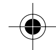

Self-Knowledge in Descartes and Malebranche

LAWRENCE NOLAN AND JOHN WHIPPLE*

1. INTRODUCTION

DESCARTES'S NOTORIOUS CLAIM that mind is better known than body has been the target of repeated criticisms, but none appears more challenging than that of his intellectual heir Nicolas Malebranche.[1] Whereas other critics—especially twentieth-century philosophers eager to use Descartes as their whipping boy—have often been uncharitable, Malebranche accepts many of the fundamental Cartesian doctrines, including mind-body dualism. But he argues that Descartes's position on knowledge of the mind is internally inconsistent. Malebranche agrees with Descartes that the *existence* of the mind is better known than that of body, but he vehemently denies that the *nature* of the mind is better known. This denial is based on his view that we lack a clear idea of the mind.[2]

[1] For the claim that mind is better known than body, see Second Meditation, AT 7:30f; CSM 2:20f and *Principles* 1:11, AT 8A:8–9; CSM 1:196.

This paper uses the following abbreviations: AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols., revised edition, eds. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76) (cited by volume number:page number). CSM(K): *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J.Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and (for vol. 3) A. Kenny (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) (cited by volume number:page number). OCM: *Oeuvres completes de Malebranche*, 20 vols., ed. A. Robinet (Paris: Vrin, 1958–78) (cited by volume number:page number). LO: *The Search After Truth*, trans. T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980) (cited by book:part:chapter or, where applicable, book:chapter). DM: *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, ed. Nicholas Jolley, trans. David Scott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) (cited by dialogue number:page number). TFI: *On True and False Ideas, New Objections to Descartes's Replies*, trans. E. J. Kremer (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990). References to Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* are by volume:section number. Any divergences from the translations above are our own.

[2] Descartes and Malebranche use the terms "mind" and "soul" synonymously, though Descartes favors the former while Malebranche favors the latter. We follow Descartes's usage.

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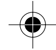

Malebranche's polemic has attracted much attention in recent scholarship.[3] The growing consensus among commentators is that Malebranche develops a devastating internal critique of Descartes's theory of the mind. For example, Nicholas Jolley writes: "In his case for his negative thesis [concerning knowledge of the mind] Malebranche mounted a powerful, even annihilating, critique of Descartes. This critique embodies the remarkable insight that there is a serious muddle at the heart of Descartes's whole theory of knowledge."[4] In a book-length defense of Malebranche's critique, Tad Schmaltz also emphasizes its internal character: "the interpretation here of Malebranche's theory presents it as fundamentally Cartesian, and thereby serves to reinforce his own view that he has provided an authoritative interpretation of the account of mind in the writings of Descartes and other Cartesians."[5] Schmaltz also asserts: "Malebranche took his negative thesis concerning our knowledge of the soul to involve not so much a rejection of Cartesianism as an internal correction of it."[6]

We think such remarks misstate the case. Indeed, we argue in this paper that Malebranche's polemic fails as an internal critique of Descartes's theory of the mind. Although we do not here aspire to defend Descartes's strong thesis—that mind is better known than body—we do think he can consistently maintain that we have a clear and distinct idea of the mind, and thus that our knowledge of the mind's nature is at least on a par with our knowledge of corporeal nature.[7] While Malebranche's rhetoric would encourage us to think that the debate between him and his predecessor is being fought on common or neutral ground, the fact is that Malebranche often appeals to assumptions and aspects of his own theory of "Vision in God" that Descartes would reject. Once more, he interprets Descartes's theory of knowledge in ways that are misguided and sometimes even uncharitable. If Malebranche's critique succeeds at all, it succeeds only against a straw man—*Malebranche's* Descartes and not the historical figure.

Ours is not the first effort to defend Descartes against this particular attack. When Malebranche first published his critique in Book Three of his first great work, *The Search After Truth* (1674),[8] Descartes had been dead for over two de-

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[3] See e.g. Nicholas Jolley, *The Light of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990),114–31 and "Malebranche on the Soul," *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, Steven Nadler, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31–58; Charles McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 76–81; Denis Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens: la polémique entre Antoine Arnauld et Nicolas Malebranche* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999); Tad Schmaltz, "Malebranche on Descartes on Mind-Body Distinctness," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32 (1994): 49–79 and *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[4] *The light of the Soul*, 43. Later, Jolley adds that Malebranche's critique is "powerful, perhaps even unassailable" (ibid., 56).

[5] *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul,* 10. Schmaltz even subtitles his work "A Cartesian Interpretation" to stress the internal nature of Malebranche's critique.

[6] Ibid., 7.

[7] One wonders whether Descartes even needs the stronger thesis. In the context of the Second Meditation it plays a rhetorical role against the Aristotelian scholastic, who thinks that the senses are the primary source of knowledge and thus that body is known better than mind. But the *Meditations* culminate in clear and distinct ideas of both mind and body, and perfect knowledge of the natures and existence of both kinds of substances, which strongly suggests that our knowledge in these cases is on a par.

[8] Books 1–3 were published in 1674 and Books 4–6 in 1675.

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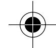

cades, but he was ably defended by the famous Cartesian Antoine Arnauld in *On True and False Ideas* (1683). In the ensuing debate Arnauld was clearly the superior dialectician, but while winning several tactical points, he appears not to fully appreciate the crux of Malebranche's argument, or at least that is the view of Jolley and Schmaltz.[9] We have a somewhat higher opinion of Arnauld's side of the debate. Granted, some of his defenses are facile and can be easily dismissed; others however are quite compelling when properly developed. In at least one instance, we attempt to provide that development. At the same time we think it is a mistake to treat Arnauld as Descartes's surrogate or as if he had issued the final salvo from the camp of the orthodox Cartesians. Arnauld was a skilled debater who had special insight into the Cartesian system, but he does not exhaust all of Descartes's resources. Thus, the bulk of our argument is original and moves beyond Arnauld's provocative, albeit incomplete, defense.

In the next section, we begin by laying out two versions of Malebranche's strongest argument for the claim that we lack a clear idea of the mind, and discuss the devastating implications they would have for Descartes's system, *if sound*. In sections 3 and 4, we develop a systematic defense of Descartes against each version of this argument, focusing on his notion of *scientia*, his epistemology of finite substances and their modes, mathematical knowledge, and the relation between human and divine knowledge. Descartes and Malebranche hold much in common philosophically but the debate over self-knowledge reveals that the differences between them are more pronounced than they seem. We conclude the paper by measuring the depth of the gulf between them and by uncovering one of the deeper motivations for Malebranche's critique.

2. MALEBRANCHE'S POLEMIC

2.1 *Knowledge through Ideas vs. Knowledge through Consciousness*

The dispute between Descartes and Malebranche over knowledge of the mind is part of a much larger debate concerning the ontological status of ideas. For Descartes, ideas are modes of finite minds, whereas for Malebranche ideas exist "in" God as the objects of both human and divine thought and as archetypes for divine creation. It seems odd, given this doctrine of "Vision in God," that Malebranche typically states his critique of Descartes's theory of the mind by saying that we do not possess a clear idea of the mind. Strictly speaking, he should say that we *lack access* to the idea of mind that resides in God's understanding. Such an idea must exist, even if we lack access to it, to serve as the archetype for divine creation of human minds.[10] Why then does Malebranche allow himself this looser way of speaking? We suggest that it is part of an effort to conform to Descartes's ontology of thought, given the internal nature of the critique. Although the dispute over knowledge of the mind is part of a larger debate regarding the status of ideas, Malebranche tries to make his case for the impoverished character

[9] See Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 125; "Malebranche on the Soul," 47; and Schmaltz, *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 128.

[10] Malebranche rejects the notion of "blind creation" as it contravenes the general principle, at work in his occasionalism, that the causal power to produce some effect requires knowledge of that effect.

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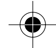

of our knowledge of the mind on grounds that he thinks Descartes himself would be forced to accept. We follow Malebranche's looser way of speaking in this paper, but one should not lose sight of his deeper position.

Within Malebranche's philosophical system, unlike Descartes's, the conclusion that we lack a clear idea of the mind does not entail that we lack knowledge of the mind completely. This is because Malebranche does not think that knowledge is univocal. He distinguishes between knowledge through ideas and knowledge through consciousness or what he calls "inner sensation" (*sentiment intèrieur*).[11] This distinction lies at the heart of Malebranche's critique of Descartes' theory of the mind. He thinks that although we have knowledge through idea of body, we know the mind "only through consciousness, and because of this, our knowledge of it is imperfect" (*Search* 3.2.7, OCM 1:451; LO:237). Knowledge through ideas is superior because it involves direct access to the "blueprints" for creation in the divine understanding, whereas in consciousness we are employing our own feeble cognitive resources that Malebranche believes are "total darkness."[12] Thus, Malebranche is committed to the position, in direct opposition to Descartes, that the nature of body is better known than the nature of mind.

Malebranche marshals several arguments to prove that we lack a clear idea of the mind. These arguments vary in strength, with some of the weaker ones appealing to popular consent and even to theological considerations. In the interests of brevity and philosophical charity, we concentrate on his strongest argument, which constitutes the centerpiece of his polemic against Descartes. Malebranche consistently presents this proof—which we shall refer to as the "*A Priori* Argument"—in the *Search*, the *Elucidations*, and the *Dialogues*, and it is the primary means by which he distinguishes knowledge through ideas from knowledge through consciousness. It has also been the battle cry of Malebranche's contemporary defenders, who have declared his attack against Descartes' theory of self-knowledge to be victorious precisely on this front.

2.2 *Malebranche's A Priori Argument: First Version*

There are two main versions of the "*A Priori* Argument." We begin by considering the version most commonly found in Malebranche's writings. Most of Malebranche's arguments proceed by drawing a disanalogy between our knowledge of mind and our knowledge of body. In the *A Priori* Argument, this disanalogy concerns the ways in which the possible modifications of these substances are known. Malebranche wants us to observe that we can discover the modifications of which body is capable simply by consulting the idea representing it, i.e. *a priori*. We can know, for example, that a body is capable of being round or square, in motion or at rest (Elucidation 11, OCM 3:164; LO:633).[13] And if we are consider-

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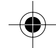
[11] LO:236f. Malebranche delineates two other ways of knowing in the same context—knowledge by things themselves (a form of "direct and immediate perception") and knowledge through conjecture. He claims that our knowledge of God is of the former kind and our knowledge of other souls is of the latter (ibid.).

[12] See e.g. DM 3:33, 35, 47; OCM 12:64–65, 67, 82.

[13] Following Descartes, Malebranche holds that body in general is pure extension in height, breadth, and depth; hence the properties of any particular body will be geometrical or mechanical in character.



ing a particular geometrical figure, such as a triangle, we can discover independently of sense experience that its angles are equal to two right angles and so on.[14] But the modifications of the mind are not like this; they can be discovered only through experience:

> If we had never felt pleasure or pain we could not know whether or not the soul could feel them. If a man had never eaten a melon, or seen red or blue, he would consult this alleged idea of his soul in vain and would never discover distinctly whether or not it was capable of these sensations or modifications. (Elucidation 11, OCM 3:164; LO:634)

If we had a clear idea of mind, then we could know *a priori* the sensory modifications of which it is capable. We could know that the mind is capable of pain, color, etc. even if we had never experienced any particular pain or color. The fact that we lack this knowledge demonstrates that we do not have a clear idea of the mind.

One must be very careful here to understand exactly what Malebranche is claiming with respect to our knowledge of body. He is not asserting that we can know *all* possible modifications of body, for "extension is capable of an infinite number of figures" (*Search* 3:2:7, OCM 1:452; LO:238). There is not only an infinite number of figures, but an infinite number of different kinds of triangle, quadrangle, pentagon, and so on. "A simple piece of wax is therefore capable of an infinite number, or rather, of an infinitely infinite number of modifications that no [finite] mind can comprehend. . . . " (*Search* 3:1:1, OCM 1:384; LO:199). But even if we cannot know all of them, we can know *that* extension is capable of an infinite number[15] of modifications and, more importantly, for any given modification, we could discover it *a priori*. Moreover, the idea of extension is so fecund that we could continually discover new modifications indefinitely.[16] Malebranche is also not claiming to know *a priori* the determinate shape or motion of any actually existing body, such as a golf club. We could know that it is capable of shape and motion, but knowledge of its determinate modifications depends on experience.

With these two qualifications in view, we can formally express the main thrust of Malebranche's argument as follows:

1) For any substance *s* and for any possible modification *m* of *s*, if one had a clear idea of *s*, one could know *m a prior* (referred to below as Malebranche's "*a priori* principle").
2) One cannot know any of the mind's sensory modifications *a priori*.
3) Therefore, one does not have a clear idea of the mind.

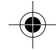
2.3 *Malebranche's A Priori Argument: Second Version*

This statement of the *A Priori* Argument attempts to remain as faithful to the texts as possible, but Malebranche's emphasis on the fertility of the clear idea of extension has inspired his recent advocates to champion a somewhat different version

[14] OCM 6:161–62.

[15] In fact, that is the point of the passage from *Search* 3:2:7.

[16] The idea of extension is "so luminous that it is by contemplating it that geometers and good physicists are made; and it is so fertile in truths that all minds together will never exhaust it" (DM 3:34, OCM 12:67). Also see Elucidation 10, OCM 3:130; LO:614.



of the argument—one that highlights the purportedly deductive and systematic character of our knowledge of body. Although less prominent in the texts, this second version of the argument has been the focus of most recent scholarly attention and is thus deserving of serious consideration.

This version of the argument was first articulated by Charles McCracken and later developed and refined by Jolley. McCracken explains Malebranche's argument as follows:

> The geometer, he supposed, begins with a clear *a priori* concept of extension from which he can deduce truths about the figures of two-and three-dimensional objects, and the physicist, recognizing that extended things are movable, can discover *a priori* the general laws governing motion and its communication. Euclid showed the properties of figures, in his *Elements*; Descartes, the laws of motion, in his *Principles*. But there will never be a Euclid or Descartes in psychology, for we lack an *a priori* idea of the mind from which to deduce its properties.[17]

McCracken interprets Malebranche as claiming that there is an *a priori* science of geometry and physics. This is to say that we can deduce truths about geometrical figures and the laws of motion simply by consulting the idea of extension. Likewise, if we had a clear idea of the mind, then we would be able to deduce the truths that pertain to it; that is, we could have an *a priori* science of psychology. But this is not possible. The fact that it is not possible demonstrates that we do not possess a clear idea of the mind.

Jolley thinks favorably of McCracken's take on Malebranche's argument, but he and Schmaltz recognize that it is problematic for Malebranche to claim that there is an *a priori* science of physics.[18] An important tenet of occasionalism is that the laws of motion are contingent. Thus, from Malebranche's perspective, the truths of physics are not logically necessary. For Malebranche, this entails that one must discover through experience the ways that bodies move in order to discover the laws of motion. As such, physics cannot be considered *a priori*.

But if physics is not *a priori*, the science of geometry is. Just so, Jolley takes geometry to be Malebranche's paradigm of knowledge through clear ideas. He thinks this is true for Descartes as well: Clearly on Cartesian principles, geometry is a paradigm case of a discipline where we know the nature of the objects of study, and if we ask what such knowledge involves, it seems obvious that it is the ability to derive theorems from axioms and definitions.[19] Jolley argues that geometry is the paradigm of what Descartes calls *scientia*—"that is, a systematic body of demonstrative truths of the sort that was traditionally held to constitute science."[20] But even Descartes, he thinks, is forced to concede that there is no science of the mind in this sense, and thus that our knowledge of it is limited to what little we can discern through consciousness.

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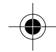
[17] McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 77–78.

[18] Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 122; and Schmaltz, *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 68.

[19] "Malebranche on the Soul," 45.

[20] Ibid., 44. No one claims that geometry is a *predictive* science. See Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 122f.



3. CARTESIAN *SCIENTIA*

3.1 Descartes' Notion of "Demonstration"

Since recent commentators have taken this last version of the argument to constitute the crux of Malebranche's critique, we begin our defense of Descartes by addressing it immediately. Once this second version has been disarmed, it will be much easier to show how Descartes can be defended against the other version of the argument.

On its face, the second version of the *A Priori* Argument appears to have considerable force against Descartes. After all, he claims in the Fifth Meditation that the clear and distinct idea of extension is so rich that it gives rise to countless ideas of geometrical figures, and that various properties can in turn be demonstrated of these figures from their "immutable and eternal" natures: "of the triangle, for example, that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle. . . . " (AT 7:63–4; CSM 2:44–45). Readers of the Fifth Meditation have often taken these and similar remarks in the First Replies to show that Descartes conceives *scientia*, or what Malebranche calls knowledge through ideas, on the model of an axiomatic system, in which the various parts of knowledge bear complex entailment relations to one another.[21] One might suspect that Malebranche was similarly inspired.

However, a close reading of the Fifth Meditation, and of Descartes's accounts of deduction and *scientia*, shows that this interpretation is in fact deeply misguided. The primary reason that Descartes invokes the notion of a "geometrical demonstration" in the Fifth Meditation is to draw an analogy with his version of the so-called ontological argument. Descartes wants the meditator to see that existence is "contained in" the clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being in the same way that it is "contained in" the idea of a triangle, for example, that it has angles equal to two right angles. Descartes's emphasis is not on deriving theorems from epistemically prior axioms and definitions but on perceiving the *contents* of our clear and distinct ideas.[22] He thinks that by perceiving these contents we are able to *intuit* (rather than deduce) that God exists and that geometrical objects have various properties.[23]

Although Descartes sometimes uses the language of "demonstration" (*demonstrare*) here, it is noteworthy that the examples given of demonstrable "properties" are typically very simple axioms or definitional truths, such as the fact that the number two is even or that the greatest side of a triangle subtends its greatest angle. Again, the suggestion is that we "demonstrate" various truths in mathemat-

[21] Margaret Wilson is largely responsible for this reading of the Fifth Meditation over the last few decades. See *Descartes* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 166f. Also see Walter Edelberg, "The Fifth Meditation," *Philosophical Review* XCIX (1990): 493–533.

[22] In the Fifth Meditation proper, the precise locution "contained in" is not so apparent. Instead Descartes tends to state the point negatively: existence "cannot be separated from" the idea of God just as the properties of a triangle "cannot be separated from" our idea of it (see e.g. AT 7:66, CSM 2:46). In cognate passages in the First and Second Replies, Descartes speaks more positively of properties "pertaining to" (*pertinere*) or "being contained in" (*continere*) the ideas or natures of things (see e.g. AT 7:116–17, 150, 166; CSM 2:83–84, 107, 117).

[23] For a fuller treatment of this account of Descartes's ontological argument, see Lawrence Nolan, "The Ontological Argument and Cartesian Therapy," unpublished manuscript.

ics and in (philosophical) theology simply by reading off the contents of our clear and distinct ideas. This is not to deny that there is a distinction to be drawn between "axioms" and "theorems." Descartes never uses these terms in the Fifth Meditation (which is itself significant) but it is not difficult to see how he would mark such a distinction. For him, the distinction is not something intrinsic to a set of truths, such as that between given and derived truths; rather, it is to be conceived in psychological or epistemological terms. What qualifies as an axiom or theorem is relative to the epistemic status of the meditator. Descartes makes this point explicitly toward the middle of the Fifth Meditation. There he observes that some truths are "obvious to everyone, while others are discovered only by those who look more closely and investigate more carefully; but once they have been discovered, the latter are judged to be just as certain as the former" (AT 7:68, CSM 2:47). Here Descartes's emphasis is on "discovering" or "laying bare" (*detecta sunt*) (rather than deducing) the truths that are contained in our clear and distinct ideas, and his point is that some truths (traditionally called "theorems") are sometimes uncovered only through careful investigation, but once perceived are as certain and as self-evident as those truths we normally call "axioms." In effect, what were formerly theorems *become* axioms to the meditator who makes sufficient epistemic progress. Descartes illustrates this point using two examples—the Pythagorean Theorem and the proposition that God exists—and notes that although these truths are not immediately apparent they can become self-evident once one's prejudices have been dispelled (AT 7:68–69, CSM 2:47). For Descartes, unveiling the contents of our clear and distinct ideas and thereby attaining knowledge has nothing to do with deducing theorems from axioms in the traditional sense, and everything to do with removing prejudices so that these contents can be immediately intuited.[24]

This reading of the Fifth Meditation is further supported by Descartes's disparaging remarks against traditional, Aristotelian logic. Like some other early modern figures, Descartes was highly critical of the Scholastic syllogism and, in general, of any kind of formal reasoning. He preferred the native light of reason to such mechanical "fetters" as rules of inference and argument forms, proclaiming that when employing such instruments "reason takes a holiday" (Rule 10, AT 10:405–6; CSM 1:36). The primary use of formal reasoning, as he saw it, is to explain to others what has already been discovered through one's native powers. It is useless as a method of discovering new truths and "should therefore be transferred from philosophy to rhetoric" (Rule 10, AT 10:406; CSM 1:37).[25]

Given such unqualified criticisms of formal logic, it is clearly a mistake to conceive Cartesian *scientia* as a systematic body of deductive truths in the traditional sense. This point becomes even clearer when considering Descartes's alternative account of deductive inference. In the *Regulae*, Descartes defines a deduction as a chain of self-evident intuitions in which there is a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought from one intuition to another (Rule 3, AT 10:369–70, CSM 1:15). The notion of intuition employed here is the precursor to the notion of

[24] For a more detailed interpretation of this passage, see Nolan (ibid.).

[25] Also see *Discourse on Method* (AT 6:17, CSM 1:119) and the Preface to the *Principles* (AT 9B:13–14, CSM 1:186).

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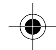

clear and distinct perception that one finds in the mature works: "intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason" (Rule 3, AT 10:368; CSM 1:14). By defining deduction in terms of intuition, Descartes is showing that deduction depends on this more primary notion. In fact, one of the primary goals of reasoning is to reduce deductions to single intuitions (Rule 7, AT 10:387–88, CSM 1:25). If a given truth is not susceptible to an immediate intuition, then we might construct a deduction or chain of intuitions in order to grasp it. But once the truth has been perceived we should attempt to reduce this chain so that we can intuit the desired truth immediately. This procedure is similar to the one Descartes prescribes in the passage from the Fifth Meditation considered above: a truth such as the Pythagorean theorem that is not immediately obvious can become self-evident after careful investigation. Again, the distinction between axioms and theorems and, correlatively, intuitions and deductions, is psychologistic, and relative to the epistemic status of the meditator.[26]

As has been argued, if Descartes rejects the traditional conception of deduction, then *a fortiori* he does not conceive *scientia* as a systematic body of deductive truths in the traditional sense. There is of course independent evidence that Descartes has a different understanding of *scientia* from his ample remarks in the *Meditations* and elsewhere. He consistently characterizes *scientia* as a variety of certainty that is grounded in knowledge of the existence and nature of God who guarantees that our intellectual faculty "cannot but tend towards the truth" (Second Replies, AT 7:14; CSM 2:104). Cartesian knowledge requires that one have the proper clear and distinct perceptions of mind, body, God, etc. and the divine assurance that those clear and distinct perceptions are true. In short, Cartesian knowledge demands that one have a divine guarantee; nowhere does Descartes proclaim that knowledge of any sort (including mathematical knowledge) must form a complex system of truths that bear logical relations to one another. One easily forgets that this account of *scientia* is also given, of all places, at the end of the Fifth Meditation: "the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge [*perfecte scire*] about anything else until I became aware of him" (AT 7:71, CSM 2:49).[27]

[26] Ian Hacking was the first to articulate this general interpretation of Descartes's theory of deductive inference. See "Proof and Eternal Truths: Descartes and Leibniz," *Descartes: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics*, Stephen Gaukroger, ed. (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), 169–80. To be clear, we are not denying that Descartes sometimes employs "deduction" in his sense to attain knowledge. As Descartes stresses in the *Rules*, not all of our knowledge is immediately available to intuition, though the goal of reasoning is to reduce deductions—or chains of intuitions—to single intuitions. What we reject is the view that Descartes conceived knowledge in the traditional sense as an axiomatic system in which the parts of knowledge bear rich entailment relations to one another.

[27] As is well known, Descartes also stresses the difference between *scientia* and *persuasio* or mere conviction. The latter is achieved when one is in the grip of a clear and distinct perception and is compelled to assent to it. Descartes thinks this often takes place when working through an argument and one achieves "firm and immutable conviction" concerning its conclusion (Second Replies, AT 7:146; CSM 2:104). Such conclusions are certain while one attends to the principles from which they are drawn, but as soon as one turns her attention away from these principles, she can, in spite of remembering that the conclusion was clear and distinct, easily fall into doubt about it. Such is not the case, however, for someone who knows that a benevolent God exists and that everything else depends

3.2 *The "Inexhaustibility" of the Idea of Extension*

Defenders of Malebranche assert that there is something distinctive, even for Descartes, about mathematical knowledge for which there is no counterpart in psychology: knowledge in the former case is deductive in the traditional sense. Now that this criticism has been shown to rely on a faulty interpretation of the Fifth Meditation and of Descartes's notions of deduction and *scientia*, does anything remain? One still might try to lean on the fertility and inexhaustibility of the clear and distinct idea of extension: in mathematics one can discover an indefinite number of truths *a priori*, while few if any truths can be discovered *a priori* about the mind. We think this fallback position is closer to the first version of Malebranche's *A Priori* Argument, and so will be dealt with more thoroughly below. However, a few words are in order here. As we have seen, one acquires knowledge about the nature and properties of mathematical objects, God, and even the mind by unveiling the contents of our clear and distinct ideas of these things. It is true that in the case of mind, we can know *a priori* only a very few truths—e.g. that it is a thinking thing capable of perceiving, affirming, denying, doubting, etc.; that its will is free, and so forth. Granted, many more truths about geometrical objects can be discovered in our idea of extension. But what does this prove? Nothing, we would argue, for there is a very simple reason for this disparity. Mind and body have very different natures—a fact that Malebranche himself cannot fail to appreciate. By its very nature, *res extensa* can be regarded abstractly and delimited in various ways in our thought. We can regard it as having parts, and those parts as having different sizes, shapes, motions, positions, and so on; we can then discern various properties of these shapes, etc.[28] The mind, by contrast, is utterly simple. As an immaterial thinking thing, it cannot be regarded abstractly or divided into parts, even in thought. Does that mean that knowledge of mind is inferior? No, for as we have seen, knowledge for Descartes simply requires that one have a divine guarantee that the things one perceives clearly and distinctly are true. It does not require that one's clear and distinct ideas be infinitely fertile or that one's knowledge constitute a deductive system.

4. HOW CARTESIAN SUBSTANCES ARE KNOWN

4.1 *Geometrical Knowledge*

We turn now to the first version of Malebranche's *A Priori* Argument, as stated in section 2.2. The main strategy of our defense against this version is to show that Descartes has a very different account of how substances are known than Malebranche, and thus that the latter's argument fails as an internal critique. Contrary to Malebranche, Descartes does not hold that having a clear idea of a substance requires having *a priori* knowledge of all of its possible modifications (in the restricted sense detailed in section 2.2.). He rejects Malebranche's *a priori*

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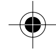
on him. That person is assured that everything she presently clearly and distinctly perceives—*or* merely remembers so perceiving in the past—is true. In short, that person has achieved *scientia* (Fifth Meditation, AT 7:69–70, CSM 2:48). Also see Letter to Regius, AT 3:64–65; CSM 3:147.

[28] This is a paraphrase of Descartes's remarks at the beginning of the Fifth Meditation (AT 7:63, CSM 2:44).



principle[29] as a necessary and/or sufficient condition on knowledge. Before turning to Descartes' positive account of how substances are known, however, we begin with an important ambiguity in Malebranche's use of the term "modification" and with a peculiarity in the kinds of examples that he proffers of the modifications of corporeal substance. Much of the force of the *A Priori* Argument trades on using the term "modifications" (*manières d'être*) in such a loose manner so as to include the "properties" of geometrical figures. As we shall see, Descartes would regard this move as highly suspicious.

When Malebranche denies in the second premise of the *A Priori* Argument that we can know the mind's modifications *a priori*, it is natural to wonder whether he is referring to particular properties, general properties, or both. As is well known, Descartes drew an important distinction between two kinds of affections of finite substances, *viz.* modes and attributes. Broadly speaking, attributes are unchanging, determinable properties and modes are determinate but variable instances of them. Malebranche's invocation of the term "modifications" naturally leads one to think he is referring exclusively to particular properties or modes in Descartes' sense, but his examples defy this expectation. In the case of body, Malebranche cites shape and mobility as two of the "modifications" which can be known *a priori*, but of course these are general, determinable properties (see e.g. Elucidation 11, OCM 3:164; LO:633). To be sure, he also lists "particular"[30] properties, such as the fact that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, but the point is that he uses the term "modification" quite broadly. In fact, in one of his replies to Arnauld, he explicitly distinguishes general properties from particular ones and insists that *a priori* knowledge of a substance encompasses both.[31]

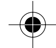
Given this broad use of the term "modification," it is interesting to point out here in Descartes's defense that one can know at least some of the general properties of the mind *a priori*. Just as we can know that body is capable of shape and motion, we can know, for example, that the mind is capable of thought and volition—that it has passive and active aspects. The *res cogitans* proof in the Second Meditation is intended to demonstrate this very point. Applying the method of doubt, Descartes discovers that there is only one thing (besides his existence) that cannot be doubted at this point in the *Meditations*, namely that he is thinking. Doubting or, more exactly, attempting to doubt, that one is thinking is akin to trying to exclude thought from the idea of oneself that Descartes later claims is innate.[32] By means of the method of doubt, the meditator discovers that thought is contained in the idea of the self and cannot be excluded by a clear and distinct intellectual operation. Further analysis of the attribute of thought reveals that

[29] Again, this is what we are calling the first premise of Malebranche's *A Priori* Argument. See section 2.1.

[30] We set this term in scare quotes because although Malebranche presents geometrical properties as examples of particular properties, we show below that they in fact are more akin to Cartesian attributes, which are general.

[31] "One is acquainted with a thing by its idea, when one contemplates this idea, one can know . . . its general properties, that which it contains and that which it excludes, and when one applies oneself to contemplate the general properties, one can discover there an infinite number of particular properties" (OCM 6:160).

[32] Third Meditation, AT 7:51; CSM 2:35.



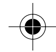
there are various modes of perception and that the mind is a volitional thing, i.e. a thing that affirms, denies, etc. (AT 7:26–28, CSM 2:18–19) All of this is discovered *a priori* from our innate idea of self.

With respect to attributes, then, there appears to be an important symmetry between our knowledge of body and our knowledge of mind. Our knowledge of the modes of substances, however, is much more complicated and will occupy us throughout much of this section. We begin that topic with a consideration of the modes of body. When citing examples of the "modifications" of body, although he sometimes mentions shape and mobility (in general), Malebranche focuses primarily on the "properties" of geometrical figures. In some contexts, he even speaks carelessly of two-dimensional geometrical objects as if they were corporeal substances and treats their properties as analogues of the sensory modalities of the mind:

> Regarding bodies, or particular extended things, as, for example, a triangle, I have a clear idea of it, because I know that it is a space bounded by three lines. . . . [I]t is certain that if one considers well this idea of a triangle, one will discover that its three angles are equal to two right angles: it is equal to the rectangle made from its base and from the middle of its height, etc. But for particular souls, or their modifications, as, for example, the pain of gout, the taste of a fruit; I know it only through inner sensation. (OCM 6:161–62)

There is something very misleading about treating geometrical objects as corporeal substances and the "properties" that can be demonstrated of these objects as their modes. Surely, there is a strong philosophical presumption against the existence of perfect geometrical objects in nature. Such a view seems highly implausible on its face; so much so that it is difficult to name a single philosopher historically who affirmed the existence of geometrical objects outside the mind in any but a third realm. Descartes himself explicitly denies that such objects exist in nature. In the Fifth Replies, we are told that there are no "true triangles" in the world, nor any points or lines, if for no other reason than there are no corporeal substances having less than three dimensions. Given the nature of matter as extension in length, breadth, and depth, there can be no bodies "which have length but no breadth, or breadth but no depth" (AT 7:381–82, CSM 2:262). As for solid geometry, Descartes seems also to rule out the existence of perfect cubes, spheres, tetrahedrons, etc., as there are no objects in the world with perfectly straight edges or surfaces. In this context he appeals to empirical considerations regarding macroscopic objects: any lines or surfaces appearing to be straight or uniform are in fact quite irregular when examined under a magnifying glass (ibid.). But his conception of body as pure extension would seem to provide strong *a priori* grounds for rejecting the *very possibility* of bodies with perfect geometrical shapes.

One way to think about this issue is to ask what it would take for there to be perfect solids in nature. For one thing, it would require bodies whose superficies were "real" in the sense that they were distinct from the superficies of other bodies and retained their identity over time. But there appear to be only two ways in which these requirements could be satisfied: 1) if there were immaterial forms à la the Scholastics or 2) if bodies were located in a void. If, as on the first proposal, bodies were composites of matter and form, then the form, say, of a tetrahedron, could account for its distinctive shape and also enable it to maintain its shape over



time despite whatever other changes it might undergo. On the second proposal, the presence of vacua between bodies could distinguish the surface of one body from that of another, and could also enable a body to maintain its shape so long as it did not collide with other bodies. Descartes of course famously rejects the existence of forms and the void based on his conception of body as pure extension, and it is precisely because of this conception that there are no resources within his system for distinguishing the surface of one body from that of another.[33] The Cartesian universe is a plenum such that any given body shares a surface with at least one other body. In discussing transubstantiation at various places in his writings, Descartes explicitly acknowledges this point and underscores the difficulty it poses for the possibility of a real surface:

> This surface intermediate between the air and the bread does not differ in reality from the surface of the bread, or from the surface of the air touching the bread; these three surfaces are in fact a single thing and differ only in relation to our thought. (Letter to Mesland; February 9, 1645; AT 4:164; CSMK 3:241)[34]

Descartes observes here that the surface of one body, the surface of the body that surrounds it, and the interface between them are identical in reality. In effect, there is a merely a conceptual distinction between them. Extending this point to the whole of the physical universe, there can be no real surfaces—and thus no perfect solids—in nature.

At first glance, the impossibility of perfect solids in nature may seem to defy the mathematical character of Descartes's scientific project and its "geometrization" of nature. Of particular interest here are 1) the identification of matter with geometrical extension and the associated claim that matter is the subject-matter of pure mathematics[35] and 2) Descartes's remark to Mersenne that "my entire physics is nothing but geometry" (July 27, 1638; AT 2:268; CSMK 3:119). But such pronouncements must be interpreted very carefully. In the second case, Descartes is making a point not about the ontological status of geometrical objects but about the form of genuine scientific explanations: all physical phenomena are to be explained in terms of the size, shape, and (above all) motion of the parts of geometrical extension (rather than in terms of substantial forms and other occult entities countenanced by the Scholastics). In fact, the remark to Mersenne anticipates a fuller and more famous statement about the relation between Cartesian physics and geometry in the *Principles*:

> I recognize no matter in corporeal things apart from that which the geometers call quantity, and take as the object of their demonstrations, i.e. that to which every kind of division, shape and motion is applicable. Moreover, my consideration of such

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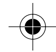
[33] One might be tempted to invoke motion to individuate a body's surface. After all, Descartes affirms that the shape of a body depends on its motion (see e.g. *Principles* 4:200, AT 8A:323; CSM 1:286). But given his circular and relativistic definition of motion, there are several notorious problems in trying to use it to individuate. See Daniel Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 175–81. Descartes's physics also seems to entail that *all* bodies are in motion and constantly being divided *ad indefinitum*, which means that their surfaces are changing at every instant. See Alan Nelson, "Micro-Chaos and Idealization in Cartesian Physics," *Philosophical Studies* 77 (1995): 377–91.

[34] Also see Fourth Replies, AT 7:250f; CSM 2:174f and Sixth Replies, AT 7:433–34; CSM 2:292–93.

[35] See e.g. the Fifth and Sixth Meditations, AT 7:71; CSM 2:49–50.



> matter involves absolutely nothing apart from these divisions, shapes and motions. . . . *And since all natural phenomena can be explained in this way*, . . . I do not think that any other principles are either admissible or desirable in physics. (2:64, AT 8A:78; CSM 1:247, our emphasis)

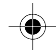
As for the first point, Descartes thinks that geometry and physics share the same object or subject-matter, but they regard this object in different ways. Toward the end of his life, he reportedly told Burman that physics regards matter "as something actually and specifically existing. Mathematics, on the other hand, considers its object merely as possible, i.e. as something which does not actually exist in space but is capable of so doing" (AT 5:160, CSMK 3:343). To unpack this modal claim, one must turn to two different contexts within Descartes' work—the passage from the Fifth Replies considered above and another passage from the *Rules*. In the former, he states that geometrical figures are "regarded not as [corporeal] substances but as boundaries [*termini*] within which a substance is contained" (AT 7:381, CSM 2:262). This statement strongly suggests that geometrical figures are idealizations of corporeal substances. Such figures are generated in thought when we regard the superficies of a corporeal substance in an abstract and idealized way. Strictly speaking, geometrical objects do not exist in nature; however, we abstract to such objects in thought by considering actual bodies or *res extensa* as a whole.

In Rule 14, Descartes makes this point more explicitly, and even warns of the dangers of reifying geometrical objects, so abstracted. He notes that when doing mathematics one must not lose sight of the fact that one is regarding corporeal substance in an abstract way:

> For example, when the problem concerns number, we imagine some subject which is measurable in terms of a set of units. The intellect of course may for the moment confine its attention to this set; nevertheless we must see to it that, in doing so, it does not draw a conclusion which implies that the thing numbered has been excluded from our conception. Those who attribute wonderful and mysterious properties to numbers do just that. They would surely not believe so firmly in such sheer nonsense, if they did not think that number is something distinct from things numbered. *Likewise, when we are concerned with a figure, we should bear in mind that we are dealing with an extended subject, conceived simply with respect to its having a shape.* (AT 10:445–46, CSM 1:61, our emphasis)

Descartes's main agendum in this passage is clearly to warn us about the dangers of "Platonizing" numbers and geometrical objects; because of their abstract character, "arithmetic and geometry lead us astray here in spite of their being the most certain of all the arts."[36] But he also reveals his view of the relation between

[36] Readers of Descartes's published work may be surprised that he would take such a line here, as he is sometimes thought to endorse a Platonic account of mathematical objects in the Fifth Meditation, as part of a theory of "true and immutable natures." See Anthony Kenny, "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths," *Journal of Philosophy* LXVII (1970), 685–700 and *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), 146–71. One of us has argued elsewhere, however, that Descartes is not a Platonist but a conceptualist regarding mathematical objects and all universals. See Nolan, "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997): 169–94 and "Descartes's Theory of Universals," *Philosophical Studies* 89 (1998): 161–80. Also see Vere Chappell, "Descartes's Ontoslogy," *Topoi* 16 (1997): 111–27. This view is expressed most clearly in the *Principles*, where he says that number and all other universals, when regarded in the abstract, are merely ideas or "modes of thinking" (1:58, AT 8A:27; CSM 1:212). Such passages provide further evidence that mathematical objects do not exist in the Cartesian universe.



mathematical objects and corporeal substances. Although mathematical objects such as figures and numbers are not bodies existing in nature, they are abstracted by the intellect from our idea of body, and therefore should not be treated as something distinct from that body.[37] Number, for example, is not something distinct from things numbered. In the last line of this citation, Descartes also confirms our reading of the passage from the Fifth Replies: when considering a geometrical figure—be it solid or plane—we are abstractly regarding an extended substance, and attending not to its actual shape but to the bare fact that it has a shape, which we then delimit in various ways in our thought.

The upshot of this discussion is that Cartesian geometrical objects are not corporeal substances but idealizations that cannot exist outside thought.[38] This means that when arguing that our knowledge of body is superior to our knowledge of mind, Malebranche has not found the proper analogue in the corporeal world for our sensory modalities. Perhaps there is no analogue. What Malebranche needs to locate is the mode of an actual body analogous, say, to the taste of a pineapple. But he explicitly denies that we can know the modes of actual bodies *a priori*: "I know the nature of the properties of extension, but I do not know the internal configuration of the parts of marble; what makes the marble what it is, and not brick or lead" (OCM 6:98).[39]

One should conclude from these considerations that the *a priori* principle is too strong, such that even the idea of body fails to satisfy it. We can know the properties of geometrical figures *a priori*, but they are only idealized objects that cannot exist in nature as such. But if the idea of body fails to satisfy the *a priori* principle, then what reason do we have for supposing that the idea of mind must satisfy it? Malebranche's argument hinges on the purported analogy between the clear ideas of mind and body.[40]

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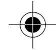
[37] On the abstractive character of geometrical objects, also see AT 10:448–49, CSM 1:63.

[38] Malebranche concedes at times that geometrical objects are ideal: "Nature is not abstract; the levers and balls of mechanics are not the lines and circles of mathematics" (*Search* 6.1.4, OCM LO 428).

[39] Malebranche makes this point in response to an objection raised by Arnauld that bears some slight resemblance to ours. Arnauld observes that knowledge of the properties of particular bodies, such as those responsible for the explosive effects of gunpowder, derives from experience alone and cannot be discovered in the idea of extension (TFI:142). See Pierre-Sylvain Régis, *Cours Entier de Philosophie ou System General selon les Principles de M. Descartes*, vol. 1 (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), 165 for a similar point. Arnauld tries to use this point to establish that, on Malebranche's (false) definition of a clear idea, the idea of body is equally unclear as that of the mind. But Malebranche has a decisive response, namely that he was not claiming to know *a priori* the modifications of particular bodies, such as that of marble. In an attempt to defend Malebranche here, Schmaltz observes that when we perceive a column of marble through a clear idea of extension, "we consider it abstractly as a purely geometrical object. . . . The clear idea of extension reveals only those possible properties that pertain to the column *so considered*" (*Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 68). Granted, this response refutes Arnauld, who simply misunderstood Malebranche's argument, but serves to confirm our objection that Malebranche is double-dealing. He *should* have been focusing on the real properties of particular bodies and not merely their idealized counterparts in geometry. Given the analogy with modes of mind, Arnauld appears to have assumed rather innocently that Malebranche *was* referring to the former.

[40] One might try to defend Malebranche here by urging that the knowledge in question is of the counterfactual conditional: "if the surface of a body were (perfectly) triangular, then its angles would equal two right angles," etc. But on Descartes's view there is no way of making sense of the antecedent, for, as we have argued, geometrical objects *cannot* exist in nature. It would be better to express the



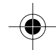
4.2. The Relation between our Knowledge of Substances and our Knowledge of Modes

We turn now to Descartes's account of how substances are known. This discussion will show why he rejects Malebranche's *a priori* principle and also uncover the proper relation and order between our knowledge of a substance and our knowledge of its modes. The clearest and most careful statement of Descartes's epistemology of substances is contained in the *Principles of Philosophy*, in a series of articles devoted to explaining how things are known, and how they must be regarded in order to perceive them clearly and distinctly. In *Principles* 1:52, Descartes begins by stating a general principle that is often associated with his epistemology, namely that substances are known through their attributes. Here the term "attributes" is being used as a blanket expression to include both attributes and modes in the strict senses of those terms. In effect, he is affirming that a substance is known through any of its affections whatsoever. In making this point, he appears to be concerned exclusively with our knowledge of the *existence* of substances:

> we cannot initially become aware of a substance merely through its being an existing thing, since this alone does not of itself have any effect on us. We can, however, easily come to know a substance by one of its attributes, in virtue of the common notion that nothingness possesses no attributes. . . . Thus, if we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there must also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed. (AT 8A:25, CSM 1:210)

In the subsequent article in this passage, however, Descartes makes clear that he is concerned not simply with our knowledge of the *existences* of finite substances, but also, and more particularly, with our knowledge of their *essences*. For this reason, he introduces an important addendum to the principle already stated: although a substance can be known through any affection at all, it is best known through its "principal attribute," which constitutes its essence or nature (1.53, AT 8A:25; CSM 1:210). For Descartes, the principal attributes or essences of mind and body are of course thought and extension, respectively. Thus, body is best known through extension and mind is best known through the attribute of thought. In claiming that substances are best known through their essences Descartes is following tradition and not saying anything to which his Aristotelian-schooled predecessors would likely object. But his reason for endorsing this traditional view appears to be unique. A substance is known best through its principal attribute because all the modes of a substance are "referred" to it. By "referred" Descartes means "understood" or "conceived through;" all the modes of a substance are made intelligible through the principal attribute. For example, in the case of body, a determinate motion is "unintelligible" except as motion in an object with spatial dimension that traverses a certain distance. Likewise, acts of imagination, sensation, and will are understood only as modes *of* a thinking thing (ibid., CSM 1:210–11). In sum, for Descartes there is a very tight conceptual connection between a substance's principal attribute and its other properties; the principal attribute of

objection via an alternative conditional: if a particular body were idealized to a geometrical figure, then its angles would equal two right angles. This formulation, however, only underscores our point that geometrical objects are ideal.



a substance is conceptually prior to its modes.[41] We are now well placed to understand the relation between articles 52 and 53: a substance can be known through any property whatsoever because if that property is not the principal attribute itself, then it must be conceived through the principal attribute.[42, 43]

What is distinctive then about Descartes's account of how substances are known is that it places primary emphasis on the principal attribute. One does not have knowledge 1) of body until one conceives it as a wholly extended thing and 2) of mind until one conceives it as a purely thinking thing. Contrary to Malebranche, Descartes makes no claims about the necessity of knowing *a priori* any or all of the possible modes or particular properties of a substance. Rather, Descartes's position is that one can know the principal attribute *a priori* and if one happens to consider one of the modes of a substance, it can be understood only through the principal attribute.

Knowledge of the modes of Cartesian substances might be aptly described as "bottom-up" rather than "top-down." This ordering is in keeping with Descartes's ontology, which distinguishes three degrees or levels of reality—infinite substantial, finite substantial, and modal.[44] The difference between these levels is measured by a thing's ontological dependence (or *in*dependence): as an infinite and completely independent substance, God enjoys the highest degree of reality, followed by finite, created substances which depend on God—but nothing else—for

[41] Following Descartes, we omit consideration of what might be termed the "common" attributes such as existence and duration, which we later learn pertain to both bodies and minds (see *Principles* 1:55–6). For a discussion of these attributes, see Chappell, "Descartes's Ontology" and Nolan, "Reductionism and Nominalism in Descartes's Theory of Attributes," *Topoi* 16 (1997): 129–40.

[42] Incidentally, this account of the conceptual relation between the essence of a substance and its modes is confirmed later in article 61, where Descartes asserts that we recognize a modal distinction "from the fact that we can clearly perceive a substance apart from the mode which we say differs from it, whereas we cannot, conversely, understand the mode apart from the substance" (AT 8A:29; CSM 1:214).

[43] In addition to claiming that a substance is known through its attributes, Descartes sometimes adds that a substance is better known the more attributes we know of it. For example, in attempting to defend the claim that mind is better known than body, he writes in the Fifth Replies: "I have never thought that anything more is required to reveal a substance than its various attributes; thus the more attributes of a given substance we know, the more perfectly we understand its nature" (AT 7:360; CSM 2:249). Many commentators have found this principle to be highly implausible, as it seems to stress the quantity of knowledge over the quality. Jolley, for example, observes: "I may be able to list more properties of my computer than of my pencil-sharpener, but it would hardly be convincing to say that I thereby know the nature of the former better than the nature of the latter" ("Malebranche on the Soul," 45). Also see Schmaltz (*Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 37f) and Wilson (*Descartes*, 96f). There is a way of reading Descartes' remarks in the Fifth Replies, however, in line with the passages from the *Principles* that lends them greater plausibility and coherence. If the modes of a substance must be conceived through its principal attribute, then there is a sense in which the nature of that substance is better known the more properties that are known of it. Each of the other affections of a substance becomes a vehicle for knowing its principal attribute or nature. Descartes is not claiming that our knowledge is increased quantitatively the more properties that are known of a substance, but rather that a substance is known better the more distinct its nature becomes, and this is facilitated by perceiving that nature through a greater number of properties. The parallel passage in the *Principles* 1:11 admits of a similar reading (AT 8A:8–9; CSM 1:196). We present this interpretation, however, merely as a suggestion. Nothing in our argument depends on it, for in both these passages Descartes is arguing for the strong thesis that mind is better known than body which, as was noted in the Introduction, is beyond the scope of this paper.

[44] See e.g. Second Replies, Axiom 6, AT 7:165; CSM 2:117.

their existence. As variable properties of finite substances, modes have the lowest degree of reality, lower even than a substance's principal attribute or essence, which Descartes insists is merely rationally distinct from the substance itself (*Principles* 1:62, AT 8A:30; CSM 1:214). The modes of a substance are thus of a lower ontological order than its essence or principal attribute, but in some sense "determine" or limit that attribute. It is only natural then that the modes of a substance would be conceived "up through" the attribute that they determine.

This account of the conceptual relation between substances and modes is completely contrary to Malebranche's *a priori* principle, which asserts that if we had a clear idea of a substance then we could know *a priori* any given modification of that substance. In effect, Malebranche has mistakenly supposed that knowledge of modes for Descartes is top-down.[45] Malebranche makes this mistake, we suggest, because he takes geometrical properties to be the paradigm of modes (or "particular properties") of body. The likely inspiration for this view, and for the *a priori* principle itself, is the Fifth Meditation, where Descartes affirms that knowledge of geometrical properties is top-down. Simply by inspecting the clear and distinct idea of a triangle, for example, one can discover that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, that the sum of its angles are equal to two right angles, etc. (AT 7:64, CSM 2:45). However, as discussed above, geometrical figures are not corporeal substances, but mere idealizations that have no reality outside thought. Descartes was not intending this account of how geometrical properties are known to be the model for how the modes of actual bodies, or any substances, are known. Indeed, in the Fifth Meditation and in the First Replies, Descartes treats geometrical properties on the model of attributes rather than of modes. For example, when contemplating a triangle clearly and distinctly, we regard it *as if* it were a corporeal substance and *as if* the fact that it has angles equal to two right angles were an attribute of that substance, which cannot be excluded from it in thought (anymore than extension can be excluded from our clear and distinct idea of body) (First Replies, AT: 117–18; CSM 2:84).[46] Again, by stressing geometry as the paradigm, Malebranche has not found the proper analogue for our sensory modalities. Knowledge of geometrical properties is indeed top-down, but such properties are not modes of bodies. Knowing that a triangle has angles equal to two right angles is more akin to knowing that the essential attribute of body is extension or that the principal attribute of mind is thought. But knowledge in all three of these cases is top-down and thus on a par.[47]

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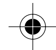
[45] We credit Nelson for suggesting this way of making the point.

[46] In the *Principles*, Descartes states that the inability to exclude a property from a substance in our thought shows that it qualifies as an attribute (in the strict sense) of that substance (1:62, AT 8A:30; CSM 1:214). It is only because Descartes treats geometrical properties on the model of attributes that his analogy in the Fifth Meditation between the ontological argument and a geometrical demonstration makes sense. Descartes argues that existence, which he regards as an attribute, is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being in the same way that having angles equal to two right angles is contained in the idea of a triangle (AT 7:66; CSM 2:46.) On the status of existence as an attribute, see *Principles* 1:56, AT 8A:26; CSM 1:211–12.

[47] Malebranche sometimes writes as if the debate with the Cartesians depended on whether we can know the mind's *capacities a priori*. By means of the clear idea of extension, we know that bodies are *capable of* shape and mobility. Similarly, if we had a clear idea of the mind, we would (or at least be able to) know *a priori* that the mind is *capable of* experiencing various colors, sounds, tastes, pains, etc.



4.3 The Role of the Imagination in Forming Clear and Distinct Ideas of Body

So far we have argued that Cartesian knowledge of extension and of the properties of geometrical figures is on a par with our knowledge of thought, the principal attribute of mind. But this involves an over-simplification that exalts our knowledge of body more than it should. Descartes does indeed affirm that we attain knowledge of corporeal substance by clearly and distinctly perceiving it as a wholly extended thing, and that its modes must be conceived through its principal attribute. But he does not hold that this knowledge is *a priori* in the way that Malebranche and his contemporary advocates stress. In a few important places in the corpus, both early and late, Descartes describes the central role that the corporeal imagination plays in our ability to form clear and distinct ideas of body and various geometrical figures. In the *Rules*, for example, he asserts that if one is trying to conceive something non-corporeal, the imagination and senses must be constrained so as not to hamper the intellect. "If, however, the intellect proposes to examine something which can be referred to the body, the idea of that thing must be formed as distinctly as possible in the imagination" (Rule 12, AT 10:416–17; CSM 1:43). To be sure, only the intellect is capable of perceiving the truth, "but it has to be assisted by imagination. . . . " (ibid., AT 10:411; CSM 1:39) The role of the imagination as an aid to the intellect in its conception of corporeal nature persists in Descartes's mature writings. In the Fifth Meditation, for example, one finds him speaking of distinctly perceiving the properties of a triangle as a result of "imagining" such a figure (AT 7:64; CSM 2:44–45). More notably, in a letter written later to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes urges that body can be known by the intellect alone, "but much better by the intellect aided by the imagination. . . . " He adds: "the study of mathematics, which exercises mainly the imagination in the consideration of shapes and motions, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body" (28 June 1643; AT 3:691–92; CSMK 3:227). In geometry, the imagination is necessary not simply for attaining clear and distinct ideas of geometrical figures, but also as a heuristic for discovering various properties of those figures.[48] As Descartes correctly recognized, the geometer employs diagrams, constructions,

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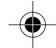
Philosophers often speak loosely of "capacities" but, strictly speaking, there is no place for such items within Descartes's austere, substance-mode ontology. Echoing this sentiment himself, Malebranche sometimes disparages mental capacities as reminiscent of occult powers and faculties countenanced by the Scholastics, and urges that they be banished from the true ontology (Elucidation 10, OCM 3:144; LO:622).

Perhaps Malebranche's point, however, could be reformulated in terms of Cartesian attributes. After all, Descartes regards shape and mobility as attributes of body, and thinks they can be known simply by inspecting our clear and distinct idea of extension. But are the "capacities" for pain and for having a sensation of red, etc. "attributes" of the mind? We think not. Descartes certainly never treats them as such in his work. On the contrary, he regards occurrent pains and particular tastes, etc. as modes of *thought*—the principal attribute of the mind (see *Principles* 1:68, AT 8A:33; CSM 1:217, discussed below). It is true that we distinguish between various kinds of sensations—pains from pleasures, sensations of red from sensations of green, etc.—but we do so on the basis of their phenomenological character alone, not on the basis of any ontological differences. An occurrent pain (or the capacity for it) is not a distinct ontological category from an occurrent pleasure; pain and pleasure do not have distinct "essences" that can serve as objects of knowledge. All sensations are simply modes of thought.

[48] Wilson (*Descartes*, 171) concurs with this reading of the role of the imagination in Cartesian mathematical science.



symbols of various sorts, etc. in order to attain clear and distinct perceptions of these properties. But if the imagination is necessary in this way, then our knowledge of the modifications of extended substance cannot be *a priori*, for Descartes held that when using the imagination, the mind is directed toward images depicted on the brain.[49]

Interestingly, Malebranche also conceives the imagination as an aid to the intellect in its conception of geometrical extension, but assigns it a more restricted role, namely to preserve the mind's attention. Unlike Descartes, he also appears to regard it only as a useful aid, not as one necessary to forming clear ideas of geometrical objects (*Search* 6.1.4, OCM 2:262; LO:419f). To account for this difference, it helps to recall that for Malebranche the idea of body and the ideas of various geometrical figures are intrinsically clear and distinct as immutable and eternal archetypes within the mind of God. And, once one has learned to distinguish these ideas from sensations, accessing them is simply a matter of directing one's attention. But if Malebranche must appeal to his own account of the ontology of thought to support his criticisms of Descartes's theory of the mind, then his project is once again less plausible as an internal critique. His claims about the impoverished character of our knowledge of the mind cannot be deduced from a well-defined set of assumptions that he shares with his predecessor. Far from privileging knowledge of body, and putting it forth as the standard that knowledge of the mind must meet, Descartes thinks that we only attain such knowledge by means of an additional cognitive faculty that relies on sensory images.

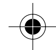
4.4 *Human Knowledge vs. Divine Knowledge*

Even if our knowledge of body is not *a priori*, Malebranche and his defenders will continue to stress that the kind of knowledge obtained in this instance is superior to the kind of knowledge one has of mind. This again is the force of Malebranche's distinction between knowledge through ideas and knowledge through consciousness. We have the former kind of knowledge in the case of body, but even after we experience various sensations we know them only imperfectly through consciousness. We do not know them through ideas. But why suppose that such knowledge of our sensations is even possible and that it is different in kind from knowledge through consciousness? Is Malebranche demanding the impossible? Malebranche's answer is that this is the kind of knowledge that God possesses. Like most Christian philosophers in this tradition, Malebranche held that God is impassible and hence does not have sensations. But since (following Malebranche's occasionalism) God causes our sensations and is omniscient he must know them in some sense:

> God knows pain, pleasure, heat, and so on, but He does not feel these things! He knows pain because He knows what that modification of the soul is in which pain consists. He knows it because He alone causes it in us . . . and He knows well what He does. In short, He knows it because His knowledge has no limits. But He does not feel it, for He would be unhappy. To know pain is not then to feel it. (DM 3:34; OCM 12:66)[50]

[49] *Conversation with Burman*, AT 5:162; CSMK 3:144–45.

[50] Also see OCM 2:97, 6:162, and 17–1:289.



In some passages, Malebranche suggests that what knowledge through ideas involves here is the ability to give definitions. Indeed, while we can give definitions of geometrical figures, and thereby make them known to others, we cannot define the modifications of the mind: "I can think of a circle, whenever I wish to think of it and can make another person think of it by means of my words, but I am not able to make anyone feel my pleasure, my pain, etc." (OCM 6:160). Similarly, in the *Search* he writes: "since we know neither the soul nor its modifications through ideas. . . . it is clear that if someone had never seen color or felt heat, he could not be made to know these sensations through any definition of them that might be given him" (3:2:7, OCM 1:45; LO:238).

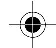
In characterizing Malebranche's critique, Schmaltz places special emphasis on these passages, arguing that the distinction between knowledge through ideas and knowledge through consciousness (or inner sentiment) can be understood in terms of Thomas Nagel's recent distinction between subjective and objective views of the world:

> God has an objective view that allows Him to know the aspects of the soul that explain how it can have modifications with certain phenomenological features. . . . Such knowledge is to be contrasted with our inner sentiment of our own sensory modifications. While this sentiment reveals the phenomenological features of these modifications, it cannot tell us how it is that our soul is capable of modifications with just these features. . . . [O]ur inner sentiment yields a subjective view of our soul that is of a radically inferior sort than God's objective view of it through a clear idea.[51]

Schmaltz seems right about the nature of Malebranche's position, and the distinction between subjective and objective views is useful in clarifying it. But we think this aspect of Malebranche's critique raises new problems of its own from within a strictly Cartesian framework. Descartes would concur that there are two perspectives that can be taken on our sensations, though both are ones that we as finite thinkers are able to occupy. First, following Schmaltz, we can regard our sensations "subjectively" in terms of their phenomenological features. Most people regard their sensations in this way, though considered as such they tend to be highly confused. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, however, Descartes suggests another way of regarding our sensations—indeed, the only way to regard them clearly and distinctly: "In order to distinguish what is clear in this connection from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and color and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts" (1:68, AT 8A:33, CSM 1:217). Commentators often misunderstand this passage for they fail to appreciate how it depends on *Principles* 1:53, as discussed above.[52]

[51] *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 72–3 (also see 41f).

[52] As a result of remarks about materially false sensations in the Third Meditation, some commentators have also thought that Descartes is not really committed to the position that sensations can be clearly and distinct perceived or at least that he is not entitled to it (see e.g. Schmaltz [*Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 81f] and Wilson [*Descartes*, 110–19]). Such writers have taken the theory of material falsity to entail that the confusion attending the ordinary person's sensations is intrinsic and thus incurable. But in a series of articles towards the end of the *Principles* (1:66–1:73), and more briefly in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes locates the source of our sensory confusion in the tendency to make false judgments in youth that later become habituated. Although it requires great effort and training, the dedicated meditator is capable of dispelling this confusion (AT 8A:32–7, 7:82–3; CSM 1:216–20, 2:56–7). When he claims in *Principles* 1:68 that we can clearly and distinctly perceive sensations as



Colors, sounds, pain, etc. are merely sensations or thoughts, which is to say they are nothing more than modes of thinking. As such, they are intelligible or capable of being perceived clearly and distinctly only through the mind's principal attribute. Schmaltz asserts that God has an objective view of our sensations "that reveals them as they are in themselves."[53] But regarding our sensations as modes of thought is objective in this sense insofar as it reveals their true nature. Granted, this way of considering our sensations does not yield definitions, though on Descartes's view thought is simple, and the attempt to give logical definitions of what is "already very simple and self-evident" only makes matters obscure (*Principles* 1:10, AT 8A:8; CSM 1:196).

Malebranche would be unsatisfied with this answer, for reasons that Schmaltz rightly observes:

> In order to have an objective view of our sensations, we need to know not only that they are modifications of our soul, *but also what changes in the soul make them possible.* According to Malebranche, until we obtain this additional knowledge we cannot claim to see our sensory modifications . . . from a God's-eye view that reveals them as they are in themselves.[54]

There are at least three problems with this point. First, it assumes that thought has a complex structure that accounts for differences in the phenomenological features of our sensations. But it is difficult to comprehend how Cartesian thought *could* have a complex structure without being corporeal.[55] Indeed, in an unfortunate metaphor, Schmaltz writes: "We have access to the appearances of sounds [and other sensations] but not to the objective manner in which they modify the ectoplasm, as it were, of the soul."[56] Although it is only a metaphor, the reference to "ectoplasm" presupposes that the mind has parts or "aspects"[57] that can be configured in various ways like the body. One is reminded here of Gassendi's criticism of Descartes's claim in the Second Meditation that the mind is a thinking thing. Gassendi objects that Descartes is telling us something we already knew; what is wanted is a "chemical analysis" of the mind of the sort that can be given of

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modes of mind, Descartes is assuming the position of just such a meditator. One attraction of this reading is that it shows Descartes to be a consistent thinker. It seems unlikely that he would have contradicted himself in the Third and Sixth Meditations. He also began writing the *Principles* just as he was putting the finishing touches on the *Meditations*. For a detailed account of material falsity that shows it to be consistent with these other passages, see Nelson, "The Falsity in Sensory Ideas: Descartes and Arnauld," *Interpreting Arnauld*, Elmar Kremer, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 13–32.

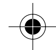
[53] *Malebanche's Theory of the Soul*,,74

[54] *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 74 (our emphasis) .

[55] Jolley has objected here in conversation that it is possible to conceive of thought as having a kind of structure without being extended, to wit, Leibniz's theory of mental dispositions. Leibniz asserts that such dispositions are grounded in unconscious perceptions (*petite perceptions*), just as physical dispositions such as fragility are reducible to the microstructure of a fragile object (see Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 159f). It is not clear, however, that unconscious perceptions would constitute the kind of structure that Malebranche has in view. More importantly, neither Descartes nor Malebranche could countenance Leibniz's notion of unconscious thought. For Descartes in particular, all thought is conscious and transparent to itself. Thus, if thought had a structure, we would be immediately aware of it. See Margaret Wilson (*Descartes*, 58–60) on the doctrine of mental transparency.

[56] *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 76 (also see 123).

[57] A term Schmaltz uses in the passage cited above (72–73).



a corporeal substance such as wine. For Gassendi, thought is not the essence of the mind but only its outer appearance, which is to be explained in terms of an "inner substance" or substratum (Fifth Objections, AT 7:276–77; CSM 2:192–93). Malebranche's polemic is sometimes compared with Gassendi's here, though one likes to think that the former is more sophisticated insofar as it respects Cartesian dualism and is non-question-begging. But if Schmaltz is correct, this aspect of Malebranche's critique reduces to Gassendism.[58]

A second and more serious problem with Schmaltz's point, and with Malebranche's critique here generally, is that it presupposes an account of divine knowledge and its relation to human knowledge that Descartes would wholeheartedly reject. To motivate the claim that we lack "objective" or *a priori* knowledge of the mind's sensory modalities, Malebranche must appeal to what an omniscient being would know about his creation. He must also take for granted that divine knowledge is the standard of all knowledge, and that the materials for knowledge are universal—that God and human knowers achieve knowledge by accessing the same set of ideas in the divine intellect. In short, he must smuggle in his own theory of Vision in God.[59]

It is well known that Malebranche and other seventeenth-century rationalists assimilate human and divine knowledge to a much greater degree than Descartes. There are deep systematic reasons that Descartes resists this assimilation. The main reason stems from Descartes' rejection of the medieval theory of divine ideas, which Malebranche saw himself as resuscitating.[60] According to this traditional theory, God knows the natures of creatures, prior to creation, by knowing how these things can imitate or "participate in" his essence. By knowing his own essence in this way, God is said to have "ideas" of all possible beings and these ideas serve as models or archetypes for creation.[61] Malebranche endorses this traditional theory at various places in his work, often citing Aquinas as the source of his inspiration:

> God knows the nature of the soul clearly because He finds in Himself a clear and representative idea of it. God, as Saint Thomas says, knows His substance or His essence perfectly, and as a result He discovers all the ways in which created things can participate in His substance. Hence His substance is truly representative of the soul, because it contains its eternal model or archetype. For God can only draw His knowledge from Himself. He sees in His essence the ideas or essences of all possible beings. . . . (*Search* 4:11, OCM 2:97–98; LO 319)[62]

The theory of divine ideas requires one to posit a gap between God's intellect and will and to suppose that the latter presupposes the former. What God knows is

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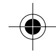
[58] Schmaltz sees himself as trying to distinguish Malebranche's critique from that of Gassendi (ibid., 5–6), as does Jolley—in fact, precisely on this point ("Malebranche on the Soul," 50).

[59] Schmaltz (*Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, 73) appears to concede that Malebranche is presupposing his theory of Vision in God.

[60] One other reason is Descartes's emphasis on the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. We simply cannot specify what God would know given the finitude of our minds, and to suppose that he knows in the way that we do would be to reduce him to the finite (see e.g. First Replies, AT 7:113–14; CSM 2:81–82).

[61] For a classical statement of this theory, see Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*:1.15.2.

[62] In a note to this passage, Malebranche cites the reference to Aquinas. Also see Elucidation 10, OCM 3:149; LO:625.



logically prior to what he wills, whether it is the nature of the soul or any of the other natures that he sees in his essence. Descartes's conception of the divine essence as perfectly simple prevents him from countenancing any such priority. Most Christian philosophers of this tradition endorse the doctrine of divine simplicity, but Descartes stresses this doctrine to a greater degree and understands it more strictly.[63] In particular, he takes it to entail that "In God, willing, understanding, and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually" (Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630; AT 1:153; CSMK 3:25–26).[64] On this view, there are no ideas in the divine intellect prior to creation, for God's intellect just is his will and vice-versa. Descartes takes it as a further consequence of this doctrine that God's will is completely indifferent. Since God understands and wills by one "single identical and perfectly simple act," there is nothing constraining his will or impelling it one direction rather than another, not even something within his intellect:

> It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true . . . prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. (Sixth Replies, AT 7:432; CSM 2:291)

It might seem ironic that Descartes would reject the traditional theory of divine ideas, for he is responsible for reinjecting the term "idea" (*idea*) into the philosophical vocabulary. Indeed, he purports to have used the term "idea" to designate human thought precisely because it was the "standard philosophical term used to refer to the forms of perception belonging to the divine mind," but this is not to draw a parallel between human and divine thought as it is to revolutionize the way the term "idea" is applied (Third Replies, AT 7:181; CSM 2:127).[65] The term that formerly referred to divine thought is now conscripted to designate human cognition exclusively. On this view there is no analogy to be drawn between human and divine cognition, for ideas are regarded as modes or operations of finite minds; God, being infinite and immutable, does not possess changeable modes.[66] If anything, Descartes says we must look to the will, rather than the intellect, as the respect in which finite souls most resemble God.[67]

A third problem with this aspect of Malebranche's critique—and this is closely related to the first two points—is that it assumes that there is something for God to know about our sensations in addition to the fact that they are modes of mind.

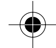
[63] "[T]he unity, simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have" (Third Meditation, AT 7:50; CSM 1:34).

[64] Cf. *Principles* 1:23: "it cannot in any way be supposed that God perceives by means of the senses, but only that he understands and wills. And even his understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by means of operations that are in a certain sense distinct one from another; *we must rather suppose that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything*" (AT 8A:14, CSM 1:201; emphasis added).

[65] By placing ideas in God, Malebranche is obviously harking back to this older tradition. Descartes, by contrast, does not need to posit ideas in God because he does not subscribe to the doctrine that creation requires archetypes.

[66] See e.g. *Principles* I:56, AT 8A:26; CSM 1:211.

[67] See e.g. Fourth Meditation, AT 7:57; CSM 2:40.



For Malebranche there is some underlying "property" of, say, a sensation of red that accounts for its unique phenomenological character, and that distinguishes it from other sensations. But it is open for Descartes to say that it is just a brute product of God's will that our sensory modifications have the particular phenomenological character that they do. As we have seen, Descartes tends to stress the arbitrary and indifferent character of the divine will, especially with respect to the creation of mathematical truths. There is no reason that explains why two plus two equals four or that the angles of a triangle equal two right angles, other than the fact that God willed it.[68] On this analogy, there is also no reason apart from God's will that explains how or why one sensation has a different subjective character than another.

In stressing God's will over his intellect, Descartes has been criticized by Malebranche, Leibniz, and others for rendering creation unintelligible. But from Descartes's perspective, such critics anthropomorphize God by conceiving him on the model of a human engineer who must first know how to create something before actually producing it. This criticism clearly applies to the case of sensation. The larger dialectic shows once again that Malebranche's critique of the Cartesian theory of self-knowledge depends on very different accounts of divine creation and divine knowledge from what Descartes himself holds.

4.5 *Clarity and Distinctness as Criteria of True Ideas*

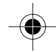
We complete our defense of Descartes with one final consideration concerning his epistemology of substances. This consideration seems decisive not only against Malebranche's *A Priori* Argument, but also against some of the other arguments he puts forth which employ a similar strategy. Each of Malebranche's arguments begins by stating a criterion for clear ideas; Malebranche then claims that the mind fails to satisfy this criterion. The criterion put forth in the *A Priori* Argument can be stated as follows: one has a clear idea of a substance *s* if and only if 1) for any possible modification *m* of *s,* one can know *m a priori.* If we consider some of Malebranche's other arguments, we can glean at least two other criteria: 2) one can know what the purported idea of *s* contains and excludes and 3) one can discover precise relations between the modifications of *s.*[69]

From Descartes's perspective, there is something very odd about Malebranche's project of proposing criteria of clear (and Descartes would add "distinct") ideas, for clarity and distinctness are already criterial. Commentators sometimes complain that Descartes's own criteria lead to an infinite regress, for in order to know that an idea is clear and distinct, one seems to require a further criterion, and so on. Is Malebranche encouraging the regress?

A charitable reading would suggest that Malebranche is trying to replace, not reproduce at a higher level, Descartes's criteria of clarity and distinctness. But this raises a new problem. Why should Descartes accept them? Whether or not one is

[68] God did not "will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary,...it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise" (Sixth Replies, AT 7:432; CSM 2:291).

[69] For the arguments that employ these last two criteria, see Elucidation 11, OCM 3:165f; LO:634f.



persuaded by Descartes's argument for the rule for truth, he is deeply committed to the criteria of clarity and distinctness—and one should add, *at least he has an argument*. Malebranche's own criteria have no basis in Descartes's thought and are introduced without argument. So how can they constitute the basis for an internal critique?[70]

There is an important reason, internal to his own system, that Malebranche wishes to replace Descartes's criteria of clarity and distinctness. As discussed in section 2.1., lurking in the background of Malebranche's denial that we have a clear idea of the mind is a deeper dispute between him and Descartes over the ontology of thought.[71] Malebranche conceives ideas as eternal, immutable, and necessary realities residing in the divine understanding, i.e. as quasi-logical entities. He thinks that Descartes's view of ideas as mind-dependent entities encourages skepticism and, in the words of Jolley, "conflates logic and psychology."[72] In keeping with this criticism, he takes clarity and distinctness to be psychological criteria, which in fact they are. Descartes defines "clarity," for example, in terms of what is present to an attentive mind (*Principles* 1:45, AT 8A:22; CSM 1:207). Descartes also stresses the psychological compulsion that accompanies a clear and distinct idea; when we understand something our will is compelled to affirm it.[73] In light of his alternative conception of the ontological status of ideas, Malebranche seeks criteria that are logical or evidentiary in character.[74] Thus the clear idea of a substance will be infinitely complex, will reveal the substance's possible modifications, and will also reveal the relations between those modifications.[75] But in affirming these criteria, Malebranche has moved far afield from Descartes's own philosophy and once again is no longer engaged in an internal critique.

5. CONCLUSION

Recent commentators have urged that Malebranche mounts a devastating internal critique of Descartes' theory of self-knowledge that demonstrates Descartes is not entitled to claim that he has a clear and distinct idea of mind. Against this view, we have argued that Malebranche's polemic fails as an internal critique be-

[70] In making these points, we are developing an objection that Arnauld had raised in his defense of Descartes. Arnauld accuses Malebranche of creating "his own particular dictionary" in deciding to use the term "clear idea" in the way that he does. Such stipulative definitions, he thinks, can easily be rejected by orthodox Cartesians (TFI:128–29).

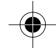
[71] Jolley ("Malebranche on the Soul," 43) concedes that Malebranche sometimes runs together his theory of Vision in God with the claim that we lack a clear idea of the mind, even though they are logically independent. But if Malebranche is indeed engaged in an internal critique of Descartes' theory of the mind, he *ought not* assume the former in order to establish the latter.

[72] *The Light of the Soul*, 55. See Elucidation 10, OCM 3:140; LO:620.

[73] See e.g. the Fourth Meditation, AT 7:58–9; CSM 2:41 and *Principles* 1:43, AT 8A:21; CSM 1:207.

[74] This point is partially owed to Thomas Lennon, who observes that Malebranche's rule for truth is "nonpsychologistic" and makes a normative claim: "when something appears entirely evident, the will is 'obliged' . . . to assent to it. . . . The kind of invincibility, obligation, and necessity here is not causal [as on Descartes' view], still less metaphysical, but evidentiary" ("Malebranche and Method," *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, Steven Nadler, ed. [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 17–18).

[75] Malebranche continues to speak of "clear" ideas, following Descartes, but this is only an expository holdover.



cause it misrepresents several aspects of Descartes's philosophy and relies on features of Malebranche's own system that a more orthodox Cartesian would reject. In a more positive vein, we have tried to illuminate some of the more opaque aspects of Descartes's philosophy, especially his account of self-knowledge and knowledge of substances generally. We have also exposed several significant differences between Descartes and Malebranche's respective philosophies that are not readily apparent. They hold radically different accounts of *scientia,* of what qualifies as a mode of body, of the epistemology of substances and their modes, of the role of the imagination in forming clear and distinct ideas of body, of what "objective" knowledge of sensations consists in, of divine knowledge and creation, and of clarity and distinctness as criteria of knowledge. Any one of these differences would be sufficient to undermine the purported internal character of Malebranche's critique; taken together they provide overwhelming evidence that this critique misses its target.

Although Malebranche presents his account of self-knowledge primarily as a correction of Descartes's philosophy, some of his remarks seem to reveal a more important motivation internal to his own system. In the *Search,* Malebranche appeals to his negative thesis about self-knowledge to reinforce the doctrine of Vision in God. The claim that we lack a clear idea of the soul "might also serve to prove that the ideas which represent to us things outside us are not modifications of our soul. For if the soul saw all things by considering its own modifications, it would have to know its own nature or essence more clearly than that of bodies. . . . " (3:2:7, OCM 1:452; LO:238) If Malebranche were to grant that we have knowledge of the essence of the mind, it would be harder for him to deny that this knowledge derives from one's own nature, given the special relation one bears to the object of knowledge in this instance. But once one allows that the mind has any cognitive resources of its own, it opens the floodgates to thinking that the mind sees all things, including bodies, "by considering its own modifications."[76]

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[76] This reading is further supported by remarks on self-knowledge in the *Dialogues,* where Theodore seems at times to derive the thesis that we lack access to the idea of soul in God from the doctrine that the soul is not a light unto itself (3:35, OCM 12:67).

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