

Cartesian and Malebranchian Meditations

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Abstract: In his *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* (1683) Malebranche develops a reflection in which the self discovers in its interiority that the interlocutor able to answer some of its questions is the divine Word. Through references to the Holy Scriptures and to Augustine, Malebranche constructs a meditative itinerary that differs from the one proposed by Descartes, as it moves from the *lumière naturelle* in the Cartesian sense to the *lumière* of the Word. In the light of these historical-theoretical data, we propose a reconstruction of the role played by interiority and meditation in certain texts by Malebranche, highlighting the moments in which he appropriated the Cartesian heritage and those in which he distanced himself from Descartes' philosophical paradigm.

Keywords: Nicolas Malebranche, René Descartes, meditation, Holy Scriptures, Augustine.

1. Introduction

The *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* were first published in 1683, printed in Holland but under the cover of a fictitious publisher in Cologne, Balthasar d'Égmond & Company. This first edition bears the title *Méditations chrétiennes* and—like the third edition of the *Christian Conversations* (1685)—the statement “by the author of *The Search after Truth* [par l'auteur de la *Recherche de la vérité*]” (Malebranche 1683, front-page). This statement is replaced by the name of Malebranche, Priest of the Oratory, from the 1699 edition onwards. This same edition, “revised, corrected and augmented,” is given the definitive title *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* (Malebranche 1699, front-page). It comprises two volumes: the first includes Meditations I to XVI; the second includes Meditations XVII to XX and the *A Treatise of the Love of God* followed by the *Three Letters to Father Lamy*. The last edition of this work to appear during Malebranche's lifetime was published in Lyon, by Léonard Plaignard, in 1707 (Malebranche 1707). This is the edition that the Oratorian recommends in the “Avertissement” of *The Search after Truth*, edition of 1712 (Malebranche 1962: OC I, 28–9; Malebranche 1997, xlvi).

Father André provides us with some interesting information on the circumstances of the composition of the *Christian Meditations*. As the *Christian Conversations* had aroused the interest of several enlightened minds, Malebranche decided to set out “the same truths [...] in the form of Meditations, to make them

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even more edifying” (André 1886, 31–2, my translation). André states that the first four Meditations were completed towards the end of 1676 and that, having interrupted the writing of this work because he feared that some readers might be bothered by the discursive strategy adopted (“this way of being instructed by the divine Word,” André 1886, 32), Malebranche resumed writing it in 1682. According to André, there were five reasons why the Oratorian began to write again: he had already written four Meditations; his friends urged him to complete this work; after the controversies with some of his friends, he would often converse with God; he found this way of writing edifying and capable of edifying others as well; he thought it was essential to find a form of expression more appropriate to his thought (André 1886, 99). The history of this book is therefore no less complex than that of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The Cartesian *Meditations*—published in 1641—represent the final version of a project that developed over time, through several successive versions (the little treatise of 1629 that Descartes mentions to Father Gibieuf in a letter dated July 1629; the criticisms addressed to the *Discourse on the Method*, published in 1637; the writing of the *Meditations* from the beginning of 1639 until the middle of the same year). Malebranche’s *Meditations* of 1683—which, as I have already said, would be published in other editions with some additions and modifications—are already the culmination of an important project that goes back to the time of the publication of *The Search after Truth* (1674–1675), the first work of the Oratorian.

2. The Discursive Device: Interiority and Meditation

Already in the first book of *The Search after Truth* (1674) Malebranche speaks of “the secret reproaches of reason [reproches secrets de la raison]” (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 55; Malebranche 1997, 10) and explains that these reproaches, like the remorse of conscience, are but “the powerful voice of the Author of Nature [la voix puissante de l’Auteur de la Nature]” urging us to yield to the evidence and to love the good (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 57; Malebranche 1997, 11). It is also interesting to remark that in this rather Cartesian context, where he sets out the general rules for avoiding error, Malebranche already evokes the role of meditation as a way by which we can interrogate “The Master who teaches us inwardly.”¹ Moreover, in the first edition of *The Search after Truth*, in a note in the

¹ “The Master who teaches us inwardly wills that we listen to Him rather than to the authority of the greatest philosophers. It pleases Him to instruct us, provided that we apply ourselves to what He tells us. By meditation and very close attention we consult Him; and by a certain inward conviction and those inward reproaches He makes to those who do not submit, He answers us [Le Maître qui nous enseigne intérieurement veut que nous l’écoutions, plutôt que l’autorité des plus grands Philosophes; il se plaît à nous instruire, pourvu que nous soyons appliqués, à ce qu’il nous dit. C’est par la méditation, et par une attention fort exacte, que nous l’interrogeons; et c’est par une certaine conviction intérieure, et par ces reproches secrets qu’il fait à ceux qui ne s’y rendent pas, qu’il nous répond.]” Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 60; Malebranche 1997, 13. Here and henceforth, the spelling has been modernized.

margin of this paragraph which, however, disappears in successive editions, he quotes the famous Augustinian precept set out in *On True Religion*: “Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward person dwells truth [*Noli foras ire; in teipsum redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas*]” (Malebranche 1674, 21 (book 1, chapter 2, paragraph 1); Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 60). All in all, the principle of interiority and the path of meditation, presented in an Augustinian tone, seem to have already imposed themselves in *The Search after Truth*. Perhaps, in certain places in his first work, Malebranche aims to emphasise the Cartesian filiation of his purpose and approach²—which could explain the disappearance of the above-mentioned quotation from the second edition of *The Search after Truth*—but the Augustinian call to meditation and inner truth infuses an intensity into certain passages of this book, notably the famous Preface:

Let us enter into ourselves and draw near the light that constantly shines there in order that our reason might be more illumined [Que l’on rentre dans soi-même, et que l’on s’approche de la lumière qui y luit incessamment, afin que notre raison soit plus éclairée] (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 25; Malebranche 1997, xlii–xliii).

It is nevertheless true that the principle of inner truth and the path of meditation permeate the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* in a particular way: one could say that the call to interiority guides the movement of meditation.³ “Enter into yourself, and listen only to me,” says the Word to the “I” who speaks (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 37; here and henceforth my translation): such is the leitmotiv of this work.⁴ To enter into oneself is to listen to the voice of Wisdom: a permanent dialogue is thus established between the universal Reason and the individual mind.⁵

² Consider, for example, the passage where, polemicising against the Aristotelians, Malebranche argues for the need to remember that “[...] we have eyes with which to try to guide ourselves [que l’on a des yeux avec lesquels on veut essayer de se conduire],” Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 61; Malebranche 1997, 14. The philosophical attitude underlying this passage is in line with the Cartesian approach. See Descartes’ *Principes de la philosophie* (1647), *Lettre-Préface*: “[...] it is undoubtedly much better to use one’s own eyes to get about, and also to enjoy the beauty of colours and light, than to close one’s eyes and be led around by someone else [il vaut beaucoup mieux se servir de ses propres yeux pour se conduire, et jouir par même moyen de la beauté des couleurs et de la lumière, que non pas de les avoir fermés et suivre la conduite d’un autre],” AT 11-b, 3; CSM 1, 180. Descartes opposes the alleged philosophers who blindly followed Aristotle (AT 11-b, 7–8). The rest of this paragraph in the first book of *The Search after Truth*, where Malebranche emphasises the rule of evidence and the need to free oneself from one’s own prejudices in order to gain access to the truth, can also be interpreted in this light (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 61 (book 1, chapter 3, paragraph 1); Malebranche 1997, 14).

³ “El autor de las *Meditaciones cristianas*, sin citar expresamente a San Agustín, va mucho en su compañía. El principio de la interioridad—*Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi*—dirige todo el movimiento del diálogo [...]. La introspección y la atención a la Verdad interior, constituyen en los dos filósofos el principio fundamental de la espiritualidad,” Capanaga 1966, 314–15.

⁴ See Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 60, 91, 110–11, 141, 149, 170, 190, 206, 217, and 218.

⁵ See Robinet 1965, 436. This dialogue—in which the mind’s journey towards truth and its listening to the word of God is expressed—involves a movement that comes from God himself.

These few remarks already show that the respective intentions of Malebranche's *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* and Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* cannot entirely overlap, even if the idea of meditation as an adequate path to metaphysical truth and as a solitary practice that requires time and reflection⁶ is common to both authors. Indeed, as is well known, the author of the *Discourse on the Method* did not want to mix religion with philosophy.⁷

In fact, in *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, it is the Word—the incarnate Light which coincides with the universal Reason—, who speaks: this also amounts to giving voice to the inner Master who gives faith. The *Meditations* translate the taking over of the Word by the Christian philosopher in his own particular way. From then on, metaphysical writing is, to a greater or lesser extent, an awkward understanding and reformulation of a series of truths taught by the Master. A risk of infidelity or betrayal nevertheless remains in this enterprise of transcription, because of the human limitations of the listener (in the Letter of Dedication of his *Mediations*, Descartes himself recognised that he could not assure that his arguments were free of mistakes: AT 7, 5). Malebranche willingly confesses this in his “Avertissement,” warning of the inevitable criticisms that his project raises (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 6; see Belin 2002, 273).

Malebranche's practice of mediation is, of course, part of a growing interest in meditative practice. Long reserved for professionals, philosophers or monks, meditation had by now spread to all cultured circles with the help of the printed book. This phenomenon was accompanied by a greater individualisation of the religious behaviour of the faithful. In a confessionally divided Christian world, Christians learned to assert their identity more as co-responsible subjects of their supernatural destiny. At the same time, they discovered that they were not only members of a formerly undivided Church but individuals immersed in an increasingly secularised world. The craze for meditative exercise corresponded to a decline in the sense of belonging to a church community, as well as to the discovery of a new singular identity. The Christian asserted a fascinating and disturbing self that makes him or her a fully-fledged subject of a universal *historia salutis*. This passage from the collective to the individual, within a fragmented Christianity, went hand in hand with a process of internalisation of the faith, which can be traced, in the long term, from the *Imitation of Christ* to Madame Guyon's *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer* (1685). The practice of meditation took route in a tension between the desire to keep the Christian faith intact and the consciousness of a world in the process of de-Christianisation, in its representations of knowledge and power (Belin 2006, 8). On this point, Christian Belin wrote that

the Galilean epistemological rupture and the secularisation of societies are accompanied by a spiritual effervescence that reflects its reality [the reality of this secularisation], but also its scandal, opportunity or threat. The art of

⁶ See Descartes' first and third Meditations, and second Replies: AT 7, 17, 34–5, and 130; AT 9-a, 13, 27, and 103.

⁷ See Descartes to Marin Mersenne, 27 August 1639, AT 2, 570–71.

meditation combines fear with enthusiasm, the obverse and reverse, because it takes charge of all the emotion contained in the mind in dialogue with the heart (Belin 2006, 8–9, my translation).

Returning to the subject of the relationships between Cartesian and Malebranchian projects, we can recall that, making fun of Malebranchianism, Pierre Jurieu affirmed in 1684 that the Word accommodated Cartesianism:

Nothing is more singular, in my opinion, than his last Work called *Christian Meditations*. The poor Peripatetics and the disciples of Aristotle have to be very confused, to see that the Eternal Word has become a Cartesian in his old age, and that their God has declared himself against them so formally. From now on, it will be necessary to be very bold to fight the new Philosophy, since Jesus Christ has put himself at the head of the new Philosophers.⁸

Jurieu warns against the dangers of Malebranche's enterprise, against the brilliance of its singularity and its novelty:

one had never yet ventured to set up the Lord Jesus Christ as a Master of Philosophy, and to have him spout physical and metaphysical visions. [...] These mysterious ways of expressing his thoughts are pleasing because of their novelty and singularity [on ne s'était encore jamais avisé d'ériger le Seigneur Jésus Christ en Maître de Philosophie, et de lui faire débiter des visions Physiques et Métaphysiques. [...] Ces manières mystérieuses de débiter ses pensées plaisent par leur nouveauté et par leur singularité] (Jurieu 1684, 79).

Malebranche, after all, had little respect for Eternal Wisdom: he merely lent his own elucidations to the Word, thus coming closer to the mystical authors.⁹ Thus, if Jurieu, at first, seems to interpret the *Christian Meditations* as an attempt to unify religion and the new philosophy by giving the Word itself the language of Cartesianism, he then calls Malebranche a mystic and argues that his *Meditations* are surrounded by a halo of mystery that has nothing positive:

In my opinion, M. Arnaud's mind has never been more successful than in the refutation of these representative beings, which are pure visions, and which are nevertheless the sole foundation of all those speculations, so thorough and so penetrating, of Father Malebranche. For it is solely on this that those mystical views, by which we see everything in God, are founded; those desires to know

⁸ "Rien n'est plus singulier, à mon avis, que son dernier Ouvrage appelé *Méditations Chrétiennes*. Les pauvres Péripatéticiens et les disciples d'Aristote doivent être bien confus, de voir que le Verbe Éternel est devenu Cartésien sur ses vieux jours, et que leur Dieu s'est déclaré contre eux si formellement. Il faudra désormais être bien hardi pour combattre la nouvelle Philosophie, puisque Jésus-Christ s'est mis à la tête des nouveaux Philosophes," Jurieu 1684, 78–9. Here and henceforth my translation.

⁹ "Mais enfin bien des gens craignent que cela ne conduise au style de Rusbroquius, de Taulerus, de la Mère Julienne, et des autres Auteurs mystiques, dont on juge comme chacun sait," Jurieu 1684, 79.

and that attention, which are the natural prayers to oblige eternal truth to reveal itself to us, and a hundred other mysteries which are found in the *Treatise on Christian Meditations*.¹⁰

In 1686, in his reply to the first book of Arnauld's *Philosophical and Theological Reflections* (1685), Malebranche himself stated that the *Christian Meditations* were intended "to confirm the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*" by explaining "at some length, and perhaps clearly, the principles on which that *Treatise* is based." He emphasises the particular nature and style of his 1683 work:

if I have resolved to continue, it is because I was urged to do so; it is because I have felt that this way of writing edified me, and that I believed it would be suitable for edifying others [si j'ai pris la résolution de continuer, c'est qu'on m'y a exhorté; c'est que j'ai éprouvé que cette manière d'écrire m'édifiait, et que j'ai cru qu'elle se-rait propre à édifier les autres] (Malebranche 1966b: OC 8–9, 636–37).

The writing of this book contributed to Father Malebranche's spiritual progress and he believes he can have the same impact on his readers.

A year earlier, in 1685, in the first of the *Three Letters Concerning M. Arnauld's Defence Against the Answer to the Book of True and False Ideas*, explaining to his adversary that he could not help but give voice to universal Reason in his *Meditations*, Malebranche also claimed a meditative dimension for his work:

I am allowed, as other men are permitted, to meditate and to write down my meditations. Now as I am, as well as St. Augustine, in this thought, that we are not our own master, and that it is Eternal Wisdom who speaks to Meditators in the most secret part of their reason; it was a necessity according to these principles, that I should attribute to this same Wisdom what ungrateful men pretend to draw from their own depths, because of the fidelity with which God responds to them as a consequence of the general laws of the union of the mind with universal Reason.¹¹

The Oratorian then makes a very interesting retrospective remark which offers us a key to reading the itinerary developed throughout the pages of his *Meditations*:

¹⁰ "À mon sens, jamais l'esprit de M. Arnaud n'a mieux réussi que dans la réfutation de ces êtres représentatifs, qui ne sont que de pures visions, et qui pourtant sont l'unique fondement de toutes ces spéculations si poussées et si pénétrées du P. Malebranche. Car c'est uniquement là-dessus que sont fondées ces vues mystiques, par lesquelles nous voyons tout en Dieu; ces désirs de connaître et cette attention, qui sont les prières naturelles pour obliger la vérité éternelle à se découvrir à nous, et cent autres mystères qui se trouvent dans le *Traité des Méditations Chrétiennes*," Jurieu 1684, 79–80.

¹¹ "Il m'est permis, comme aux autres hommes, de méditer et d'écrire mes méditations. Or comme je suis, aussi bien que saint Augustin, dans cette pensée, que nous ne sommes point notre maître à nous-mêmes, et que c'est la Sagesse Éternelle qui parle aux *Méditatifs* dans le plus secret de leur raison; c'était une nécessité selon ces principes, que j'attribuasse à cette même Sagesse ce que les hommes ingrats prétendent tirer de leur propre fond, à cause de la fidélité avec laquelle Dieu leur répond en conséquence des lois générales de l'union de l'esprit avec la Raison universelle," Malebranche 1966a: OC 6–7, 266.

If you have been paying attention, Sir, I am talking to myself about myself, in the first of the *Christian Meditations*. I did not yet know that I had a Master. But having discovered it in the second, I would certainly have wounded Reason, and shocked common sense, if I had continued in the same way, without making Him who enlightens all men speak.¹²

Two essential elements emerge from these extracts. First, the discursive device of the *Christian Meditations* is based on the principle that man is not master of himself, nor does he enlighten himself. There is nothing extraordinary or dazzling about having made the Word speak: it would be quite the opposite, and one should be shocked if someone presented these truths taught by Jesus Christ as his own knowledge.¹³ As is well known, Malebranche demonstrated in his *Elucidations on the Search after Truth* (1678) that there is a universal Reason that enlightens all minds. In the tenth Elucidation he proves that no man grasps mathematical and moral truths in the minds of others; but since all men can see these truths, it is necessary that there be a universal Reason in which all intelligences participate, and which provides them with those truths on which they agree and which constitute the common basis of all spiritual and moral community (Malebranche 1964: OC 3, 129; Malebranche 1997, 613). The Oratorian can thus assert that

[...] the mind of man that several Fathers call an illuminated or enlightened light, ‘*lumen illuminatum*,’ is enlightened only by the light of eternal wisdom, which these same Fathers therefore call illuminating light, ‘*lumen illuminans*’.¹⁴

Not only do the *Christian Meditations* take up and develop this doctrine, but their very argumentative structure is based entirely on it:

[...] how can it be that all men agree and agree with each other, if the reason they consult is a particular reason? Can you conceive that the genius which you think enlightens you, is capable of spreading the same light generally in all minds, and that a particular intelligence can be the universal Reason, which makes all the nations of the world reasonable?¹⁵

¹² “Si vous y avez pris garde, Monsieur, je me parle à moi-même de moi-même, dans la première des *Méditations Chrétiennes*. Je ne savais pas encore que j’avais un Maître. Mais l’ayant découvert dans la seconde, assurément j’eusse blessé la Raison, et choqué le bon sens, si j’eusse continué de la même manière, sans faire parler celui qui éclaire tous les hommes,” Malebranche 1966a: OC 6–7, 266.

¹³ “Étant persuadé qu’il n’y a que Jésus-Christ qui enseigne toute vérité, j’eusse choqué le bon sens, de la communiquer aux autres comme mon propre bien, dans ces *Méditations* si dignes d’être raillées,” Malebranche 1966a: OC 6–7, 267.

¹⁴ “[...] l’esprit de l’homme que plusieurs Pères appellent lumière illuminée ou éclairée, *lumen illuminatum*, n’est éclairée que de la lumière de la Sagesse éternelle, que les mêmes Pères appellent pour cela lumière qui éclaire, *lumen illuminans*,” Malebranche 1964: OC 3, 157; Malebranche 1997, 630.

¹⁵ “[...] comment se peut-il faire, que tous les hommes s’entendent et conviennent entre eux, si la raison qu’ils consultent est une raison particulière? Peux-tu concevoir que le génie que tu penses t’éclairer, soit capable de répandre la même lumière généralement dans tous les esprits, et qu’une intelligence particulière puisse être la Raison universelle, qui rend raisonnables toutes les nations du monde,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 20–1.

In the “Prayer” that precedes the first Meditation, Malebranche addresses himself directly to Eternal Wisdom as the “*lumen illuminans*” of all intelligences:

O Eternal Wisdom, I am not my own light; nor can the bodies that surround me enlighten me; nor can the intelligences themselves, which do not contain in their being the Reason that makes them wise, communicate this Reason to my spirit. You alone are the light of Angels and Men; you alone are the universal Reason of spirits: you are even the Wisdom of the Father. Eternal, unchanging, necessary Wisdom, who makes the creatures and even the Creator wise, though in a very different way. O my true and only Master, show yourself to me: make me see the light in your light.¹⁶

The starting point of the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* is that the finite mind possesses a body of valid knowledge and that there is a light, a reason that makes it possible. The problem is to understand where this light comes from and what the role of the finite mind in the cognitive processes is, and to clarify whether the body comes into play in these processes. Malebranche’s answers are as follows: the reason that illuminates the mind and makes knowledge possible is the universal, immutable, necessary Reason (it illuminates all men and makes them reasonable since they, as spiritual beings, participate in this reason); the subject does not construct his knowledge by himself—we mean the knowledge of eternal truths (metaphysics, mathematics, basic principles of morality)—but must consult and pay due attention to the universal Reason that alone can illuminate him; the body cannot act on the mind, so no knowledge can come from it (in the first Meditation, Malebranche first questioned the hypothesis of the pineal gland as a medium through which mind and body communicate and through which the body acts on the soul: Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 13).

The reasoning based on the metaphor of illumination refers back to Augustine and develops the principle set out in the *Gospel of John*; it allows the passage from the light of nature, the “*lumière naturelle*” in the Cartesian sense—which is not equated with divine light—to the light of the Word to be accomplished: from the *Metaphysical Meditations* to the *Christian Meditations*.¹⁷ To stress this

¹⁶ “Ô Sagesse éternelle, je ne suis point ma lumière à moi-même; et les corps qui m’environnent ne peuvent m’éclairer; les intelligences mêmes ne contenant point dans leur être la Raison qui les rend sages, ne peuvent communiquer cette Raison à mon esprit. Vous êtes seul la lumière des Anges et des Hommes: Vous êtes seul la Raison universelle des esprits: Vous êtes même la Sagesse du Père. Sagesse éternelle, immuable, nécessaire, qui rendez sages les créatures et même le Créateur, quoique d’une manière bien différente. Ô mon véritable et unique Maître, montrez-vous à moi: faites-moi voir la lumière en votre lumière,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 9.

¹⁷ See Gouhier 1948, 326. However, Christian Belin thinks that even though Malebranche, unlike Descartes, assumes the religious dimension of meditation, in both thinkers reason replaces Scripture as the source of the meditative exercise. See Belin 2002, 245–80. The fact remains that Descartes shares the taste for meditation and retreat that characterises the era of late humanism and the Counter-Reformation. See Belin 2006, 9 and following. On this question, see also Courtès 2006. This commentator asserts that Descartes’ philosophical

essential difference between the two books, we can consider for example the “Synopsis of the Meditations”: “Nor is there an examination of those matters pertaining to the faith or to the conduct of life, but merely of speculative truths known exclusively by the means of the light of nature” (Descartes 2006, 8; AT 9-a, 13; AT 7, 15). Admittedly, as Martial Gueroult and Matt Hettche argued, Descartes also seems to be influenced by an Augustinian devotional tradition that expresses itself in the practice of spiritual exercise, the source of which may be Mersenne’s *L’usage de la raison*, published in 1623 (Gueroult 1957, 351; Hettche 2010, 285).¹⁸ Moreover, Descartes’ relationship with Cardinal Bérulle, who urges him to elaborate a new philosophy, and other Augustinian Oratorians shows that the author of *Metaphysical Meditations* can draw on a rich conception of meditation stemming from the Neoplatonist tradition with further developments in early modernity (Sepper 2000, 738). According to Christia Mercer, Descartes’ “brilliant reimagining of the meditative genre,” which has not been sufficiently explored by commentators, can even be compared with Teresa of Ávila’s *Interior Castle* (Mercer 2017, 2541 and 2553).¹⁹ In any case, it should be pointed out that the French philosopher appropriates and uses the meditation techniques ascribable to Augustinian tradition up to the third Meditation, after which he adopts the style of a treatise, and for a sole philosophical purpose: the certainty of knowing. In other words, his concerns are with epistemological error and not with moral fault, and the consequent precarious condition of the soul in the earthly dimension (Hettche 2010, 285, 306–7). This last issue, as is well known, is particularly close the heart of Malebranche, who, from his earliest work—as we will demonstrate in the following pages—, links the need to rid oneself of error in the field of knowledge to the possibility of freeing oneself from evil and achieving moral perfection.

journey constitutes the secularised version of Christian meditation while Malebranche’s *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, “realising the union of Descartes and Augustine,” progressively unveil the possible relationship between Christ and man: Courtès 2006, 110, 121, and 123.

¹⁸ In the proceedings of the conference on Descartes organised at Royaumont, published in 1957, there is an exchange between Ferdinand Alquié, Willem Evert Beth, Gueroult, Henri Lefebvre, Robert Lenoble, Pierre Mesnard, following a paper by the latter on Descartes’ tree of wisdom. The first part of this discussion focuses on rapprochement and distinction between Descartes’ *Metaphysical Meditations*, Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, the Malebranchian meditation, and St. Augustine’s *Soliloquies*. In the last years this discussion has been mentioned in an article by de Peretti. According to this interpreter, Descartes’ *Metaphysical Meditations* are part of a double meditative tradition: that of religious meditation in vogue in the 17th century, on the one hand, and that of the ancient philosophical exercises, on the other (de Peretti 2010, 4). In this text, moreover, de Peretti refers to Pierre Hadot insofar as the latter invites us to understand the *Metaphysical Meditations* in the light of the notion of spiritual exercise, of self-transformation calling upon all the faculties and resources of thought (de Peretti 2010, 11).

¹⁹ Mercer explains that, considering the Society of Jesus’ enthusiasm for Teresa of Ávila’s spiritual writings, it is plausible that Descartes’ training was also nourished by ideas drawn from Teresa’s teachings (Mercer 2017, 2546).

Coming back to Malebranche's *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, it should be noted that in the rest of the prayer, Malebranche invokes the Word as "Word":

Speak eternal Word, Word of the Father, Word that has always been spoken, that is being said, and that will always be said: speak, and speak, loud enough to make yourself heard despite the confused noise that my senses and passions unceasingly excite in my mind.²⁰

Thus, through the intermediary of Augustine's *On the Teacher*, from which he draws the metaphor of speech and the conception of the master and of interior teaching (Gouhier 1948, 326) that runs through his entire work,²¹ Malebranche passes from the visual image to the auditory image, but the two images, here strictly intertwined, metaphorically express the same truth.

But let us return to the excerpt from the first of the *Three Letters Concerning M. Arnauld's Defence* that we quoted above and turn our attention to a second fundamental conceptual element. Reflecting on his earlier work, Malebranche invites Arnauld to notice the evolution from the first to the second Meditation. In the first, a kind of inner monologue or dialogue develops in which the speaking "Self" exposes its beliefs and doubts: "I speak to myself as of myself, in the first of the *Christian Meditations*. I did not yet know that I had a Master."²² The discovery of the Master, of this Other who enlightens the mind, is made progressively, in the course of the second Meditation,²³ after having discarded other hypotheses on the nature of this light, thanks to which minds know theoretical and moral truths and all men agree among themselves.²⁴ This work is not, therefore, constructed as a treatise in which the author sets out his system point by point, using exclusively deductive resources; although he does not renounce

²⁰ "Parlez Verbe éternel, Parole du Père, Parole qui a toujours été dite, qui se dit, et qui se dira toujours: parlez, et parlez, assez haut pour vous faire entendre malgré le bruit confus que mes sens et mes passions excitent sans cesse dans mon esprit," Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 9.

²¹ This is true already in *The Search after Truth*. Mentioning Augustine's *On the Teacher* and *Soliloquies* in the "Preface," Malebranche writes that God is "our sole Master [notre seul Maître]" and that He "alone teaches us all truth [seul nous instruit de toute vérité]" through the manifestation of His substance," Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 17–8; Malebranche 1997, xxxviii.

²² "Je me parle à moi-même comme de moi-même, dans la première des *Méditations Chrétiennes*. Je ne savais pas encore que j'avais un Maître," Malebranche 1966a: OC 6–7, 266.

²³ "Quoi, mon Jésus, c'est donc vous-même qui me parlez dans le plus secret de ma Raison? C'est donc votre voix que j'entends? Que vous venez de répandre en un instant de lumières dans mon esprit! Quoi c'est vous seul qui éclairez tous les hommes? Hélas que j'étais stupide, lorsque je pensais que vos créatures me parlaient, quand vous me répondiez! Que j'étais superbe, lorsque je m'imaginai que j'étais ma lumière à moi-même, quand vous m'éclairiez!" Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 23.

²⁴ The disciple wonders whether there is a demon who directs him and gives him his light; or whether it is the pure intelligences that have the power to enlighten men (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 20). See also 20–1: "[...] comment se peut-il faire, que tous les hommes s'entendent et conviennent entre eux, si la Raison qu'ils consultent est une Raison particulière?"

deductive reasoning, it is rather the unfolding of a reflective work involving practices of prayer,²⁵ meditation,²⁶ examination of conscience²⁷ and an exercise of constant vigilance.²⁸ In the course of this work, the “Self” discovers its own limits, recognises the existence of an infinite substance which goes beyond him and which he does not perceive in himself,²⁹ and thus he begins to listen to this other voice that speaks to him internally: “Go within yourself and listen to me: and compare what I am going to say to you with what the Religion you profess teaches you” (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 22). The *Metaphysical and Christian Meditations* thus become the transcription of the dialogue that is established between universal Reason and finite Reason.

Now, having understood that what is at stake is the foundation of morality, religion and all the sciences and that

[...] all those who meditate have a common master who answers them all in the time that they imagine they are answering themselves [tous ceux qui méditent ont un maître commun qui leur répond à tous dans le temps qu'ils imaginent se répondre à eux-mêmes],

Malebranche recognised that, in order not to deny his principles, he could not continue “the other Meditations in the same style as the first [les autres Méditations dans le même style que la première]” (Malebranche 1966a: OC 6–7, 269). In short, making the Word itself speak—or else “giving the world [...] the answers of the inner Truth [donner au monde [...] les réponses de la Vérité intérieure]” (Malebranche 1966b: OC 8–9, 638)—was peremptorily imposed.

3. Authority, Dialogue, Questioning

The first four Meditations seem to echo the original purpose and aim of *The Search after Truth*: to learn to avoid error and to rid oneself of one's own

²⁵ See for example Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 174: “Ta prière rend honneur à mes qualités, et je me fais un plaisir de t'exaucer.” Consider also the “Prière” before the first Meditation (9–10).

²⁶ See Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 28.

²⁷ “Ainsi, mon Fils, nourris-toi souvent de ma substance: mais examine et purifie ton cœur auparavant; et afin que je ne te condamne pas, n'oublie pas de te juger, et de te condamner toi-même,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 196.

²⁸ The rhetorical strategies used by Malebranche also bear witness to this. For example, we note the frequency of the phrase “beware” (“prends garde”) from the first Meditation onwards (“But beware my mind, are you not mistaken? [Mais prends garde mon esprit, ne te trompes-tu point?];” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 11) to the last: “Nevertheless, beware, the matter is of consequence, judge by the principles I have explained to you, if it is as easy for you to save yourself in the state you are in, as in some place of retreat; don't voluntarily mislead yourself [Néanmoins prends garde à toi, l'affaire est de conséquence, juge par les principes que je t'ai exposés, s'il t'est aussi facile de te sauver dans l'état où tu te trouves, que dans quelque lieu de retraite; ne te trompe point volontairement];” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 230.

²⁹ Consider the entire first Meditation, especially paragraphs 20–8: Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 16–8.

prejudices in order to free oneself from moral misery. Indeed, since error is the cause of human misery and the origin of evil in the world, if they want to be solidly and truly happy, men must work to avoid it (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 39; Malebranche 1997, 1). In other words, the search for truth should serve to reform behaviour; attention to clear ideas and the “precision of mind” should promote moral perfection: “But we must always labor to avoid error, since we always desire to be delivered from our miseries [on doit travailler sans cesse à ne point se tromper, puisqu’on souhaite sans cesse de se délivrer de ses misères]” (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 40; Malebranche 1997, 1). *The Search after Truth* examines the different kinds of errors by discovering their causes; this study constitutes the guiding thread for drawing up a picture of the mind of the whole man, by analysing its different faculties, referred either to the union with the body or to the union with God (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 19–20; Malebranche 1997, xxxviii).

But the project of reflecting on the way and the means to free oneself from the fetters of one’s own prejudices and to counter the hold of the senses, the imagination and the passions on the mind (with the acute awareness of the respective weight of two unions in the life of man that such a work requires) continues in another form in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*,³⁰ the first draft of which accompanies (and perhaps overlaps with) that of the *Christian Conversations*, which Malebranche composed in the summer of 1676, at Marine, one of the country residences of the Oratory, near Pontoise (Lelong 1967: OC 20, 299). The latter work is characterised by the integration of properly theological issues into philosophical discourse and, building on the achievements of *The Search after Truth*, aims to examine the religious and moral question from a different angle.³¹

Now, in the very first lines of the “Avertissement” that opens the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, Malebranche evokes the theoretical background of *The Research after Truth*, the conception of the double union that constitutes man and the tension between two different domains that it implies:

Since I am convinced that the eternal Word is the universal *Reason* of spirits, and that this same Word, made flesh, is the *Author and the consumer of our faith*; I believe that I must make him speak in these Meditations, as the true *Master*, who teaches all men by the authority of His word, and by the evidence of his lights. [...] I know that I am a man, and that if the Word to whom I am united like the rest of the intelligences, speaks to me clearly in the most secret part of

³⁰ See for example Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 236: “L’esprit humain est trop plein de lui-même: il forme facilement de généreux desseins: mais le poids du corps l’appesantit et le rend impuissant au bien. Étudie l’homme, sa maladie, ses faiblesses, ses inclinations, les lois de l’union de l’âme et du corps, les sens, l’imagination, les passions. Cette étude t’est nécessaire pour te conduire; et si tu fais bien réflexion sur ce qui se passe en toi, tu deviendras bientôt savant sur cette matière.”

³¹ On the *Christian Conversations*, see Bardout 2010, 13–6.

my reason, I have an insolent and rebellious body which I cannot silence, and which often speaks higher than God Himself: I have a body which seems to me to make up more than half of my being: I cannot separate my interests from those of the body: its goods and its evils make up at present my felicity and my misery.³²

But consider also this other passage from the *Christian Meditations*:

O my sole Master, I only confuse myself when you do not enlighten me. I want to pass by all the sensitive beauties to raise myself to you. But alas, I cannot find a hold in anything that has no body. I am not accustomed to contemplating purely intelligible beauties. The weight of my body weighs down my mind, I fall back and let myself be led by my imagination, which reassures and relaxes me by representing to me the proportions of figures, sensitive beauties, shadows and faint rays of the beauty I desire.³³

The “Avertissement” of the *Meditations* (but also the second text quoted) therefore presupposes a labour of reflection already realized and a theoretical baggage already acquired which will be reworked from a new perspective through the strategy implemented in the work published in 1683. This consists in making the Master Himself, He who teaches and enlightens all minds, speak. The reflections on inner truth, the common Master and the difficulty of listening to Him because of a tyrannical body³⁴ are already developed in *The Search after*

³² “Comme je suis convaincu que le Verbe Éternel est la *Raison* universelle des esprits, et que ce même Verbe, fait chair, est l’*Auteur et le consommateur de notre foi*; je crois devoir le faire parler dans ces *Méditations*, comme le véritable *Maître*, qui enseigne tous les hommes par l’autorité de sa parole, et par l’évidence de ses lumières. [...] Je sais que je suis homme, et que si le *Verbe* auquel je suis uni comme le reste des intelligences, me parle clairement dans le plus secret de ma raison, j’ai un corps insolent et rebelle que je ne puis faire taire, et qui parle souvent plus haut que Dieu même: j’ai un corps qui me paraît faire plus de la moitié de mon être: je ne puis séparer mes intérêts des siens: ses biens et ses maux font actuellement ma félicité et ma misère,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 7.

³³ “Ô mon unique Maître, je ne fais que me troubler moi-même, lorsque vous ne m’éclairez pas. Je veux passer toutes les beautés sensibles pour m’élever jusqu’à vous. Mais hélas! je ne trouve point de prise dans tout ce qui n’a point de corps. Je ne suis point accoutumé à contempler les beautés purement intelligibles. Le poids de mon corps appesantit mon esprit, je retombe et je me laisse conduire par mon imagination, qui me rassure et me délasse en me représentant des proportions de figures, des beautés sensibles, ombres et faibles rayons de la beauté que je désire,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 37.

³⁴ Let us recall that Adam’s sin and the decadence of post-lapsarian man produced an asymmetry within the psycho-physical union by transforming it into a relationship of dependence. See Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 11–2 and 15; Malebranche 1963: OC 2, 135 and 176; Malebranche 1959: OC 4, 102. This thesis is a common thread running through Malebranche’s anthropology. The Oratorian affirms it throughout his work and even in his last book, the *Reflections on Physical Premotion* (1715): Malebranche 1986: OC 16, 54. The theme of the dependence of the mind on the body since sin also appears in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*: “Tu dois aussi avoir assez de capacité pour le recevoir: car ton esprit est fort limité, et la dépendance où il est de ton corps le partage extrêmement,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 32; “Ainsi, étant pécheur, il est juste que tu dépendes du corps

*Truth*³⁵ and in the *Christian Conversations*,³⁶ and are thus received in the *Christian Meditations* to be reworked from a new perspective.

On the other hand, in a precise allusion to *The Search after Truth*, which Malebranche recommends reading in order to fully understand his new work,³⁷ the author underlines the specific character of his *Meditations*: firstly, this text presupposes a knowledge already acquired as a condition for an adequate understanding; secondly, it does not seem to be intended for everyone, but mainly for those who are familiar with the principles of Malebranchism and are willing to engage seriously in the practice of meditation. The *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* thus seem to be different from other texts which could be compared to them,³⁸ for example the *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609) by Francis de Sales. The latter work is intended to meet the needs of Christians who are not destined for the religious life but who wish to lead a holy life in the world. Addressed to a wider public than the spiritual treatises of the time, it does not aim at “the instruction of those who are very much withdrawn from worldly dealings [l’instruction des personnes fort retirées du commerce du monde]” but rather to

instruct those who live in towns, in households, in the court, and who, by their condition, are obliged to live a common life outside [instruire ceux qui vivent ès villes, ès ménages, en la cour, et qui par leur condition sont obligés de faire une vie commune quant à l’extérieur] (de Sales 1934, 3).

auquel j’avais seulement uni l’homme innocent,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 104; “Tu as un corps, ton âme y est unie, et même elle en dépend depuis le péché,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 112.

³⁵ “[...] en effet l’attention de l’esprit n’est que son retour et sa conversion vers Dieu, qui est notre seul Maître, et qui seul nous instruit de toute vérité, par la manifestation de sa substance, comme parle saint Augustin, et sans l’entremise d’aucune créature [the mind’s attention that any truths are discovered or any sciences acquired, because the mind’s attention is in fact only its conversion and return to God, who is our sole Master, who alone teaches us all truth through the manifestation of His substance, as Saint Augustine says, and without the intervention of any creature],” Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 17–8; Malebranche 1997, xxxviii.

³⁶ “Apprenez donc, mon cher Aristarque, à rentrer dans vous-mêmes, à être attentif à la vérité intérieure qui préside à tous les esprits, à demander et à recevoir les réponses de notre maître commun,” Malebranche 1959: OC 4, 11.

³⁷ It is not by chance that towards the end of the “Avertissement” Malebranche wishes to make a few clarifications to help his reader understand his work: “Je crois néanmoins devoir avertir que pour comprendre clairement ces Méditations, il est comme nécessaire d’avoir lu la *Recherche de la Vérité*, ou, du moins s’appliquer à cette lecture avec une attention sérieuse, et sans aucune préoccupation d’esprit. Ces conditions sont un peu dures. Mais comme je n’ai pas écrit ceci pour toute sorte de personnes, ce ne sont point tant là des conditions que j’exige que des avis nécessaires pour ne pas perdre son temps, et condamner la vérité sans l’entendre,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 8.

³⁸ And first of all, the *Meditations on Humility and Repentance*, which, in order to realise the project of putting down human pride and disposing man to humility, does not hesitate to use the fundamental conceptual elements of Occasionalism.

Although the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* do not exclusively advocate retreat but encourage action in the world for the edification of the faithful,³⁹ they do require a familiarity with certain notions. Of course, they do not set out this knowledge in a systematic way but use it to mark out a pathway through which each person is led to work on himself or herself. It is only from this specific angle (work on oneself) that the two treatises can be compared. In Malebranche, however, this aspect is correlated with metaphysical reflection, whereas in de Sales the emphasis is on conduct among men.⁴⁰

The doctrine of the common Master and of the inner truth, as well as the requirement to learn to question the Master in order to be enlightened,⁴¹ seem to find a coherent outcome in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*. Didn't Theodore invite his interlocutor to go beyond the framework of human conversations: "learn, then, my dear Aristarchus, to enter into yourself, to be attentive to the inner truth that presides over all minds, to ask and receive the answers of our common master"?⁴² Thus the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* implement this approach by showing how finite reason questions itself on the source of its knowledge and happiness in order to discover an Other—the infinite and

³⁹ "You like to retire: the world's business disgusts you. Content with my answers and favours, you now want nothing more. You do well: but you can do better. Do not fear to expose your salvation by exposing the truth. You will defend it without hurting, or at least without breaking charity, provided that you often enter into yourself, and that you look upon those to whom you speak as persons whom I address to you, so that you work for their sanctification and they for yours [Tu te plais dans la retraite: le commerce du monde te fait horreur. Content de mes réponses et de mes faveurs, tu ne veux maintenant rien davantage. Tu fais bien: mais tu peux mieux faire. Va ne crains point d'exposer ton salut, en exposant la vérité. Tu la défendras sans blesser, ou du moins sans rompre la charité, pourvu que tu rentres souvent en toi-même, et que tu regardes ceux à qui tu parles, comme des personnes que je t'adresse, afin que tu travailles à leur sanctification, et qu'ils travaillent à la tienne]," Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 206; see also 205.

⁴⁰ According to de Sales, for example, devotion should be practised by all men, because it is the highest point of life everywhere, but it should be adapted to each situation: "La dévotion doit être différemment exercée par le gentilhomme, par l'artisan, par le valet, par le prince, par la veuve, par la fille, par la mariée: et non seulement cela; mais il faut accommoder la pratique de la dévotion aux forces, aux affaires et aux devoirs de chaque particulier [...]. Où que nous soyons, nous pouvons et devons aspirer à la vie parfaite," de Sales 1934, 15 and 16. On these points, see Dubreucq 2002, 5.

⁴¹ See Malebranche 1959: OC 4, 11–2: "The attention of the mind is the natural prayer we make to the inner truth, so that it may be discovered to us. But this sovereign truth does not always respond to our desires, because we do not know too well how to pray to it. We often ask it without knowing what we are asking, as when we want to resolve questions whose terms we do not know [L'attention de l'esprit est la prière naturelle que nous faisons à la vérité intérieure, afin qu'elle se découvre à nous. Mais cette souveraine vérité ne répond pas toujours à nos désirs, parce que nous ne savons pas trop bien comment il faut la prier. Nous l'interrogeons souvent sans savoir ce que nous lui demandons, comme lorsque nous voulons résoudre des questions dont nous ne connaissons pas les termes]."

⁴² "Apprenez donc, mon cher Aristarque, à rentrer dans vous-même, à être attentif à la vérité intérieure qui préside à tous les esprits, à demander et à recevoir les réponses de notre maître commun," Malebranche 1959: OC 4, 11.

universal Reason—which surpasses and founds it (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 11–8), external in one sense to the mind and internal in another; this Other finally revealing itself as the eternal Word which is both truth and order,⁴³ the epistemological and moral keystone of individual existence.⁴⁴ Certainly, this work proves arduous and painful because the mind does not know how to discern the voice of the Word and the “secret inspirations [inspirations secrètes]” of its own passions and imaginations; so it must learn to recognise those thoughts which are not unquestionable truths but “confused feelings [des sentiments confus]” or “vain phantoms [des vains fantômes]” breathed into it by its passions or imaginations.⁴⁵ It is not by chance that Malebranche makes the Word say:

the labour of meditation is still absolutely necessary today to merit the clear view of truth; and I did not come to earth to spare men this labour [le travail de la Méditation est encore aujourd’hui absolument nécessaire pour mériter la vue claire de la vérité; et je ne suis pas venu sur la terre pour épargner aux hommes ce travail] (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 28).

The labour of meditation advocated in the third Meditation implies from the outset the work by which the “Self” who speaks in the *Christian Meditations* themselves, and with whom any recipient can in principle identify, has come to discover the inner Master who presides over his knowledge and happiness. Thus, in the first Meditations, a “process of questioning” unfolds;⁴⁶ at the beginning of this the “Self” who speaks is first of all the consciousness which, by making an effort, grasps certain truths. Now this enunciative subject spontaneously believes that he is the source of the light that enlightens him, that he is his reason and his light (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 11). But immediately a caesura opens up within the intrapsychic discourse: the enunciative subject finds itself in a dual space and questions its first conviction.⁴⁷ The movement must

⁴³ “Ne me consulte donc pas seulement comme vérité, mais comme ordre, ou comme la Loi immuable des esprits, et je réglerai ton amour: je te communiquerai la vie: je te donnerai la force de vaincre tes passions, et pour récompense de tes victoires je te ferai part de ma Gloire et de mes plaisirs pendant toute l’Éternité [...]. Je suis l’ordre aussi bien que la vérité; et tu dois beaucoup plus contempler la beauté de l’ordre que l’évidence de la vérité,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 33 and 34.

⁴⁴ It should be noted here that these passages from the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* reveal another important point of friction between Descartes and the Oratorian: unlike Descartes, Malebranche does not relegate metaphysics to the last rank of our concerns from an ethical point of view; first in terms of evidence, it is also first in terms of ethical utility. See Gueroult 1955–1959, vol. 3, 159.

⁴⁵ Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 27–8. This work can thus take advantage from the analyses of the senses, imagination and passions developed in *The Search after Truth*.

⁴⁶ The expression is borrowed from Dubreucq 2002, 13.

⁴⁷ “Mais prends mon esprit, ne te trompes-tu point? La lumière se répand en toi, lorsque tu le désires, et tu en conclus que tu la produis. Mais penses-tu que tes souhaits soient capables de produire quelque chose? Le vois-tu clairement? Y a-t-il une liaison nécessaire entre tes désirs et leur accomplissement?” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 11–2.

take on a different pace.⁴⁸ In the following paragraphs of the first Meditation, in this same dual space, the essential question raised takes on its full scope; at the end of this Meditation, the movement from the “I” to the “you” (of the “I” and the “you” within the enunciative space) makes it possible to circumscribe a first truth: “[...] I grant you that [your substance] is light, but *illuminated* light [...] [je t’accorde que [ta substance] est lumière, mais lumière *illuminée*]” (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 18). It is during the second Meditation that the identity of the “you” dialoguing with the “I” is revealed as the light that illuminates the latter. This “you” coincides with universal Reason, with Jesus Christ who speaks to the enunciative subject in “the most secret part of [his] Reason [le plus secret de [sa] Raison]” (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 23). At the end of this journey, the “you” who has revealed himself as the universal Reason/Divine Word coinciding with truth and moral order leads the “I” to rediscover himself, to reconstitute himself under the sign of a new self-understanding. He perceives himself as a being swollen with pride and insolence and understands that he must set out on the path to humility.⁴⁹ This reversal of perspective, which implies the castigation of a certain philosophical pride (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 14 and 34), allows Malebranche—as in the *Meditations on Humility and Repentance* (1677)—to make explicit the constructive function of the virtue of humility,⁵⁰ since the latter gives access to a new tone of existence.⁵¹

In the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, Malebranche then presents in a new light the steps that allow one to consult the inner truth and that involve questioning. As Joseph Moreau stated, the challenge is not so much to discover and contemplate immutable essences and ready-made truths in universal Reason, as to learn to question well and to listen to the word of the inner Master: “[...] truth reveals itself only to those who pray with attention and perseverance; in other words, Reason answers only to those who question it properly” (Moreau 1960, 134). This commentator rightly draws our attention to the summary of the third Meditation:

Truth speaks to men in two ways; how it is questioned, and on what subjects it must be questioned, in order to receive its answers [La vérité parle aux hommes en deux manières; comment on l’interroge, et sur quels sujets on la doit interroger, afin de recevoir ses réponses] (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 27).

⁴⁸ “Tu cours un peu trop vite,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 12.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 67 and 174.

⁵⁰ See the “Avertissement” in the *Meditations on Humility and Repentance*: “Le dessein des méditations suivantes et d’abattre l’orgueil de l’esprit, et de le disposer à l’humilité et à la pénitence,” Malebranche 1960: OC 17, 387.

⁵¹ “Ô Jésus faites voir votre beauté aux esprits superbes, afin qu’ils s’humilient devant vous, afin qu’ils se haïssent et qu’ils vous aiment: et n’attendez pas le jour auquel votre présence les remplira de honte et de désespoir; lorsque, ne pouvant supporter l’éclat de votre beauté, ils chercheront les ténèbres et se précipiteront dans les enfers. Pour moi je vous confesse maintenant mes désordres, afin que vous me fassiez rentrer dans l’ordre, et que votre beauté efface ma laideur, comme vos lumières dissipent mes ténèbres,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 34–5.

But the question appears in all its breadth already in the course of the second Meditation:

Do you not feel that the light of your Reason is always present to you, that it dwells within you, and that when you enter into yourself, you become completely enlightened by it? Do you not hear that it answers you by itself, first when you question it; when you know how to question it by paying serious attention; when your senses and your passions are in respect and in silence.⁵²

One must learn to ask questions carefully and persistently and understand what the Word can clarify—it cannot instruct the mind about the beings God created, but about how he created them (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 30–2). For, says the Word,

when you question me, you must know what you are asking me, so that when I present it to you, you can recognize it. You must also have enough capacity to receive it: for your mind is very limited, and the extent to which it is dependent on your body causes extreme division.⁵³

It seems to me, however, that the challenge is not only to develop an effective “method of interrogation.” It is also a matter of rethinking the terms in which *The Search after Truth* has conceived certain problems, and of qualifying certain conclusions. There is another reason why the third Meditation we have just mentioned constitutes an important milestone in Malebranche’s reflection: by presenting the two ways in which truth speaks to men, it makes it possible to rethink the relationship between reason and faith in a new way. If in *The Search after Truth* Malebranche distinguishes between factual and speculative truths (Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 23–6; Malebranche 1997, xli–xliii) and argues in favour of the methodological separation of reason and faith,⁵⁴ in later works he opens the way to the possibility of a harmonisation between faith and reason to the point of arguing that faith can be fulfilled in intelligence. Already in the *Christian Conversations*, he seeks to minimise the distance between the two fields:

⁵² “Ne sens-tu pas que la lumière de ta Raison t’est toujours présente, qu’elle habite en toi, et que lorsque tu rentres en toi-même, tu en deviens tout éclairé? N’entends-tu pas qu’elle te répond par elle-même, d’abord que tu l’interroges; lorsque tu sais l’interroger par une attention sérieuse; lorsque tes sens et tes passions sont dans le respect et dans le silence,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 22.

⁵³ “[...] lorsque tu m’interroges, tu dois savoir ce que tu me demandes, afin de pouvoir le reconnaître, lorsque je te le présente. Tu dois aussi avoir assez de capacité pour le recevoir: car ton esprit est fort limité, et la dépendance où il est de ton corps le partage extrêmement,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 32.

⁵⁴ See for example Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 62; Malebranche 1997, 14: “The mysteries of faith must therefore be distinguished from the things of nature. We must be equally submissive to faith and evidence; but in matters of faith, evidence must not be sought before belief, just as in matters of nature, one must not stop at faith, that is, at the authority of philosophers. In a word, to be among the Faithful, it is necessary to believe blindly; but to be a philosopher, it is necessary to see with evidence, for divine authority is infallible, whereas all men are subject to error.”

You must believe what must be believed, but you must try to see what can be seen, and consequently what must be seen. For faith must lead us to intelligence: we must not yield Reason to the enemy of truth.⁵⁵

Malebranche subsequently developed this thought in the third Meditation. In the first place, he states unambiguously that truth speaks to men in two ways:

As universal Reason and intelligible light, I enlighten all minds inwardly by the evidence and clarity of my Doctrine; as Wisdom incarnate and proportionate to their weakness, I instruct them by faith, that is to say, by the Holy Scriptures and the visible authority of the universal Church.⁵⁶

He then points out that faith concerns only a certain number of truths and that evidence alone perfectly enlightens the mind. Moreover, when the Word/ Universal Reason speaks to men about truths that have no relation to religion, “the labour of meditation” is necessarily required to conceive these truths with a clear view (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 28). And yet the Word can communicate many truths of faith in a purely intelligible way to those who enter into themselves, and consult him with all the necessary respect and application; in short, men can learn with evidence what they only know with certainty, provided they are able to consult divine Wisdom:

However, although I never teach in a tangible way the truths which it is not necessary to know in order to honour my Father and to regulate one’s mind and heart, I often show to the mind in a purely intelligible way, many truths which belong to faith. For when my disciples enter into themselves and consult Me with all the necessary respect and application, I reveal to their minds many truths which they only knew with certainty because of the infallibility of my word.⁵⁷

But this is not all. In the fourth Meditation, Malebranche reveals a diachronic and dynamic relationship between faith and reason, or rather a link that brings into play the relationship between time and eternity, for faith will pass away and intelligence will subsist forever:

⁵⁵ “Vous devez croire ce qui doit être cru, mais vous devez tâcher de voir ce qui peut, et par conséquent ce qui doit être vu. Car il faut que la foi nous conduise à l’intelligence: il ne faut pas céder la Raison au parti ennemi de la vérité,” Malebranche 1959: OC 4, 106.

⁵⁶ “Comme Raison universelle et lumière intelligible j’éclaire intérieurement tous les esprits par l’évidence et la clarté de ma Doctrine; comme Sagesse incarnée et proportionnée à leur faiblesse, je les instruis par la foi, c’est-à-dire par les Écritures saintes et l’autorité visible de l’Église universelle,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 27.

⁵⁷ “Cependant, quoique je n’enseigne jamais d’une manière sensible les vérités, qu’il n’est pas nécessaire de savoir pour honorer mon Père, et se régler l’esprit et le cœur; je montre souvent à l’esprit d’une manière purement intelligible plusieurs vérités qui appartiennent à la foi. Car, lorsque mes disciples rentrent en eux-mêmes, et me consultent avec tout le respect et toute l’application nécessaire; je découvre à leur esprit avec évidence plusieurs vérités qu’ils savaient seulement avec certitude à cause de l’infaillibilité de ma parole,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 28.

Did you not veil yourself, O Jesus, in this Sacrament to give us a pledge that one day our faith will be transformed into Intelligence, that now we possess you without knowing it: but that the happy day will come when we shall know clearly in what ways you are the life and food of our spirit.⁵⁸

Perhaps, in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, Malebranche represents the usual bipartition of truths according to their source (universal Reason, which enlightens us by evidence and clarity, and incarnate Wisdom, which instructs us by faith and the authority of the Church), but he does indicate clearly that there is a single Master who speaks to men through these two channels. While acknowledging the incomprehensibility of the mysteries and the excessive composition of the truths of morality, he claims here the right to “meditate on [the] law [of the Word] day and night, and [to] humbly ask Him for light and understanding [méditer [la] loi [du Verbe] jour et nuit, et [lui] demander humblement la lumière et l’intelligence)” (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 28). Thus, in the path opened up by the *Christian Meditations*, the mind is not exempt from the search for light and intelligence, which are presented as the true goal of the believer himself. Now, as Malebranche argues in particular in the thirteenth Meditation, those who do not succeed, in spite of their efforts, in understanding the sublime truths that the Word has taught them, can and must stick to the Scriptures and profit from the teaching of the Fathers of the Church (Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 149). However, even in this case, the labour of consulting the Word itself cannot be completely renounced. It is not by chance that Malebranche makes the Word say the following:

Nevertheless, they must not be so much trusted in their words that they do not often consult me to see whether I speak to the spirit as they do to the eyes. They have been men and subject to error. When they speak as witnesses of the doctrine

⁵⁸ “Ne vous êtes-vous pas voilé, ô Jésus, dans ce Sacrement pour nous donner un gage qu’un jour notre foi se changera en Intelligence, que maintenant nous vous possédons sans le savoir: mais que le jour heureux viendra auquel nous connaîtrons clairement en combien de manières vous êtes la vie et la nourriture de notre esprit,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 45. See also the *Treatise on Ethics* (1684): “Evidence, or understanding is preferable to faith. For faith will pass away, but understanding will endure eternally. Faith is truly a great good, but this is because it leads us to an understanding of certain necessary and essential truths, without which we can acquire neither solid virtue nor eternal felicity [L’évidence, l’intelligence est préférable à la foi. Car la foi passera, mais l’intelligence subsistera éternellement. La foi est véritablement un grand bien, mais c’est qu’elle conduit à l’intelligence de certaines vérités nécessaires, essentielles, sans lesquelles on ne peut acquérir ni la solide vertu, ni la félicité éternelle],” Malebranche 1966c: OC 11, 34; Malebranche 1993, 57. See also Malebranche 1966c: OC 11, 65 and 183; Malebranche 1993, 79 and 161. But we must also consider the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* (1688). One of the leitmotifs of this work is that we should not oppose philosophy to religion, because truth speaks to us in two different ways. In the sixth Dialogue, for example, Theodore reveals to Ariste “[...] qu’il faut être bon Philosophe pour entrer dans l’intelligence des vérités de la Foi; et que plus on est fort dans les vrais principes de la Métaphysique, plus est-on ferme dans les vérités de la Religion,” Malebranche 1976b: OC 12–13, 133.

of their century, they must be believed and my word must be respected in the tradition of the Church. But when they propose their own sentiments, you must listen to them with some sort of mistrust, and never surrender yourself entirely until I order you to do so.⁵⁹

Now, if this conception, as his Roman censor remarks, seems to smack of Protestantism (Costa 2003, 226–27; Moisuc 2016, 39–40), and to involve the rejection of ecclesiastical mediation, it is interesting for an understanding of the development of the theoretical strategy implemented by the Oratorian. This article of his *Meditations* confirms that such a strategy aims at integrating the truths of the faith into the edifice of reason through a non-dogmatic approach and an always open questioning. This process does not refute tradition but takes its questioning into account by opposing—if necessary—the historical authority of received teaching with the inner dialogue between finite reason and universal Reason. This dialogue, in the final analysis and beyond certain formulas, does not seem to be based on an acritical submission to the authority of the Word, but on a permanent questioning and on a reflection that develops through twists and turns, taking into consideration a range of answers to philosophical and theological questions as they are addressed.

All in all, the development of Malebranche's thought between *The Search after Truth* and the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* leads, as Alquié stated, to the “relative abolition of the frontiers between reason and faith” (Alquié 1974, 401). In the light of the work published in 1683, we can therefore affirm that for Malebranche: 1. our finite reason is constituted in the dialogical relation to the Word/Reason; 2. it is a participation in universal Reason, light illuminated by the divine Word; 3. the Word/Reason can show to the mind in a purely intelligible way several truths of faith. This is why reasoning can be applied to any field and the mind can deepen and rework the truths of faith through the labour of meditation. This is why the dogmas and mysteries of faith can be gradually captured in the orbit of reason.⁶⁰ On the other hand, they prove to be “not only explicable, but also explicative [non seulement explicables, mais encore explicatifs]” (Alquié 1974, 402) insofar as they allow the resolution of certain problems posed by reason.⁶¹

⁵⁹ “Néanmoins il ne faut pas tellement les croire à leur parole, qu'on ne me consulte souvent, pour voir si je parle à l'esprit, comme ils font aux yeux. Ils ont été hommes, et sujets à l'erreur. Lorsqu'ils parlent comme témoins de la doctrine de leur siècle, il faut se rendre à leur témoignage, et respecter ma parole dans la tradition de l'Église. Mais lorsqu'ils proposent leurs propres sentiments, tu dois les écouter avec quelque espèce de défiance, et ne te rendre jamais entièrement que je ne l'ordonne,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 149–50.

⁶⁰ “[...] il est permis d'expliquer même les mystères, pourvu qu'on le fasse selon l'analogie de la Foi, et qu'on suppose comme incontestables les dogmes reçus dans l'Église,” Malebranche 1976a: OC 5, 187.

⁶¹ “Que les Philosophes, mon cher Ariste, sont obligés à la Religion, car il n'y a qu'elle qui les puisse tirer de l'embaras où ils se trouvent,” Malebranche 1976b: OC 12–13, 101. See also these passages from the *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*: “[...] la foi est toujours d'accord avec la Raison, puisque l'une et l'autre viennent du même et infallible principe. Mais l'esprit

In the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, the incorporation of the truths of faith into the rational edifice and the illumination of religion on philosophical problems is achieved through a process of questioning, a dialogical journey that requires work on oneself and a conversion from pride to humility. While establishing a hierarchy—man and his finite reason depend inexorably on God—,⁶² the dialogical allure of the text, where statements tend to elicit the response of others and an active attitude,⁶³ ends up, if not defusing, at least attenuating any authoritative device. Certainly, at certain points in the book, the relationship of the “Self” who speaks to the Word is in the register of authority,⁶⁴ but as we move forward in these *Meditations*, we realise that the relationship of authority prevails when man does not succeed in beginning the work of meditation or is weary of listening to the inner truth.⁶⁵ On the other hand, submission to authority seems to be akin to a state of passive ignorance.⁶⁶ Thus, the true relationship

humain ne peut pas toujours découvrir cet accord,” Malebranche 1986: OC 16, 132; “[...] il arrive souvent que la foi conduit à l’intelligence, et obtient des idées claires de quelques vérités que l’on croyait uniquement par la foi,” Malebranche 1986: OC 16, 133.

⁶² “L’homme n’est à lui-même ni sa loi, ni sa lumière. Sa substance n’est que ténèbres; il ne peut rien voir en se contemplant: et comme il dépend de Dieu, il n’est point le Maître de ses actions,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 46.

⁶³ See these two paragraphs from the second Meditation: “11. Ne sens-tu pas que la lumière de ta Raison t’est toujours présente, qu’elle habite en toi, et que lorsque tu rentres en toi-même, tu en deviens tout éclairé? N’entends-tu pas qu’elle te répond par elle-même, d’abord que tu l’interroges; lorsque tu sais l’interroger par une attention sérieuse; lorsque tes sens et tes passions sont dans le respect et dans le silence. Ainsi quel besoin as-tu de te rendre les Démons favorables? Ce ne sont point eux qui t’éclairent, puisque sans que tu les consultes, tu entends bien qu’ou te répond. 12. Rentre en toi-même, et écoute-moi: et compare ce que je te vais dire avec ce que t’apprend la Religion que tu professes. Voici comment la vérité parle à tous ceux qui l’aiment, et qui par des désirs ardents la prient de les nourrir de sa substance,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 22.

⁶⁴ In the “Avertissement,” the subject-enunciator states that he “[...] [est] convaincu que le Verbe Éternel est la *Raison* universelle des esprits, et que ce même Verbe, fait chair, est l’*Auteur et le consommateur de notre foi*”; and then: “je crois devoir le faire parler dans ces Méditations, comme le véritable *Maître*, qui enseigne tous les hommes par l’autorité de sa parole, et par l’évidence de ses lumières,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 7.

⁶⁵ “Comme la plupart des hommes ne sont point faits au travail de la Méditation, et ne peuvent rentrer en eux-mêmes pour écouter en silence la voix purement intelligible de la Raison, ils doivent s’instruire de leurs devoirs par la lecture des Livres saints, et régler leurs sentiments par l’autorité infaillible de ma parole,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 149. See also 28: “Le travail de la Méditation est encore aujourd’hui absolument nécessaire pour mériter la vue claire de la vérité; et je ne suis point venu sur la terre pour épargner aux hommes ce travail [The work of meditation is still absolutely necessary to merit a clear view of the truth, and I did not come to earth to spare men this work]”; 221: “Que si tu es las de m’écouter comme vérité intelligible, soumets-toi à l’autorité de mes Écritures.”

⁶⁶ “Que votre lumière conduise tous mes pas, et règle toutes mes réflexions. Laissez-moi plutôt dans la simplicité de mon ignorance, soumis à l’autorité de votre parole, et sous la conduite de ma mère votre chère Épouse, que de me faire part de cette lumière qui éblouit, et qui enfile les esprits lorsqu’ils manquent de charité et d’humilité,” Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 101. Moreover, in the same paragraph (14) of the ninth Meditation, the disjunctive relationship

of the finite mind to the Word—which the metaphors of light, voice and food⁶⁷ seek to express in an increasingly prominent way—is concretely constructed in an inner dialogical space, through the work of meditation, to the rhythm of questions and answers, of the twists and turns of philosophical questioning.

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between evidence and authority emerges prominently: "[...] fortifiez mon attention afin que je ne consente jamais à rien, avant que j'y sois forcé par l'évidence de votre lumière ou par l'autorité de votre parole!" Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 101.

⁶⁷ In addition to the metaphors of light and voice, there is a third metaphor that Malebranche uses to express the relationship between the finite mind and the Word: that of food. The Word/Reason is thus presented as "the true manna of spirits" (in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*: Malebranche 1986: OC 10, 24; in the *Treatise on Ethics*: Malebranche 1966c: OC 11, 63; Malebranche 1993, 78). It would be—as Lucien Bridet has argued—the metaphor that "expresses the least imperfectly the ineffable relationship of our intelligence with God. For the light or the voice leave an opposition between the one who illuminates or speaks and the one who looks or listens. But the union of our spirit with God is closer. We are not outside God, but in God. He is the very atmosphere in which we breathe," Bridet 1929, 91, my translation. In this sense, the metaphor of food is in line with St Paul's assertion that life, movement and being reside in God, which Malebranche quotes in the chapter of *The Search after Truth* titled "That we see all things in God," Malebranche 1962: OC 1, 447; Malebranche 1997, 235.

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