Comment on Dewart's Language and Religion

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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
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 trans-
actional 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 con-
clusion 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 percep-
tions. 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.