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Malebranche on Intelligible Extension: A Programmatic Interpretation

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is exegesis. I explicate Nicholas Malebranche's concept of intelligible extension. I begin by detailing how the concept matured throughout Malebranche's work, and the new functions it took on within his metaphysical system. I then examine Gustav Bergmann's (1956. "Some Remarks on the Philosophy of Malebranche." *The Review of Metaphysics* 10(2): 207–26) "axiomatic" interpretation, as well as the criticism of it offered by Daise Radner (1994. "Malebranche and the Individuation of Perceptual Objects." In *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Kenneth F. Barber, and Jorge J. E. Gracia, New York: SUNY Press). I argue that Radner's criticism of the interpretation is only partly successful; some of her objections can be met; others cannot. I then develop a novel interpretation of the concept, given insights from this dispute. I call it the "programmatic interpretation." I argue that this interpretation coheres well with Malebranche's famous Vision in God thesis, as well as many of his other commitments. I conclude by considering a certain pertinent objection to my proposal, summarizing the dialectic, and forcefully restating my case.

Keywords: Nicholas Malebranche, intelligible extension, Vision in God, sensory perception

Introduction

My goal in this essay is to explicate a concept in Nicholas Malebranche's metaphysical system – *intelligible extension* (IE), or what Malebranche referred to early on as the "ideas" in the mind of God. This concept plays a central role in Malebranche's metaphysico-theological *Vision in God* thesis (VG). The primary question of this essay is: How ought we to comprehend Malebranchian intelligible extension?; or, in virtue of what is IE supposedly able to play the roles that Malebranche assigns to it in his system?

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Prima facie, answering this question presents an interpretive challenge, since the concept changed and matured throughout the course of Malebranche's (1674–1714) work. Within his metaphysics, Malebranche first assigns one set of functions to it in *The Search after Truth*; then, another in his *Elucidations*; and finally, a third and fourth in his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*. Supposing INTELLIGIBLE EXTENSION forms a unified concept throughout his work, this means that, before one can answer the question about what the concept means as a whole, one must first account for all of its diverse functions.¹

So, to this end, I begin by detailing how the concept developed throughout Malebranche's work, and the new functions it took on within his metaphysical system at each discrete stage. I discuss each modification as it occurs in Malebranche's historical and dialectical context (principally in the heat of dialogue with Malebranche's nemesis, Antoine Arnauld).

After stating these individual functions, I then consider an interpretation of the concept *in toto*. I examine Gustav Bergmann's (1956) "axiomatic" interpretive answer to this question – according to which Malebranchian IE is best understood as a system of *axioms* within the mind of God. I think this is a very plausible interpretation of IE, largely in part because it takes the task of accounting for these diverse functions seriously. However, this position has been met with criticism. Daise Radner (1994) offers two critiques of it. I argue that Radner's criticism of the interpretation is only partly successful; one of her objections can be met; the other two, however, cannot. Insights from this exchange point the way toward a better understanding of the concept.

Finally, I develop a novel interpretation of the concept, given these insights. I call it the "programmatically" interpretive answer to this essay's central question. I believe this interpretation preserves what's inherently correct about Bergmann's account, without also embracing the account's flaws. In this way, it is my hope that this essay contributes to a greater understanding and appreciation of Malebranche's metaphysics, "for its own sake" (Pessin 2006, p. 36).

¹ I follow Kelley (1998) in designating concepts with terms in caps, speech with quotes, and ordinary reference with ordinary text.

Functional Analysis of Intelligible Extension

Malebranche's concept of IE changed substantially throughout his career. It changed both *nominally* and *functionally*. Nominally, whereas at first Malebranche spoke of "ideas" – plural – in the mind of God, he later came to speak of the one idea – "the idea of extension," or "intelligible extension" – in God's mind. And functionally, the concept changed primarily as a result of Malebranche's engagement with criticism offered him by his nemesis, Antoine Arnauld (1683, 1684). I have called Malebranche's popular doctrine "metaphysico-theological" because in both cases in which Malebranche's thesis was under fire, the criticisms leveled against him were theological in character. Malebranche and his interlocutors presumed received Scholastic theology, whereby God is understood to be a being that is perfectly simple, perfectly spiritual, perfectly intelligent, a being who possesses perfect reality, who is in want of nothing outside of himself [cf. Anselm 1076; Aquinas 1274; Bittle 1953].² Arnauld argued that, beginning with Malebranche's first formulation of IE, his Vision in God contradicts some one or other of these theological doctrines. Malebranche responded in each instance by *modifying* his previous conception of the ideational content in the mind of God. In this way, his concept of IE was born under punches.

First Formulation (VG)

In Malebranche's (1674) earliest formulation of Vision in God in *The Search after Truth*, he appeals to the "ideas" in the mind of God (III.ii.6). His account is as follows. (a) God has multiple ideas, one for every kind of thing that there is. (b) Ideas are the archetypes God consulted in creating our world. (c) In intellection, we perceive those archetypes directly and purely. And (d) in sensory perception, we perceive those archetypes indirectly and impurely (by "painting" our sensations onto God's ideas) [cf. Malebranche 1674, I.vii.4–5; Nolan 2012, p. 21]. In this way, all veridical perception depends on both God and the ideas in his mind. "As a result, it might be said that if we do not to some extent see God, we see nothing ... " (III.ii.6).

² On Malebranche's debt to the Scholastics for his Vision in God thesis, see Connell (1967). And for a brief discussion of Malebranche's Augustinian inheritance, see, e. g. Lennon (1997, x-xiv): "Malebranche's signature doctrine of the vision of all things in God ... finds support in Augustine, at least in broad outline, and certainly comports with Augustine's insistence on man's dependence on God for all things, including even cognition" (p. xi).

Why think that VG is true? Malebranche offers several arguments in its support. Accounting for (a) and (b) is a matter of course. We suppose that God knows everything that there is, and so his ideational content covers it all. Moreover, we suppose that God created everything and he did so intelligently, with forethought, and so he laid out something like a blueprint before acting.

The arguments for (c) and (d) hang on an assumption, common to many early modern thinkers. This is the assumption that the only real properties possessed by bodies in the world are those derivable from extension generally. Accordingly, for any representational state of some object, it is veridical only to the extent that it tracks that object's extensional properties. So, consider the sensation of seeing a brown, rectangular table. Suppose such a table exists. To the extent that the sensation represents the table *as rectangular*, it is true; but to the extent that it represents the table *as brown*, it is not – its appearing brown (per se) says something only about us, not the table.

With this thought in the background, Malebranche offers two arguments in support of (d). The first takes a disjunctive syllogistic form, and the second is an argument from economy. He argues first that there are *only five ways* we might know objects in the world: (i) “the ideas we have of bodies and of all other objects we do not perceive by themselves come from these bodies or objects; or (ii) our soul has the power of producing these ideas; or (iii) God has produced them in us while creating the soul or produces them every time we think about a given object; or (iv) the soul has in itself all the perfections it sees in bodies; or else (v) the soul is joined to a completely perfect being that contains all intelligible perfections, or all the ideas of created beings” (III.ii.1).

Option (i) is the historic view of the Aristotelian Peripatetics, “who hold that external objects transmit species that resemble them” (III.ii.2). Malebranche rejects this view because, on it, it seems impossible to understand how, “if we look at [an] object with magnifying glasses or a microscope, the species suddenly becomes five or six hundred times larger than it was before, for still less do we see with what parts it can so greatly increase its size in an instant” (III.ii.2). Malebranche rejects option (ii) because “the intelligible world must be more perfect than the material, terrestrial world ... [So,] when it is claimed that men have the power to form such ideas as please them, one runs the risk of claiming that men have the power of creating beings worthier and more perfect than the world God has created;” which is absurd. Malebranche rejects option (iv) because it would lead to a kind of skepticism about the external world. “For everyone can have the idea of a golden mountain without there being a golden mountain in nature ... Undoubtedly, then, it is not in itself or through itself that the mind sees the existence of things, but rather it depends on something else for this” (III.ii.5).

And in support of (v) and against (iii), Malebranche reasons: “[I]t is apparent from the *economy* found throughout nature that God never does in a very complicated fashion what can be done in a very simple and straightforward way.” But, “since God can reveal everything to minds simply by willing that they see what is in their midst, i. e. what *in Him* is related to and represents these things, there is no likelihood that He does otherwise, or that he does so by producing as many infinities or infinite numbers of ideas as there are created mind” (III.ii.6). Therefore, (v) is the simpler option. And (v), of course, is just VG.

Finally, with respect to (c), Malebranche reasons: “It even seems that the mind would be incapable of representing universal ideas of genus, species, and so on, to itself, had it not seen all beings contained in one. For, given that every creature is a particular being, we cannot say that we see a created thing when, for example, we see a triangle in general. Finally, I think that sense can be made of the way the mind knows certain abstract and general truths only through the presence of Him who can enlighten the mind in an infinity of different ways” (III.ii.6). In other words, we must accept (c), otherwise we face an *explanatory gap*. Therefore, Malebranche argues, we ought to accept VG and all of these (a)-(d).³

Arnauld’s First Critique⁴

Malebranche’s VG was critically discussed by his peers. Antoine Arnauld argued that this thesis cannot be true, for (a) is false; it contradicts received theology – namely that God is a being with perfect reality, in want of nothing. Arnauld reasoned as follows:

- (1) If God has a multitude of ideas, then God’s mind has modes. [Premise]⁵
- (2) If something has modes, then it does not have perfect reality. [Premise]

³ The arguments, as I have presented them, are only intended to amount to a sketch. Cf. Schmaltz (2017, § 2), Pessin (2006, 37–38), Jolley (1996, 537ff), and esp. Nolan (2017) for more extensive examinations of Malebranche’s arguments in favor of VG generally, some of which were not discussed here.

⁴ I am liberal in my representation of both this and the following of Arnauld’s critiques [cf. Arnauld 1683, 1684]. Compare my coverage of the debate to that offered similarly by Radner (1994), Pessin (2006, 40), and Nolan (2017: § 7).

⁵ Malebranche and Arnauld share a Cartesian ontology. See Descartes (1644/-47) for a discussion of the difference between SUBSTANCE and MODE.

- (3) Therefore, if God has a multitude of ideas, then God does not have perfect reality. [From (1) & (2)]
- (4) But, God does have perfect reality. [Premise]
- (5) Ergo, it is not the case that God has a multitude of ideas. [From (3) & (4)]

So, (a) is false, and, if (a) is false, then (b)-(d) no longer make sense. Therefore, VG as a whole is false.

Second Formulation (MVG)

In response to Arnauld's criticism, Malebranche (1678) concedes the point. However, in his *Elucidations on the Search after Truth*, he offers in its place a modified version of VG. According to MVG, (a*) God has only one idea: the idea of extension, or intelligible extension. (b*) IE is the archetype of all reality, which God consulted in creating the world; IE contains within it the idea of every other body. (c*) In intellection, a part of IE touches the mind faintly. And (d*) in sensory perception, a part of IE touches the mind more vividly (and, in this case, it is supposed we now "paint" our sensations onto it). In this way, veridical perception depends on both God and the idea (singular) in his mind. In this modified account, Arnauld's objection is bypassed.

Arnauld's Second Critique

Arnauld then argued that MVG cannot be true either, for, in this case, (c*) and (d*) are false; they, again, contradict received theology – namely that God is perfectly simple and has no parts. Arnauld's reasoning here seems to run as follows:

- (1) If (c*) and (d*) are true, then IE has parts. [Premise]
- (2) Now, God is perfectly simple. [Premise]
- (3) So, God is not distinct from IE. [From (2)]
- (4) From which it follows that, if IE has parts, then God has parts. [From (1) & (3)]
- (5) So, if (c*) and (d*) are true, then God has parts. [From (1) & (4)]
- (6) But, again, God has no parts. [From (2)]
- (7) Ergo, (c*) and (d*) are false. [From (5) & (6)]

And so, while (a*) and (b*) may be true, (c*) and (d*) certainly are not. MVG fails too.

Third Formulation (MMVG)

In response to Arnauld's second critique, Malebranche (1678) offers a different elucidation. He claims that, in saying (c*) and (d*) in MVG, he intended only to suggest that IE has *intelligible* parts. God certainly has intelligible (i. e. logical) parts, even if he has no real parts (i. e. in reality he is perfectly simple).⁶ With this clarification, we can modify VG yet again: (c**) In intellection, an intelligible part of IE touches the mind faintly. And (d**) in sensory perception, an intelligible part of IE touches the mind more vividly. Stated this way, Malebranche's third formulation, MMVG, bypasses both the first and second critiques.

Final Formulation (MMMVG)⁷

However, having stated MMVG, Malebranche (1688) did not rest content. In his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, he adds two final features to his Vision in God thesis. First, he adds (e) IE represents not only every thing that *actually* exists, but every thing that *possibly* exists; and, second, moreover (f) IE represents not only the entire *actual world*, but other *possible worlds* as well; our world is just one of the possible worlds – the best of all possible worlds [cf. Leibniz 1686, 1710].⁸

Malebranche does not explain why he has now included these additional features in his theory, but I think this rationale might be stated as follows. Intellection and sensory perception are not the only kinds of perception with which we are acquainted. Besides these, we also engage in *modal* reflection. We

⁶ Another way to put this is that no *real distinction* can be made between any two of God's "parts" – e. g. among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For a critical discussion of this concept within Cartesian philosophy generally, see Hoffman (2002); Skirry (2004); & Rozemond (2011).

⁷ I have detailed, anyway, what I take to be the most important dialectical exchanges between Malebranche and his critics on this point. I have chosen Arnauld as a spokesman for the front, but Malebranche faced much more critique during his life, on a variety of subjects. For more on Malebranche's exchange between, e. g. Simon Foucher (1675, 1679), as well as those critiques offered by Anselme (1678), Le Volois (1680), and Pierre-Sylvain Regis (1690), see Lennon 1997, xiv-xx). See Ablondi (1998) for more on De Mairan and Malebranche's exchanges.

⁸ Malebranche apparently subscribes to a kind of modal realism. However, note that, Malebranche's realism about possible worlds contrasts with that of, say, David Lewis (1986), in several remarkable respects. For starters, Malebranche supposes that there is something *special* about the actual world, in virtue of which it is actual – God has chosen this world and not the others, and this has something like qualitative implications. Our world has a privileged existence in Malebranche's account, whereas Lewis subscribes to a kind of *indexical* theory of actuality. Cf. Adams (1974) and Bricker (2006) for a fuller discussion of Divine Choice theories of (absolute) actuality.

conceive of possible objects, such as my sister's possible son; and we conceive of entire possible states of affairs too, such as the possibility that Donald Trump will be re-elected as president of the United States in the upcoming election. Perceiving my sister's future son can be accurate or inaccurate; for if I presently consider him as being six feet tall, he so happens to be born sometime in the future, and when he is born and matures into adulthood, he, in fact, is *not* six feet tall, then my conception was inaccurate; my current modal reflection is non-veridical. And when I conceive of the possibility of Trump's second potential future term, this, again, can be either accurate or inaccurate, according to how things, in fact, *come to be*. Malebranche holds that all perception, pure, impure, or otherwise, is veridical only insofar as it corresponds to the ideational content in the mind of God; therefore, modal apprehension – (e) and (f) – had to be accounted for within the scope of VG, as well.

In summary, in Malebranche's mature and final formulation of Vision in God: **(a*)** God has only one idea: the idea of extension (IE); **(b*)** IE is the archetype for all of reality, which contains all discrete realities; **(c**)** In intellection, an intelligible part of IE touches the mind faintly; **(d**)** In sensory perception, an intelligible part of IE touches the mind more vividly; **(e)** IE represents not only every thing that actually exists, but every thing that possibly exists; and **(f)** IE represents not only the entire actual world, but other possible worlds as well.

(a*) may be described as an *ontic* function: It says what exists in God's mind, in virtue of *how many things* all perceivable things are fundamentally grounded. **(b*)** may be described as a *teleological* function: IE functions as the *design* of something; in this case, as the design of the actual and all possible objects and worlds. **(c**)** and **(d**)** are *psychological*, *phenomenological*, and *epistemic* functions: IE makes possible certain conscious psychological states and also imposes mind-to-world directions of fit on those states (i. e. imparting on them representational capacity, in virtue of which those states can truly or falsely represent things as they are). And finally, **(e)** and **(f)** may be described as *modal* functions: They express that in virtue of which what is possible to perceive is possible and what is impossible to perceive is impossible.

Interpretation of Intelligible Extension (*In Toto*)

These are the various functions that Malebranche assigns to IE throughout his career. One concept in Malebranche's metaphysics plays all of these explanatory roles; supposedly one thing in reality – intelligible extension – is responsible for

each of these metaphysical phenomena. Having stated these functions, however, the task of explication is not yet complete. For it is one thing to state what IE *does*, what function(s) it serves, and it is another to state what it *is*, or in virtue of *being* what it is able to perform all of these metaphysical roles.

Malebranche claims that one solitary idea in the mind of God is able to not only make possible (in fact, *cause*) all perception (internal, external, etc.) whatsoever, but that it is also able to represent everything that is, was, will be, or even possibly is [cf. Malebranche 1678, *Ehuc.* 10]. But here is an interpretive riddle: How can one idea possess such a *magnitude* of representational capacity? How can one idea possibly represent all being whatsoever – in the sense used by Bittle (1935, 1939) that whatever is not identical to *nothing*, is a *being* in the broadest sense of the term? An answer to this question is a statement not just about the concept's various *teloi*, but an interpretation of intelligible extension *in toto*. In the attempt to answer this question, the various functions assigned to the concept serve as so much data with which to adjudicate different interpretations.

Malebranche's Remarks

Malebranche himself offers painfully little by way of clarifying this issue. He says only:

When, eyes closed, I think of extension, then the idea of extension represents it to me as immense and everywhere the same, because it affects my mind throughout with a pure perception, so light that it seems to me that it is nothing and represents nothing real. I call this extension intelligible, because this idea does not affect me through my senses. But as soon as I open my eyes, I say that it is the same idea and not some other that affects me with sensible perceptions that are colors, red, green, blue. Then this same idea becomes sensible instead of intelligible (Malebranche 1714, Third Letter; cf. Ablondi 1998, p. 197).

It is not however that there are properly intelligible figures in the intelligible spaces that we know, no more than there are material figures in material spaces, which would be entirely immovable. It is rather that, as all possible figures are in a block of marble potentially, and can be drawn from it by the movement or action of the chisel; likewise all intelligible figures are potentially in intelligible extension, and are discovered there, according as this extension is diversely represented to the mind according to the general laws that God has established, and according to which he acts in us without ceasing (Malebranche, *Oeuvres*, 6: 208-209; cf. Radner 1994, 62)

That is, Malebranche says, it is in virtue of *containing* every other concept and percept within it that IE is able to represent all being; in such cases, all discrete beings are *drawn out* from it. In the *Dialogues*, Malebranche (1688) says that, to

God, IE represents to him his immensity itself. All beings have their existence grounded in God's immensity.⁹ Unlike God, we cannot conceive of all being at once (for that would, in effect, be to conceive of God himself as complete).¹⁰ But, just as all discrete beings enjoy their existence in God's unified immensity, so too every concept and precept in some sense enjoys existence *in* the unified idea of extension within God's mind.¹¹ Intelligible extension is the mental correlate of God's absolute extension.

These remarks are suggestive. However, there are (at least) two ways to interpret Malebranche on this point. First, we can take his statue analogy seriously and suppose that the sense of "containment" used in this case is just the sense in which we ought to take "containment" in saying that all possible figures are contained within a statue. That is, we can presume *material* containment.¹² And second, we can suppose that Malebranche did not mean "containment" in this sense, but rather some other – mere *logical* containment.

The first interpretation would be more informative, but this interpretive option is blocked. First, as Malebranche himself says in response to Arnauld's second criticism, the mind of God has no material parts; rather, it has only "intelligible parts" that make possible all percepts, despite itself being "perfectly general" [cf. (Malebranche 1688), *Dialogue* 1]. This is false of the relation between a statue and its marble, for the resulting statue of a sculpture literally is a material part of the preceding marble. And second, as noted by Radner (1994), Malebranche's own interpretation does not account for functions **(e)** and **(f)** noted above. All possible bodies and worlds are contained in IE too, not just the actual ones. And while it might be said that every statue is *potentially* in a block of marble before the act of chiseling, once a statue has been selected and chiseled out, all of the other statues cease being potential. In other words, marbles are *dynamically* potential with respect to their becoming statues,

⁹ Jasper Reid (2003) refers to this view as "holenmerism" (596).

¹⁰ Even though, nominally, Malebranche may be said to ascribe to a kind of critical realism about perception, whereby what we perceive is not reality as it really is but only as it appears to us, one consequence of this account is that that distinction is merely a logical (rather than real) one too. IE is identical to God and represents his immensity (which is also identical to himself) to himself. Therefore, via IE, God does perceive himself (the ground of reality) as it really is. On Malebranche's critical realism, therefore, there is no separation between the *manifest image* and the *scientific image* in principle, but only in practice, given our finite mental capacities [cf. (Sellars 1963)].

¹¹ Cf. Malebranche's (1714) correspondence with Dortous de Mairan: "[E]verything that is in God is wholly God, if one may put it that way" (88).

¹² Malebranche (1688) uses this same analogy in his *Dialogues* (I.10): "For *just as* one can sculpt all kinds of figures from a block of marble by using a chisel, *so* God can represent all material beings to us through various applications of intelligible extension to our mind."

whereas the kind of potentially being considered here is a *static* one – in fact, it is the potentiality of some idea that is capable of becoming absolutely any other idea or set of ideas, without suffering any prolific modal loss in its transformation [cf. (Radner 1994), p. 62].

So, the first way to interpret Malebranche’s remarks here fails to account for the functions that Malebranche himself assigns to intelligible extension throughout his career; moreover, it would reduce MMMVG back to MVG once again.

Bergmann’s Axiomatic Interpretation

How ought we to comprehend Malebranchian intelligible extension?; or, in virtue of what is IE supposedly able to play the roles that Malebranche assigns to it in his system? Gustav Bergmann (1956) has offered a plausible critical interpretive answer to this question. He supposes that Malebranche ought to be thought here as only intending to express *logical* containment in saying that all other ideas are *in* IE (as discussed). In additional support of this interpretation, Bergmann cites linguistic evidence. He notes that, just as in English, the French use of “in” is semantically ambiguous between both a material and a logical sense. This second “in” corresponds to the IN we intend to express in saying that the conclusion of a valid deductive argument is contained “within” its premises – i. e. that it is *derivable* from those premises [cf. (Bergmann 1956), p. 213]. Malebranche wrote (and thought) in French; so, it is plausible, given what we have said, that this is the sense of “in” Malebranche intended.

Bergmann then develops his account with this insight in mind. He says, given Malebranche’s understanding of “pure perception,” whereby we literally *perceive* pure platonic and geometric forms, it is plausible to suppose that Malebranche may have thought that, in sensory perception, we are in some sense imperfectly *deriving* particular figures from these more general templates. Now, again, in Malebranche’s metaphysical system, it is supposed, with Locke (1689), that all possible qualities may be categorized into either primary (objectively grounded) or secondary (subjectively grounded) qualities. Malebranche holds that extension (best conceived of via Geometry) is the most representative of the primary class, and so, in a very real sense, reality is thoroughly *geometrical*. In geometry, we say that the various propositions comprising that field may themselves be categorized into the more fundamental and the less, relative to the system as a whole. The *axioms* are our primitives, and every other equation or relation within the system is ultimately derivable from this primitive set of propositions. This model provides the structure of one interpretation of Malebranchian intelligible extension: IE is the set of geometric axioms in the

mind of God, from which every other kind of perceivable being is deductively drawn out from, either soundly or unsoundly.

Bergmann calls this an “axiomatic” interpretative answer to this essay’s primary question, so called because it states that *what intelligible extension* is ought to be understood as some primitive set of *geometrical axioms* in the mind of God.

This interpretation has several virtues. First, besides explaining how IE makes possible both pure and impure apperception, it also explains how IE is the sole truth-maker in Malebranche’s metaphysics.¹³ Just as a set of axioms in geometry determines whether or not some drawn geometrical consequence is sound or not, so too IE (and proper interpretations of it) determines whether or not some judgment or perception is veridical. Second, this interpretation can make sense of why Malebranche might have thought of IE as possessing mere *intelligible* parts, but not necessarily material ones. As Daise Radner (1994) puts it, on this account,

The idea that is present to us, the idea made sensible by light, is the same idea that is also present to us when we view any other round object. This point can be expressed in terms of axiomatization as follows: We do not apprehend the theorem that is God’s idea of the sun. We only perceive one step in its derivation, namely, what such an object will look like to an observer in certain circumstances – a step that is common to the derivation of other theorems (Radner 1994, p. 66).

This account, moreover,

... makes sense of Malebranche’s denial that the intelligible world contains discrete intelligible objects, each destined to represent a different body. The theorems of an axiomatic system are interrelated. Derivations of different theorems have different steps in common. *One* theorem can be used to derive *others* (Radner 1994, p. 65). [Italics added for emphasis]

That is, this interpretation plausibly accounts for function (**a***), as well. So, this interpretation is simple, elegant, and creative, and purportedly offers an explanation of how intelligible extension is able to perform many of the important metaphysical functions that Malebranche assigns to it in his system.

Radner’s First Critique

However, despite these *prima facie* virtues, Radner (1994) has contended that this interpretation is flawed. It suffers, she says, from three major setbacks. I’ll

¹³ That is, the axiomatic interpretation accounts well for functions (**c****) and (**d****), and it hangs well within VG.

begin by detailing her first objection and offering a response to it before considering her final two. I proceed in this order because while Radner's second and third critique, I think, are decisive, her first critique is not; moreover, offering a proper response to this first critique lights the way towards a more defensible interpretation of Malebranchian intelligible extension.

Radner's first critique runs as follows: If IE is axiomatic in nature, then it follows that during all perceptual acts, we are, in fact, perceiving a kind of linguistic or propositional phenomenon. We are not acquainted with *objects*; we are only ever acquainted with, as she says, *theorems*. "According to Malebranche, the immediate objects of sense experience are particular ideas. If particular ideas are theorems, then when we look out over a meadow, what we see directly are statements;" but this is a consequence, she says, "Malebranche would never accept" (p. 66). So, the axiomatic interpretation cannot be correct.

Defense of the Axiomatic Interpretation

This critique might be taken as decisive, but it is not really so. It is not the case that Malebranche would not accept the consequence that all of perception is ultimately linguistic or propositional in nature. In fact, there is good textual evidence to support the claim that he did, in fact, endorse this thesis. Moreover, in contrast to his *Vision in God* thesis, this appears to have been one of his consistent and stable commitments throughout his early work (*The Search*) and his later work (the *Dialogues*).

In the *Search*, Malebranche (1674) speaks of the nature of sensory perception explicitly. He first raises this discussion in connection with what he calls "natural judgments." Malebranche distinguishes between simple and pure sensory perception, on the one hand, and "compound sensation," on the other. He writes of the latter:

When we look at a cube, for example, it is certain that the sides of it that we see almost never project an image of equal size on the fundus of the eye. This is so because the image of each of its sides that appear on the retina, or optic nerve, is very like a cube painted in perspective; and consequently the sensation we have of it ought to represent the faces of the cube to us as being unequal, since they are unequal in a cube in perspective. Nonetheless, we see them *as equal*, and we are not deceived. (Malebranche 1674, *Search* I.vii.)

He adds, further:

Now it might be said that this happens by a kind of judgment we naturally make, to wit, that the faces of the cube that are farthest away and that we viewed obliquely should not form images on the fundus of the eye as big as those formed by the faces that are closer.

But as it is *given to the senses* only to sense and never, properly speaking, to judge, it is clear that this natural judgment is *but* a compound sensation that consequently can sometimes be mistaken ... Nevertheless, since what in us is but a sensation can be considered in relation to the Author of Nature who excites it in us as a kind of judgment, *I speak of sensations as natural judgments* ... (Malebranche 1674, *Search* I.vii.)

Here, Malebranche tells us that, in fact, what is given to us in sensation has the structure of a judgment. We never merely see *the cube*; rather, sensations occur in us in such a way that we see objects *as* a certain way; we see *that* such-and-such is a cube. That Malebranche calls sensory perception “natural judgments” speaks in favor of the axiomatic interpretation, a consequence of which is that the intentional objects of sensation are ultimately linguistic or propositional in nature.¹⁴

Moreover, in the *Dialogues*, Malebranche (1688) makes a surprising metaphysico-theological claim. In the first dialogue, Malebranche’s spokesman *Theodore* claims that IE is identical to the *Word of God* (i. e. the Divine Λογος, one of the *hypostases* of the Trinity). Like the Word of God, he says, IE is only logically distinct from God, not really distinct. And moreover, like God’s Word, IE, we can presume, is at least (partly) essentially linguistic and propositional in form. It was the Word spoken by God “in the beginning,” from which every concrete particular object whatsoever ultimately traces its existence [cf. (Malebranche 1688), *Dialog*. 1; Genesis 1; John 1:1–5; Reid 2003, 596].

So, while we might agree with Radner that this is an unusual view to hold, we must disagree with her that “Malebranche would never accept” such a consequence; in fact, we have good reason to think that he did accept such a consequence.¹⁵ This is no weakness for the axiomatic interpretation; this is additional evidence in the interpretation’s favor.

¹⁴ Malebranche’s remarks on the relation between natural judgments and free judgments should be considered in this connection. Malebranche (1674) writes that natural judgments only ever incline us to form a free judgment that the perceived state of affairs is such-and-such. This, he supposes, is the differentiae between NATURAL JUDGMENT, on the what hand, and FREE JUDGMENT, on the other. Both are ultimately propositional in nature; the difference is just that compound sensations function as a bias on our faculties of free judgment [cf. *Search* I.i.].

¹⁵ On this point, Malebranche (1674) says: “It can be predicted at the outset that few people will not be taken aback by the following proposition, viz., that we have no sensation of external objects that does not involve one or more false judgments. It is well known that most people do not even think there is any judgment, true or false, in our sensations. Consequently, these people, surprised by the novelty of this proposition, will undoubtedly say to themselves: but how can that be? I do not judge that this wall is white, I see that it is; I do not judge that there is pain in my hand, I assuredly feel it there; and who can doubt what is so certain unless he senses things in a way different from mine?” Nonetheless, Malebranche contends, “we have no sensation of external objects that does not include some false *judgment*” (I.xiv.). [Italics added for emphasis]

Radner's Second Critique

However, Radner (1994) also offers two additional objections. Second, she says, this account is flawed because the axioms of geometry alone cannot derive every other concept with which we are familiar and can form veridical judgments. The concept SPACE, for example, is not (analytically) contained in the concept EXTENSION. "Geometry is not about space;" it represents mere extension (p. 67). And so the axioms of geometry alone are unable to account for space and spatial awareness. Moreover, if the ideational content in the mind of God is God's sole means for representing reality, then it would follow that God knows nothing of space. But, by definition, God is perfectly intelligent; so IE cannot be just some primitive set of geometric axioms.¹⁶

And finally, she says that the axiomatic interpretation of Malebranchian intelligible extension is weak because it cannot explain function (**f**), in virtue of *being what* IE is able to represent all possible worlds. The axioms of geometry alone are one-dimensional (merely extensional) in their representational capacity. The axioms are able to represent every possible configured *object*, but not every possible *world* of configured objects.¹⁷ And so, again, geometric axioms alone seem insufficient to serve one of the roles Malebranche has assigned to IE; intelligible extension is not just a set of axioms [cf. (Radner 1994), p. 67].

The Programmatic Interpretation

Now, I take it that each of these critiques, in contrast with the first, is decisive. EXTENSION does not imply SPACE; and EXTENSION on its own does not imply INTENSION. The axiomatic interpretation is insufficient.

However, if this account is flawed, what other plausible competing accounts are there? And is there one that can preserve what is correct about the axiomatic interpretation while disregarding its critical baggage? I think there is, and I'll suggest one now: We ought not understand intelligible extension as a set of axioms, but rather as a *program* (along the lines of something like a computer program). The single idea in God's mind is the idea of a program – a program of *reality*.

¹⁶ Radner (1994) does not state this further point. I add it here on behalf of Arnauld, were he to likewise consider that SPACE cannot be analyzed out of EXTENSION. These are objections to the axiomatic interpretation's claim to functional adequacy with respect to (**d****) and (**b***), respectively.

¹⁷ In this respect, this interpretation shares a flaw with the material containment interpretation, considered previously.

This interpretation has many virtues, enough, I think, to consider serious consideration. Besides being simple, elegant, and creative, I contend that this interpretation has great external consistency, for it is able to make comprehensible how IE is able to serve *all* of roles **(a*)**, **(b*)**, **(c**)**, **(d**)**, **(e)**, and **(f)** above. Moreover, it coheres well with Malebranche's Vision in God and preserves certain core insights common also to the axiomatic interpretation of Malebranchian intelligible extension.

(a*) The programmatic interpretation explains that IE is a single idea in the mind of God just as the idea of a program is *singular*. Consider, for example, the program *Tinder*. Phenomenologically, conceiving of *Tinder* is apprehension of a single comprehensive idea. Moreover, this concept forms a natural unity. It is not merely a gerrymandered, disjunctive category, like the concept of something that is either RED-BLOODED OR LIVES UNDERGROUND. Programs are unified phenomena. Moreover, while they have logical parts, they do not possess real parts. If a "part" of a program were removed, then the program (itself) would be destroyed. Programs are defined by their functions, and it is in virtue of the lines of the program's code (it's logical parts) that it is able to fulfill its function.¹⁸ And so, it is reasonable to suppose that the concept of a program, like that of intelligible extension, is a singular idea.

(b*) The programmatic interpretation explains that IE is *teleological* in the sense that all programs are teleological, as just discussed. Programs may be understood as both strings of propositions and strings of commands.¹⁹ Commands are goal-directed. In the case of, e. g. *Windows XP*, this program both guides and puts rational restrictions on what the computer's machinery is able to do. Moreover, the program, *Windows XP*, can also be understood as the archetype or template for all token instances of the program, created in its image.²⁰

(c & d**)** How does this account explain the phenomenological functions of IE? I think here the account would suggest that perception of intelligible

18 Incidentally, if a "part" of a program were removed and, thereafter, we were to discover that it still retains its *telos*, we would not conclude that programs have real parts and that that "part" was merely an accidental one; rather, we would conclude that this "part" was not really included within the program at all. Cf. Wittgenstein (1953, § 271): "Here I should like to say: a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism."

19 Note that God's first words in Genesis is: "Let there be light." Besides having the structure of a proposition, the *Λογος*, it appears, *likewise* has the structure of a command.

20 Radner (1994) complained earlier that Malebranche would not approve of the idea that when we look out at a pleasant meadow, what we perceive is literally a theorem or some partial derivation of one. I agree: It seems much more likely that Malebranche thought something like, when we see a pleasant *natural* vista, we see a pleasant *Windows Vista*.

extension is like perception of a virtual reality (VR) program. Now, in viewing the information of VR, there are two ways the perceivable phenomena may be understood. First, one can consider it as would its program-engineer, in terms of the coded-templates added into the program's central code (cf. pure perception). And second, one can consider it as it, in fact, operates – in terms of the images that its code manifests to the senses (cf. impure perception). In this way, this interpretation would explain *that in virtue of which* IE is able to play its psychological, phenomenological, and epistemic functions on the analogy with VR.

(e) This account can also explain how intelligible extension is able to represent all discrete phenomena while yet retaining its static potentiality. Consider video game programs. *Super Mario Bros.*, in virtue of being a video game program, is capable of representing many distinct types of object in gameplay. It can represent Mario, piranha plants, spinning flame-swords, etc. – many kinds of things. It is capable of doing this, even when it is actually displaying none of the above. They are templates of the gameplay; they reside within the program's code. I suggest that we understood IE here on the analog of a video game program, for both are able to fulfill function (e) within their respective domains.

(f) And, what's more, this interpretation can make sense of how IE can represent entire possible worlds (i. e. how it represents modal intension), as well. Consider again *Mario*. Each world may be understood as one possible token gameplay. The single program, *Super Mario Bros.*, admits of many possible ways that the game might be played. In fact, it merely sets down certain laws for how the game must be played, without fully determining how it is actually played (in perfect detail). When we play through the program, we initiate one gameplay; it is manifested in virtue of our making certain choices. Despite how the game *might have been* played, it *actually* comes to be played in one distinct way.²¹

(Misc.) This account can also make sense of certain other functions Malebranche came to ascribe to IE: for example, that it is causally efficacious (it causes all of our percepts, both internal and external), and it represents to God his own immensity itself, embedded within the domain of which everything exists. Programs, when run on some hardware, likewise become causally efficacious. And with respect to representing God's immensity, I propose that we understand the relation between God's intellect (IE) and God's immensity on a similar relational-model within Malebranche's system; God's immensity is to

²¹ This coheres well with a Malebranchian Divine Choice theory of actuality, as discussed previously.

hardware as God's idea of extension is to its software.²² If this analogy is right, then we can also make sense of how IE is able to both represent to us all veridical percepts, but also represent to God himself. The intentionality of, say, *Super Mario Bros.*, is likewise dualistic. On the one hand, the program may be said to represent goombas (token instances of goombas in gameplay and also goombas, in general, as a type of thing) – things as they appear to us from within the program. Alternatively, computer programs may be thought to also represent their hardware and the possible states that they command their hardware to initiate. On this analogy, we finite creatures are granted the first phenomenological representation; God, on the other hand, gets the second – that, in fact, which grounds the first.

(Crit.) Finally, it might also be well-noted that this account escapes the first of Radner's critiques with respect to the axiomatic interpretation. Radner (1994) noted that SPACE does not fall out of EXTENSION, and geometry, in virtue of taking EXTENSION as its sole material object of inquiry, therefore, cannot account for space and spatial awareness. But, importantly, there is at least one sense in which *programs* imply space. Consider two people, α and β , each operating an iPhone. Now, in α 's phone, the Grubhub app is *to the left of* her Safari app. And, in β 's phone, Grubhub is *to the right*. These are *spatial* distinctions. And so, we can suppose that intelligible extension, conceived of as a program, therefore, can also imply a space or spaces of sorts.²³

Therefore, as I have contended, the programmatic interpretation of Malebranche intelligible extension is not only simple, elegant, and creative, but it also enjoys excellent external consistent with respect to the various functions Malebranche ascribes to it. As a final point, we can note that programs, like axioms, are (at least partly) essentially linguistic, propositional sorts

²² Incidentally, there is a sense in which programs are the ultimate causes *in esse* of any token gameplay, and a sense in which they are the ultimate causes *in fieri* of it too [cf. Edwards 1959]. Now, in Malebranchian theology, as indicated, God is not really distinct from any of his logical parts, including his action, his intelligence, his will, and his immensity (spoken of equivocally). So, in this case, the world would work like this: God's volition chooses from His intelligence one possible world and then God *runs* that world in His immensity. Notice that on such an account, Malebranche's Occasionalism and Vision in God, despite sometimes being discussed as distinct theses, really amount to the same thing: Both extensional causation and intensional causation are ultimately grounded in God.

²³ One might wish to object to my point here by contending that programs do not literally contain within them spaces; they only *appear* to exemplify spatial relations when run on some hardware (such as a computer screen). I think Malebranche would likely agree. After all, as he says above, "It is not however that there are properly intelligible figures in the intelligible spaces that we know, no more than there are material figures in material spaces, which would be entirely immovable."

of things. And so, this account also helps to make sense of Malebranche's theory of natural judgments as well. I take it that these are all virtues in favor of the account. This interpretation is thoroughly coherent with Vision in God, as well as the rest of the theses comprising Malebranche's metaphysical system.

Objections & Replies

I believe this interpretation is plausible; nonetheless, one might wish to object to the proposal by offering a rather obvious critique. I have set out in this essay with an exegetical purpose: To make sense of what intelligible extension means within the confines of Nicholas Malebranche's metaphysical system. Now, as a parameter to successfully completing that task, the interpretation being proposed should (I) charitably explicate the concept, to show how there is a plausible interpretation of it within Malebranche's Vision in God thesis; and (II) the interpretation offered must be *timely*, in the sense that it grants Malebranche only what he can be reasonably granted. It would not make sense to offer Malebranche, first example, all of the knowledge of the axioms of contemporary S5 modal logic, since this was not a resource available to him. Such a projection would suffer mightily from inaccuracy.

Now, the interpretation I have offered would obviously need further development; but, I think, so stated, my proposal satisfies (I) fairly well, as just explained. However, I might be charged with flouting criterion (II). Malebranche lived and wrote in the seventeenth century; he had no experience with programs of any kind. So, it is not plausible to suppose that he intended intelligible extension to be understood within a programmatic model. PROGRAM was not among Malebranche's conceptual resources. Therefore, this account ought not be accepted as a reasonable doxographical hypothesis, as I have claimed.

To this objection, I can only rationally concede that it has merit and warrants pause. I cannot say with any moral certitude that Malebranche possessed the concept PROGRAM. If he did, he certainly did not use the term in his texts, and, without textual evidence, I have no great evidence for thinking that he, in fact, did.²⁴ Nonetheless, I offer this by way of apology. (1) Given that Malebranche changed his mind on IE several times throughout his career, it is possible that, during his lifetime, he may never have developed the concept in

²⁴ Although, note, *per contra*, neither does my opponent have great reason in thinking decisively that he did not possess the concept. The proper attitude here very well may be to suspend judgment on the subject.

its entirety, to his satisfaction. This interpretation is consistent with the historical account that he was, at least, working his way towards an adequate comprehension of the concept, which may have been that of PROGRAM. (2) Given that Malebranche was a brilliant thinker, showing great intellectual flexibility and desire for logical consistency (as evinced in the Malebranche-Arnauld debate, detailed above), it is nonetheless still possible that he at least came to possess something like a *proto-concept* of PROGRAM.

And finally, (3) Given how well the programmatic interpretation scores on hermeneutical criterion (I), even if it is conceded that the interpretation is not perfect (due to its weaknesses with respect to (II)), it can still be maintained that this is a plausible *charitable* interpretation of Malebranchian intelligible extension. Criteria (I) and (II) sometimes conflict, and there are times when the interpreter must choose between the two – offer the writer a consistent but possibly anachronistic concept, or suppose that the writer, unfortunately, has contradicted herself. In such a situation, as an interpreter, I favor criterion (I), though this may not currently be in fashion. Malebranche may have *actually* (chronistically) put forward an internally inconsistent thesis, but *charitably* he has not. It is in virtue of IE's being an idea of a program that it is able to perform all of the functions that Malebranche assigns it throughout the course of his work.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay I set out to explicate the concept of *intelligible extension* within the metaphysics of Nicholas Malebranche (1674, 1678, 1688, 1714). INTELLIGIBLE EXTENSION plays a central role in Malebranche's formulation of his Vision in God thesis, whereby it is thought that all apperception (internal, external, and modal) is ultimately perception of, by, through, and in God. Moreover, as we have seen, the concept came to play numerous roles in Malebranche's metaphysical system throughout his several works. Besides its often-discussed phenomenological functions, IE was ultimately thought also to be a singular idea that represent God's own immensity to himself, represents all possible objects and all possible worlds (actual and otherwise), and both causes and grounds all veridical representational states in us whatsoever.

After describing this, I then examined one promising answer to the question: How is intelligible extension able to do this; or, in virtue of what is IE able to play all of these metaphysically robust roles? According to the axiomatic interpretation of intelligible extension, IE ought to be understood as a set of

geometric axioms in the mind of God; it is in virtue of being axiomatic in nature that all extensional representations may be derived. This proposal has been, I think, decisively criticized by Daise Radner (1994), who argues that this account cannot be right, for geometrical axioms on their own are insufficient for representing both spatial and certain modal phenomena, of which we are sometimes veridically acquainted, and of which we suppose that God is aware.

However, I then argued that this account is at least still defensible in spirit, if not in letter. By modifying the account, I have introduced a novel (outline of an) interpretation: what I have referred to as the “programmatically interpretation” of Malebranchian intelligible extension, wherein it is supposed, instead, that the idea in God’s mind ought to be understood as the idea of a program; in virtue of being programmatic, it is able to play all of the roles Malebranche assigns to it in his metaphysical system.

It might be objected that this account is anachronistic; surely Malebranche had no such concept in his conceptual arsenal, and so it is not plausible to suppose that he really intended to put forward a view that God possesses the idea of a single concept – the PROGRAM OF REALITY. I concede this point. Nonetheless, I recommend taking this new interpretation seriously, for it has many interpretive virtues in its favor. Moreover, it is a charitable interpretation of IE, and supposes that Malebranche’s understanding of the concept remained consistent throughout the course of his career, despite some superficial evidence suggesting otherwise.

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