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The medium of signs: nominalism, language and the philosophy of mind in the early thought of Dugald Stewart

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Abstract

In 1792 Dugald Stewart published *Elements of the philosophy of the human mind*. In its section on abstraction he declared himself to be a nominalist. Although a few scholars have made brief reference to this position, no sustained attention has been given to the central role that it played within Stewart's early philosophy of mind. It is therefore the purpose of this essay to unpack Stewart's nominalism and the intellectual context that fostered it. In the first three sections I aver that his nominalism emanated from his belief that objects of the mind—qualities, ideas and words—were signs that bore no necessary relation to the external objects that they were meant to represent. More specifically, it was these signs that were arranged into systems of thought by the 'operations of the mind'. The next three sections suggest that his treatment of words as signs most probably originated in his views on language and medicine and that his nominalistic philosophy of mind could also be extended to systems that sought to classify the natural world. I conclude by suggesting several avenues of enquiry that could be pursued by future scholars interested in excavating Stewart's thought.

Keywords: Ideas; Signs; Abstraction; Natural history; Classification; Medicine

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1. Introduction

Dugald Stewart (1753–1828) was the gifted son of Matthew Stewart (1717–1785), the University Edinburgh's professor of mathematics. As a boy he spent his summer holidays in the Scottish countryside and his school days in the family's city residence. While in Edinburgh he grew up rubbing shoulders with university professors and socialising with their children. His teaching career started at the age of nineteen when his father became ill in 1772. Following Edinburgh's long established practice of fathers giving professorships to their sons, he took over Matthew's mathematics course. His real interest, however, was moral philosophy. When Adam Ferguson went to America in 1778, Stewart jumped at the opportunity and took over Ferguson's course on the subject. Even after Ferguson returned, Stewart continued to teach moral philosophy and the town council officially gave him the chair in 1785.[1] By the late 1790s, his lectures were divided into two parts: 'Of the intellectual powers of man' and 'Of the active and of the moral powers of man'. Student manuscripts also show that, from the 1790s forward, he expanded a third section on the legal implications of the former two sections.

After a decade and a half of lecturing on moral philosophy he published *Elements of the philosophy of the human mind* (1792). It was his first book and it was an expansion of the first part of his moral philosophy lectures. A year later he published another book that summarised all of his lectures, that is, it addressed both the intellectual and moral powers of the human mind. It was called *Outlines of moral philosophy* and it served as a textbook for his students. After these two works Stewart went on to publish several essays and books that had a strong impact on the nineteenth century. Indeed, the subsequent editions of the *Elements* (1814), along with his *Philosophical essays* (1810) and *Dissertation* (1815–1821),[2] went on to shape a number of philosophical schools in both Britain and America. He was also the editor of Adam Smith's collected work (1811–1812), the teacher of many eminent Victorians (including two prime ministers)[3] and biographer of the Scottish Enlightenment.[4] However, although this popularity made his name commonplace for nineteenth-century intellectuals, it also guided his Victorian biographers, editors and commentators. For this reason, later works about him, including John Veitch's widely cited nineteenth-century *Memoir of Dugald Stewart* (1858),[5] framed his philosophy in relation to how it was accepted, modified or rejected by his Victorian opponents or disciples. Additionally, Stewart's last two decades were extremely fertile. He revised the 1792 edition of the *Elements* by inserting and removing information and added two new volumes. The standard nineteenth-century editions of Stewart's *Elements*, therefore, bear changes and

[1] MacIntyre (2003) is a helpful introduction to Stewart's life. It is chronologically arranged and dips into several manuscript sources. However, as MacIntyre clearly states, it is not an intellectual biography.

[2] As stated in the *Disseration*'s 1854 advertisement by the editor, 'The First Part of the Dissertation originally appeared in 1815; the Second Part, in 1821'. Stewart (1854), p. vii. The impetus for the work came from Stewart's articles in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

[3] Henry John Temple, third Viscount Palmerston (1784–1865) and John Russell, first Earl Russell (1792–1878). He also taught a number of prominent Victorian politicians, including the reformer and Lord Chancellor Henry Peter Brougham, first Baron Brougham and Vaux (1778–1868). For Stewart's intellectual influence at Oxford University, see Corsi (1987).

[4] Wood (1985; 2000).

[5] M. Stewart (1838).