NICOLAS MALEBRANCHE.[1]

(1638-1715.)

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MALEBRANCHE was a philosopher, to use Plato's beautiful expression, from his whole soul. Far from raising a kind of impenetrable partition between his religious faith and his rational thought, he did not even conceive the possibility of a conflict between faith and philosophy, if the latter were genuine. "I am persuaded, Ariste, that one has need to be a sound philosopher in order to find one's way in the understanding of the truths of faith, and that the better fortified one is in the true principles of metaphysics, the more steadfastly will one cling to the truths of religion." These few words sum up the program which Malebranche endeavored to carry out, or, more exactly, the *postulatum*, the truth of which his whole philosophy seeks to establish.

To this end it was necessary for him to introduce new elements between Catholic dogma and the Cartesian rationalism, which would enable him to pass insensibly from the one to the other. These elements almost spontaneously offered themselves to him in Augustine, whose doctrine was particularly studied by the congregation of the Oratory, to which Malebranche belonged. With the help of Augustine, he dived deep into ancient philosophy, from which he chiefly borrowed Platonic notions, and towards whose notions the natural bent of his mind inclined him. Thus the tradition which Descartes thought to have definitely interrupted between the ancient and the modern philosophy was renewed with the very first generation which sprang from him, at the hands of his most illustrious successor. But Malebranche did not make himself a slave to Plato as Scholasticism had been to Aristotle. On the contrary, the mixture, or rather, blending, of these Platonic ele-

[1] Extracts from a forthcoming work on the *History of Modern French Philosophy*.

ments with the Cartesian principles gave to Malebranche's writings an original flavor. The great work with which Malebranche busied himself for ten years, and which appeared in 1674, was entitled *La Recherche de la vérité.*

First of all, whoever undertakes such a research is to make a careful distinction between rational evidence, the only sign of truth, and the false light of the senses, which, in spite of its apparent clearness, gives but deceitful information. Our senses produce vivid impressions upon us, but do not enlighten us. The light of reason, which on the contrary seems cold, makes us see things as they really are. Therefore, we must close the eyes of the body, and accustom ourselves to see only with the mind's eye.

This precept is often expressed in language which reminds us of Plato's Socrates in the *Phædo,* and represents the body as a principle of trouble and darkness, offensive to the natural clear-sightedness of the soul, which it binds down to grossly deceitful appearances, leaving behind it but an imperfect reminiscence of eternal realities, being, in fact, a sort of poison, from which the wise man's soul yearns to be released. Malebranche likewise speaks of the tumult of the senses hindering the soul from hearkening to the voice of reason. He then insensibly passes on from the Platonic to the Christian point of view. The soul's subservience to the body becomes a consequence of the original fall; the dominancy of the senses over the spirit is said to be the result of sin, and the soul's possession of truth to be communion with God. "The spirit stands, so to speak, between God and the body, between good and evil, between what enlightens and what blinds it, what rules it well and what rules it ill, what makes it perfect and happy and what is apt to make it imperfect and unhappy."

Thus, according to Malebranche, as well as to Plato, philosophy first requires the soul to move to a different position from that which it occupied before reflecting. Things which are visible and tangible, which may be tasted and smelt, it first believed to be real: it shall henceforth look upon them as illusory. Things, on the contrary, which are neither seen nor touched, but purely intelligible, it shall look upon as alone real. Malebranche has no difficulty in bringing out the truth of this precept, even on Descartes's principles. He shows that the secondary qualities of bodies are all relative to the thinking subject. That property alone belongs to body which we conceive by means of our understanding—i. e., extension. Our senses therefore teach us nothing. We think we see the room in which we are. We think we see the sun. It is a delusion

and it is certain that we do not. It is not even possible to understand how we could see them; for in what way could such material objects act upon the immaterial soul, while there is nothing in common between it and them?

Shall we then entirely reject the notions of our senses as false and deceitful? No, says Malebranche; our senses are neither deceitful nor corrupted, if we make use of them only as regards their proper function; that is, the preservation of the body. They fulfil their duty admirably well, speedily warn the soul by means of pain and pleasure, by means of pleasant and unpleasant tastes, of what it must do or refrain from doing for the preservation of life. . . . . They represent instinct in us, and have its blind unerringness. Were we to ward off by means of reflexion the various dangers which threaten our body at every moment, we should very soon perish. The senses are marvelously well suited for this office, and in most cases it is sufficient for us to trust to their spontaneous activity. But let us require nothing more from them! Valuable as they are for our preservation they are incapable of teaching us. Many of our errors arise from our neglecting to make this distinction. As our senses do not deceive us concerning what is profitable or harmful, we fall into the habit of trusting to them in all things, even where they may lead us astray.

This impulse is almost unavoidable. In order to make us heedful of the warnings given by the senses, God caused them to be attended with pleasure and pain. A pin's prick, though conveying no distinct information (for we do not even know what takes place here in the nerves and brain), produces upon us a most vivid impression, and compels us to give our attention to it. We thus form the habit of judging of the reality of things by their practical interest for us; that is, we trust to the senses in order to know what things are, and we are mistaken.

If, therefore, we are really acquainted with "outward objects," it is not by means of sensations, since these are dim and unfit to instruct us. It is by means of *ideas*—i. e., of representations clear to the understanding and which have nothing in common with sensations. Ideas are in God, and the mind perceives them in God. When it discovers any truth, or sees things as they are in themselves, it sees them in God's ideas—that is, with a clear and distinct vision of what is in God, who represents them. Thus, every time the mind knows the truth it is united with God; in some manner it knows and possesses God.

For the demonstration of this celebrated theory of "Vision

in God," Malebranche leans upon the Cartesian principles. He defines the soul as that which thinks, and the body as that which has extension. The instinct of feeling persuades us that these two are united, and we have no doubts about it. But we have no evidence either, and we even see quite plainly that the mind and the body are two beings of quite opposite kinds. We do not, then, understand how something corporeal—that is, something which has extension—can produce upon the soul an impression which should be called knowledge, or how the soul can go out of itself to "*aller se promener dans les cieux.*"[1] The object of knowledge, therefore, can be nothing else than an idea. When I perceive the sun, for instance, whether it be above the horizon or not, whether I be awake or dreaming, matters little. In one case, no doubt, my perception is true, and in the other false, and we are not without a means of distinguishing between them; but it is never the material object that I perceive, it is always the idea of the object that offers itself to my soul.

Beset by the objections raised against him, Malebranche gave several successive forms to his theory of the vision of ideas in God. We cannot here make a distinction between them; let it be sufficient to mention the chief arguments on behalf of this theory. He examines, one after another, all the hypotheses which may explain our knowledge of ideas. He first eliminates the theory of "sensible images," which had been preserved from antiquity by scholastic philosophers. This hypothesis increases, instead of solving, difficulties, and one cannot understand how sensible images, being something material, could be transformed into something spiritual, as ideas are. Does, then, the human soul produce ideas spontaneously? It is mere human pride that imagines that the soul can produce anything. Such a supposition would imply that it was endowed with causality. Now, as will soon be shown, no creature is a cause. God alone acts in the Universe. Shall we say that ideas were created by God, together with the soul? A very improbable hypothesis, and not easily made to agree with God's wiswisdom, as it would suppose "infinities of infinite numbers of ideas" to exist in each created soul. Is it not far more reasonable to suppose that ideas are eternally subsisting in God? We know them when God deems it fit for them to be discovered to us. This hypothesis is not only the most "economical," but also the one which best enables us to perceive the state of dependency we are in with regard to God. As space encompasses bodies, so does God

[1] Roam through the heavens.

encompass minds. To know is to partake of divine intelligence. The ideas which represent God's creatures to our minds are but God's perfections corresponding to these very creatures and representative of them.

We perceive ideas only by means of pure understanding; for the world of ideas is a purely intellectual world to which the senses have no access. The worst sort of confusion would follow from mistaking sensations, which Malebranche terms the modalities of our soul, for ideas, which are within divine intelligence. But the mistake is impossible, so completely do the features of modalities contrast with those of ideas. The modalities of the soul are changeable, ideas are immutable; modalities are particular, ideas are universal; modalities are contingent, ideas are eternal and necessary; modalities are dim and obscure, and ideas are very clear and lucid; modalities are but dimly though keenly felt, and ideas are clearly known, being the foundation of all sciences. And not only do we see in God the ideas of "outward" objects, but we also see in Him the axioms of reason; and such truths as Bossuet, after Augustine, termed eternal.

The hypothesis of the Vision in God, the most, and indeed the only probable one, according to Malebranche, seems to our common sense wonderfully paradoxical. It called forth the taunts of his contemporaries, and the well-known line:

"Lui qui voit tout en Dieu n'y voit pas qu'il est fou."[1]

Yet it is a direct consequence of the principles of Descartes; and the theories of Spinoza and Leibniz on this point, though different in expression, are not very remote from that of Malebranche. Descartes had proved that we are not made acquainted with objects by our senses, but by our understanding; and that matter, to the intuition of the mind, is nothing else than extension. Now the science of extension is geometry. It is composed of truths which appear to the mind as universal and necessary. Kant denominates them "*a priori;*" Malebranche calls them immutable and eternal. Where is the primary cause of these truths, and consequently of the whole physical world? Evidently not in my individual understanding, which is finite and perishable. It can be only in an understanding which is as eternal and necessary as those truths themselves. Descartes had already said that all our science is true only because God exists. Malebranche went a step farther, and asserted that there is no science save through our participation in di-

[1] "He who sees all things in God, sees not his own lunacy there."

vine thought. We see the truth only when we see things as they really are, which we never do unless we see them in Him who comprises them intelligibly.

Malebranche, as a good Cartesian, has a purely geometrical and mechanical conception of nature. "With extension alone," he says, "God has produced all the admirable things we see in nature, and even what gives life and movement to animals." Yet, though Malebranche agreed with Descartes in saying that animals are machines and "do not feel," he was visibly attentive to the discoveries just made by Swammerdam, Leeuwenhoek, and many other scientific men with the help of the newly-invented microscrope. The theory of "encased germs," though he accepted it with Leibniz as the most plausible theory of the time, leaves him only half satisfied. He easily understands how, by the mere power of mechanical laws, the tiny tree hidden in the seed will grow progressively and gradually become the tall oak which we behold. No doubt the actual division of matter goes far beyond the reach of our senses, and it is probably the same with the organisation of matter. A drop of liquid, Leibniz says, is a pond full of fishes, and every drop of blood in one of those fishes is another pond full of fishes, and so on *ad infinitum*. Malebranche also concedes this, but he cannot so easily account for species' being preserved, each apart from the others, in their minutest features, by the power of purely mechanical laws. He does not see as plainly as Descartes does that with matter and the laws of motion one can completely account for a world similar to ours, including plants and animals. He would suppose something to exist besides, not unlike Plato's ideas, "divine models," "archetypes," which live forever in God's understanding, and which determine his choice among possible things. The permanence of species would seem to him inexplicable otherwise. Malebranche here stands half-way between Descartes and Leibniz. He begins, as the former does, with a geometrical conception of the science of nature; and almost finishes, as the latter, with a metaphysical conception, the predominant ideas of which are order and harmony.

We are hereby brought back to God. The sight of nature everywhere compels us to admire the simplicity and fecundity of her ways. Malebranche vividly feels the beauty of nature. But, as most men did in his time, what he feels above all in her beauty is the reason which it expresses. He sees also there, above all things, order. The idea of order is almost the central one in the

philosophy of Malebranche; not only is it the very principle of his ethics, but it holds a no less important place in his metaphysical speculations. He conceives reality to be an assemblage of "orders," corresponding and subordinate to one another. Above the order of the physical world rises the order of moral realities: the one being ruled by the laws of the magnitude or quantity, the other by the laws of quality or perfection. The order of grace comes next, not to change but to mend the order of nature. Even in the attributes and perfections of divine essence, order also reigns. All these "orders" converge in harmonious unity, of which our feeble understanding can have but a very imperfect glimpse. They have caused Malebranche's system to be compared to a magnificent palace—a vast and noble building, the richness and majesty of which, while flattering the imagination, give reason cause for supreme gratification. They might also be compared to the grand choral constructions of J. S. Bach, who also reaches to the sublime by the harmonious richness of a powerful development in which order always predominates.

Everything that is, owes its being to God; all that we know, we know in God. But how do we know God Himself? How are we made sure of His existence? What do we know of His nature and attributes? In what measure can we understand His relation to the world?

In such a philosophy as that of Malebranche the existence of God is not called in question. From the very first step which reason tries to take this idea demands acquiescence. If I am, God is; if I think, God is; if I know any truth, God is; if any phenomenon takes place, God is. Nothing can be or can appear without a cause, and there is no other cause than God. Therefore Malebranche might look upon a demonstration of the existence of God as superfluous. Yet he gives proof of it, and he even thinks that some of his arguments usually proffered are not worthless. He does not reject the proof based on final causes. The contemplation of the order which reigns in nature often fills him with admiration for the Author of so much splendor, inasmuch as there can be no doubt but some mind must be postulated to explain it. He reasons on this point as afterwards Voltaire did. When I see a watch, I am right in concluding that there is intelligence back of it, as mere chance cannot possibly have produced and combined all the wheels. How then could it be possible for chance and the meeting together of atoms to be capable of arranging in all men and animals the many various springs, accurate and well pro-

portioned, which we see in them, and for men and animals to beget others in their exact likeness.

This proof produces a strong impression upon souls; but Malebranche was aware that, from a logical point of view, it is not unimpeachable. The most beautiful, the noblest and strongest proof that may be given of the existence of God is drawn from our idea of the infinite. That we have this idea, is an undoubted fact. Even those who deny the existence of God have this idea, even while denying. Not only does the human mind conceive the idea of the infinite, but it conceives it even before the idea of the finite. For the idea of the infinite is given us together with the very idea of being. In order to form an idea of a finite being, we subtract something from the general idea of being, which must therefore be considered as an anterior one. Fénelon likewise says afterwards that, in spite of appearances, the idea of the infinite is positive, and the idea of the finite negative, since the former represents being as unlimited and the latter represents it as limited—*i. e., with a negation of what is beyond the limit.* Therefore, Malebranche concludes, the mind perceives nothing save through the idea it has of the infinite, and all particular ideas are but participations in the general idea of the infinite. And from this he demonstrates in several ways the necessary existence of God.

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There is but one cause in the universe, and that is God. For a cause is that which produces or engenders an effect, and brings it to pass. Being a cause, then, means creating something, a power which belongs to God alone. Therefore, to suppose that a creature may be the cause of anything whatever, is to make it divine and to participate in the most dangerous error of the ancient philosophy. It means falling into the sin of pride, and failing to recognise the dependency in which all creatures are towards God. This appears evident enough if we consider only the essence of God, that of creatures, and the notion of cause.

The universe known to us is composed of spirits and bodies; that is to say, of thinking souls, and of extended substances. Malebranche seeks to prove that a spirit never acts upon a body, nor a body upon a spirit, nor a body upon a body. Spirits indeed are in communication with one another, but only through God; for God encompasses all spirits as space encompasses all bodies.

To say that the spirit never acts upon the body may at first seem contrary to what experience shows. If I *will* move my arm,

I move it; is not my volition the cause of the motion of my arm? No, answers Malebranche, unless you simply mean by "cause" the antecedent which constantly precedes a given phenomenon. But if the word "cause" means to you "what produces" the phenomenon, when you say that your volition is the cause of the motion of your arm, you go beyond what is known to you. All that you are conscious of is your volition, accompanied by a confused feeling of effort, and then the motion of your arm. But that the volition *produces* the motion is so little evident that you have no idea of the way in which it is done. In order to move your arm, you must have some animal spirits, and send them through certain nerves into certain muscles which they swell or shorten, for this is how the arm attached to them can move, or else, as some others think, we do not yet know how it is done. And we see that men who do not even know whether they have spirits, nerves, and muscles, move their arms, and indeed move them more skilfully and easily than those who are most versed in anatomy. Therefore, to say that my volition is the cause of the motion of my arm, is to give of the fact an explanation which I do not even understand, and which is a wrong one. But to say that God has willed it, that every time I have this or that volition, this or that motion is to take place in my arm, is to give an intelligible and satisfactory explanation, for it is sure that God is an effectual cause. So my volition is but the occasional cause of the motion of my arm. God is the real cause. A veritable cause, Malebranche says with deep meaning, is a cause between which and its effect the mind perceives a necessary connexion. Now, this necessary connexion I do not perceive between my volition and my movements. Experience alone makes it known to me.

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Such then is the greatest, the most fruitful and the most necessary of all principles. We find in the universe but the *occasional causes* of the effects which God Himself produces. And as God does not act by means of particular volitions, He has regulated all the "infinitely infinite" combinations of physical with physical, and of physical with moral things in such a way that phenomena appear to us as subjected to necessary laws, and that like antecedents are always followed by like consequents. We may indeed go on using the current language; we may say that the soul moves its body, that it is touched by the impression the body receives, and that bodies in motion transmit to each other part of their speed. We may do this, just as we say that the sun rises or sets. It is

sufficient that we should know that all the causes we speak of are purely occasional, and that the only real cause is God.

This remarkable theory marks a decisive stage in the history of philosophy. With regard to the past, it achieves the Cartesian revolution, and consummates the defeat of scholastic physics. Already Descartes, in his conception of nature, did not suppose any force or power, but chose to explain all phenomena by the laws of motion only. It is the very idea of "nature" that Malebranche attacks. The religion of the ancients made nature divine. The philosophy of Aristotle saw in the φύσις the inward power which gives to beings their shape and growth, and builds the ascending scale of genera and species. Malebranche shows that nature is but a word, a delusion, which the philosophy of clear ideas drives away. "I owe nothing to my nature, nothing to the imaginary nature of philosophers. I owe everything to God and His decrees." Natural causality is the last of occult qualities; it must disappear like the others. God has linked His works together, but He has not produced between them any *linking entities*. In short, Malebranche, as a worthy successor of Descartes, replaces the confused scholastic notion of *cause* by the clear scientific notion of *law*.

In this he forestalls the future. Prior to Hume and Kant he made clear the importance of the idea of causality in metaphysics. His criticism of the common notion of cause is a masterly one. Hume does not excel him in showing that the connexion between cause and effect escapes us precisely where we think we take hold of it, and that it therefore cannot be a notion given by experience.

Malebranche speaks a metaphysical and theological language. Strip his thought of this form, preserve the matter and give it a positive expression, and no theory of causality agrees with the spirit and practice of modern sciences better than his. Bacon first, and Descartes afterwards, had already recognised that the science of nature need not seek after final causes. Malebranche goes a step further. He exempts it from seeking even after efficient causes. Science henceforth will only have to determine constant successions, "reciprocal modalities;" and to state how such and such a phenomenon varies when such another phenomenon undergoes a given change. Now, this is exactly the point of view of modern physics. This science has wisely ceased to inquire why opium makes us sleep, and restricted its attention to phenomena and the laws of phenomena. What Malebranche says of the rela-

tion between body and soul, and of the action which bodies exercise upon one another, is no less apt to please our scientific men. On this point none ever contributed more than this great metaphysician to purge positive science of the popular metaphysics which for so long a time falsified its definitions and paralysed its progress. In this sense, the theory of occasional causes is a worthy sequel to the Cartesian theory of science.

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Malebranche's ethics is closely linked to the rest of his system, being, like the latter, both rational and Christian. Silence your senses, imagination, and passions, and you shall hear the pure voice of the inward truth, the clear and evident answers of our common Master. He does not teach us only what we are to believe, but also what we are to do. He reveals to us what is beautiful and good, together with what is true, for he shows us the relative degrees of perfection between things, and the order in which we should prefer them one to another. Above all, he shows us the very principle of order—i. e., the supremely wise and kind Being, who gives us existence, thought, and will. When we lavish upon finite beings the love which God gives us for Himself, unless He has so ordained it; in a word, when we disobey Him, we do evil and we are sinful. Shall we say that it is God—being the only cause in the universe—who acts within us, and we are not responsible for our sins? that He has permitted, if not decreed, them? Malebranche replies to this formidable objection. No doubt we have no existence or activity but by God's will. His will, most certainly, makes us seek our own happiness, but it does not make us seek it in the gratification of the senses rather than in obedience to Himself. If being able to sin is a power, this power we have. We have sufficient liberty not to cast on the all-perfect Being the responsibility for our sins. God is just, and we were all born under the curse of original sin.

We shall not follow Malebranche through his theological explanations. Let us come back to the purely human domain of moral things, and observe that he has spoken of these with remarkable aptness and penetration. This "meditative" man is a keen observer of human nature. Such parts of the *Recherche de la vérité* as bear upon the errors caused by our imagination, inclination, or passions, are justly celebrated. Being pleasant and lively, they contributed in no small degree to the success of the work. They won to it a great many readers who, though not engrossed in

metaphysics, were charmed by the originality and liveliness of the author's moral reflexions.

Malebranche often opposes his ethics to that of the Stoics. The latter in his eyes represent heathenish pride, and their virtues are but vices to a Christian soul that knows nature to be powerless without God. He combats their paradoxes, he maintains that pain is an evil, and that men must needs seek after happiness. Nor does he agree that man, in his present state, being closely bound to the body, can suppress its passions; and this indeed is no duty, as passions are not essentially evil. Only we do not make use of our passions as we should. There are rightful passions, as, for instance, a desire to discover the truth, to acquire sufficient light to regulate our behavior, to be useful to others, etc.; there are also wrong or dangerous ones, as a desire to acquire reputation, to gain wealth in life, to rise above our fellow-creatures. . . . . And it often happens that even our most injudicious passions more strongly urge us to seek after truth, and afford us more pleasant consolations for the pains we find therein than the most righteous and judicious passions would. Malebranche excels in discovering the hidden motives of human actions; in pointing out the means of combating them when we must, and of turning them to good account when we can. He has a most delicate psychological sense, though his clear-sightedness may occasionally be unmerciful. The passage in which he brings to light the vanity of Montaigne is a little masterpiece.

A general view of Malebranche's works shows that he carried out the programme he had set for himself. He made good the conformity of his rational doctrine with the Christian dogma, without the latter being altered, and without reason being obliged to give up its rights. This accordance is not brought about by dialectical tricks, by prodigious feats of dexterity and suppleness, leaving upon the reader's mind an uncomfortable feeling of perplexity. We do not wonder, as we sometimes do with Leibniz, whether the author is entirely sincere, and whether he does not seek the reconciliation merely for the sake of peace. Malebranche produces quite another impression, and a perfectly genuine one. We feel that he puts his whole soul and faith into his philosophy. "O Theodore!" he exclaims in one of his finest *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, "how clear your principles are, how solid, how worthy of a Christian! But how lovely and touching they are also!" Malebranche's philosophical reflexion is perfectly sincere. He is checked by no after-thought and paralysed by no diffidence. He

shrinks from no rightfully deduced consequences. What need has he to fear, since reason and the divine Word are one? Then reason cannot, if its method is sound, come to any conclusion which may alarm a Christian conscience.

An admirable metaphysical system was the fruit of such candid boldness and pious temerity. Malebranche was thereby enabled to say, as a Christian, a great part of what Spinoza said as a free-thinker. He could, at the same time, be the idealist that had not distinctly appeared in Descartes; and that he was, with a fine passion for logic. He paved the way for Berkeley, Hume, and Kant. His glory, while he lived, was great, and his influence remained considerable in the eighteenth century in France and in England. In our days, his doctrine seems to have sunk somewhat into the background, between Descartes, from whom he proceeds, and the idealist philosophers who came after him. But while these philosophers owe to him many of their leading ideas, Malebranche still has the merit, rare in all countries and unique in France, of having constituted a religious philosophy which is not merely a philosophy inspired by religion.