Malebranche’s Alleged Idealism

Introduction

Over the span of eleven years (1683–1694), Nicolas Malebranche and Antoine Arnauld, two prominent sympathizers of the Cartesian tradition, engaged in a rigorous debate. In his initial set of criticisms, Arnauld objects that a natural consequence of Malebranche’s theory of ideas is idealism.¹ This charge of idealism has puzzled scholars: why did Arnauld believe this? Han Adriaenssen² has convincingly argued that Arnauld’s charge of idealism is founded on the representationality of Malebranchean ideas. According to Arnauld, ideas represent for Malebranche in much the same way that portraits do—by inciting a perceiver to form a conception of whatever they pertain to. The portrait of Louis XIV, for example, represents the French monarch by inciting a conception that pertains to him in a perceiver. However, a portrait will only represent Louis XIV to a perceiver that is already familiar with the king. Only then will the conception of Louis XIV arise in a perceiver that actually pertains to him.

Similarly, then, an idea of the sun will only represent it to a perceiver with a previous conception of the sun. But, for Malebranche, the conception of an object requires the perception of the idea which represents that object. Thus, a perceiver cannot have a conception of the sun prior to the perception of its idea. Malebranchean ideas accordingly fail to function as representations of their objects. In order for Malebranchean ideas to adequately represent an object to a perceiver, according to Arnauld, a prior conception of that object is required which, on Malebranche’s own view, is impossible. By failing to represent external objects, moreover, the ideas in the divine intellect are not just the immediate objects of our perception, but the only objects of our perceptual cognition reaches no further than ideas. Consequently, Arnauld concludes that Malebranche’s view leads to idealism.

Arnauld’s objection, however, presupposes a particular account of representation, namely, resemblance. For a prior conception of what an idea represents would be required in order for the idea to actually represent its object only if ideas represented by resembling their objects as portraits do. This paper will challenge the traditional³ characterization of the representationality of Malebranchean ideas in terms of resemblance on the grounds that Malebranche denies both an ontological resemblance as well as an epistemological resemblance between ideas and external bodies. I argue instead that a careful examination of Malebranche’s texts, and of the Neoplatonic-Augustinian sources upon which Malebranche bases his theory of ideas, reveals that Malebranche is not committed to the view that intelligible extension is representationally related to created bodies by means of resemblance, but rather, by means of an

¹ Des Vraies et Des Fausses Idées (Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld XXXVIII), 227-228.
² In Representation and Scepticism: From Aquinas to Descartes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)
³ Other historical figures such as Foucher, in the Critique de la Recherche de la Vérité, have also characterized the representationality of Malebranchean ideas this way. More recently, scholars like Richard Watson, in The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics, and Jasper Reid, in Malebranche on Intelligible Extension, have supported the resemblance reading of representation.
exemplary causal relation. On this view, Malebranchean ideas are divine archetypes according to which particular bodies are created by being the exemplary causes of these bodies. And it is in virtue of this exemplary causal relation, therefore, that a representational relation is established between intelligible extension and created bodies. When we interpret Malebranche’s view of ideational representation this way, the charge of idealism broached by Arnauld, and some recent commentators⁴, dissipates. This is because intelligible extension can direct a perceiver to the individual bodies that are created in accordance with it which does not require a prior conception of these bodies.

I. The Nature of Intelligible Extension

The upshot of Arnauld’s objection is that Malebranchean ideas fail to function as representations of their objects. And by failing to represent external objects, moreover, the ideas in the divine intellect are not just the immediate objects of our perception, but the only objects of our perception since our perceptual cognition reaches no further than ideas. It is for this reason, then, that Arnauld believed that Malebranche’s theory of ideas results in idealism. On this basis, we can understand the idealism whereof Arnauld accuses Malebranche to be an epistemological one, according to which our cognition is strictly limited to ideas as the sole object of cognition. Given that there is no viable representational relation between ideas and external bodies on Malebranche’s view, Arnauld concludes that ideas are no longer signs that cognitively direct us to bodies, but are themselves the only objects of cognition.

This objection, if correct, proves disastrous for Malebranche’s theory of ideas, as well as its concomitant doctrine of the Vision in God. However, Arnauld’s objection appears to rest upon two important sets of assumptions. The first regards the nature of the ideas in God. Arnauld seems to think that there are individual ideas in God each of which represents a particular body so that, for example, there is in the divine intellect an idea of the sun, another of a horse, yet another of a tree, each of which represent the sun, a horse, and a tree, respectively. Additionally, Arnauld presumes that Malebranchean ideas are images or pictures. Arnauld therefore understands Malebranche to hold an imagistic conception of ideas whereby ideas present their content in the form of images. The second assumption regards the nature of the representationality of ideas. That is, Arnauld assumes that there is an analogy between the way ideas are representationally related to their objects and the way portraits are, namely, by means of resemblance. In what follows, I will address each of Arnauld’s assumptions in turn.

As regards the assumption about the plurality of ideas, Malebranche explicitly denies this given that the objects we perceive in sense perception are perceived in God. This is Malebranche’s (in)famous doctrine of the Vision in God. Through this doctrine, Malebranche strips the mind of ideas and thus the capacity for representing external bodies to itself. Rather, God alone has this capacity for representing bodies. This is because only God can “eminently” contain all the perfections of bodies. In order for something to eminently contain the perfections of another being, and thus represent that being, on Malebranche’s view, it must satisfy the following two criteria. The first criterion is substitutability. That is to say, that which eminently

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⁴ See, for example, Walter Ott’s argument on the grounds of the representationality of ideas in Descartes, Malebranche, and the Crisis of Perception (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
contains the perfection of another being must both lack the perfection as it ‘formally’ (i.e., actually) exists, yet contain something that “is such that it can stand in the place of such [a perfection].”\(^5\) The second criterion is intelligibility. According to this criterion, something is intelligible just in case it grounds the nature of the being whose perfection it contains. Particular things as such, then, are unintelligible because they are not the ground of their own being nor of the being of another thing—they depend on something else, namely, God, not just for their existence, but more importantly, for their nature, that is, to be the kind of thing they are. It follows from the intelligibility criterion that whatever eminently contains the perfections of another being thereby constitutes the archetype or essence of that being.

Now, only God can satisfy the two criteria of eminent containment. Therefore, only God can contain within Himself the ideas or perfections of bodies. But since God is eternal and immutable, and so incapable of change, and since we perceive bodies as perpetually changing, Malebranche concludes that God cannot contain a plurality of ideas each of which correspond to an individual body in the material world. For otherwise we could not, as Malebranche says, “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.”\(^6\) Instead of a plurality of ideas in God, Malebranche posits a single idea of extension in God, that is, intelligible extension. It is by immediately perceiving intelligible extension, according to Malebranche, that we have the perceptions of all possible and created bodies and their (possible or actual) modifications. For intelligible extension “contains all the perfections, or rather, all the differences of bodies”\(^7\) which are made sensible or “rendered particular” when combined with sensations.\(^8\) On the basis of Malebranche’s intelligibility criterion, moreover, intelligible extension constitutes the archetype or essence of bodies given that intelligible extension is the ground of the nature (viz., extension) of particular bodies, or in other words, bodies derive their extended natures from intelligible extension.

But what does it mean for intelligible extension to be, or contain, a ‘substitute’ for bodies and their properties? To put this differently, in what way does intelligible extension contain all the perfections of bodies, so as to constitute the archetype of extension, without itself being extended? In the course of their correspondence, Malebranche tells Arnauld that the idea of intelligible extension is “the idea of length, breadth and depth” without being “itself long and broad and deep”.\(^9\) This description of intelligible extension suggests that, while it is not the case that intelligible extension is itself extended in length, breadth, and depth, nevertheless, intelligible extension is the concept or blueprint of extension. In this way, the idea of intelligible extension contains the definitions of all possible bodies and their infinite variations, in terms of

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\(^6\) OCM III 154, LO 627-8.
\(^7\) OCM III 154, LO 628.
\(^8\) The way in which sensations render intelligible extension particular in order for us to perceive particular bodied has generated a massive literature. Since this concerns the mind-idea relation, rather than the idea-body relation which is the concern of this paper, I shall not discuss it here. For various discussions of this mind-idea relation, see, for example, Radner (1978), Lennon (1980), Nolan (2012).
\(^9\) OCM VI 242.
the properties of which they are capable, that constitute the rules according to which external bodies along with their properties can be created. So, for example, intelligible extension, as the divine concept of extension, contains the definition of a triangle in addition to all the possible configurations that various triangles can have. Intelligible extension thus serves as the blueprint of all possible triangles in that it provides a set of rules or directions for constructing any particular triangle.

This is what Malebranche means in his frequent description of intelligible extension as the “eternal model or archetype” of created bodies. That is, intelligible extension is the model or archetype of created extension in the sense of containing a set of specifications for constructing any particular body. So, despite intelligible extension not formally containing the perfections of bodies, it is nonetheless the blueprint of created extension insofar as it contains the concepts or definitions of bodies which constitute the rules for constructing particular bodies. And through His divine omniscience, God is able to know in intelligible extension at once any and all possible bodies and their properties which He consults in order to create particular bodies.

It must be noted, however, that for Malebranche the idea of intelligible extension does not consist of separate and discrete logical concepts in the same way that the material world contains separate and discrete bodies. That is to say, the definitions of bodies contained in intelligible extension are not “positioned” in the intelligible world as bodies are positioned in the material world. So, for example, the concept of the sun does not occupy a certain area of intelligible extension which is positioned in a certain (ideal) distance away from the concept of the earth. To attribute this conception of intelligible extension to Malebranche would be to assume with Arnauld that intelligible extension consists of image-like entities.

But as the model of the material world, intelligible extension consists of a system of interrelated geometrical definitions of every possible body, rather than a series of pictures. Intelligible extension contains the geometrical definitions of the sun, the earth, and every other planetary body, for instance, as conceptual aspects of the general definition of extension which just is that which contains the generative definitions of all possible bodies. This gives us a sense of what Malebranche means when he says in Elucidation X that, “[s]ince the parts of intelligible extension are all of the same nature, they may all represent any body whatsoever.” Malebranche does not mean that intelligible extension is itself entirely uniform or homogenous in the sense of containing nothing other than a blank canvas wherein God can draw out, as it were, any body whatsoever through it. Instead, Malebranche means that the idea of intelligible

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10 See, for example, OCM IX 926, 956, 959, 968.
12 Radner (1978), p. 92. Malebranche occasionally gives the impression that intelligible extension does in fact contain bodies in this way. See, for example, Elucidation X, LO 626f. However, Malebranche is here discussing our sensible apprehension of intelligible extension in sense perception, by rendering sensible the meanings of bodies that intelligible extension contains. This and other similar passages, then, should not be interpreted as explaining the way in which intelligible extension contains the perfections of bodies in itself.
13 OCM III 153, LO 627.
extension contains the geometrical definitions of each and every possible body as interrelated conceptual aspects of the general definition of extension.

Indeed, this is precisely Malebranche’s sense of the generality of the idea of intelligible extension. The conceptual definitions of all possible bodies are contained in an irreducible unity which transcends a mere collection of particulars, that is, without there being in God a collection of particular ideas which have a one-to-one correspondence with these bodies. The general idea of intelligible extension is not, as some commentators understand it, a bare abstraction from particulars what is common to all of them, but rather, contains the definition of every possible body in one united whole. Intelligible extension contains, as Daisie Radner says, “all the generative definitions for particular triangles construed as a single definition.”

II. A Resemblance Theory of the Representational Relation?

Up to this point, we have been considering Malebranche’s account of the nature of the idea of intelligible extension. In doing so, Arnauld’s assumptions regarding its nature—namely, that intelligible extension consists of many individual ideas of bodies, on the one hand, and that these ideas are images of bodies, on the other—have been shown to be inaccurate. For, on Malebranche’s view, intelligible extension consists of a single general idea of extension which eminently contains all the perfections of bodies, that is, the generative definitions of bodies, in a purely conceptual way. Having done so, we can now move on to the second of Arnauld’s assumptions concerning the representationality of intelligible extension.

Recall that Arnauld appears to presuppose that the representational relation between the idea of intelligible extension and created bodies is based on resemblance. For intelligible extension to represent bodies via resemblance, it would have to share certain properties with bodies. Now, there are two different ways in which intelligible extension can ‘share properties’ with created bodies so as to resemble them. First, there is an ontological resemblance according to which intelligible extension formally shares properties with created bodies. In order for intelligible extension to resemble created bodies in this sense, intelligible extension would have to be material, and so would resemble created bodies by having in itself the extended properties exemplified by bodies. Second, there is a pictorial resemblance according to which the content of the idea of intelligible extension consists of images which exemplify properties that are formally contained, or physically manifested, in created bodies. In this sense, intelligible extension resembles created bodies insofar as bodies are merely copies or duplicates of these images in intelligible extension. This appears to be the version of resemblance that Arnauld assumes grounds the representational relation between intelligible extension and created bodies: “[t]his alleged archetype of the Sun, will it be able to represent the sun to me in another way than the portrait of the king represents the king to me? I do not see that it could be otherwise.”

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15 Connell (1967a) also suggests this reading of the generality of intelligible extension.
16 Ibid. 117.
Neither of these senses of resemblance, however, is sufficient for explaining Malebranche’s view of the representational relation between intelligible extension and created bodies. On the one hand, ontological resemblance cannot explain the representational relation because, as previously discussed, intelligible extension does not formally contain bodies. Malebranche vehemently denies that intelligible extension is itself extended, for this would imply that God is Himself extended. On the other hand, in order for a pictorial resemblance to adequately ground a representational resemblance, intelligible extension would have to consist of images which pictorially depict created bodies and their properties. That is to say, pictorial resemblance relies on an imagistic conception of intelligible extension. As discussed above, however, Malebranche does not conceive of intelligible extension as containing images or pictures of created bodies, but rather, as containing the definitions of created bodies which constitute the rules for constructing them. It follows, then, that this pictorial resemblance cannot ground the representational relation between intelligible extension and created bodies.

III. The Representational Relation of Exemplary Causation

It is clear at this point that both of Arnauld’s assumptions regarding, on the one hand, the nature of intelligible extension as consisting of individual pictures in the divine intellect, and on the other hand, the representational relation between intelligible extension and created bodies as grounded on resemblance, are unfounded. But it has yet to be determined what does ground this representational relation. In what remains, I will argue that for Malebranche the representational relation between intelligible extension and created bodies is grounded on a relation of exemplary causation.

The notion of exemplarity has its roots in the Platonic tradition, indeed in Plato himself, and is developed by the Christian Neoplatonists—particularly, Augustine and Ficino—with respect to the ontological issue of God’s creation of material bodies, as well as the epistemological issue of the representational relation between the Idea in the divine intellect and created bodies. As a species of causality, exemplary causation is the causal influence exercised by a model or an exemplar on the operation of an agent which is in the mind of the agent prior to the creation of a thing. For example, when an artist creates a sculpture, the artist has in mind an exemplar or model of the statue beforehand which influences the artist’s act of creating the statue. This blueprint of the statue in the mind of the artist is the exemplary cause of the statue.

According to both Augustine and Ficino, there is an ontological relation established between the divine ideas and created bodies in God’s act of creation which consists in an exemplary causal relation. For the divine ideas constitute the models or exemplars which determine God’s act of creating particular bodies. In addition to this ontological relation based on exemplary causation, however, there is also an epistemological relation between divine ideas and created bodies grounded in exemplary causation. This is because it is by means of the exemplary causal relation between divine ideas and created bodies that God is able to know or perceive in Himself the bodies created in accordance with the divine exemplars. In other words, the exemplary causal relation establishes a further representational relation in virtue of which God is cognitively related to created bodies by contemplating the divine exemplars contained in His intellect in accordance with which bodies are constructed.
As an Oratorian in seventeenth-century France, Malebranche would have been familiar with these important Church figures, and clearly derived much inspiration on matters concerning intelligible extension from them as evidenced by his own proclamation that his view of intelligible extension is Neoplatonist or Augustinian in spirit. Indeed, this Neoplatonist position can also be found in Malebranche’s texts, and evidently supported by the same reasons that it is in Augustine and Ficino. In the *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, Malebranche explicitly endorses the view that the representational relation is established by the exemplary causal relation between intelligible extension and created bodies. In Dialogue VII, Theodore tells Aristes to, “Contemplate intelligible extension, the archetype of bodies. This represents them, as it is on its basis that they have all been formed.” Here, Malebranche, through his mouthpiece Theodore, expresses the view that intelligible extension is representationally related to created bodies in virtue of being the archetype and exemplary cause of these bodies.

In Elucidation X of the *Search*, moreover, Malebranche reiterates the Neoplatonist reason offered by Augustine and Ficino for positing the representational relation in terms of the exemplary causal relation, namely, to explain the epistemological relation by means of which God knows the bodies He has created. As Malebranche says, “God contains in Himself an ideal or intelligible infinite extension; for since He has created it, God knows extension, and He can know it only in Himself.” Malebranche, like Augustine and Ficino, states that God knows created bodies by contemplating the idea of them, i.e., intelligible extension, contained within His intellect. For it is inferior to God’s divine perfection to know things by contemplating them outside Himself, as this would entail that there is some perfection which God lacks. Thus, God knows the bodies He has created by contemplating the idea of intelligible extension which cognitively relates God to created bodies. But what is the nature of this representational relation that cognitively relates God to His material creatures? Malebranche suggests in this passage that God knows created bodies in intelligible extension since these bodies are created on the basis of intelligible extension as their model or archetype. In other words, because the idea of intelligible extension is the exemplary cause of created bodies, it is the exemplary causal relation between intelligible extension and created bodies that cognitively relates God to these bodies when He contemplates the idea of intelligible extension in Himself.

Recall that for Malebranche the general idea of intelligible extension is the blueprint of bodies. That is, intelligible extension contains the interrelated definitions of all possible bodies, which consist in the rules or specifications for constructing these bodies, in a simple unity that transcends a mere collection of (abstract) particulars. By containing the definitions of all possible bodies as the means for constructing them, the idea of intelligible extension thus constitutes the exemplary cause of bodies. Moreover, the idea of intelligible extension shares a representational

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18 See, for example, the Malebranche-Arnauld correspondence. Marsilio Ficino was responsible for providing translations and commentaries on the works of the Platonic dialogues as well as several of those of the Greek Neoplatonists which Malebranche would have encountered in his studies. Ficino was also heavily discussed by the Cartesians, and so Malebranche certainly would have been quite familiar with Ficino through his Cartesian ties. For instance, La Forge’s *Treatise on the Human Mind*, which Malebranche read, frequently cites Ficino.

19 JS 110.

20 LO 626.
relation with individual created bodies as a result of the exemplary causal relation that is established between intelligible extension and bodies when God consults this idea, as a blueprint, in the creation of particular bodies. In other words, when God consults the general idea of intelligible extension in order to create particular bodies, He contemplates the definitions of bodies contained in intelligible extension which constitute the rules or specifications that direct the creation of these bodies. Upon the creation of some particular body, an exemplary causal relation is established which pins the general idea of intelligible extension as the exemplary cause to that particular body. The same holds with respect to each and every particular body created in accordance with intelligible extension as its exemplary cause. In this way, then, the exemplary causal relation establishes a representational relation between intelligible extension and each body created on the basis of the interrelated definitions contained in this general idea as exemplary cause.

Now, it must be emphasized that, for Malebranche, the exemplary causal relation is to be distinguished from the efficient causal relation. For although both of these relations in general involve a causal relationship between God and His creatures, the nature of these causal relations differ. The first difference consists in their distinct causal relata. The relata involved in the efficient causal relation are created bodies and the Divine Will. Those involved in the exemplary causal relation, by contrast, are created bodies and the Divine Intellect. Malebranche makes this distinction when he says that God knows bodies in His intellect, whereas He sees that they exist in His will\(^{21}\).

The second difference concerns the distinguishability or individuation of bodies. The efficient causal relation suffices only to explain the actual existence of a body—and in this respect the efficient causal relation is the same for any and all created bodies, such that created bodies are not distinguishable simply on the basis of their efficient causal relation with the Divine Will. In other words, there is nothing about God’s volitional act of bringing bodies into existence itself that determines the individuality of bodies: it is, as the Neoplatonists say, only the unfolding of the divine idea\(^ {22}\).

The exemplary causal relation, by contrast, accounts for the individuality of each created body insofar as the idea of intelligible extension qua exemplary cause contains the unique definitions of every possible particular body. For it is in virtue of these definitions, which consist of the rules or specifications for the construction of particular bodies with respect to their properties and relations, that bodies can be distinguished from one another. Intelligible extension thus exemplifies the individuality of bodies which is reflected in creation when God consults this idea in order to direct His will in creating bodies. So, for example, although the efficient causal relation establishes the existence of a horse and a chair, it does not by itself explain the individuality of these bodies. Rather, it is the exemplary causal relation that explains the individuality of the horse and the chair given the definitions of these bodies contained in intelligible extension by means of which God can distinguish them from one another and from all other bodies.

\(^{21}\) See Search III.i.5, IV.11.

\(^{22}\) See, for example, Ficino’s Platonic Theology II.9.
This view is a consequence of Malebranche’s subscription to *intellectualism* with respect to God’s act(s) of creation according to which God creates by consulting an idea or reason which serves as the exemplary cause that directs His will in creating individual bodies. On this view, primacy is placed on the divine intellect over the divine will in explaining the creation of individual bodies. This is contrasted with a *voluntarist* position according to which God acts by means of an indifferent will. According to voluntarism, there is nothing over and above the divine will which directs or explains God’s creative activity. God creates this or that body simply because He wills to do so without any recourse to some further idea.

I will conclude by discussing how this account resolves the charge of epistemological idealism directed at Malebranche by Arnauld. In order to resolve this charge, it must be explained how a representational relation based on exemplary causation can cognitively direct a perceiver of intelligible extension to a particular body in the external world. This can be explained by referencing the way in which God is cognitively directed to particular created bodies by contemplating intelligible extension. For just as God is cognitively directed at a particular body when he contemplates intelligible extension because of the representational relation established by the exemplary causal relation, so also is a finite mind that perceives a particular body through intelligible extension in sense perception cognitively related to that body as a result of the exemplary causal relation it has with intelligible extension.

The definitions contained in intelligible extension, which are sensibly perceived by the mind in sense perception, constitute the exemplary causes of particular bodies such that there is an exemplary causal relation established between intelligible extension and particular bodies when God creates bodies in accordance with them. Accordingly, when the finite mind sensibly perceives the definitions contained in intelligible extension, though the mind does not perceive created bodies as they are in themselves, nevertheless the mind is cognitively or representationally directed to the particular bodies that are created in accordance with them in virtue of the exemplary causal relation. The sensory perceptions of finite minds and God’s divine contemplation both involve a kind of perception of intelligible extension. And so, just as God is cognitively directed at particular bodies by contemplating intelligible extension in virtue of the exemplary causal relation, so also is the mind cognitively directed at particular bodies when it sensibly perceives intelligible extension in virtue of the exemplary causal relation. On this account, then, the mind is cognitively directed to particular created bodies when it perceives intelligible extension in such a way that does not require the mind to have a previous conception of these bodies. For the mind’s conception of a particular body in sense perception presupposes a perception of the definition pertaining to that body contained in intelligible extension, by means of which the mind is cognitively directed to the particular body via the exemplary causal relation, which cannot be acquired prior to the perception of intelligible extension.