

Malebranche on Sensory Cognition and “Seeing As”

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I. INTRODUCTION

NICOLAS MALEBRANCHE FAMOUSLY HOLDS that we see all things in the physical world by means of ideas in God. This is the doctrine of Vision in God. In his initial formulation of the doctrine in the first edition of the *Search After Truth* (1674), Malebranche seems to posit ideas of particular physical objects in God, such as the idea of the sun or the idea of a tree. However, in *Elucidations of the Search* published four years later he insists that there is only one idea of extension and it is general.¹ Malebranche refers to this idea as “intelligible extension,” in part because he thinks that we confuse it with its object, material extension, which he takes to be *unintelligible* in itself.

By insisting upon a single idea of matter, Malebranche is able to forestall objections to the doctrine of Vision in God that would otherwise result from positing ideas of particular bodies in God. However, the insistence upon a single idea of body appears to invite difficulties of its own, as commentators have made clear.² The main difficulty concerns how this general idea comes to represent particular sensible objects. Malebranche sometimes says that this is achieved when the mind “paints” or projects its sensations onto intelligible extension. But, if taken literally, this suggestion only exacerbates the problem, for how could something general and purely intellectual have sensations painted onto it? The aim of this paper is

¹Malebranche claims to be clarifying his view (*OC* 6:111), but his chief critic Antoine Arnauld sees him as retracting it in favor of a theory that “plunges him into many infinitely greater” difficulties (*True and False Ideas*, 64). Some commentators hold that the introduction of intelligible extension marks a radical shift in Malebranche’s doctrine. See Bouillier, *Histoire de la philosophie cartésienne*, 71–72; Church, *Study of Malebranche*, 187; Gueroult, *Malebranche*, 1:214; Radner, *Malebranche: A Study*, 78–79; and Robinet, *Système et existence*, 215. However, I agree with Thomas Lennon (“Malebranche’s Argument for Ideas,” 61–62) that Malebranche always subscribed to the “intelligibility principle,” which asserts that only general things are intelligible.

²See e.g. Church, *Study of Malebranche*, 139–42; Gueroult, *Malebranche*, 1:219–23; Pyle, *Malebranche*, 61–66; Radner, *Malebranche: A Study*, 78–79; Radner, “Malebranche and Individuation,” 59–72; and Schmaltz, “Malebranche on Ideas,” 59–86.

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to resolve this and other purported difficulties that have been thought to plague Malebranche's theory of sensory cognition.

In the next section, I begin by detailing three main problems that are traditionally associated with Malebranche's theory of cognition, as part of a larger discussion of the aims of the doctrine of Vision in God. In section 3, I develop a systematic solution to these putative difficulties by appealing to two Malebranchean resources—the doctrine of efficacious ideas and the notion of “seeing as.” The first of these is well-appreciated by commentators; the second is not and is defended here for the first time. I argue that the notion of “seeing as” is closely connected with the doctrine of efficacious ideas and that both are crucial for understanding the details of Malebranche's account of sense perception. One attraction of this interpretation is that, in addition to resolving the three long-standing problems with Vision in God, it uncovers the relation between that doctrine and the poorly understood theory of natural judgments. I explicate this relation in section 4 as a way of distinguishing the notion of “seeing as” from an adverbial theory of sensation, which is often attributed to Malebranche, though I believe mistakenly. In section 5, I revisit the question of whether Malebranche is committed to particular ideas in God given his Augustinian account of creation in terms of divine archetypes. Ultimately, I conclude that the real (internal) problem with Malebranche's philosophy is not with his theory of cognition but with his Cartesian metaphysical inheritance, which makes it impossible to provide a coherent account of the individuation of bodies.

2. PUTATIVE DIFFICULTIES WITH THE DOCTRINE OF VISION IN GOD

Although we are primarily concerned with Malebranche's account of sense perception, it is important to keep in mind that he intended the doctrine of Vision in God to serve as a general account of human cognition, including abstract or conceptual thought. Some commentators have suggested that this is the ultimate source of the problem: Vision in God seems to work best as a theory of one form of cognition or the other, but not both.³

In developing his doctrine, Malebranche saw himself as broadening the scope of Augustine's theory of divine illumination. Augustine's theory was primarily an account of how we are capable of knowing eternal and necessary truths. But Malebranche thought that he could offer a more general account of cognition, encompassing sense perception as well. His motivation for doing so is primarily theological. He aims to show that God is the object of all of our thoughts and perceptions, as a way of vindicating the view that in creating the world, God can act only for his own glory. In one of his arguments for Vision in God in *The Search After Truth*, Malebranche appeals to this account of God's purpose in creation.

[Since] God made all things for Himself . . . not only must our natural love tend toward Him but also the knowledge and light He gives it must reveal to us something in Him, for everything coming from God can be only for God. If God had made a mind

³See e.g. Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 152n1, and Pyle, *Malebranche*, 66.

and had given the sun to it as an idea, or immediate object of knowledge, it seems to me God would have made this mind and its idea for the sun and not for Himself.

God can make a mind in order for it to know His works, then, only if that mind to some extent sees God in seeing His works. As a result, it might be said that if we do not to some extent see God, we see nothing. . . . (*OC* 1:442–43/*LO* 233)

God can glorify himself in creation only if his creatures always see him—only if he is the immediate object of perception—even in sense perception. Malebranche adds here the important qualification that we see God “to some extent.” Antoine Arnauld, Malebranche’s staunchest and most persistent critic, charged that Vision in God constituted a Vision *of* God’s essence, which, if true, would be tantamount to asserting that one could have a beatific vision in this life, an egregious heresy. But Malebranche is quite consistent in maintaining that in seeing objects in God we do not see God in his absolute nature. We see him only in terms of the corporeal beings that he can create.⁴ It is controversial just how Malebranche conceived of the relation between intelligible extension and God, but he is fond of using the Platonic language of participation to describe it.⁵ “God’s ideas of creatures are, as Saint Thomas says, only his essence, insofar as it is participable or imperfectly imitable, for God contains every creaturely perfection, though in a divine and infinite way” (*OC* 3:149/*LO* 625). Intelligible extension is consubstantial with God insofar as he is “imitable” by corporeal beings. This qualified identity statement explains how, in seeing all things in intelligible extension, we see God (considered in a certain way).

Malebranche goes on to cite Augustine’s endorsement of this account of God’s purpose in creation, viz. to glorify himself. But he believes that Augustine was prevented from appreciating its implications for sense perception by the prejudice that if changeable and corruptible things such as physical objects were known in God, then God himself would be changeable and corruptible, and hence not absolutely perfect.⁶ Malebranche, however, thinks he can evade this consequence by distinguishing two disparate elements in sense perception—sensations (*senti-ments*) and the “pure” idea of extension. This distinction is of course Cartesian in origin, and it is precisely because of his Cartesian inheritance that Malebranche is able to extend Augustine’s theory of cognition to encompass sense perception. But Malebranche is not simply borrowing from Descartes; he is heavily adapting his inheritance. Descartes conceived the idea of extension and sensations (or sensory ideas) as modifications of finite, human minds. By contrast, Malebranche maintains that while sensations are modifications of our minds, the pure idea of extension resides solely in the divine intellect. So for Malebranche every act of sense perception is a compound of these two very disparate ontological elements.⁷

⁴ “[S]eeing his creatures in him is not really seeing God. Seeing the essences of creatures in his substance is not seeing his essence, just as merely seeing the objects it represents is not seeing a mirror. Seeing the essence of God, not in its absolute being, but in relation to creatures or insofar as it is representative of them, is not seeing the essence of God” (*OC* 3:155/*LO* 628). Also see *OC* 9:921–22.

⁵ See Cook, “Malebranchian Ideas,” 525–44; and Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 96, 149–50.

⁶ *OC* 1:444–45/*LO* 234.

⁷ See e.g. *OC* 1:445/*LO* 234 and *OC* 3:143/*LO* 621.

It was a truism among early modern philosophers that we discriminate objects in our visual field via differences in color—a view that jibes with common sense: I can determine where one body ends and another begins because of differences in color, shading, light, and so on. But Malebranche applies this insight in a novel way. As a representationalist, he affirms that we perceive bodies only indirectly. According to him, what we directly perceive is always intelligible extension.⁸ So colors serve to differentiate intelligible extension in the first instance and objects in the world only secondarily.

[I]ntelligible extension becomes visible and represents a certain body in particular only by means of color, because it is only by the variety of colors that we judge the difference between the objects we see. . . . If I distinguish your hand from your coat and both from the air surrounding them, this is because the sensations of light or color that I have of them are very different.⁹ (*OC* 12:46–47/*JS* 17)

Color sensations “particularize” intelligible extension and thus enable us to perceive particular physical objects. But how can color sensations serve this function? It is sometimes thought that in asserting in the Second Meditation that sense perception includes a purely intellectual component, Descartes faces a problem in explaining how sensations and the pure idea of extension can come together. But at least for Descartes sensations and the idea of extension are both mental items. By placing the idea of extension in God, Malebranche faces a far greater challenge. How can these very disparate ontological entities—sensations and intelligible extension—have any commerce with one another? More specifically, how can sensations of color and light make particular or determinate what is general in itself?¹⁰ Again, Malebranche conceives intelligible extension as something general and pure in the Cartesian sense of non-sensory. In so doing, he seems to rule out the possibility of them forming a compound.

As if to answer these questions, Malebranche invokes the metaphor of an artist. In several passages, he compares intelligible extension to a blank canvas onto which colors are “painted,” “projected,” or “attached” by our mind.

[T]he soul almost always projects [*répand*] its sensation on an idea that strikes it in a lively fashion. (*OC* 3:152/*LO* 626)

[Intelligible extension] becomes sensible and particular through color, or by some other sensible quality that the soul attaches [*attache*] to it. (*OC* 3:152c/*LO* 626)

[I]t is necessary that a mind have the idea of extension, in order to attach [*attache*] the sensation of color to it, just as a canvas is necessary to a painter, in order to apply colors to it.¹¹ (*OC* 6:78)

In a similar metaphor, he compares intelligible extension to a block of marble from which particular bodies can be chiseled.

⁸I follow the standard view of Malebranche as a representationalist. Nadler has challenged this orthodoxy, arguing that he is a direct realist. See *Malebranche and Ideas*, 177–78; and “Malebranche’s Theory of Perception,” 108–28.

⁹Also see *OC* 6:61.

¹⁰See Radner, “Malebranche and Individuation,” 65. Some commentators take intelligible extension to be a logical concept, but that claim is controversial and not essential to the problem here. So I bracket it in this paper.

¹¹Also see *OC* 9:998–99.

[A]s all possible figures are in a block of marble potentially, and can be drawn from it by the movement or action of the chisel; likewise all intelligible figures are potentially in *intelligible* extension, and are discovered there, according as this extension is diversely represented to the mind according to the general laws that God has established, and according to which he acts in us without ceasing. (*OC* 6:208–9)

Unfortunately, as I noted in the Introduction, the artist metaphor appears only to exacerbate the problem, without explaining anything. In itself, intelligible extension is general and pure. In virtue of being in God, it is also immutable and thus unchanged in sense perception. So color sensations cannot literally be painted onto intelligible extension and, moreover, inasmuch as sense perceptions occur independently of our will, it cannot be the human mind that is active.¹² So how are we to understand this artist metaphor? Unless we determine its cash value, we will be unable to explain how color sensations serve to “particularize” and “sensualize” intelligible extension in sense perception.¹³

This is the first of three putative problems with Malebranche’s theory of sense perception that I will canvass in this section, before developing a systematic solution to them in section 3. The second problem, related to the first, concerns how many ideas of bodies there are in God to which we have access. As noted in the Introduction, Malebranche speaks freely of particular ideas in God in the first edition of the *Search* (1674). But in *Elucidation* 10, written four years later, he insists that we perceive everything in the sensible world via the single and unique intelligible extension in God. His professed reason for affirming this view is similar to Augustine’s reason for denying that we perceive physical objects in God, namely that God is immutable, while physical objects are ever changing. If there were particular ideas of bodies in God, such as the idea of a particular tree, then those ideas would have to be unchanging given God’s immutability, but in that case they would not represent those bodies accurately over time. In a key passage from *Elucidation* 10, Malebranche writes,

It should not be imagined that the intelligible world is related to the sensible, material world in such a way that there is an intelligible sun, for example, or an intelligible horse or tree intended to represent to us the sun or a horse or a tree, or that everyone who sees the sun necessarily sees this hypothetical intelligible sun. Given that all intelligible extension can be conceived of as circular, or as having the intelligible figure of a horse or a tree, all of intelligible extension can serve to represent the sun, or a horse or a tree . . .

Thus, when I said that we see different bodies through the knowledge we have of God’s perfections that represent them, I did not exactly mean that there are in God certain particular ideas that represent each body individually, and that we see such an idea when we see the body; for we certainly could not see this body as sometimes great, sometimes small, sometimes round, sometimes square, if we saw it through a particular idea that would always be the same. (*OC* 3:153–54/*LO* 627–28)

Malebranche also has metaphysical reasons for denying that there are particular ideas of bodies in God. Most notably, ideas in God are essences.¹⁴ But like Descartes,

¹²One might also note that for Malebranche the mind is causally *inefficacious*.

¹³Nadler (*Malebranche and Ideas*, 63) and Schmaltz (“Malebranche on Ideas”) coin these apt phrases, which are loose translations of *rendent particuliere* (e.g. *OC* 6:60) and *rendu sensible* (e.g. *OC* 6:55), respectively.

¹⁴See e.g. *OC* 3:155/*LO* 628.

Malebranche maintains that all bodies have the same essence, namely extension. So if there were particular ideas of bodies, or at least of *kinds* of bodies, then there would be a plurality of corporeal essences, thus resurrecting the scholastic theory of natural kinds that the Cartesian revolution in science repudiated. The French commentator Martial Gueroult has discerned yet another difficulty. He argues that if there were finite, particular ideas then they would have to be created, for everything finite depends on God's creative power. But nothing created can be in God, on pain of heresy.¹⁵ Thus, in order to be in God, ideas must be infinite and general. Gueroult takes this to be the motivating insight for the notion of intelligible extension.¹⁶

Despite what he says about there being one single and unique intelligible extension by which we see all bodies, and despite the systematic philosophical pressures just discussed, Malebranche continues throughout his career to speak of particular ideas.¹⁷ He writes in various places, for example, of the "idea of a hand" or the "ideal hand."

The idea of a hand, which alone is the immediate object of my mind, can, at the same time, affect me with different perceptions, namely, color, heat, pain, and, if God willed it, perhaps a hundred thousand others. . . . For the hand that gives pain to an amputee, when the source of the nerves that corresponded to his hand before it was cut off are roughly shaken, is only the ideal hand.¹⁸ (*OC* 19:884–85/G 86)

What is the relation between the idea of a hand and intelligible extension? Is the ideal hand general or particular? Are there different ideas for each and every hand in the world or only for kinds? As if in an attempt to answer at least the first question, Malebranche sometimes says that the ideas of particular bodies are "contained in" intelligible extension.

The general idea of created extension, which *contains* the ideas of all particular bodies, or from which the particular ideas of all bodies can be drawn, just as one can form or fashion all particular bodies from created extension. . . .¹⁹ (*OC* 9:1068–69; emphasis added)

But, unfortunately, Malebranche provides no guidance concerning how to understand this containment metaphor. Without such guidance, it is unclear how the talk of particular ideas squares with his insistence upon a single, general idea of extension, and we are left with the strong appearance of inconsistency.

The third and final problem that I would like to discuss is closely related to the first two. In addition to speaking of the ideas of particular bodies, Malebranche also describes intelligible extension as having parts.

[Y]ou can understand why you see the intelligible sun now as large and now as small although it is always the same with regard to God. All that is needed for this is that we sometimes see a greater part of intelligible extension and sometimes a smaller. Since

¹⁵A simpler route to the same conclusion would be to say that God *qua* infinite being cannot contain anything finite.

¹⁶Gueroult, *Malebranche*, 1:213–14.

¹⁷As noted e.g. by Alquié, *Le cartésianisme de Malebranche*, 223; Pyle, *Malebranche*, 64; and Radner, *Malebranche: A Study*, 83.

¹⁸Cf. *OC* 9:961, 14:910, 16:38–39, 17-1:287–288.

¹⁹Cf. *OC* 6:201; 9:942, 9:959

the parts of intelligible extension are all of the same nature, they may all represent any body whatsoever. (Elucidation 10, *OC* 3:153/LO 627)

The reference to “parts” suggests that intelligible extension is spatially extended and thus invites the charge that Malebranche regards God as corporeal—the Spinozistic heresy.²⁰ When pressed by critics on this point, he insists that he means intelligible, not material, parts, but many readers have found this reply unconvincing and/or incoherent. How can intelligible extension have parts without being spatially extended? It does not help that Malebranche describes these so-called intelligible parts as if they were material. In the passage just cited, for example, he suggests that some parts of intelligible extension are greater in size than others. By comparing intelligible extension to a blank canvas onto which the mind “paints” its sensations, he also implies that its parts “function like material parts.”²¹

A long historical line of commentators and critics have found one or more of the three problems just outlined to be completely intractable and have relinquished any hope that Malebranche has the resources for resolving them.²² In an essay devoted to the first two problems, for example, Daisie Radner concedes that her account leaves open the questions of how particular ideas are contained in intelligible extension and how sensations serve to limit it. But she claims that this is not a deficiency of her account because “[i]n order to answer each of these questions, one needs some item of knowledge that Malebranche denies we have.”²³ Speaking more generally, Andrew Pyle asserts: “There is no way to save Malebranche’s theory [of Vision in God] as it stands.”²⁴ Contrary to these commentators, I present a systematic solution to these problems in the next section by appealing to two important developments in Malebranche’s philosophy.

3. THE DOCTRINE OF EFFICACIOUS IDEAS AND THE NOTION OF “SEEING AS”

Rather late in his career Malebranche introduces a view that has come to be known as the doctrine of efficacious ideas. This is the thesis that ideas in God have causal powers to affect our mind. Malebranche had already attributed various other properties to divine ideas in Elucidation 10 and again later in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (1688). He said there that ideas in God are necessary, immutable, eternal, and inexhaustible.²⁵ But beginning in 1695, though with clear anticipations earlier, he also describes them as being causally efficacious.²⁶

²⁰Arnauld first raised this criticism, but Malebranche debated the issue at length during the final years of his life in correspondence with Jean-Jacques Dortous De Mairan (see *OC* 19:852–53). See section 3 and n. 41.

²¹Radner, “Malebranche and Individuation,” 63.

²²The second and third problems go back to Arnauld and the third also to Dortous de Mairan, Malebranche’s former student. For scholarly discussions of the first problem, see the list of commentators in n. 2.

²³Radner, “Malebranche and Individuation,” 71.

²⁴Pyle, *Malebranche*, 66.

²⁵See e.g. *OC* 3:130–33/LO 613–15 and *OC* 12:42/JS 14.

²⁶Robinet, the French commentator and editor of the contemporary edition of Malebranche’s works, marks the introduction of the doctrine at 1695, but Schmaltz notes that there are anticipations of it as early as 1688 in the *Dialogues*. The first of the texts cited here, from a letter to Régis dated

So intelligible extension is not merely the immediate object of perception but also the cause of my perceptions of it. With the advent of this doctrine, Malebranche reformulates the theory of Vision in God in later writings so as to reflect it, including revised editions of earlier works such as the *Search*. In these mature statements of the theory, he employs explicit causal language: intelligible extension is said variously to “touch,” “affect,” “modify,” and be “applied to” the human mind. Here, for example, are two such statements.

[T]o see bodies is nothing other than having actually present to the soul the idea of extension which touches it or modifies it with different colors, for one does not see them [bodies] directly or immediately in themselves. . . . For it is clear that material extension cannot act efficaciously and directly on our soul. It is absolutely invisible by itself. It is only intelligible ideas that can affect intelligences. (*OC* 17-1:282–83)

The soul is a substance that thinks, it is an intelligence that perceives, but it perceives only that which touches it, that which affects it; and it is not that which affects it, it is not itself formally its light. . . . Nothing can affect it, touch it except the divine ideas, except the luminous and efficacious substance of the divinity, of sovereign Reason. (*OC* 9:921)

Many commentators see the doctrine of efficacious ideas as marking a radical shift in Malebranche’s theory of Vision in God. Most notably, the French commentator Ferdinand Alquié asserts that Malebranche’s theory shifts from a vision *in* God to a vision *by* God: “the character of the causality and the efficacy of an idea replaces that of its visible character.”²⁷ It is unclear how strongly Alquié intends this point to be taken, but if what it means is that Vision in God reduces to Occasionalism, or the doctrine that God is the only genuine cause, then it goes too far. As I shall argue below, the causal character of ideas in God plays a significant role in the mature theory of Vision in God, but is incomplete without the complementary notion of “seeing as.” So Malebranche did not intend to reduce one theory to the other. Alquié is clearly right, however, in thinking that the doctrine of efficacious ideas marks an important shift in Malebranche’s theory of cognition and a salutary one at that. One attraction of attributing causal powers to ideas is that it establishes an intimate link between Malebranche’s two central doctrines. The theory of Vision in God asserts that we see bodies indirectly via the idea of extension in God. Once Malebranche has endowed ideas with causal powers, he can appeal to Occasionalism to explain why this is so. We cannot see bodies directly because they lack causal efficacy to produce sensations or affect the mind in any way. “The mind is a substance that perceives; but it perceives only what can affect it and modify it, which body cannot do” (*OC* 19:883/G 85). Only ideas, in virtue of being in God’s essentially efficacious substance, can “affect intelligences.”

Besides unifying Malebranche’s twin doctrines, the theory of efficacious ideas has another, more important advantage: together with the notion of “seeing as,”

1693, attests to the latter point. See Robinet, *Système et existence*, 259n2; and Schmalz, “Malebranche on Ideas,” 78. Also see Alquié, *Le cartésianisme de Malebranche*, 210n8. Robinet deserves credit for being one of the first to appreciate the significance of the doctrine of efficacious ideas for Malebranche’s mature thought (see *Système et existence*, 259–72).

²⁷Alquié, *Le cartésianisme de Malebranche*, 209.

it offers a systematic way of resolving the three purported difficulties with the theory of Vision in God.²⁸ We can begin to get a sense of this resolution by considering the first and most fundamental difficulty. To review briefly, this problem concerns how, as a general and “pure” idea in God, intelligible extension can serve to represent particular sensible objects. As if in explanation, Malebranche suggests that we render intelligible extension sensuous and particular by “painting” our sensations onto it, just as an artist paints colors onto a blank canvas. But this explanation only exacerbates the problem, for how can something that is not intrinsically determinate and sensuous be made so? Given God’s immutability, how can it be affected at all?

Fortunately, the introduction of the doctrine of efficacious ideas marks a gestalt shift in the way that Malebranche formulates his account of cognition. He no longer implies that intelligible extension is altered in sense perception; rather our mind is changed when intelligible extension causally affects it in various ways. In keeping with this shift, he reverses the artist analogy. He now compares the mind (rather than intelligible extension) to a blank canvas onto which color sensations are “painted” and casts God or intelligible extension (rather than the mind) in the role of artist.

In order to see different bodies, it suffices that the idea of extension or intelligible extension affects or touches the soul with diverse colors. For indeed, painters need only an extended canvas and diverse material colors in order to represent all visible bodies, by distributing diverse material colors on their canvas in accordance with their art. (*OC* 9:1066, cf. 6:78)

In a similar fashion in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, he reconfigures the sculptor analogy by comparing the mind to a block of marble that God “chisels” to produce perceptions of individual bodies.

[I]ntelligible extension, applied diversely to our mind, can provide us with all the ideas we have of mathematical figures and of all the objects we admire in the universe, and finally of everything the imagination represents to us. For just as one can sculpt all kinds of figures from a block of marble by using a chisel, so God can represent all material beings to us through various applications of intelligible extension to our mind. (*OC* 12:47/JS 17–18)

Of course, saying that the mind is like a blank canvas or like a block of marble are just metaphors; the mind is not material any more than intelligible extension is. The key to understanding these shifting metaphors is the point that the mind is affected or altered in cognition, not intelligible extension. The doctrine of efficacious ideas clarifies the proper direction of the causal relation and thus vindicates the view that in sense perception the mind is, in some important sense, passive.²⁹

At this point, one might naturally wonder how intelligible extension, if it is not altered in sense perception, serves to represent particular sensible objects.

²⁸Schmaltz (“Malebranche on Ideas,” 78) appreciates the importance of efficacious ideas for resolving the first set of problems. See n. 30 below for his account of the sense in which God’s pure ideas are “sensible.”

²⁹“The understanding or the faculty that the soul has for perceiving is purely passive, and the activity that it appears to have is only a species of practical desire that one calls attention . . .” (*OC* 9:920).

Recall that Malebranche first proposes that we project our sensations onto intelligible extension in an apparent effort to explain how we see sensible objects in God. Having abandoned that account, what does he propose in its place? Has he eluded one difficulty only to put the solution to his original problem forever out of reach? Fortunately, I do not think he has, for this is where he appeals to the notion of “seeing as” or of seeing intelligible extension in “different ways.” This notion is introduced as early as the third edition (1678) of the *Search*, long before the advent of the doctrine of efficacious ideas.

[T]here need be in God no sensible bodies or real figures in intelligible extension in order for us to see them in God or for God to see them in Himself. It is enough that His substance, insofar as the corporeal creature can participate it in, *should be able to be perceived in different ways*. (Elucidation 10, *OC* 3:152/LO 626; emphasis added)

Intelligible extension need not contain particular ideas nor, as he says here, be composed of particular bodies, in order for us to see sensible objects in him. It suffices that this one idea is perceived in different ways. I take this to mean that, in itself, intelligible extension is general, pure, and unchanged by our perceptions of it, but we *see it as* sensuous and *as* some particular body or other (and, more generally, *as* being divided into discrete physical objects).³⁰

Malebranche explicitly invokes the notion of “seeing as” and—to highlight the intellectual character of sense perception—the related phrase “conceiving as,” two paragraphs later, in the key passage from Elucidation 10 adumbrated above. Let us consider this passage again, but with new emphasis.

From what I have just said, you can understand why you see the intelligible sun now *as large* and now *as small* [*tantôt grand & tantôt petit*], although it is always the same with regard to God. . . .

It should not be imagined that the intelligible world is related to the sensible, material world in such a way that there is an intelligible sun, for example, or an intelligible horse or tree. . . . Given that all intelligible extension can be *conceived of as circular* [*conçûë circulaire*], or *as having the intelligible figure of a horse or a tree*, all of intelligible extension can serve to represent the sun, or a horse or a tree, and consequently can be the sun or a horse or a tree of the intelligible world and can even become a visible and sensible sun, horse, or tree if the soul has some sensation upon the occasion of bodies to attach to these ideas, i.e. if these ideas affect the soul with sensible perceptions.³¹ (*OC* 3:153–54/LO 627; emphasis added)

We should not allow the reference to particular ideas (viz. “the intelligible sun”) in the first paragraph to confuse us, for in the second paragraph he asserts for the first time that there is neither an intelligible sun nor any particular ideas in

³⁰Schmaltz (“Malebranche on Ideas,” 79–80) argues that the doctrine of efficacious ideas provides Malebranche with a way of explaining how intelligible extension is sensible that does not compromise its purely intellectual character. It is sensible in the sense that it produces our sensory perceptions. I agree that this is one (modest) sense in which intelligible extension is sensible but also think it is important for Malebranche that we see it *as* sensible or, better, *as* sensuous, where this way of perceiving is caused by intelligible extension but not reducible to that cause. See below, especially section 4, for an explication of this stronger sense.

³¹There is no French equivalent in this passage for the English word ‘as,’ but the meaning requires it. The last clause in this citation (“i.e., if these ideas affect the soul with sensible perceptions”) was added in the 1700 edition of the *Search* to reflect the doctrine of efficacious ideas.

the intelligible world.³² So talk of particular ideas must be just a way of speaking (a point we shall develop below). Indeed, the main point of the passage is that there need not be any particular ideas in intelligible extension for it to represent a particular body. It suffices that we see it *as* some sensible object or other when it affects our soul with various sensations.

Although the notion of “seeing as” predates the doctrine of efficacious ideas, Malebranche came to regard them as being intimately connected.³³ According to the mature theory of Vision in God, we see intelligible extension in different ways because it *causes* us to do so by producing various sensations in our mind. When it affects our mind with one set of sensations, we see it as the sun. When it affects it with another such set, we see it as a tree, etc. So we see intelligible extension in different ways because it affects our mind in different ways: “[W]e see all things in God through the efficacy of his substance, and particularly sensible things, through God’s applying intelligible extension to our mind in a thousand different ways . . .” (*OC* 3:154/*LO* 628).

The notion of “seeing as” that I am attributing to Malebranche is markedly different from the one found in ordinary language.³⁴ In the case of the latter, for example, one might say that Don Quixote saw windmills, but saw them *as* giants. This statement makes sense because windmills are the kind of thing that could be mistaken for giants (especially in the dark, during a storm, if one were intoxicated, etc.). Don Quixote was deceived by their size and mistook their sails for arms. But it would not make sense to say that he saw windmills as mice or as proofs of God’s existence.³⁵ Malebranche’s use of the notion of “seeing as” is very different because the (immediate) object of perception is non-sensory. A linguistic philosopher like J.L. Austin might conclude that this constitutes an abuse of ordinary language: Malebranche is taking a phrase that has an intelligible use within a narrowly defined discourse and injecting into a context where it has no proper meaning. This objection, while cogent on its own terms, would hardly move Malebranche, whose philosophical concerns are at a wholly different level from that of ordinary language. Leaving this objection aside, it is interesting to observe what the two uses of “seeing as” have in common. In both cases, the object being perceived constrains the way it can be seen (or, in the case of ordinary language, can be said to be seen). The nature of windmills provides a foundation for seeing them as giants, but not for seeing them as mice or theistic proofs. Similarly, in the case of Malebranche’s use of “seeing as,” intelligible extension constrains the way we see it. More strongly, it causally determines how we see it. It plays this role not because of its intrinsic nature, which is non-sensuous, but because it causes our sensations. In one sense, it might seem as if there are no constraints on how we can see intelligible extension, for we can see it as a windmill, a giant, a mouse, a

³²This is an example of the point made above, namely that Malebranche continues to speak of particular ideas even after introducing the notion of intelligible extension. The qualifier ‘intelligible’ was added to ‘sun’ in the fifth edition of the *Search* (1700).

³³The bulk of the passage cited above comes from the original 1678 edition of *Elucidation* 10, long prior to the introduction of efficacious ideas. See n. 26 for the dating of the latter.

³⁴It also differs from the notion of “aspect seeing” made famous by Wittgenstein.

³⁵I am indebted to a referee from this journal for this set of examples.

golden retriever, etc. But it would be a mistake to conclude from the sheer number of ways that intelligible extension can be perceived that these ways of seeing are ungrounded. One sees intelligible extension as a windmill, rather than a giant, precisely because this idea causes a particular set of sensations in one's mind. More generally, the doctrine of efficacious ideas serves as a foundation for the notion of "seeing as." The various ways of seeing intelligible extension are not arbitrary or up to us to determine, but instead prescribed by God in accordance with the laws of mind-body union and of the soul's union with him.³⁶ One should also keep in mind here that Malebranche could avail himself of the Cartesian doctrine that sense perception is highly confused. The confused nature of sense perceptions helps to explain how one can be said to see intelligible extension even though the manner in which one sees it is very different from the way it is in itself. One confusedly sees something, which is intrinsically general and pure, as discrete and sensuous.³⁷

The doctrine of efficacious ideas provides Malebranche with a resource for answering an important objection. As we have discovered, sensations of color provide us with the means for seeing intelligible extension *as* discrete and limited. But sensations are modes of mind. So, one might naturally object, how is this a vision of bodies *in God* rather than in our own mind? Here is Malebranche's answer:

It is only color that renders objects visible. It is only by the variety of colors that we see and that we distinguish the diversity of objects. Now when we see bodies, *it is the idea of extension that modifies us with diverse sensations of color*, and you remain in agreement that this idea is found only in God. *Therefore it is evident that we see in God all this variety of bodies, of which we have sensations so different*; since it is certain that we do not see objects in themselves. . . . God teaches us nothing except by the efficacious application of his ideas on our souls, which find themselves penetrated, modified, and illuminated in several ways. (*OC* 4:76; emphasis added)

Although the sensations of color by which we see discriminate bodies are modes of our mind, we see all bodies *in God* because he causes these sensations by applying intelligible extension to our mind in different ways.

We have now explained how the notion of "seeing as" and the doctrine of efficacious ideas dissolve the first problem that we considered in the previous section. Intelligible extension is not altered in sense perception; it remains general and pure. But we see all bodies in this one idea because it causes our sensations, which lead us to see it as sensuous and as divided into discrete objects. Strictly speaking, then, sensations do not "particularize" or, literally, "sensualize" intelligible extension. Rather, intelligible extension causes us to see it as particular and as sensuous.

The other two problems can be neatly dispensed with using the same philosophical machinery. Recall that the second problem concerned the issue of Malebranche's consistency. From 1678 onward he insists that there is only one general

³⁶On the nomological character of Vision in God, see e.g. *OC* 4:76; 9:959 and 12:319/*JS* 252–53.

³⁷As Schmaltz notes, however, these confused sensory ways of regarding intelligible extension can, insofar as they awaken our attention, give rise to a more distinct intellectual understanding of it ("Malebranche on Ideas," 80). Indeed, as a result of the doctrine of efficacious ideas, Malebranche came to distinguish different perceptual effects of intelligible extension on the mind. Most notably, he adopts the term 'pure perceptions' to refer to our clear and distinct apprehensions of it.

idea of extension. Nevertheless, he continues to speak of particular ideas as he had in the first two editions of the *Search*. If Malebranche were guilty of inconsistency on this score, it would be rather egregious, since he often refers to particular ideas in the very same context in which intelligible extension figures prominently. In the passage from *Elucidation 10* considered above, for example, he refers to the “intelligible sun” and then, in the very next paragraph, denies that there is intelligible sun or need be one, since “all of intelligible extension can serve to represent the sun, or a horse, or a tree. . . .” Surely, Malebranche could not have been guilty of such an obvious blunder. On the contrary, his remarks here suggest that he conceived particular ideas in such a way that he saw no inconsistency with his insistence upon a single idea of extension. In keeping with the interpretation just developed, I submit that Malebranche speaks of particular ideas because intelligible extension causes us to perceive it *as* a particular body by producing a certain set of color sensations in us. So the reference to particular ideas is merely nominal. When intelligible extension causes us to perceive it as a hand, we call it the idea of a hand. When it causes us to perceive it as the sun, we call it the idea of the sun. But strictly speaking, there is only one idea of extension in God. We refer to this one idea by different names depending on the variety of color sensations that it causally produces in us and which lead us to perceive it *as* some particular body or other.³⁸ If this interpretation is correct, then Malebranche is absolved of any kind of inconsistency in speaking of particular ideas. He explicitly affirms such a reading in the revised statement of the sculptor analogy, considered above.

[I]ntelligible extension, applied diversely to our mind, can provide us with all the ideas [*idées*] we have of mathematical figures and of all the objects we admire in the universe, and finally of everything the imagination represents to us. For just as one can sculpt all kinds of figures from a block of marble by using a chisel, so God can represent all material beings to us through various applications of intelligible extension to our mind. (*OC* 1:47/*JS* 17–18)

In this passage, Malebranche extends the point to all forms of human cognition: when intelligible extension affects our mind in one way, we speak of the ideas of mathematical figures; when it affects us in another way, we speak of ideas of the imagination and similarly in the case of sense perception, though here what is distinctive is that it affects us with sensations. In each and every case, the reference to particular ideas is just a way of referring to intelligible extension depending on how it acts on the mind. Restricting ourselves to sense perception, particular ideas need not be something over and above intelligible extension, for “God can

³⁸The reference to particular ideas of bodies is not the only instance in Malebranche’s philosophy where he allows himself to speak of the “idea of *x*” even though, strictly speaking, there is no such idea. The most notable instance of this is “the idea of God” to which he sometimes refers even though his official view is that God cannot be represented by an idea since he is completely indeterminate (“being in general”), while ideas—albeit general—are determinate insofar as they represent some kind of being or other. So he sometimes speaks of the “idea of God,” but then corrects himself by saying that “[t]he infinite is its own idea,” which means that God *qua* being in general “has no idea that represents it.” See, e.g., *OC* 12:52–53/*JS* 22–23. There need not be an idea of God to account for human cognition of the divine, for one knows him immediately through himself “by a direct and immediate perception”—in effect, through the soul’s union with him (*OC* 1:449/*LO* 236–37).

represent all material beings to us through various applications of intelligible extension to our mind.” In other words, intelligible extension can represent all bodies simply by producing different sets of sensations in us.³⁹

The present interpretation also explains the sense in which particular ideas are “contained in” intelligible extension. There is no problem in saying that intelligible extension contains an *infinity* of particular ideas, for all this means is that God can cause us to perceive it in an infinite number of different ways. In a letter to Arnauld that we excerpted above, Malebranche writes,

It is not, however, that there are properly *intelligible* figures in the intelligible spaces that we know, no more than there are *material* figures in material spaces, which would be entirely immovable. It is rather that, as all possible figures are in a block of marble potentially, and can be drawn from it by the movement or action of the chisel; likewise all intelligible figures are potentially in *intelligible* extension, and are discovered there, according as this extension is diversely represented to the mind according to the general laws that God has established, and according to which he acts in us without ceasing. (*OC* 6:208–9)

The claim that intelligible figures are “potentially in” intelligible extension shows that Malebranche does not hold that there are ideas of particular bodies in God independent from our perceptions. Rather, we see it as this or that intelligible figure when it affects our mind in various lawful ways, as prescribed by God. These ways of seeing qualify as “discoveries” because they are grounded in the causal powers of intelligible extension itself.

The interpretation that we have now developed for how to understand Malebranche’s references to particular ideas is strongly reinforced by considering the main context in which such references appear. A common refrain of Malebranche’s writings, in keeping with his representationalism, is that the immediate object of cognition and the cause of our perceptions is not material extension but the general *idea* of extension (i.e. intelligible extension) in God. But in passages where he is explaining how we perceive *particular* bodies, parity requires him to put this point in terms of *particular* ideas. When I perceive a hand, for example, the immediate object of my thought is not a material hand, but the idea of hand or the ideal hand. To convince his interlocutor of this point, he often appeals to the phantom-limb phenomenon.

For the hand that gives pain to an amputee . . . is only the ideal hand. For the hand he thinks gives him the perception pain no longer exists. Even before it was cut off, it was not [the hand] that he saw and that he felt immediately, for it is only ideas that can affect minds. . . . (*OC* 19:885/G 86–87)

There is therefore an ideal arm which is painful to the one-armed man, an arm which affects him alone with a disagreeable perception, an arm that is efficacious and representative of his inefficacious arm, an arm by consequence of which he is united more immediately than his own arm, even supposing that he still had it;

³⁹In one of his replies to Arnauld, Malebranche writes, “The difference between *ideas* of visible bodies comes about only by the difference of colors” (*OC* 6:61; emphasis added). It is significant that he says that color is responsible for the difference between *ideas* of bodies, for it shows once again that there is only one, general idea of extension in God and that so-called particular ideas are just ways of referring to this one idea when it affects our mind with various color sensations.

since it is only by the divine efficacy of this ideal arm of which he has an immediate perception that he feels his real arm, since whether there is or is not an arm, he has or can have the same perception equally. (*OC* 9:961)

In speaking of the “ideal hand” and the “ideal arm” in these and other such passages, Malebranche is not committing himself to the existence of particular ideas in God in addition to intelligible extension. On the contrary, the reference to particular ideas has rhetorical force and is intended merely as a heuristic when speaking to an interlocutor who, in Malebranche’s estimation, (1) conflates material extension with the *idea* of extension and (2) thinks that a particular body is the immediate object of thought and the cause of our perceptions of it. Both of these passages are addressed to correspondents (Dortuous de Mairan and Arnauld, respectively) whom Malebranche chastises for not understanding his published writings on these two points.⁴⁰ At the same time, he thinks that both of these mistakes are ones that the ordinary person makes. He also identifies the first error as the chief paralogism of Spinoza’s philosophy (*OC* 19:855/G 70). No wonder then that he speaks of particular ideas in a context where he feels the need to clarify and defend the distinction between particular bodies and the “ideas” of those bodies. This most fundamental distinction must be understood first before one can understand the more abstract notion of intelligible extension. To be sure, the notion of intelligible extension is not absent from these discussions. But the very fact that he moves so nonchalantly from speaking of the idea of a particular body, such as the idea of an arm, to speaking of intelligible extension (and vice versa) only confirms that the former locution is merely a way of referring to the latter. For example, just before the statement to Arnauld cited above, he invokes the term “ideal arm” and then writes of this idea: “It is uniquely this intelligible extension that acts in the soul. . . .” (*OC* 9:961).

The third and final problem that we discussed in the previous section concerned Malebranche’s repeated references to the “parts” of intelligible extension, which invites the charge of Spinozism.⁴¹ How could Malebranche, who is so keen to warn us of the dangers of confusing “the ideas of things with the things themselves,” commit this mistake himself by characterizing the *idea* of extension in terms apposite to created, material extension?⁴² This problem can be resolved in the same way that we resolved the last difficulty concerning particular ideas. Indeed, it is essentially the same problem. In at least three passages Malebranche identifies the so-called parts of intelligible extension with particular ideas.

⁴⁰See *OC* 19:884–85/G 85–86 and *OC* 9:959. He writes to Mairan in the former: “I do not understand, Sir, how you can find difficulty in understanding the difference between the idea of a thing and the thing itself, between created extension . . . and the idea that God has of it, and by which he affects my mind . . . because matter or created extension has no efficacy of its own, and cannot act on my mind.”

⁴¹It is worth noting that associating this view of extension with the historical Spinoza, as Malebranche’s critics often do, involves a gross misreading. Spinoza himself denies that extension has parts. Thinking of as divided into parts requires the use of the imagination and is inferior to an intellectual conception, which reveals its indivisibility (*Ethics*, IP15S). I am grateful to a referee for this journal for reminding me of this. He or she also rightly observes that Spinoza (in effect) regards the parts of extension as “epistemological artifacts,” much as my Malebranche treats the parts of intelligible extension. See below for an explication of this point.

⁴²*OC* 19:885/G 86.

[I]f we conceive of a given created extension to which there corresponds a given part of intelligible extension as its idea . . . (OC 3:153/LO 627)

All the intelligible parts of intelligible extension are of the same nature in their capacity as idea [*de meme nature en qualité d'idée*], just as all the parts of local or material extension are of the same nature in their capacity as substance [*en qualité de substance*]. But as the sensations of color are essentially different, by means of them we judge the variety of bodies. (OC 12:46/JS 17)

For the same idea [i.e. intelligible extension] can through its efficacy . . . affect the soul by different perceptions, and *it can do that even through each ideal part*: I say ideal, since intelligible extension is not locally extended and has no extended parts. *For example, the idea of a hand* which alone is the immediate object of my mind, can, at the same time, affect me with different perceptions, namely, color, heat, pain, and, if God willed it, perhaps a hundred others. (OC 19:884/G 86; emphasis added)

In the first two passages, Malebranche speaks explicitly of the (intelligible) parts of intelligible extension as ideas. In the third citation, he says that intelligible extension can affect the soul through each of its ideal parts, and then proffers the idea of a hand as an example of one of these efficacious parts. Clearly, Malebranche sees the talk of intelligible parts and of particular ideas as interchangeable.⁴³ Understanding this point helps to explain why he grows so impatient with Arnauld and other critics for supposing that the reference to intelligible parts entails that the idea of extension is itself extended.⁴⁴ For Malebranche, intelligible parts are not even real parts, let alone material ones. They are, like the talk of particular ideas, just different ways of referring to the one general idea of extension when it affects our mind with various sensory perceptions.

If Malebranche does not believe that intelligible extension has real parts, then why does he speak of parts at all in this context? The simple answer is that these remarks should be read not as efforts at ontology but at phenomenology: what he intends to say is that intelligible extension is *perceived as* having parts, again through color sensations. The so-called parts of intelligible extension are merely

⁴³Radner (*Malebranche. A Study*, 92) rejects this suggestion but not on textual grounds and without considering the passages supplied here.

⁴⁴See e.g. OC 6:208. A referee from this journal suggests that perhaps one reason that Malebranche's critics were inclined to conflate the idea of extension with its ideatum is that they were laboring under the assumption that representation requires resemblance. If this conjecture is correct, it would be very ironic, for one commentator has insisted that Malebranche himself is committed to such a theory of representation and that this commitment spells doom for his and Cartesian philosophy generally (Watson, *Breakdown*). My interpretation shows why, in speaking of the parts of intelligible extension, Malebranche was not presupposing a resemblance theory of representation where the parts in questions are intended to be spatial. Does this mean that intelligible extension does not resemble material extension in any sense? No, the reading I have defended here does not require anything quite so strong. But the sense in which intelligible extension as a general essence represents and/or resembles material extension is something about which Malebranche tells us precious little.

Incidentally, another recent interpretation of intelligible extension attempts to vindicate Watson's thesis by arguing that Malebranche is committed to a structural account of representational resemblance. On this view, the parts of intelligible extension are not material themselves, but enjoy a one-to-one correspondence with the parts of material extension. See Reid, "Malebranche on Intelligible Extension," 581–608. One problem with this reading is that it requires conceiving of space (or extension) as a set of points, which is completely alien to the Cartesian conception that Malebranche embraces.

epistemological artifacts. “Thus, by the sensible differences between colors which bound [*terminent*] precisely the intelligible parts we find in the idea of space or extension, in a stroke we discover an infinity of different objects, their size, their shape, their situation, their motion, or their rest” (*OC* 12:280/*JS* 219). This excerpt shows that Malebranche did not regard the “parts” of intelligible extension as real parts that exist independently of human cognition, for these parts are “bound” or individuated only by the color sensations that are modes of the human mind. Indeed, if the parts of intelligible extension were pre-individuated, then there would be no role for sensations to play in “particularizing” intelligible extension or, more precisely, seeing it as particularized—a role that Malebranche clearly intends them to play. In this passage, he also indicates why it is important for us to perceive intelligible extension as having parts; it is in virtue of doing so that we see the material world as divided into discrete bodies, with different sizes, shapes, motions, positions, and so on.^{45, 46}

Having established that the parts of intelligible extension are merely epistemological artifacts, we can lay to rest another putative problem with the theory of Vision in God. Andrew Pyle has recently argued that in comparing intelligible extension to a blank canvas, Malebranche treats it along the lines of Kant’s notion of space as an a priori particular. Pyle asserts that this way of treating intelligible extension, however, is inconsistent with Malebranche’s other tendency to treat intelligible extension as a general concept in abstract or conceptual thought.⁴⁷ This is a variation on the first problem that we discussed in section 2. The solution to this version of the problem is to point out that on the mature doctrine of Vision in God intelligible extension is not literally an a priori particular but that we *see it as one*. What this shows is that to say that we see intelligible extension as *one* particular body or other is an oversimplification. In fact, our “sensory manifold” is given to us as divided into *numerous* particular bodies, and we see any single body as part of a larger whole. We cannot perceive one body as particular and discrete unless we perceive it as distinct from other bodies. The notion of “seeing as” allows Malebranche to make these proto-Kantian claims, again, without compromising his view that intelligible extension is general, pure, and undifferentiated in itself.

⁴⁵One attractive feature of this interpretation is that it alleviates the tension in those passages in which Malebranche implies, on the one hand, that the parts of intelligible extension admit of different sizes while, on the other hand, insisting that they are intelligible rather than material parts. See e.g. *OC* 3:153/*LO* 627, cited above. Malebranche is making a conceptual point. These are not real parts with real sizes. Rather, we regard intelligible extension as having parts that admit of different sizes. That is what it means to say that they are “intelligible,” rather than material, parts.

⁴⁶The focus of this paper is on human sensory cognition. But one might well wonder what “bounds” the so-called parts of intelligible extension in abstract thought when conceiving e.g. a triangle, if such a conception has no sensory content. I argue elsewhere that the imagination plays a crucial role in Malebranche’s account of mathematical cognition, which means that sensory images individuate the so-called parts of intelligible extension even in that case. See Nolan, “The Role of the Imagination,” 224–49.

⁴⁷See Pyle, *Malebranche*, 66; cf. 72. Also see Alquié (whom Pyle credits), *Le cartésianisme de Malebranche*, 226, 506–7; and Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 65.

4. VISION IN GOD AND THE
THEORY OF NATURAL JUDGMENTS

One attraction of the interpretation developed in the previous section is that, in addition to dissolving the three long-standing problems with Vision in God, it provides the key to understanding Malebranche's theory of natural judgments. Although commentators often acknowledge its importance, this theory has received very little sustained attention in the secondary literature. This is unfortunate, for natural judgments play a pivotal role in Malebranche's account of sensory cognition and are thus intimately related to the doctrine of Vision in God. I briefly develop this relation in this section. Doing so has an important payoff that is directly relevant to the aims of this paper: it illustrates the difference between the notion of "seeing as" and an adverbial theory of sensation, which several commentators have attributed to Malebranche.⁴⁸ According to an adverbial theory, sensations are not objects of perception, but ways of perceiving. So, when I see a red beach ball, I do not see two things, the beach ball and its redness. Rather, I see the one object—viz. the beach ball—"redly." An adverbial interpretation bears a superficial resemblance to the notion of "seeing as" that I developed in the previous section: both interpretations characterize sensory cognition in terms of different ways of seeing. But, as I argue below, there are crucial differences between them, the most important of which is that the adverbial reading is inconsistent with Malebranche's theory of natural judgments. The notion of "seeing as," by contrast, is something that Malebranche explicitly invokes in this context. Appreciating the role that this notion plays in the account of natural judgments serves to further elucidate and confirm the interpretation developed in the previous section.

The theory of natural judgments is part of a functional or teleological account of the senses. Like Descartes before him, Malebranche holds that the purpose of the senses is not to deliver metaphysical truth about the nature of bodies but to preserve the mind-body union.⁴⁹ God created us with sense faculties in order to inform us which objects in the environment are beneficial to our body and which are harmful, so that we can seek or avoid these objects. Not trusting our limited intellectual capacities to make snap judgments or to perform complex calculations about the size, shape, motion, and distance of objects, God instilled in us various "natural judgments"—so called because the author of nature, as it were, makes these judgments for us.⁵⁰ One of the most basic natural judgments is that colors are on the surfaces of physical objects. Judging in this way enables us to distinguish these objects from one another, a crucial first step in determining which objects are harmful or beneficial.

It should not be imagined that it is up to us to assign [*attacher*] the sensation of whiteness to snow or to see it as white. . . . All of this occurs in us independently of us and even in spite of us as natural judgments. . . . And this occurs in us solely in connection

⁴⁸See e.g. Jolley, "Malebranche on the Soul," 37–41, and "Malebranche's Theory of the Mind," 128–31; Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 64–65; Pyle, *Malebranche*, 57, 63–65; and Radner, *Malebranche: A Study*, 87–89.

⁴⁹See e.g. *OC* 12:280–81/*JS* 219.

⁵⁰*OC* 1:97/*LO* 34.

with the preservation of life; it is clear that . . . sensations of colors must be sensed in objects in order to distinguish them from each other. (*OC* 1:133–34/*LO* 55)

Malebranche maintains that colors and other so-called sensible qualities are merely sensations in the mind. But, as he notes in this passage, we naturally judge that these qualities are in external objects. Strictly speaking, this is a mistake, but doing so helps to preserve the mind-body union: “the judgments into which our sense impressions lead us are quite correct, if they are considered in relation to the preservation of the body. But they are nevertheless quite bizarre and far removed from the truth . . .” (*OC* 1:142/*LO* 60). Although they are misleading if taken as touchstones for the nature of physical objects, natural judgments are nevertheless useful because they present those objects to us in a way that best promotes the well being of the mind-body union.⁵¹

In the first edition of the *Search*, Malebranche says that natural judgments are “contrary” to sensations.⁵² But in the second edition, he reverses himself and characterizes them as a species of sensation, a view he retains throughout the remainder of his career.⁵³ “[A]s it is given to the senses only to sense and never, properly speaking, to judge, it is clear that this natural judgment is but a compound sensation. . . .” (*OC* 1:97/*LO* 34). So-called natural “judgments,” then, are not real judgments but they are almost always followed by free judgments,⁵⁴ and one has to be especially careful not to confuse them, for the soul “almost always accords its free judgments to the natural judgments of the senses” (*OC* 1:141/*LO* 59). Whereas every natural judgment occurs without our willing it (“independently of us, and even in spite of us”), the free judgment that follows is wholly voluntary and thus can be withheld, which is important to Malebranche’s project in the First Book of the *Search* of training us to avoid error.

This development in Malebranche’s view raises a couple of important interpretive questions: If natural judgments are merely compound sensations, then why does he continue to refer to them as “judgments”? Moreover, why do they incline us to make corresponding free judgments? Among commentators who have discussed the theory of natural judgments, these questions are some of the most controversial and difficult to answer.⁵⁵ The interpretation developed in this paper provides a systematic way of addressing them. As with Malebranche’s theory of sensory cognition of which they are a part, natural judgments are best understood

⁵¹A referee for this journal wonders how this account of the natural judgment that colors are in bodies avoids making God a deceiver. Malebranche does not address this issue explicitly, but I think his main defense would be that natural judgments are not real judgments, as discussed below. Such judgments are almost always followed by “free judgments,” but the latter are not compulsory. One can suspend one’s consent and part of the aim of book I of the *Search* is to provide the reader with a method for doing so. Malebranche believes that the “strangeness” (*bizarrenie*) of our natural judgments can also be explained by the Fall (*OC* 1:136/*LO* 57).

⁵²*OC* 1:96c.

⁵³For an extended discussion of this and other modifications of the theory of natural judgments in the second edition, see Klopke, “Malebranche’s Theory of Natural Judgment.”

⁵⁴“Now this natural judgment is only a sensation, but the sensation or natural judgment is almost always followed by another, free judgment” (*OC* 1:130/*LO* 52).

⁵⁵See, e.g., Bréhier, “Les ‘jugements naturels,’” 142–50; Church, *A Study of Malebranche*; and Smith, “Perception of Distance and Magnitude,” 191–204.

in terms of the notion of “seeing as.” When offering examples of natural judgments, Malebranche sometimes invokes this notion explicitly, as for example in the passage cited above, where he says that we see snow *as* white. Properly speaking, what this means is that we see intelligible extension as white snow.⁵⁶ To see intelligible extension in this way is akin to judging that it is white snow. In general, natural judgments are *like* judgments insofar as they involve seeing relations between objects or between objects and properties, and this feature of them is best captured by the notion of “seeing as.” Malebranche suggests in at least one place that natural judgments and their corresponding free judgments have the same content. “Now these natural judgments, although quite useful, often involve us in error of some sort, by making us form free judgments in perfect agreement with them” (OC 1:99/LO 35–36). It is precisely because natural judgments are like actual judgments, and have the same content, that we are inclined to make the corresponding free judgments. The crucial difference between them is that, as real judgments, free judgments require an act of consent.

This elucidation of the theory of natural judgments helps to resolve a puzzle relating to Vision in God that we encountered in section 2. There we noted that in early editions of the *Search* Malebranche characterizes sensory cognition in terms of the mind “painting” or projecting its sensations onto intelligible extension. We observed, however, that with the advent of the doctrine of efficacious ideas he reverses this analogy. But what exactly was he trying to express by means of the original metaphor? He must have thought that there was something felicitous about it, for otherwise he would not have used it. I suggest that the original artist analogy makes sense if we see it as an effort to characterize our natural judgments, or at least one of the most fundamental kinds of natural judgment: the metaphor of projection is to be understood in terms of naturally judging that colors are on the surface of bodies (or naturally judging that intelligible extension is colored). One strong piece of evidence for this reading is that he uses the very same language in both cases: the mind is said to “project” or literally “attach” (*attacher*) its sensations of colors onto bodies (or intelligible extension). And when characterizing natural judgments generally, he uses language that explicitly recalls the artist analogy:

[O]ur soul . . . almost always blindly follows sensible impressions or the natural judgments of the senses, and . . . is content, as it were, *to spread itself* [*se répandre*] onto the objects it considers by clothing them with what it has stripped from itself. (OC 1:138/LO 58; emphasis added)

The only difference is that in the original artist analogy Malebranche had said that the soul spreads its sensations onto intelligible extension rather than onto bodies. But this difference is insignificant, for it is in virtue of spreading them onto the former that we spread them onto the latter, given his representationalism.

Much more could be said about natural judgments, but we have unearthed enough of the doctrine to appreciate how the notion of “seeing as,” as developed in the previous section, differs from an adverbial theory of sensation and to show

⁵⁶To cast the point in the language of particular ideas, the “idea” of this white snow just is our seeing intelligible extension as white snow.

why Malebranche could not accept the latter on pain of contradiction. There are two varieties of the adverbialist interpretation in the secondary literature; so I will take each in turn. The first variety stresses that for Malebranche, unlike Descartes, intentionality is *not* the mark of the mental. Although some Malebranchean perceptions are intentional—in particular, so-called “pure perceptions,” which are directed toward the idea of extension in God—sensations are not. Defenders of this view like to contrast sensations not just with pure perceptions but also with divine ideas. Unlike the latter, which are intrinsically representational, sensations are mere modifications of the human mind and not directed toward anything. The following statements from Jolley and Pyle, respectively, are representative of this view:

Malebranche holds that there is a large class of mental states—namely, *sentiments* or sensations—which are not intentional at all. Into this class Malebranche puts not merely bodily sensations such as pain and pleasure but all the secondary qualities as well. (“Malebranche’s Theory of the Mind,” 130)⁵⁷

[Malebranche] insists on a sharp contrast between sensations, which are modes of our souls and represent nothing beyond themselves, and ideas, which are “in” God and represent objects. His rejection of the *monde intelligible* hypothesis [which asserts that the soul can know other creatures by knowing itself] thus carries with it an absolute denial of the thesis that intentionality is the mark of the mental. (*Malebranche*, 61)⁵⁸

Jolley rightly points out that Malebranche holds an “object theory,” as opposed to a “content theory,” of intentionality.⁵⁹ The latter treats intentionality as the function of the intrinsic content of a mental act, while the former maintains that a mental act is intentional if and only if it is directed toward an independently existing object. Malebranchean pure perceptions are intentional in the latter sense because they are directed toward intelligible extension, which exists in God’s mind. But, again, he and Pyle deny that Malebranchean sensations are intentional in this or any sense.⁶⁰

Readers of the previous section will see at once that this view is belied by the doctrine of efficacious ideas: intelligible extension cause us to cognize it in different ways depending on how it affects the soul. So intelligible extension is the immediate object of all of our perceptions, sensory or otherwise.⁶¹

⁵⁷Also see Jolley, “Malebranche on the Soul,” 37–41.

⁵⁸Also see Pyle, *Malebranche*, 57, 63–65.

⁵⁹Jolley, “Malebranche’s Theory of the Mind,” 129–30. Jolley borrows this distinction from Nadler (*Arnauld and Cartesian Philosophy*, ch. 6), but it ultimately traces to scholarly discussions of intentionality within Husserl and Brentano’s philosophies.

⁶⁰Jolley writes, “Malebranche is explicit that sensations are modifications of the soul and thus by virtue of his ‘object theory,’ they cannot be intrinsically intentional; for no mental states are intrinsically intentional. Thus the only way in which sensations could have intentionality is if they were directed to independently existing objects—ideas in God; but on Malebranche’s view they are not” (“Malebranche’s Theory of the Mind,” 130–31).

⁶¹A referee for this journal drew my attention to a recently published essay by Alison Simmons (“Sensation in a Malebranchean Mind”), where she articulates the same objection. I recommend her discussion, which is much more detailed than I have space for here. As I argue below, however, the other version of the adverbialist interpretation is immune from this objection and so must be handled differently.

This idea [of extension], take note, is indelibly in your mind, like that of being or the infinite, of indeterminate being. It is always present to you. You cannot separate yourself from it or completely lose sight of it. (Dialogue I, JS 14; OC 12:42)

[T]he same idea of extension can be known, imagine, or sensed, according to the way the divine substance containing it applies it diversely to our mind. (Dialogue II, JS 30; OC 12:61)

When the idea of extension affects or modifies the soul with a pure perception, then the soul conceives simply this extension. But when the idea of extension touches the soul more vividly, and affects it with a sensible perception, then the soul sees or feels extension. The soul sees it when this perception is a sensation of color and it feels it or perceives it still more vividly when the perception with which intelligible extension modifies it is a pain. For color, pain and all the other sensations are only sensible perceptions, produced in intelligences by intelligible ideas. (*Christian Conversations*, OC 4:75–76)

These passages provide compelling evidence that Malebranche holds that sensations are intentionally directed to intelligible extension. Thus, the first version of the adverbial interpretation is clearly mistaken. By contrast, the interpretation developed in the previous section based on the notion of “seeing as” is perfectly consistent with these passages and even highlights the fact that sensation is just one among many ways of regarding intelligible extension, depending on how it causally affects the mind.

The second form of the adverbialist interpretation cannot be defeated in the same way, for commentators who advocate this version acknowledge that sensations are directed toward intelligible extension. Rather than denying that sensations are intentional, they argue instead that sensations are not themselves mental objects, but (adverbial) ways of perceiving intelligible extension. The following statements by Radner and Nadler, respectively, are representative:

There is an ambiguity in calling sensible qualities such as colors ‘perceptions’. Does Malebranche mean that they are *objects* of perception or does he mean that they are *acts* of perception? . . . Color, coldness and pain . . . are not objects of sensible perception but sensible perceptions of an object. The Cartesian doctrine that sensible qualities are “only in the mind” has a twofold significance for Malebranche. It means that there is nothing like sensible qualities in physical objects. It also means that sensible qualities are species of mental acts. (*Malebranche: A Study*, 87)

Malebranche’s sensations are not *percepta*, or entities perceived by the mind at the same time it apprehends the idea. They are not, that is, mental *objects*. As modes of the mind, they are simply *perceptions*, or ways of apprehending. . . . On this schema, to perceive a red body is to apprehend an *idea* of extension redly. The sensible apprehension of the idea is, then, contrasted with the pure perception of the idea . . . simply in virtue of the nature of the mind’s perceptual activity. The idea itself is one and the same in both cases, and it is grasped either by a *perception pure* or a sensation. (*Malebranche and Ideas*, 64–65)

So, according to Nadler and Radner, sensations are *of* intelligible extension but they do not represent its properties or the properties of bodies. The problem with this form of adverbialism (and another problem with the first form) is that it is inconsistent with the doctrine of natural judgments. The aim of an adverbial

theory is to avoid reifying sensations in any way. But in characterizing our natural judgments Malebranche explicitly reifies them, for he claims that sensible qualities are presented to us in sense perception as *properties* of intelligible extension and, in virtue of that, of bodies. We do not see intelligible extension “redly,” as adverbialism would have it; rather, we see it *as* red, which is to say we see it as having the property of redness. As noted in previous sections, we could not discriminate bodies one from the other unless we saw intelligible extension as colored. At one point in the *Search*, Malebranche envisages a threefold taxonomy of sensations: first, we perceive “weak and languid” sensations, such as colors, as properties of the surfaces of external bodies. Second, we perceive “strong and lively” sensations, such as the pain occasioned by the prick of a thorn, as properties of our own body. Third, we perceive sensations that fall between these two extremes, such as the heat occasioned by proximity to fire, as properties of both external bodies and our own body (*OC* I:137–42/*LO* 57–60). The differences among these various types of sensation are accounted for in terms of the different roles they play in preserving our mind-body union.⁶² But the important point is that, in each and every case, sensations are given to us in experience as properties *of* intelligible extension (and bodies) rather than as mental acts, as the second form of adverbialism would have it.

As previously discussed, Malebranche holds that colors and other so-called “secondary qualities” are merely sensations, that is, modifications of the mind. This means that some of our sensations represent intelligible extension (and bodies) as having properties that they do not have, which is to say they *misrepresent* them. But proponents of the second form of adverbialism wish to deny that our sensations even purport to represent.

As far as I can tell, Nadler is the only other commentator to have recognized that natural judgments have representational content. But to avoid inconsistency with the adverbialist interpretation, he draws a distinction between our sensations and the natural judgments that “accompany” them:

Malebranche notes . . . that every sensation (e.g., pain, heat) is accompanied by an involuntary *jugement naturel*. . . This natural judgment (which must be distinguished from, but is often followed by, an explicit “voluntary judgment” to the same effect) is always false. The sensation/judgment compound is itself often called a *sensation* by Malebranche and clearly possesses a representational content of some kind, however false and obscure. The judgment, in a sense, attaches a content to the sensation proper, to the *qualité sensible*, thereby making it an intentional or object-directed phenomenon (e.g., “this pain is in that hand”). (*Malebranche and Ideas*, 24)

Given this distinction, Nadler would most likely say that the adverbial theory applies exclusively to sensations in what he calls the “strict sense”; so there is no conflict with the claim that natural judgments are representational. But I do not think that the proposed distinction can stand. As we have seen, in the second edition of the *Search* onwards, Malebranche characterizes natural judgments as compound sensa-

⁶² “[W]e always refer sensations to what most suits the good of the body. We refer the pain of a prick not to the thorn but to the pricked finger. We refer heat, smell, and taste both to the organs and to the objects. As for color, we refer it to objects alone” (Dialogue XII, JS 219).

tions. So they do not “accompany” sensations; rather, sensations are constitutive of them. It would make sense to distinguish sensations from natural judgments if the latter were real judgments, but Malebranche insists that they are not.

To save the adverbialist interpretation, one might try instead to distinguish *simple* sensations from *compound* ones, and say that only the latter—being natural judgments—purport to represent. But this is not plausible either, for the purpose of the senses is to preserve and promote the welfare of the mind-body union. For Malebranche, sensations serve this function only insofar as they individuate sensible objects and present them to us as sources of benefit or harm, either actual or potential. This would seem to entail that every sensation that we actually experience is compounded so as to constitute a natural judgment.⁶³ More importantly, given the doctrine of natural judgments, Malebranche lacks philosophical motivation for affirming an adverbial theory. As Jolley notes, the most common motivation for such a theory is to avoid multiplying entities beyond necessity, in particular to avoid committing to entities such as sense-data or, in this case, to realism about sensible qualities.⁶⁴ But if Malebranche wants to honor Ockham’s razor, he can do that, *as he already does*, (1) by noting that our natural judgments are always false and (2) by insisting that sensible qualities such as colors, smells, odors, etc. are merely sensations or modifications of the mind.

Although our focus in this section so far has been on natural judgments concerning so-called secondary qualities such as colors, it is important to point out that the theory of natural judgments is not limited to them. Malebranche also thinks such judgments play a role in our perception of the primary qualities of bodies such as size, shape, and distance. Indeed, one of his favorite examples of a natural judgment is the moon or sun illusion, in which such heavenly bodies appear larger and more distant when they are on the horizon than when situated above it. The explanation for this illusion also involves the notion of “seeing as.”

[O]ur imagination ordinarily does not represent great distance between objects unless it is aided by the sight of other objects between them, beyond which it can imagine more objects. This is why we see the moon as much larger when it is rising or setting than when it is well above the horizon; for when the moon is high, we see no objects between us and it whose size we might know in order to judge the size of the moon by comparison. . . . It should be noted that when the moon has risen above our heads, although we might know for certain through reason that it is at a great distance, we cannot help but see it as quite near and small, because these natural judgments of vision occur in us, independently of us, and even in spite of us.⁶⁵ (*OC* 1:98–99/*LO* 35)

As Malebranche explains it, we see the moon as larger and more distant when it is near the horizon than when it is on the upper meridian, because of the presence of other sensory objects, such as mountains and valleys, with which it can be compared.

⁶³As the quotation above indicates, Nadler and I agree that every sensation “involves” a natural judgment.

⁶⁴Jolley, “Malebranche on the Soul,” 40–41.

⁶⁵There is no French equivalent in this passage for the English word ‘as,’ but the meaning requires it.

Malebranche's explanation of the moon illusion provides further evidence for the interpretation developed in the previous section concerning the so-called "parts" of intelligible extension. I argued there that intelligible extension lacks real parts but, as a result of the sensations that this idea produces in us at different times, we see it as having parts. I would now like to add one further point in light of the present discussion: we see these parts as larger or smaller depending on the body being represented. This point recalls the following remark from *Elucidation 10*: "[Y]ou can understand why you see the intelligible sun now as large and now as small. . . . All that is needed for this is that we sometimes see a greater part of intelligible extension and sometimes a smaller" (*OC 3:153/LO 627*). Malebranche's account of the moon or sun illusion indicates the proper way of interpreting this passage. When we see the sun on the horizon we naturally judge that it is large, which is just to say that we see it as large. We see it as large in virtue of seeing intelligible extension as consisting of parts, one of which we see as large (and reddish orange, spherical, etc.).

Thus, the theory of natural judgments is subsumed under the doctrine of Vision in God. According to the mature version of the latter, intelligible extension causally affects our mind in different ways. In sense perception, it affects our mind with various sensations, which, in turn, lead us to see it as divided into discrete parts and to see those parts as having particular properties. This is where natural judgments come into play, for in virtue of seeing intelligible extension in these ways, we see the world as divided into discrete bodies with various properties. As we have discovered, so-called natural judgments just are ways of seeing bodies that in turn incline us to make free judgments. And, owing to the functional role of the senses, the properties we perceive bodies as having are those most relevant to preserving our mind-body union.

5. PARTICULAR IDEAS REVISITED: IDEAS AS ARCHETYPES FOR CREATION

In section 3, we established that Malebranche continues to speak of ideas of particular bodies even after introducing the notion of intelligible extension in *Elucidation 10* as a way of referring to this general idea. Expressions such as 'the idea of a hand' or 'the intelligible sun' are merely different names for intelligible extension. Hence, Malebranche is a nominalist about particular ideas. He speaks of particular ideas because, by affecting our mind with various color sensations, intelligible extension causes us to perceive it as some particular body or other. Thus, there is no inconsistency between his reference to particular ideas and his insistence that the idea of extension is single and unique. Unfortunately, the appearance of inconsistency with respect to particular ideas resurrects itself under another guise. The aim of this section is to discuss this second source of the problem to determine whether it poses a difficulty for the interpretation developed above and whether Malebranche can be cleared of the charge of inconsistency on this score once and for all. Ultimately, I conclude that this new version of the problem does not threaten my interpretation, but does point to a systematic difficulty within Malebranche's metaphysics, and within Cartesian metaphysics generally, concerning the individuation of bodies.

Malebranche assigns two roles to ideas in God: they serve as 1) the immediate objects of divine and human cognition and 2) the archetypes or exemplars for divine creation. Our discussion so far has focused on the first, but the second is equally important for his philosophy. Following Augustine and Aquinas, Malebranche maintains that there can be no willing without understanding or knowing. In the case of God this means that there can be no blind creation; creation requires ideas or archetypes. "God must have within Himself the ideas of all beings He has created (since otherwise He could not have created them)" (*OC* 1:437/*LO* 230).⁶⁶ This Augustinian doctrine would seem to entail that if there are particular corporeal substances in the world then God must have particular ideas of those bodies.⁶⁷ As an adherent of this doctrine himself, Arnauld pounces on Malebranche in *On True and False Ideas* for not remaining faithful to it.

[G]iven the fact that the ideas in God are the forms and exemplars according to which he created each of his works, there must be particular ideas representing to him not only the sun, a horse and a tree, but also the smallest midge and the smallest speck of matter, because there are none, no matter how small, that he did not create with distinct knowledge of what he was doing. That is an incontestable truth. St. Augustine establishes it in several places. (*A* 38:244/*K* 65)

Gueroult thinks Malebranche faces an "inextricable dilemma" (*aporie . . . inextricable*) here. On the one hand, his account of creation requires positing particular ideas of all created things in the divine intellect. On the other hand, his view that ideas in God are uncreated requires banishing particular ideas from the divine intellect, on the ground that only that which is general is uncreated.⁶⁸ Whether or not the latter analysis is correct, it is nevertheless true that Malebranche insists that there is only one, general idea of extension, even while affirming the Augustinian account of creation, which seems to commit him to ideas of particular bodies. Is this dilemma inextricable?

What Malebranche should have said in order to escape this dilemma is that there is only one corporeal substance and that individual bodies such as the sun are merely conceptual or phenomenal. His insistence upon a single idea of body in God would then satisfy the Augustinian doctrine. If the extended plenum (*res extensa*) taken as a whole were the only genuine corporeal substance, then intelligible extension would suffice to serve as its archetype. Some commentators have attributed phenomenalism regarding the individuation of particular bodies to Descartes,⁶⁹ and it would be quite natural for Malebranche, as a good Cartesian, to follow suit. But unlike Descartes, who affirms the one-material-substance theory in the Synopsis to the *Meditations* and whose account of vortical motion seems to

⁶⁶Also see *OC* 1:434/*LO* 229 and *OC* 12:11, where he cites approvingly Augustine's view that "all creatures have their ideas or archetypes." See Pyle, *Malebranche*, 60.

⁶⁷Since there is a plurality of thinking substances, this doctrine also entails that there are ideas of particular souls in God. But Malebranche famously holds that God denies us access to the general idea of soul (or "intelligible thought") in him, let alone particular ideas (see, most notably, *Elucidation* 11).

⁶⁸Gueroult, *Malebranche*, I, 241.

⁶⁹See Lennon, "The Eleatic Descartes," 29–47; and Sowaal, "Cartesian Bodies," 217–40. It should be noted that such an interpretation of Descartes is highly controversial. Some commentators are inclined to read Descartes as a realist about individual bodies on textual grounds alone.

require it,⁷⁰ Malebranche never even flirts with such a position. On the contrary, he is committed to the existence of individual corporeal substances on theological grounds.⁷¹ Indeed, while railing against the very possibility of mounting an “exact demonstration” of their existence, and asserting that the senses provide us with only probable opinion, Malebranche maintains that the existence of bodies “can be rigorously demonstrated” on the basis of scripture (*OC* 12:37/JS 9).⁷²

Given Malebranche’s commitment to realism regarding individual bodies, one might think that his only option in the face of this new problem of inconsistency is to concede defeat. In his reply to Arnauld’s criticism, he appears to do just that.

I say . . . that we see in God his works *by that which there is in him that represents them*. But *that which there is in him that represents them is intelligible extension*, or the idea of extension. The sun appears smaller to me than the earth, and it appears larger to God who sees things such as they are. It is therefore not by *each* of His ideas that God makes me see his works, but the word “each” is Mr. Arnauld’s. I speak more generally, in saying always, that we see the works of God *by that which there is in him that represents them*, and never by *each* of their ideas. Thus, I was right to say: “It is not necessary to imagine that the intelligible world has such a relation to the material and sensible world that there is, for example, an intelligible sun, horse, [and] tree destined to represent to us the sun, a horse, and a tree.” And Mr. Arnauld is wrong to have attributed to me the view that God reveals his works to us by *each* of his ideas, in order to conclude that I changed my opinion and to repeat it at every moment. He is wrong again to correct me by these words. “[I]t is not an imagination but a certitude that the intelligible world has such a relation with the material and sensible world that there is [an intelligible] sun, etc. And that it is impossible that that not be the case.” But it is even more wrong to have employed eight pages of prose and the authority of St. Augustine and St. Thomas in order to prove it. For who doubts of this truth? Certainly I have never doubted it. (*OC* 6:114–15; Malebranche’s emphasis)

Malebranche begins here by reaffirming his view that *we* see all bodies in God via intelligible extension and this, he explains, is why he said in *Elucidation 10* that the intelligible world does not bear a direct relation to the sensible world such that there is an intelligible sun, etc. However, in the latter half of the passage, he seems to concede Arnauld’s Augustinian point that God must have particular ideas of bodies in order to create them, even if we do not have access to them. So, one might conclude after reading this passage, there is an intelligible sun after all, but God does not reveal it to us. Arnauld interprets the passage in this way and asserts, on the basis of it, that Malebranche is being inconsistent yet again (A 38:506). In *Elucidation 10*, he had explicitly denied that “there are in God certain particular ideas that represent each body individually,” but in the passage above he seems to affirm it (*OC* 3:154/LO 627).

However one reads the latter half of the passage, Malebranche consistently maintains here and elsewhere that *we* see all bodies via intelligible extension alone. This is important because it shows that the issue of whether there must be particular ideas to serve as archetypes for God’s creative act is independent of the

⁷⁰See Lennon, “The Eleatic Descartes.”

⁷¹In his paper on Descartes’s phenomenalism with respect to individual bodies, Lennon makes a point of contrasting that view with Malebranche’s realism. See “The Eleatic Descartes,” 44n48.

⁷²Also see *Dialogue 6* and *Elucidation 6*.

question of whether *we* see bodies in God via particular ideas. We can be assured, therefore, that the interpretation developed in section 3 is not compromised in any way by this new threat of inconsistency. Even if Malebranche were to appeal to particular ideas to account for divine creation, he does not require them to explain human sensory cognition.

It would, however, be rather peculiar to hold that God has within himself particular ideas of bodies but that we do not have access to them, especially in light of Malebranche's refrain, stated above and repeated at various places in his replies to Arnauld, that we see God's works "by that which there is in him that represents them." As Arnauld wonders, if there are ideas that represent particular bodies in God and that serve as the blueprints for creation, then should not Malebranche hold that we see bodies through those ideas? (A 38:503–4).

I do not think that Malebranche can be entirely absolved of difficulty here, but I would like to develop a few suggestions as to why he thought he was on safe ground. Returning to Malebranche's reply above, I do not think that he intended to concede Arnauld's point, at least not in the way that Arnauld understands it. Arnauld claims that God must have particular ideas in his intellect of each and every thing that he creates. But, again, Malebranche begins the passage by stressing, "[W]e see in God his works *by that which there is in him that represents them*. But *that which there is in him that represents them is intelligible extension, or the idea of extension*." Malebranche is making a point here not just about how *we* see all bodies in God but also about what there is in God that represents them. His unequivocal answer is that intelligible extension represents all bodies and it does so by representing their common essence. This point strongly suggests that intelligible extension is the sole archetype for bodies. And, indeed, he affirms this view elsewhere: "[T]he idea that I have of extension in length, breadth, and depth is . . . eternal, immutable, necessary, common to God and all intelligences, *and this idea is the model of created extension from which all bodies are formed*" (OC 9:925–26; emphasis added).

What then are we to make of the end of Malebranche's reply to Arnauld as cited above? If there is only one archetype for bodies in the divine intellect, what is he conceding when he claims to have never doubted that "the intelligible world has such a relation with the material and sensible world that there is [an intelligible] sun, etc."? How did he think he could reconcile the Augustinian concept of creation with his own view that there is only one general idea of extension? The answer is to be found in his account of how God knows all things. At various places in his writings, especially the *Search*, Malebranche asserts that God sees the essences of created things in his own perfections and sees their existence in his volitions. "God can only draw His knowledge from Himself. He sees in His essence the ideas or essences of all possible beings, and in His volitions (He sees) their existence and all its circumstances" (OC 2:98/LO 319).⁷³ Later, in *Elucidation 10*, he applies this point specifically to corporeal substances, noting that God knows both the actual motion of bodies and their existence only in his volitions (OC 3:152/LO 627). He does not see the actual existence of bodies in his essence because the created world is contingent. I think Malebranche believed that his

⁷³Cf. OC 1:435/LO 229 and OC 3:61/LO 573.

view that God knows the existence of all individual bodies *in his volitions* could accommodate the Augustinian concept of creation and thus answer Arnauld. What he “never doubted” is that God knows all things, including all individual bodies. But God knows all things only by knowing himself; he is uniquely intelligible. As Malebranche is fond of pointing out, bodies are unintelligible in themselves, both in their essence and in their existence. So there is a sense in which the “intelligible sun,” or, as I think he means here, the idea of *the actually existing* sun, is contained in God but it’s contained in his volitions not in his intellect.⁷⁴

While I think this is how Malebranche intended his reply to Arnauld, I hasten to add that as an attempt to accommodate the Augustinian concept of creation it fails miserably. To satisfy the latter, God must have particular ideas of all created things in his intellect, *prior to his will*. To say, as Malebranche does, that God knows particular bodies by knowing his volitions would be to concede that God creates blindly.⁷⁵ Malebranche of course has a very different conception of body than Augustine and other medieval predecessors. Following Descartes, Malebranche holds that all bodies have extension as their essence. So he was likely thinking that it would suffice for God to know this single essence prior to creation. The difficulty that he, and perhaps Descartes too,⁷⁶ failed to appreciate is that if there are particular corporeal substances, then there must be particular corporeal essences in order to individuate them. Realist strategies for individuating Cartesian bodies by some other method—e.g. appealing to motion, position, or quantity of matter—have all been shown to fail.⁷⁷ Some Malebranche commentators claim that God sees particular bodies in intelligible extension by knowing their respective quantities or volumes (e.g. he knows that it is possible for a body to be 12 x 15 x 26 centimeters). But such volumes are universals and thus cannot uniquely constitute the identity conditions for any particular body. Thus, God could know bodies prior to his volitions only if Malebranche were to countenance individual essences or, what is the same, divine ideas of particular bodies. But then he would have to relinquish the Cartesian view of extension as the essence (or archetype) of all bodies. These are the philosophical pressures he faces in trying to remain faithful to both Augustine and Descartes.

That the problem of individuation constitutes Malebranche’s ultimate downfall should come as no surprise. Cartesians notoriously have trouble accounting for

⁷⁴Joseph Moreau concurs that particular bodies do not have their own distinctive essences in the divine understanding; intelligible extension is the sole archetype of matter. He also agrees that God knows particular bodies by knowing his decrees. See “*Malebranche et le spinozisme*,” 82.

⁷⁵A referee for this journal objects that there are places in his writings where Malebranche says that God sees all possible bodies in intelligible extension prior to his volitions. It is true that Malebranche sometimes says this. For example, in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* he expresses this point by saying that the idea of extension in God contains an infinite number of possible worlds (see e.g. *OC* 12:52/*JS* 22). But, given his rejection of particular ideas in God, this claim is best understood in a highly deflationary sense: God knows prior to his will that any body, should it exist, will be extended. Intelligible extension is a general essence and so cannot reveal bodies in their particularity or individuality.

⁷⁶I say “perhaps” because there is a debate among commentators about whether Descartes countenanced individual corporeal substances or whether he recognized only one, consisting of the whole material plenum.

⁷⁷See Garber, *Descartes’ Metaphysical Physics*, 168–69, 179–81; Kenny, *Descartes*, 214–15; Lennon, “The Eleatic Descartes”; and Sowaal, “Cartesian Bodies,” 217–22.

the individuation of particular bodies. For our purposes, the important point is that this problem is independent from the other difficulties concerning human cognition discussed in this paper and does not in any way threaten the interpretive strategy that we developed in the previous section for resolving them. The task of this section has been to neutralize the second version of the inconsistency problem by locating its source in one of the great bugbears of Cartesian metaphysics, rather than in the details of Malebranche's account of sense perception. This task is now complete.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to develop a systematic solution to three putative difficulties with Malebranche's account of sensory cognition that some notable commentators have declared to be unsolvable. The key to resolving these problems, I have argued, is the doctrine of efficacious ideas, which Malebranche introduces late in his career, and the closely related notion of "seeing as," which appears much earlier. His final position is that intelligible extension causes all of our sensory perceptions (and, indeed, all forms of human cognition) by affecting our mind in different ways. By affecting our mind in these ways, we in turn see it in different ways. In particular, we see intelligible extension—which in itself is pure, general, and immutable—as sensuous and as divided into discrete parts whose properties change over time. Although these ways of seeing intelligible extension are (owing to their sensory character) highly confused, they are nevertheless grounded in the laws of mind-body union and the laws of the mind's union with God.

On this mature version of the doctrine of Vision in God, the three putative difficulties are easily dissolved. First, Malebranche need not claim that intelligible extension becomes discrete and sensuous in sense perception to account for how it represents particular sensible objects. He need only say that intelligible extension causes us to see it *as* discrete and sensuous. And, indeed, in reversing the painter analogy, this is what he does say. Second, there is no inconsistency in speaking of particular ideas in God, while insisting upon a single, general idea of extension, for the former are merely ways of referring to the latter when it causes us to perceive it as some particular body or other. Finally, in speaking of the "parts" of intelligible extension, Malebranche is not conflating the idea of extension with its ideatum (something he repeatedly cautions against), for these are merely epistemological artifacts. We see intelligible extension as having parts or, again, as being divided into discrete objects, just as we see it as sensuous.

This interpretation has several philosophical attractions. First, by resolving these three problems, it vindicates the consistency and systematic nature of Malebranche's theory of human cognition. Second, by showing how Malebranche's reference to the parts of intelligible extension is merely nominal, it refutes the charge of Spinozism, which has dogged him since such early critics as Arnauld and de Mairan first raised it. Third, by explicating the role that efficacious ideas play in Vision in God, it shows how the latter relates to Malebranche's other signature doctrine, namely, Occasionalism. Fourth, it uncovers the relation between Vision

in God and the poorly understood theory of natural judgments, thus opening avenues for further research.⁷⁸

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