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The Malebranchean Ontological Argument

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The Malebranchean Ontological Argument¹

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Abstract

Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) advanced a form of the ontological argument for theism that has gone largely unnoticed. The argument's central contention is that an infinitely perfect being could not have a corresponding idea distinct from it, since no finite idea could 'contain' such a being. Thus, an infinitely perfect being could only *be* its own idea. Our awareness of the idea of infinite perfection, then, just *is* a direct awareness of an infinitely perfect being. I present and defend a reconstruction of the Malebranchean argument.

1. Introduction

"one cannot see the essence of an infinitely perfect being without seeing its existence (...)

if we think of the infinite, it must exist" *The Search After truth* 4.11

To this day, ontological arguments for theism continue to perplex philosophers. Such arguments infer the existence of a perfect being from premises that can be known through *a priori* reflection on the idea or concept of a perfect being. The earliest known formulation of the argument, found in Anselm's *Proslogion*, famously (or infamously) argued that 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' must exist both in the understanding and in reality, since this is greater than to exist solely inside the understanding. Today, proponents of ontological arguments have tended to move away from Anselm,ⁱ taking their cue instead from Leibniz, who proposed a modal version of the argument. As such, they offer variations on the following theme:

¹ This paper first appeared in the journal *Faith and Philosophy*.

Possibly, a perfect being exists. If a perfect being possibly exists, then a perfect being necessarily exists. Therefore a perfect being necessarily exists.

Others have taken the ontological argument in a different direction. Nicolas Malebranche, a contemporary of Leibniz, advanced a form of the argument that has gone largely unnoticed. This, I suspect, is because it is commonly assumed that Malebranche, being a Cartesian philosopher, simply rehashes the argument from Descartes 5th Meditation.ⁱⁱ Others charge that the ‘argument’ in Malebranche’s work is really no argument or inference to God’s existence at all, but rather a statement to the effect that we can just ‘see’ that God existsⁱⁱⁱ. The former ignores the philosopher’s express intent to improve on Descartes^{iv} and the key argumentative moves which, to my knowledge, are unique to him. As to the latter, while it is true that we enjoy direct awareness of God according to Malebranche, he nevertheless offers an argument in support of this contention, as I will show.

What follows is a presentation and defence of the Malebranchian argument, which I reconstruct from relevant passages in *The Search After Truth* and the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*.

2. Outline of the argument, and preliminaries

Malebranche develops his ontological argument in at least two places: *The Search After Truth*, Book 4, Chapter 11 ; and *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* 1 & 2. It is primarily on these passages that the argument advanced in this paper will be based.

However, the eighth of the *Dialogues* offers the most succinct formulation of the argument that I have been able to find:

“Hence, the infinite exists since I see it and I can see it only in itself”^v

Or, rephrased: *I see the infinite, I can see it only in itself, therefore the infinite exists*. So far, the argument appears circular—how could one accept the premise that one ‘sees’ the infinite without already believing that the infinite exists, *prior* to accepting the premise? The key is that ‘the infinite’ here is not univocal. It can refer either to an infinite *being*—or, an ‘infinitely perfect being’ as Malebranche normally puts it—or the

idea of such a being. The former is what is referred to in the argument's conclusion, whereas the latter is what is referred to in the premise. So, when Malebranche claims to 'see the infinite', he means to say that he is aware of an idea of infinity.

How does Malebranche move from 'I see the idea of an infinite being' to 'An infinite being exists'? Those who suppose that Malebranche is merely following Descartes might expect him to say that an infinite being would possess all perfections, and that existence is a perfection, or something along those lines. But he does not say that—rather, he says that 'I can only see it [i.e. the infinite] in itself'. A comment from Malebranche's reply to fellow Cartesian Antoine Arnauld sheds some light on this phrase: "I want, nevertheless, for us to see the infinite, for us to know God by means of an idea, but certainly *this idea will be God himself*."^{vi} In other words, I can only see the infinite 'in itself', i.e. *as* an infinite being rather than *as* an idea distinct from the being, because the idea of the infinite being just *is* the infinite being itself.

We may therefore reformulate the argument as follows:

- (1) I am aware of the idea of infinite perfection
- (2) The idea of infinite perfection just is the infinitely perfect being
- (3) So, I am aware of the infinitely perfect being

In order to yield the conclusion that an infinitely perfect being exists, we may add the following second stage:

- (4) If I am aware of the infinitely perfect being, an infinitely perfect being exists
- (5) Therefore, the infinitely perfect being exists

'Ideas' in Malebranche's writings are consistently characterised as "immediate objects of the mind"^{vii} i.e. things of which the mind can become aware, through what

both he and Descartes would have simply called ‘perception’, and what we might call ‘rational intuition’ or ‘rational insight’.^{viii} This should not be terribly controversial—leaving aside extreme sceptics about our capacity for introspection, even most empiricists, I take it, would accept that we have some access to our ideas through armchair reflection, even if these amount to nothing more than Humean copies of sense-impressions. Nowadays, it is typically assumed that ideas, or *concepts*^{ix} as they are more commonly called, are things that subsist within our minds, even if they represent extra-mental realities. Descartes appears to have largely conformed to this assumption, holding that “an idea is never outside the intellect”, though he may not have been entirely consistent on this point.^x His position is echoed most prominently by advocates of the ‘Representational Theory of the Mind’ (RTM), who identify concepts with mental representations. This is apparently the default view among cognitive scientists.^{xi}

Others, unsurprisingly referred to as ‘platonists’ in the literature,^{xii} point to unintuitive implications of the identification of ideas with mental entities. For instance, it entails that you and I can never literally have the same idea, since my ideas reside solely in my mind, just as your ideas are confined to your mind. Hence, the talk of human beings all sharing an idea of (say) goodness or truth would be strictly false.^{xiii}

Malebranche stands resolutely in the second camp, sharply distinguishing between the ideas, which are “eternal and independent of finite minds”^{xiv} from our perceptions of them (which are mere modifications of our souls), a distinction that Book III of the *Search* is dedicated to defending. His ontological argument, however, requires no prior commitment to his view, or to any metaphysical theory of ideas. All that is required is to assume that *a priori* reflection puts us in epistemic contact with realities which we call ‘ideas’, e.g. the idea of knowledge, of time, etc. These ‘ideas’ *may* turn out to be mental entities, or rather more like platonic universals, or something else entirely. Of course, it *will* turn out that at least one idea, the idea of infinite perfection, is not a mental entity (or a platonic universal, for that matter). But this is a conclusion to be reached, not a background assumption.^{xv}

The relevant notion of ‘infinite perfection’ remains to be clarified. Here I do not see that Malebranche adds significantly to the ‘perfect being’ theology inherited from Descartes and medieval scholasticism: God is ‘infinitely perfect’ in the sense of lacking restriction or limit on his excellence; or, as he put it in a fictional dialogue with a Chinese philosopher, “[including] in his essence all there is of (...) perfection in all beings.”^{xvi} An infinitely perfect being, then, is something that is as excellent as a being can be, where ‘excellence’ here is plausibly synonymous with being worthy of praise, awe or admiration.^{xvii} All other beings are excellent only to the extent that they imitate the infinitely perfect being, which they do imperfectly. Some have denied that it is meaningful to speak of something being an excellent being or excellent *simpliciter*, as opposed to being an excellent knife or an excellent human being. This denial appears to entail that there is no sense in which a human being is more excellent than a mosquito, which will strike many as a deeply implausible result. I must leave this debate to the side, however, and take it for granted that the relevant notion of ‘excellence’ or ‘perfection’ is a meaningful one.

With these preliminaries out of the way, it is time to examine the argument’s premises, which I will motivate in turn.

3. Premise (1): I am aware of the idea of infinite perfection

This premise strikes Malebranche as patently obvious, so much so that he almost sounds dismissive when addressing those who would deny it. As far as he is concerned, one need only survey one’s ideas, and ‘see’ the idea of infinite perfection standing among them. Even so, he does offer some reasons in favour of the premise. In the second *Dialogue*, he writes that the very act of asking whether an infinitely perfect being exists, which we often do, shows that we have the corresponding idea—otherwise, we would have (literally) no idea of what we would be asking, which is “ridiculous.”^{xviii} This is insufficient, since one might also ask whether there exists a married bachelor, but it wouldn’t follow that we have an idea of a married bachelor. Indeed, Malebranche’s discussion in the *Search* of the ‘idea’ of an infinite body, which

he argues is ‘false’ (i.e. not a *true* idea),^{xix} shows that he is aware of the possibility that some of what we take to be ‘ideas’ are in fact pseudo-ideas.

The *Search* advances a different motivation for the claim that we have an idea of infinite perfection: when asked whether an infinitely perfect being would be “round or square or some similar thing”^{xx} those who deny that we have an idea of infinite perfection would reply in the negative (presumably because having a shape would entail being spatially located, and a truly infinite being would transcend space). In so doing, they show that they *do* have an idea of infinite perfection after all—how else would they know that an infinitely perfect being would not have this or that property?

We must tread carefully here. For we also know that a married bachelor would not be round or square. We don’t know this thanks to our idea of a married bachelor, because there (plausibly) is no such idea. Rather, we know this because we know that a married bachelor wouldn’t exist, and thus trivially couldn’t be a square, or anything else. But Malebranche’s argument can be salvaged if we simply switch to speaking of the features that we know an infinitely perfect being would *have*, rather than those that those features that we know it would *not* have:

- (i) I know that an infinitely perfect being would be perfectly practically rational
- (ii) I wouldn’t know this, unless I had an idea of an infinitely perfect being
- (iii) Therefore, I have an idea of an infinitely perfect being

To say that the infinitely perfect being is ‘perfectly practically rational’ can be taken to mean just that this being “will always do any action that he believes to be the best action available to him.”^{xxi} I suspect that even most atheists would agree with (i), since the practical rationality of an infinitely perfect being is a key assumption of the argument from evil, which remains popular among atheists: indeed, the claim that God would prevent evil given that he wills the well-being of his creatures presupposes that God’s actions will always conform to God’s beliefs about what the best course of action is. And (ii) is not subject to the same counter-example as above, since we do *not* know

that a married bachelor would be practically rational (to be practically rational, it would need to exist, which it wouldn't).

Of course, some critics of theism would reject (i) on the basis that an infinitely perfect being is just like a married bachelor, in that neither could exist due to being contradictory. Here is not the place to explain, let alone address, challenges to the internal coherence of perfect being theism. Unless one takes such challenges to be successful, it seems to me that the above sub-argument constitutes strong grounds for believing that we have an idea of infinite perfection. In any case, the claim that we have an idea of an infinitely perfect being is common to all ontological arguments (and indeed to all arguments for the existence of an infinitely perfect being), and is typically conceded by critics, who tend to take far more issue with later stages of the argument. Hence, I turn to the argument's second premise, which is easily the more controversial of the two.

4. Premise (2): The idea of infinite perfection just *is* the infinitely perfect being

4.1. Outline of the case for (2)

Crucial to the case for this premise is Malebranche's claim that the infinitely perfect being "does not and cannot have (...) an idea distinct from it."^{xxii} That is, supposing that an infinitely perfect being did exist, there could be no distinct idea corresponding to it, whether in our minds or in an abstract platonic realm. This, he tells us, is because "nothing finite can *contain* an infinite reality."^{xxiii} Malebranche is drawing on the Cartesian notion of *eminent* containment, which Descartes had distinguished from *formal* containment, or what we might call containment 'in the strict sense'. In contrast, something 'eminently' contains some feature *F* just as long as, while strictly lacking *F*, it nevertheless "has something that can stand in the place" of *F*.^{xxiv} The 'stand-in-place-of' relation in Malebranche is simply identified with *representation*. Thus, he repeatedly contends that "nothing finite can represent the infinite."^{xxv}

The assumption here is that the relation between an infinitely perfect being and its corresponding idea (supposing they are distinct) would have to be one of representation. This in turn assumes that ideas are representational entities^{xxvi}, an assumption that would alienate those who hold ideas to be abstract objects.^{xxvii} But we will not in fact need to assume this. For even if an idea does not represent its *ideatum*, some relation presumably still obtains between the two. Whatever one believes about ideas, one must surely accept that they ‘include’ or ‘contain’ their corresponding objects, insofar as these objects ‘fall under’ their respective ideas. Hence, I will speak of an idea *containing* its corresponding object, as this term strikes me as being neutral between different theories of ideas. The reader can think of the term ‘containment’ as a placeholder term for whatever relation is supposed to obtain between a dog and the idea of a dog.

An infinitely perfect being, Malebranche hence tells us, could not be contained by any finite thing—specifically, it could not be contained by any idea distinct from itself, which would necessarily be only finitely perfect (otherwise, it would simply be the infinitely perfect being, not a distinct idea of it). The motivation for (2) may be laid out as follows:

- (iv) If the idea of infinite perfection is distinct from the infinitely perfect being, then the infinitely perfect being, if it exists, is contained by an idea distinct from itself
- (v) The infinitely perfect being, if it exists, could not be contained by an idea distinct from itself
- (vi) Therefore, the idea of infinite perfection could not be distinct from the infinitely perfect being

Notice that (vi) entails (2), since if *X* and *Y* could not be distinct from one another, then they can only be identical, in which case they are in fact identical. We have just seen why (iv) is true—containment just is the relation that obtains between an idea and its *ideatum*, if the latter exists. For instance, for an idea to be the idea of a dog just is for it to be such that, if a dog exists, the idea contains the dog. Similarly, for an idea to be the idea of infinite perfection just is for it to be such that, if an infinitely perfect being exists, the idea contains the being, hence (iv).

Let us then turn to (v).

4.2. **Why no distinct idea could contain an infinitely perfect being**

(v) is a startling claim, and a clear departure from Descartes, who had taught that “the idea which we have of the infinite does not merely represent one part of it, but really does represent the infinite in its entirety”,^{xxviii} in which case there surely is an idea for an infinitely perfect being to fall under. Thus, the more thoroughly Cartesian Arnauld charged Malebranche with the failure to see that an idea could represent or contain an infinitely perfect being without itself being infinitely perfect.^{xxix} Malebranche offers little by the way of explanation for his denial of this possibility, other than admitting to his inability to “conceive” how “a being that is without restriction, immense and universal can be perceived through an idea,^{xxx} i.e. a through a particular being different from universal and infinite being”, as he puts it in the *Search*.^{xxxi}

Despite this, I would submit that a basis for a more satisfying defence of premise (2) can be found in Malebranche’s broader work. Consider first the role that ideas are meant to play in his thought. Our ideas are the proper means by which we *judge* things : as he puts it, “one can judge the perfection of works only through (...) the ideas one has of them.”^{xxxii} For instance, to judge that some shape is a good or true circle, we must consult the idea of a circle, and consider the extent to which the shape conforms to the idea. Though Malebranche sometimes speaks as if ‘conforming’ to an idea meant resembling it in some way, he explicitly denies this, stating in an exchange with a critic that “the idea of length, breadth and depth” is not itself “broad, long and deep.”^{xxxiii} Rather, ideas or ‘archetypes’ as he frequently calls them are less like images and more like blueprints:^{xxxiv} the blueprint of a house dictates what a house needs to be like without itself being a house. Analogously, the idea of a circle specifies what something needs to be like in order to fall under it, without itself being a circle. Thus, our ideas enable us to recognise circles, cats, trees (etc) *as such* when we encounter them, as well as to recognise non-circles, non-cats, non-trees (etc) *as such* when we encounter them.

All of this is fairly banal. In effect, it is implicit in the widespread view that ideas (or ‘concepts’, to use the more common term) are crucially involved in categorisation,

and as such have a key epistemological function.^{xxxv} Jesse J. Prinz^{xxxvi} helpfully distinguishes between “category identification” (or “recognition”), where one identifies the category to which something belongs, and “category production”, where one identifies what attributes something possesses given that it belongs to a certain category. I would add that the latter is necessary to the former: in order to know that Snoopy belongs to the category of ‘dogs’, I need to know what it takes to belong to this category. This in turn requires me to possess the idea of a dog, which I use as a standard to evaluate Snoopy as to his ‘dogness’.^{xxxvii xxxviii}

But what of the idea of infinite perfection? Given the foregoing, the idea should be the means by which we properly determine whether or not something is infinitely perfect, and, given that it is infinitely perfect, what attributes it must have. For example, if our idea of infinite perfection tells us that an infinitely perfect being would be “immutable” (as Malebranche argues in the eighth *Dialogue*,^{xxxix} we ought to rule out mutable things as falling outside of infinite perfection. Importantly though, we judge by an idea *I* not just the things that fail to fall under *I*, but also the things that *do* fall under *I*. If I encounter a perfect circle and recognise it as such, this is because I have judged it to meet the standard set by the idea of a perfect circle. Similarly, if I recognised something to be infinitely perfect, this is because I have judged that thing to meet the standard set by the idea of infinite perfection. Now, supposing that the idea of infinite perfection is distinct from the infinitely perfect being to which it corresponds, the above act of judgment involves judging the infinitely perfect being *by* that which is only finitely perfect, namely the idea in question. The infinitely perfect being would thus be placed ‘under’ something other than itself, which functions as an ultimate standard of excellence.

But, plausibly, it is greater (i.e. more excellent) to be that through which all (other) things are properly judged according to their excellence by rational subjects, than to instead be judged through something other than oneself according to one’s excellence by rational subjects. Hence, a supposedly infinitely perfect being that was contained by an idea distinct from itself would not be as excellent as it could be, and would thus not be infinitely perfect after all. This just is to say that an infinitely perfect being would not be contained by any idea distinct from itself.

4.3. Summary and transition

The argument's second premise (2) states that the idea of an infinitely perfect being just is an infinitely perfect being. Let us recall the sub-argument for (2):

(iv) If the idea of infinite perfection is distinct from the infinitely perfect being, then the infinitely perfect being, if it exists, is contained by an idea distinct from itself

(v) The infinitely perfect being, if it exists, could not be contained by an idea distinct from itself

(vi) Therefore, the idea of infinite perfection could not be distinct from the infinitely perfect being

Once again, (vi) entails (2) (cf. 4.1.). Challenges specifically directed at sub-premises (iv) and (v) will be discussed shortly. But first, I wish to address a more general worry.

5. Can something be its own idea?

A very natural response at this stage is that there must be something wrong with the case for (2), since it is impossible for something to be its own idea. Since (2) is entailed by (iv) and (v), it must be that one of these sub-premises is false. Alternatively, one might think that even if the sub-argument for (2) is sound, it only shows that (1) is false, and that we don't have an idea of infinite perfection after all. For if (2) is true, then the idea of infinite perfection, *if* it exists, just is an infinitely perfect being. But since this implies that something is its own idea—which, we would be told, is impossible—then it follows that there is, in fact, no idea of infinite perfection.

But while it is true that things ordinarily aren't their own ideas (e.g. no horse is the idea of a horse), there is at least one thing that is its own idea: namely, *the idea of an idea*. That such an idea exists is fairly obvious, for if it didn't, we could not claim to know anything about the attributes that a thing must have in order to be an idea. For instance, we wouldn't be able to know that an idea can be shared by more than one thinking subject, which we clearly do know. It is equally obvious that the idea of an

idea falls under itself—Malebranche would say that it ‘represents’ or ‘contains’ itself. The idea of an idea is itself an idea.

This is strong grounds to refrain from ruling out the possibility that the idea of infinite perfection is itself an infinitely perfect being. Admittedly, the hypothesis that the idea of infinite perfection would not itself be infinitely perfect enjoys considerable inductive support: as we have just seen, it is not generally the case that things are their own ideas. But the sub-argument for (2), if sound, gives us reason to believe that the idea of infinite perfection constitutes a bona fide exception to this general rule, much like the idea of an idea.

Other reasons to deny from the outset that an infinitely perfect being would be its own idea might include the claim that an infinitely perfect being would be concrete, when no idea can be concrete, or the claim that an infinitely perfect being would be mind-independent, when no idea can be mind-independent. But again, I have advanced positive reasons for to think that *one* idea is concrete and mind-independent. To simply deny that any idea could have these attributes in the face of these reasons would simply be question-begging, since it assumes what is at stake, namely a thesis about the nature of ideas (one might as well reject all arguments for platonism about concepts simply by stating that concepts cannot be abstract). One would need to put forward arguments in defence of the thesis that ideas *must* be abstract, or the thesis that ideas *must* be mind-dependent. I am aware of no such arguments.

But, one might protest, couldn't a strong intuition to the effect that ideas must be abstract (or mind-dependent) be sufficient grounds for rejecting my argument's conclusion? It is widely held that intuitive seemings can confer justification on beliefs. But equally common is the thought that this justification can be overridden by strong arguments to the contrary: if it intuitively seems to me that *P* but I am faced with an argument to the effect that not-*P* and I unable to show how the argument is unsound, then it seems that I ought to at least lower my confidence in the intuitive seeming. An exception might be someone for whom the seeming is particularly strong, on par with the seeming that the law of non-contradiction is true. In such a case, rejecting my conclusion, even without being able to show what went wrong in the argument, might

be justified. Given the fact that the debate between platonists (who hold ideas to be abstract) and conceptualists (who hold ideas to be concrete mental states) endures to this day, I suspect that there are very few such individuals.

For these reasons, and with some possible exceptions, I do not believe that one can reasonably dismiss the case for (2) (or for (1)) by merely stating that it must be faulty, since it yields an impossible conclusion. A better approach would be to try to show that (2) is unmotivated, because its supporting sub-argument is unsound. It is to this kind of objection that I now turn.

6. Defending (iv)

According to (iv), if the infinitely perfect being and what I call my 'idea of infinite perfection' are distinct, then, if such a being exists, it is contained by an idea distinct from itself, namely my idea of infinite perfection. This, I argued, just *is* what it means for something to be the idea of infinite perfection. To put it another way, for something to be the *ideatum* of a particular idea just *is* for it to bear the 'contained' relation (whatever the exact nature of that relation) to the idea. Thus, what makes Snoopy an *ideatum* of the idea of a dog is that Snoopy, if he existed, would be contained or 'fall under' the idea of a dog, and the same applies to the infinitely perfect being.

But perhaps this is too hasty. For one might propose that the identity of the idea of infinite perfection varies depending on the kind of world we find ourselves in. In a theistic world, where the infinitely perfect being exists, the idea of infinite perfection just is the infinitely perfect being. In an atheistic world, where no such being exists, the idea of infinite perfection is something else—e.g. a mental particular, or an abstract universal. Now, suppose the actual world is an atheistic world, and thus obviously such that the idea of infinite perfection is distinct from the infinitely perfect being (since, again, no such being exists). In that case, we could *not* say that, if an infinitely perfect being exists, it would be contained by an idea distinct from itself. For we would know that, if the world was theistic, the idea of infinite perfection would just *be* the infinitely perfect being. Whatever actually happens to be the idea of infinite perfection would

not be that, if an infinitely perfect being existed, and thus would not contain said being. So, if the identity of the idea of infinite perfection varies across possible worlds in the way described above, (iv) is a false sub-premise.

One possible response would be to insist that if some x is the idea of F , then x must be the idea of F in all worlds where x exists. If so, then whatever is the idea of infinite perfection in our world is *that* in all other worlds where it exists, whether theistic or atheistic. But the objection can be defused without the need to make such strong claims. To see how, contrast (iv) to alternative premise (iv'):

(iv) If the idea of infinite perfection is distinct from the infinitely perfect being, then, if the infinitely perfect being exists, it is contained by an idea distinct from itself.

(iv') If the idea of infinite perfection is distinct from the infinitely perfect being, then, had the infinitely perfect being existed, it would have been contained by an idea distinct from itself

Suppose, as per the objection, that the idea of infinite perfection and the infinitely perfect being are identical in all theistic worlds, and distinct in all atheistic worlds, *and* that the actual world is an atheistic world (and thus one in which the idea and the being are distinct). In that case, (iv') is clearly false, since its antecedent is true, and its consequent makes a false claim about what obtains in other possible worlds. But does it follow that (iv) is also false? Unlike (iv'), whose consequent is a counterfactual conditional, the consequent of (iv) is an implication, and is thus strictly about the actual world. And it is true of the actual world (given our assumptions about its contents) that, if the infinitely perfect being exists, it is distinct from the corresponding idea, just as it is true of the actual world that if Snoopy exists, he is distinct from the idea of a dog. And insofar as 'containment' is the relation that an idea bears to its existing *ideatum*, it follows that it is true of the actual world that, if the infinitely perfect being exists, it is contained by an idea distinct from itself.

Thus it appears to me that the objection mistakenly takes the consequent of (iv) to be a statement about all worlds in which an infinitely perfect being exists, when it is strictly about the actual world. In any case, the scenario advanced by the objection

has a deeply implausible implication, and can be rejected on that basis alone: it implies that the idea of infinite perfection could never contain its *ideatum*. To say that some x is the idea of F intuitively just *is* to say that x is the sort of thing that *can* contain an F (in other words, that x is such that an F could fall under it). But if the entity that is actually the idea of infinite perfection would not be *that* in any world where an infinitely perfect being exists, then this entity could never contain the infinitely perfect being. The alleged idea could never bear the ‘containment’ relation to its corresponding *ideatum*, and thus cannot plausibly be said to be the idea of said *ideatum*. Thus it seems that what the scenario proposed by the objection is not a possible scenario, in which case it cannot succeed in undermining (iv).

7. Defending (v)

I will now consider objections to sub-premise (v), which states that an infinitely perfect being, if it exists, could not have a corresponding idea of infinite perfection distinct from it. At certain points, my responses to these objections will seem like restatements of the supporting reasons for (v). This is because I aim to use the objections as opportunities to clarify and refine the case for this sub-premise.

7.1. A Cartesian objection

Crucial to the case for (v) was the claim that an infinitely perfect being, if existent, would not have a corresponding idea distinct from itself, in the way that (say) dogs have a distinct idea, i.e. the idea of a dog, which corresponds to them. This, I argued, was because an infinitely perfect being, if it existed, would be the standard by which all things (other than it) are judged according to their excellence, rather than itself being judged by a standard distinct from itself.

One may object that an infinitely perfect being could in fact coexist with a distinct idea of infinite perfection, as long as the idea is still dependent on the being. Descartes’ God, while sharply distinct from the idea of God, provides us with this idea, as a means of knowing him, famously comparing it to a ‘trademark’ imprinted on the creature by

the Creator in the *Meditations*. In this scenario, the standard by which we determine a thing's excellence (or lack thereof) is distinct from God, but this may not seem to detract much at all from God's own excellence, since the standard is chosen and even created by God, rather than being a transcendent entity in an abstract realm outside the purview of divine control. That the idea would presumably be 'modelled' or otherwise based on God's nature only serves to strengthen this seeming. But in that case, God could still be an infinitely perfect being while being distinct from the idea of infinite perfection, undercutting the motivation for (v).

In reply, note first that creating something which could function as the idea of infinite perfection would be unnecessary, *if* the infinite perfect being could itself fulfil that function. To assess whether it could do so, consider why no particular dog could fulfil the function of the idea of a dog. At a minimum, this idea must be epistemically accessible to us through reflection or introspection. Particular dogs, being physical creatures existing at particular locations, are not the sort of thing that can be known in this way. In contrast, an infinitely perfect being would not be limited in space, as this would be incompatible with maximal excellence. Such a being would (or at the very least *could*) be ever-present to us, just as we take our ideas to be ever-present to us, such that we may consult them simply by 'peering inside ourselves', so to speak.^{xi}

An infinitely perfect being, then, would not be subject to the limitations that preclude ordinary physical objects from being ideas. Moreover, its infinite perfection makes it particularly well-suited to playing the role of the standard of infinite perfection: one way for something to function as a standard of *F*-ness is for it to be a perfect exemplar of *F*-ness, which we can compare to other putative instances of *F*-ness in view of determining whether they are indeed true *F*s. Obviously, an infinitely perfect being would be a perfect exemplar of infinite perfection. Such a being could therefore act as a standard of infinite perfection, the direct awareness of which would enable us to determine that other beings are not infinitely perfect.

I conclude that an infinitely perfect being would be able to fulfil the functions that a distinct idea of infinite perfection would fulfil. If this is true, then there is no good reason for an infinitely perfect being to provide us with an idea distinct from itself to function as a standard of infinite perfection, when the being itself could play that role.

Thus, had God created an idea of God which he then gave to us as per the Cartesian schema, God would have created something entirely otiose. As such, he would have failed to act according to what Malebranche called the “simplicity of ways”, the principle according to which it is best to achieve a goal in the simplest possible way.^{xli} If the aim is to enable rational subjects to know what infinite perfection is and to determine where it is (and isn’t) instantiated, it is surely simpler (more ‘elegant’) for God to provide himself as the means by which we accomplish this, rather than providing some intermediate instrument. More precisely perhaps, it would be irrational for God to produce something with no more instrumental value than he himself has, and no intrinsic value. A distinct idea of infinite perfection is no more instrumentally valuable than an infinitely perfect being (since its function can be performed just as well by the being), and I am unable to see any intrinsic value in it either.^{xlii} Hence, producing a distinct idea of infinite perfection would be irrational, and thus fall short of infinite perfection, insofar as this must include perfect rationality.

If this does not persuade, consider again the case of ordinary physical objects like dogs. In order to know that Snoopy is a dog, I must first possess the idea of a dog. Snoopy cannot make his dog nature known to me, except through a mediating entity, the idea of a dog. Similarly, if God created an idea of God distinct from itself as Descartes would have us believe, God would be knowable as God only through an epistemic ‘middle man’, i.e. the idea. Now, I have argued that it is possible for something to be its own idea. Such a being would be known through itself, since to know the idea just *is* to know the *ideatum*, as they are one and the same. It would be knowable with the immediacy and directness with which we know our other ideas. This strikes me as more excellent than being dependent on mediating ideas in order to be known. If so, Descartes’ God has a limitation on his excellence, and is thus not infinitely perfect.

For these reasons, I submit, against the Cartesian objection and in accordance with the case for (v), that an allegedly infinitely perfect being would not in fact be infinitely perfect if it produced and gave us a distinct idea of infinite perfection, rather than being its own idea.

7.2. Proving too much

Another objection would be to hold that the excellence of a being cannot depend on facts about how rational subjects treat said being. Such facts are wholly extrinsic to the being, and we should only consider facts intrinsic to it (e.g. its virtue, power etc) when assessing it for excellence. For example, while it is better to be loved than not to be loved, it seems absurd to say that an infinitely perfect being must therefore be loved by everyone, or fail to be truly infinitely perfect. 'Being loved' is not an excellence (if it were, theists would be forced to maintain, against overwhelming evidence, that God is in fact loved by everyone). Similarly, one might argue, being the standard by which rational subjects determine whether or not something is infinitely perfect is not an excellence. If so, one can be an infinitely perfect being without functioning as the ultimate standard of excellence for all rational subjects. But the case for (v) crucially depends on the claim that this cannot in fact obtain.

That being treated in a certain way by rational subjects is not a necessary condition for being infinitely perfect seems plausible enough. But even so, infinite perfection is plausibly dependent on being *properly* treated in certain ways by rational subjects. For instance, in order to be infinitely perfect, one may not need to be loved by everyone, but one must surely be *worthy* of that love, whether or not one actually receives it. Likewise, even if an infinitely perfect being need not be treated by everyone as the ultimate standard of excellence, it must nevertheless be the sort of thing that *ought* to be treated in that way. It is the *proper* means by which we are to judge all things according to their excellence.

This, I contend, is how the claim that an infinitely perfect being must be the ultimate standard of excellence should be understood. While this addresses the initial objection, it gives rise to a new one: if an infinitely perfect being need not *in fact* be treated as the ultimate standard of excellence, why couldn't it co-exist with a distinct idea of perfection? For then the being could still be infinitely perfect, even if there also existed a distinct of infinite perfection, which people treated as a standard of excellence.

In response, suppose that the idea of infinite perfection was distinct from an infinitely perfect being. This idea would inform us about what it means to be infinitely perfect, thereby enabling us to determine whether or not something is infinitely perfect. But not only that, it would be the case that we *ought* to make use of the idea in this way. Consider the following principle:

Idea Principle: if x is the idea of F , we ought to rely on x to determine whether something is an F

If some mental particular subsisting in my mind, or some abstract universal, is in fact the idea of a triangle, it seems that I ought to use it to determine whether something is a triangle, i.e. to judge putative triangles as to their ‘triangleness’. After all, for something to be the idea of a triangle just *is* for it to give us at least some information about what it means to be a triangle—if it didn’t do that, it wouldn’t be the idea of a triangle at all. Hence, I cannot know whether something is a triangle unless I consult the idea of a triangle. It surely follows that I ought to rely on the idea in order to determine whether something is a triangle, as per the *Idea Principle*.

Similarly, I cannot know what it means for something to be an infinitely perfect being unless I consult the idea of infinite perfection. In consequence, if there exists an infinitely perfect being, I can know that it is in fact infinitely perfect only ‘through’ my idea of infinite perfection. I therefore not only can but *must* judge the infinitely perfect being using my idea of infinite perfection. Thus, if the idea and the being are distinct, the idea, *not* the being, is the proper means by which we are to judge all things according to their excellence, in which case the being is not, in fact, infinitely perfect.

8. An alternative case for (v): the metaphysical function of ideas

Having presented and defended a case for the Malebranchean claim that the idea of infinite perfection could not contain an infinitely perfect being, I will now offer a different argumentative strategy. The motivation for (v) was based on the epistemological function of ideas (cf. 4.2.), i.e. their role in enabling us to determine whether something belongs to a certain category. Others have proposed that ideas have a *metaphysical* function as well.^{xliii} Ideas, they tell us, not only tell us which things belong in a certain category, they also *make* it the case that certain things belong in a category, while

others don't. For example, the idea of a dog not only reveals to me that Snoopy is a dog, but *grounds* the fact that Snoopy is a dog. Snoopy is a dog in virtue of falling under the idea of a dog.^{xliv}

Various commentators have maintained that Malebranche ascribes such a function to ideas.^{xlv} The fact that he uses the terms 'idea' and 'essence' interchangeably^{xlvi} certainly suggests as much: a thing's essence, on any plausible account, just is that in virtue of which that thing belongs to its kind. But if ideas do indeed play this metaphysical role, then the 'containment' relation between an idea and its *ideatum* consists in a kind of *dependence*. For example, Snoopy depends on the idea of a dog for his 'dogness'—he could not be a dog without falling under the idea of a dog. Likewise, an infinitely perfect being could not be infinitely perfect without falling under the idea of infinite perfection. To be contained by an idea distinct from itself, then, would amount to depending on something distinct from itself. In the case of an infinitely perfect being, it would amount to depending on something else *for its perfection*. But an infinitely perfect being would *not* be dependent on anything for its perfection—in Malebranche's own words in the second of the *Dialogues*, "God is infinitely perfect Being. Hence, God is independent."^{xlvii} For it is more excellent to enjoy absolute ontological independence, than not to. Thus, an allegedly 'infinitely perfect being' who was contained by a distinct idea, thereby depending on that idea, would not be an infinitely perfect being after all. Therefore, an infinitely perfect being, if it exists, could not be contained by an idea distinct from itself, as per (v).

This metaphysical route to (v) is more straightforward than its epistemological counterpart, and arguably more persuasive: I expect that the reader will be more easily convinced by the claim that infinite perfection requires ontological independence, than by the claim that it requires being that through which all (other) things are properly judged according to their excellence by rational subjects. The reader might hence be puzzled by the choice to leave it to the end of the paper, almost as an afterthought. The decision to focus on the epistemological route was motivated by the consideration that, while the epistemological function of ideas is very widely accepted, their supposed metaphysical function is far more controversial. In particular, the thesis that ideas *ground* (in addition to giving us knowledge of) facts like 'Snoopy is a dog' will be unappealing to many who hold ideas to be mental particulars, given the apparently

idealist or subjectivist implication that Snoopy's 'dogness' depends on our mental states (in contrast, it will be far more palatable to those who hold ideas to be mind-independent universals).

As it happens, I believe that the metaphysical theory of the role of ideas has considerably more merit than is commonly supposed. For instance, the proposition 'Snoopy is a dog only if Snoopy falls under the idea or concept of a dog' seems intuitively true to me. If it is, the only plausible explanation of its truth that I am aware of is that Snoopy being a dog necessarily *depends* on Snoopy falling under the relevant concept.^{xlviii} Another proposition that I find intuitively appealing is 'I grasp the concept of a dog *if and only if* I grasp the essence of a dog', which, if true, would be aptly explained by the Malebranchean view (encountered earlier in this section) that ideas just are essences, which certainly do have a metaphysical function. A full case for the metaphysical function of ideas, however, would require far more space than is currently available to me. Suffice it to say for our purposes that, if ideas have a metaphysical function, there is another way to show that an infinitely perfect being couldn't have a corresponding idea distinct from itself. Perhaps this will motivate more research into this historically important but now largely ignored account of ideas.

9. The Malebranchean argument and its modal cousin

Having articulated and defended the Malebranchean ontological argument, now would be a good time to return to the question of its relationship to other ontological arguments, especially those of the *modal* variety, which is the most prominent in contemporary philosophy of religion. Those familiar with such arguments should hopefully be convinced by now that Malebranche's argument is not simply another iteration of the modal ontological argument. For Malebranche draws no inference from the possibility of an infinitely perfect being to its necessity and (thus) to its actual existence, but rather from the existence of an idea of infinite perfection to the existence of an infinitely perfect being (which, it turns out, just *is* that idea).

Despite this, one might worry that the Malebranchean argument makes no real advance over modal ontological arguments. For plausibly, we only have an idea of infinite perfection if infinite perfection is logically coherent—if not, then the 'idea' is

really a pseudo-idea (like our ‘idea’ of a married bachelor). And if infinite perfection is logically coherent, then it is metaphysically *possible* for an infinitely perfect being to exist. Thus it might be thought that the Malebranchian argument implicitly presupposes what the modal ontological argument explicitly states as one of its premises, namely that an infinitely perfect being possibly exists. This seems problematic because much of the contemporary debate over the modal ontological argument now centres on this ‘possibility premise’,^{xlix} with critics arguing that an infinitely perfect being is not possible after all, or that proponents of the argument have provided insufficient justification for the contention that an infinitely perfect being is possible. Hence, if it turns out that the Malebranchian ontological argument assumes precisely what proponents and detractors of ontological arguments disagree on, then it is unclear that it makes a valuable contribution to the debate.

I have several responses to this challenge. First, it is not obvious that the logical coherence of infinite perfection is sufficient for the metaphysical possibility of an infinitely perfect being : many remain convinced by Kripkean arguments to the effect that ‘water is not H₂O’ is a logically coherent proposition despite not being metaphysically possible. If such arguments succeed, then the Malebranchian argument need not make any assumption about the metaphysical possibility of an infinitely perfect being at all. But even if we set aside this difficult debate and grant the equivalence of logical coherence and metaphysical possibility, note that *any* argument for an infinitely perfect being (including many cosmological arguments, moral and axiological arguments,^l etc) will need to presuppose that ‘infinite perfection’ is coherent—if it isn’t, then it is necessarily false that there is an infinitely perfect being, and no argument can demonstrate that it is true. Hence, if the ‘possibility premise’ just is the premise that infinite perfection is a coherent concept, then all arguments for God (understood as an infinitely perfect being) presuppose a possibility premise. But it seems strange to hold that (say) Leibniz’ cosmological argument adds nothing to his modal ontological argument, simply because it presupposes that there is nothing contradictory about the concept of an infinitely perfect being.

Thirdly, it is not quite correct to say that the debate over the ontological argument entirely hinges on whether an infinitely perfect being is possible, or whether

infinite perfection is logically coherent. After all, one could accept this, but reject the inference to the necessary (and therefore actual) existence of an infinitely perfect being. There is much historical precedent for this kind of response to the ontological argument, though it is admittedly less popular today, given the widespread acceptance of the S5 system of modal logic (specifically, of the axiom that if it is possible that a proposition is necessarily true, then it is necessarily true), which sanctions the inference. Even so, there is value in advancing an ontological argument which could still convince those who, for whatever reason, are unconvinced that the possibility of an infinitely perfect being would entail its necessity (indeed, we are about to see a good reason for friends of the ontological argument to prefer a version that does not require adherence to S5).

Fourthly and finally, even if the Malebranchean argument contains an implicit possibility premise, there would still be a subtle but important difference between this premise and the possibility premise required of modal ontological arguments. For the latter states that ‘possibly an infinitely perfect being exists’, *where ‘infinite perfection’ is understood to include metaphysically necessary existence*. This is a crucial requirement, as it enables one to infer (under S5) that an infinitely perfect exists in all possible worlds, including the actual world, given that it exists in one possible world. But it also opens up the argument to a serious problem, which is referred to as the ‘symmetry problem’ in the literature: the non-existence of an infinitely perfect being seems possible. But if necessity is an essential component of infinite perfection, an infinitely perfect being (again, under S5) must exist in all possible worlds, or in none at all. Thus, the advocate of modal ontological arguments is hoisted by his own petard: the claim about infinite perfection that enables him to draw the required inference also makes him vulnerable to an argument for the non-existence of an infinitely perfect being.

In contrast, necessary existence plays no role in the Malebranchean argument. Thus the advocate of this argument is free to deny, like Richard Swinburne and other theistic philosophers, that an infinitely perfect being would be metaphysically necessary, without undermining the argument. Recall that I have defined ‘infinitely perfect’ as ‘as excellent as a being can be’—if there could be no being such that it exists in all possible worlds (as per the symmetry problem), then metaphysically

necessary existence simply isn't one of the excellences available to a being. Alternatively, one could reject the relevant S5 axiom, which is both essential to the modal ontological argument and gives rise to the symmetry problem, but is entirely unnecessary to the Malebranchian argument.

These considerations also enable a response to a related worry, which is that atheists typically suppose that there *could* be no infinitely perfect being (it is not just a contingent matter that there is no infinitely perfect being), and thus are committed to rejecting my argument's first premise ('I am aware of the idea of infinite perfection') from the outset, at least on the assumption that having an idea of infinite imperfection entails that an infinitely perfect being can exist (agnostics might similarly be committed to agnosticism about whether an infinitely perfect being is possible, and thus about whether they have an idea of infinite perfection). Leaving aside those atheists who are convinced that the divine attributes are mutually inconsistent, I suspect atheists who deny the possibility of an infinitely perfect being generally do so because they take infinite perfection to essentially include necessary existence. Since such atheists take themselves to exist in an atheistic world, they infer from this that there is at least one world in which an infinitely perfect (and therefore necessary) being does not exist, which entails that such a being exists in no possible world (as per the 'symmetry problem' discussed above).^{li} But if (as suggested above) we follow Swinburne and others in taking infinite perfection *not* to include metaphysically necessary existence, then this particular reason for denying the possibility of an infinitely perfect being no longer applies. Put differently, if '*NE-perfection*' is infinite perfection inclusive of necessary existence and '*Non-NE perfection*' is infinite perfection *not* inclusive of necessary existence, then it seems to me that while atheists (simply in virtue of their atheism) have strong grounds for denying the possibility of an *NE-perfect* being, it is much less clear that they have strong grounds for denying the possibility of a *Non-NE perfect* being, and thus for denying that they have an idea of *Non-NE* infinite perfection. But the existence of an idea of *Non-NE* infinite perfection is all the argument needs to get off the ground.

In sum, I believe that the Malebranchian ontological argument, if sound, is not redundant, and that there is good reason to be optimistic about the alternative path that it charts.

10. Conclusion : Anselm vindicated

Recall, the Malebranchian ontological argument is as follows:

- (1) I am aware of the idea of infinite perfection
- (2) The idea of infinite perfection just is the infinitely perfect being
- (3) So, I am aware of the infinitely perfect being
- (4) If I am aware of the infinitely perfect being, the infinitely perfect being exists
- (5) Therefore, the infinitely perfect being exists.

I have offered supporting sub-arguments for (1) and (2), which jointly entail (3). When joined to (4) (which I take to be self-evident), (3) yields (5), the desired theistic conclusion.

Proponents of the ontological argument have taken up what many (including many theists) have judged to be an insurmountable challenge: namely, to build a bridge “between mere abstractions and concrete existence”, as one critic put it.^{lii} The usual way of attempting this has been to try to show that idea of God, while distinct from God, cannot remain unexemplified. The Malebranchian argument offers a radically different path: when we collapse the difference between the idea and the being, there is no need for a bridge between the two, since they are one and the same.

In doing so, the argument vindicates the original Anselmian claim ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ must exist both in the understanding—that is, as an idea—and in reality. If Malebranche is correct, this is literally true, as God is idea and *ideatum* all at once. Interestingly however, Malebranche reaches Anselm’s

conclusion using the inverse of Anselm's method: instead of arguing that God cannot exist solely as an idea and must therefore also exist in reality (as Anselm had done), he argues that God could not exist solely in reality without also existing as an idea (since if he did, he would be contained by a distinct idea, which is impossible). The Malebranchean argument, if sound, thus offers a new way forward for the ontological argument.

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NOTES

ⁱ E.g. Plantinga & Barnes, "The Ontological Argument" ; Pruss & Rasmussen, *Necessary Existence*.

That said, some recent work on Anselm has argued for explicitly modal versions of the ontological argument in Anselm. See Smith, *Anselm's Other Argument* and Leftow, *Anselm's Argument*.

ⁱⁱ For example: "Malebranche gives two related arguments for the existence of God. The first argument is a version of Descartes' ontological argument, which Malebranche claims is the simplest and best argument for the existence of God (...) Although his ontological argument

is not unique, his conception of God is" (Lascano, *Arguments for the Existence of God*, 18–19).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Hartshorne, *Anselm's discovery*. See also Jalabert, *Le Dieu de Leibniz*, 77: "For the oratorian, the ontological proof becomes a proof of "mere sight (...). There is here no argument, no deduction from an innate idea" (translation mine).

^{iv} See Larivière & Lennon, "True Believers", 98.

In Malebranche's own words: "so that we shall be able to understand Descartes's proof for the existence of God still more distinctly, and to reply more clearly to any criticisms one could make of it, here is what seems to me must be added to it" (*The Search after Truth* 4.11, 318).

^v Malebranche, *Dialogues*, 240

^{vi} Cited in Bardout, "Metaphysics and Philosophy", 155. Emphasis mine.

^{vii} E.g. *The Search After Truth* III.2.1; *Dialogue 2*

^{viii} See Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason*

^{ix} I will be using the terms 'idea' and 'concept' interchangeably here.

^x See Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 19

^{xi} See Margolis & Laurence, "The ontology of concepts", 563. See also Sutton, "Are Concepts Mental Representations or Abstracta?"

^{xii} See Peacocke, "The metaphysics of concepts" and Bealer, "A theory of concepts and concepts possession."

^{xiii} Frege forcefully argued this point. For a more recent formulation of the Fregean objection, cf. Glock, "Concepts."

^{xiv} From Nadler, *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, 4

^{xv} This clarification should also ward off the worry that any inference from ideas to God in Malebranche will inevitably be circular, since ideas for Malebranche just are either eternal archetypes subsisting in the divine mind, or the divine being itself, in the case of the idea of

infinite perfection. While this is indeed Malebranche's position, it can easily be set aside for the purpose of motivating his ontological argument's premises.

^{xvi} Cited in Mungello, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy", 972.

^{xvii} See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 14

^{xviii} Malebranche, *Dialogues*, 164.

^{xix} Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 318

^{xx} Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 317

^{xxi} Swinburne, *The existence of God*, 105

^{xxii} Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 321

An anonymous review worries about the apparent implication that God cannot not have an idea of himself, which (perhaps) is a defect. But if God just *is* the idea of himself, i.e. the idea of God (as Malebranche argues) then God *does* 'have' an idea of himself, insofar as he is fully aware of himself.

^{xxiii} Malebranche, *Dialogues*, 160. Emphasis mine.

^{xxiv} Schmaltz, "Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God", 63.

^{xxv} Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 318.

^{xxvi} On this point, Malebranche agrees with the already-mentioned 'Representational Theory of the Mind' (RTM), despite disagreeing with the latter on the location of ideas (which he takes to exist outside of human minds).

^{xxvii} Peacocke, "The metaphysics of concepts", 525.

^{xxviii} Cited in Puškarić, "Cartesian Idea of God and the Infinite", 288.

^{xxix} Schmaltz, "Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God", 73.

^{xxx} This choice of words reflects Malebranche's theory that all things are perceived *through* their corresponding ideas, which need not concern us here.

^{xxxi} Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 237.

One philosopher who did offer an explicit justification for Malebranche's claim, or a related

one at any rate, is Aquinas. In response to the question of whether the divine essence can be seen through an idea or ‘image’ representing it, he argues that “because the essence of God is His own very existence (...) which cannot be said of any created form; and so no created form can be the similitude representing the essence of God to the seer” (*Summa Theologiae* I.12.2). Insofar as this assumes the need for a ‘similitude’ between the idea and the *ideatum*, Malebranche cannot avail himself of this motivation, since he denies that there is such a need, as I will explain presently.

xxxii Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 66.

Similarly, the third of the *Dialogues* insists that “we must judge things only by the ideas which represent them” (168)

xxxiii Cited in Radner, *Malebranche*, 111.

xxxiv Radner, *Malebranche*, 117. See also Pyle, *Malebranche*, 64.

xxxv Rey, “Concepts and Stereotypes”, 282.

xxxvi Prinz, *Furnishing the Mind*, 9.

xxxvii Importantly, the epistemological function of ideas distinguishes them from *words*. Words may perhaps be said to ‘represent’ or even ‘contain’ their corresponding objects in a sense (it is natural to say that ‘dog’ represents dogs). Thus, it may initially seem that the Malebranchean dictum that the finite cannot represent or contain the infinite is obviously false, since the infinitely perfect being is represented/contained by the finite string of words ‘the infinitely perfect being’. But however we name them, the relation that stands between words and their corresponding objects on one hand (call it ‘*w-containment*’), and the relation between ideas and their corresponding objects on the other (call it ‘*i-containment*’), are different in kind. If some idea *X* *i-contains* dogs, then *X* will be the means by which I evaluate candidate dogs like Snoopy as to their dogness, as per the epistemological function of ideas. Words, in contrast, have no such function—I may use a word *W* to refer to dogs, but knowledge of *W*, taken by itself, does not tell me what it takes to be a dog (unless perhaps if

we hold that knowing a word *W* essentially involves knowing the meaning of *W*—but since knowing the meaning of a word in turn essentially involves knowing an idea, I would submit that in this case it is the corresponding idea that is doing the epistemological work). Later in this section, I will argue that nothing distinct from an infinitely perfect being can *i-contain* an infinitely perfect being. This is entirely consistent with saying that an infinitely perfect being can be *w-contained*.

^{xxxviii} This account of ideas as playing an epistemological role may strike one as naïve : we rarely know the real definitions or essences of the things we encounter in the world, and simply consulting our ideas of them will not give us knowledge of these. For example, the essence of ‘dogness’ is plausibly a certain genome, which no one grasps, despite our possession of the idea of a dog. But we can affirm the epistemological function of ideas without thinking that our ideas will always give us complete knowledge of the essences of the things they contain. My idea of a dog may not give me the entire real definition of a dog, but it still tells me that something needs to be alive and an animal in order to be a dog, which can help me determine whether or not Snoopy is a dog.

^{xxxix} Malebranche, *Dialogues*, 240.

^{xl} The Augustinian tradition, of which Malebranche was a part, has long claimed that God was knowable through an act of introspection. Cf. Stern-Gillet, “Consciousness and Introspection in Plotinus and Augustine.”

^{xli} Moreau, “The Malebranche-Arnault debate”, 97.

^{xlii} Even granting the medieval dictum that goodness ‘diffuses’ itself, which I take to mean that an infinitely valuable being would wish to communicate its value to other things, it could do so simply by creating things which share some of its value (e.g. persons)—there is no specific need to create a distinct idea of infinite perfection.

^{xliii} E.g. Rey, “Concepts and Stereotypes”, 284.

^{xliv} Admittedly, it seems more natural to say this of artifacts than of natural things like dogs.

^{xlv} Pessin, “Malebranche on Ideas”, 263.

^{xlvi} E.g. “The idea of a circle in general, or the essence of a circle” *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* 2, 161.

^{xlvii} Malebranche, *Dialogues*, 240.

^{xlviii} An anonymous reviewer notes that if this (if true) could form the basis for a separate theistic argument, or at least an argument for a necessary mind, whose necessarily-existing concepts would make things what they are during (say) the Jurassic period, when there were no humans.

^{xlix} See Pruss, “The ontological argument and the motivational centres of our lives.”

ⁱ E.g. See de Ray, “Why the Good is Supremely Good” for an axiological argument for a ‘supremely perfect being’ based on Anselm’s *Monologion*.

ⁱⁱ Alternatively, an atheist might deny that necessity can coherently and/or meaningfully be attributed to beings. Bertrand Russell exemplifies this: “(. . .) I don’t admit the idea of a necessary being and I don’t admit that there is any particular meaning in calling other beings ‘contingent.’ These phrases don’t for me have a significance except within a logic that I reject.” Cited in Sumares, “Revisiting Bertrand Russell’s Refusal of the Christian Faith”, 855.

ⁱⁱⁱ Namely, J.N.D. Findlay, cited in Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery*, 255.