



**Some of Malebranche's Reactions to Spinoza as Revealed in his Correspondence
with Dourtous de Mairan**

George S. Getchev

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 41, No. 4. (Jul., 1932), pp. 385-394.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28193207%2941%3A4%3C385%3ASOMRTS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

The Philosophical Review is currently published by Cornell University.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sageschool.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME OF MALEBRANCHE'S REACTIONS TO SPINOZA
AS REVEALED IN HIS CORRESPONDENCE WITH
DOURTOUS DE MAIRAN

IN 1841 F. Feuillet de Conches published an unedited manuscript from the pen of Malebranche consisting of two notebooks on metaphysics and a correspondence between the famous philosopher and Dourtois de Mairan, member of the French Academy,¹ and permanent secretary of the Academy of Science. Originally this MS. was the possession of a M. Millon of the Faculty of letters of the University of Paris, who, for some unknown reason, did not, during his lifetime, see fit to acquaint the philosophical public with so valuable and authentic a document. At his death the MS. found its way into the hands of F. Feuillet de Conches, who made it accessible to all, through print, as stated, in 1841 under the title "Méditations Métaphysiques et Correspondence avec Dourtois de Mairan sur des sujets de Métaphysique par N. Malebranche, Prêtre de l'Oratoire".

There is a facsimile of the first page of the *Méditations Métaphysiques* inserted in the first publication of this MS., which seems quite appropriate, not only as giving a sample of the longhand of Malebranche, but also as showing, as the editor remarks in the preface apropos of the erasures and corrections with which the facsimile is covered, "that Genius exacts a high price from man for what it is commonly supposed that It simply gives him".

The correspondence alone interests us here. It took place between September 17, 1713, and September 19, 1714, and consists of eight letters, four from the pen of Malebranche and four by D. de Mairan, covering eighty-eight pages in all. No information is given as to whether D. de Mairan's letters were in the MS. in his longhand. One infers, however, that they were transcriptions either by Malebranche or by some of the *Confrères* of the Oratory, for in his first letter D. de Mairan enjoins Malebranche "to destroy this and all letters that may follow", a circumstance indicat-

¹ Elected in 1743 (F-27), under the Protectorate of Louis XV.

ing, incidentally, the fear of persecution that haunted all students of Spinoza who dared discuss his system openly or showed themselves in sympathy with it.

At the time the correspondence took place D. de Mairan lived at or near Béziers, preoccupied with the care of his estates. He recalls himself to Malebranche in his first letter as "that young scholar of the Academy of Longpray whom M. de Romainval, your kin, used to fetch betimes to your house and to whom you explained on such occasions the book of M. de l'Hôpital and gave many and sundry instructions in Mathematics and Physics". He says further, explaining the end in view of which he was writing, that, "having passed a year or two ago from Mathematics and Physics to the study of Religion, your writings, Descartes, Pascal and Labadie, were my chief instructors, their teaching serving to confirm me in those beliefs which a pious early training and the reading of the Holy Scriptures had taught me to love". He thus enjoyed the perfect peace of mind of the faithful and lived in "the gentle persuasion", which neither "the arguments of the atheists" nor "the mocking laughter of worldly men could perturb", until, by some chance, the works of Spinoza, including the *Ethics*, fell into his hands. He read the latter work in "solitude", in "the silence of the passions", using a favorite expression of Malebranche. The rigidity and correctness of its reasoning seemed to him flawless. "As I keep rereading this work, I am increasingly impressed with its soundness and good sense", he says. He finds further, he continues, that one cannot, on the one hand, envisage without fear and pity for humanity the implications of this system; on the other, that it is hard to resist him, that his reasoning "seduces". In this divided, vexing state of mind, as it must have been for one who took his philosophical convictions seriously, he turns to Malebranche for aid, begging him to point out to him "the paralogism on which Spinoza's system", he would like to believe, "is built, and which if discovered, would cause the entire structure to collapse" (p. 95).

In a very brief letter Malebranche replies that he had at one time begun reading the principal work of the author in question, but, becoming disgusted with its "horrible" implications, had failed to finish it. The principal cause or source of its error he

found to consist in the author's "mistaking the ideas for the creatures, the ideas of bodies for the bodies themselves, and in supposing that they can be seen in themselves . . . a gross error as you know." "For being convinced", he says further, "that the idea of extension is eternal, necessary and infinite, and supposing, moreover, creation to be impossible, he takes the world, or created extension, for intelligible extension, which is the object of the mind. Thus he confuses God, or the sovereign reason which contains the ideas that illumine our minds, with the work which the ideas represent" (p. 109).

In his answer (*i.e.* his second letter) D. de Mairan takes up unreservedly the defense of Spinoza against Malebranche's criticism that the *Ethics* mistakes things for ideas, which is the same as mistaking material extension for intelligible extension, and makes the following points. (1) The distinction between things and ideas is fundamental to Spinoza's system; "I know of no other system in which the distinction between ideas and objects is more clearly drawn and whence one can conclude with greater plausibility the truth that you have so beautifully brought to light, *i.e.*, that all that we see, we see in God" (p. 109). (2) That Malebranche has failed to give anywhere in his works an adequate idea of what one is to understand by (*a*) material or created extension, and (*b*) intelligible extension (p. 110). (3) That there are passages in his works which show that he has thought that there is only one extension, quoting in support from *Entretien* II, 12, *i.e.*, "That Ariste having asked: 'Do you mean, Théodore, that the idea of space as object of my thought does not differ from the idea of the space which I now see, which I impinge upon with my foot and which resists me?', Théodore replies, 'No, Ariste, there are no two kinds of extension, nor two kinds of ideas, representing them; and if the extension which you mentally perceive should affect you or should modify your soul with some sensation, intelligible though it were, it would appear to you as sensible, hard, colored, and perhaps also painful'." (4) That Malebranche has spoken of this one extension in a way that would make it indistinguishable from Spinoza's material extension made up of bodies and parts as its modes, referring in support of his contention to *Entretien Métaphysique* I, 5 and 10; *Entretien* II, 1; *Entretien*

VIII, 4, 8; *Méd.* IV, 9-10, etc. "In all these places your so-called created extension or material extension is nothing else than the simple modes or affections of the extended substance . . . and it is indeed in this sense that space is to the true space, to space properly so called, *i.e.*, space viewed as substance, as time is to eternity—a comparison made an infinite number of times in our author and by which he understands nothing else than what you have said, namely, that created extension holds the same relation to the Divine Immensity as time to eternity and that *all bodies are extended in the Divine Immensity*" (p. 110). (5) That, finally, if one takes this one extension to contain in itself only the distinction of mode and substance, there will be seen to follow some very embarrassing consequences for the theological system. "For this extension is either in God and constitutes His essence or it is not in God. If it is in God, all bodies are in consequence merely modifications of one of the divine attributes. . . . If this extension is not a property of God, one is compelled to say that there exists something which though outside of God is necessarily existent, infinite, eternal and indivisible" (p. 112). "It seems to me", he concludes, "that the distinction between intelligible and created extension has been imagined to conceal these difficulties" (p. 112).

There is a lapse of nearly a year between the second letter of D. de Mairan and Malebranche's reply (*i.e.*, his third letter). He explains the delay as due to his having lost his correspondent's address and looked for it in vain, that he has suffered during the year past from severe colds and general debility, and, finally, that it is hard for him to do as much at his advanced age of 76 as he had done previously. All of de Mairan's objections are passed over in silence. Malebranche simply reiterates that the source of Spinoza's fundamental error is found in his taking material for intelligible extension, objects for ideas. That he has fallen into this error is evidenced by the fact that he has ascribed to the material extension properties which belong only to the intelligible. He has, for instance, construed the relation of material objects to material extension in a manner (substance-modes) peculiar only to the constitution of intelligible extension. His space and bodies do not stand in the relation of substance to mode, but rather as whole

to part. Consequently, he does not prove, as he thinks he does, that there is only one material substance with an infinite number of modes, but rather an infinite number of independent material parts or substances. "According to the third definition of the author", he proceeds to explain his point, "commonly accepted by philosophers, what is conceived alone is a substance, whereas a modification is that which cannot be conceived without the substance of which it is the modification. Now I can conceive, experience, a cubic foot of space without thinking of anything else; this extension is therefore the substance and its cubic figure its modification. This cubic foot of space is admittedly a part of a greater substance, but is not its modification. The same is true of numbers, cardinal and ordinal. Two is not a modification of four, but half of it; nor two pistoles the modification of four pistoles. This is evident" (p. 118).

In his following letter he will go even further and will leave serious doubts whether material extension has any "wholeness", for he says there that no one ever imagined that one can get a "whole" out of mere parts.

Malebranche admits here the fact of the material space of Spinoza and commits himself to a two-space theory. As is well known to the student of his philosophy, he is never definite on this point. He now affirms, now denies, the fact of material space. It depends upon which Malebranche is speaking.² The point clearly made in this letter is that the material space of Spinoza (assuming it to be a fact in the cosmic economy) is made up of independent parts or substances, and not as Spinoza has said of substance and modes, an error resulting from his mistaking this material space for the intelligible space.

In his next letter D. de Mairan counters the assertion of Malebranche that Spinoza's space is composed of so many substances with the well-known Spinozistic argument of diversity and distinction. "Two square feet of space", he says "could not be distinguished from four square feet, because their attribute is the same, number not being a sign of distinction" (p. 127).

There follows now a long letter from Malebranche (his third) in which he seems thoroughly aroused. He has read over and over again, he says, the last two letters of his correspondent and is at a

² Cf. explanatory note on letter 3.

loss to know why he should still have difficulty in understanding his (Malebranche's) point of view, as propounded in his books and implied in his criticism of Spinoza in his previous letters.

Malebranche takes up at first the discussion of the space situation, defines the nature of his intelligible extension, and then goes on to state his theory of the relation of the intelligible to the material space. Intelligible space he defines as follows. "When I think of space with my eyes closed the idea of extension presents itself to me as immense and as the same everywhere, with a pure perception and so light that it seems as if it were nothing, or that it represents nothing real. I call this extension intelligible, because its idea³ does not affect me through my senses. But as soon as I open my eyes, this same idea becomes sensible, though it were intelligible formerly; *i.e.*, it affects me now with sensible perceptions. For the same idea can, through its efficacy, affect the soul with different perceptions with each ideal part of its being. I say ideal, because intelligible extension is not locally extended and has no extended parts. For instance, the idea of my hand, which alone is the immediate object of my mind, is able to affect me simultaneously with different perceptions; *i.e.*, the perceptions of color, warmth, pain, and if God wishes it, with a thousand other perceptions" (pp. 139-140).

De Mairan, it would seem, is thus confirmed in his contention that for Malebranche as well as Spinoza there is only one extension. For this mere experience of the intelligible extension through the sense-organs appears as the totality of his "idées sensées", which are nothing more than sensible states of the intelligible-space ideas, temporary and vanishing as soon as the percipient organism lapses back into inactivity. Yet there is a *tertium quid*, a created material space and material bodies, which Malebranche as a philosopher is never quite willing to admit.⁴ It is

³ The idea of intelligible extension and intelligible extension are interchangeable terms in Malebranche.

⁴ It is very important to distinguish between what Malebranche thought, on the one hand, as churchman and, on the other, as philosopher. In the former capacity he could not very well flout the story of Genesis. For the churchman the existence of a created material world was a fact, based on Biblical revelation no doubt, but a fact none the less. It is a different story when he takes off the cloak and takes up "the weapons of reason". He is then most intolerant and pugnacious of materialism. Material space or created space, or matter or ma-

this material space, these unknowable, yet affirmable objects that he has in mind when he accuses Spinoza of having mistaken material for intelligible space. This space, he says, is made up of parts, not of modes. The distinction between a mode or a modification and a part is a very sharply drawn one: "The modifications of extension are nothing else than the figures which define or terminate them, and no one has ever taken the parts of a whole for its modifications; a cubic foot of space for a modification of an infinite extension" (p. 141). These parts of material extension or material bodies, he reiterates again and again, are substances. "I am well aware that a cubic foot of space is of the same nature as any other extension; what distinguishes a given cubic foot of space from any other is its own being, its existence. It does not matter whether there are beings of the same or different nature in its environs (whatever the possibilities here);⁵ even if

terial things or objects (interchangeable terms with him), have then the "*idée sensée*" significance explained by him above. His usual argument against the view which regards material space (or etc.) as an independent created entity is as follows: God, being an infinite intelligence, acts in the simplest ways, for it is more intelligent to do complicated things in a simple way than simple things in a complicated way. Now, if God can make me see things through the action of intelligible space upon my soul, then why does not matter appear as a stupid complication, an unnecessary frill in the cosmic economy?—an argument no one would dispute provided things could be conceived as having no other function than that of making themselves visible.

It is such a usual procedure with Malebranche first to confirm himself in the belief of a created material space on the ground of Biblical revelation and then, by invoking the simplicity-intelligence motive (which, as a matter of fact, he saw at work everywhere in the cosmos, coloring and giving the pattern to the constitution of its economy in all its departments) to disavow this and have recourse to the "*idée sensée*" theory of material space, that one comes to look upon it as an almost conscious technique.

Of course, there is never any doubt in his mind concerning the nature of intelligible space. It is first, uncreated, indivisible, infinite, as attribute of God. It is on the nature of the material space that he does not seem to have a settled view. Even in the present dispute, which is to all intents and purposes a theological one (and the view of material space as a separate and independent entity should have been taken for granted, it would seem), "*the idée sensée*" view is found to intrude itself here and there, causing confusion in the reader's mind.

⁵ It would take us far afield to attempt to give an account of Malebranche's conception of the possible. It is evident from the paragraph quoted above that the possible could not be taken to be determined for him as in Spinoza, *i.e.* contextually.

there were nothing surrounding it, it will be in all cases what it is" (p. 112). In other words, and as the modern realist would say, relations are external and non-constitutive.

These modifications or figures are what Malebranche understands also by ideas. The term 'idea' in fact has no other connotation in his system. We see now why he passes over in silence D. de Mairan's statement that there is no system in which the object-idea distinction is more clearly drawn. What conceivable likeness is there between Spinoza's ideal replicas of material objects as existing in this or that individual's mind and these objective delineations within the intelligible expanse? It appears that one of the terms of the distinction to which his attention has been called, not being conceived in his way, is incomprehensible to him, and he declines to take cognizance of it.

The relation of the intelligible extension and its modifications or figures to material extension and its parts or objects is not one of involution or participation, as D. de Mairan would have it, but of representation, of archetype to type, idea to ideatum. And there is now an important consequence to be drawn from this representative relation of material to intelligible space, bearing on the question of the necessary character of Spinozistic space. "One agrees", he goes on, "that one can affirm of a thing what one sees to be contained in its idea, but this principle holds good only of the properties of things; it has no validity with reference to their existence. I can infer that matter is divisible because the idea I have of it represents it to me as such, but I cannot affirm that it exists though I cannot doubt the existence of its idea" (p. 136).

What Malebranche has done, in fact, is to separate essence and existence into two separate realities, calling the first intelligible extension, and its figures ideas, while the latter is given the name of material space, and its parts material objects. The former is the pattern, the idea, of the latter. Not being involved with each other into one being, it is impossible to pass from the one to the other by the well-known Spinozistic argument of essence-existence. The former, being a spiritual reality and in God alone, is necessarily existent; the latter is contingent, dependent upon the will of God. Only by mistaking matter for ideal space, as Spinoza has done, can one claim necessary existence for matter.

The first point made by Malebranche against Spinoza is that matter is not a unitary substance, but is made up of parts or an infinite number of substances, that only by confusing it, as Spinoza has done, with intelligible space, can one regard it as unitary and indivisible; the second point now made is that matter is not necessarily existent, and is viewed by Spinoza as such only through a like confusion. Finally, he disallows infinitude to Spinoza's space by saying "the idea of extension is infinite but its ideatum is perhaps finite" (p. 175).

Do these arguments convince D. de Mairan? Not at all, judging from his fourth and final letter. He insists here that even if one allows the relation of the material to the intelligible space to be as ideatum to idea, or type to archetype, the trinity of characters, the exclusive monopoly of which is claimed for the intelligible space, must also be allowed to Spinoza's space, else the representation would not be a true one. For what sort of representation is a representation of a nonexistent (as matter must be said to be in possibility, at least, if it is taken as contingent), or a representative relation in which the represented is not in all respects like its representation?

In his final letter Malebranche goes over again the same ground as in his previous letters, the same arguments are developed somewhat more emphatically and clearly, but nothing new is added to deserve indication.

The point Malebranche has obviously aimed to prove in his letters is that material space does not possess indivisibility, necessary existence, and infinitude, and for that reason is disqualified for inclusion in God. It is not one of the divine attributes. His aim is, therefore, essentially theological, *i.e.*, to buttress "the theological system" and appease the minds of the faithful. There are, however, two points made in the course of his argument which are closely akin to the principal tenets of modern realism: (1) that material objects are not enchained in a mutually-limiting and character-constituting system of logical relations, but that each is what it is through its own being and would be what it is independently and regardless of its ambient conditions; and (2) that idea and existence are not at one. One cannot draw existence out of God

by a logical compulsion. This is optional with God, and its fact is ascertainable by us through experiment.

His conception of material space and objects, however, is so problematic, his theory of ideas so unlike anything found anywhere in modern realism, that there is dubious historical support to be seen in these Malebranchian postulates for the modern realist, little cheer to be derived therefrom by him.

GEORGE S. GETCHEV