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MENTAL IMAGES AND THEIR ONTOLOGY

*Abstract*

This paper is divided in three parts. In the first part, I summarize the main points of the debate among Descartes, Locke and Berkeley on the general problem of ideas and mental imagery. In particular I focus both on the question whether it is possible to form general ideas and on the relationship between imagery and conception. In the second part, I describe the more important empirical results on the subject, in particular the effect of “confusion” between perception and imagery, the relationship between language and imagery and the main general theories proposed by Pylyshyn and Kosslyn. Moreover, the descriptionalist vs pictorialist controversy is described. In the final part, I develop a philosophical argument to show how the problems of mental imagery can be treated and unified under the more general problem of their ontology. It is argued that in the philosophical debate of the XVII century are foundable some of the roots that entangle philosophers on the ontological and theoretical status of this subject matter. The empirical way out is indicated in one of the models proposed by Pylyshyn, and the philosophical hypothesis suggests to consider the theoretical and ontological status of mental image as that of beliefs, where the difference is expressed in the general format, that is, visual. The framework for the treatment of beliefs is on the line developed by Dennett, even if “reinforced” by more realistic considerations. The advantage of this proposal is double: it give the theoretical possibility to interpret a mental image with a propositional format and it allows to consider imagery as a phylogenetic refinement of cognitive abilities.