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17th Century French Philosophy: Nicolas Malebranche, Antoine Arnauld and the Nature of Ideas

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*Course Based Research: “17th century French Philosophy: Nicolas Malebranche, Antoine
Arnauld and the nature of ideas” - History of Modern Philosophy*

Professor Andrew Pessin

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I. Introduction

Nicolas Malebranche's definition of ideas is the ambiguous core of the conflict in the debate between him and Antoine Arnauld that marks the highpoint in the intellectual life of the late seventeenth century. The translation from the French original is crucial, when defining the distinction between ideas and sensations, as it is supposed for Malebranche's work. We must take into account the various meanings that can be used to explain for example Malebranche's use of the verbs *connaître* and *sentir*, in order to understand the nature of the debate between Arnauld and him. In that sense, argues Malebranche for example, that Arnauld "should have heeded the distinction marked in the French language by the [two distinct French verbs], between on the one hand knowledge of objects by way of their ideas and on the other hand mere immediate awareness of one's own sensations." (Pyle 80)

Malebranche and Arnauld – An Introduction

Nicolas Malebranche and Antoine Arnauld were, in their times, very famous for their decades-long debate about the most important issues in philosophy and philosophical theology. Concerning the issue of evil and the problem with freedom and the distribution of grace, it was early philosophical theology, when "Malebranche said [his assertion in *Eclairissement XV* that God must act, in the domain of grace as in that of nature, in a manner that is worthy of His attributes] that so scandalized Arnauld" (Pyle 221). The entire debate ranged over two decades in the late seventeenth century and was only brought to an end with the death of Nicolas Malebranche, who was in the beginning of his life believed to be one of the greatest minds in the intellectual world and a perfect continuation of philosophical thought after Descartes's death.

The major starting point of the debate however comprised the nature of ideas. Malebranche establishes his doctrine on the nature of ideas in his early work *De la Recherche de la Vérité*. With his *Des Vraies et Des Fausses Idées* Antoine Arnauld answers to what in his eyes Malebranche's main mistakes of reasoning are. The debate gains momentum with various answers from both philosophers, such as Malebranche's *Réponse* and *Eclairissements*. It is highly debated which interpretation of Malebranche's explanation of ideas seems to best describe his thoughts, because there are so many different approaches to his *Recherche*, "since the works initial publication in 1674"¹ (Nadler, ACPI 60). It is generally understood that "Arnauld himself (...) appears to waver between the two readings in his critique of the *Recherche*; a critique which, more generally, focuses on Malebranche's notion that an idea can be a perceptual object distinct from both the mental act of perceiving and the mind itself." (Nadler, ACPI 60) To Andrew Pyle it seems clear that Arnauld worries the most about "the role of ideas in perception" and argues that for him ideas are mere modes of one's soul. (Pyle 83-86) However, "if ideas are just modifications of our souls, Malebranche maintains, there will be no escape from the Pyrrhonian skepticism he saw gathering strength all around him." (Pyle 86) It seems quite clear how important this part of the debate was to the other issues of the Cartesian metaphysics that were part of the debate. The dimensions of this debate only become quite clear when realizing that both philosophers "disagree not just about the subject under the debate (the nature of ideas) but also about exactly what philosophical issues are at stake and which of these issues are of central importance." (Pyle 83)

It is therefore absolutely crucial to look at the French originals, most of which have never been translated into English as a whole and identify key passages that represent both philosophers' arguments. In this paper I will also dissect the key issues "in deciding just what exactly is at issue between Arnauld and Malebranche", which seems to be an "interesting problem" in the debate (Nadler, ACPI 81-82).

¹ The *Recherche* was published in multiple editions, with Malebranche amending several parts until the sixth and last edition (1712) before his death.

II. Malebranche

On a superficial level it seems very clear what Malebranche is trying to convey with his theory on ideas. However, when delving deeper into the issue of the divine context in which he asserts his theory, it becomes quite difficult to make out a clear line that Malebranche is trying to follow. While he claims that “*nous voyons toutes choses en Dieu*” (OC I: 437), meaning that we see all things in God, he continues for example that “we see in God only the things of which we have ideas, and in particular, only bodies and their properties” (Nadler, CCM 59).² In establishing his doctrine of ideas, Malebranche bases his vision on the premise that we cannot consider any of the previous explanations of the perception of objects, because ideas themselves are a way of perceiving through God. “Ideas are, for Malebranche, the direct and immediate objects of perception: direct and immediate, in the sense that the mind’s apprehension of the idea is not inferentially based on the non-inferential apprehension of some ‘tertium quid’ standing between the mind and the idea.” (Nadler, ACPI 60)

A. Distinguishing Sensations from Ideas

It is very important to note in the beginning, that Malebranche introduces his doctrine with the distinction between pure perceptions and sensations. To Malebranche, ‘ideas’ can symbolize two different meanings. First of all “those which represent objects external to the mind and allow us to see their properties;” (Nadler 60) and secondly “sensations, which are merely modifications of the mind and do not represent anything in the external world.” (Nadler 60) It is best described by the following passage from his *Recherche*:

On peut dire de même que les perceptions que l’âme a des idées sont de deux sortes. Les premières, que l’on appelle perceptions pures, sont pour ainsi dire superficielles à l’âme; elles ne la pénètrent et ne la modifient pas sensiblement. Les secondes, qu’on appelle sensibles, la pénètrent plus ou moins vivement. Telles sont le plaisir et la douleur, la lumière et les couleurs, les saveurs, les odeurs, etc. Car on fera voir dans la suite que les sensations ne sont rien autre chose que des manières d’être de l’esprit; et c’est pour cela que je les appellerai des modifications de l’esprit. (Recherche, Book I, Chapter I, 3)

The translation by Lennon and Olscamp is very precise in differentiating the different meanings of the terminology that Malebranche uses:

We can likewise say that the ideas of the soul are of two kinds. The first, which are called pure perceptions, are as it were, accidental to the soul; they do not make an impression on it and do not sensibly modify it. The second, which are called sensible, make a more or less vivid impression on it. Such are pleasure and pain, light and colors, tastes, odors and so on. For it will be seen later on that sensations are nothing but modes of the mind, and it is for this reason that I call them *modifications* of the mind. (*Recherche*, Book I, chapter I, Section 1: OC I, 42; LO, 2; also used in Nadler, 61)

A differentiation between “the two elements, which compose perceptual awareness” follows later on in the development of the *Recherche*. (Nadler 61) Malebranche’s theory furthermore distinguishes two separate categories. On one hand “all sensations qualify as

² Nadler notes that “On the view there we see neither our soul nor other souls nor God himself through ideas in God, but rather see God “through Himself” (*par lui-même*), our own soul through “consciousness or inner feeling” (*conscience ou sentiment interieur*), and other souls similar to ours “though conjecture” (*par conjecture*) (Search III.2.vii, OC I:448-55; LO 236-40).

“ideas” in broad sense”; on the other hand however, ideas in representational character connected to sensations are rather ambiguous to Malebranche. (Nadler 62)

However, why does Malebranche treat sensations as modifications and not a clear form of perceptions? To begin with, “he identifies sensation with a certain *jugement naturel*”, calling it a sensation *qua jugement naturel*. (Nadler 62) In this sense, to Malebranche, “(i)t is certain, then, that the judgments we make concerning extension, figure, and motion of bodies include some measure of the truth. But the same is not true of those concerning light, colors, tastes, odors, and all the other sensible qualities, for truth is never encountered here.” (*Rech.*, I, x: OC I, 122; LO, 48) He furthermore distinguishes those other sensations, such as lights and tastes into more specific categories, explaining that they are in both, the object and the mind. “The spontaneous judgment that the sensation (...) which modifies the mind is in the sense organ or in the external object itself so closely and constantly accompanies the sensation that is often “confounded” with the sensation proper.” (Nadler 63) Ideas thus need to be differentiated from sensations, when taking Malebranche’s words literally. The clear distinction between, what Locke later on became to describe as primary and secondary qualities, is taken from Descartes, who distinguishes between the properties of objects and their origin. Also adopting elements from Descartes’s mechanical philosophy Malebranche thinks of sensations as modifications, because those are really in the mind and not in the objects or anywhere else.

In contrast to this part of the theory there are the pure perceptions that create the representational character of ideas. It is probably the best to compare sensations as “no more than modifications of the soul which occur in relation to what takes place in the body to which that soul is joined”, with ideas not as “modifications of the soul, but (...) in God” (Nadler, ACPI 64) This ontological difference between sensations and ideas is prevalent in the analysis of Malebranche’s work. For it is argued “ideas are capable of representing to the mind to which they are revealed objects external to the mind.” (Nadler 64) Malebranche furthermore clarifies in his response to Arnauld’s accusations:

On connoît une chose par son idée, lors qu’en contemplant cette idée, on peut connaître de simple vûe ses propriétés generales, ce qu’elle enferme, et ce qu’elle exclud: et lors qu’on s’applique à contempler ses propriétés generales, on y peut découvrir des propriétés particulières à l’infini. (Réponse, Chapter XXIII, Section ii: OC VI, 160)

Here Malebranche is specifically trying to explain the divine in ideas of objects, which can be discovered to/through *infinity*.

One can know a thing through its idea when, while studying this idea, one can know with a simple inspection its general properties, whatever it entails, and what it excludes; and, while one applies him(her)self to studying those general properties, one can discover particular properties to infinity.(OC VI, 160)

It becomes a little clearer what the nature of ideas really is for Malebranche, when realizing that we do see bodies only through the ideas of those bodies, however, not *en eux-même*, meaning “in themselves” (OC VI, 101).

After finishing the *Recherche*, Malebranche added a set of *Eclairissements* in which he continues in explaining his doctrine of the Vision in God. In this work he continues to emphasize the dichotomy of elements that make up our perceptual awareness.

The mind knows objects in only two ways: through illumination and through sensation. It sees things through illumination when it has a clear idea of them, and when by consulting this idea it can discover all the properties of which these things are capable. It sees things through sensation when it finds no clear idea of these things in itself to be consulted,

when it is thus unable to discover their properties clearly, and when it knows them only through a confused sensation, without illumination and without evidence. Through illumination and through a clear idea, the mind sees numbers, extension, and the essence of things... The things the mind sees through illumination or through a clear idea it perceives in a very perfect fashion... But what the mind perceives through sensation is never clearly known to it... because of the inadequacy of the idea, which is extremely obscure and confused. (*Rech.*, Ecl. X: OC III, 141-2; LO, 621)

Furthermore there is an important argument made that substantiates this representational theory of mind (RTM), which emphasizes that no matter what we think about, it is qualitatively the same, considered *from inside*. However, there doesn't need to actually exist any object outside of our mind that we perceive, "for it often happens that we perceive things that do not exist, and that even have never existed – thus our mind often has real ideas of things that have never existed. (*Rech.*, II, 1. 1:OC I, 414) In the RTM described by Descartes, this 'non-existing objects' argument is important to see that we don't need to have any external perception in order to have qualitatively the same thoughts and images in our minds.

Overall, there are many different examples given to explain the outline of Malebranche's thoughts. To add together the most important factors that essentially make up Malebranche's doctrine on perception we can focus on two distinct parts. Sensations, which are now only modifications of the mind, do not represent external objects, whereas ideas, or pure perceptions, do act representational. Furthermore, ideas now, after defining them as pure perceptions, allow clarity, which cannot be given by sensations. It is thus that two questions arise that need to be answered, when analyzing Malebranche's doctrine. Why is it that ideas stand between the object and the perceiver, or how do they act as mediators for perceptions of bodies? Secondly, which addresses the ontological issues that starting arising earlier in the paper, what *are* ideas really?

B. Malebranche's "Ideas as Objects" Theory

After examining Malebranche's doctrine on the nature of ideas as a way of perception, there are certain features that surface, which contribute to what can be called the object theory. To him "any perception must have an object, i.e. (...) the proper analysis of perception is relational". (Pyle 47) To answer the questions that surfaced in section A, there is a lot of material in Malebranche's pieces that can be used for arguments.

Both questions seem to intersect in many of their aspects, but how do ideas 'mediate' perceptions of bodies? In perceptual relationship between the mind and the object that are represented by ideas, both are definitively distinct. "More particularly, ideas are objects ontologically distinct from both the perceptual act (which is a property of the mind) and the external material body (which, it seems, is the ultimately-intended object of perception)." (Nadler, ACPI 80) It is this exact point that Antoine Arnauld claims is fallacious. His main claim is that ideas are mere modifications of the soul and therefore " 'idea' refers to clear and distinct conceptions of essences and of objects *qua* extended bodies, as well as to sensations such as heat (...)" (Nadler, ACPI 82). If Arnauld is right with his objections, however, Malebranche claims the only consequence is skepticism. In order to uphold the Cartesian idea of representational character of ideas, Malebranche maintains logical theories like, "if (...) our idea of matter (...) represents it as infinitely divisible, then matter is infinitely divisible" (Pyle 86)³. For there was nothing more important to Malebranche than the prospect of objective thought, he incorporates the basic Cartesian idea of the clear and distinct criterion into his replies to Arnauld:

³ Here, Pyle refers to Descartes's *Fifth Replies* (At IX 212, CSMK II 275) where he argues that it is absolutely crucial to "reason thus from ideas to things".

On convient ordinairement de ce principe: Que l'on peut affirmer d'une chose ce que l'on conçoit clairement être renfermé dans l'idée qu'on en a. Mais si l'idée qu'on a n'est pas distinguée de la perception, ou de la modification de l'esprit qui l'aperçoit, ce principe n'est pas certain. Car assurément Dieu n'a pas créé les estres sur nos perceptions passagères, mais sur les éternelles idées: lesquelles idées nous appercevons quand elles nous touchent, et par elles les estres qui leur sont nécessairement conformes. (OC XV 50-1)

This principle is generally accepted: That one can affirm of a thing what one clearly perceives to be contained in the idea one has of it. But if the idea which one has is not distinct from the perception, or from the modification of the mind, which perceives it, this principle is not certain. For assuredly God has not created things on the basis of our fleeting perceptions, but on the basis of His eternal ideas: which ideas we perceive when they touch us, and by means of them we perceive the things which are necessarily in conformity to them. (OC XV 50-1)

This divine account of ideas helps us in understanding how Malebranche deems ideas necessary in order to perceive, and how “these idea-objects serve as non-material representative surrogates for material objects, taking the place of those objects in the mind.” (Nadler, ACPI, 80)

An important argument for this Representational Theory of Mind is that of ‘no action at a distance’, explaining that we do not perceive objects directly. When talking about examples such as the sun and the moon, Malebranche notes, that it cannot be the case that “the soul should leave the body to stroll about the heavens to see the objects present there” (OC I, 413). If we need contact to have causal effects, then the mind can clearly only have mental representations present. Because the mind⁴ cannot simply go out and perceive objects themselves, Malebranche concludes that an idea is an object itself, “which affects and modifies the mind with the perception it has of an object.” (OC I, 413-14: LO 217) For it is only the idea, in Malebranche’s sense, that can have an immediate impact/action on the mind, we can see how important this criterion of the RTM is in his argument. We can thus conclude that Malebranche believed that there was ‘no action at a distance’, since “for the mind to perceive an object, it is absolutely necessary for the idea of that object to be actually present to it – and about this there can be no doubt;” (*Rech.*, II, 1. 1:OC I, 414)

At this point we can more clearly see what Malebranche thinks ideas really are and what defines them. He says very specifically “we must carefully distinguish the direct and immediate objects of all perception (ideas) from the indirect and mediate objects of most sense perception (bodies).” (Pyle 48) Bodies could not be objects of immediate perception and experience, based on a metaphysical stance already. He explains, as touched upon earlier, “it is not likely that the soul should leave the body to stroll about the heavens, as it were, in order to behold all these objects” (OC I, 413-14; LO 217). It is at the same point in the *Recherche* when he establishes the fundamental explanation of what he “means” by ideas.

Thus, by the word idea, I mean here nothing other than the immediate object, or the object closest to the mind, when it perceives something, i.e. that which affects and modifies the mind with the perception it has of an object. (OC I, 413-14: LO 217)

Here it once again becomes quite clear, how basic Cartesian ideas, were the foundation on which Malebranche built the relational theory between ideas as objects and the bodies themselves. Causation thus seems to be much more important in the description of the

⁴ The mind and soul are thought of in a very similar way, which means that they don’t need to be differentiated in a very distinct fashion, when analyzing Malebranche’s work.

distance between objects and the mind. The cognitive presence (rather than spatial) of a certain body in my mind is what matters to Malebranche in the conclusion that “the direct and immediate object of my perception is an idea” (Pyle 49). Ideas are therefore not in us, but what is it that causes those ideas?

Another argument presented in the Search, which is trying to establish ideas as objects is what is referred to as the non-existing objects argument. Here, Malebranche is arguing that all we really see are representations, and “because all things that we see immediately are always such as we see them, and we err only because we judge that what we see immediately is found in the external objects that are the cause of what we see.” (LO 69) Whereas what we see are in fact only representations. Malebranche gives the example of a rising sun, which seems to be much greater than the sun high up in the sky. However, it can’t be of different size, “for it is really no the rising sun that we see or are looking at, since this one is several million leagues away.” (LO 69) All that we see are representations of those objects that are intimately joined to our mind. “Our error is that, without any reason and indeed against all reason, we require the light we immediately see to exist in the sun outside us.” (LO 69) After this is established, the discussion opens to the question what the source of those ideas is. How is it therefore that those ideas are put in our minds?

C. Vision in God (Argument by elimination; Properties of Ideas)

Malebranche offers two main arguments leading to the Vision in God, the argument by elimination and the argument from the properties of ideas, which we shall consider in turn. The argument by elimination proceeds by considering various different accounts of the source of ideas, and eliminating all except for the Vision in God, which furthermore supports Malebranche’s occasionalist view. There therefore must be one divine set of ideas to which everyone has access. Just as he goes about designing his thoughts on ideas he states that ideas “must be archetypes of bodies in the all-seeing mind of God.” (Pyle 50) It is therefore fundamental that the “problem of intentionality, like the problem of causality, demands a supernatural solution” (Pyle 51). By eliminating all other options Malebranche is arguing his conclusion “(c) God has produced them in us while creating the soul or produces them every time we think about a given object” (OC I 417). It is not very hard to discover that the very occasionalist thought is at the base of this conclusion. The list of hypotheses that Malebranche makes includes the occasionalist theory, stating, “God produces in each soul just the ideas it needs on the occasions of particular patterns of stimulation of its sense organs.” (Pyle 52) It is the fact that this theory does not allow us to choose what to think of independently, why Malebranche rules it out of the hypothesis for his doctrine on the Vision in God. He argues the occasionalist theory in a way that God touches us with those permanently existing ideas. This means God is still causing everything, but in a way of illuminating us with his all-seeing nature.

Furthermore, we must at all times actually have in us the ideas of all things, since we can at all times will to think about anything – which we could not do unless an infinite number of ideas were present to the mind; for after all, one cannot will to think about objects of which one has no ideas. Furthermore, it is clear that the idea, or immediate object of our mind, when we think about limitless space, or a circle in general, or indeterminate being, is nothing created. For no created reality can be either infinite or even general, as is what we perceive in these cases. (OC I 432, LO 227)

Even though Malebranche realizes that the classical explanation is not suitable to explain his theory on ideas, he does stand by the theory that by revealing His idea of a certain object to the mind, it is through God that we see certain objects. He concludes that “the mind surely can see what in God represents created beings, since what in God represents created beings is very spiritual, intelligible, and present to the mind. Thus, the mind can see God’s

works in Him, provided that God wills to reveal to it what in Him represents them.” (OC I 437, LO 230)⁵

The most extreme innovation that Malebranche goes through in the “fabric of Cartesian metaphysics” (Pyle 50) is clearly when answering to Arnauld’s objection that ideas are mere modifications of our souls. He argues that ideas “cannot (...) be modes of my own soul; rather, they must be archetypes of bodies in the all-seeing mind of God.” (Pyle 50) Here, we again arrive at the explanation of the divine in ideas, which I mentioned before. As mentioned above it is skepticism that worries Malebranche most. If ideas were to be in our soul, then all we would ever really know about is our own soul. This is one of the arguments that Malebranche presents to refute Arnauld’s claim about modes of the soul. However, an even more powerful argument is presented within the debate on the properties of ideas.

When focusing on this objection by Arnauld, it is interesting to see how Malebranche takes a very direct approach to negate it, leading to the second main argument for the Vision in God, which is based on the properties of ideas. On the basis that in order to prove that two things are not equal, one has to show that the one thing has a properties that the other thing lacks. Malebranche does exactly this analysis, when comparing ideas from perceptions in several of his works (Recherche, Eclaircissement X, Entretiens sur la Métaphysique), ensuring mainly that “the ideas of things are immutable, and that eternal laws and truths are necessary” (OC III 130, LO 613-14) Malebranche assigns certain properties to ideas, such as immutability, necessity, infinity, and eternity. It is those properties, which make it impossible for ideas to be modes of the human soul.

For it is clear that the soul’s modes are changeable but ideas are immutable; that its modes are particular, but ideas are universal and general to all intelligences; that its modes are contingent, but ideas are eternal and necessary; that its modes are obscure and shadowy, but ideas are very clear and luminous; (...); that these ideas are indeed efficacious because they act in the mind, they enlighten it and make it happy or unhappy, which is evident by the pain that the idea of the hand causes in those who have had an arm cut off. (OCM II 103)

Clear to see, it is those properties of ideas, which help Malebranche to explain why ideas just cannot be identified with the modes of our minds. Arnauld will be challenging this point especially, since it is him who establishes the theory that ideas are mere modifications of our soul.

III. Arnauld

The investigation of the debate that was so comprehensive and entails too much material to be considered in one exploration ought to be looked at from two sides. The significance of this debate gets clearer only through the arguments brought forth by Arnauld. It is therefore absolutely necessary to present the most important objections by Antoine Arnauld, which he presents in his work *On True and False Ideas*. Over the entire length of his work Arnauld is trying to build up on the claim that, Malebranche’s ideas are based on false premises. And with his interpretation of works by philosophers such as St. Augustine, Arnauld is trying to give examples that will disprove Malebranche’s case. Arnauld’s position is made very clear in his case. He is supporting the notion of direct perception, however, disagrees on Malebranche’s theory of indirect perception through ideas. To Arnauld ideas are ultimately mere modifications of the mind or soul by means of which we can directly perceive

⁵ Pyle uses similar examples, when explaining more thoroughly the extent of Malebranche’s eliminative argument for the vision in God.

objects. The big issue that Arnauld will take with Malebranche's doctrine is the bold claim that we see all things in God.

A. Rejection of the Claim that Ideas are Objects of Perception

As mentioned above, due to the immense amount of material, it is easiest to structure the objections in three specific kinds. (A) First of all, the motivation of Arnauld rejecting Malebranche's claim that ideas are objects of perception and not the immediate objects. (B) Thereafter, Arnauld's reasons to challenge the claim that ideas are distinct from the soul and its modifications need to be considered. (C) At the end, Arnauld strongly disagrees with the claim that ideas are identified in God, which sits at the core of Malebranche's doctrine. Most of those issues and objections overlap with each other, for it is addressed as one in Arnauld's work.

He starts off with seven rules that in his eyes are necessary to investigate further the nature of ideas and therewith all the other issues. Arnauld even goes as far as to claim that no "man of good sense" (VFI, 50) would not agree with those rules, which include some of Descartes's original ideas about doubt and are mainly directed to simplify the search for definitions. After establishing the rules, Arnauld furthermore includes the basic ideas that Descartes and even St. Augustine had from the very beginning onwards. It is thus just as "clear that I *think*, (...) that I think of something, i.e. that I know and perceive something." (VFI, 53) When looking at the rules established in the beginning we can see that it makes no longer sense to "ask for the reason why I think of something" (VFI, 53). Therefore, we now only need to be apprehensive of the "efficient cause of our contingent perceptions", when asking about the "cause of our perceptions". (VFI, 54) Arnauld takes this as a key part of his theory. When thinking about an object x, it is that object x that one is aware of in his/her mind and one does not need a mental representation in order to perceive x. It is therefore that he says, when I think of a tree, that tree is what I perceive, and not a representation of the tree. Because for the mind "it would be as unreasonable to ask why it thinks as it would be to ask why extension is divisible", it is clear that it is its nature to think and perceive. It now seems transparent to argue, that "in its knowledge of material things our soul does not need *representations* distinct from perceptions" (VFI, 77)

Arnauld clearly suggests that Malebranche is making a fundamental mistake by confusing different ways or manners of vision. The big misstep, Arnauld claims, is that Malebranche creates an "analogy between my soul having a perception of a square and extension having a shape." (VFI, 56) The key argument here is the difference between corporeal vision and true 'mental' or 'spiritual' vision. Malebranche, he argues, is wrongly assuming that minds have to follow the same form of causation with contact. Minds do not require spatial presence in order to perceive or be part of some form of causation.

To Malebranche's "no action at a distance" argument about the stars and the sun, which is presented earlier in this paper, Arnauld demonstrates that the mistake lies in presuming that "our mind can only know objects that are present to our soul" (VFI, 80). Based on this very argument, Malebranche asserts something that Arnauld deems as "totally false, for it is as evident as can be that our soul can know an infinite number of things at a distance from it". (VFI, 81) Arnauld's main argument is therefore based on the claim that "I am certain that my soul has the faculty of seeing all things and that, as it is dependent on the thought which constitutes its nature, it derives this from its author, God." (VFI, 81) He concludes that "because it is something dependent on its nature, by the last definition", the mind now "has the faculty of seeing bodies at a distance from it." (VFI, 81-2)

In Arnauld's eyes, the mistake everyone makes "results from the comparison of corporeal vision, poorly understood, with the mind's vision". (VFI, 82) Malebranche and his followers "crudely take this presence to be the special presence, which is appropriate to bodies" and therefore the argument contradicts itself when thinking about one's own body.

“We do not see our own body by itself any more than we see any other.” (VFI, 83) Thus, Malebranche’s claim that a body needs “to be present to our soul in a way necessary for our soul to perceive it” is no longer valid. (VFI, 83) Arnauld knows “that spatial presence or distance does not matter to whether a body can or cannot be the object of our mind”. (VFI, 84) This argument helps to understand this objection to the confusion between spatial and mental presence of the object, which is being perceived. It is one of the two childhood prejudices that were mentioned above, which Arnauld is trying to disprove. An object does not need to be present to one’s eye in order to be perceived. On the contrary, it needs to be at a distance from the soul in order to be perceived.

Just as it is true for refusing the “no action at a distance” argument, the same material is also arguing against the claim about non-existing objects. Arnauld clearly holds that an object only has to be objectively present and not spatially in order to be perceived. In Arnauld’s eyes Malebranche only claims that perceived objects have to be spatially present to our soul in order to be truly knowable. Just as the case against the “no action at a distance” argument shows, however, perceived things no longer have to be spatially present to our mind. We merely have to think of the object to have it objectively present. Following this, Arnauld dispenses the physical existence of those objects. Since “spatial presence or distance does not matter to whether a body can or cannot be the object of our mind”, we are now merely left with modes of our minds. (VFI, 84) Saying that an object exists objectively can now be seen as one thinking of that object. No matter if at distance or not existing, our mind perceives through their objective presence and therefore as a modification of our own minds.

B. Rejection of the Claim that Ideas are Distinct from Soul

The foundation on which Arnauld bases his rejection against the claim that ideas are fundamentally distinct from the soul is overlapping with the first argument presented. By presenting this difference Arnauld furthermore responds to Malebranche’s argument by elimination. Arnauld strongly asserts as a conclusion to the questions of objects of perception and ‘action at a distance’ that it is the already mentioned ‘objective presence’ that is the right way to think about ideas in one’s head:

One must therefore not be surprised, if, almost without being noticed, objective presence, which alone is necessary for a body as well as anything else if it is to be known by the mind, but which is distinct from the knowledge of it, has been changed into spatial presence, the word ‘presence’ being associated much more closely with this notion than with the other. (VFI, 85)

It is therefore not needed anymore to distinguish ideas from the soul, since only those fallacious thoughts about spatial presence lead to “the bizarre consequences that result from these representations”. (VFI, 85)

Arnauld furthermore points out equivocal arguments and logic in Malebranche’s work with his assumption that it is “absolutely necessary that the idea of the object be actually present to it, but it is not necessary that there be something external which is like the idea” (VFI, 86). Arnauld does not believe that those representations, which is what Malebranche calls ideas, are necessary for “providing our mind with means of seeing material things” (VFI, 87). He goes very much into depth with examples for this discussion, which are however far too complex to be considered only hastily. The theory that we can only see certain objects, or we are only able to perceive objects when they are “intimately joined to our soul” (VFI, 92) is part of this point that Arnauld criticizes harshly. Arnauld claims therefore that we are able to perceive both things “which are outside the soul, as well as those which are in the soul” (VFI, 92). For Arnauld concludes that therefore “nothing is more baseless (...) than this bizarre fantasy that when we turn our eyes towards material bodies, which is called *looking*, it is not material bodies but intelligible bodies that we see” (VFI, 97).

Arnauld's theory of ideas as 'modes of the soul' or mediators rather than being distinct from the soul, is clearly overlapping with the arguments against objects of perception. Having an object in front of our eyes is "what they call presence and this makes them regard the presence of the object as a necessity for sight." (Oeuvres, vol.39, p.190) Arnauld therefore realizes that "we sometimes see visible things in mirrors, or in water, or in other things which represent them. Thus they believe, wrongly, that they do not then see the things themselves, but only their images." (Oeuvres, vol.39, p.190) Arnauld claims that those images are mere mediators in the visual process, which directly relates to perception too. We do not see ideas as objects representing other objects outside of our mind. However, ideas merely mediate our perception as modes of our souls.

The two distinctions that are listed above become quite clear in Arnauld's text, when he emphasizes that objects need not be present spatially, but only objectively, when I perceive something. The object being only objectively present just is the state of perceiving, clearly not being distinct from the mind, which perceives. That ideas are just modes of perception, then nicely follows, since the Cartesian ontology distinctly describes everything non-substantial as modes of the one who thinks.⁶

In the first, it is imagined that this presence is prior to the knowledge of bodies, and that it is necessary if bodies are to be in a knowable state, whereas the presence of objects in our mind, which is only an *objective presence* and no different from our mind's perception of an object, is thus far from preceding the knowledge that it has of them, since it is by means of this knowledge that it knows that they are present to it. (VFI, 82)

This is preceding the false concept that the "spatial presence, which is appropriate to bodies" must be the same for perception. (VFI, 82) Arnauld emphasizes at this point that it is therefore crucial that we do not confound the wrong perception of the soul with ideas, as he thinks Malebranche does.

At this point it becomes evident how Arnauld's critique of Malebranche spills over into their related dispute over whether we have a clear idea of our own souls. Arnauld claims we do have a clear idea of our soul, which makes us be aware of our own states. Since we are indicating the soul's virtues, "to have a clear and distinct idea of an object, and to know an object by a clear idea, are clearly the same thing: hence it is not true that we have no clear and distinct idea of our soul." (VFI, 187) It is thus this Cartesian idea that both Malebranche and Arnauld are fighting over, which includes Descartes's claim "that there is nothing of which I know more attributes than my soul, for to the extent that one knows the attributes of other things in those things, one can count an equivalent number of attributes in the mind because it knows them". (CSM II, 249) Malebranche wants to distinguish a more logical essence of the soul, differentiating the awareness of an object from being aware of one's own state. Arnauld on the other hand continues to hold that being aware of my own state just is being aware of the object.

In this sense Arnauld is convinced to show that ideas are mere modes of one's soul, since Malebranche "has no reason to deny this, (...) also that he has not refuted the argument by which Descartes hoped to show 'that the nature of mind is better known than anything else'". (VFI, 190) Arnauld concludes this theory, because "I cannot know the attribute or property of anything else unless I know the perception that I have of it clearly, and this perception is an attribute or property of my mind". (VFI, 191) This critique of Malebranche's argument on ideas and extension being in God, and the proof that ideas are mere modes of the soul show Arnauld's response to the argument by elimination. Now it becomes clear why the question about the properties of ideas and the dispute about our ideas of the soul are crucial to

⁶ We remember here that Descartes finds his way out of uncertainty with the claim that 'cogito ergo sum'.

the debate. The importance of this distinction to the argument on the Vision in God is explained further in section D of part II.

C. Response to the ‘Properties of Ideas’ Argument

By now it is clear to see how Arnauld responds to Malebranche’s claim that ideas are objects. By rejecting the “no action at a distance” and the “non-existing objects” arguments it was successfully shown, how ideas should be identified with modes of the soul, rather than objects themselves, as in Malebranche claims. Lastly we arrive at the argument on the properties of ideas. It is this argument that Malebranche deems so important to his theory. Malebranche’s argument that ideas are infinite, eternal, and immutable is the strongest obstacle for Arnauld’s objection, which claims that ideas are not objects, but mere modifications of the soul. As shown earlier, Malebranche asserts that the ultimately infinite nature of objects and extension cannot be in us. Malebranche identifies this as infinite intelligible extension. In his objections Arnauld is thus showing both that our minds can indeed contain everything we need in the idea of infinite extension, and that the question about infinity is not worthy of putting in God. In this way Arnauld counters Malebranche’s ‘properties of ideas’ argument.

Before delving into the argument, Arnauld lists the three prejudices that he claims Malebranche is entailing when establishing his doctrine on the nature of ideas. First of all Arnauld attacks “one’s esteem for the author” (VFI, 140), claiming that it is Malebranche’s great reputation that is making people believe what he is saying. The second prejudice is, “that this new philosophy of ideas (put forward by Malebranche) shows us better than any other how much minds are dependent on God, and the extent to which they should be united with him.” (VFI, 143) Arnauld clearly asserts that Malebranche is wrong in his account of the Vision in God, which he uses to justify his theory on the nature of ideas. The third and last prejudice that Malebranche includes is “that in rejecting his philosophy of ideas we are reduced to saying that our soul thinks because that is its nature, and that God, in creating it, gave it the faculty of thinking” (VFI, 151).

In his disapproval of Malebranche’s theories Arnauld furthermore includes major parts on the doctrine of the Vision in God, and how it couldn’t be God, through whom we see the representation of objects in our minds. The debate over the vision in God is mainly caused by the disagreement of infinite intelligible extension. As explained in the beginning, Arnauld uses this to show how our minds can indeed contain this infinite extension. Malebranche, Arnauld claims, has invented this infinite intelligible extension “so as to provide us with a means of seeing things in God” (VFI, 123). However, he asserts, “infinite intelligible extension cannot be the means by which we see things that we do not know but wish to know” (VFI, 123). Besides this, Arnauld points out further dissonance between the arguments on laws, laid on us by God, and “that what our author (Malebranche) makes our mind do in order to discover its ideas in his infinite intelligible extension.” (VFI, 129) This is key to one argument that asserts Arnauld of his position against the vision in God.

Secondly, Malebranche’s primary motivation to claim that we see all things in God is based on the assertion that “God contains in Himself an infinite intelligible extension”, which He knows of since He created it. (VFI, 113) Arnauld deems this fallacious and states that “on the true notion of intelligible extension, (...), (Malebranche’s) arguments do not prove that intelligible extension is not in our soul, and on his confused notion, if they show that intelligible extension is not in our soul they also show that it is not in God’s.” (VFI, 117) Furthermore, it is impossible to state, that “the property of infinity that he ascribes to this intelligible extension renders it any more worthy of being admitted into God”. (VFI, 118) Specifically the things that we “wish to know” are impossible to explain through infinite intelligible extension. (VFI, 123) “I would like to know what the number is which, when divided by 28 leaves 5 over, when divided by 19 leaves 6 over, and when divided by 15

leaves 7 over”. (VFI, 123) With this example Arnauld shows that the numbers are not there “when my mind puts them there”. (VFI, 124) It is therefore impossible that “all the numbers are there because the mind can distinguish an infinite number of parts in it”. (VFI, 123)

Resulting from this Arnauld claims that it is certainly not impossible for us to have this extension in us, which doesn’t require the excuse “on false grounds, that we cannot see objects outside us in any other way”. (VFI, 123) Furthermore, he emphasizes that this extension is not worthy of putting in God, and is only done in order to strengthen the argument. But as he writes, the arguments are no proof to show that intelligible extension is not contained in our soul. This argument is furthermore laid out in the following section, when it becomes clearer that those properties shouldn’t be a reason to put ideas ‘in God’.

D. Ideas of the Soul create problems with the Vision in God

Earlier in section B the substance of the debate on whether or not we have a clear idea of our own soul is described in detail. In this section it is shown how important this distinction really is in order to respond to Malebranche’s argument on the Vision in God. As shown in the sections on Malebranche, he distinguishes very clearly between normal sensations and pure perceptions. In his theory he establishes that ideas are only necessary for pure perceptions, because said perceptions are representative. Sensations, however, do not involve ideas and “do not represent anything in the external world.” (Nadler 60) Since he states that sensations are modifications of the soul, Malebranche must therewith assert that we are aware of our own souls directly. In this section the argument shows that Arnauld therefore claims that we shouldn’t distinguish the idea we have of our souls from the ideas of the external world. It is only through direct perception that we can have the same mode of knowing soul as knowing external objects.

Arnauld thus disagrees with the claim that we see things by representations, in respect to Malebranche’s arguments on the soul. He subsequently explains how, “if it were true that we saw things by means of *representations*, (Malebranche) would have no basis for his claim that we do not see our soul in this way.” (VFI, 160) The perception of the soul is therefore another big disagreement between him and Malebranche, in the domain of the nature of ideas. Arnauld is not trying to prove that we see the soul in that way too, however, simply to furthermore exemplify how “poorly this philosophy of ideas fits together” (VFI, 160). Based on what Malebranche argues about the way we see all things in God, Arnauld explains by replying to nine of Malebranche’s arguments (which try to show “that we have no clear idea of the soul but that we have a clear idea of extension” (VFI, 164)) how we have no reason to exempt the soul from God’s infinite intelligible extension, if his theory was right.

The question if we have a clear idea of our soul, therefore, seems critical in determining Arnauld’s argument. Malebranche would not be able to “maintain that we do not see our soul in this way”, if the first premise about seeing “material things by means of representations” would be correct. (VFI, 160) Arnauld argues that, because Malebranche claims that the vision in God “places created minds in a position of complete dependence on God”, it isn’t coherent for the “created mind to be completely dependent on God for its knowledge of the sun, a horse, a tree, and a fly, and not have the same dependence in knowing itself.” (VFI, 162) Therefore, in the disagreement on the “clarity of the idea of the soul” (VFI, 182), Arnauld determines further prejudices that Malebranche includes in his arguments. This can be boiled down to the main disagreement that Malebranche asserts the soul to be purely passive, and Arnauld, on the other hand, thinks that the soul is active and received faculty from God. This lies at the base of the contradiction that Arnauld sees in Malebranche’s struggle to project the vision in God onto the soul, which makes it so crucial to conceptualize the clear idea of the soul.

As the major objections by Antoine Arnauld are presented it becomes quite clear why that debate was so overwhelming and thorough in almost every important aspect of modern

philosophical issues. Arnauld disagrees with the majority of Malebranche's assertions, however, sees the major fault in starting from the assumption about the nature of ideas. Taking this as a base to the entire doctrine, Arnauld realizes that Malebranche assumes most of his theories on this very base; he therefore criticizes these major points through pointing out the falsity of the main doctrine of ideas and the vision in God. As stated before the idea of the soul, is very important related to God, because of the reasons explained at the end of Section II, B. It is the clear and distinct idea of our soul that makes us not required to move all ideas in God, since they are all simply modifications of that soul. The Cartesian heritage once more influences the debate with the notion of knowing something clearly and distinctly.

IV. Issues at Stake

In the beginning it seems very clear what exactly both of the philosophers are debating about. However, when moving deeper and deeper into the issue, it is not quite unambiguous anymore, as to what exactly is at stake in the debate. In his book *Des Vraies et Fausses Idées* it is stated very clearly: "what the author of the book *The Search after Truth* says about the subject is based on nothing more than false prejudices, and that nothing is more groundless than his claim that *we see all things in god.*" (Arnauld 1) Very obviously the first issue that is being addressed is Malebranche's Vision in God. However, over the course of their debate Arnauld is more and more attacking Malebranche's account of ideas and perception. With a race for Descartes's ultimate scholarship in the background, Arnauld is depicting "himself as the defender of Descartes against the dangerous innovations of Malebranche" (Pyle, 84). Malebranche, mostly starting to complain about the way in which Arnauld responded to his work, maintains that we see bodies, however, "adding only the qualification that we do not see them *en eux-même* (OC VI 101)". Overall, this thought is important in order to connect this debate to some of the big issues at stake, such as the nature of God, of providence, causation and occasionalism, and so on.

From different authors that published on this issue, even though there aren't very many, we can also read, that "the general position regarding the perception of external objects that (Arnauld) is attacking (...) is this "object theory of ideas"" (Nadler, ACPI, 81). It is however very interesting, as Nadler mentions, that Malebranche is addressing the question of what this debate is really about. The beginnings of each *Response* help us in identifying Malebranche's issues.

Quel est l'état de la question. Mr Arnauld prétend que les modalités de l'ame sont essentiellement représentatives des objets differens de l'ame : et je soûtiens que ces modalités ne sont que des sentimens, qui ne représentent à l'ame rien de different d'elle-même. (OC VI, 50)

Here one can already see that Malebranche was very much characterizing the debate himself, from his understandings of *Des Vraies et Fausses Idées*.

What is the shape/condition of the question? Mr. Arnauld claims that the modalities of the soul are essentially representative of objects distinct from the soul; and I maintain that these modalities are nothing but sensation, which do not represent to the soul anything different from itself. (OC VI, 50)

Are representative ideas modifications of the mind, or are they external to the mind/soul? This is what Malebranche deemed the major issue of the debate to be. Once again, he captures that thought in the introduction to Chapter vi of his *Réponse*, which is when he also introduces the important distinction between his interpretation of the verbs *connaître* and *sentir*. Very clearly directing the debate, Malebranche says:

Preuves tirées de la Recherche de la vérité: Que les modalités de l'ame ne sont que l'objet immédiat de nos sentiments, et non celui de nos connaissances. (OC VI, 55)

He is structuring and explaining his arguments against Arnauld very clearly with many subtitles; each responding to what Arnauld accuses him of.

Evidence from the *Search for Truth*: That the modes of the soul are nothing but the immediate objects of our sensations, and not of our *knowledge*. (OC VI, 55)

By including these points in his *Réponse* to Arnauld, Malebranche is shaping the debate after his idea of the importance of different issues at stake. As described earlier in the research, Arnauld seems not to be too concerned about this issue. In the beginning he mainly focuses on his concerns about Malebranche's Vision in God, which he uses to justify his arguments on the nature of ideas. In the nature of most philosophical disputes during this time, Arnauld offensively argues that "(w)hat the author of *The Search after Truth* says concerning *the nature of ideas* in his third Book is based merely on fancies deriving from childhood prejudices." (Gaukroger, 58) However, during the course of writing his *Des Vraies et Fausses Idées* Arnauld also takes issue with Malebranche's description of perception and how he incorporates the concept of ideas into that theory. "Nevertheless, it is clear (...) that 'the idea of an object' is the same as 'the perception of that object' (...)" (Gaukroger, 63).

Arnauld develops this theory in his work and uses it as the main argument in order to challenge that "(...) it is no longer *the perception of bodies* that [Malebranche] calls an *idea*, but rather a particular *representation* of bodies which [Malebranche] claims is needed to make good the absence of any body that can be joined intimately to the soul, so that the *representation* is thereby *the immediate object and what is closest to our mind when it perceives it*" (Gaukroger, 63). We can clearly witness how this debate on the nature of ideas lies at the roots of much bigger issues. Arnauld rejects Malebranche's Vision in God so vehemently, mainly because it would open the door to so many bigger issues concerning theodicy and occasionalism. Once Malebranche is granted the point on God's general idea and laws, as mentioned earlier, Arnauld realizes that bigger mistakes such as general volition are at stake. In his argument on the Vision in God, Malebranche insists that "it is indubitable that we could desire to see a particular object only if we had already seen it, though in a general and confused fashion." (OC I, 440-1) Therefore, "it seems that all being can be present to our mind only because God i.e. He who includes all things in the simplicity of His being, is present to it" (OC I, 440-1). We already see this argument as one of his arguments for occasionalism, which shows that, if true, there is no mind-body causation, completely dissolving the mind-body problem that Descartes already struggled with. Arnauld's different opinion on theological questions is now what shapes the debate at a very late point.

Addressing the general issues at stake, it is important to realize that to Arnauld at this point it isn't a simple philosophical debate about perception and the soul anymore. However, it is much more about the relationship between humans and God, which is seriously attacked by Malebranche's claims. It is Malebranche's theories about humans being able to grasp God's nature and in fact coming into direct contact with God's mind, that really agitates Arnauld's response. With the argument on infinite intelligible extension, as it is described earlier, the immense gap between the infinite God and humans is overrun. Arnauld realizes that this is utterly unacceptable to claim that we are so close to God himself through 'touching' his mind. Arnauld emphasizes how on the basis on Malebranche's theory on ideas so many other fallacious claims are build, which need to be rejected by all means. Saying that God not only has access to our minds but also "is present to it" leads to a close proximity between humans and God, which is unacceptable. (OC I, 440-1) This claim being the biggest hubris, Arnauld insists that Malebranche's theory on ideas needs to be rejected in order to prevent this outrageous theological assertion.

We can thus see that while Arnauld is trying to take a more rationalist approach, claiming that we ultimately “cannot doubt that our perceptions (the modes of our souls) are representations of objects”, Malebranche sustains a view focusing on causation, claiming that “only God’s action can provide genuine necessary connections” and “only God’s ideas can provide genuine objective knowledge”. (Pyle 81) Overall, however, this is simply leading towards major differences in what is to become Malebranche’s theory on theodicy in his later works. At that point of the debate Arnauld and Malebranche are drifting even further apart from each other and delve into this significant dispute on theodicy and the relationship between humans and God.

V. Conclusion

Nicolas Malebranche’s theory on the nature of ideas and including the Vision in God lies at the base of the conflict between him and the famous Cartesian Jansenist Antoine Arnauld. To Malebranche ideas can be expressed in two different cases. On one hand, ideas can be “objects external to the mind and allow us to see their properties;” (Nadler 60) and on the other hand “sensations, which are merely modifications of the mind and do not represent anything in the external world.” (Nadler 60) While one of Arnauld’s major criticisms is the point that ideas are to describe mere modes of the soul/mind, Malebranche clearly distinguishes between that description of sensations and the presence of *ideas in God*. We see bodies through the immediate ideational object that is present in our mind through God, but we don’t see those bodies *en eux-même* (in themselves).

Throughout the course of the debate it is not always quite clear what it really is that the two philosophers are trying to accuse the other of, which philosophical problems really are in jeopardy, and how important this issue about the nature of ideas really is. Clearly, Malebranche’s claim on the Vision in God is what Arnauld initially takes as the most “groundless” theories of all. (Arnauld 1) However, over the course of the debate Malebranche’s object theory of ideas and the mind becomes ever-closer attention by Arnauld’s critical arguments. Malebranche, however, is starting to shape the debate by his own interpretations of Arnauld’s work *Des Vraies et Fausses Idées*. During the course of the debate Malebranche himself accuses Arnauld of only attacking the form of his arguments and not the very thought itself. However, at the heart of the early debate it is the distinction between ‘the idea of an object’ and the ‘the perception of that object’. (Gaukroger 63)

As mentioned above, it is crucial to remark that this, in comparison rather small, debate on cognition and perception leads to an even more fundamental dispute. It is putting in question the fundamental relationship between God and humans. Arnauld sees Malebranche’s claims that we are touching God’s mind and have clear and distinct idea of the same as outrageously unacceptable. God’s essence, Arnauld insists, is untouchable and unintelligible to us. This is furthermore creating a bigger picture against Malebranche’s idea that we can know how God works through reason.

The debate is taking place during the end of the 17th century and postulates the core of modern philosophical thoughts leading into the time of the enlightenment in Europe. It is very clear to see how many of the core issues of Modern Philosophy are at the heart of the debate and even the dispute about the nature of ideas and the Vision in God. Taking the representational theory of mind, which was already engraved by Descartes’s early ontological thoughts, as an example, it becomes clear how many of the arguments that Malebranche presents are incorporating that very same theory. The arguments that support the RTM are very much in support of what Malebranche discusses on the nature of ideas and vice-versa. It almost seems as though Nicolas Malebranche takes the RTM one step further and includes it into a more specific analysis and theory. The occasionalist views that were an issue during this time were very much also deductible from the debate on the nature of ideas and especially the Vision in God. Even though Malebranche argued against the occasionalist theory in his

eliminative prove of the Vision in God, the link between the issue of the debate and the major theories that dictated the rationalist life in the 17th century and beyond seems clear. The huge time frame in which the debate was taking place, gives a lot of opportunities for different interpretations of the main issues. However, it also shows how important and prevalent the debate was in the intellectual life of the late 17th century.

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