



Remarks on the Structure of the Recherche de la Verité: The Role of Vision in God

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Abstract: The present article will discuss the argumentative context in which Nicolas Malebranche presents the doctrine of the vision in God in his work, *Recherche de la Verité*. Malebranche is known for this doctrine about human cognition, and also for his occasionalistic view of causality, and such positions are only properly understood when put in the argumentative context designed by the author, which is not usually seen in commentaries. With this goal, we intend to look into the precise position of the vision of God in the *Recherche* and to identify the argument of the work as a whole. Thus, by seeing how the malebranchean theory of cognition fits in his philosophical project, we will be able to adequately reconstruct this important and influential philosophical doctrine of the seventeenth century.

Keywords: Nicolas Malebranche. Recherche de la Verité. Vision in God.

Considerações sobre a Estrutura da Recherche de la Verité: O Papel da Visão em Deus

Resumo: No seguinte artigo abordamos o contexto argumentativo em que se insere a doutrina da visão em Deus de Nicolas Malebranche na sua obra, *Recherche de la Verité*. Ainda que Malebranche seja conhecido tanto por essa doutrina acerca da cognição humana, quanto pela sua visão ocasionalista da estrutura causal, tais posições só são adequadamente compreendidas quando as colocamos no contexto argumentativo projetado pelo autor, o que costumeiramente não é feito. Com isso, pretendemos situar a posição da visão em Deus na *Recherche* partindo, em um primeiro momento, da análise do fio condutor

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da obra. Desse modo, ao vislumbrarmos de que modo uma teoria da cognição se encaixa no projeto filosófico malebranchista, seremos capazes de reconstruir adequadamente essa importante e influente doutrina filosófica do século XVII.

Palavras-chave: Nicolas Malebranche. Recherche de la Verité. Visão em Deus.

Remarques sur la Structure de la Recherche de la Verité: Le Rôle de la Vision em Dieu

Résumé: Dans l'article suivant, nous abordons le context argumentative dans lequel la doctrine de la vision en Dieu de Nicolas Malebranche est insérée dans la *Recherche de la Verité*. Bien que Malebranche soit connu à la fois pour cette doctrine de la cognition humaine et pour sa perspective ocasionelle de la structure causale, de tells positions ne sont correctement comprises que lorsque nous les plaçons dans le context argumentative conçu par l'auteur; ce qui n'est généralement pas fait. Avec cela, nous avons l'intention de situer la position de la vision en Dieu dans la *Recherche* comme fil conducteur de l'oeuvre. De cette façon, lorsque nous entrevoyons comment une théorie de la cognition s'intègre dans le projet philosophique malebranchiste, nous serons en conditions de reconstruire correctement cette important et influent doctrine philosophique du XVIIe siècle.

Mots-clés: Malebranche. Recherche de la Verité. Vision em Dieu.

Nicolas Malebranche famously, or perhaps infamously, argued that we see all things in God.¹ This thesis that received the label 'Vision in God' aims to explain how human minds are able to have cognition of material things and the objects of geometry.² In this paper, we intend to present the

¹ There is a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding of Malebranche's thesis concerning the nature of cognition. This is clear from his long controversy on the subject with Antoine Arnauld; Cf. Denis Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens*. The reception of his thought in Britain is also an intricate combination of deep influence with critical approaches; cf. C. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*. Being one of the most important philosophers of the seventeenth century, the fact that he had deep theological motivation caused him to be given the unwarranted reputation of mystical and obscure by twentieth century anglo-saxon philosophy.

² Cf. Steven Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*. p. 90-9; Nicholas Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, p.88; Tad Schmaltz, 'Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God', p. 59.

vision of God in its precise argumentative position within the *Recherche de la Verité*, identifying its function in Malebranche's project to establish a method that can free humanity from error. Thus, by seeing how the malebranchean theory of cognition fits in his philosophical project, we will be able to adequately reconstruct this important and influential philosophical doctrine of the seventeenth century. Since Malebranche's thought is formed by an attempt of harmonizing philosophy with theology, we dedicate the first part of the paper to presenting Malebranche's deep commitment with the absolute dependence of humans on God and how this determines the background upon which the *Recherche* is developed. After it is properly understood, we will be able to apprehend the function and meaning of the controversial claim that we see all things in God.

1. A double union

An entity connected with God and the material world. Nicolas Malebranche opens the *Recherche*³ with a peculiar description of human nature that informs the whole work. The soul or the spirit of human beings are united with God and also, united with the body.⁴ In stating such a thesis, we note that Malebranche is already moving away from Descartes, and while there is a clear cartesian influence in his thought, we cannot argue that he merely repeated what his predecessor advocated.⁵ While Descartes sustained the existence of a substantial union between soul and body, Malebranche affirms a double union; the human soul being characterized as an intermediary entity between two ontological realms. If in Descartes the problem is to understand the nature of the union and how

³ Cf. OCM I, 9. The references to the works of Malebranche will follow the critical edition by André Robinet *Oeuvres Complètes de Malebranche* (OCM) with volume indicated by roman numerals and the pages by Arabic numerals. The English version is my responsibility.

⁴ The terms 'soul' and 'spirit' and 'mind' will be used interchangeably, designating sometimes the ontological aspect of the immaterial substance and sometimes its cognitive one.

⁵ Cf. Ferdinand Alquie. *Le Cartésianisme de Malebranche*.

it guarantees the interactions of the immaterial with the material, for Malebranche, it is the soul that must answer such questions and, in order to understand his project on the *Recherche*, it is necessary to grasp the nature of such peculiar interaction.⁶

The double union is not equivalent in both of its poles. The human soul does not relate in the same way with God and with the body. The union with God is immediate and very intimate; the union with the body, however, is not absolutely essential to humans. Although the bond with the body is necessary for the soul to maintain itself as an element of the living body, the destruction of such bond does not imply in the annihilation of the soul, since it can exist without the body.⁷ Different is the case of the bond of the soul with God, since it is absolutely necessary for the existence of the soul considering its complete dependence on its creator. Besides the metaphysical differences between the two unions, there is also an epistemic one. The union with the body, when inappropriately managed, is the cause of all the errors and miseries for human beings, while the union with God is the source of happiness and truth.

Malebranche intends to establish the absolute dependence of the human being upon God. This dependence appears in every aspect of its being, and, since the *Recherche* is a work on how we can achieve knowledge in the sciences, Malebranche highlights the dependence on ideas (conceived as divine entities) for cognition and knowledge of material objects. Since happiness also has its foundation in the union with God, we can say that there is also a moral dependence on God, but such dependence is also grounded in an epistemic dependence, as will be detailed further on. There is also a causal dependence on God. Occasionalism asserts that, besides God, no other being has causal power by itself; it can only be considered an occasional cause, or an occasion for the divine power to manifest itself. Such understanding of causality makes

⁶ We can observe the influence of Saint Augustine in the employment of such thematic by Malebranche.. Cf. Treatise on Saint John; XXIII, 6 (BA LXXII, 368). On the immortality of the soul; XIII, 22 (BA V, 210).

⁷ OCM I, 10-12.

the human being dependent upon God in producing any state of affairs in the world.

When it comes to characterizing the relationship of the human soul with God, ‘union’, as we can see, refers to a complete and absolute dependence. In contrast, ‘union’ does not have the same meaning when we analyze the relation of the soul with body. Despite being required for the effective existence of a human being in the material world, to receive information, through sensation, of what is beneficial or harmful, as it is concluded at the end of the first book of the *Recherche*, such union is not necessary for the soul itself.⁸ That is not the case of the union with God, the corruption of such union corresponds to the corruption of the soul.

In the preface to the *Recherche*, we find a theological argument for the primacy of the union with God. Starting with a principle vindicated by Malebranche: the will of God regulates the nature of each thing, that is, it is God, as a creator, that provides the essential features of creatures. It is in the human soul, taken as understanding, to seek the truth. God makes the human soul in such a way that it possesses, as a formal object, the truth. It has, in this sense, the natural capacity for distinguishing, among a variety of cognitive contents, the one which appears more evident and truthful. By faith, we accept that God is the source and the foundation of truth. Thus, the human soul naturally goes after God in searching for the truth:

1. Human understanding, by its nature and definition, seeks the truth;
2. God is the source and the foundation of truth (theological principle accepted by faith);
3. Human understanding naturally tends to seek God in its search for truth.

⁸ It could be suggested, however, that the body is dependent on the soul. Not that every bodily being needs a soul in order to exist, but that the human body, without a soul, could never exist. As Malebranche asserts, although such characteristic is not essential to the soul, it naturally is the *form* of the body (OCM I, 10).

It is the union with the body and its problematic influence on the soul that is the source of a detour from God. The argument for the vision in God, presented on the third book, corresponds to an alternative version of this theological argument, reasoning, in its turn, on rational principles only.

The first book of the *Recherche* attempts to demonstrate that the data we obtain from the senses through the union of the soul with the body does not reveal any truth concerning the objects they seem to represent, configuring themselves, hence, as occasions for error. Endowed with this information, Malebranche believes, it is natural for the soul to avoid the sense data in its representational aspect.

2. The combination of philosophy and theology

The theological argument, may raise more questions than, in fact, clarify and answer issues in Malebranche's philosophy. However, its exemplary character, in what concerns the model of text and style adopted by Malebranche, reveals its relevance in understanding the structure of the work. There is a mixture of revealed theology and theoretical philosophy operating in the *Recherche*. Before being a philosopher, it is worth to notice, Malebranche is a theologian. His investigation always proceeds in two domains: purely rational and purely revealed. Nonetheless, the boundaries of these domains of argument intercross, making the proper interpretation of the text more difficult. It is required, therefore, to understand Malebranche's position, to pay attention to the relationship between faith and reason and for the eventual tensions that this relation may generate.⁹

For Malebranche, knowledge is obtained by revelation.¹⁰ Knowledge by revelation can be divided into two kinds: natural revelation

⁹ A detailed discussion of this subject can be found in Henri Gouhier's work: *La Philosophie de Malebranche et Son Expérience Religieuse*. Cf. also, Denis Moreau, *Malebranche* p. 197-8.

¹⁰ To warrant this assertion it would be necessary to investigate topics that are beyond the scope of this essay. We can note that Malebranche's epistemology is clearly influenced by

and revelation by faith.¹¹ The first concerns the revelation that is available to all human beings that reflect and meditate in the adequate manner; through this kind of exercise we are able to know the nature of material objects, mathematics, metaphysics and ethics. This intellectual activity is possible through the revelation of the archetypes or divine models that were utilized in creation (Malebranche will name them ideas). The other kind of revelation occurs upon acceptance of the divine scripture and interpretations of religious authorities.

Insofar as both revelations have a common origin, namely, a divine origin, there cannot be any discrepancies or contradictions between them. Any observed conflict between philosophy and dogmatic theology must be taken as illusory, the result of a misapprehension. Now, if reason and faith may not contradict themselves two possibilities remain: they either establish two entirely different disciplines of enquiry, philosophy on the one hand, and, on the other one, theology; or they constitute an interconnected effort, albeit by different methods of support and illumination.

According to Pyle¹², Descartes and Arnauld adopted the first alternative. The first, despite attempting to demonstrate, in the *Meditations* and other works, the existence of God and the real distinction between soul and body, considered them as subjects of philosophy, relying only on rational grounds. Themes such as trinity, incarnation and Eucharist do not have a place in Descartes's official doctrine.¹³ Arnauld had observed this

Augustine and Neoplatonistic approaches. The context of the sources that shape the doctrine of the vision in God is quite complex, but there is a consensus in the literature about this aspect of Malebranche's philosophy. E.g. Desmond Connell, *The Vision in God: Malebranche's Scholastic Sources* and Jason Skirry *Malebranche's Augustinianism and the Mind's Perfection*.

¹¹ I follow, here, the suggestions presented by Andrew Pyle, in his book. Cf. Malebranche. p. 9-17.

¹² Andrew Pyle, Malebranche. p. 14.

¹³ It is not my intention here to deny the difficulties that Descartes's physics imposes on transubstantiation – one of the reasons for the inclusion of his *Works* on the Index. My aim is only to call attention to the fact that differently from Malebranche, it was not Descartes's goal to use philosophy as an instrument of theology.

intentional distancing in Descartes and approves of it.¹⁴ He had also followed this principle, separating the investigation into two domains (the philosophical and the theological ones) as it can be noticed in his correspondence.¹⁵ This separation, however, cannot find support in Malebranche: “It must not be said that at times I act as a philosopher and at other times as theologian. I always speak, or intend to speak, as a rational theologian”¹⁶. It can be argued that this methodological approach makes the investigation rather intricate and imprecise. For Malebranche, to combine is different than to confuse: “To speak of God, as an absolutely perfect being, that He is not a deceiver consists in philosophical reasoning, is to show rationally that which, by faith, we must assume. Inversely, we had many experiences, in our lives, that reason cannot unfold, however, they are explained by theology”¹⁷. The key point for Malebranche is the utilization of theological principles and dogmas as philosophical axioms. He is explicit in condemning this use. Every philosophical argument, whether it is used to demonstrate a theological truth or not, will be, Malebranche assures us, rationally justified: “it will not be found on my text that I suppose any article of faith as a principle...”¹⁸.

The interdependence between faith and reason, in Malebranche, represents what he calls “true philosophy”, *veritable philosophie*¹⁹. Philosophy is properly done when is taken as an argumentative instrument of an external discourse, in such a way that its essence, limits and function must be, ultimately, determined by an investigation that subordinates it and that is, by itself, distinct from it.²⁰ Philosophy and other disciplines are capable of rationally helping in the demonstrations of truth, that could otherwise be only known by faith.

¹⁴ Cf. Fourth Replies. AT IX 153-4.

¹⁵ Idem.

¹⁶ OCM VIII, 632.

¹⁷ Cf. OCM II; 495.

¹⁸ Cf. Idem.

¹⁹ Cf. The introduction to the *Recherche* by Jean-Christophe Bardout to the edition published by Vrin. p. 88-99.

²⁰ OCM II, 52-4

This interdependence of the two domains happens in three ways: 1) reason as a support of the principles of faith; 2) reason presenting explanations for the mysteries of faith; 3) faith explaining the difficulties in reason.²¹ In 1) we have, for example, the examination of the existence of a benevolent God. Such existence is presupposed by revealed theology and cannot be rationally proved through it. Turning to philosophy, to reason, is required. 2) Malebranche, when answering Arnauld²², asserts that it was always a usual task to make use of reason in the clarification of themes such as trinity, incarnation and eucharist. Examples of that can be found in Augustine, when making use of Plato, and in Aquinas, when making use of Aristotle. Malebranche intends to make room for Descartes. This movement cannot be understood as an attempt of posing new religious truths, but rather as a clarification that had not yet been obtained. In 3) the observation of the world and of human beings implies the facing of a variety of imperfections (natural disasters, hunger, diseases, and moral flaws). It is not unusual to conceive of evil as a constitutive flaw of the world. For Malebranche we must be aware that, although a perfect being has created everything, after original sin, the current state of both the world and of human beings constitutes a state of diminishment. Creation, in that state, is an imperfect remainder of the original plan.

3. The goal of the *Recherche*

We find, therefore, the central aim of the *Recherche* at this intersection of philosophy and theology: “Error is the cause of men’s misery; it is the sinister principle that has produced evil in the world; it generates and maintains in our soul all the evils that afflict us, and we may hope for sound and genuine happiness only by seriously laboring to avoid it”.²³ It is required to assume, hence, as a starting point, that humans are subject to error, that being an inescapable fact of human experience. The

²¹ This list taken from Pyle. Cf. p. 11-13.

²² Cf. OCM VIII, 632.

²³ OCM I, 39.

interactions of mankind in the world reveal such fallibility. This occurs in a theoretical approach, that is, doing metaphysics or natural sciences that concern knowledge of things in themselves; and occur in practical approaches, that concerns the moral life. And insofar as, by definition, the one who errs strays away from the truth or from happiness, it cannot be expected that humans can know the nature of things or that they act as they should, as long as the cause, or causes, of their errors are not identified and corrected.

Nevertheless, it is not immediately clear how Malebranche can assume that the existence of error is an evident fact of human experience. To point, as he does on the first page of the *Recherche*, to an essential union of the soul with God, that union being responsible for the revelation, among other things, of truth; the evidence of error seems to turn pale.

We face two alternatives. On one hand God deceives us; that is, what is revealed to us as truth, in fact, is not. If the entire human cognitive structure is grounded in this revelation, our existence is determined to be an existence in error. On the other hand, the human being is free for Malebranche. It is his responsibility to give assent and to decide the path to follow in life. In this sense, error is a mistake of the will. To take as true and good what, in fact, is not. And, by considering freedom as a perfection, a will that eventually makes mistakes, by the exercise of its freedom, is not considered as a flaw of its nature. To adopt the first alternative will bring, for Malebranche, not only conceptual problems (of reconciling the notion of ‘being absolutely perfect’ with that of ‘being a deceiver’), but also theological difficulties. The second alternative is not free of problems, however. It is necessary to explain how a human being can make a mistake while it has the truth within its reach and how in Malebranche’s metaphysics, we can conceive the notion of freedom²⁴.

²⁴ The lack of causal power of creatures promoted by occasionalism makes it hard to understand the possibility of the human being as primary cause of judgments and actions. However, to further investigate this point would take us beyond the scope of this text. Cf. Steven Nadler, Malebranche on Causation and Elmar Kremer, Malebranche on Human Freedom; both chapters in the Cambridge Companion to Malebranche.

The theological doctrine of the fall of man, from the original sin, intends to answer the first of these difficulties. At the preface of the *Recherche*, Malebranche says:

The first man's sin has so weakened our mind's union with God that it can be felt only by those whose heart is purified and whose mind is enlightened, for this union appears imaginary to all those who blindly follow the judgments of the senses and the impulses of the passions...On contrary, original sin has so strengthened our soul's union with our body that it seems to us that these two parts of us are but one and the same substance; or, rather, it has subjected us to our senses and passions in such a way that we are led to believe that our body is the more important of the two parts of which we are composed.²⁵

In the passage above, we observe that the asymmetry of the two unions acquires a new element. Besides their mutual opposition, the strengthening of one is proportional to the weakening of the other. We know that the union with God is essential to the soul and cannot be corrupted without the corruption of the soul with it. Nevertheless, after the original sin, the union with God was weakened to a degree that it may be thought as not existing. Parallel to that, the union with the body was strengthened to such a degree that the soul now seems to be dependent of it. In other words, our natural cognitive state, before the fall, in which we knew the essence of things by God's intervention, and the senses and passions were under control, serving as guides for the useful and harmful in the preservation of bodily life, almost nothing, sustains Malebranche, remained. The belief in the correspondence of sense data blurs human understanding. For Malebranche, this is the most important cause of error: the trust, that is grounded in the will²⁶, in the information of the senses that is provided by the fortification of the union with the body²⁷.

²⁵ OCM I, 11-2; LO xx

²⁶ Malebranche asserts that the true source of error is the misguided use of the freedom of will. But the peculiar circumstances that make error possible can be called occasional sources of error. He says: "...as our false judgements include two things, consent of the will and perception of the understanding, it is clear that the manner in which we perceive

However, the situation is not irreversible. The first step is to realize that we make errors. Endowed with an awareness of error, we are capable of walking in the opposite direction. For just as making a mistake implies moving away from truth or happiness, the one who knows that he is making a mistake knows that he is moving away from truth or happiness.²⁸ This consciousness thus provides the object of investigation to be undertaken, namely, the error and the identification of its causes; so that we may, if this proves possible, move away from his present condition.²⁹

We must avoid error. To avoid something, it seems natural to investigate its causes. Thus, the identification of the causes that may engender error and how they operate, must be the aim of the project that intends to reconduct the human soul onto the correct path. It is this conflict between error and correctness, truth and falsehood, that is always on the horizon of Malebranche's enterprise at the *Recherche*. If the human being is capable of truth, it is radically exposed to error.

The analysis of error and its causes is the object of investigation of the first five books of the *Recherche*: 'The Senses', book I; 'The Imagination', book II; 'The Understanding', book III; 'The Inclinations', book IV; 'The Passions', book V. Together the examination of these different faculties and characteristics pertinent to human beings represent the analysis of the soul as a whole, a philosophical anthropology. This is patent from the subtitle of the work: "...où l'on traite de la nature de l'esprit de l'homme et d'usage qu'il en doit faire pour éviter l'erreur dans les sciences" and also from the preface: "Thus, the subject of this work is the spirit of men in its whole: it is considered in itself, in relation to bodies and to God; I examine the nature of all its faculties, note the uses that must

can provide an occasion for error, since it can turn into a precipitated consent" OCM I, 66). Further, inclinations and passions can also be involved in an infinite number of mistakes, since they "...turn the mind confused with false lights that cast it to shadows" (OCM I, 67).

²⁷ Cf. OCM I, 77-8.

²⁸ Malebranche sees the 'good' and the 'true' as convertible concepts. Cf. OCM I, 39.

²⁹ Cf. OCM I, 39.

be made of them to avoid error; I explain, finally, most of the things I believe to be helpful in advancing man's knowledge".³⁰

4. Method in the *Recherche*

Book VI of the *Recherche* is dedicated to method.³¹ Having examined the three forms of perception (sensation, imagination and understanding) and what can determine the will (inclinations and passions), focusing on what may or may not cause error, Malebranche intends to build a corpus of rules which, supported by his previous investigation, may safely drive man from error if followed properly.

The first item prescribed is the repetition of a general principle already indicated in Book I: "I repeat it: we must only fully consent to those propositions which seem so evidently true that we cannot refuse them, without feeling an inner suffering and secret reproaches of Reason, that is, without knowing that we would make a misuse of our freedom, if we wish not to consent".³² The notion of evidence, as in Descartes, gains a central role in the search for knowledge. We should only give assent to what appears so evident as to constrain the cognitive faculties of man.³³

Evident perceptions are the guide for the proper judgment, it is necessary to preserve them in order to build a solid scientific body.³⁴ It is from this rule, and the observation of the need for preservation of evidence, that book VI of *Recherche* develops³⁵. This warning suggests two things: 1) that the evidence is not something introduced into our

³⁰ Cf. OCM I, 20

³¹ This presentation of the method in Malebranche's philosophy is based on the interpretation of the text by Thomas Lennon, in his *Philosophical Commentary* of the English translation of the *Recherche*. Cf. p. 762-73.

³² Cf. OCM II, 246.

³³ Cf. For a detailed discussion of method and evidence in Malebranche's epistemology see the chapter dedicated to method in Daisie Radner's book Malebranche: A study of a Cartesian System. Also David Scott's paper: 'Malebranche's Method: Knowledge and Evidence' and Thomas Lennon, Malebranche and Method in the Cambridge Companion to Malebranche.

³⁴ Cf. Thomas Lennon *Philosophical Commentary* p. 766.

³⁵ Cf. OCM II, 296.

perceptions, but a quality of what is perceived; and 2) that the evidence is, therefore, prior to our perceptions, which is in the perceived object to be discovered. With this in mind, Malebranche presents eight specific rules for the formation of well-founded judgments. The first two relate to the object of study, while the other six to how to resolve the issues raised by the research.³⁶ In general terms, his objective in this book is to make "the mind as perfect as it can naturally be, by providing it with the necessary help to extend its scope and make it more attentive, and by establishing the rules it must observe in the search for truth, with the purpose of never making mistakes, while it can learn everything it can."³⁷ If successful, the malebranchean project would provide us with a universal science and the foundations for all particular sciences, the mind having in its power the capacity "to form true and certain judgments in all matters concerning it."³⁸

The unity of the work, taking stock of what has been said, presents itself more clearly, and reconciles with the disconcerting multiplicity of issues addressed. This unity is both that of the object of research (the human spirit) and that of the problem surrounding this object (understanding what in all circumstances exposes it to error). The search undertaken does not simply concern the set of constituted knowledge, but the totality of the faculties of the spirit being united to a body. Situated by nature between God and matter, man is, by his spirit, the only being who, without possessing the truth in himself, is nevertheless able to reach it. The first sentences of the preface manifest the ambiguity of the situation of the spirit, united to God, though infinitely distant from that whence all its light originates. The spirit is arranged between the universal and the particular; the infinite and the finite; the intelligible and the sensible.³⁹ Thus we must start from man, in his concrete existence, to discover in what way he will obtain what he seeks, and consequently avoid what diverts him from the search. To understand how to seek the truth imposes the elaboration of a

³⁶ Cf. Idem.

³⁷ Cf. OCM II, 245.

³⁸ Cf. Idem.

³⁹ Cf. Denis Moreau; Malebranche p. 36.

science of man, which the preface already manifests the extreme necessity.⁴⁰

5. The role of the Vision in God

What is the role of the vision in God in the *Recherche*? How can such a doctrine assist in a project of building a method that aims to avoid error and reach what is true? After the presentation of the *Recherche*'s argumentative structure, such questions seem to impose themselves. However, before answering them directly, some clarification about the vision in God is needed.

Usually taken as the paradigm of Malebranche's epistemology, the famous and controversial claim (chapter VI, book III, at the *Recherche*) that "we see all things in God"⁴¹ serves as a conclusion of an argument started in chapter I of the same book. Certainly, the situation changes when we pay attention to the restrictions that are made to it in the sequence of the text. We see in God all the things we see through ideas. Ideas are beings in God that are necessary for the cognition of material objects. Other objects or other types of content in cognition would be perceived by themselves and not by ideas. Thus, they would not be perceived or seen in God.⁴²

Therefore, the vision in God consists in the defense of an epistemic thesis concerning the way in which human beings can have cognitions and knowledge of corporeal or material objects. However, even this version is not without controversy. Arnauld, perhaps the first objector of the vision in God, protested that the thesis had the bizarre consequence of stating that we see God when we see bodies such as the sun, a horse or a tree.⁴³ This vision about the nature of knowledge of the material world is pointed out as a clumsy synthesis, according to Arnauld, of principles

⁴⁰ Cf. OCM I, 20-2.

⁴¹ Cf. OCM I, 437;

⁴² Cf. OCM I, 413-7. Also, OCM I, 448-55.

⁴³ Cf. *Oeuvres de messire Antoine Arnauld* XXXVIII, 286. Des Vraies et Fausses Idées Chapter, XX.

supported by Augustine with Descartes's philosophy on the nature of ideas.⁴⁴

It would hence combine as a cartesian element, the feature of ideas being presented as clear and distinct, that is, their representational character as clear and distinct, and, as an Augustinian element, the ontological dependence of ideas on God, adhering to the doctrine of knowledge by divine illumination. However, the vision in God is not a mere juxtaposition of the doctrines of Augustine and Descartes. In stating that ideas are not, nor could they be, modifications of a thinking and immaterial substance, so that they are configured as genuine representations of material objects, this thesis departs considerably from Descartes. It constitutes one of the great themes in the debate with Arnauld. On the other hand, as Malebranche himself acknowledges⁴⁵, Augustine does not claim that there is a perception of material entities in God. The Augustinian thesis concerns the knowledge of eternal truths in God; not mentioning a privileged access to the nature of bodies as Malebranche seems to postulate. The vision in God in Malebranche, therefore, consists in a resumption of a thesis that circulated in the Augustinian circles of the 17th century⁴⁶, introducing a significant modification with adhesion of a peculiar perspective of the ontology of cognition. Such a theory becomes the centerpiece of an epistemology and constitutes the malebranchean answer to the following questions: how does a thinking and immaterial substance perceive and know bodies? And, how does a finite and limited being access eternal and immutable truths?

⁴⁴ To mention a few commentators that see Malebranche's position as a combination of Descartes's and Augustine's thought (but not necessarily judging it clumsy): Gouhier, Guérout, Alquié (185-90), Moreau, Nadler (99-108) e, Jolley, Schmaltz (61-69). On other perspective Desmond Connell intends to point to the scholastic foundations of the vision in God in his book.

⁴⁵ Cf. OCM I, 444 e OCM VI, 199.

⁴⁶ As Denis Moreau points out, Jansénius in his "Augustinus" of 1640; Ambrosius Victor, who compiled and commented Augustine's Works in the "Philosophia Christiana" of 1667 and Louis Thomassin in the "Dogmata Theologica" of 1684 adopted different forms of the Augustinian vision in God. Cf. Moreau; Malebranche p. 64-5.

The vision in God, stands out as a safe point in a context of errors. As Nadler asserts: “The vision in God represents for Malebranche the strongest and most effective strategy against skepticism that he has at his disposal”.⁴⁷ The skepticism that is fought is certainly not about the existence of the outside world. For Malebranche, when opposed to this type of skepticism, the vision in God is useless.⁴⁸ None of the ideas we learn from God tell us anything about the existence of the objects they present. Thus, the doctrine of the vision in God is of no help in dealing with skepticism about existence. This, however, does not mean that Malebranche is skeptic about the existence of material things, nor that he resigns himself to such skepticism. It states, in the seventh section of dialogue VI⁴⁹, that the evidence of the senses, although it does not demonstrate unrestrictedly, is sufficient to cause the belief in its existence so that there is no reason, although it cannot be proved, because absolute certainty is not humanly attainable, to doubt the existence of bodies.

The situation is different when it comes to skepticism about the knowledge of eternal truths and the nature of the world. In the domain of mathematical knowledge and the knowledge of eternal laws (including moral principles), as Nadler says⁵⁰, the doctrine ensures that the ideas and truths we know are objective and independent of all human minds refuting any form of relativism or subjectivism. The divine origin plays the role of justification against skepticism when the following questions are raised: how can we be sure of the truth of what we are compelled to believe, that is, of what appears to us as certain when we perceive clear and distinct ideas? Yet, how can we know if what we have is knowledge, and not just subjective conviction?

The only way, according to Malebranche, to establish objective knowledge is for the ideas, which constitute our cognitions, to be real entities and independent of the mind. In this way, accessible to all minds in

⁴⁷ Cf. Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, p. 145.

⁴⁸ Cf. OCM III, 53-66. Cf. Also Monte Cook’s paper “Malebranche’s Criticism of Descartes’s Proof That There Are Bodies”.

⁴⁹ *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, p. 55-58.

⁵⁰ Cf. Nadler. p. 146.

a universal reason. On the contrary, to assume Arnauld's position and, at least apparently, Descartes's as well, stating that ideas are only changes or modifications of the mind, acts of perception of the mind, is to submit to skepticism. Malebranche says: "Maintaining that ideas are just private and momentary perceptions or modifications of the mind, is to establish Pyrrhonism and to make room for the belief that what is moral or immoral is not necessarily so, which is the most dangerous mistake of all"⁵¹. In this model, in which ideas are modifications, not even the principles of evidence, clearness and distinction is guaranteed:

The author (Arnauld) thus establishes a ridiculous Pyrrhonism, as his principle can, and with good reason, be contested. Its principle is true, we can answer, if the thing conforms to the idea that it has; but that is precisely what is not right. A creature necessarily conforms to the idea in the mind of the person who created it. I agree. But the idea you have, you say, is nothing more than a modification of the soul. And this modification is certainly not the idea of the creator based on which he formed such a creature. It is by no means certain that this thing conforms to your idea, but only that you think so. Thus, his vision establishes Pyrrhonism, but mine destroys it.⁵²

If the moral and mathematical ideas that we perceive were not independent of minds and available to everyone in God, then there would be no basis for distinguishing objectively what is truly moral from immoral. Nor could we have lasting confidence in mathematical reasoning. We could not be sure that our cognitions correspond to the nature of things in themselves.

In the case of the knowledge of nature of the material world, skepticism is overcome due to the fact that the ideas we apprehend are necessarily the representations of bodies in that world. The idea of extension in general and the particular ideas of extended bodies that are

⁵¹ Cf. OCM III, 140.

⁵² Cf. OCM IX, 925.

present in our minds are the same archetypes for God in the creation of bodies. In this way, they cannot fail to reveal the nature of extended things as they really are, because it is inconceivable that God fails to create bodies in complete accordance with ideas.⁵³

Only the vision in God, Malebranche says, can guarantee the principle in question. Malebranche's strategy is clearly cartesian in its use of the divine guarantee of the objectivity of ideas, although it apparently presents a deviation from Descartes's epistemic use of God. For Malebranche, God also provides a guarantee for the truth of clear and distinct ideas. However, God does not do so because He somehow guarantees the functioning of our cognitive faculties, but because our clear and distinct ideas are God's ideas. Our mathematical ideas truly present mathematical reality, and our idea of extension represents bodies as they really are, since, in the first case, we are in direct contact with mathematical essences, and in the second case, we are in direct contact with the divine model from which bodies were created. This is only because God chooses to reveal them to us; and in this aspect Malebranche is being influenced by Augustine.

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⁵³ Cf. OCM IX, 925-26. Also, Jasper Reid's paper 'Malebranche on Intelligible Extension'.

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