

## Malebranche and the Doctrine of Transcreation

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### Abstract

Malebranche held that bodies are inert and they cannot move by themselves. His occasionalism later had been criticized by Leibniz, who argued that finite and created substances must have actions. But in his early work *Pacidius Philalethi* (1676), Leibniz argued for the doctrine of transcreation, according to which bodies are recreated from moment to moment, and they do not have any capacity to act. In this paper, I attempt to clarify the difference between Malebranche's occasionalism and the doctrine of transcreation proposed by Leibniz. The most crucial difference is that Malebranche thought that God literally conserves a body as identical whether it moves or it is at rest, while Leibniz argued that bodies completely recreated from moment to moment.

### Keywords

History of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy, Malebranche, Leibniz, Metaphysics, Natural Philosophy

## マールブランシュと超越創造説

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### キーワード

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Malebranche was a representative occasionalist, and held that bodies are inert and they cannot move by themselves.<sup>(1)</sup> This view triggers a serious question from the view point of another important philosopher in 17<sup>th</sup> century, namely Leibniz. According to him, things endure through their actions. If so, bodies seems not be able to endure

if they cannot act. However, interestingly, he once held a view that is similar to Malebranche's occasionalism.<sup>(2)</sup> If he argued for the doctrine of transcreation, according to which bodies are recreated from moment to moment, and they do not have any capacity to act spontaneously. In this paper, I attempt to clarify the difference between

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Malebranche's occasionalism and the doctrine of transcreation proposed by Leibniz when he was young. In the first part, I briefly summarize Leibniz' early view that bodies are recreated from moment to moment in different places. In the second, I explain that according to Malebranche, bodies do endure, whether they move or do not move. They are either moved or conserved by God. This leads to a discussion to elaborate the crucial difference between these two important figures of the early modern period.

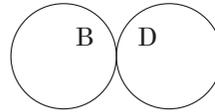
### 1. Leibniz's *Pacidius Philalethi*

In 1676, Leibniz wrote the dialogue *Pacidius Philalethi* (hereinafter PP), where he suggested that bodies only exist at a moment. There Pacidius (hereafter PA) is a spokesman of Leibniz's own view among interlocutors, given that he often used this name as a pseudonym (Arthur, 2001, p. 127). Other interlocutors, Charinus (hereafter CH), Theophilus (TH), and Gallutius (GA), may also present Leibniz's view, since Pacidius explicitly agrees with their views in some passages. And in the following passage, Leibniz introduced the doctrine of transcreation that God annihilates physical objects and recreates them in every moment, and these physical objects do not subsist as they were:

“PA.: I do not think that we can explain this better than by saying that the body *E* is somehow extinguished and annihilated at *B*, and is actually created anew and resuscitated at *D*, which you may call by the new but very beautiful name transcreation.”<sup>(3)</sup> (A.VI.iii.567 = Ar.213)

Leibniz introduced two places *B* and *D*, and drew a figure with two contiguous circles. There the point *B* in one circle is contiguous to the point *D* in the other

circle. After a moment, the body *E* disappears at the place *B*. The very object that existed at *B* no longer exists. But a new object shows up at the new place of *D*.



In this scenario, bodies occupy some points contiguous to the places which they occupied at the previous moment.<sup>(4)</sup> Since these points are not distant, bodies are not considered as leaping to different places.

“PA.: [...] Moreover, although this is indeed a sort of leap from one sphere *B* into the other *D*, it is not the kind of leap we refuted above, since these two spheres are not distant.”<sup>(5)</sup> (A.VI.iii.567 = Ar.213)

Leibniz denied some kind of leap here. Leibniz argued that body does not move to a distant place at a moment, since a world with such a leap is not adopted by God's wisdom.<sup>(6)</sup>

“CH.: [...] Let us suppose that there are in our bodies animalcules that are as small compared to us as a human head is to the terrestrial sphere. If one of these animalcules were to pass through from one ear to the other, then its friends would say, if we imagine them using reason, that it had passed from one pole to the other. [...]

PA.: You do well to resist this opinion, Charinus, which is offensive to the beauty of things and the wisdom of God.”<sup>(7)</sup> (A.VI.iii.560 = Ar.197-9)

In Leibniz's view, if one tiny corpuscle moves from one place to another, and the distance is 10 times larger than its size, then its movement is supernatural since it can be considered as a teleportation. Even if we cannot observe the movement of this tiny corpuscle, some other observer that has an excellent capacity to perceive a micro-level object could see this unnatural leap. Leibniz rejected this leap on the basis that it is a miracle for which God would not find any good reason to realize:

“PA.: [...] Finally, because He creates every thing, the supremely wise author of things does nothing without a reason; yet there is no reason why these miraculous leaps should be ascribed to this rather than that grade of corpuscles – unless, of course, we admit atoms, i.e. bodies so firm that they do not suffer any subdivision or bending.”<sup>(8)</sup> (A.VI. iii.561 = Ar.199)

Leibniz seems to suggest that there is no reason to determine the distance and direction of leap, and the movements of bodies would be miraculous if they successively leaped to distant places. In contrast, if a body successively occupies contiguous places, we do not have to explain why a body leaps for a distance.

Another important implication of the doctrine of transcreation is that bodies, strictly speaking, do not act upon other bodies. Bodies are inert because they do not “move” at any moment, and therefore they cannot push other bodies to different places.

“PA.: But I would like to notice something else, that this demonstrates that bodies do not act while they are in motion.

TH.: Why is that?

PA.: Because there is no moment of change

common to each of two states, and thus no state of change either, but only an aggregate of two states, old and new; and so there is no state of action in a body, that is to say, no moment can be assigned at which it acts. For by moving the body would act, and by acting it would change or be acted upon; but there is no moment of being acted upon, that is, of change or motion, in the body.”<sup>(9)</sup> (A.VI. iii.566 = Ar.211)

Following a common-sensical view, we may ascribe continuous movements to bodies, and think that bodies continuously occupy different places in space. But according to PP, they actually do not. Bodies stay at their places, and they do so at a next moment as well. Since they do not move, there is no continuity between two moments and movements are not continuous.

“CH.: Assuming a uniform continuous motion, and taking the notion of change you spoke of as established, I cannot deny that the continuum is composed of points. For so long as the motion lasts, just as we assumed that next to one point or one moment there would be another, so there is no reason why we should not assume there to be a third next to this second. And since, continuing in this way, space and time will finally be completed, they will certainly consist of points or moments immediately next to each other.

PA.: But we have, I believe, demonstrated that they cannot consist of these.

CH.: Therefore, however we may keep changing our minds, it must be conceded that a continuous motion, in which a moving body uniformly traverses some place in some stretch of time successively and without any

intervening rest, is impossible.”<sup>(10)</sup> (A.VI. iii.556 = Ar.187)

Leibniz did not suppose that points are actual parts of a continuum, and he denied that a body has some (infinitesimal) motion at a moment. If it has, then the motion can be further divided to parts, and the duration of the moment can also be divided. But by definition, a moment is indivisible, and therefore it should not be composed of any shorter moments.

## 2. Malebranche and God as the “Only One True Cause”

Malebranche’s view has some things in common with Leibniz’s view in PP. As Leibniz did there, Malebranche justified the view that bodies do not move by themselves on the basis of that God is the only cause of phenomena:<sup>(11)</sup>

“[T]here is only one true cause because there is only one true God; that the nature or power of each thing is nothing but the will of God; that all natural causes are not *true* causes are not true causes but only *occasional* causes, and certain other truths that will follow from these.

It is clear that no body, large or small, has the power to move itself. A mountain, a house, a rock, a grain of sand, in short, the tiniest or largest body conceivable does not have the power to move itself.”<sup>(12)</sup> (LO.448)

This can be understood as a declaration of occasionalist view,<sup>(13)</sup> and according to Malebranche, it is *necessary* that God is the only true cause of natural phenomena. For Malebranche, a natural phenomenon and God’s will to actualize it have a necessary connection, and no other item has such a necessary connection with the phenomenon:

“But not only are men not the true causes of the movements they produce in their bodies, there even seems to be some contradiction (in saying) that they could be. A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects.”<sup>(14)</sup> (LO.450; Nadler, 2000, p. 113)

Here Malebranche did not merely argue that the connection of divine will and event is epistemologically necessary. Rather, he argued that they are in fact necessarily connected, since we are capable to access God’s ideas that found necessary truths. From this bold epistemological assumption, Malebranche thought that bodies must not move by themselves, or move other bodies.

## 3. How Does God Directly Move Bodies?

Unlike the young Leibniz, Malebranche did not think that God recreates bodies every moment. In Malebranche’s view, God literally moves bodies in space. And Malebranche thought that God’s will to make them exist is different from His will to move them. In the following, I will present the reasons why I interpret Malebranche this way.

First, Malebranche argued that there is an absolute distinction of moving and rest bodies, which implies that bodies are somehow actually moving:<sup>(15)</sup>

“Nevertheless, I have no certain proof that God wills, through a positive volition, that bodies remain at rest; and it seems to suffice that God wills matter to exist, in order not only that it exist, but also that it exist at rest. Such is not the case with motion, because the idea of matter in motion certainly includes two powers or efficacies to which it is

related, to wit, what created it, and further, what activated it. But the idea of matter at rest includes only the idea of the power that created it, without the necessity of another power to put it at rest, since if we simply conceive of matter without considering any power, we will necessarily conceive of it at rest.”<sup>(16)</sup> (LO.515)

The distinction between moving and still bodies is not only an epistemological one. To be sure, we observe that some bodies are moving, while others are rest. And yet, the seemingly-moving bodies may not actually move: They may at a rest from another point of view. And thus there seems to be no real distinction between moving and still bodies. But Malebranche did not stop here. He went further to argue that some bodies are *really* moving. And there is a clear distinction of moving and rest bodies even for God. To ensure that my reading is correct, I will see the context of the passage above. Malebranche wrote this to refute Descartes’ view that “God wills each thing to remain in the state it is in, whether in rest or in motion, and that this will is the natural power bodies have for remaining in the state in which they were once placed” (LO.515). According to Descartes, a large body has a stronger power to resist the motion of another body compared to a smaller one (AT.II.627 = CT.III.141). Against Descartes, Malebranche argued that both larger and smaller bodies do not have any power to resist.

“From this I conclude, in spite of all the evasions of Descartes and the Cartesians, that if these large bodies were in a void they could be agitated still more easily.”<sup>(17)</sup> (LO.517-518)

Malebranche’s suggestion is that a large and rest body alone does not have any power to resist the

movement of another body. It seems to resist more strongly than a small body does, only because it is surrounded by many other bodies that are contiguous to it, and their movements weaken the movement of another body. Furthermore, for Malebranche, even the “movement” of a body is not effective itself. In reality, God weakens the movement of a body when another body seems to move to the opposing direction. Here we should not interpret that according to Malebranche, God recreates bodies from moment to moment at different places, and He stops to will to actualize the existence of a body every moment, as PP shows. Rather, Malebranche thought that God continuously wills to keep the existence of a body, and also moves it. Malebranche wrote that God “conserves” things, and we need to clarify what he meant:

“For I believe it certain that conservation is but continued creation, for it is but the same will of God, who continues to will what He has willed, and this is the general view among theologians.”<sup>(18)</sup> (LO.551)

Here Malebranche suggested that he agreed with the majority of theologians when they characterize “conservation” as “continued creation.” Then Malebranche implied that if God once annihilated a thing, He once would stop to will it to exist, although since God actually continues to will a thing to exist, a body is not once annihilated to move to another place (LO.517). Here we can see the difference between the views of Malebranche and Leibniz. Steven Nadler also holds that Malebranche believed God’s action to move a body is really different from that of sustaining a body at rest:

“There is a crucial difference between the way in which God causes a body to move and

the way in which God causes a body to be at rest. For a body to be at rest is just for God to sustain it in existence, nothing more. For a body to be in motion, however, is for God to sustain it in existence *and* actually to put it in motion.” (Nadler, 2000, p. 132)

Thus Nadler argued that for Malebranche, there is a real distinction between God’s moving a body, and His placing it somewhere. Not only that we understand them as two different actions of God, but that He actually has two distinct actions.

Contrary to our interpretations, Andrew Pyle argues that according to Malebranche, God annihilates Body A at some place, and create Body A’ at the neighborhood.

“If the continued existence of any given body is nothing but its continuous re-creation by God then, given that a body cannot exist without a determinate set of modes (size, shape and relations to other bodies) it follows that for a body to move from X to Y is simple for God to create it at X, then to re-create it at Y.” (Pyle, 2003, p. 111)

Pyle went further to argue that for Malebranche, God does not have to annihilate bodies. Rather, Malebranche’s God just stops to exercise His creational power toward a body, when it ceases to exist. To justify his interpretation, Pyle refers to a passage from the *Elucidations of the Search after Truth*:

“A body... exists because God wills that it exists, and He wills it to exist either here or there, for He cannot create it nowhere. And if He creates it here, is it conceivable that a creature should displace it and move it

elsewhere unless God at the same time wills to create it elsewhere in order to share His power with His creature as far as capable of it? But if this be assumed possible or not to contain a metaphysical contradiction, for only that is impossible for God, by what principle of reason or religion can the dependence of creatures be diminished?”<sup>(19)</sup> (LO.551-552; Pyle, 2003, p. 111)

I am not sure if the passage really supports Pyle’s interpretation. Malebranche was thinking about the case in which God creates a body “here,” and He “wills to create it elsewhere.” Malebranche wrote that “[i]t even seems to me that it is a contradiction and that therefore God cannot give to his creatures any real power or make them the cause of some material reality” (LO.551). This is the main thesis of the paragraph. Then Malebranche asked readers whether they really suppose that God shares His power with creatures. Malebranche thought it is ridiculous to suppose so. But at least he thought that a body can continue to exist at rest insofar as God wills so. And Malebranche actually did not deny that moving bodies continue to exist without losing their identities.<sup>(20)</sup>

### Concluding Remark

An implication of Malebranche’s view is that rest bodies endure. One may raise a question on it from an Aristotelian point of view: How can we measure the duration of a completely rest body, if we do not observe another moving body? If time needs to be measured by the size or number of a movement, in this case, there is no way to measure it. This question may be related to Malebranche’s statement that “*duration, which is necessary for knowledge of the magnitude of motion, is unknown to us.*” (LO.38) Malebranche wrote so partially

because every duration is infinitely divisible, and does not have an invisible element (LO.38-39). But he obviously accepts that a body at rest endures as an extended thing. And at this point Malebranche's view is distinguished from Leibniz's view in PP, where Leibniz suggested that a finite duration of time is actually not continuous, and it is nothing but an aggregate of an infinite number of moments,

and that the motion of a body results from God's recreating it every moment at different places. Unlike Leibniz, Malebranche thought that a finite duration of time is completely continuous, and it is possible to pick out parts of this continuous duration by dividing it. So in his view, any small portion of duration is itself continuous, and there is no way to pick out an individual duration.

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## Notes

- (1) In his entry "Occasionalism" of *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Sukjae Lee introduces Louis de la Forge, Géraud de Cordemoy and Arnold Geulincx as representative Cartesian occasionalists (Lee, 2008 cf. Nadler, 2011). Malebranche's view is more original, systematic and influential than those of the three figures.
- (2) Daniel Garber even argued that in *Pacidius Philalethi*, "Leibniz clearly presents a version of occasionalism," given that Leibniz wrote "what moves and transfers [a] body is not the body itself, but a superior cause which by acting does not change, which we call God" (A.IV.iii.567 = Ar.213; Garber, 2008, p. 192).
- (3) "Hoc non puto explicari posse melius quam si dicamus corpus *e* extingui quadammodo et annihilari in *B*, creari vero denuo ac resuscitari in *D*. Quod posses novo sed pulcherrimo vocabulo appellare transcreationem."
- (4) As Samuel Levey shows, Leibniz noticed Aristotle's definition of continuous thing in a letter to Jakob Thomasius of 1669 (A.VI.ii.435; Levey, 1999, p. 84). Leibniz here accepted Aristotle's view that parts of a continuous thing must share a boundary (Physics 231a21, 227a10–15; Metaphysics 1069a5–8). Although Leibniz thought that a continuous thing could have actual parts in 1669-71, since these actual parts may share their boundary and constitute a continuous whole, in PP Leibniz held that a continuous thing could not have actual parts (Levey, 1998, p. 58).
- (5) "...Et hic sane est quasi saltus quidam ex sphaera una *B* in alteram *D*, non tamen qualem supra refutavimus quia hae duae sphaerae non distant."
- (6) Larry Jorgensen points out that Leibniz explicitly argued in PP that some kind of leap is "objectionable and absurd while others are not," though he did not so in the previous work "*On Motion and Matter*," supposedly written in April 1676, where he at least argued that bodies recreated from moment to moment (Jorgensen, 2013, pp. 74-75).
- (7) "CH.: [...] Ponamus in corpora nostra esse animalcula nanto minora nobis, quanto caput humanum minus est orbe terrarum; horum animalculorum unum si ab una auricular ad alteram pervenerit, dicent socii eius, so ratione uti fingantur, ab uno polo ad alterum pervenisse. [...] PA.: Recte facis Charine, quod huic sententiae resistis, quae pugnat cum pulchritudinem rerum, et sapientia Dei."
- (8) "PA.: [...] Denique, quod rem omnem conficit, nihil sine ratione facit sapientissimus rerum autor; nulla autem ratio est, cur huic potius quam illi corpusculorum gradui saltus illi miraculosi ascribantur, nisi atmos scilicet admittamus, seu corpora ita firma ut nullam subdivisionem nullumve flexum patiantur..."
- (9) "PA.: Sed aliud velim a vobis animadverti, quod hic demonstratur corpora cum in motu sunt non agere.  
TH.: Cur ita?  
PA.: Quia nullum est momentum mutationis commune utrique statui, itaque nec ullus status est mutationis; sed aggregatum tantum duorum statuum veteris et novi; itaque nec status actionis est in corpore; seu nullum potest assignari momentum quo agat, nam corpus movendo ageret et agendo mutaretur seu pateretur, at nullum est momentum passionis seu mutationis vel motus in corpore."
- (10) "CH.: Non possum negare posito motu continuo uniformi, et stabilita quam dixisti, mutationis notione, componi continuum ex punctis. Nam durante motu, ut uni puncto atque uno momento aliud proximum sumpsimus, ita nulla ratio est cur non et huic secundo aliud tertium proximum assumamus; cumque hoc modo pergendo tandem spatium tempusque absolvantur, utique ex punctis momentisve sibi immediatis constabunt.  
PA.: At constare ex illis non posse est credo a nobis demonstratum.  
CH.: Concedendum est ergo quicquid tergiversemur, motum continuum quo mobile aliquot temporis tractu aliquem locum successive sine quiete intercedente uniformiter transmittat impossibilem esse."
- (11) Nicholas Jolley argues that although Malebranche often suggested that laws of nature are "efficacious," we should

not take his suggestion as implying that laws of nature are secondary causes of natural phenomena (Jolley, 2002, p. 257). For Jolley, the suggestion should be interpreted as saying that God is the only cause of natural phenomena, and He wills bodies to exist continuously and move in accordance with the laws.

- (12) “[I]l n’y a qu’une vraie cause, parce qu’il n’y a qu’un vrai Dieu ; que la nature ou la force de chaque chose n’est que la volonté de Dieu ; que toutes les causes naturelles ne sont point de véritables causes, mais seulement des causes occasionnelles, et quelques autres vérités qui seront des suites de celles-ci. Il est évident que tous les corps grands et petits n’ont point la force de se remuer. Une montagne, une maison, une pierre, un grain de sable, enfin le plus petit ou le plus grand des corps que l’on puisse concevoir, n’a point la force de se remuer.”
- (13) As Sukjae Lee points out, Malebranche distinguished “(1) body-body causation; (2) body-mind causation; (3) mind-body causation and (4) mind-mind causation,” and argued that none of these four are real since God is the only true agent (Lee, 2007, p. 73).
- (14) “Mais non-seulement les hommes ne sont point les véritables causes des mouvements qu’ils produisent dans leur corps, il semble même qu’il y ait contradiction qu’ils puissent l’être. Une cause véritable est une cause entre laquelle et son effet l’esprit aperçoit une liaison nécessaire, c’est ainsi que je l’entends.”
- (15) Tad Schmaltz argues that although there is a distinction between moving and rest bodies for Malebranche, he thought that “by a single action [God] directly causes the transfer of motion” of a moving and rest body, as God does not have two distinct actions for the two bodies (Schmaltz, 2003, p. 746).
- (16) “Cependant je n’ai point de preuve certaine que Dieu veuille, par une volonté positive, que les corps demeurent en repos ; et il semble qu’il suffit que Dieu veuille qu’il y ait de la matière, afin que non-seulement elle existe, mais aussi afin qu’elle existe en repos.  
Il n’en est pas de même du mouvement, parce que l’idée d’une matière mue renferme certainement deux puissances ou efficaces, auxquelles elle a rapport, savoir, celle qui l’a créée et de plus celle qui l’a agitée. Mais l’idée d’une matière en repos ne renferme que l’idée de la puissance qui l’a créée, sans qu’il soit nécessaire d’une autre puissance pour la mettre en repos; puisque si on conçoit simplement de la matière sans songer à aucune puissance, on la concevra nécessairement en repos.”
- (17) “De là je prétends malgré toutes les défaites de M. Descartes et des cartésiens, que si ces grands corps étaient dans le vide ils pourraient encore être agitée avec plus de facilité.”
- (18) “Car je crois qu’il est certain que la conservation n’est qu’une création continuée, puisque ce n’est que la même volonté de Dieu qui continue de vouloir ce qu’il a voulu, et c’est le sentiment commun des théologiens.”
- (19) “Un corps [...] existe, parce que Dieu veut qu’il soit, et il le veut ici ou ailleurs, car il ne peut le créer nulle part. Et, s’il le crée ici, peut-on concevoir qu’une créature l’en ôte et le mette ailleurs, si ce n’est que Dieu dans le même temps le veuille créer ailleurs, pour donner part de sa puissance à sa créature au sens qu’elle en est capable? Mais, quand on supposerait que la chose serait possible, ou ne renfermerait point de contradiction métaphysique, car il n’y a que cela qui soit impossible à Dieu ; par quel principe de raison ou de religion peut-on diminuer la dépendance des créatures?”
- (20) André Robinet argues that according to Malebranche, “a body is in movement since God creates it and conserves it in different places” (Robinet, 1965, p. 98). Rather than suggesting that Malebranche thought that God recreates a body as a new thing, Robinet seems to hold that for Malebranche, a body really continues to be identical during movement.

#### Abbreviations of Primary Texts and Translations

- A: *Sämtliche Schriften and Briefe*, eds. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923-. Cited by series, volume and page.
- Ar: *The Labyrinth of the Continuum*. Trans. and ed. By Richard Arthur. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Eds. By Adam and P. Tannery. Paris: L. Cerf, 1897-1913. Cited by volume and page.
- CT: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. and eds. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenney. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Cited by volume and

page.

- LO: N. Malebranche. *The Search after Truth*. Translated and Edited by T.M. Lennon and P.J. Olscamp. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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