our experience of entities. However, there are a number of passages in *Being and Time* which imply that Heidegger is instead concerned with ontology in a more or less traditional sense. Firstly, during his discussion of *Zuhandenheit*, Heidegger states that he is concerned with the being of entities (1967, 66-67). Secondly, Heidegger says that an enquiry into the being of entities is an enquiry into the categories, i.e. the basic ontological concepts, which must be used in any thought or talk (*logos*) about those entities (1967, 44-45). So, consider the following passage from *Being and Time*:

Basic-concepts are the determinations in which the subject-area underlying all the thematic objects of a science reaches an understanding that is prior and guides all positive investigation. The genuine designation and grounding of these concepts is thus obtained only in a corresponding prior exploration of the subject-area itself. But so far as each of these areas is obtained from the district of entities itself, this means that such prior research that draws out the basic-concepts is nothing other than interpretation of these entities in the basic-constitution of their being. (1967, pp. 10-11; translation by Howard Kelly)

In other words, an enquiry into the being of an entity is ordered towards ascertaining the basic concepts which may be used to think and talk about the entity. Does your interpretation of Heidegger's position differ?

VD: Heidegger is certainly right to maintain that any scientific investigation in a particular "region" presupposes a philosophical definition of that domain, and therefore an "ontology". As you suggest, there is some similarity between such a view and the traditional distinction between the *quid sit* question and the *an sit* one: before undertaking an inquiry, we have to define what we are looking for (in terms of entities and characteristics), what are the criteria of identity, etc.

In other words, Heidegger is right to oppose a positivistic view of science according to which you could do a research, let say in biology, without taking any stand on the question whether there is a specific mode of being for living beings. But it is important to stress two points. First, in that case, the "basic concepts" to be clarified by a philosophical inquiry would be the basic concepts of biology. We are not speaking of a general ontology for thinking about unspecified "entities" or "objects". Second, I don't see that this requirement of an ontological clarification of our thinking has any bearing on the question whether the distinction between *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* is ontological as opposed to merely phenomenological.

Praxis: With regard to your interpretation of Husserl's notion of the phenomenological reduction, it seems that Alva Noë would disagree with your interpretation. For whereas you seem to suggest that the phenomenological reduction involves a suspension of belief in the existence of entities other than the self and its acts, Noë claims that the purpose of

the phenomenological reduction 'is not to enable *introspection* unencumbered by concern with matters of fact, but rather, to enable one to attend to the world in a new way, with an interest in the world as it presents itself for us in experience' (2009, 238). Heidegger could well endorse such a "reduction" and, indeed, he seems to do so, as during his discussion of *Zuhandenheit* in *Being and Time* he indicates that he seeks knowledge of the being of intraworldly entities 'as they are encountered in concern' (1967, 67). That is, Heidegger intends to acquire knowledge of intraworldly entities *insofar as* they are the objects of a certain kind of experience; and his recognition of being-in-the-world seems not to be in conflict with this intention.

VD: Alva Noë's version of the phenomenological reduction would be fine if we took phenomenology to be nothing other than a kind of descriptive psychology. Now, of course, Husserl told us a different story in the *Cartesian Meditations*. Heidegger, it seems to me, would have rejected both versions of "reduction", either as a mere descriptive tool for psychology, or as a conversion of the human philosopher into a transcendental Ego.

3. The Content of Perception

Praxis: In *Objects of All Sorts*, you claim that '[t]he real given is not a totality of lived states. It is a totality of ways of speaking' (p. 59). You explain this claim when you say that '[t]he difference between intentional acts is manifest in the difference between ways of saying that we are performing them. As a result, the description of a mental act is a description of the language of this act' (p.59). At least as far as perception is concerned, it would seem that the majority of analytic philosophers today would agree with you on this score, as it is the orthodox view in the philosophy of perception that perception is to be characterised by its *representational* content; and such content is propositional. However, Bill Brewer has taken issue with this position on the grounds that to say that perception has propositional content is to introduce an element of cognition into perception which is unwarranted (2006). What is your stance on this debate? In particular, what relationship do you take to hold between the language we use to talk about perception and the nature of perception itself?

VD: On the topic of intentionality, I find very helpful the distinctions once drawn by Arthur Prior. Philosophers use to speak of our acts of thinking being directed towards objects or having objects. But we can construe the phrase “object of thought” in three ways. Among these ways, only one is propositional. The object of my thinking can be said to be, he writes: (i) exactly *what I think*, e.g. that grass is green; (ii) *what I think about grass*, i.e. that it is green; (iii) *what I think about*, namely grass.

Certainly, an experience of visual perception can be reported in two ways : “I see a tree”, “I see that there is a tree”. It is a matter of context whether we express ourselves one way or the other.

Praxis: When you say that it is a matter of context whether we speak of an act of seeing, say, as a relation to a particular entity or as an act with propositional content, do you mean to imply that there is no fact of the matter as to whether an act of seeing is either, or both, a relation to a particular entity or/and an act with propositional content? Bill Brewer (2006), for example, holds that the claim that perception involves propositional content threatens the, seemingly unimpeachable, datum that perception involves a relation to a particular entity, as it imports an element of generality into perception. Do you consider Brewer’s fears to be ill-founded?

VD: We don’t have to decide whether visual perception is to be expressed as a transitive activity (“I see a tree”) or a propositional attitude (“I see that there is tree”, i.e. I am cognizant in the visual way of the presence of a tree). We need both forms of expression.

By the way, there seems to be as much generality in “I see a tree” than in “I see that there is a tree”, since seeing a tree amounts to seeing something *as (being) a tree*.

4. Mental States and Ordinary Language

Praxis: In *Objects of All Sorts*, you write:

From every difference that comes to light in the logical form of various kinds of statement, we deduce a difference in psychological acts, states, or dispositions. [...] [T]he description of mental acts implies an analysis of the meaning of those

statements that “express” them. Only in this way can we elucidate psychological concepts’. (p. 59)

We have three questions regarding the position outlined in this passage. First, you say that it is the logical form of various kinds of statement which reveals which types of mental state there are. But how is the logical form of statements about mental states to be uncovered? It is arguable that the taxonomy of mental states to be found in ordinary language is inadequate, since it merely reflects a pre-scientific ‘folk psychology’. Consider terms for emotions, for instance. Yet your reference to the *logical form* of statements about mental states, and your claim that analysis is the *only* way in which we can elucidate psychological concepts, implies that the truth about mental states is to be discovered by analysing statements of ordinary language. Do you deny that science has a role to play in establishing the truth about mental states? If so, how does science fit into your analysis-centric philosophy of mind?

VD: In *Objects of All Sorts*, my way of putting the matter was somehow unsophisticated and dogmatic. But I have dealt in a much more detailed manner with these questions in my book *La Denrée Mentale* (translated as *The Mind’s Provisions*) and its sequel *Les Institutions du Sens* (a translation of which will be published by Harvard UP). Basically, the idea is that a scientific psychology cannot cut itself off from the ordinary psychological vocabulary and totally replace it with an entirely new taxonomy. The same would be true for other human sciences such as sociology, social anthropology or political science. Which does not mean that psychology is not a natural science. What it means is that it is in the nature of the human being to be a linguistic animal, so that we cannot define “mental states”, “emotions”, etc., apart from the way in which they are expressed, either in human behaviour or in a linguistic articulated form.

Praxis: Would you be able to provide a summary of your reasons for holding that ‘a scientific psychology cannot cut itself from the ordinary psychological vocabulary and totally replace it with an entirely new taxonomy’? In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty famously followed Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey in seeking to ‘break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes, rather than to provide

“grounding” for the intuitions and customs of the present’ (1980, pp. 11-12). In addition, in an elucidation of this aim, Rorty wrote:

In my Wittgensteinian view, an intuition is never anything more or less than familiarity with a language-game, so to discover the source of our intuitions is to relive the history of the philosophical language-game we find ourselves playing. (p. 34)

What, in particular, would you say in response to an advocate of Rorty’s position?

VD: To oppose a “scientific psychology” to what is supposed to be a “folk psychology” is to be totally confused about the status of our psychological vocabulary, if what we mean by that is e.g. our vocabulary for emotions. As was pointed out by Heidegger, Aristotle’s psychology of emotions is to be found in his *Art of Rhetoric*. In other words, our vocabulary for emotions is part of the way we understand people and deal with them, it is not to be assimilated to a primitive classification of natural kinds which could give way to a more sophisticated one.

To Rorty’s advocate, I would answer that Wittgenstein has offered a way out of the disastrous alternative for philosophers, *either* to provide our present (contingent) habits of thought with a (transcendent) foundation, *or* to create (out of nothing and from nowhere) an entirely new outlook. Such an alternative sounds to me to be closer to Deleuze’s idea of philosophy than to Wittgenstein’s. But it is disastrous since in both cases, we are supposed to have found a way to step out of our current practices in order to accomplish our philosophical task.

But on that point, it is enough to quote Wittgenstein about the alleged need for a foundation of mathematics by means of pure logic:

[T]each it to us and then you have laid its foundations. (1974, p. 297)

Praxis: The second question concerning the passage quoted at the beginning of question 4 is as follows. You say that the description of mental acts implies an analysis of the meaning of those statements that express them and that this is the *only* way in which we

can elucidate psychological concepts. Does this claim commit you to a denial of the existence of components of mental states that are not expressible in language? Many contemporary analytic philosophers hold that perceptual states have a qualitative content which although perhaps related to the propositional content of such a state, is not fully capturable in language. The position that perceptual states have non-conceptual, but yet still representational, content is also defended. Do you deny the existence of perceptual content of this kind? If so, what are your reasons for doing so?

VD: Tell me what “qualia” are supposed to be – apart from being ineffable – and I will tell you what I think of them on the basis of your linguistic description and categorization of them.

Praxis: In the most common formulation of the idea of qualia, it is suggested that there is *something it is like* to undergo a particular experience, that is, that the experience in question *feels* a certain way to the subject. In defence of this claim, it is typically said that such qualities are evident in introspection. Do you deny the coherence of such an idea? If so, on what basis?

VD: “What it is like to undergo such-and-such experience”. Such a phrase is of course idiomatic English, but nevertheless quite confusing. You might be surprised to learn that it is almost impossible to translate it adequately in French. Why is it confusing? Because it suggests that we should try to identify undergoing an experience of type A by comparing it to something else, but that it does so without providing a term of comparison B from which we could draw the description of A-type experiences.

Here I can only refer you to the devastating criticism aimed by Peter Hacker at the philosophical use of phrases such as “what it is like to be” or “what it is like to feel” (e.g. in Bennett and Hacker, 2009, p. 271 sq.)

4. Phenomenological Description and Transparency

Praxis: Our third question is: how does your account of phenomenological description, as discussed in question 4, accommodate the claim that experiences are ‘transparent’: that is, the claim that ‘[i]n turning one’s mind inward to attend to the experience, one seems to end up concentrating on what is outside again, on external features or properties’ (Tye, 1995, p. 30)?

VD: Of course, “turning one’s mind inward” is just a metaphor for focusing one’s attention on one’s experience. Here, my way of dealing with the topic of “describing one’s experience” would be to turn to literary criticism. (In fact, this is exactly what I did in my essay on Proust, translated as *Proust : philosophy of the Novel*, at Stanford UP.) How does a writer makes clear that she is not describing just the landscape, but her experience of looking at the landscape? Here, Wittgenstein’s notion of “experiential content” (*Erlebnisinhalt*) is very helpful.

Praxis: Question 4 was concerned specifically with the accommodation of the *transparency* claim within your construal of phenomenological description as a description of our ways of speaking about experiences, as opposed to a description of the experiences *per se*. Would you mind elaborating on your response to the question of how this datum would thus be accommodated?

VD: Suppose I am told to describe *what I am now seeing*. Such a request can be understood in two ways, since “what I am now seeing” can be taken to refer *either* to the objects that are there to be seen from my present viewpoint, *or* to the intentional content of my visual experience. In the first case, I would have to undertake a more careful inspection of the items present in front of me in order to provide a physical description of them. I would have to move around them, to take measurements, etc. In the second case, I would have to focus on the *Erlebnisinhalt* of my present perception. And then, as Wittgenstein said, I could make a drawing showing how the scene strikes me, or I could

try to produce a literary description of it. In other words, I would not be concerned with *what is there*, but rather with *how whatever is there looks to me*.

5. Past the Linguistic Turn

Praxis: In ‘Past the Linguistic Turn?’ (2006), Timothy Williamson makes the claim that the primary concern of analytical philosophy is no longer the study of thought via language. Williamson says that ‘the philosophy of mind has famously displaced the philosophy of language at the centre of much current debate’ (p. 4). Do you believe that linguistic philosophy, as you conceive of it, is alive and well?

VD: I cannot agree with that claim, but I would not make a fuss about “linguistic philosophy”, since that label seems to me to have been just an umbrella for a variety of very different positions. I have seen around me bright people turning from their first involvement with linguistic analysis to cognitive psychology. But I have observed that their psychological views are still shaped by their former commitment to linguistic analysis. Just think of John Searle. His work on intentionality was clearly conducted as a piece of linguistic philosophy. For instance, the idea that “intentionality” is “directedness” or “being representational” can only come to a philosopher trying to explain the way physical entities or events can become linguistic signs. A signpost is, in a way, directed at something or literally *pointing to it*. It is just by accepting to transfer this kind of description from linguistic signs to mental states that you can say the same of mental states.

Praxis: You attribute to Searle the claim that the interpretation of intentionality in terms of the metaphor of directedness could come to a philosopher only by way of a desire to explain the constitution of physical entities as linguistic signs. Now, in *Intentionality*, Searle adverts to the fact that intentional ‘directedness’ is a metaphor (1980, 4); and you do the same in *The Mind’s Provisions* (p. 23-24). Do you believe that a non-metaphorical analysis of intentionality can be provided? If so, how would such an analysis be provided?

VD: The problem with Searle’s explanation of intentionality is not that it is metaphorical or analogical. Rather, it is that the metaphor does not help us to make sense of intentionality. We certainly can say that signposts are pointing to something (beyond themselves), since we know how to use signposts in order to travel in the right direction. But what would it mean for “mental states” to be *pointing beyond themselves* or *directed at objects*? Do we use our mental states in order to find our way to the intended objects? What is confusing here is the suggestion that somehow mental states are “natural” signposts whereas ordinary signposts are just so by convention.

In my book *Les institutions du Sens*, I have argued – following Anscombe’s lead in her seminal paper “The Intentionality of Sensation” – that intentionality should be characterised and defined as a “grammatical feature” of some verbs. Thanks to our having a class of intentional verbs in our language, we can ascribe thoughts and experiences to people in *oratio obliqua* without endorsing their beliefs about what is there.

6. Fictional Names

Praxis: In *Objects of All Sorts*, you discuss fictional names. What is your position on empty names? For instance, do you believe that an utterance of ‘Santa Claus is a man’ can be true, in spite of the fact that the subject term appears not to refer?

VD: Fictional names are empty names. When people are using the empty name “Santa Claus”, they make believe they are speaking of a man. E.g., in French, you would have to put all the adjectives and participles in the masculine gender (“Le Père Noël est fatigué”).

Praxis: Question 8 concerned specifically the question of whether predications featuring empty names can be true; and, if indeed they can be true, how this can be. What is your favoured alternative to Meinongianism?

VD: Since the term “Santa Klaus” is not really the name of a real person, it is not really a name. Therefore, “Santa Klaus is a man” is not really a predication about anything. What is true, then, is just that people are happy to use the words “Santa Klaus” *as if* they were naming an old man coming from the North, etc.

7. Metaphysics and Linguistic Analysis

Praxis: What role do you believe the analysis of language should play in settling questions of ontology?

VD: We have to make clear what we mean by “ontology”. Some philosophers are following Quine in taking the word to mean an inventory of everything we are “ontologically” committed to. Then we are back to Russell’s image of an “inventory of the furniture of the world”, which implies that we can count all the items *in the same category*.

I certainly accept Quine’s idea of an ontological commitment of our use of referential expressions. Now this analytical tool doesn’t impose on us a further thesis about there being just one mode of being. I can be committed to the idea that *there are rules*, e.g. rules of such-and-such game, without being committed to the further claim that *rules are entities like trees and rocks and people*.

So the kind of linguistic analysis we need, it seems to me, is a grammatical or syntactical one. Just as the linguist should remind us that not all words belong to just one category (such as names), the philosopher should remind herself that not all “entities” belong to just one category (such as material objects).

Praxis: You thus affirm a distinction between ontological categories. What do you hold ontological categories to be – for example, are they concepts or properties? – and how do ontological categories differ from one another?

VD: Well, I try to keep to the classical definition of a categorical difference as a difference in the form of predication (Aristotle's *schema tès categorias*). Therefore, categories are classes of predicates. Why do we need to distinguish between "categories"? Precisely because we cannot reduce all our predications to a single form (ascribing a "property" to an object). E.g. it might be a property of this man Socrates *to be seated* (at present), but it is not a property of this man Socrates *to be human*. Otherwise we should be able to think of this man Socrates as becoming (or having previously been) other than human. These differences are indeed ontological since they have to do with the mode of being of the various entities we acknowledge (the humanity of Socrates, the position of Socrates, etc.)

Praxis: It seems that the quotations from Rorty deployed in the follow-up to question (4) may also be levelled against your proposed ontological methodology. Does your method for ontology involve a commitment to the position that questions of ontology, in a broadly Quinean sense, are to be settled by analysing a natural language as it in fact is? Or is there a place for *reform* of language, in the manner Rorty envisaged?

VD: For us, linguistic animals, there is obviously room for *reforming* some of our linguistic habits. Insofar as these reforms are supposed to be philosophical innovations, they will always be *local* reforms, to be explained and carried out from within our global capacity for language. What would be wrong is to suggest that at some point we would be able to step out of the whole of our linguistic institutions in order to accomplish the philosophical reform.

As to the idea that ontology could be reduced to the mere study of a natural language, I would object that a philosophical grammar is interested in what makes sense, not in the peculiarities of this or that language (Latin, English or whatever).

I don't think that Rorty found these views of mine uncongenial [cf. his paper on *The Mind's Provisions* (2004, pp. 219-235)].

8. Animal Intentionality

Praxis: In *Objects of All Sorts*, you claim that ‘the difference between intentional acts is manifest in the difference between ways of saying that we are performing them’ (p. 59). What significance does this have for an account of the intentional states of non-human animals?

VD: It is the same with non-human animal as with babies. We can understand them in so far as we can take their non-linguistic behaviour as expressive of their needs, desires and beliefs.

Praxis: Do you not believe that thus taking a non-human animal’s non-linguistic behaviour as expressive of its intentional states is in danger of falling foul of anthropomorphism? In your view, is there any way in which a genuine understanding of the mental life of non-human animals may be obtained?

VD: Human beings are human animals, ain’t they? So it is quite natural for us to ascribe thoughts to non-human animals and there is nothing wrong with this kind of “anthropomorphism”. Of course, the only thoughts we can ascribe to them are *animal* thoughts, i.e. thoughts that can be expressed in a non-linguistic behaviour, as opposed to specifically *human* thoughts, which require for their identification the possibility of a linguistic expression.

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