

Psychologism vs. Anti-Psychologism: Platonism, Intentionality, and the Early Modern Representationalism

The terminology of intentionality derives from medieval scholastic philosophy and was revived in 1874 by Franz Brentano in “Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint”. In this work, Brentano characterised intentionality in terms of ‘the mind’s direction towards an object’. He regarded intentionality as the distinctive mark of mental phenomena, which distinguishes them from physical phenomena. In the proposed paper, I will argue that Brentano combined both terminology (present in the late scholasticism), the concept (proposed by Brentano), and the problem of intentionality (elaborated by early modern philosophy). Moreover, I will suggest that Brentano’s understanding of the concept of intentionality would not be possible without the early modern discussion of representationalism in terms of the explanatory role of experience — discussion, that is, of how perceptual experience gives us cognitive contact with the mind-independent, external world. In particular, I would like to emphasise the role that Platonism played in this discussion.

The impact of Platonism on the early modern question of intentionality will be demonstrated by the controversy between Locke and Malebranche over the nature of ideas as representations. The controversy outlines two possible approaches to our mental contents, namely the psychologistic and anti-psychologistic. Within this dichotomy, Locke is a representative of the first standpoint, whereas Malebranche of the second. In the psychologistic approach, ideas as the contents of our conscious acts are exclusively internal elements of this consciousness. On the contrary, in the case of the anti-psychologistic characterisation, the contents of our consciousness are described as ontologically autonomous, i.e. as independent from the mind. In the context of this controversy, we find an explicit reshaping of the problem of intentionality in the direction leading to the Brentanian concept, as it seems that the post-Cartesian philosophers were gradually aware that there was a need to distinguish between acts and contents in the description of ideas as representations of things. However, the distinction was possible due to the anti-psychological Platonic description of ideas by Malebranche.