
”I” and ”Descombes”, the hammer and the nail ?

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Résumé

For several decades following its publication, Elizabeth Anscombe’s essay ” The first person ” was usually cited as an example of an illuminating absurdity, her ” extraordinary(1) ” or ” bizarre(2) ” conclusion – that the word ” I ” does not refer to its speaker – being one that we ought to find ” barely credible(3) ”, indeed ” difficult to understand at all(4) ”. More recently, this consensus has shifted, with a number of philosophers arguing that Anscombe’s doctrines are not only defensible, but key to preserving our ordinary conception of self-conscious thought.

My talk will consider a work in this genre, namely Vincent Descombes’ ” Le marteau, le maillet et le clout ”. I begin by introducing Descombes’ reading of Anscombe’s essay, emphasizing his argument that Anscombe’s conclusion is neither contrary to common sense nor aligned with the Lichtenbertian ” impersonalist ” account of first-person thought.

Having done this, I challenge one part of Descombes’ interpretation of Anscombe’s conclusion, namely his suggested assimilation of the first-person pronouns to indexical terms like ” here ” and ” now ”. I argue that it is possible to use a word like ” now ” to specify a time that is different from the time that one intends to specify, as when I say that something will happen *now* but it only happens later. With the use of ” I ”, however, there is no such possibility. For example, if I mistake someone in a photograph for myself, then if I point to this person and say ” I ”, this word will *not* specify the person I point to. This undermines the suggestion that the words ” I ” and ” Descombes ” share the same metaphorical relation of hammer to nail as do ” now ” and ” five o’clock ”, or ” here ” and ” Chicago ”.

(1) Evans, 1982, p. 215

(2) Bermúdez, 1998, p. 16

(3) Peacocke, 2008, p. 80

(4) Kripke, 2011, p. 312

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