

THE SEARCH AFTER MORAL CERTAINTY. THE ORIGINS OF MALEBRANCHE'S PROJECT OF A SCIENCE OF ETHICS AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN HIS *TREATISE ON ETHICS*

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Abstract. Inspired by the Cartesian plan to construct a universal system of science based on certain knowledge, the Oratorian philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) attempts to found a “science” of ethics which could serve to liberate practical knowledge from the restrictions of uncertainty and relativity in which it was confined. In applying to ethics the criteria established by Cartesian epistemology, the author highlights the necessity to study the stable and immutable principles of morality, from which could emerge, through rational arguments, a whole system of moral values. This project, first announced in the *Search after Truth* is developed in the *Treatise on Ethics*, in which Malebranche's vision comes to life as an original theory. His strictly rationalist and intellectualist approach – focusing on the challenge of rational knowledge of moral truths – converges with a Christian and theocentric conception, true to the strong apologetic requirements that direct the author's thinking. In this text, using the form of philosophical reasoning, Malebranche proposes and demonstrates as certain the principles of religion ultimately achieving a philosophical definition of Christian virtue and its rational justification.

Keywords: Malebranche, Descartes, Epistemological Cartesianism, Ethical Rationalism, Moral Certitude, Vision in God, Virtue

For many seventeenth century authors, the philosophy of Descartes represented a complete revolution: its focus on the autonomy of reasoning, its metaphysical “axioms,” its scientific results or other new concepts that it introduced – all contributed to it being perceived by both admirers and critics as something new and original. This new thinking, which Descartes claimed as his own,¹ was mainly based on the adoption of an epistemological approach that set the acquisition of rational certainty as prime objective of philosophical knowledge, and the application of an orderly and systematic method – founded on the laws of geometry – as the

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absolute rule that would govern new deductions. In the biographical introduction to his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes clearly explains that the reason first impelling him to claim the need to test a new epistemological approach to philosophical questions, was his frustration in attempting to “[...] acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life”² through the education he had received in La Flèche, the prestigious Jesuit college. With the exception of arithmetic,³ the knowledge he had acquired in this early education seemed to him full of doubts and errors:⁴ a lack of truth with regard first to philosophy – in which the multitude of opinions on a single subject resulted, in Descartes’ view, in the impossibility of safely adopting a rational position on anything⁵ – and which then spread to the other branches of science: “[...] in so far as they borrow their principles from philosophy, I decided that nothing solid could have been built upon such shaky foundations.”⁶ Thus it was an awareness of the uncertainty of the learning transmitted to him which prompted the author to consider a global, autonomous revision of the system of knowledge, which he attempts to achieve, as is well known, through defining and applying two complementary epistemological instruments in his philosophy, that is “doubt” and “the method.”⁷ The study of these instruments, which prepared the creation of a new system of philosophical learning designed to replace scholastic manuals, as set forth in the *Principia philosophiae* (1644),⁸ occupied Descartes’ very first philosophical efforts, to be found in works that remained unpublished during his lifetime, such as the *Studium bonae mentis* (lost), the *Rules for the direction of the mind*,⁹ and the dialogue *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light*.¹⁰ In this last text, dated 1629, the author already defined, along with the rules that reasoning must respect in order to attain true knowledge, his impressive plan for the elaboration of a veritable *summa* of human knowledge founded on a secure basis.¹¹

From then on, the philosophy of Descartes was dominated by a compelling drive to seek out a stable system of truths and by the aim of constructing knowledge that was solid and definitive: it was this original requirement that led the author in his later works to the theoretical choice of radically demolishing all knowledge, including the most elementary truths (such as our existence or that of the external world), with a view to a global rebuilding of knowledge, based on certainty and evidence.¹²

Nicolas Malebranche seems to have adhered fully to this Cartesian plan to construct certain knowledge, which he held, along with the author of the *Discourse on the Method*,¹³ to be a progressive and joint operation. By establishing rigorous epistemological norms as the exclusive basis on which to construct certain knowledge, in whatever discipline, and by proposing the essential metaphysical principles as foundations of the system of philosophical knowledge, Descartes had provided the pillars for a scientific edifice which others were implicitly called upon to complete. The method had provided him with a means thanks to which, he wrote, “I can increase my knowledge gradually and raise it little by little to the highest point allowed by the mediocrity of my mind and the short duration of my life.”¹⁴ It was thanks to this key element of his epistemological doctrine, that Malebranche defined as “a most safe road to the discovery of all the truths a limited understanding can comprehend,”¹⁵ that “in thirty years Descartes discovered more truths than all other philosophers.”¹⁶ The building site begun by the *Discourse* remained open however, from the perspective

of second generation Cartesians, to which Malebranche belonged, both because the construction of a solid, all-embracing system of knowledge was far from having been completed by its founder,¹⁷ and because some segments of his philosophy seemed in need of restructuring or adjusting¹⁸ – which should of course be achieved according to the epistemological criteria of rational certainty and evidence as imperative parameters of this building. As pointed out by Henri Gouhier, Descartes thus passed on to his disciples the task of “completing his world.”¹⁹

Malebranche’s first work, so deeply inspired by Descartes’ philosophy, clearly bears the hallmark of this project shared by several Cartesian authors, aimed at completing and adjusting the construction of a solid system of knowledge. Its explicit programme proposed in fact a purging from knowledge of the principal errors that prevent us from capturing the truth, conceived as solid and certain learning. In reviewing throughout five of the six books that make up this work the main causes of error (attributed primarily to the senses, imagination and passions), Malebranche adds his brick to the Cartesian programme founding a new system of certain knowledge based on the epistemological principles enounced by Descartes. Preventing or eradicating error is considered by Malebranche as an essential complement to acquisition of true knowledge, such as made possible by the method, which he presents and tests – by applying it to several problems of varying nature – in the last book of his work. His *Search after Truth. In which is treated the nature of the human mind and the use that must be made of it to avoid error in the sciences*²⁰ – proposing a long and detailed *pars destruens* aimed at detecting the errors most affecting our judgment – would thus appear as perfect complement to the Cartesian hypothesis contained in the *Rules for the direction of the mind*²¹ and in the *Discourse on the Method*. Indeed, Malebranche’s reflection on such errors also culminates in the formulation of certain functional norms (resulting explicitly from the first rule of the Cartesian method) that permit one to utter correct judgments. As specified by the author, the purpose of the sixth book of his work is to render to the mind “as perfect as it can naturally be,”²² in order that: “Were I to fulfill this aim perfectly, which I do not pretend to do since this is but an attempt thereat, I could be said to have produced a universal science.”²³ It is hard to imagine the objective of a scheme that could be closer to the aim of the Cartesian *Discourse*, of which the original title proposed by the author was precisely *Project for a universal science capable of elevating our nature to its highest degree of perfection (Projet d’une science universelle qui puisse élever notre nature à son plus haut degré de perfection)*. The goal pursued by Malebranche, through the gradual stages of perfecting the faculty of knowing which we find in his work, is indeed that of constructing a system of certain knowledge. It is a task that he mostly defers, in terms of specific content, to individual reason, which he intends to provide with the necessary epistemological instruments; “[...] for in this treatise I have tried to enable the mind to form true and certain judgments on all questions suited to it.”²⁴ A statement that to an enthusiastic admirer of Malebranche, such as his translator Jacques Lenfant, appeared to be fully achieved in the *Search after Truth*, for if all the rules proposed by the author in this book “would be observed in all particular circumstances, they would allow us to attain a degree of certainty such that we would be declared almost infallible.”²⁵

However, while this Cartesian quest for certainty embraced by Malebranche can – indeed must – be required in all fields of knowledge, the application of the epistemological criterion of evidence and the procedures imposed by the method encounter marked resistance and increasing difficulties as soon as we move away from scientific disciplines, notably mathematics (which had inspired these very intuitions) and find ourselves confronted with branches of knowledge which appear incompatible with definitive conclusions. This is notably true of practical sciences such as physics, medicine and above all ethics, a discipline at the heart of the author’s attention, to which he refers as “the most necessary of all the sciences.”²⁶ Several statements contained in the *Search after Truth* indicate that, already at this stage of his career, morality was considered by Malebranche as foremost in his encyclopaedia of knowledge. Founded in metaphysics, which provides its basic principles, morality reigns supreme over other philosophical disciplines by virtue of the very nature of human beings: “No science has such close relation to us,” declared Malebranche, “as morals. Morality teaches us our duties to God, our king, our relatives, our friends, and generally to our whole environment. It even teaches us the path we must follow in order to become eternally happy.”²⁷ He thus concluded that “all men are under an essential obligation, or rather an indispensable necessity, of applying themselves exclusively to it.”²⁸

In his *Search after Truth*, Malebranche thus ranks morality as the most important of the practical disciplines, in perfect conformity with the hierarchical scale of knowledge set out by Descartes in the *Preface* of his *Principles of philosophy* – that placed morality at the top of the tree of knowledge (along with medicine and mechanics), and defined it as the ultimate degree of Wisdom, presupposing perfect knowledge of all other sciences.²⁹ However, this “ultimate level of wisdom” had remained largely unexplored in the philosophy of Descartes, who apart from the study “as physician” of the phenomenon of passions,³⁰ did not provide the public with a systematic essay on ethics,³¹ nor reveal the “certain foundations of morals” which he told Chanut³² he had meditated on and grasped.

As a Catholic thinker belonging to the congregation of the Oratory, Malebranche not only reaffirmed the priority of morals, but also invoked the need to tackle directly and systematically the problem of ethical knowledge, to which he intended to apply the criteria of Cartesian epistemology. These intellectual exigencies suggested to the author a particularly ambitious project: the elevation of morality to the rank of a true science.³³ In elaborating this project, Malebranche implicitly distanced himself from the path chosen by other authors who had undertaken to formulate “Cartesian” ethical theories, such as his Oratorian friend Claude Ameline (*L’art de vivre heureux*)³⁴ or Jacques du Roure (*Morale* of *Abrégé de la vraie philosophie*).³⁵ For these authors, to elaborate a “Cartesian ethics” mainly consisted in assembling ethical concepts to be found in various parts of Descartes’ work and fitting them within a theoretical structure (while also inserting elements from other philosophical traditions).³⁶ For Malebranche, to whom fidelity to the word of the master was less important than adhering to the epistemological criteria of his philosophy, it was a question of founding a discipline in line with the Cartesian scientific ideal.

Malebranche was aware of the difficulties involved in attaining this objective, the first among them being the problems intrinsically linked to the knowledge of the matter: “For everything related to more’s [sic] is very little known and very difficult to know exactly. This is because the principles and the ideas which we have about this subject are obscured by our passions”;³⁷ moreover, the practical sciences such as medicine and morality contain “a great number of questions [...] that depend on so many relations that the quickest and most penetrating minds were able to discover their truth only after many centuries and an almost infinite number of experiments.”³⁸

It may be of interest to note that the comparison proposed by Malebranche of morality with medicine is not insignificant in this kind of analysis, since it implicitly recalls a problem raised in a basic reference text for moral philosophy, such as the *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁹ In this text, the comparison between ethics and medicine, which recurs quite frequently, was articulated by Aristotle as part of a reflection on the degree of certainty to which ethics can aim. He explained that the very form of ethical reasoning makes it impossible to attain a level of certainty that is higher than that of medical science, which in the final analysis remains firmly anchored in practice, its place being somewhere between science and arts.⁴⁰ While it is possible to formulate medical theories which can serve as reference with respect to the health of the body, such theories may not always be applied – nor in the same manner – to all specific cases for all patients. Morality would seem to “suffer” from the same structural problem, since according to Aristotle, this is not a case of an extrinsic fault arising from incomplete knowledge of the matter, but of an essential feature of a subject of which the specific aim is to regulate our deliberations. But wherever deliberation is required, the subject is inevitably uncertain.⁴¹

Deliberation takes place indeed in situations that, though occurring frequently, remain uncertain as to their outcome and when results are undefined. Thus, when it comes to ethics, which Aristotle considers as a form of politics, we have to be satisfied with knowledge that is simply probable, since the subject itself imposes limits to any ambitions of certainty:

[...] because the same degree of precision is not to be sought in all discussion any more than in works of craftsmanship. The spheres of what is noble and what is just, which political science examines, admit of a good deal of diversity and variation, so that they seem to exist only by convention and not by nature. Goods vary in this way as well, since it happens that, for many, good things have harmful consequences: some people have been ruined by wealth, and others by courage. So we should be content, since we are discussing things like this in such a way, to demonstrate the truth sketchily and in outline, and, because we are making generalizations on the basis of generalizations, to draw conclusions along the same lines.⁴²

Malebranche seems to know this reply which Aristotle had proposed to the question of the certainty of ethical knowledge, as he refers to it at the beginning of his *Search after Truth*, anticipating the objections that could be raised to his reasoning on the search for certain knowledge: the people who “pretend to know everything” he

wrote “will always echo Aristotle, that only in mathematics must complete certitude be sought, but that morals and physics are sciences in which probability alone suffices.”⁴³ Yet for Malebranche this conclusion classifying probability as the actual form of moral knowledge is unacceptable, especially in view of its relevance – the Oratorian considering the finality of morality as identical to that of religion – to our salvation and eternal beatitude. If Descartes seems to have conceded⁴⁴ in several passages of his work the compromise of reducing morality to a form of knowledge that is simply probable and likely, for Malebranche this compromise is dictated only by contingencies relating to the state of our knowledge. Probability may only be acceptable as a temporary and contingent solution, since the uncertainty of moral knowledge is not for Malebranche an intrinsic feature of this discipline, but a purely extrinsic flaw, resulting from the inadequacy of the research undertaken in this field:

In morals, politics, medicine, and all the practical science, we must be satisfied with probability not permanently but temporarily – not because probability satisfies the mind, but because the need to act is urgent and if one waits to act until entirely assured of success, the opportunity is often lost.⁴⁵

If today we have no choice than to accept the uncertain and purely plausible form of moral knowledge, Malebranche sees no “structural” obstacles to the possibility of elevating this discipline to the rank of a science, of which the truths would be recognized as just as essential and unchanging as those of the speculative disciplines; indeed, if, in the view of the Oratorian, we need to distinguish truths that are transient, changing and shifting from the essential truths – rendered unchanging through God’s will – it is mainly the latter that are to be found in ethics, as well as in metaphysics and mathematics.⁴⁶

It would therefore only remain to “[...] try to make such progress in these sciences that we can act at the appropriate time with greater certitude, for this should be the general goal of the study and occupation of all men who make use of their mind.”⁴⁷ Certainly, as already mentioned, any true progress in this field, as in all other disciplines, can only happen if, according to Malebranche, we go about it differently than “we have until now”⁴⁸ and apply the epistemological criteria and rigour such as evoked by the philosopher of “the method”; “if more people had philosophized as he did, we could eventually know the greater part of what is necessary for living happily, insofar as we are able on an earth that God has cursed.”⁴⁹

Hence the essential truths of practical philosophy can function as the basic principles of a real science of ethics, developed through successive deductions even if, as conceded by the author, “in moral reasoning it is not so easy to preserve evidence and precision as in some other sciences.”⁵⁰ As for the nature of these principles, the author already indicated some examples in the *Search after Truth*, giving the reader some preliminary indications and demonstrating the potential of such as science. These principles, as we perceive from the brief summary provided by Malebranche in the sixth book, are closely linked to the dogmata of Christian religion, and just as certain and universal as mathematical truths, perceptible by all intelligent beings.⁵¹ Thus, concludes the author, “If we meditate on these principles with order and with as much

care and application as the scope of the subject merits, and if we accept as true only conclusions that follow deductively from these principles, we shall have a sure morality that will agree perfectly with that of the Gospel although it might not be as complete or as extensive.”⁵²

These then are the requirements and objectives that underpin Malebranche’s project of ethics: in line with his theocentric vision of philosophy, while Cartesian in form and scientific in its gnoseological goals, his ethics claims to be Christian in terms of content.

The development of moral knowledge, with rationality and reasoning as basis, has indeed as prime objective for Malebranche to confirm through philosophy the values of the Christian religion, as clearly demonstrated in the *Christian Conferences* – the author’s second (anonymous) work – of which the aim as declared in the title was to justify and demonstrate “the truth of the Christian religion and morality.” This work appears, indeed, to have been conceived by Malebranche as a book on morality, responding (according to the writings of Lelong and of D’Allemand) to the request of the Duc de Chevreuse to “assemble in a single work,” in order that “their impact being greater, they should carry more weight and be more useful,” “[...] the passages of such beauty for religion and for morality”⁵³ that he had found in the *Search after Truth*. The *Christian Conferences* thus provide a first specific outline of the author’s moral concepts, and clearly define the programme in which the design of an ethical science must fit, precisely at the meeting point – for apologetic reasons – of reason and faith. Since morality springs directly from the essential principles of metaphysics which are established both by revelation and by Cartesian reasoned philosophy, Malebranche sees no need to acquire perfection in the study of the other sciences – contrary to the recommendations of Descartes in the *Principles of Philosophy* – before beginning the work of creating an ethical science: “Having read several times the *Search after Truth*,” he wrote, “and considered the reflections contained throughout in this work, I believed that I had enough elements to justify the truth of Religion and Morality.”⁵⁴ And indeed, this was sufficient for the author to elaborate functional theoretical instruments to tackle problems of morality and to formulate philosophical arguments designed to reveal the ethical principles of Christianity. But it was not yet enough to formulate positive and systematic moral thinking. If only because of their form as a dialogue, the *Christian Conferences* were unsuited to a true elaboration of the project of a scientific morality as envisaged by Malebranche in the *Search after Truth*. While they fulfilled the purpose of providing an apology for religion and Christian morality, they did not constitute a true philosophical proposal.

So it is not to the *Christian Conferences*, but to the *Treatise on Ethics* of 1684 that Malebranche refers in a note he added to the final edition of the *Search after Truth*, (immediately after the definition of a systematic and certain morality quoted above),⁵⁵ in which he states: “I tried to demonstrate the foundations of morality in a special treatise.”⁵⁶ It is in this book then that Malebranche attempts to achieve his project of creating a moral science, and it is here that we can grasp the solutions proposed by the author in order to meet the requirements of certainty in ethical knowledge, that he had posed as fundamental premise of his moral reflection.

It is first and foremost in its form that the *Treatise on Ethics* satisfies the requirement of an orderly exposition desired by Malebranche: the book has two parts, each with about the same number of pages, of which the first, entitled *On Virtue*, presents the general principles and means of acquiring ethical knowledge, and in some way constitutes the theoretical part of his discourse, while the second, entitled *On Duties*, analyses the circumstances of our life as citizens, and appears to constitute the truly practical part of the treatise. The choice made by Malebranche to make this distinction in the layout, is already an implicit confirmation of his adhesion – explicitly revealed in the *Search after Truth* – to a rationalist concept of morality, founded on the Cartesian belief of the interaction, when formulating a judgement, of the faculties of the mind and the subordination of the will to knowledge provided to it by the intellect. In this perspective, which – unlike that of other authors close to Cartesianism such as the Port-Royalists – does not attribute to the will specific motives and mechanisms that are completely removed from reason, the action of the will comes from knowledge acquired by the intellect. It follows that for the Oratorian, as for Descartes, a good understanding is the basis of good action.

The adoption of this intellectualist concept of ethics enables Malebranche to effectuate a global shift of the ethical problem from the practical field of action to the theoretical domain of knowledge. It follows that the question of moral certainty – the elements considered contingent to the action (such as the manner of reaching given objectives) being relegated to second place – can be ultimately reformulated as a question of the certainty of the “knowledge” of moral principles. Such a certainty seems logically to require two essential conditions: on the one hand, that of the existence of universal and unchanging moral truths – still to be argued for and proved – and on the other the possibility of achieving the acquisition of this same knowledge.

The solution Malebranche proposes to these two problems can be equated to the one he offers to justify the possibility of certain knowledge in general: the essential equivalence which he establishes between speculative and practical truths allows him to align his analysis of moral principles with that of the principles of the speculative sciences.⁵⁷ This also explains how the capacity to sustain attention – which the author defines as *Strength of the mind* – becomes a condition of primary importance in moral life.⁵⁸ We should add – even if we cannot offer an explanation here of the gnoseological theory of Malebranche, which is relatively complex and evolves over time – that the mind’s attention referred to by the author, does not concern the external world, but the effort of individual reason, “the internal master” (“le maître intérieur”), required to examine the knowledge contained in God’s mind. This idea comes from Malebranche’s theory – of Augustinian origin – of the “Vision in God,” according to which the evidence of true intellectual intuitions results from their presence, as eternal truths, in the divine Reason, in which they can be contemplated, by all rational intelligence (both incarnate, as in men, and disembodied), through an effort of meditation. This theory, placing God as guarantor of the existence, the certainty and the unchangeability of the speculative truths, is also applied by Malebranche to practical truths, conceived as the unchanging norms of divine will; as he states clearly in different passages of his work “We not only see in God the

numbers, figures, all the speculative truths, but also the practical truths, the eternal laws, the immutable rules of morality.”⁵⁹

This then is how Malebranche solves the problem of the possibility of a certain moral knowledge: on the one hand he places ethics, along with mathematics in “a unique region that he has defined beforehand, divine Reason” which “through its attributes legitimates science based on evidence as well as morality”;⁶⁰ and on the other, to ensure so to speak the practicability of this knowledge, of which the principles are rooted and preserved in God’s mind, he also applies the theory of the Vision in God, that grants us the possibility of appropriating “the unconditional bases of a universal morality, valid a priori for any reasonable mind.”⁶¹

As a result of this epistemological solution, the moral truths, thus combined with the speculative truths in the mind of God, at once become eternal, and as unchanging archetypes, protected from any change or “ontological” evolution. But they are also safeguarded from any uncertainty or variation in interpretation, thanks to the conception that links the accessibility to these truths to the more firm among the human faculties – in accordance with a wide range of philosophical traditions – that is to say reason. In choosing reason as principal *medium* of access to the moral truths, Malebranche calls on what men hold as most objective and constant, a condition equally essential for his project of a “scientific” morality. As stated by Jean-Christophe Bardout, within the scope of such a project, the author would have been unable to choose a psychological basis for his morality; nor would he have been able to elevate sentiment – the choice for example of several English authors in the eighteenth century – to the principal epistemological means of access to ethical truths, since this *medium*, by its very nature, cannot provide the necessary level of intelligibility demanded by “true” and evident knowledge.

Through rational transcendence the truths of morality find their place amid unchanging and certain knowledge. It is therefore at this superhuman level that men share among themselves and with God, and where we can contemplate all the truths of the Word (relationships of magnitude – as conceived by God – and relationships of perfection – as desired by God), to which we must direct the focus of our intellect in order to comprehend the rules of behaviour.

Thus, as recommended in the *Search after Truth*, the path to follow when confronted with a moral dilemma, is that of rational meditation that leads us to knowledge of the unchanging truths of morality which govern all intelligent beings:

I withdraw into myself [...] I draw near God and [...] my senses and passions quiet [...] then shall I hear a clear and distinct reply about what I should do, an eternal reply that has always been given, is being given and always will be given, I reply I need not explain because everyone knows it, both those who read this and those who do not, a reply that is neither Greek, nor Latin nor French nor German, but that all nations understand [...]. I shall hear this reply and be persuaded by it.⁶²

It is therefore through rational “meditation” that we can attain the intuition of principles from which we can deduce the corollaries that together make up ethical

knowledge. But in accordance with Malebranche's apologetic perspective, these principles, while presented as evidence of rationality, are heavily endowed with theology (the first and most important of these principles being for Malebranche God's love for Himself), and hence the system of values which this engenders appears welded to this reference.

In the *Treatise on Ethics*, the practical truths established by the author together form a system represented as an image of divine wills, offering a hierarchy of values which Malebranche defines more specifically by the expression (of Augustinian resonance) of "Order." For the Oratorian, the concept of Order embodies the criteria of morality since, by clearly establishing the hierarchy of relative perfections of created entities (with God at the summit), he indicates the just proportion, that is the measure – both metaphorical and literal – of love due to each being.⁶³

In the theocentric vision which was that of Malebranche, knowledge of the Order – ensemble of moral virtues – is knowledge of the wills of God. It follows that virtue, which in Christian thinking means equating the will of the individual with that of God, is re-thought by the author as a "habitual love of Order." It can be noted that in this definition the word "love" should not be interpreted with a sentimental connotation: on the contrary, it designates a deliberate, free and conscious intellectual adherence (commendable in this alone) to what one has understood to be the norms applied and unfailingly desired by divine will.

This definition of virtue would appear as the main achievement of the analysis undertaken by Malebranche of the theoretical principles of morality. As stated earlier, the adoption of an intellectualist perspective seems to allow the author to minimise the strictly "practical" aspect of ethics – even if the second part of the *Treatise on Ethics* reveals an attempt to approach the problem also from this angle. Moreover, action seems confined to a somewhat secondary role in an intentionalist ethics such as this. Indeed, according to Malebranche, God judges us only on the basis of our internal attitudes and intentions, so that even a "love of Order" expressed only in the pure desire for this system of truths, seems to fulfil satisfactorily the criteria of the justifying virtue.⁶⁴

Concluding remarks

The definition of virtue as "the habitual and dominant love of immutable Order" ("amour habituel et dominant de l'Ordre")⁶⁵ can be considered as the principal outcome of the Malebranchean science of ethics. This definition, inspired by theological principles, is constructed by the author in his *Treatise on Ethics* with a series of philosophical reasonings (founded in selected axioms of Cartesian metaphysics) as basis, and is ultimately proposed as a universal rule of ethics.

We can then question whether Malebranche's aim to create a moral science has effectively been achieved in the *Treatise on Ethics*. The author himself seems to express some reservations: speaking of this attempt in the last edition of the *Search after Truths*, he writes: "I tried to demonstrate the foundations of morality [...] but I hope both for myself and others that someone provides a work both more exact and more complete on the subject."⁶⁶

For our part, without claiming any definite response to the question, we would like to offer two very general remarks on Malebranche's ethical system:

The first concerns its close link – also explained by the author's intentions as apologist – with theology. The question of the certainty of moral knowledge is directly woven into this superposing of disciplines, for it is theology, certainly backed by Malebranche with metaphysical arguments, together with divine Reason that truly guarantee the certainty of moral truths. The moral science of Malebranche thus appears so indistinguishable from his apologetic aims such that it cannot be projected as a philosophical proposal, beyond the boundaries defined by the basic beliefs of Christianity.

The second concerns its eminently theoretical character, resulting from Malebranche's intellectualist approach and his scientific ambitions. Jean-Christophe Bardout sums up this difficulty as follows: “the exploration of morals that are strictly metaphysical in their principles [...] results in an aporia: the universal character of the relations of perfections displayed by the order runs counter to the formulation of principles that will guide concrete action.”⁶⁷

This lack of “practice” and of “individualization” that we observe in Malebranche's morals seems inevitably destined, however, to compromise any attempt to construct a rational and normative moral theory, such as clearly demonstrated in Kantian ethics, in which the ultimate goal, the categorical imperative, is a strictly formal rule. Just as the Malebranchean “habitual love of Order” the categorical imperative is not for those norms which state “how we must act”, but rather for those stating “how we must wish.”⁶⁸ It would therefore appear that it is in general the shifting of the moral question towards the speculative realm that inevitably relegates to the background reflections linked to contingencies of the achievement of action, to its success as well as its consequences.

But such reflections on excessive formalism as possible deviation of a rationalist moral concepts leads us to suspect that these observations on Malebranche could equally be addressed to other systems aimed at establishing rational, normative ethics. For any scheme of this kind must deal with the problem of the foundation of truth, of the certainty of moral knowledge, as well as the theorisation of this knowledge, in other words, its shift (as for any science) away from the domain of experience and individuality, towards that of speculation and universality.

In this general perspective, it would seem just to recognize the value of Malebranche's project to found certain moral knowledge as a significant and ambitious expression of the enduring theoretical demand that drives philosophy – the search for truth. Viewed from this angle, the *Treatise on Ethics*, in spite of its weaknesses, can be perceived as an intellectually courageous and theoretically interesting enterprise, aimed at formulating responses to questions that still today remain unanswered.

References

- ¹ Despite what he claimed, one should not believe that Descartes' thinking was totally original and free of influence of scholastic philosophy, though much criticized by him. Descartes' debt to scholastic philosophy such as he had encountered during his education at the Jesuit College in La Flèche has been analysed and explained by Etienne Gilson: see *Index scolastico-cartésien* (Paris: Vrin, 1960). More recent studies on the subject include those by Ariew, R., *Descartes among the Scholastics* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011); Secada, J., *Cartesian Metaphysics: the Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Biard, J. and Rashed, R., (eds.), *Descartes et le moyen âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1997); Ghisalberti, A., "La dottrina delle distinzioni nei *Principia*: tradizione e innovazione" in *Descartes Principia Philosophiae*, eds. J.-R. Armogathe and G. Belgioioso (Naples: Vivarium, 1996), 179-201.
- ² Descartes, R., *Discourse on the Method*, in *Philosophical writings of Descartes*, trans. and ed. By J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) – henceforth CSM –, I, 113 or *Discours de la méthode*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, eds. Ch. Adam and P. Tannay (Paris: Cerf, 1908) – henceforth AT –, VI, 4.
- ³ "Above all I delighted in mathematics, because of the certainty and self-evidence of its reasoning. But I did not yet notice its real use; and since I thought it was of service only in the mechanical arts, I was surprised that nothing more exalted had been built upon such firm and solid foundations" (Descartes, R., CSM I 114 or AT VI 7).
- ⁴ "From my childhood I have been nourished upon letters, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them. But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance" (Descartes, R., CSM I 112-113 or AT VI 4).
- ⁵ "Regarding philosophy, I shall say only this: seeing that it has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds and yet there is still no point in it which is not disputed and hence doubtful, I was not so presumptuous as to hope to achieve any more in it than others had done" (Descartes, R., CSM I 114-115 or AT VI 8).
- ⁶ Descartes, R., CSM I 115 or AT VI 8-9.
- ⁷ These essential concepts of Descartes' philosophy have been examined in many studies, as for example in Broughton, J., *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Curley, E. M., *Descartes Against the Sceptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) and "Certainty: Psychological, Moral, and Metaphysical", in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. S. Voss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Bonicalzi, F., *L'ordine della certezza. Scientificità e persuasione in Descartes* (Genova: Marietti, 1990); Rodis-Lewis, G., (ed.), *Méthode et métaphysique chez Descartes* (New York – London: Garland, 1987); Vinci, Th. C., *Cartesian Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Newman, L., "Descartes' Rationalist Epistemology", in *A Companion to Rationalism*, ed. A. Nelson (Padstow: Blackwell, 2006); Van Cleve, J. "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle", *Philosophical Review* 88 (January 1979): 55–91.
- ⁸ See Ariew, R., "Descartes, les premiers cartésiens et la logique", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 49 (1, 2006): 55-71.
- ⁹ Original title: *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. This book, the first "structured" work of Descartes, was written before 1628, according to analysts, and according to Arrigo, B. (*Saggi sulla formazione del pensiero di Descartes* (Florence: Olschki, 1983) 164) probably between the drafting of his *Studium bonae mentis* (1618) and *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle* (1628 or 1629).

¹⁰ Original title: *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*.

¹¹ See Descartes, R., *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle* in AT X 505-506.

¹² The question of the criteria of certainty of knowledge in Descartes' work has been the subject of recent publications; see Dobre, M., "Knowledge and Certainty in the Foundation of Cartesian Natural Philosophy", *Revue Roumaine de philosophie* 57 (1, 2013): 95-110; Ariew, R., "The New Matter Theory and its Epistemology. Descartes (and the Late Scholastics) on Hypotheses and Moral Certainty" in *Vanishing Matter and the Laws of Motion. Descartes and Beyond*, eds. D. Jalobeanu and P. Anstey (London: Routledge, 2011), 31-46.

¹³ As noted by François Azouvi, "For his adepts Descartes marks the beginning of an era in which learning can be amassed, in which fields of knowledge correct each other since they are at last exact" (Azouvi, F., *Descartes et la France, histoire d'une passion nationale* (Paris: Hachette, 2006), 53).

¹⁴ Descartes, R., CSM I 112 or AT VI 3.

¹⁵ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth: With Elucidations of The Search After Truth*, trans. and eds. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14.

¹⁶ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 15.

¹⁷ On the attempts of the disciples of Descartes to complete a philosophical compendium designed to replace scholastic manuals (see note 8) see Ariew, R., "Ethics in Descartes and Seventeenth Century Cartesian Textbooks" in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, eds. C. Fraenkel, D. Perinetti, J.E.H. Smith (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 67-75 and Ariew, R., (2006).

¹⁸ In addition to major gaps, there were other aspects of Cartesian philosophy which disciples of "the founder of the method" considered in urgent need of being completed, amended, explained or developed. One such example was the Cartesian doctrine on the interaction within man of the two substances, for which the first occasionalist hypotheses were formulated by the Cartesians Louis De la Forge (in the *Traité de l'esprit de l'homme, de ses facultés et fonctions, et de son union avec le corps suivant les principes de René Descartes*, 1666), Géraud de Cordemoy (*Le Discernement de l'âme et du corps en six discours, pour servir de discernement à la physique*, 1666), Arnold Geulincx (*Ethica*, 1665) and Johann Clauberg (*Physica*, 1664).

¹⁹ Gouhier, H., *La vocation de Malebranche*, (Paris: Vrin, 1926), 80-81.

²⁰ Original title: *Recherche de la vérité, Où l'on traite de la Nature et de l'Esprit de l'homme, et de l'usage qu'il en doit faire pour éviter l'erreur dans les Sciences*, which Geneviève Rodis-Lewis suggests to be aptly inspired by the Cartesian dialogue *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle* which Malebranche is thought to have known via Clerselier (see note 21).

²¹ Of which the first manuscript was entitled: *Traité des règles utiles et claires pour la direction de l'esprit en la recherche de la Vérité*. Although this work was not made public until 1684, when its Dutch translation was published (translated by Jan Hendriksz: *Des Cartes Regulen van de bestieringe des verstants*, Amsterdam: Glazemaker) – preceding the Latin edition of reference (*Regulae ad directionem ingenii* in R. *Des-Cartes Opuscula posthuma, physica et mathematica*, Amsterdam, Blaeu) which appeared in 1701 – it is very probable, according to Genève Rodis-Lewis (Malebranche, N., *Recherche de la vérité*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. A. Robinet (Paris: Vrin, 1958-1990), v. I, XXV) and the editors of the *Œuvres complètes* de Descartes, Charles Adam et Paul Tannery (AT XII 352) that Malebranche had access to a manuscript copy of the work via Clerselier. The latter had already made available the *Regulae* to Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole several years earlier, to assist with the drafting of *La logique de Port Royal* (Paris: 1662). Indeed, the presence within the *Search after Truth* (1674) of several references to the *Regulae* (see Malebranche, N., *Recherche de la vérité*, *Index*, v. III) which differ from those in the *Logique de Port-Royal* appear to confirm the fact that Malebranche was familiar with the text in question at the time of writing his first work. Finally, we can recall that during Malebranche's "Cartesian noviciate" (see

Gouhier, H., (1926): 63-74), between 1664 and 1669, another Oratorian and friend of Malebranche, Father Nicolas Joseph Poisson, who edited in 1668 the *Mécanique* by Descartes (*Traité de la mécanique, composé par monsieur Descartes. De plus L'abrégé de musique du mesme auteur mis en françois. Avec les éclaircissemens nécessaires*, Paris: Charles Angot) and wrote a *Commentaire ou remarques sur la méthode de M. Descartes* (Paris: 1670) was in possession of all the manuscript documents on Descartes' work and life that Cerselier had been able to obtain for him. Thanks to his reputation as « cartiste » – the term used at the time – Father Poisson had indeed been entrusted by Christine of Sweden to write Descartes' biography. Father Poisson was not able, however, to complete this project and thus passed all the material he had available, together with the new documents he had assembled, to Baillet who used them for his *Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (Paris: 1691). See Batterel, L., *Mémoires domestiques pour servir à l'histoire de l'Oratoire* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1971), v. IV, 184-203; Gouhier, H., *Cartésianisme et augustinisme au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1978), 103-121; Faye, E., “Cartésiens et augustinis au XVII^e siècle” and “Un inédit du P. Nicolas J. Poisson sur la philosophie de Descartes”, *Corpus, revue de philosophie* 37 (2000): 5-25 and 91-130.

²² Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 408.

²³ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 408. There is a slight difference between this translation and the original text. In the French version the author uses the impersonal form instead of the first person, as follows: “Si l'on portait ce dessein jusqu'à sa dernière perfection, ce que l'on ne prétend pas, car ceci est un essai, on pourrait dire qu'on aurait donné une science universelle” (Malebranche, N., *Recherche de la vérité*, v. II, 245).

²⁴ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 409.

²⁵ “*Certe si omnibus e singulis occasionibus oserventur hi canones, illorum ope eo certitudinis devenimus ut tantum non infallibiles dicamur*” (Lenfant, J., “Praefatio interpretis”, in Malebranche, N., *De inquirenda veritate* (Genevae: Dufour, 1685), 11 - unnumbered page).

²⁶ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 485.

²⁷ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 270.

²⁸ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 270.

²⁹ “Thus the whole philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. By “morals” I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presuppose a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom” (Descartes, R., *Principles of philosophy* in CSM I 186 or AT IX 14).

³⁰ “My intention was to explain the passions only as a natural philosopher and not as a rhetorician or even as a moral philosopher”, Descartes, R., *The Passions of the Soul*, 327. The term “natural philosopher” does not appear to reflect the exact sense of the original version, as follows: “Mon dessein n'a pas été d'expliquer les Passions en Orateur, ni même en Philosophe moral, mais seulement en Physicien” (Descartes, R., *Les passions de l'âme*, in AT XI 326).

³¹ This subject has often been discussed et contested in historiography; see Kambouchner, D., *Descartes et la philosophie morale* (Paris: Hermann, 2008) and Rodis-Lewis, G., *La morale de Descartes* (Paris: Puf, 1957).

³² See Descartes to Chanut, Egmond, 15 June 1646 (Descartes, R., *Correspondance*, in AT IV 441).

³³ “it remains [...] paradoxically governed Cartesian intention, since the Oratorian intends to make a true science of morality, and therefore to give a greater systematic connection to the work of its illustrious predecessor, by completing it with a demonstrative morality” (Bardout,

J.-Ch., “A reception without attachment”, in *Receptions of Descartes*, ed. T. M. Schmaltz. (London: Routledge Studies in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, 2005), 45).

³⁴ Original Title: *L'art de vivre heureux, formé sur les idées les plus claires de la raison et du sens commun & sur de très belles maximes de Monsieur Descartes* (Paris: Coignard, 1667).

³⁵ Original Title: *Abrégé de la vraie philosophie, lequel en contient... les définitions, les divisions, les sentences et les questions principales* (Paris: 1665).

³⁶ In particular, the thinking of Saint Augustin for Claude Ameline, and Stoic moral philosophy for Jacques du Roure.

³⁷ Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, trans. and ed. C. Walton (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1993), 87.

³⁸ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 207.

³⁹ To which Malebranche makes reference concerning the degree of certainty to be sought in knowledge: see *infra* p. 7, note 43.

⁴⁰ This comparison between ethics and medicine and its significance in *Nicomachean Ethics* has been very well studied by Jaeger, W., “Aristotle’s use of medicine as model of method in his ethics”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957): 54-61. See also Lloyd, G.E.R., “The Role of Medical and Biological Analogies in Aristotle's Ethics”, *Phronesis* 13 (1968): 68-83.

⁴¹ “There is no deliberation about precise and self-sufficient sciences – letters for example, because we are in no doubt about how they should be written. Rather, what we deliberate about are things that we bring about, and not always in the same way – questions of medicine and of finance for example [...]. We deliberate about other fields in the same way and more about the skills than about the sciences, since we are less certain about the skills”, (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43).

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4-5.

⁴³ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 12.

⁴⁴ See on this subject Boriau, Ch., “Descartes est-il relativiste en morale?”, *XVII^e siècle* 226, (1, 2005): 69-83 and Bardout, J.-Ch., (2005)

⁴⁵ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 15.

⁴⁶ “There are two kinds of truths, those are *necessary* and those are *contingent*. I call those truths necessary that by their nature are immutable or that have been fixed by the will of God, which is in no way subject to change. All others are *contingent* truths. Mathematics, metaphysics, and even a large part of physics and morals contain necessary truths. History, grammar, local custom, and several other things that depend on the changing will of men contain only *contingent* truths” (Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 15).

⁴⁷ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 15.

⁴⁸ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 208.

⁴⁹ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 15.

⁵⁰ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 485.

⁵¹ “I know – he wrote – that twice two is four, that is better to be just than rich, and I am not mistaken in believing that others know these truths as well as I” (Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 239).

⁵² Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 485.

⁵³ Malebranche, N., *Conversations Chrétiennes*, in *O.C.*, v. IV, VI-VII.

⁵⁴ Malebranche, N., *Conversations Chrétiennes*, in *O.C.*, v. IV, 3.

⁵⁵ See note 52.

⁵⁶ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 485.

⁵⁷ As noted by Jean-Christophe Bardout “In Malebranchian terms, one cannot assign any distinction between the certainty that is properly metaphysical and the certainty required in morality. Between the truths called speculative and practical truths, there is not, strictly

speaking, any difference of nature, but only a gradual difference as far as our cognitive capacity is concerned" (Bardout, J.-Ch. (2005): 46).

⁵⁸ "The mind's attention is thus a natural prayer by which we obtain Reason, which enlightens us [...] There is no other way to obtain light and understanding than by effort and attention [...] Now those who are made this effort and who are always attentive to the truth which must lead them, have a habit which doubtless should merit a name more magnificent than those given to the most impressive virtues. [...] Permit me, then, to designate it by the equivocal name of *strength of mind*" (Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, 76).

⁵⁹ "Nous ne voyons pas seulement en Dieu les nombres, les figures, toutes les vérités spéculatives, mais encore les verités de pratique, les lois éternelles, les règles immuables de la morale" (Malebranche, N., "Preface", *Entretiens sur la métaphysique, sur la religion et sur la mort*, O.C., v. XII, 17). The English translation of *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* ed. N. Jolley and trans. by D. Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) does not include the entire text of Malebranche's work, notably the Author's *Preface* and the *Entretiens sur la mort* (*Dialogues on Death*), both added in the third edition of the book.

⁶⁰ "[...] dans une unique région qu'il a préalablement définie, la Raison divine [...] par ses attributs, légitime les sciences d'évidence et la morale" (Carbone, R., *Infini et science de l'homme, l'horizon et les paysages de l'anthropologie chez Malebranche* (Naples et Paris: La città del sole – Vrin, 2007), 315).

⁶¹ "[...] les fondements inconditionnés d'une morale universelle, valable *a priori* pour tout esprit raisonnable" (Bardout, J.-Ch., *La vertu de la philosophie: essai sur la morale de Malebranche* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2000) 37).

⁶² Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 262.

⁶³ "Supposing that man is reasonable, certainly we cannot disagree that he knows something of that which God thinks, and something of the way in which God acts. For by contemplating the intelligible substance of the Word, which alone makes reasonable me and all other intelligent beings, I clearly see the *relations of magnitude* which exist between the intelligible ideas contained therein; and these *relations* are the same eternal *truths* which God sees. For God sees as well as I that 2 and 2 are 4, and the triangles which have the same base and are between the same parallels are equal. I may also discover, at least confusedly, the *relations of perfection* which exist between these same ideas; and these relations are the immutable *Order* which also must govern the esteem and love of all intelligent beings" (Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, 46).

⁶⁴ Malebranche wrote: "The mind is only capable of thinking and of willing. Hence spiritual worship consists only in judgments and movements of the soul. Anyone who loves and thinks as God loves and thinks, who judges the divine attributes as God judges them, and who governs his movements as God does, according to the divine law, the immutable Order – such a one, I say, honors God and is loved by God because he resembles Him" (Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, 166).

⁶⁵ Definition which conclude the first part of the book, see Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, 139. The "love of Order" was defined by Malebranche as "our chief duty, the one for which God has created us; here is the love which is the virtue of virtues, the universal virtue, the fundamental virtue; here is that virtue which makes us just and perfect, which will one day make us happy" (Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, 49).

⁶⁶ Malebranche, N., *Search after Truth*, 485.

⁶⁷ Bardout, J.-Ch., (2000): 108.

⁶⁸ "Anyone who might wish to undertake detailed examination of all our duties in all situations would be undertaking a task which could never be accomplished, however tireless he might be. For myself, I do not feel that I have the strength for such a vast difficult job; thus what I intend to do now is to mark off, in general way, those duties man should render to God, to his

neighbor and to himself, insofar as it can be done. Every person must examine his own particular duties with reference to these general and essential obligations, and also according to the changing circumstances of the moment” (Malebranche, N., *Treatise on Ethics*, 144).