

NICOLAS MALEBRANCHE: FROM THE THEORY OF “GENERAL WILL” TO THE CONCEPT OF “INCLINATION”

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Abstract: The period between 1670 and 1740 is considered a time of “crisis of Christian rationalism” (A. McKenna) or a time of “skepticism” (V. Cousin), since the Christian apologetics, trapped between Protestantism and the Rationalism, are gradually reduced to a row of inefficient and traditional “proofs” for the existence and kindness of God. In 1680, Nicolas Malebranche publishes the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, following to explain the way in which God granted His grace to all mankind. In order to fight the skeptical thesis according to which God takes not directly part in this world, Malebranche refers the action of God to the concept of “general/divine will”. If such a theory is useful at a certain metaphysical level in explaining the presence of the evil in the world (God does not *create* but *allows* the evil), it raises some anthropological issues, especially concerning the nature of the human free will. If anything in the world emerges as a direct consequence of God’s “general will”, how can be conceived a real free human will? The theory of God’s general will generates an unexpected anthropological consequence (the dissolution of the human free will) that Malebranche tries to hide it by inventing the concept of “*inclination* of the will”: God does not *interfere* (by causation) with the human will, but He *influences* it (by inclination). Is it philosophically defensible? The aim of the article is to analyze some philosophical and methodological difficulties related to the new Malebranchist concept of “*inclination* of human will” in order to prove that the passage from the occasionalist theory of *general will* to an inquiry about the *human will* is quite problematic.

Keywords: occasionalism, general will, free will, causation, inclination.

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL AND MALEBRANCHE’S PESSIMISM

If the new element of Malebranche’s philosophy was to be identified, it could be defined as “rupture”¹ regarding the Augustinian and

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Thomistic solution for the problem of evil. This rupture is manifested in several forms: the affirmation of an ontological consistency of evil, the refusal of the classical concept of “harmony” in whole God’s creation, the rejection of the causal correlation between the physical evil and the moral one. A relevant excerpt from the book *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* captures the radicalism of Malebranche’s pessimism regarding the evil in the world: “The Universe is not as perfect as it could be in an absolute way [...] All these disastrous effects that God allows in the Universe are not necessary [...] I mean, after all, that this does not make the work of God more perfect. Rather, it disfigures it and makes it unpleasant for everyone who appreciates the order”². For Malebranche, this world created by God “seems too neglected, thousands of defects disfigure it”³. The disfigurement is manifested both in a physical form (“too many irregularities and monsters”) and in a spiritual form (“too much evil and disorder in the spiritual world”), and it cannot simply be denied, which is why the question regarding the way in which God rules this world full of defects cannot be avoided or discharged: “Does God’s Providence include even the last being in it? Isn’t God the One who governs everything, regulates everything, orders and arranges everything in this present and future world?”⁴ Unlike the Augustinian and the Thomistic tradition which devalues the existence of evil and reduces it to a mere “lack” of good (St. Augustine himself calls the evil a “*nihil*” in *De ordine*), Malebranche considers that evil exists independent of man’s sinfulness, but his existence does not contradict the idea of God’s goodness. To demonstrate the existence of evil and God’s goodness, Malebranche develops an argumentative stratagem putting forward two key concepts: “simplicity of means” and “general wills.”

NATURE OF DIVINE ACTION

In *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1680), Malebranche introduces for the first time the concept of “simplicity of means” (*simplicité des voies*). This concept defines the providential action of God, Who does

¹ Denis Moreau (1999). *Deux cartésiens. La polémique entre Antoine Arnauld et Nicolas Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, p.93.

² Nicolas Malebranche (1967). *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*. Paris: Vrin, p.73.

³ *Ibidem*, p.74.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.73.

not create the world without consider the relationship between *attributes* and the *means* chosen to achieve certain effects in the creation: "an excellent workman should proportion the action to his work; he does not accomplish by quite complex means that he can execute by simpler ones"⁵.

The analogy between human and divine creation is risky, because any analogy between God and man has only a partial relevance; moreover, the divine creation does not have the characteristics of a process in which a "mean" requires to be adapted to a "purpose", but Malebranche uses it without restriction because it has a precise role, namely determining the elements of the perfection of God's creation, in the "*convenance*"⁶ between means and purpose.

The perfection of divine creation lies not in the acknowledgment of the complexity and harmony which exists between created things, but in the *simplicity of the means* used by God for the creation and preservation of the created world: "God which could have been produced and preserved by the simplest laws, and which ought to be the most perfect, with respect to the simplicity of the ways necessary to its production or to its conservation"⁷.

This definition of divine perfection in relation to the simplicity of means is surprising, theologically speaking, but it is designed to allow the assertion of an agreement or of a "proportion" between divine action and the existence of the world, which determines the most suitable means that God uses when He creates and maintains the world: those "reflecting the divine attributes"⁸. However, these means have a direct relationship with those attributes that best describe the divine essence: simplicity, generality, consistency and constancy. In another work, Malebranche says that the most appropriate means used by God are those that glorify Him due to their "simplicity, fecundity, universality, through the characteristics that express the qualities He is glorified in possessing"⁹. Malebranche mostly favors the *simplicity*.

⁵ Nicolas Malebranche (1992). *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Transl., with Introduction and Notes by Patrick Riley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.116.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.53.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.116.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp.117, 116.

⁹ Nicolas Malebranche (1997a). *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*. Edited by Nicolas Jolley. Translated by Davis Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.163.

The *simplicity of means* is a “structural stratagem”¹⁰ that allows Malebranche to justify the existence of evil in the world: God could have intervened to prevent or stop the evil, but it would have been a breach of simplicity of the means by which He created and maintains the world. Thus, everything we see as monstrous and messy in the divine creation has effects that God allows not in a positive and direct way, but only indirectly. “He wills them only indirectly, because they are the natural consequences of His laws”¹¹.

But the “simplicity of means” describes only partially the Malebranchist stratagem, namely the nomothetic dimension of *creation*. One needs, in addition, a clarification on the nature of the *divine will*, in order to understand why God chooses not to intervene in the course of things. The analogy between human action and divine action is used by Malebranche to explain the way in which God exercises His will. In Chapter XIX of the First speech of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, Malebranche believes that a will which is required to go back on a previous decision shows “ignorance or caprice”. However, God has not by particular wills, which are limited and, therefore, often obliged to return and correct a previous decision. God acts only by means of “general wills”, which means that He acts “in consequence of general laws that He has established”¹². As a result, the concept of divine providence no longer represents the detailed and targeted intervention of God in the order of things, but the production, by a general will or cause, of a series of universal effects due to universal laws.

This production of effects depends on the relationship between *general* and *occasional causes*. Without excessively insisting on this famous conceptual couple, we shall remain only within the boundaries of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, in which Malebranche writes: “We seek that [cause] which regulates and determines the efficiency of the general cause, the one called fruitful, particular, and occasional”. The way in which the general cause acts, being “determined” by an occasional cause is explained by Malebranche as such: “For in order that the general cause acts by general laws or wills, and that his action be lawful, constant, and uniform, it is absolutely necessary to be some

¹⁰ Denis Moreau, *op.cit.*, p.100.

¹¹ Nicolas Malebranche (1997a), *op.cit.*, p.164.

¹² Nicolas Malebranche (1992), *op.cit.*, pp.118; 195.

occasional cause which determines the efficacy of these laws, and which serves to establish them"¹³.

In other words, the occasional causes ensure the effectiveness and applicability of general laws or divine wills. In themselves, the occasional causes (creatures) do not actually act, but only God, as a general, real cause, acts *through* them. In *The Fifteenth Elucidation*, Malebranche exposes and comments seven philosophical and theological piece of evidence against the alleged efficiency of secondary causes, focusing on the central idea that "only God's volitions are efficacious by themselves"¹⁴.

No less, the conceptual couple *general cause-occasional cause* risks to endanger the justification of God's goodness approach; on the one hand, Malebranche says that God does not intervene punctually, but only generally in the world (and therefore He cannot be held responsible for the existence of evil), and on the other hand, the secondary causes (which should be seen as responsible for the effects of general laws) are clearly lacking any effective action. Therefore, the dilemma is: either the general will (which manifests causally) of God is the only one that possesses its own effectiveness, and in that case God cannot be exonerated from the accusation of being responsible for the existence of evil; or particular (occasional) cases have their own effectiveness and then the difference between the general cause and the efficient cause proves ineffective.

But in terms of the human action, this metaphysical and theological dilemma raises the question of both the existence and the nature of the free human will: if God is real cause, man's will is just an occasional cause, lacking its own ineffectiveness? How can be sustained the freedom of the human will, seeing that it is still considered as an occasional cause? Susan Peppers-Bates analyzes the issue at a deeper level, talking about the theoretical impossibility of thinking about a human *action*: "for Malebranche's doctrine that only God is a true cause, it appears that all genuine human action is impossible"¹⁵.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p.139.

¹⁴ Nicolas Malebranche (1997b). *The Search after Truth: With Elucidations of The Search after Truth*. Edited by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.679.

¹⁵ Susan Peppers-Bates (2009). *Nicolas Malebranche: Freedom in an Occasionalist World*. London and New-York: Continuum, p.90.

THE CONCEPT OF “INCLINATION”

In the fourth book of the *Search after Truth*, Malebranche defines the human will with the help of the concept of “inclination”. The classical exegesis noted that the analysis of will requires again a method based on analogy: the analogy between the movement of the will and the movement of the matter. For example, Ginette Dreyfus claims that it allows an understanding of the nature of will: “the clear idea and the distinctiveness of the movement ... clarify the obscure and confused feeling that we have about the will”¹⁶; and Martial Gueroult believes that Malebranche, by means of this analogy between the will and matter, reverses the Cartesian order which clearly separates the two substances¹⁷.

However, in first and fourth books of *The Search after Truth*, the analogy between the *movement* of matter and the *movement* of will is often affirmed and justified by using the concept of “inclination”. The human will is described as “capacity of the soul to love different goods, and the impression or natural movement that takes us towards the general good”¹⁸.

Therefore, if the will is judged by terms that describe the movement of matter (thirst, inclination, movement), it means that the functioning of the will respects the laws of occasionalism: God is the *general* cause that “moves” or “pushes” the will towards good, and this is one plays as *occasional* cause. The key question that we can formulate at this point of our approach is the following: can the concept of “inclination” explain the free will and if so, how?

According to Malebranche himself, the functional analogy reaches a limit in this case, and it is marked even by the *action-free* nature of the will. Here comes the freedom of the will: in the ability to “determine in a different way” the movement towards good with which God endowed it. As in *The Search after Truth* this problem is not explained in detail, Malebranche thematizes, in the *First Elucidation*, the way in which this capability of “determination” of the will can be understood.

God, in His quality of general cause, “incessantly pushes by an invincible movement towards good in general”¹⁹.

¹⁶ Ginette Dreyfus (1958). *La volonté selon Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, p.199.

¹⁷ Martial Gueroult (1987). *Etendue et pshychologie chez Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, p.50.

¹⁸ Nicolas Malebranche (1997b), *op.cit.*, p.6.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p.547.

The impression or natural movement that takes us to the general good does neither increase nor decrease and it is constant; God always pushes us with an equal force towards Him. Within this movement toward God the ability of the will to "determine" itself lies not in the power of the will to move towards an object of good (since only God, the only real cause may trigger the will), but in the power to ... stop. This explains the disordered (or sinful) acts of the will: the sinner "stops, rests, and no longer follows the movement imprinted by God"²⁰. The determination of the will to "stop" from the movement imprinted by God is called "consent".

The solution found by Malebranche to explain simultaneously the functioning of the will and the issue raised by the relationship between the general cause (the general will of God) and occasional cause (human will) is paradoxical from a theological perspective and complicated at a philosophical level.

THEOLOGICAL PARADOX

The paradox of Malebranchist solution to the problem of liberty lies in the fact that the free operation of the human will is conceived not as an action itself, but as its *refusal*. In the *First Clarification*, this "negative" definition of freedom, as refusal of action, is repeatedly emphasized: "our consent or our rest", "all we do is to stop, to rest"; "a period of rest or a free stop of the search", "this rest (*repos*) in the creature is disturbed, because no creature is the true cause of happiness"²¹.

Or, if freedom is defined not by action but by its refusal, not by its inclusion in the "inclination" given by God but by its stopping, it will necessarily result that sin does not have an ontological consistency: "there is nothing on our part, but a lack"; "When we sin, what are we doing? Nothing."²²

Theologically, this thesis of de-achievement of sin is impossible to be sustained. But philosophically, the portrayal of human freedom as non-action, as a *nihil* that "determines" the operation of the human will is paradoxical, because it presupposes that a nothingness can, from an ontological perspective, determine actual practical consequences. Malebranche himself is aware of this paradox when he writes: "Can we conceive nothingness to be a real cause? And nevertheless we affirm

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp.550, 551.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp.549, 554, 555.

²² *Ibidem*, p.542.

it”²³. Some authors closely concerned with this issue of the will as “nothingness” seem to have noticed the paradox: “no doubt, freedom acts, but this action is lacked by any effectiveness, it does not exercise any influence, it has no power over the extent of our will”²⁴.

The hypothesis we suggest is the following: we have to deal with Malebranche's attempt to connect to the Augustinian and Thomistic tradition (that considers the evil as a *nihil*). For Malebranche, the human will is “nothingness”, and God’s will is the only efficacious will.

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

The theological paradox stems from a philosophical problem, namely the alleged “inclination” (or constant “pushing motion”) towards good about which Malebranche says that God imprints on the soul. The author does not advance an argument to support this sentence: “I confess that I have no clear idea, nor an inner sense of this equality of the pushing movement or of the natural movement towards good”²⁵. But this may not be an impediment to believe that God pushes man towards Him, with a force which is always equal.

In our opinion, the thesis of the constant inclination or movement towards good, despite the fact that it does not receive any philosophical justification, is unconsciously derived from the principle of *inertia* that Malebranche considers to be the first of the two laws that God observes when He creates the world: “moved bodies tend to continue their motion in a straight line”²⁶. This transposition of a principle of physics in a philosophical ground (followed by consequences such as the ones mentioned in this article) clearly shows the limitation of the mechanistic model used by Malebranche to describe the act of divine creation (seen as an effect of a general will which acts only by simple, constant and uniform laws).

CONCLUSION

The argumentation used by Malebranche seems to reach the target (the one intended to justify the goodness of God and to exonerate Him of the accusation which makes Him responsible for the existence of evil)

²³ *Ibidem*, p.563.

²⁴ Miklos Veto (1978). *Le rien de la liberté : Malebranche et la philosophie de la volonté*. Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 92 (4), p.487.

²⁵ Nicolas Malebranche (1997b), *op.cit.*, p.549.

²⁶ Nicolas Malebranche (1992), *op.cit.*, p.117.

only by emptying the consistence of human will and the theological concept of sin.

Far from writing a *theodicy*, Malebranche seems to achieve an *anthropodicy*.

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