THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS IN EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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7 UNIVERSALS AND INDIVIDUALS IN MALEBRANCHE'S PHILOSOPHY

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In early modern philosophy the problem of universals, far from disappearing, became central to philosophical debate, but with a very important change. In fact, although in the scholastic debate the point at issue was above all the ontological status of universals, in the modern age philosophers seem more interested in epistemological than in metaphysical questions. It is known that, from Descartes to Hume, the discussion on the nature of universals was strictly related to research on the modalities of human knowledge, in particular the definition of ideas. In Descartes, for instance, it is only through the ideas—which represent the universal essences of bodies, i.e., innate ideas—that we can get true knowledge of the mathematical structure of the world and then build an a priori physics; by contrast, the particular and individual ideas reached by the senses, that is, adventice ideas, do not possess any epistemic content.[1]

Indeed, in Malebranche's philosophy the connection between ideas and universals becomes much stronger than in Descartes, since Malebranche, at least in his mature writings, thinks that *all* ideas,

1. The shift from the ontological to the epistemological treatment of universals in Descartes is attested, I think, by the difficulty in giving a definitive answer as to Descartes's opinion of the status of universals, as shown by the wide range of interpretations on this subject that we can find in the literature. Some scholars think that Descartes is a Platonist (e.g., Kenny 1968), others a conceptualist (e.g., Chappell 1997), others a nominalist (e.g., Cunning 2003). The problem arises from the difference between some places in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* in which Descartes defines universal essences represented by ideas as "true and immutable natures" (Fifth Meditation, AT 7:64), and two articles in the *Principles of Philosophy* in which Descartes says that "number, when it is considered simply in the abstract or in general, and not in any created things, is merely a mode of thinking; and the same applies to all the other universals, as we call them. . . . These universals arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea for thinking of all individual items which resemble each other: we apply one and the same term [*nomen*] to all the things which are represented by the idea in question, and this is the universal term" (1:58, 59, AT 8:27).

properly speaking, are universal *and* infinite. This is one of the main reasons provided by Malebranche to support the thesis according to which man cannot own ideas, but can only attain God's ones—this is the core of Malebranche's theory of the "vision in God of ideas." This is because no finite and particular idea is able to represent something that is universal and infinite.[2] According to Malebranche, since science—that is, a true, universal, and necessary knowledge of the world—exists and, as Descartes showed, we attain knowledge of the world through ideas, then these ideas can belong to the only reason that satisfies the requirements of truthfulness, universality, and necessity: the reason of God.[3] But God's ideas, which are the archetypes of the world, possess the same features of God's reason: universality, infinity, and necessity. Hence, the ideas attained by man are the same ideas of God, and the certainty of our knowledge—the science we can have about the world—depends on these ideas being the model that God used to create the world. As we will see, by drawing on a medieval model of knowledge that has been identified in Aquinas's beatific vision,[4] Malebranche built the new science on divine grounds. But a question then arises: if the ideas through which we know the world are universal, general, and infinite, how is it possible to know a single and particular body—for instance, the sun?

In the following, we try to answer this question by analyzing the relationships between Malebranche's vision in God and its medieval source, in order not only to clarify Malebranche's conception of the universal but also to show that this scholastic source can be very helpful for understanding the relationships between the conception of universals and knowledge of individuals in Malebranche. This road will show that, in contrast to his contemporaries, for Malebranche the conception of universal cannot be separated at all from its metaphysical background—an impossibility that seems to lend further evidence to Paul Hazard's suggestive description of Malebranche: "Il eût été capable d'inventer la métaphysique si elle n'eût existé avant lui" (Hazard 1995, 93).

7.1

As previously mentioned, since Malebranche placed a strict connection between universals and ideas, in order to understand his view about universals we must plainly

2. The emphasis on the "and" is not casual because, as we will see, Malebranche, in contrast with Descartes, saw a strict connection between the two features of ideas, giving to both of them the same, positive, value.

3. See especially Tenth Elucidation of *The Search after Truth*, OC 3: 128–31.

4. See Scribano 1996 and Priarolo 2004.

turn to his definition of idea. The better place to find Malebranche's opinion on this subject is the book explicitly devoted to the theory of knowledge: *La Recherche de la verité*. Written between 1668 and 1673—after four years in which Malebranche had studied Descartes and the new scientific discoveries—the *Search after Truth* should be considered a "work in progress." Seven different editions were in fact published during Malebranche's life: the first volume appears in 1674, followed the next year by a second one and by the second edition of the first volume. Two new editions were published in 1678 when the Elucidations, the third volume of *Search*, appeared; the fifth edition in 1700, at the end of the *querelle des idées* with Arnauld;[5] and the last one in 1714, one year before Malebranche's death. The fundamental critical edition directed by André Robinet allows us now to follow the evolution of Malebranche's theory of knowledge, an evolution that some scholars, as Robinet himself, see more as a series of radical changes than a progressive adjustment of the theory.

In the introduction, Malebranche—who, like Descartes, thinks that man is composed of two distinct realities: body and soul—states that man's soul is characterized by a "double union," one with his body, another with God:

> The mind of man is by nature situated, as it were, between its Creator and corporeal creatures, for, according to Saint Augustine, there is nothing but God above it and nothing but bodies below it. But as the mind's position above all material things does not prevent it from being joined to them, and even depending in a way on a part of matter, so the infinite distance between the sovereign Being and the mind of man does not prevent it from being immediately joined to it in a very intimate way. (SAT Preface xxxiii, OC 1:9)

While the union with the body is the main source of our errors—since the two faculties of the soul that are strictly related to the body, i.e., sensibility and imagination, are given to us not for knowing the world but only for preserving ourselves—they have, in current words, an *adaptive* function—union with God provides us with the truth. In this sense, Malebranche explicitly refers to Saint Augustine's doctrine of divine illumination, which states that the truth attained by man derives from the connection between our intellect and God.[6] It is important to note that Malebranche's sympathy toward Augustine's doctrine of divine

5. On this debate, see Moreau 1999 and Nadler 1989.

6. See SAT xxxvii, OC 1:16–17: "This is what Saint Augustine teaches us with these elegant words. 'Eternal wisdom' he says, 'is the source of all creatures capable of understanding, and this immutable wisdom never ceases speaking to His creatures in the most secret recesses of their reason so that they might be inclined toward Him, their source, because only the vision of eternal wisdom gives minds being, only eternal wisdom can complete them, so to speak, and give them the ultimate perfection of which they are capable.'"

illumination depends on a thesis that plays a pivotal role in his philosophy: the radical *impotence* of creatures. This thesis is one of the bases of so-called *occasionalism*, the theory shared by Malebranche according to which the only real and true cause is God, whereas the actions of finite beings are just the occasions for God to carry out his decrees.[7] As we will see, it is precisely by appealing to the thesis of the structural impotence of creatures that Malebranche in the third book of the *Search*—where he discusses different theories of ideas—refuses every theory that considers ideas as mental modifications. This is an essential step for affirming the vision in God of ideas. Malebranche's argument is as follows.

Malebranche first states that we know the external world through ideas, by invoking the *consensus omnium*:

> I think everyone agrees that we do not perceive objects external to us by themselves. We see the sun, the stars, and an infinity of objects external to us; and 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. Thus, it does not see them by themselves, and our mind's immediate object when it sees the sun, for example, is not the sun, but something that is intimately joined to our soul, and this is what I call an *idea*. 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. (SAT 217, OC 1:413–14)

Since the objects of knowledge, ideas, have many properties, but "nothing has no properties," we must conclude that ideas not only are "something," but are *real* in a strong sense; they are more real than external bodies that could not exist even if we perceived them, since what we perceive is the idea of a body, not the body itself: "It often happens that we perceive things which do not exist, and that even have never existed" (SAT 217, OC 1:414).[8] But to know the function of the ideas, that is, their being the primary object of perception, and to state that they possess some kind of reality is not sufficient to understand what an idea actually is. According to Malebranche, in order to fully grasp the role of ideas in human knowledge, we shall need to detect their origin. There are five

7. See Nadler 2011.

8. In his late writings, Malebranche will say that, for the above reasons, even if God would destroy the material world, we could continue to perceive the same things we perceive now. See, for instance, *Entretiens d'un philosophe chrétien et un philosophe chinois*, OC 15.

different possible answers to this question, five hypotheses that can be divided into three subsets:

(a) ideas could come from bodies (first hypothesis);
(b) they could come from the mind (second and fourth hypotheses);
(c) they could come from God (third and fifth hypotheses).[9]

The first hypothesis, a rough interpretation of the scholastic theory of the *species intellegibilis*,[10] is quickly refused by Malebranche, who reads this theory in a materialistic way. According to his interpretation, the species are a kind of Epicurean *simulacra*, composed by matter and then impenetrable, and above all similar to the bodies they are supposed to represent, a likeness that Malebranche, by means of an argument already used by Descartes,[11] refuses:

> [W]hen we look at a perfect cube, all the species of its sides are unequal, and yet we see all its sides as equally square. And likewise when we look at a picture of ovals and parallelograms, which can transmit only species of the same shape, we see in it only circles and squares. This clearly shows that the object we are looking at need not produce species that resemble it in order for us to see it. (SAT 221, OC 1:420)

But the nonsimilarity between the object represented and the representation is not a sufficient sign of the correctness of the theory. In fact, the second hypothesis, an empiristic model of knowledge according to which the mind produces ideas—which are here considered as dissimilar from their objects—from the sensible impressions it receives from bodies,[12] is also refused by Malebranche, because it gives man too much power. Since the ideas are real, Malebranche explains, if we

9. "We assert the absolute necessity, then, of the following: either (1) the ideas we have of the bodies and of all other objects we do not perceive by themselves come from these bodies or objects; or (2) our soul has the power of producing these ideas; or (3) God has produced them in us while creating the soul or produces them every time we think about a given object; or (4) the soul has in itself all the perfections it sees in bodies; or else (5) the soul is joined to a completely perfect being that contains all intelligible perfections, or all the ideas of created being" (SAT 219, OC 1:417).

10. On this subject see Spruit 1995.

11. See Descartes, *Dioptrics*, Discours IV, AT 6:113. For a discussion of Malebranche's denial of likeness in representation see Scribano 2003.

12. Emanuela Scribano showed that this hypothesis could be found in Arnauld's *Logique de Port-Royal* (I, 1). See Scribano 2006, 201ff.

say that the mind could produce ideas, we are then saying that the mind is able to *create* something and, hence, that man has the same power as God:

> According to them, it is in this that man is made after the image of God and shares in His power. . . . This share in God's power that men boast of for representing objects to themselves . . . is a share that seems to involve a certain independence. . . . But it is also an illusory share, which men's ignorance and vanity makes them imagine. (SAT 222, OC 1:422)

With a Platonic argument, Malebranche explains that we cannot represent something if its idea is not already present to our minds:

> [A]s a painter, no matter how good he is at his art, cannot represent an animal he has never seen and of which he has no idea—so that the painting he would be required to produce could not be like this unknown animal—so a man could not form the idea of an object unless he knows it beforehand, i.e., unless he already had the idea of it, which idea does not depend on his will. (SAT 223, OC 1:424–25)

Nor can it be said that man has the power to produce particular and distinct ideas from general and confused ones, as shown by "the painter's example":

> For just as an artist cannot draw the portrait of an individual in such a fashion that he could be certain of having done a proper job unless he had a distinct idea of the individual, . . . so a mind that, for example, has only the idea of being, or of an animal in general cannot represent a horse to itself, or form a very distinct idea of it, or be sure that the idea exactly resembles a horse, unless it already has an initial idea against which it compares the second. (SAT 223–24, OC 1:425)[13]

The reason is that, according to Malebranche, the intellect of man is only a passive faculty that can only receive ideas and, thus, having no power at all, cannot produce by itself any representative content:

> [T]he faculty of receiving different ideas and modifications in mind is *entirely passive and contains no action*; and I call that faculty or that

13. We will come back to this passage because, as we will see, Malebranche in the following will say that the idea of God, which is the basis for everything we could know about the world, is precisely *l'idée de l'être en general*.

> capacity which the soul has of receiving all these things *understanding* [SAT 3, OC 1:41, my emphasis]
>
> . . . I understand by this word *understanding* that passive faculty of the soul by means of which we receive all the modifications of which it is capable. (SAT 3, OC 1:41)

The same argument is invoked for refusing the third hypothesis—the thesis according to which we know the world through "ideas created with us" (SAT 226, OC 1:429)—and the fourth theory—which states that "the mind needs only itself in order to see objects, and that by considering itself and its own perfections, it can discover all external things" (SAT 228, OC 1:433). These are two different versions of innatism—the first is very close to the innatism present in Descartes's Fifth Meditation, and the second is possibly contained in *The Port-Royal Logic*, written by the Cartesians Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole.[14] Whereas the fourth hypothesis is rejected by means of the "powerlessness argument," the third is not considered valid for a reason that will become very important in Malebranche's metaphysics, the so-called economy principle—that is, the conviction in which God does not make complex that which he can make in a simpler and more economical way. As Malebranche writes:

> To see the implausibility of this view, it should be considered that there are in the world many totally different things of which we have ideas. But to mention only simple figures, it is certain that their number is infinite, and even if we fix upon only one, such as an ellipse, the mind undoubtedly conceives of an infinite number of different kinds of them. . . . The mind, then, perceives all these things; it has ideas of them; it is certain that it will never want for ideas should it spend countless centuries investigating even a single figure. . . . It has, then, an infinite number of ideas—what am I saying?—it has as many numbers of ideas as there are different figures; consequently since there is an infinite number of different figures, the mind must have an infinity of infinite numbers of ideas just to know the figures. Now, I ask whether it is likely that God created so many things along with the mind of man. My own view is that such is not the case, especially since all this could be done in another, much simpler and easier way. (SAT 226–27, OC 1:430–31)

14. See Nadler 1994 and Scribano 2006.

This "way" is precisely the vision in God of ideas, the fifth hypothesis described by Malebranche, the only hypothesis that satisfies the three conditions previously mentioned: (1) the reality of ideas; (2) the impotence of the human intellect—since, once provided with ideas, it would be independent from God; and (3) the "economics" of God's action.

Let us try to summarize the relevant points of Malebranche's conception of idea as it emerged in the argument of the *Search*:

(1) We cannot know the bodies directly but we can know them through ideas (premise);
(2) ideas are the direct object of our knowledge of the world (consequence of the premise);
(3) ideas are real (consequence of the thesis "nothing has no properties");
(4) ideas can be neither material nor similar to material objects (first hypothesis);
5) ideas shall already be present to our minds when we know something (second hypothesis);
(6) ideas can be in us neither as dispositions (third hypothesis) nor contents (fourth hypothesis), due to the thesis of the impotence of creatures;
(7) ideas can be created neither by us (second hypothesis) nor by God (fourth hypothesis);
(8) ideas through which man knows things are not in human minds but in God (fifth hypothesis and conclusion).

Given the tenets presented by Malebranche in the discussion of the second and the fourth hypothesis—that is, the "painter example" and the claim about "an infinite number of ideas" for understanding a single figure—it seems that we shall conclude that, for Malebranche, in God we see an infinite number of particular and distinct ideas. In the first edition of the *Search* we might find an answer that confirms this suggestion:

> But the strongest argument of all [for supporting the vision in God] is the mind's way of perceiving anything. It is certain, and everyone knows from experience, that when we want to think about some particular thing, we first glance over all beings and then apply ourselves to the consideration of the object we wish to think about. Now, 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. As a result of this, given that we can desire to see all beings, now one, now another, it is certain that all beings are present to our mind; and 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. (SAT 232, OC 1:440)

But three years later, in the Tenth Elucidation, Malebranche will explicitly deny this conclusion:

> It should not be imagined that the intelligible word is related to the sensible, material world in such a way that there is an intelligible sun, for example, or an intelligible horse or tree intended to represent to us the sun or a horse or a tree. (Tenth Elucidation, SAT 627, OC 3:153)

This difference between the two writings has been remarked upon by Malebranche's contemporaries, such as Arnauld, and by several of Malebranche scholars. These scholars see a clear sign of a radical change that occurred in Malebranche's description of knowledge,[15] a change that Malebranche on the contrary has always denied. He therefore aimed *to* clarify, not modify, his opinions. One possible way to shed light on the question, in my opinion, would be to look to Malebranche's conception of universal.

In order to better understand this point we must first remember that since his first writings Malebranche has agreed with Descartes that the essence of bodies is extension. As Malebranche writes in a chapter dedicated to "The essence of matter" in the *Search*:

> [E]xtension is the essence of matter . . . with extension alone we can certainly form the heavens, an earth, and the entire world we see as well as an infinity of others. (SAT 245, OC 1:463)

To know the essence of bodies is then equivalent to knowing their extension, not directly, but through the idea of extension:

> [O]ur idea of extension suffices to inform us of all the properties of which extension is capable, and we could not wish for an idea of extension, figure, or motion more distinct or more fruitful that the one God gives us. (SAT 237, OC 1:450)

Since every body is nothing but a particular configuration of extension, the knowledge of the essence of the general idea of extension, "the intelligible extension" in

15. Cf. Gueroult 1955 and Robinet 1965.

Malebranche's words, is also the knowledge of the essence of the singular body. As we read in the Tenth Elucidation:

> [A]ll intelligible extension can be conceived of as circular, or as having the intelligible figure of a horse or a tree, all of intelligible extension can serve to represent the sun, or a horse or a tree, and consequently can be the sun or a horse or a tree of the intelligible world. (SAT 627, OC 3:153–54)

Malebranche explains that when he had said that we know the ideas, and not the *idea*, of bodies in God,

> I did not exactly mean that there are in God certain perfections that represent each body individually, and that we see such an idea when we see the body; for we certainly could not see this body as sometimes great, sometimes small, sometimes round, sometimes square, if we saw it through a particular idea that would always be the same. (SAT 627–28, OC 3:154)

Why then does Malebranche, in his critiques of innatism, speak about an infinite number of ideas? It becomes clear in the third edition of the *Search* when, at the end of the critiques, he concludes that if the ideas were created they *have to be* particular, since *every creature* is particular:

> [I]t 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. (SAT 227, OC 1:432)

Indeed, this statement is consistent with another definition of ideas already present in the first edition of the *Recherche*, where Malebranche defines the particular ideas as "participations" of the idea of God:

> [A]ll these particular ideas are in fact but participations in the general idea of the infinite. (SAT 232, OC 1:441)[16]

16. It must be noted that properly speaking for Malebranche we do not possess any idea of God, but we see God directly: "Only God do we know through Himself. . . . Only God do we perceive by a direct and immediate perception. Only He can enlighten our mind with His own substance. Finally, only through the union we have with Him we are capable in this life of knowing what we know" (SAT 236–37, OC 1:449).

The entire passage is especially interesting: here, Malebranche is saying that the last argument for supporting the vision in God is the proof of the existence of God derived from the idea of the infinite. Recalling what Descartes has written in the Third Meditation, Malebranche explains that our idea of infinite is primitive—that is, not derived from the finite. But unlike Descartes, Malebranche states that (a) we know this idea only because we are "united" to God, and (b) the idea of infinite, although "very distinct" coincides with the "general notion of being":

> [T]he proof of God's existence, the loftiest and most beautiful, the primary and most solid (or the one that assumes the least) is the idea we have of the infinite. For it is certain that (a) the mind perceives the infinite, enough it does not comprehend it, and (b) it has a very distinct idea of God, which it can have only by means of its union with him. . . . But not only does the mind have the idea of the infinite, it even has it before that of the finite. For we conceive of infinite being simply because we conceive of being, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite. In order for us to conceive of a finite being, something must necessarily be eliminated from this general notion of being, which consequently must come first. Thus, the mind perceives nothing except in the idea it has of the infinite, and far from this idea being formed from the confused collection of all our ideas of particular beings (as philosophers think), all these particular ideas are in fact but participations in the general idea of infinite. (SAT 232, OC 1:441)

For Malebranche, therefore, the general idea of being, which is equivalent to the idea of infinite, is positive—that is, nonnegative, primary—and *unitary* as well as the idea of infinite, so that it cannot be seen as a mere combination, a sum, of particular ideas, but the (general) principle from which the different (particular) ideas derive ("participate"). In this sense, we must underscore that the relationship between the unity of God and the plurality of ideas is invoked by Malebranche also in order to explain the origin of universals:

> [I]t 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. It even seems that the mind would be incapable of representing universal ideas of genus, species, and so on, to itself had it not seen all beings contained in one. (SAT 232, OC 1:441)

Hence, it is because of the connection between our minds and the infinite, that is, God, that we can have general or universal ideas. This point will be clearly stated

in the later *Dialogues on Metaphysics* (*Entretiens sur la Métaphysique*, 1688), in which Malebranche defends the thesis of the priority of the infinite on the finite by arguing against an empiricist objection to the origin of universals. In the *II Dialogue*, Ariste—a young and talented man not yet fully convinced by Malebranche's philosophy—declares that it is impossible for him to admit that the general idea of being is not "un amas confus d'idées" (*II Dialogue*, art. viii, OC 12:57). "Let us see what is true and what is false in this thought to which you are so strongly predisposed," answers Malebranche-Theodore. Ariste's reasoning, according to Malebranche, is the following: one thinks of a circle that is one foot in diameter, then a circle that is two feet, then three feet, and so on, and at least he does not determine the diameter and thinks of a circle in general. This idea, if Ariste were right, would be a confused set of the "different and particular circles" thought. But this consequence is wrong, concludes Malebranche, since "the idea of the general circle represents infinite circles and applies to them all, whereas you have thought only of a finite number of circles" (DM 27, OC 12:58). Therefore, the general idea of a circle cannot be the sum of *n*-particular circles. But, continues Malebranche, there is a sense in which we can say that the general idea is the result of a mental process that goes from the particular to the general. When Ariste first considers the particular circles and second the circle in general, what he does is *to* extend "the idea of generality over the confused ideas of circles you have imagined" (DM 27, OC 12:58). This means that it is not Ariste who makes the process of generalization, but "the idea of infinity" that transforms the particular ideas into a general one. As Malebranche writes,

> I maintain you could form general ideas only because you find enough reality in the idea of the infinite to give the idea of generality to your ideas. You can think of an indeterminate diameter only because you see the infinite in extension and can increase or decrease extension to infinity. I hold that you could never think of these abstract forms of genera and species were the idea of infinity, which is inseparable from your mind, not entirely naturally joined to the particular ideas you perceive. You could think of a particular circle, but never of the circle. (DM 27, OC 12:58)

Hence, according to Malebranche, the only reason why we can have general concepts is that we are already and originally connected to the idea of the infinite, which is then the only and real cause, metaphysical and cognitive, of what we think of being *our* mental process of generalization. In other words, generality is at the *beginning* and not at the *end* of our knowledge of general ideas, since it coincides with the infinity of God. In this sense, God is the source of *all* general ideas, not only the "good" ideas, but also the "bad" ones. In fact, with an amazing

know a particular being because God applies the idea of extension to human minds in different ways giving rise to a sensation, void of epistemic content, and a particular idea, whose "intelligibility" is then an effect of God's almightiness and not a cause related to God's mind.[21] Furthermore, the dependency of the individuals on God's causality invests God himself, which, according to this interpretation, can know the individuals only in his will and then (logically) after the creation.[22] Hence, this answer also cannot explain how God can know individual bodies before the creation of the world.

The third answer, which I would like to propose here, needs a preliminary consideration on what is the real problem that Malebranche must solve. What I mean is that in Malebranche the problem of the knowledge of individuals is not the problem of determining how we know existing bodies, since, in Malebranche's view, properly speaking we do not *know* existing bodies, but *perceive* them.[23] Now, the perception of a sensible object is obtained through a combination of a cognitive element, the idea, and a particular sensation:

> When we perceive something sensible, two things are found in our perception: *sensation* and *pure idea*. The sensation is a modification of our soul. . . . As for the idea found in the conjunction with the sensation, it is in God, and we see it because it pleases God to reveal it to us. God joins the sensation to the idea when objects are present. (SAT 234, OC 1:445)

In the first book of the *Search*, in which Malebranche discusses the sensations and the errors caused by them, he explains that the function of the sensations, pain, pleasure, and colors, is precisely to distinguish the different bodies:

> [W]hile feeling pleasure and pain . . . we more easily distinguish the objects that occasion them. (SAT 52, OC 1:128)
>
> We need these colors only to know objects more distinctly, and that is why our senses lead us to attribute them solely to objects. (SAT 60, OC 1:142)

21. "Toute se passe comme si l'intelligibilité était désormais suspendue à l'efficience de l'idée" (Bardout 1998, 112).

22. "Dieu lui-même ne semble pas en mesure de concevoir les possibles en leur singularité, antérieurment à leur effectuation par sa volonté" (Bardout 1998, 105).

23. The confusion of knowing and perceiving is caused by Malebranche's ambiguity in using the two terms often interchangeably. For an exhaustive account of this subject, see Nadler 1992, 60ff.

As we have seen, because sensations have only an adaptive function, and not a cognitive one, they allow us to discern bodies, since to survive we *need* to quickly discern them; for this reason, God has established some laws of the mind-body union that produce this kind of experience in us. But perceiving is not knowing and knowing is the task of the "pure intellect," a faculty that does not have a corporeal equivalent.[24] Therefore, the problem of the knowledge of individuals shall not be related to the knowledge of existing things, as Robinet and Bardout *seem* to think, but to the problem posed by Gueroult of the relationship between the general idea of the essence of bodies and the notion of idea as archetype of creation.

Now, I think that a possible solution can be found if we consider Malebranche's definition of God's ideas as God's "perfections" and as "participations of the general idea of infinity." But in order to understand this assertion we must take a step back and turn to the traditional conception of idea, analyzing one of the "standard" Christian theories of God's knowledge: Thomas Aquinas's theory of divine ideas.[25]

7.2

The opportunity to dwell on Aquinas's conception of divine ideas lies with the strict connections that have been noted between Malebranche's vision in God of ideas and Aquinas' description of the beatific vision.[26] A brief recalling of Malebranche's relevant positions can be useful here.

As we have seen, Malebranche firmly denies that human ideas are mental modifications, not only because of the mentioned thesis of the radical impotence of creatures, but also because, as Malebranche will write in answering Arnauld's objections, if ideas were properties of human minds, they would be as finite and particular as everything belonging to creatures. Moreover, mental modifications

24. As Malebranche writes at the beginning of the third book of the *Search*: "We shall first discuss the mind as it is in itself and without any relation to the body to which it is joined. Accordingly, what will be said about it could be said as well about pure intelligences and *a fortiori* about what we have here called pure understanding, for by the expression *pure understanding*, nothing is meant but the mind's faculty of knowing external objects without forming corporeal images of them in the brain to represent them" (SAT 198, OC 1:380–81). The problem of the pure intellections is one of the targets of the first critics of Malebranche, Simon Foucher. See on this subject Favaretti Camposampiero 2010.

25. Despite Malebranche's criticisms of scholastic philosophy, several scholars have shown how deep Malebranche's debt is to it. See, for instance, Connell 1967, Scribano 1996 and 2003, and Priarolo 2004.

26. See the previously cited Priarolo 2004, Scribano 1996 and 2003, and Trottmann 1998.

cannot have the features of clearness and distinction that characterize the ideas through which we know the essence of the world, since the knowledge we have of our minds is not clear and distinct, but obscure and confused. As Malebranche explains in the *Search after Truth*, we do not know our mind through an idea, but through an "inner sensation," or "consciousness," so that "our knowledge of it is imperfect" (SAT 238, OC 1:451). If ideas were mental modifications, the finitude and obscurity of our mind would, then, also invest them, and this would make it impossible to represent anything as clear and infinite as God—whose knowledge is for Malebranche undeniable—or the idea of extension—whose clearness and distinctness is considered by Malebranche as unquestionable. Hence, for Malebranche we know things because of God's ideas, and we have access to God's ideas since we are strictly united to God and we see him directly. As we read in the first edition of the *Search after Truth*:

> Only God do we know through Himself. . . . Only God do we perceive by a direct and immediate perception. Only He can enlighten our mind with His own substance. Finally, only through the union we have with Him are we capable in this life of knowing what we know. (SAT 237, OC 1:449)

Now, what we do "in this life," according to Malebranche, is what we will do in another life according to Thomas Aquinas.

As it is well known, for Aquinas the *viator* cannot know the essence of God, but can only attain his existence, starting from the effects of God's action in the world. Since our minds are embodied—and for this reason we know things through *species* abstracted by the sensible impressions that are the ground for every cognitive experience we have of the world—in order to know God we would need a *species* of God—that is, a finite *medium* representing God's essence. But, in Aquinas's view, knowing the essence of God in this way is impossible: first, because there would be no proportion between the representation and the *representatum*; second, because of the indistinction of essence and existence in God, which makes impossible that something which is created, whose essence is always distinct from existence, could be similar to God and thus able to represent him; and thirdly, because the infinite essence of God cannot be circumscribed by a finite *species*.[27] But if knowledge of God in himself is the ultimate scope of the

27. "[T]he essence of God cannot be seen by any created similitude. First, because as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. i), 'by the similitudes of the inferior order of things, the superior can in no way be known;' as by the likeness of a body the essence of an incorporeal thing cannot be known. Much less therefore can the essence of God be seen by any created likeness whatever. Secondly, because the essence of God is His own very existence, as was shown above (q. 3, art. 4), which cannot be said of any created form; and so no created form can be the similitude representing the essence of God to the seer. Thirdly, because the divine essence is uncircumscribed, and contains in itself super-eminently whatever can be signified or understood by the created intellect. Now this cannot in any way be represented by any created likeness; for every created form is determined according to some aspect of wisdom, or of power, or of being itself, or of some like thing. Hence to say that God is seen by some similitude, is to say that the divine essence is not seen at all; which is false" (ST, I, q. 12, art. 2, resp.).

human soul, its "beatitude," how is it possible to deny that "any created intellect can see the essence of God"? (ST, I, q. 12, art. 1). Against the negative theology of Dionysius, noted in many other parts of his writing, Aquinas explains that man *must* know the essence of God, since denying this knowledge to man would mean depriving him of achieving "his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect":

> [I]f we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else besides God, which is opposed to faith. (ST, I, q. 12, art. 1, resp.)

We must underscore the word "see," since, as we have mentioned, according to Aquinas, knowledge of the essence of God cannot be mediated, occurring through a finite species that functions as a *medium* between human minds and God. Hence, the only way a created mind has for knowing God is to see him. Of course, this kind of knowledge is not available to sinners or during this life, but only to those who deserve to see God "face to face": the blessed, which are pure souls until the resurrection of their bodies strengthened by the *lumen gloriae*. But a new question arises: if the blessed are pure souls, how can they know material things? The answer given by Aquinas is that the blessed know things through God's essence "as in an intelligible mirror":

> The created intellect of one who sees God is assimilated to what is seen in God, inasmuch as it is united to the Divine essence, in which the similitudes of all things pre-exist. (ST, I, q. 12, art 9 ad contra, resp.)

The similitudes of all things are nothing other than God's ideas, which are required for the intentional creation of the world.[28] Hence, similar to Malebranche's men, Aquinas's blessed know material things through God's ideas.

28. "As then the world was not made by chance, but by God acting by His intellect . . . there must exist in the divine mind a form to the likeness of which the world was made. And in this the notion of an idea consists" (ST I, q. 15, a. 1, resp.).

It is important to note that, according to Aquinas, ideas are not different from the essence of God—they are not creatures or Platonic models external to God—and must be many because God knows every aspect of what he creates and because every created thing participates in some respects of God's being. In this sense, ideas—which are defined by Aquinas as the same essence of God as "capable of imitation" by creatures—are not only the cognitive principles of the divine knowledge of things, but also the ontological principles of creation:

> [M]any ideas exist in the divine mind, as things understood by it; as can be proved thus. Inasmuch as He knows His own essence perfectly, He knows it according to every mode in which it can be known. Now it can be known not only as it is in itself, but as it can be participated in by creatures according to some degree of likeness. But every creature has its own proper species, according to which it participates in some degree in likeness to the divine essence. So far, therefore, as God knows His essence as capable of such imitation by any creature, He knows it as the particular type and idea of that creature; and in like manner as regards other creatures. (ST I, q. 15, art. 2 ad 2, resp.)

Notice that the plurality of ideas does not conflict with the simplicity of God, an attribute that Aquinas strongly defends in many places,[29] precisely because the differentiation of ideas lies not in God's essence considered by itself, but in the relationships that the knowledge of God has with the plurality of things. This does not mean that the plurality of ideas is caused by the plurality of things created, but rather that the plurality depends on an act of the divine intellect, that is, "by the divine intellect comparing its own essence with these things" (ST I, q. 15, art. 2, ad 3). Hence, the relations that give rise to the multiplicity of God's ideas "are not real relations, such as those whereby the Persons are distinguished, but relations understood by God" (ST I, q. 15 art. 2, ad 4), so that we could say that the essence of God is the unique model of the entire creation. As Aquinas will write in Question 44,

> [D]ivine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists in the variety of things. And therefore we must say that in the divine wisdom are the types of all things, which types we have called ideas—i.e., exemplar forms existing in the divine mind. And these ideas, though multiplied by their relations to things, in reality are not apart from the divine essence, according as the likeness to that essence can be shared diversely by different things. In this manner therefore God Himself is the first exemplar of all things. (ST I, q. 44, art. 3, resp.)

29. On these questions, see Wippel 2000.

In brief, for Aquinas the multiplicity of ideas is a consequence of an act of knowledge, which grounds different relations between the essence of God and creatures and is not an ontological feature of ideas, whose reality is, then, not different from the reality of the essence of God. Moreover, as we have mentioned, ideas can be considered both as cognitive principles and ontological principles of the creation. In the first sense, Aquinas calls them "notions" (*rationes*), in the second sense, "exemplars."[30] As we read in Question 15,

> As ideas, according to Plato, are principles of the knowledge of things and of their generation, an idea has this twofold office, as it exists in the mind of God. So far as the idea is the principle of the making of things, it may be called an "exemplar", and belongs to practical knowledge. But so far as it is a principle of knowledge, it is properly called a "notion" (*ratio*), and may belong to speculative knowledge also. As an exemplar, therefore, it has respect to everything made by God in any period of time; whereas as a principle of knowledge it has respect to all things known by God, even though they never come to be in time; and to all things that He knows according to their proper notion, in so far as they are known by Him in a speculative manner. (ST I, q. 15, art. 3, resp.)

As exemplars, ideas pertain to the domain of God's practical knowledge, that is, the knowledge that God has about things that he will create "in any period of time," and for this reason their objects are also the singulars, since singular objects are what God creates. As Aquinas has explained in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, since God, who knows himself perfectly, is the cause of everything, and "when the cause is known, the effect is known" (SG bk. 1, chap. 60, art. 2), then God knows perfectly everything he created "not only universally, but also in the singular" (SG bk. 1, chap. 65, art. 2). But "as principle of knowledge," that is, as an object of the divine intellect, ideas denote "proper notions," which are the same essence of God considered as "capable of imitation by the creatures":

> [T]he divine essence comprehends within itself the nobilities of all beings, not indeed compositely, but, as we have shown above, according to the

30. See Doolan 2008.

> mode of perfection. Now, every form, both proper and common, considered as positing something, is a certain perfection; it includes imperfection only to the extent that it falls short of true being. The intellect of God, therefore, can comprehend in His essence that which is proper to each thing by understanding wherein the divine essence is being imitated and wherein each thing falls short of its perfection. Thus, by understanding His essence as imitable in the mode of life and not of knowledge, God has the proper form of a plant; and if He knows His essence as imitable in the mode of knowledge and not of intellect, God has the proper form of animal, and so forth. Thus, it is clear that, being absolutely perfect, the divine essence can be taken as the proper notion [*ratio*] of singulars. Through it, therefore, God can have a proper knowledge of all things. (SG bk. 1, chap. 54, art. 4)

Hence, the divine perfections that represent the things, which are God's ideas, contain "virtually" all their possible "specifications" and then can provide the knowledge of the singulars without being in themselves singulars. In other words, the singularity typical of things that can be created by God is not a real property of God's ideas—which are the same infinite essence of God—but, rather, a *relational* property that arises from the divine act, logically prior to the creation, of comparison between his essence and the different perfections he possesses. Therefore, from an epistemological point of view, the ideas are but different ways of looking at the same source of knowledge, the essence of God—an outlook that gives rise to different models for practical knowledge; in other words, the act of creating the world. The epistemological aspect of ideas seems then to precede the ontological feature of ideas, the causality of God following his understanding. In Aquinas's words, "God causes things through His intellect, since His being is His understanding" (SG bk. 1, chap. 50, art. 3).

7.3

Let us now come back to Malebranche. As we have seen, since the first edition of the *Search after Truth*, Malebranche has defined God's ideas as "the perfections of God that represent them" (SAT 68, OC 1:157). With words very similar to Aquinas's, in refusing the fourth hypothesis on the origin of ideas, Malebranche explains that

> It cannot be doubted that only God existed before the world was created and that He could not have produced it without knowledge or ideas; consequently, the ideas He had of the world are not different from Himself,

> so that all the creatures, even the most material and terrestrial, are in God, though in a completely spiritual way that is incomprehensible to us. God therefore sees within Himself all beings by considering His own perfections, which represent them to Him. . . . He sees all these beings by considering the perfections He contains to which they are related. (SAT 229–30, OC 1:434–35)[31]

The connection with Aquinas will become explicit in the Tenth Elucidation in the *Search after Truth*, where Malebranche writes

> God's ideas of creatures are, as Saint Thomas says, only His essence, insofar as it is participable or imperfectly imitable, for God contains every creaturely perfection, though in a divine and infinite way. (Tenth Elucidation, SAT 625, OC 3:149)

By saying that we see God's ideas, Malebranche means then to say that we see "the divine substance . . . as relative to creatures and to the degree that they can participate in it" (SAT 231, OC 1:439). God reveals to us "what in Him is related to and represents these things" (SAT 231, OC 1:439), a "revelation" that in our minds give rise to particular representations: "He is no being in particular[, but] what we see is but one or more particular beings, and we do not understand this perfect simplicity of God" (SAT 231, OC 1:439). Therefore, the constructive process proposed by Gueroult to explain how it can be possible that man knows a particular object as the astronomical sun is realized by God himself, who, looking at his essence in different ways, gives rise to the different relationships that can represent any object.

The undeniable ambiguity that characterizes Malebranche's description of ideas—sometimes defined as particular and sometimes as genera—seems then caused by the same twofold consideration of ideas present in Aquinas, as ontological exemplars and as notions. But with regard to the first meaning of ideas, it should be noted that Malebranche does not have the same problems as Aquinas because, following Descartes, for Malebranche God creates one and only one material substance: extension. Singular bodies are only modifications—that is, particular configurations of extension—resulting from the laws of motion that God has given to

31. Gueroult concludes that Malebranche's theory of knowledge is not fully consistent and cannot resolve once and for all the problem of the knowledge of individuals—above all because Malebranche's conception of idea tries, and fails, to keep together the traditional Platonic definition of idea as the archetype of creation and the new Cartesian notion of extension. See, for instance, Gueroult 1955: 249.

the world;[32] consequently, for creation only one exemplar is needed. Instead, with regard to the second meaning, the general idea of extension requires a multiplication in order to give rise to a real knowledge of the world, even if, as we have seen, knowledge of the particular depends on knowledge of the universal. But this multiplication, caused by an act of God's understanding, does not produce new realities—that is, new (particular) ideas—but only different relationships between the general idea of extension and the universal ideas of numbers present in God. In this sense, as Malebranche explains, knowing the relationships present in the ideas is nothing more, nothing less, than knowing the truth—a truth, however, that does not possess reality by itself:

> We are of the opinion . . . that truths (and even those that are eternal, such as that twice two is four) are not absolute beings, much less that they are God himself. For clearly, this truth consists only in the relation of equality between twice two and four. . . . The ideas are real, whereas the equality between ideas, which is the truth, is nothing real. (SAT 234, OC 1:444)

If my interpretation is correct, we understand, then, why Malebranche so firmly denies having changed his opinion about the presence of particular ideas in God: in fact, as an ontological model of creation, as archetypes, in God there is only one idea, the idea of extension. But considered as cognitive objects, God's ideas are several. This is not because of an act of man's understanding—which, as we have seen, is considered by Malebranche to be a very limited faculty, as Gueroult suggested—but because of an act of the understanding of God, which, regarding his essence, "multiplies" the possible cognitive objects; this is the foundation for the various relationships between them that man can know.[33] Secondly, it should be noted that these ideas maintain a strict connection with its source, the essence of God. This is because, as we have seen, for Malebranche, only ideas that represent real essences are real ideas and not mere logical or, in his words, abstract concepts which denote nothing that is real. In this sense, the ontological ground of ideas—their being the essence of God as exemplar of the world—is what guarantees the reality and effectiveness of our knowledge. For this reason, as we suggested at the beginning of this chapter, according to Malebranche it is

32. See SAT bk. 6, pt. 2, chap. 4, 453–66, in which Malebranche resumes the fourth part of Descartes's *Principia philosophiae*.

33. The above-mentioned "painter's example" can be read, in this sense, as an element of proof of the thesis here proposed, since it shows that according to Malebranche even if *we* possess general ideas *we* cannot derive from them particular ones. We cannot, because only God has this power.

very difficult to separate the epistemological conception of universals from their metaphysical notion. It is precisely this ambivalence that gives rise to the several problems of interpretation that we have detected.[34]

Abbreviations

AT = Descartes 1964–74; cited by volume and page.
DM = Malebranche 1999; cited by page.
OC = Malebranche 1958–67; cited by volume and page.
SAT = Malebranche 1997; cited by page.
SG = Aquinas 1955–57; cited by book, chapter, and article.
ST = Aquinas 1947; cited by part, question, and article.

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