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MALEBRANCHE AND NATURAL LAW

1.

One does not normally think of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715)¹ as a ‘natural law’ theorist – and indeed his main work on moral and political philosophy, the *Traité de Morale* (1684), uses the term *loi naturelle* only a handful of (non-crucial) times. For this there is a reason: Malebranche began his philosophical life as a Cartesian,² and his first efforts in practical philosophy put forward the (more-or-less) ‘Cartesian’ argument that God governs the universe, justly, through simple, constant, uniform ‘general wills’ and ‘general laws’ (which should be imitated by human beings striving to avoid arbitrary, *ad hoc* ‘particular wills’).³ But later in his life, possibly under the influence of his friend and correspondent Leibniz, Malebranche increasingly weakened or abandoned Cartesian lawful *généralité* in favour of an ‘eternal’ law (reason-given, changeless, universal) which had absorbed many of the attributes of traditional natural law – though here Malebranche follows Leibniz’s collapsing of ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ law into each other,⁴ deviating thereby from Thomistic orthodoxy (as will be seen). Since Malebranche was a Catholic priest who revered Augustine equally with Descartes, it is perhaps surprising that ‘natural law’ should make only a *belated* appearance in his practical philosophy; he loved not Augustine less, however, but Descartes more. Only as he took on Leibnizian doubts about Cartesian moral thought – especially the Cartesian view that God *creates* moral (and all other) truth *ex nihilo* – did he move toward an unorthodox ‘natural/eternal’ law, which tried to fuse a Platonic notion of ‘eternity’ with surviving Cartesian remnants.

To make all of this clear, the wise course will be to begin with an account of Malebranche’s demi-Cartesian practical thought (in the 1670s and 1680s), and then to move on to his increasingly Leibniz-coloured ‘natural/eternal’ law in the early years of the eighteenth century – above all in the *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique* (1715), in which ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ law fully collapse into each other.

2.

Given the radical theocentrism of Malebranche’s philosophy⁵ – in which God is the only ‘true’ good and ‘true’ cause, in which “we see all things in God”, in which God “moves our arm” on the occasion “of our willing it”⁶, in which existence is only “continual creation” by God, and in which nature is “nothing but the general laws which God has established”⁷ – it is to be expected that a theodicy (“the justice of

God”) will be the central and governing moral-political notion, in an almost Leibnizian way, and that this quasi-*Theodicée* will then shape (say) the meaning of Christian love, the Pauline notion that “the greatest of these is charity” (I. Corinthians xiii). And this expectation is borne out: for Malebranche a ‘love of union’ should be reserved for God alone (the true good, the true cause) while finite creatures should receive only a ‘love of benevolence.’ As he says in the *Traité de morale*,

The word love is equivocal, and therefore we must take care of it...[we must] love none but God with a love of union or conjunction, because he alone is the cause of our happiness...we must love our neighbor not as our good, or the cause of our happiness, but only as capable of enjoying the same happiness with us...

We may join ourselves to other men; but we must never adore them within the motion of our love, either as our good, or as capable of procuring us any good; we must love and fear only the true cause of good and evil; we must love and fear no one but God in the creatures...The creatures are all particular beings, and therefore cannot be one general and common good.⁸

The God-centeredness of Malebranche’s thought determines everything he says about morality and justice – not least when he finally turns to ‘natural/eternal’ law late in life.

Malebranche wrote a whole book on practical philosophy – on moral and political ideas, on divine and human justice, on virtue and duty, on ‘order’ and ‘relations of perfection’, on the various kinds of ‘love’.⁹ And this is the *Traité de morale*, dating from 1684. But the *Treatise on Morality*, for the most part, simply draws out the practical implications of Malebranche’s metaphysics, theology and epistemology. And it is well to begin with a preliminary sketch of these implications before turning to a fuller treatment of Malebranche’s texts.

(1) In what amounts to a theodicy or God-justification in works beginning with *Traité de la nature et de la grâce* (1680), the early Malebranche urges that just as God governs the universe, justly, through constant, simple, uniform ‘Cartesian’ general laws and ‘general wills’ (*volontés générales*) which are ‘worthy’ of him, and not through an *ad hoc* patchwork of arbitrary particular wills (*volontés particulières*) and ‘miracles’, so too wise statesmen should will and legislate generally – and even ordinary men should subordinate their ‘particular’ passions and self-love to a general love of ‘order.’¹⁰ This is the proto-radical side of Malebranchian practical thought – a *recherche de la généralité*, which leads finally to Rousseau’s notion of “the general will is always right”,¹¹ and even (in a transmogrified form) to Robespierre’s claim to incarnate the *volonté générale* of the French nation.¹² In this part of Malebranche’s moral-political thought, *theodicée* equals *généralité*, and it is precisely the generality of God’s willing that incidentally throws up particular evils (such as ‘monsters’) – evils which are justifiable because God did not translate them into existence by a positive *volonté particulière*.¹³ (At this early point traditional ‘natural law’ is scarcely present.)

(2) Since God is the ‘true’ cause, and finite created beings are mere ‘occasional’ causes, we should reserve a love of ‘union’ for God (our true good), and practice toward men only a well-wishing love of ‘benevolence’ (a limited love for those who

enjoy God with us). Hence for Malebranche the Pauline saying, “the greatest of these is charity” is (ironically) over-general, needs to be nuanced, and turned into what Augustine had called ‘regulated’ or ‘ordered’ love (in *De Doctrina Christiana*).¹⁴ Indeed Malebranche redefines charity as the love of order, much as his contemporary and friend Leibniz redefines justice as ordered *caritas sapientis*, “the charity of the wise”, not as a flood of undifferentiated emotion.¹⁵

(3) Malebranche’s ‘occasionalism’ leads, not surprisingly, to difficulties in his moral philosophy, inasmuch as human beings are not ‘true’ causes but must nonetheless ‘suspend’ their consent to ‘particular’ motives arising out of self-love, while they seek out and will ‘order’ and *le bien général*. (But this ‘suspension’ and ‘will’ must involve “nothing *physical [rien de physique]*”, as Malebranche insists in the *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique* from 1715.)¹⁶

Despite these difficulties the notion of ‘will’ is central in Malebranche’s conception of God and of man: unless God has a will (*en général*) he cannot have a ‘general will’ (*en particulier*) to rule the universe through simple, constant, uniform ‘Cartesian’ natural laws which he creates (avoiding all *ad hoc* ‘particular wills’ and lawless miraculous interventions in nature); unless man has a will he cannot freely and meritoriously determine himself to embrace *le bien général*, ‘order’, and ‘relations of perfection’, while shunning deceptive *biens particuliers*. Both God and man must will the general and flee the particular in Malebranche: God does so ‘naturally’ (as it were), since *généralité* is ‘worthy’ of him; men must strive to do so, with the help of Christ-distributed grace. What this means is that ‘will’ is nearly as important to Malebranche as to more celebrated voluntarists such as Augustine or Kant (with their notions of *bona voluntas* and ‘good will’¹⁷); and though Malebranche’s occasionalism (which deprives finite creatures of true causality) is problematical for human free will, and real self-determination, it remains true that *Malebranchisme* contains an important voluntarist strand. God simply has a *volonté générale*, and men ought to strive to have one.

(4) The Malebranchian notion that “we see all things in God” is (*inter alia*) a quasi-Platonic view of the status of moral ideas which descends to Malebranche through Augustinianism – and it is quasi-Platonic in two senses: (a) the idea of the good and the right cannot be derived from mere natural phenomena (“I prefer being called a visionary...to agreeing that bodies might enlighten us”¹⁸); and (b) the moral idea of ‘relations of perfection’ can only be ‘expressed’ in mathematical ‘relations of size’.¹⁹ (This ‘descent’ from Plato to Malebranche comes mainly from the *Phaedo*, in which moral and mathematical ‘absolute’ ideas – equally universal, necessary, and free of Heraclitan flux – are summoned up by reminiscence, not ‘seen’ in observed phenomena.²⁰) And all of this demi-Platonism is finally aimed (in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics*) against the English ‘empiricism’ of Hobbes and Locke: Malebranche’s view is that neither English philosopher can even account for the *conceivability* of ‘moral necessity’.²¹ (Here Leibniz, and then later Kant, would agree with Malebranche.)

(5) For Malebranche ‘grace’ is an integral and necessary part of moral philosophy and moral activity, given his view in the *Traité de morale* that “charity does not always operate in the just themselves”, that “men cannot...persevere in



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