Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

Malebranche, Nicholas

Born Paris, France, 6 August 1638

Died Paris, France, 13 October 1715

Nicholas Malebranche, a prominent natural philosopher who wrote on the metaphysical nature of the Universe, developed a synthesis of Cartesian rationalism with accepted Christian dogma. His replacement of the Cartesian subtle matter with miniature elastic vortices received its most elaborate mathematical treatment in the work of Johann and Daniel Bernoulli, who attempted to make it consistent with the work of Johannes Kepler.

Malebranche was the youngest of 13 children born to the prosperous family of Nicholas Malebranche and Catherine de Lauzon Due to a spinal condition, he was educated at home until the age of 16. He then went to the Collège de la Marche, where he received his Master of Arts degree in 1656. Malebranche studied theology at the Sorbonne University for the next three years and then, in 1660, entered the Oratory, a papally approved Augustinian order dedicated to reforming the Catholic Church from within. He would remain in the order until his death. In 1664, two events of particular importance occurred in Malebranche's life: his ordination as a priest and his first encounter with René Descartes' physics. His reading of Descartes' *Traité de l'homme* (Treatise on Man) contributed to his adoption of the view that all natural phenomena are to be explained in terms of matter and the laws that govern its motions. In 1669, Malebranche was elected to the Académie royale des sciences for his *Treatise on the Laws of the Communication of Movement*.

A popular move in 17th-century science was to attempt to subsume natural phenomena under general laws. Despite the great success of this in the work of figures like Isaac Newton, one issue that still bothered philosophers was the cause of the adherence of bodies to these laws. Some, like the Cambridge Platonists Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, argued that God created immaterial viceregents to keep bodies in line. Even Newton worried about this issue; he flirted with the latter view, also with the view that God Himself acts on bodies to make them adhere to laws. Famously, at the end of the day, Newton opted to "feign no hypotheses" on the issue. Where Newton did not like the metaphysical and theological consequences of the view that God does each and everything, Malebranche embraced them and was thus a full-blown occasionalist

Although he held that God does each and everything, Malebranche did not think that scientific explanations ought to constantly appeal to God's activity. Instead, he argued that they ought to be given in terms of the laws that God has instituted, the laws in accordance with which He constantly acts. Malebranche's view was that since the divine attributes include order and simplicity, God's constant activity is in accordance with general laws. He appears to have been committed to the view that even miracles are in accordance with God's general laws and that we call something a "miracle" when it is anomalous with respect to what we mistakenly take

to be the laws in place. (An alternate interpretation has Malebranche committed to the view that God acts in accordance with general laws except when performing miracles.) Nonetheless, Malebranche thinks that in "explaining" a particular event, we should not say that God brings it about; we should instead appeal to the general laws under which it is subsumed. Science, for Malebranche, is the search to uncover these laws He thus contributed to the tendency in 17th-century science to offer explanations in terms of matter and the laws that govern its motion.

An interesting flaw in Malebranche's view arises from a consideration of his deeper metaphysics. He adhered to a representational theory of perception, holding that in sensory perception we perceive objects indirectly *via* our mental representations of them. When we observe an object, we are really just having a mental perception that might or might not correspond to an actual object. Since perception, like everything else, is caused by God, the question for Malebranche was not whether or not our perceptions correspond to their causes, but whether or not there is a material reality that God has created to correspond to these perceptions. In fact, Malebranche maintained that we cannot know that any material objects exist, except through faith. Malebranche could even maintain that the material Universe is perfectly harmonious and orderly. A common tactic for people like Johannes Kepler was to insist on the mathematical order of the Universe even when astronomical data suggested something less. Malebranche's system allowed him not to take empirical data so seriously. Our perceptions might sometimes be of anomalies and irregularities, but Malebranche could insist that these perceptions do not tell us all about the actual material reality that corresponds to them. Since God's Universe would be maximally perfect and harmonious, Malebranche could ignore unhappy sensory perceptions and hold that our best idealizations of the Universe describe it exactly.

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