

**The Specter of
Spinozism:
Malebranche,
Arnauld, Fénelon**

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Abstract: Malebranche was accused by his contemporary critics of being a Spinozist for the way in which he introduced matter or extension in God. But very little attention has been paid to the way in which Spinozistic necessitarianism also informs early modern critiques of Malebranche. The charge of Spinozism *qua* necessitarianism is not as prominent or frequent as the charge of Spinozism *qua* divine materialism, and it is certainly more subtle, but, as I show in this article, it is there—in the polemics against Malebranche launched by Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon. In section 1 of this paper, I review Malebranche’s account of God’s *modus operandi* and the way in which eternal laws and what Malebranche calls “Order” direct—and apparently determine—the divine will in its creative and causal activities. I also consider the implications of this for Malebranche’s understanding of miracles. I then turn, in sections 2 and 3, to the way in which Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon object to what they perceive to be a latent but easily discovered necessitarianism in Malebranche’s philosophical theology, with the implication that Malebranche, no less than Spinoza, renders miracles impossible. However, there remains a glaring and rather puzzling lacuna in these necessitarian charges against Malebranche: namely, the total absence of Spinoza’s name. While there seems to be no clear explanation for this lacuna, I conclude, in section 4, with some speculation as to a possible reason for it.

Keywords: Spinoza, necessitarianism, Malebranche, Arnauld, Fénelon, miracles

What might a French Bishop, a German Lutheran polymath, two unorthodox Catholic priests—both French, one an Oratorian Cartesian in Paris and the other a Jansenist on the lam in the Spanish Low Countries—and a Huguenot exile in the Dutch Republic, all contemporaries in the second half of the seventeenth century, possibly have in common? The answer is not too difficult to find. François Fénelon, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Nicolas Malebranche, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Bayle—like so many others in the period—all suffered from Spinozophobia (although Bayle, at least, had some admiration for the “atheist” Spinoza’s virtuous life). Just as the specter of communism united Democrats and Republicans in the rough and tumble world of American politics in the 1940s and 50s, so the specter of Spinozism made room for strange bedfellows in the equally rough and tumble world of the early modern Republic of Letters.

One of the topics which accounts for a good deal of the backlash against Spinoza, and which led some thinkers to accuse others of being—willingly or in spite of themselves—Spinozists, was the perceived materialism of Spinoza’s theology. If one of the attributes of God is

extension, as Spinoza claimed, then, it was argued by his critics, matter itself must belong to the essence of God, thereby making God material or body.¹ And anyone whose philosophy even *looks* like it places extension or body (in whatever form) in God must be a Spinozist. Thus, Arnauld explicitly invokes Spinoza (a philosopher “who believed that the matter from which God made the world was uncreated”) as he insists that Malebranche's claim, in the Vision in God doctrine, that something called “intelligible extension” is in God—which is why we are able to cognize material bodies by apprehending their ideas or intelligible archtypes in God—is tantamount to making God Himself extended.²

Arnauld was certainly not alone in claiming that Malebranche's theory of “intelligible extension” implies a kind of Spinozism. Dortuous de Mairan, who in his letters to Malebranche is pressing the Oratorian to distinguish his views from those of Spinoza, suggests that “if intelligible extension is in God, then every body is the modification of the divine essence, or the divine essence is the substance of all bodies.”³

However, Spinoza's other, perhaps equal if not greater offense, was his necessitarianism. If all things, extended and thinking, are in God as modes of the one infinite and eternal substance, and if they all follow necessarily from God—if, as Spinoza insists, “the face of the whole world” is but a necessary consequence of God's power through the divine attributes⁴—then not only is this not the *best* of all possible worlds, but there *are no other* possible worlds. As Spinoza puts it in a series of propositions in Part One of the *Ethics*:

1 As Bayle puts it, “among the absurdities of [Spinoza's] system” is that “God and extension are the same thing” (*Dictionnaire historique et critique*, “Spinoza”, Remark N, 1).

2 *Défense de Monsieur Arnauld, Docteur de Sorbonne, contre la Réponse au Livre des Vraies et des Fausses Idées*, OA XXXVIII.516-518. See also *Des vraies et des fausses idées*, OA XXXVIII.253-258 (although in this instance Spinoza's name is not explicitly mentioned).

3 Letter to Malebranche, 6 May 1714, in Nicolas Malebranche, *Correspondance avec J.-J. Dortuous de Mairan*, ed. Joseph Moreau (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947). Moreau's introduction to this volume, “Malebranche et le Spinozisme” (pp. 2-98), is a useful overview of this correspondence. See also Fred Ablondi, “Le Spinoziste Malgré Lui? Malebranche, De Mairan, and Intelligible Extension”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15 (1998): 191-203. Noel Aubert de Versé likewise assimilates Malebranche's intelligible extension to a Spinozistic materialism; see *L'Impie convaincu, ou Dissertaion contre Spinosà* (1685). Leibniz's well-known charge of Spinozism against Malebranche, on the other hand, focuses on what he sees as the Spinozistic implications of Malebranche's occasionalism. If finite creatures have no active causal powers, then they are not true substances—“God would be the sole substance and creatures would be only accidents or modifications of God, such that those who are of this opinion would fall, despite themselves, into that of Spinoza, who seems to have taken the consequences of the Cartesian doctrine of occasional causes the furthest” (*Addition à l'explication du système nouveau touchant l'union de l'ame et du corps, envoyée à Paris à l'occasion d'un livre intitulé Connaissance de soy même*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 6 vols., ed. C. J. Gerhardt [Hildesheim: Olms, 1965], vol. 4, p. 590).

4 *Ethics* Ip16: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).” My citations from Spinoza's *Ethics* use the standard notation of roman numeral (Part) and proposition (p).

In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. (Ip29)

Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced. (Ip33)

Moreover, as Spinoza explicitly argues, miracles are therefore impossible. It is not just that, as Hume would later claim, the belief in miracles is never justified. Spinoza's point is not merely an epistemological one. Rather, miracles, understood as divinely caused violations of or exceptions to the ordinary course of nature as this is determined by nature's most universal causal principles, are ruled out on metaphysical grounds. Given the identification of God and Nature and the absolute necessity of the existence and essence of God or Nature, it is absolutely impossible for what follows necessarily from God or Nature to have been or be other than what it is. In Chapter 6 of the *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)* Spinoza insists that

nothing, therefore, happens in Nature which is contrary to its universal laws. Nor does anything happen which does not agree with those laws or does not follow from them ... Thus, from these considerations—that nothing happens in nature that does not follow from its laws, that its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine intellect itself, and finally that Nature maintains a fixed and immutable order—it clearly follows that the term 'miracle' cannot be understood except in relation to men's opinions, and means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by the example of another familiar thing.⁵

Spinoza's brand of necessitarianism—not just causal determinism, but the absolute impossibility of the law-like course of nature and anything coming to be in and through nature having been or being other than what it is—rules out miracles a priori.⁶

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5 *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1925), III.83-84; the translation is from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2., ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 155.

6 That Spinoza is indeed a necessitarian has been well argued for in the literature; see, for example, Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Necessitarianism", in Yirmiyahu Yovel, ed., *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 191-218; and Dominik Perler, "The Problem of Necessitarianism (1P28-36)", in Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz and Robert Schnepf, eds., *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 57-77. Garrett is responding to Edwin Curley, who argues that Spinoza is merely a determinist; see Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), chapter 3, and Edwin Curley and Gregory Walski, "Spinoza's Necessitarianism Reconsidered", in Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann, eds., *New Essays on the Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 241-62. Jonathan Bennett (*A Study of Spinoza's*

Leibniz, Bayle, Arnauld and Fénelon are all opponents of necessitarianism. Some of them were more successful in avoiding it than others.⁷ They also, like many of their contemporaries, associated a necessitarian cosmos with Spinoza. Leibniz, for one, confesses that at one point "I found myself very close to the opinion of those who hold everything to be absolutely necessary"—he clearly means Spinoza—but says that he was "pulled back from the precipice" by his discovery of what seemed a workable account of contingency.⁸ Bayle, meanwhile, describes the Spinozist view as that according to which "there is no other cause of all things but a nature that exists necessarily, and which acts by an immutable, inevitable, and irrevocable necessity."⁹

What seems to have received insufficient notice, however, is the way in which necessitarianism, like the issue of materialism, also informs early modern critiques of Malebranche that seek to reduce his system to a kind of Spinozism. In other words, the charge of Spinozism against Malebranche had its source not only in the claim that he made God material, but also in the claim that he—perhaps *malgré lui*, perhaps not—made the cosmos and every thing, state of affairs and event in it into an absolutely necessary consequence of God's power. The charge of Spinozism *qua* necessitarianism is not as prominent or frequent as the charge of Spinozism *qua* divine materialism, and it is certainly more subtle, but, as I hope to show, it is there—in the polemics against Malebranche launched by Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon.¹⁰

Ethics [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1984]) insists that "the texts on this are difficult and inconclusive" (111). Be that as it may, it is clear that Spinoza's contemporaries, at least, saw his philosophy as necessitarian.

7 Leibniz, for one, can reasonably be read as a necessitarian *malgré lui*; see, for example, Michael Griffin, *Leibniz, God and Necessity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

8 "De Libertate" (1680), in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Sechste Reihe, Vierter Band (Berlin: Brandenbugischen Akademie der Wissenschaftern, 1999; abbreviated henceforth as "A VI.iv"), p. 1653; "On Freedom", in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd. edition, ed. Leroy Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), p. 263. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz describes "the Spinozist view" as that which "explains everything through brute necessity" (Book 1, chapter i). On Leibniz as a reader of Spinoza, see Mogens Laerke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008).

9 *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, "Spinoza", Remark M. Bayle is here describing the way in which (he believes) Johannes Bredenburg exposed the true metaphysical core of Spinoza's system.

10 Antonella Del Prete suggests that, in general, "le rapprochement de Malebranche et de Spinoza est initialement bien plus rare avant la fin du siècle et souvent il est avancé avec précaution: il ressemble en effet à un fleuve souterrain, innervant implicitement certains polémiques de l'époque et ne faisant surface qu'à des occasions bien spécifiques" ("Malebranche-Spinoza, aller-retour: Le parcours polémique de Pierre-Sylvain Régis", in Raffaele Carbone, Chantal Jaquet and Pierre-François Moreau, eds., *Spinoza-Malebranche. A la croisée des chemins* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2018), pp. 161-178 (p. 161). I would argue, however, that this is true more of the necessitarian *rapprochement* than the materialism one. In an unpublished paper "Necessitarianism Within Malebranche's Theodicy", Michèle Martin (undergraduate, Concordia University, Montreal) argues, among other things, that Malebranche's theodicy generates a necessitarian cosmogeny.

In section 1 of this paper, I review Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi* and the way in which eternal laws and what Malebranche calls "Order" direct—and apparently determine—the divine will in its creative and causal activities. I also consider the implications of this for Malebranche's understanding of miracles. I then turn, in sections 2 and 3, to the way in which Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon, all with excellent anti-Spinoza credentials, object to what they perceive to be a latent but (they would insist) easily discovered necessitarianism in Malebranche's philosophical theology, with the implication that Malebranche, no less than Spinoza and for very Spinozistic reasons, renders miracles impossible—a serious charge indeed.¹¹

However, there remains a glaring and rather puzzling lacuna in these necessitarian charges against Malebranche: namely, the total absence of Spinoza's name. While there seems to be no clear explanation for this lacuna, I will conclude, in section 4, with some speculation as to a possible reason for it.

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The central text of Malebranche on the topic of miracles is the *Traité de la nature et de la grace* (*Treatise on Nature and Grace*, henceforth *TNG*), first published in 1680. In this work, Malebranche addresses the problem of evil, that is, the question of why there are imperfections—physical traumas, disabilities and disasters, moral crimes, etc.—in a world created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, wise and just God. The centerpiece of Malebranche's theodicy is his account of the nature of God's causal activity and especially his distinction between different kinds of volitions in God.

Malebranche insists that God is "obliged always to act in a manner worthy of himself, by simple, general, constant and uniform means" (*TNG*, Premier Discours, §43: *OCV.49*). He puts this in his own terms by saying that God acts only by "general volitions [*volontez générales*]" and (almost) never by "particular volitions [*volontez particulières*]." Here is how Malebranche distinguishes these sorts of volition: "God acts by general volitions when he acts in consequence of general laws that he has established ... I say, on the other hand, that God acts by particular volitions when the efficacy of his will is not determined by some general law to produce some effect" (*TNG*, Premier Elucidation, §§1-2: *OCV.147-48*). A general volition is a will to do something that is in accordance with or follows from some law or general principle. A law of physics, for example, specifies that if a body of a certain size at rest is struck by a body of a certain size in motion, then it will be moved in a certain way. When Malebranche's God then moves a body in the appropriate

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11 For studies of the relationship between Malebranche and Spinoza, see the essays in Carbone et al., eds., *Spinoza–Malebranche. A la croisée des chemins* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2018)

way on the occasion of its being struck by another body, God is acting by a general volition. Similarly, if God causes a feeling of pain in some person's mind on the occasion of his body being pricked by a needle, this is done through a general volition, since it is in accordance with the laws of mind-body union that God has established. A particular volition, on the other hand, does not obey any law, but is (relative to the laws) *ad hoc*. If God were to move a body without its having been struck by another body, or if God were to cause pain in someone without anything having happened to that person's body, God would be acting by a particular volition.¹² Thus, Malebranche's God not only institutes the most simple laws when creating the world, but also is bound by His own nature—as a wise, good, immutable, and absolutely simple being who acts with perfect constancy—to follow those laws in the causal operations through which He makes nature function.

Why, then, is there evil in the world? Why are individuals born without limbs, why are there floods and droughts, why is there sin and suffering, and why do virtuous people sometimes suffer while vicious people prosper? And why, especially, are not all human beings saved by the grace of a God who, we are told, wants everyone to be saved? Malebranche believes that it is important, above all, to bear in mind that God does not will any of these evils with a particular volition. God does not choose them for their own sake and regardless of what else happens to be the case.

If the rain fall on certain lands while the sun burns others; if a time that is favorable for the harvests is followed by a hail that ravages them; if a child comes into the world with a malformed and useless head, which rises from his chest and makes him miserable, it is not at all because God wanted to produce these effects through particular volitions. (*TNG* I.18: *OCV*.32)

These unfortunate events occur because God allows them to occur—or, rather, given God's unique and ubiquitous causal role in the world under Malebranche's doctrine of occasionalism, brings them about—as a part of the ordinary course of nature as this is regulated by its most simple laws. General laws have a wide variety of effects. As anyone whose picnic plans have ever been upended by the weather knows, these laws, which on the whole make for an orderly and predictable world, cannot take into account the convenience and wishes of particular individuals or even an

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¹²The recent literature on general vs. particular volitions includes Eric Stencil and Julie Walsh, "Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54 (2016): 227-55; Andrew Pessin, "Malebranche's Distinction Between Particular and General Volitions", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 77-99; Andrew Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 27-44; and Andrew Pyle, *Malebranche* (London: Routledge, 2003).

entire species. Birth defects, earthquakes, and other natural disorders are but "the necessary consequences [of laws] so simple, and at the same time so fecund, that they serve to produce everything beautiful that we see in the world" (*TNG* I.18: *OC* V.32). God, who is obliged by His nature to follow the laws of nature, makes it rain on fallow lands as well as on those that are cultivated because that is the meteorological result to which the laws lead. Likewise, "if, for example, one is dropping rocks on the heads of passersby, the rocks will always fall with an equal speed, regardless of the piety or condition, the good or bad disposition of those passersby" (*TNG* I.59: *OC* V.63). Just as the rain falls where it must, regardless of what lies underneath, so the rocks, falling as rocks do, will land on the heads of the virtuous and the vicious alike. In these and other cases, God is simply carrying out the natural consequences of the laws of nature—laws that are so simple that they admit of no exceptions, and that specify that when certain things occur, other things must happen.

God, then, is more committed to acting in a general way and to a nature governed by the most simple laws than He is to the well-being of individuals and the justice of the distribution of rewards and punishments. As the universal cause, God follows those laws, come what may to those affected by them. For this reason, Malebranche says that God "permits disorder, but he does not create it, He does not will it" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* IX.9: *OC* XII.212; *JS* 161).

Thus, there is sin and suffering in the world, rain falls on the oceans while inseminated soil suffers drought, there are murders, deformities of birth, and tsunamis, and not every individual receives the grace necessary to move him to faith. But none of this happens because God directly wills it. Rather, such things happen as a result of the simple laws of nature and grace instituted by God at creation and which He is committed to carrying out, come what may for many individuals affected by them.

Of course, God can always intervene in these cases and keep the rain from falling, prevent a tornado from hitting a town, or stop a person from committing some sin. But this, Malebranche says, would be for God to depart from the generality of His ways and thus perform a miracle; and we must not expect, much less demand constant miracles from God.

This brings us to our first point. Malebranche—who, like many other philosophers (most famously, Leibniz), is committed to a rationalist conception of God, a God who is an agent that always acts for reasons—is clearly uncomfortable with miracles. Malebranche's primary fealty is to the simplicity, generality, regularity and predictability of God's ways. He believes that God's wisdom, goodness, and power are revealed more by the regular, law-like course of nature than by any unusual supernatural intervention.

Malebranche identifies a miracle with God acting "by a particular volition." "God", he says, "only acts by particular volitions when

he brings about miracles" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* II.1: OC VIII.696). A miracle, he says, in "the most exact and particular [sense] of philosophers" refers to all effects that are not natural, or that are not the consequence of natural laws ...

Thus, whether an effect is common or rare, if God does not produce it as a consequence of his general laws, which are the natural laws, it is a true miracle. If, for example, a thought comes to my mind, or if I have some sensation of pleasure or pain without there being in my brain any disturbance that is its natural cause, this effect will be a miracle, even though there seems to be nothing extraordinary about it. (OC VIII.696)

Every miraculous event—every violation of some “natural law”—is the performance of a particular volition in God; and every practical or effective particular volition in God brings about a miracle.¹³

Now the laws of nature are only one kind of law for Malebranche. In fact, he distinguishes five sets of laws in the cosmos. They are hierarchically ordered, with lower level laws capable of being suspended by God for the sake of a higher order law. The types of law are as follows:

1. Laws governing the communication of motion between bodies. The occasional causes of the operation of these laws are collisions among bodies.
2. Laws governing the union between mind and body. These laws dictate how the body will be moved on the occasion of certain thoughts in the mind; and what sensations will occur in the mind on the occasion of certain motions in the body.
3. Laws governing the union of the soul with God, "the intelligible substance of universal reason." These laws cover the ordinary access that human minds have to ideas in God's understanding in thinking and perception—Malebranche's infamous doctrine of the Vision in God.
4. Laws that provide angels and demons with the power to move bodies.
5. The laws of grace. These govern the distribution of interior grace among souls, and their operation is occasioned by the desires in Jesus Christ.¹⁴

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13 A practical volition is an effective volition in the sense that it is a volition whose intention is actually fulfilled. On the distinction between simple vs. practical volitions in Malebranche, see OC VIII.651. See Jean-Christophe Bardout, *Malebranche et la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 259-63.

14 The laws are detailed in *Dialogues on Metaphysics* XIII.9: OC XII.319-320; JS 252-253.

What is perfectly clear in Malebranche is that if the following two conditions are *both* satisfied, an event is *not* a miracle: (1) the event is the effect of a general volition in God, that is, a volition that is carrying out some law on the appropriate occasion; and (2) the law being carried out belongs to one of the first three kinds of laws. The first three sets of laws are, I presume, all "laws of nature" in a narrow sense for Malebranche, in so far as the occasional causes for the operation of these laws, as well as the consequent effects, are a familiar part of nature: they are all either physical items or events (for example, the collision of bodies) or items or events in the human mind (ideas and volitions). The laws of physics, the laws setting correlations between states of the body and states of the mind, and the laws determining how all human minds regularly have access to ideas in God are all laws that God follows in the ordinary course of nature.

Now it often seems that Malebranche intends *only* these three types of laws to constitute the set beyond which lies the domain of miracles. That is, perhaps a miracle is an event that is brought about by God, even in accordance with a law, but just not in accordance with any of these laws of nature. For example, when God moves a body on the occasion of a desire by an angel (rather than that of a human soul), in accordance with the fourth set of laws, this is a miracle; or the distribution of grace by God on the occasion of desires in the soul of Christ, according to the fifth set of laws, is always a miraculous event.

There is indeed some good textual support for this reading (which I will call the "narrow" definition of miracles). For example, notice that in the text quoted above, from the *Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]*, Malebranche identifies miracles with "all effects that are not natural, or that are not the consequence of natural laws", and says that "if God does not produce it as a consequence of his general laws, *which are the natural laws*, it is a true miracle" (II.1: OC VIII.696, my emphasis).¹⁵ Similarly, in a note to the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* XII.13, Malebranche states that "by 'miracle' I mean the effects which depend on general laws which are *not known to us naturally*" (OC XII.295; JS 231, my emphasis). On this reading, then, it is a miracle when God suspends the laws of nature to do something that is in accordance with, even demanded by, the laws of grace.

However, the problem with this narrow reading is that it clashes with Malebranche's frequent claim that miracles are equivalent to events caused by particular volitions, and particular volitions are those divine volitions that are *not* in accordance with or the carrying out of *any* general laws, whether it be the laws of nature (in the narrow sense) or the angelic laws and the laws of grace. On the suggested reading, events brought about by God in accordance with the two higher-order sets of general

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15 See also *Dialogues on Metaphysics* VIII.3: OC XII.177; JS 131.

laws—those governing the angelic motion of bodies and those governing grace—would be miracles even though in such cases God is acting by general volitions. But if this were the case, Malebranche could not then say, in the very same works, that "miracles are such only because they never come about according to general laws" (*TNG* I.59: OC V.63). Nor could he say that "anything that God does by a particular volition is certainly a miracle, because it does not at all happen according to the general laws that he has established"" (*TNG*, Elucidation I.13: OC V.160).¹⁶ Moreover, Malebranche also explicitly notes elsewhere that as long as God is following the laws of grace, God is *not* performing a miracle (*The Search After Truth*, Elucidation XV: OC III.221; LO 667).¹⁷

One could reply that the notion of a *particular* volition is a relative one: relative, that is, to a specific set of laws. A particular volition would then comprise not a divine volition that is undirected by any law whatsoever, but rather a divine volition that is an exception to some specified laws, but nonetheless required by another, higher set of laws. However, this seems to be an especially *ad hoc* solution to the problem. I see no reason for thinking that Malebranche's particular volitions are supposed to be anything but *absolutely* particular—that is, not in accordance with any general laws whatsoever—and not merely relatively particular. Malebranche himself could not be more clear about this: "I have said that God never acts by particular volitions when he is acting as a consequence of general laws" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* I.1.iii: OC VIII.651).

But what, then, are we to do with the above passages and the problematic reading for miracles they seem to support? It seems, in fact, that what Malebranche is doing in these instances is suggesting that many of the so-called "miracles" of the Hebrew Bible, "the Ancient Law", are in fact not, strictly speaking, miracles at all. All those phenomena reported by the authors of Hebrew Scripture that involve God and angels acting in this world are—despite appearances, despite their rarity—not truly miracles. This is because while such events are suspensions or violations of the laws of nature, they occurred as a consequence of higher-order general laws and so were not really brought about by particular volitions. This would be in keeping with Malebranche's apparent desire to minimize the number of miracles in history. At one point in the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* he explicitly notes that the angelic motion of bodies, common in the Hebrew Bible, does *not* count

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16 Nor could Malebranche say that "when I say that God always follows the general laws that he has prescribed for himself, I am talking only of his general and ordinary providence. I do not exclude miracles or effects which do not follow from his general laws" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* VIII.3: OC XII.177; JS 130).

17 As Bardout notes, "des événements qui nous paraissent miraculeux est en fait identique à celui de n'import quel événement naturel", because they too are the function of occasional causes whose secondary efficacy is governed by laws (*Malebranche et la métaphysique*, 263-4).

as a miracle. He says that those things that occurred under "the Law of the Jews" that were "contrary to the natural laws known to us" were *not* miracles because they were not produced by God through particular volitions; to support this he cites the fact that angels have powers in the present world because of general laws unknown to us (*TNG* I.20.addition: *OC* V.34). In fact, Malebranche is emphatic in his debate with Arnauld that "most of the miraculous effects of the ancient Law occurred as a consequence of some general laws" (*OC* VII.489), and so they are not truly miracles but only "miracles" in a secondary sense, as wondrous and unusual events (*des prodiges*), because we do not know the relevant laws. Elsewhere, Malebranche concedes that "the term 'miracle' is equivocal. It can either be taken to refer to an effect that does not at all depend on the general laws known to human beings"—and so, in this epistemological sense (in essence, what I have been calling the "narrow" sense), a miracle is an event that surprises us because of its novelty and natural inexplicability—or it can be taken "more generally, for an effect that does not depend on any laws, neither known nor unknown" (*Méditations Chrétiennes* VIII.26: *OC* X.92; *Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* II.1: *OC* VIII.695-6).¹⁸ The angelic events of the "Old Testament", such as when a person walks on water, are miracles only in the first, epistemological sense, and thus not really *true* miracles. As Malebranche says, "the frequent miracles of the Ancient Law do not at all prove that God often acts by particular volitions" (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]* XV.6: *OC* VII.593).

It is this latter, "more general" sense of 'miracle', however, that offers a stricter and proper Malebranchian notion of what a miracle is, and it seems *prima facie* to restore their status as products of particular volitions. Thus, according to a second reading of Malebranchian miracles, a miraculous event is one whose occurrence transcends *all five orders of law*: all the laws of nature *and* all the laws of angelic action and of grace. A miracle is an event brought about by a divine volition that is not the carrying out of some law, neither the familiar laws of nature nor the higher-order "laws that are unknown to us." That is, we should take Malebranche at his word when he says that "miracles are such only because they do not at all happen according to general laws" (*TNG* I.59: *OC* V.63). Thus, before the birth of Christ and so without the possibility of his desires functioning as occasions for the operation of the (general) laws of grace, if God distributed grace to the Patriarchs it would have to have been through particular volitions. Such grace would be miraculous, just because "everything that God does by particular volitions is certainly a miracle, since they never happen by the general laws that he has established" (*TNG*, *Elucidation* I.13: *OC* V.160). Similarly, God's creation

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18 See Henri Gouhier, *La Philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), 65-6.

of this world had to be a particular volition—in fact, it had to involve an extraordinary number of particular volitions. This is because it includes creating the laws of the world and many members of each of the species of fauna and flora, as well as the initial setting of bodies into motion; and so before the creation of the world there were no laws to follow and no natural substances to occasion their operation (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* III: OC VIII.759; *Dialogues on Metaphysics* X.16: OC XII.245-246; JS 190-191). Without laws and occasional causes, there are no general volitions.¹⁹

It is important to bear in mind, however, that for Malebranche any divine departures from the laws of nature and grace are not rationally unmotivated; God's particular volitions do not happen *ad hoc* or with absolute indifference. Even Malebranchian miracles properly speaking are, in fact, in accordance with a higher set of principles that Malebranche calls "Order". God, he says to Arnauld, "never acts by particular volitions without compelling reasons" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* I.1.vi: OC VIII.661), and those more weighty reasons are found in Order. Malebranche says that "the immutable Order that consists in the necessary relation among the divine perfections is *his inviolable law* and the rule of all his volitions" (OC VIII.753, my emphasis; see also *TNG* I.20: OC V.33). Order is "the Eternal Wisdom" in God Himself, and bears the uncreated principles of truths, beauty, and justice. It dictates that God is more worthy than a creature, that a soul is more worthy than a body, and that a human being is more worthy than a beast. Above all, Order informs God that His wisdom, justice and other attributes are sometimes better honored by an exception to the laws of nature and grace than by following them.

In one of his responses to Arnauld, Malebranche defends himself against the accusation that on his view God *never* acts by particular volitions, and thus never performs miracles. On the contrary, Malebranche replies, he has said many times that God has always acted by these kinds of volitions, when Order demands it and often when Order permits it, since Order is the inviolable law of divine volitions (*Trois lettres*, I: OC VI.267-8). In the *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, Theodore notes that God has "these important reasons" to suspend the laws and depart

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19 One might argue, however, that whatever God does *during* creation—which includes the creation of the laws and the occasional causes that instigate their operation—while it would be carried out by particular volitions, would *not* qualify as a miracle, since God's activity would not be a violation of, to use Malebranche's phrase from the quote above, "the general laws that he has established", since God has not yet established *any* laws. Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin apparently does not agree with the identification of miracles with particular volitions. In *Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2006), she does say that "toutes les volontés particulières de Dieu sont des miracles" (175); but in communication with me she claims that for Malebranche being a particular volition is only a necessary (but not sufficient condition for being a miracle)—it must also be a violation of an existing law. And since before creation there are no laws, the act of creation, while the product of a particular volition, is not a miracle.

from the simplicity and generality of his ways "when the glory that he derives from the perfection of his work counterbalances that which he receives from the uniformity of his conduct. He has these serious reasons when what he owes to his immutability is equal to or of less consideration than what he owes to another one of his attributes in particular" (XII.12: OC XII.293-4; JS 230-231)—for example, to His justice. God has a necessary and sufficient reason to execute a particular volition and perform a miracle "when he acts as much or more according to his nature by departing from the general laws he has prescribed for himself than by following them. For God always acts according to what he is. He inviolably follows the immutable order of his own perfections" (XII.12: OC XII.294; JS 231).

What this account of Divine Order means, however, is that Malebranche inscribes even miracles in the strict sense within a law-like framework.²⁰ To be sure, divine acts demanded by Order do, in a sense, represent departures from the "the general laws that God has established"; but they do not represent a departure from the "legality" or prescriptive rationality of God's conduct.²¹ Miracles, strictly speaking, may transcend all five sets of laws of nature and grace, but they still remain within the domain of divine reason and, more importantly, are still a consequence of general principle—this time the highest-order principle, an *eternal* "law" that can require the suspension of all other laws. So it appears that even here it may be that we are not dealing with absolutely particular volitions—that is, with divine volitions that, while certainly purposive and not capricious, are truly *ad hoc* and do not represent the necessary consequence of some general law.²²

Are there then, in Malebranche's system, *any* divine actions that are beyond even the rational demands of Order—true and pure miracles in

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20 As Pellegrin puts it, Malebranche subjects even miraculous events to a kind of "legalité" (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, chapter 3).

21 Bardout puts this nicely: "Dieu se voit cependant contraint de déroger parfois à la généralité de sa conduite. En ce cas, néanmoins, la causalité particulière de Dieu demeure soumise aux exigences de l'ordre" (*Malebranche et la métaphysique*, 264).

22 Leibniz, whose views on this point really are not all that different from Malebranche's, seems to be more forthcoming. He insists that God's volitions or actions are commonly divided into ordinary and extraordinary. But it is good to consider that God does nothing outside of order. Thus, what passes for extraordinary is such only with regard to some particular order established among creatures ... Miracles conform to general order, although they are contrary to subordinate maxims and to what God wants or permits by a general or particular volition. Since nothing can happen that is not within order, it can be said that miracles are also just as within order as are natural operations that are called such because they conform to certain subordinate maxims that we call the nature of things. (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, §§6-7)

In the *Theodicy* he notes that

I agree with Father Malebranche that God does things in the way most worthy of him. But I go a little further than he does, with regard to "general and particular acts of will." Since God can do nothing without reasons, even when he acts miraculously, it follows that he has no will about individual events but what results from some general truth or will. Thus, I would say that God never has a particular will such as this Father implies. (§206).

the sense that they are the result of absolutely particular volitions and do not follow from *any* law whatsoever, whether the "general laws that God has established" or the eternal law of Order?²³ If there are, there seems to be only one possible instance: God's decision to create something distinct from Himself in the first place. Because God is all-perfect and completely self-sufficient, God's decision to create something outside Himself appears not to be motivated by any law or principle or need. Having decided to create, God's choice to create *this* world rather than some other world was dictated by Order; but the decision to create in the first place was, he says, a matter of "a perfect liberty and complete indifference" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* VIII.2: OC XII.176; JS 130). Malebranche makes a distinction between those things that Order "demands" and those that Order "permits" (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]* III.9: OC VII.490). Almost all of the particular volitions that constitute proper Malebranchian miracles—as opposed to the merely apparent miracles of the Hebrew Bible—are exceptions to the laws of nature and grace that Order *requires*. By contrast, God's decision to create something in the first place is not required by Order, although it is not contrary to Order and so is permitted by it. It is, however, in its arbitrariness the exception that seems to prove the rule.²⁴

It is precisely this emphasis on the demands that Order makes upon God's volitions that drove at least two of Malebranche's critics, Arnauld and Fénelon, to distraction. Malebranche's shrinking of the number of miracles and his reduction of even true miracles to law-governed events, in effect "naturalizing" them and making them appear to be *necessary* events (because they are demanded either by higher-order laws or by Order itself—that is, by God's nature), seemed to these opponents only to confirm that for Malebranche true miracles were impossible.²⁵ In fact, it confirmed for them that, in the end, Malebranche's cosmos is, ultimately, a Spinozistic cosmos.

2

Perhaps the most subtle insinuation that Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi* has Spinozistic implications is found in Bayle.

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23 Pellegrin believes the answer to this question is "no"; she says "l'idée d'une intervention gratuite de Dieu, c'est-à-dire sans nécessité du point de vue de l'ordre, serait une aberration" (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 177).

24 See Stencil and Walsh, "Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions." Pellegrin wants to deny that creation is a miracle, since, while it is the result of a particular volition, it is not a violation of a law governing occasional causes (since before creation these laws did not exist yet).

25 For Arnauld's critique of Malebranche on miracles, see, for example, *Dissertation de M. Arnauld sur la manière dont Dieu a fait les fréquens miracles de l'ancienne loi par le ministre des anges*, in OA XXXVIII.637-741. See also Pellegrin, *Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 178-9; Gouhier, *La Philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse*, 56.

In his typically indirect, even cryptic manner, and without naming either Malebranche nor Spinoza, Bayle draws the two philosophers together in his article on “Bérenger” in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Remark H):

Here is another very shocking dogma, that things that have never been and never will be are not at all possible. This was undoubtedly Abelard’s opinion, and I do not see that those who say that God is determined by his infinite wisdom to do what is most worthy of him can deny, without inconsequence, this philosopher’s doctrine.²⁶

The informed reader should have no difficulty knowing whom Bayle is talking about here.

Arnauld and Fénelon are not quite as subtle as Bayle. Though they, too, do not explicitly name Spinoza, they level the necessitarian charge directly against Malebranche’s account of God’s *modus operandi*.

The most problematic aspect of Malebranche’s theodicy, for Arnauld, is also its most central one: the idea that God acts only by general volitions, and never by particular ones. Such a claim, which relieves God of direct responsibility for everything that happens in the universe, is what allows Malebranche to concede—without impugning God’s justice or power—that some elements of God’s handiwork really are imperfect or defective. But as Arnauld explains at great length in his *Reflections philosophiques et théologiques sur le nouveau système de la nature et de la grace*, it also undermines God’s providence by removing Him from a direct and immediate care for every part of His creation. And this, Arnauld believes, no good Christian can tolerate. Whatever God wills, Arnauld insists, He wills in particular, by a “positive, direct and particular volition.” This applies to everything in the world, no matter how small and insignificant, regardless of its apparent beauty or deformity. Every natural disaster, monster, and failed ambition, every life and every death—and, above all, every soul’s salvation or damnation—is an intended part of God’s plan. As Arnauld puts it, “God makes every drop of rain fall with a particular volition.” To suggest otherwise, as Malebranche does, is to compromise the universality of divine governance. “Nothing happens in the world”, Arnauld insists, “be it a leaf or a fruit falling from a tree, or, more importantly, the birth or death of an animal, except by the will of God applied to each event . . . by the particular commands of His providence” (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.197).

As important as the distinction between particular and general volitions is, it is clear that there is something just as deep that is bothering Arnauld. It concerns the notion of Order or God’s wisdom

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²⁶ “Bérenger”, Remark H, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Nouvelle édition (Paris: Desoer, 1820), vol. 3, p. 335.

directing, even compelling God's will. For Arnauld, God does not "consult His wisdom," as Malebranche had said. This is a false and thoroughly improper and anthropomorphic way to think of the relationship among God's attributes and the nature of God's activity.

Did he [Malebranche] really think that this was an expression perfectly conforming to the idea of the perfect being, to say of God that He consults His wisdom? One consults only when one is in doubt; and one consults about how to accomplish one's desires only when there may be some difficulty in achieving what one desires. Neither the one nor the other can be said about the perfect being, whose knowledge is infinite and whose will is all-powerful (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.449).

Part of Malebranche's problem, according to Arnauld, is that to distinguish wisdom from will in God and have Order guide His will by providing compelling reasons for its choices is to undermine divine freedom. Malebranche does repeatedly say that "God's wisdom renders Him, in a sense, impotent" by determining Him to choose one world rather than another.²⁷ Malebranche takes comfort in the "in a sense" qualification, as well as in God's original indifference as to whether or not to create a world in the first place, and so is not particularly troubled by the implications of this for God's freedom. Arnauld, however, *is* troubled. He conceives of God's freedom as consisting in an absolute "liberty of indifference," thoroughly undetermined in the creation and governance of things. God's will is not guided by anything whatsoever external to it, not even by the dictates of His own wisdom.

By following Malebranche in the manner in which he conceives God, I do not see how He can be indifferent to creating or not creating something outside Himself, if He was not indifferent to choosing among several works and among several ways of producing them. For God . . . , according to [Malebranche], having consulted His wisdom, is necessarily determined to produce the work that it [wisdom] has shown him to be the most perfect, and to choose the means that it has shown Him also to be the most worthy of Him (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.600).²⁸

Malebranche's God, Arnauld claims, cannot possibly satisfy what Arnauld at least sees as Aquinas's authoritative demand that the will of

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²⁷ In addition to the passage cited above, see *Traité de la nature et de la grace*, OC V.180, 185.

²⁸ According to Arnauld, it also generates a problem of consistency for Malebranche because Malebranche does want to say that God *is* indifferent in the initial choice to create a world outside Himself.

God remain perfectly self-determining, never willing anything external to itself *ex necessitate* (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.598-99).

Now Malebranche, despite his deterministic language, strives to preserve the ultimate contingency of God's creative act. But—and this is Arnauld's point— Malebranche's account fails miserably; he ends up subjecting God to "a more than stoical necessity" (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.599).²⁹ In fact, Arnauld appears to be saying, how could it be otherwise? In a perfectly rational being, in whom there are no passions exercising a contrary influence, reasons must determine and necessitate the will and render it "impotent" to choose otherwise. When Order or wisdom dictates the creation of one world over all the others, Malebranche's God must obey; He *must* create that world, Arnauld insists, and Malebranche apparently agrees.

As for miracles, because they, too, are demanded by Order, not even they are freely ordained by Malebranche's God.

The only thing free, with respect to God, is to have wanted to create something. But everything else is the result of a more than Stoic fatalism, with the exception of miracles, which He has done by particular volitions. But one does not see how even miracles can be excepted. For He only performs them, according to the author [Malebranche], when order demands it (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.599).

As Arnauld sees it, if Malebranche is right, then everything is absolutely necessary. Even miracles are "*les suites nécessaires*" of either general laws or Order.

3

Fénelon composed his *Réfutation du système du père Malebranche*, at the urging of Bossuet, probably in 1687-88—some years before he was appointed Archbishop of Cambrai (1696)—but it was not published in his lifetime.³⁰ He devotes a good deal of his lengthy critique to just the same set of problems that troubled Arnauld.

Fénelon is disturbed by Malebranche's claim that God never or rarely acts by particular volitions. Like Arnauld, his concern is with how this undermines true divine providence and a particular care for all aspects of creation. But Fénelon actually begins his *Réfutation* with

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29 As Robert C. Sleight, Jr., points out, this concern (worded in almost exactly the same way) reappears less than two years later in Arnauld's criticisms of Leibniz; see *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 45-47.

30 For the dating of the composition of the *Réfutation*, see Henri Gouhier, *Fénelon philosophe* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1977), 33-40; it was not published until 1820. For an illuminating analysis of Fénelon's critique of Malebranche, see Jean-Christophe Bardout, "La puissance ou la raison: Remarques sur l'anti-Malebranchisme de Fénelon", in *Le Malebranchisme à l'épreuve de ses amis et de ses ennemis*, Elena Muceni and Maria-Cristina Pitassi, eds. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018), 57-95.

what he sees as the necessitarian consequences of Malebranche's theodicy. He agrees with Malebranche that "God is absolutely and in every sense incapable of acting contrary to the order that is sovereign reason" (*Réfutation*, 336).³¹ But because Malebranche adds to this general principle the claim that order demands that whenever God acts and whatever God does he must do what is absolutely the most perfect, Fénelon says that "it follows ... that whatever is beneath what is the most perfect is absolutely impossible" (*Réfutation*, 336). What God cannot possibly do is not, in fact, really possible at all. But if this is so, then, of course, whatever God does do must therefore be absolutely necessary. "Supposing that God acts", Fénelon argues, then on Malebranche's account "it must be the case that He produces whatever is the most perfect among possible beings; order invincibly so determines Him" (*Réfutation*, 329). If Order "invincibly" determines God in this way, then it is impossible for God to produce other than what he produces. The world that God creates is the only world He can create.

Fénelon takes things one logical step further. If God can create only one among the many possible worlds, then not only is it the case that other possible worlds cannot possibly exist, but, Fénelon insists, there are not many possible worlds at all; there really is in fact only *one* possible world. Here is how he puts it:

If the least perfect work is impossible, it is false that God chose from among many possible designs the most perfect to do his work. God could see as possible only that which was truly so. The only thing possible is that which immutable and necessary order permits ... What is less perfect has no objective possibility ... If [God] could do only what is the most perfect, the world taken as whole is not only the most perfect work, but it is the only work that God could produce. ... This infinity of plans reduces to a single one, since one cannot choose among impossible plans" (*Réfutation*, 341-2).

These other allegedly possible worlds are not only (existentially) impossible relative to God's determined choice, but, if everything Malebranche says is true, they are not even possible "in themselves", at least as Fénelon sees it. (Here Fénelon removes from Malebranche's grasp one of the strategies used by Leibniz for preserving the contingency of the actual world and the possibility of other possible worlds.³²) This is because these other worlds must be, absolutely

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31 Citations from the *Réfutation du système du père Malebranche* are to the text in volume 2 of François Fénelon, *Oeuvres*, 2 vols., Jacques Le Brun, ed. (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1997).

32The "possible in its own nature [*possibile sua natura*]" strategy appears, for example, in "De Libertate", A VI.iv.1653-59; and G. W. Leibniz, *Textes Inédits*, ed. Gaston Grua, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), I.287-91.

speaking, "nothing." What God cannot possibly create, Fénelon insists, God cannot know as possible, and thus cannot possibly conceive. "The conclusion must be that no other plan can be known by God, since what has neither existence nor possibility is so purely and absolutely a nothing that God cannot even have knowledge of it" (*Réfutation*, 348). Still assessing Malebranche's schema, Fénelon compares such alternative, less perfect worlds to a "square without angles or a mountain without a valley" (*Réfutation*, 348). All such impossible things are non-entities. "Everything that is absolutely contrary to order is contrary to the essence of God. Everything that is contrary to the essence of God is bad, and absolutely impossible" (*Réfutation*, 347).

Malebranche's system, Fénelon insists—and here he precisely echoes Arnauld's complaints—not only destroys God's freedom, but makes everything that ever happens in the cosmos absolutely necessary. Indeed, even Malebranche's attempt to preserve God's presumed absolute freedom as indifference in choosing to create anything at all outside of himself is undermined. Once Malebranche grants that it is more perfect to create something than not to create something—which, Fénelon insists, he must grant lest he admit that nothingness is just as good as the most perfect work—God cannot be indifferent as to whether or not to create, and is forced by Order to create a world (*Réfutation*, 352). Thus, that a world exists at all is just as absolutely necessary as whatever takes place in that world once it is created.

The implications of Malebranche's philosophy for miracles, understood as particular volitions in God, is clear: there can be none. Not even the event that Malebranche grants is truly miraculous—creation itself—escapes the apparent necessitarianism that Fénelon finds in his system. As Fénelon reads Malebranche, the world is a necessary effect of God; or, as he dramatically puts it, "*voilà le monde nécessaire et éternel*" (*Réfutation*, 498).

4

I promised that this article would culminate with something of a puzzle, an inexplicable lacuna, so here it is. Anyone reading through the attacks by Bayle, Arnauld and Fénelon on Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi*, and especially their common accusation that that Oratorian's philosophical theology leads inexorably to a necessitarian cosmos where miracles, understood as free, particular acts or interventions by God, are impossible, should notice that a certain name is never mentioned in the relevant texts. As I have mentioned, nowhere, in none of these critiques—not in Bayle, not in Arnauld and not in Fénelon—does the name 'Spinoza' or the term 'Spinozism' appear in the context of this particular set of topics. And that should seem rather odd.³³

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33 There is at least one seventeenth-century writer who explicitly links Malebranche's occasionalism

It is not that Spinoza was not on their respective radars. Arnauld and Fénelon, in particular, in other contexts explicitly attack Spinoza and/or use Spinoza as a bogeyman to cast aspersion on an opponent. In Arnauld's case, as we have seen, the object of his irascibility is, as usual, Malebranche. Arnauld tells one of his correspondents that "I have not read any of the books of Spinoza [*sic*]. But I know these are very evil books."³⁴ This denial, however, cannot be taken at face value. After all, Arnauld explicitly invokes and names Spinoza—appealing to his making extension an attribute of God—when he criticizes Malebranche for having placed extension "formally" (and not just "objectively" or "ideally") in God.³⁵

Fénelon, for his part, embedded what a later editor labeled a "Réfutation du spinozisme" as a chapter in Part Two of his treatise *Démonstration de l'existence de Dieu*, probably written a short time after his refutation of Malebranche.³⁶ In this relatively brief refutation, Fénelon, without explicitly naming Spinoza, rebuts the very Spinozistic notion that infinite perfection might pertain to nature itself—that is, that "the multitude of beings the collection of which bears the name 'universe'" might be the infinite (divine) being of which he has an idea. Fénelon argues that, on the contrary, God or the infinite being must be "an incomprehensible nature", an immutable, simple and indivisible being of "sovereign unity" distinct from this chaotic, "perpetually changeable" universe. We also have from Fénelon a letter to the Benedictine François Lamy regarding the latter's *Le nouvel athéisme renversé, ou Réfutation du système de Spinoza*. In this letter, which was published in 1696 as an appendix to Lamy's work, Fénelon, again without explicitly naming Spinoza, presents a demonstration that created things are substances in their own right and not simply modifications of a single substance.³⁷ In a similar vein, but this time expressly mentioning the target of his attack, he elsewhere proclaims, in reference to the idea that finite things are all together but "one and the same indivisible Being", that "the system of Spinoza is not at all difficult to refute ... The sect of Spinozists is thus a sect of liars, not philosophers."³⁸

with Spinoza's denial of miracles. Pierre-Valentin Faydit, in his *Lettres theologiques sur nouvelles opinions du temps, à Madame La Marquise d'****, "Premiere Lettre: La Presbyteromachie" (n.p, 1699), says that "Le Pere Malebranche ... ne veut point qu'on admette aucunes volonte particulieres en Dieu, hors le cas des Miracles, qui sont presqu'aussi rares selon lui, que selon Spinoza, dont il a emprunté la definition du Miracle" (p. 2).

³⁴To Louis-Paul du Vaucel, 1691, OA III.406.

³⁵*Défense de Monsieur Arnauld, Docteur de Sorbonne, contre la Réponse au Livre des Vraies et des Fausses Idées*, OA XXXVIII.516-518.

³⁶*Oeuvres*, II.623-631. Fénelon himself did not give the chapter that title.

³⁷*Oeuvres*, II.685-689.

³⁸"[Lettre] sur l'existence de Dieu, sur le culte digne de lui, et sur la véritable église", *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 794-5.

Fénelon, then, rarely mentions Spinoza's name, and does so only when it is a question of the philosopher's monism. Nowhere in his discussion of Malebranche's necessitarianism, on the other hand, does Fénelon explicitly accuse Malebranche of being a closet Spinozist. There is one point in the course of his *Réfutation du système du père Malebranche* that Fénelon does refer to "Spinoza who, under the pretext of reasoning with geometric exactitude on evident metaphysical principles, composed dreams that combine extravagance and impiety", but again, it is not in a context that has anything to do with his worries over Malebranche's alleged necessitarianism.³⁹

To many thinkers in the second half of the seventeenth century, necessitarianism was Spinozism. We have seen that Leibniz and Bayle make that association, and it was practically a commonplace. As Spinoza's friends Lodewijk Meijer and Jarig Jellesz note in their preface to the collection of Spinoza's writings they published just after his death, "several men brought forth difficulties against his *Theological–Political Treatise*: first, that the author mingles God and nature together, or that he takes them for one and the same (as they pretend) and, second, that he establishes the fatal necessity of all things and actions."⁴⁰

So, why do Arnauld and Fénelon avoid accusing Malebranche explicitly of falling into the Spinozistic vortex, right where they see Malebranche crossing the line into necessitarianism and what is basically a practical, and possibly principled, denial of miracles?⁴¹ It would seem an easy and natural, even (in the context) obligatory and certainly anticipated accusation to make, and one could be forgiven for thinking that they go out of their way *not* to make it. Both Arnauld and Fénelon are deeply concerned to preserve divine freedom and divine providence, including miracles, all of which they see as betrayed by Malebranche's system. Why do they hesitate, then, to tarnish Malebranche with the most available and damaging label one could employ in the intellectual world of the late seventeenth century?

While I do not have a certain answer to this question, let me conclude with some brief speculations. Neither Arnauld nor Fénelon would have liked to see curiosity raised among their contemporaries for the heretical and scandalous writings of the Jew from The Hague. Thus, while on occasion they were not above using the specter of Spinozism to tar an opponent, the last thing they wanted was to bring any unnecessary attention to Spinoza and his ideas. To their minds, the author of the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* was, in effect, "He who—for the

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39 *Oeuvres*, II.419.

40 "Praefatio", in B.D.S. [Benedictus de Spinoza], *Opera Postuma* ([Amsterdam,] 1677) no pagination, but p. v.

41 Denis Moreau notes that "'l'ombre de Spinoza" hovers over Fénelon's "Réfutation", especially chapter 14; see *Deux Cartésiens: La polémique Arnauld-Malebranche* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999), 246 n. 3.

most part—shall not be named." So perhaps the absence of Spinoza's name—even in Fénelon's writings that are devoted to refuting Spinoza's doctrines—are a reflection of their reluctance to add to this heretic's renown ... or, better, his notoriety.

Not a very satisfying answer, I admit. Another possibility is that, while Arnauld and Fénelon see in Malebranche a Spinozistic kind of necessitarianism, it is a necessitarianism divorced from the Spinozistic God. After all, Malebranche's God, whose will is distinct from His understanding, is, like Leibniz's God, a rational being, one endowed with an agency not that unlike human agency. Arnauld, for one, is severely opposed to seeing God in such anthropomorphic terms. He prefers a more Cartesian God, a divinity in which will and understanding are one and the same; and much of his general critique of Malebranche's philosophical theology is directed at Malebranche's all-too-human conception of God.⁴² Still, at least Malebranche's God, as problematic as it may be in Arnauld's eyes, remains a transcendent being distinct from Nature who is endowed with volitional agency—it is not Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*. Thus, perhaps Arnauld resists the Spinozistic label here just because, strictly speaking, Malebranche's alleged necessitarianism is not completely identical to that of Spinoza, at least in its theological foundations.⁴³

However, this kind of rhetorical restraint does not strike me as Arnauld's *modus operandi*. Arnauld is not one to shy away from name-calling, especially on the basis of fine and subtle distinctions. I find it hard to believe that he would resist the opportunity to hit Malebranche with the most damning label in the period just because, technically, Malebranche's necessitarianism is not exactly the same as that of Spinoza.

And so, the puzzle remains.

ABBREVIATIONS

JS = *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, translated by Nicholas Jolley and David Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

LO = *The Search After Truth*, translated by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1980).

OA = *Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*, 43 vols. (Lausanne: Sigismond D'Arnay, 1775).

OC = *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, 20 vols., edited by André Robinet (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958-76).

[All translations of passages other than those from *The Search After Truth* and the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* are my own.]

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42 See Steven Nadler, "Arnauld's God", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 517-538; and *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God and Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

43 My thanks to Don Rutherford and Clinton Tolley for, independently, suggesting this possible explanation.

