


1-1-1972

Comment on Dewart's Language and Religion

John Catan
The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Epistemology Commons](#), [Esthetics Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Logic and foundations of mathematics Commons](#), [Metaphysics Commons](#), [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Catan, John (1972) "Comment on Dewart's Language and Religion," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol3/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmayers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



JOHN CATAN

Associate Professor of Philosophy

S.U.C. Brockport

COMMENT ON DEWART'S LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

by

John Catan

Professor Dewart's paper is an attempt to criticize a proto-phenomenal conception of the human mind as exemplified in the Kantian categories of the understanding. His attack on these categories is to show that they are contingent and therefore not universally valid. Dewart replaces these Kantian categories with linguistic or semantic categories which to my mind, still retain their old Kantian character of necessitating certain conclusions about language. The pivotal illustration in the negative criticism of the Kantian categories, especially causality, is that of the natural phenomenologist, the Indonesian. Having disposed of his Kantian adversary, he proceeds to offer, to those who have been bereaved, some conceptual consolation in the form of a hope for a third concept which will supersede the antinomy between the concept of nature and the concept of supernature. But Professor Dewart, to his credit, recognizes the essentially futile hope that yet another concept will aid us in the existential situation by pointing out the entrenched cultural forces to which the concepts in question correspond.

This rather concise summary of the thesis of Professor Dewart's paper would be incomplete without mentioning the specific historical details upon which the paper rests. It seems to me that here he is in need of some important qualifications. For example, Professor Dewart says in the first sentence of his paper that "During most of the history of Greek-Western philosophy there was an assumption of a certain concept of language called the semantic concept of language i.e., speech is the outward and bodily sign of an inner, mental experience." He then singles out the implication that sign implies that human consciousness and thought in particular are complete in their own nature and that speech is likewise complete apart from what has been experienced and thought. If what Dewart means is that a sign must *be* a sign before it signifies, I would readily grant the statement in agreement with Aristotle in *De Int.* 16 a 3-4, "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words." But there is no necessity to conclude, as Dewart does, that there is a necessary temporal priority of mental experience in relation to spoken words, just as there is no necessary temporal priority of spoken words in relation to written words. Thus one can grant with Dewart that speech or mental experiences or written words are complete in themselves, i.e., have a nature and still not deny that they can influence one another or be causally related. The sticking point which is nowhere cleared up by Professor Dewart is precisely what kind of causality is he denying to speech when he says that "speech can have no active role in the formation of thought." It would seem *prima facie* false to say that my utterance which is complete e.g., a question, does not influence my respondent's thought and/or his verbal response to

COMMENT ON DEWART'S LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

me. In the case of myself, if I ask a question, and the nuances in the meaning of the question have not occurred to me, but that in uttering the question, I realize something and then either do not complete the utterance or immediately append a disclaimer so that my question is understood correctly, this seems to be an influence of speech on a completed thought. Thus there seems to be an "active role" for speech.

Central to Professor Dewart's thesis is the notion that language is a way of perceiving things. To put it more formally, language establishes the conditions for the possibility of perceiving things. Once we realize the debilitating nature of this fact we will not be so confident about our conceptions nor our world. The difficulty with this thesis is that it seems to be unfalsifiable. Thus that language is not a way of perceiving seems to be true e.g. viewed as a transactional field but trivial. In a sense Dewart is offering us a metaphysical view equally as embracing as the one he is attacking. Now either there is a way of judging this dispute or there isn't. If there is, then Dewart's criticism is trivial; if there isn't, then Dewart's view of language is one of many and the one he attacks is equally valid or invalid as his own view. Thus it does not seem to be a strictly intellectual matter, but some other basis of preference rather than truth must be involved.

The challenge in Professor Dewart's position is that he is examining the sources of knowledge, what used to be called experience and reason. He has added a third which he calls language. Plato in the dialogue the *Meno* when showing that knowledge is re-cognition had set only one condition for the demonstration, "Does the boy know Greek?" he asked (*Meno* 82B). The conclusion of the demonstration is that the boy knew something beyond this world. The conclusion that Professor Dewart reaches in proposing language as the condition for the possibility of perceiving is that there is no world to know neither here nor there. The objects of our perceptions are our perceptions. If we have problems with our perceptions the solution is obvious: change the perceptions. Of course, new problems will arise in our new world, but the solution is near at hand: change the perceptions again, or more rigorously, learn a new language—preferably one outside the Indo-European group.