

## MALEBRANCHE'S APPROACH TO GOD'S EXISTENCE

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**Abstract.** In this paper, the author reproduces one of Nicolas Malebranche's arguments for God's existence. The text offers (I) a logical formalization of the argument, (II) a formal proof of validity of the argument and, finally, some philosophical reflections concerning not only (III.I) the soundness of the argument, but (III.II) the intellectual benefits that a logical formalization offers to a philosophical historian of philosophy.

**Keywords:** God • Malebranche • idea • formalization • formal proof of validity

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To Andr maca, Casiopea,  
Lucas and Tamara

In first place, (a) I will reproduce one of Nicolas Malebranche's (1638–1715), *O.I.*, arguments in favour of God's existence. Because the text, *i.e.*, the *Entretiens sur la m taphysique et sur la religion*, a philosophical dialogue, was written in French, I will (firstly) reproduce the text in French. (b) Following the text in French, I will formulate my English translation. Next, (c) I will informally diagram the argument. Fourthly, (d) I will propose, as correlative, the logical formalization of the argument (in accordance to quantificational first order logic). Subsequently, (e) I will propose, informally, the proof of the argument (an intuitively valid argument). Following, (f) I will construct a proof of the formal validity of the argument. To end —last but not least—, (g) I will formulate one objection concerning the soundness of the argument, that is, its demonstrative character, and (h) a philosophical reflection concerning the advantages of logical formalization for the philosophical history of philosophy (in this particular case, for the philosophical history of Early Modern philosophy), *h.e.*, the intellectual history of philosophy.

N. Malebranche was a conspicuous Cartesian philosopher (the author of *De la recherch  de la v rit  [1674]*) and theologian (the author of the *Treatise de la nature et de la gr ce [1680]*). He proposed the most (conceptually) refined version of the metaphysical theory of occasional causes, that is, the so called system of occasional causes. In 1688, he published the first edition of his metaphysical dialogue *Entretiens*



sur la métaphysique, sur la religion, et sur la mort. I have used the revised and ameliorated edition of 1711, contemporarily edited by the superbly learned Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (1918–2004), internationally acclaimed expert in the philosophies of René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche.

Here is Father Malebranche’s text. The claim concerning God’s existence is synthetically formulated by Théodore, Malebranche’s spokesman.

I. [THÉODORE:] Par la divinité nous entendons tous l’infini, l’Être sans restriction, l’Être infiniment parfait. Or rien de fini ne peut représenter l’infini. Donc il suffit de penser à Dieu pour savoir qu’il est. Ne soyez pas surprise, Théotime [one of Malebranche’s dialogue interlocutor], si Ariste me passé cela. C’est qu’il en est déjà demeuré d’accord [\* 2<sup>e</sup> Entretien (Editor’s note)]<sup>1</sup> avant que vous fussiez ici. (*Entretiens sur la métaphysique, sur la religion, et sur la mort*, VIII<sup>e</sup> Entretien [De Dieu et de ses attributs], article I [1992, p. 802])<sup>2</sup>

The *demonstrandum* of the argument is the existential proposition, “God exists” (Vd. *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion* [first published 1688], eighth conversation, first article). This argument is an important piece of Father Malebranche’s Natural theology, that is, of Father Malebranche’s metaphysical theology, according to which we see everything in God.

Next, Ariste introduces something like an elucidatory comment of Théodore’s inferential proposal (and construction).

ARISTE: Oui, Théotime, je suis convaincu que rien de fini ne peut avoir assez de réalité pour représenter l’infini, qu’en voyant le fini, on puisse y découvrir l’infini qu’il ne contient pas. Or je suis certain que je vois l’infini. Donc l’infini existe, puisque je le vois, et que je ne puis le voir qu’en lui-même. Comme mon esprit est fini, la connaissance que j’ai de l’infini est finie. Je ne le comprend pas, je ne le mesure pas: je suis même bien certain que je ne pourrai jamais le mesurer. Non seulement je n’y trouve point de fin, je vois de plus qu’il n’en a point. En un mot la perception que j’ai de l’infini est bornée: mais la réalité objective dans laquelle mon esprit se perd, pour ainsi dire, elle n’a point de bornes. C’est de quoi maintenant il m’est impossible de douter. (*Entretiens sur la métaphysique, sur la religion, et sur la mort*, VIII<sup>e</sup> Entretien [Concerning God and His Attributes], article I [1992, p. 802])<sup>3</sup>

According to this text, Ariste is convinced that our knowledge of God is direct knowledge, by no means knowledge by description (that is, a mode of non-direct knowledge). While is true that our perception of God is finite, the *realitas objectiva* that we capture through our perception of God is infinite.<sup>4</sup> That this *realitas objectiva* is an infinite reality is something we cannot reasonably doubt.

## I

Here is the diagram of the argument (and its correlative logical formalization [according to the formalism of quantificational first order logic]). This diagrammatic version is my *interpretans* concerning Father Malebranche's argument in favour of God's existence.

0. God= $_{Df.}$  the infinite being (*i. e.*, the infinitely perfect being). =  $\forall x(Gx \leftrightarrow \neg FBx)$
  1. Everything that has a limit (or a contour) is finite. =  $\forall y[\exists z(Cz \wedge yHz) \rightarrow Fy]$
  2. The finite does not represent the infinite being. =  $\forall x\forall y\{Fy \rightarrow [\neg FBx \rightarrow \neg(yRx)]\}$  / (2.0) *N. b.*: In addition, it is impossible for a finite reality to represent an infinite reality. It is notorious that the formalization of this *addendum* requires the symbolism of modal logic.
  3. Every idea has a limit (or a contour). =  $\forall y[Iy \rightarrow \exists z(Cz \wedge yHz)]$
  4. If no idea represents God then if there is at least one  $w$  who thinks God, then God exists. =  $\forall x\forall y\{\{Iy \rightarrow [Gx \rightarrow \neg(yRx)]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwTx \rightarrow \exists xGx)\}$
  5. Théodore thinks God. =  $aTb \wedge Gb$
- ↓  
God exists. =  $\exists Gx^5$

## II

Intuitively, Théodore's argument is deductively valid. From 1 & 3, it follows that (a) every idea is finite. The corresponding syllogistic form is AAA-1. From 2 and the last one we can validly infer that (b) there is no idea that represents the infinite being. The corresponding syllogistic form is AAA-1. From 0 and the last one it follows that (c) no idea represents God (by the principle of substitutivity). (d) But this proposition is identical with the antecedent of 4. Therefore, from both propositions it follows, by a *modus ponendo ponens*, (e) that if there is at least a  $w$  that thinks God, then God exists. So, (f) if Théodore thinks God, then at least a (thinking being)  $w$  thinks God (from the last one, by an existential generalization). (g) But this proposition is identical with the antecedent of "if there is at least a  $w$  that thinks God, then God exists". The logical consequence is that (h) God exists (from the two last propositions, by the rule of *modus ponendo ponens*).

## III

In order to certify the argument's deductive correction, I will formulate a formal proof of validity. My formal proof of validity is the symbolic expression of the content of the previous paragraph.

6.  $\exists z(Cz \wedge cHz) \rightarrow Fc$  (from 1 [by the rule of UI])
7.  $Ic \rightarrow \exists z(Cz \wedge cHz)$  (3 [UI])
8.  $Ic \rightarrow Fc$  (6-7 [HS])
9.  $\forall y\{Fy \rightarrow [\neg Fbb \rightarrow \neg(yRb)]\}$  (2 [UI])
10.  $Fc \rightarrow [\neg Fbb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (9 [UI])
11.  $Ic \rightarrow [\neg Fbb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (8 & 10 [HS])
12.  $Gb \leftrightarrow \neg Fbb$  (0 [UI])
13.  $Ic \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (11–12 [by the principle of substitutivity]<sup>6</sup> = (There is no idea that represents God [= *Idea Deum repræsentans non datur*]).
14.  $\forall y\{\{[Iy \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(yRb)]]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwTx \rightarrow \exists xGx)\}$  (4 [UI])
15.  $\{Ic \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwTb \rightarrow \exists xGx)$  (14 [UI])
16.  $\exists wwTb \rightarrow \exists xGx$  (13 & 15 [MPP])
17.  $aTb$  (5 [simplification])
18.  $\exists wwTb$  (17 [existential generalization])
19.  $\exists xGx$  (16 & 18 [MPP]). Q.E.D.

My reconstruction of Malebranche's argument provides a rationale for the claim according to which every idea is finite, *h.e.*, premise 3. If we dispense with this rationale, then the argument is simplified.

0. God= $_{Df}$ . the infinite being (*i.e.*, the infinitely perfect being). =  $\forall x(Gx \leftrightarrow \neg FBx)$
1. Every idea is finite. =  $\forall y(Iy \rightarrow Fy)$
2. The finite does not represent the infinite being. =  $\forall x\forall y\{Fy \rightarrow [\neg FBx \rightarrow \neg(yRx)]\}$
3. If no idea represents God then if there is at least one  $w$  who thinks God, then God exists. =  $\forall x\forall y\{\{Iy \rightarrow [Gx \rightarrow \neg(yRx)]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwTx \rightarrow \exists xGx)\}$
4. Théodore thinks God. =  $aTb \wedge Gb$   
 $\Downarrow$   
 God exists. =  $\exists xGx$
5.  $Ic \rightarrow Fc$  (1 [UI])
6.  $\forall y\{Fy \rightarrow [\neg Fbb \rightarrow \neg(yRb)]\}$  (2 [UI])
7.  $Fc \rightarrow [\neg Fbb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (6 [UI])
8.  $Ic \rightarrow [\neg Fbb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (5 & 7 [HS])
9.  $Gb \leftrightarrow \neg Fbb$  (0 [UI])
10.  $Ic \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (8–9 [by the principle of substitutivity])
11.  $\forall y\{\{[Iy \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(yRb)]]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwTx \rightarrow \exists xGx)\}$  (3 [UI])
12.  $\{Ic \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]\} \rightarrow (\forall wwTb \rightarrow \forall xGx)$  (11 [UI])
13.  $\exists wwTb \rightarrow \exists xGx$  (10 & 12 [MPP])

14.  $aTb$  (4 [simplification])
15.  $\exists wwTb$  (14 [EG])
16.  $\exists xGx$  (13 & 15 [MPP]). Q.E.D.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV

The Oratorian's argument is not sound, because there are epistemic reasons to doubt the truth of at least one of its premises. Specifically, there are epistemic reasons to doubt the truth of the second premise. Why cannot a finite being, such as a finite creature, represent God? To the extent that a vestige (Bruno 1888, p.228; Bruno 1984, p.77 [A100, G-A35]) can represent something else, with respect to which it is a similitude (Saint T. Aquinas [according to whose onto-theology, every *ens reale* is a similitude [*similitudo*] of *ipsum esse subsistens*, that is, God]) or *simulacrum*,<sup>8</sup> every finite creature, which is in principle a vestige of God, can represent God without being infinite. Malebranche seems to have confounded representation *in genere* and strictly adequate representation (*representation in specie*), that is, *genus* and *species*.

Surprisingly, Malebranche's position is similar to Hobbes' position since the English philosopher clearly stated that we cannot have an idea of God, to the extent that (a) God is infinite and (d) every idea is singular and finite (for the reason that [b] every idea is an image, and [c] every image is singular and finite (Hobbes, 1966 V, p.95). But (e) no being that is singular and finite can represent an infinite being. Therefore, (f) we cannot have an idea (*quatenus* mental representation) of God.

Additionally, premise 5 implies *the being of God*. Nevertheless, *the being of God* is the argument's *demonstrandum*. So, the argument ultimately bears a *petitio principii*. Let's explain a little bit this point. It can be observed without much ado that premise 5 is susceptible of the following enuntiation: " $\exists x(aTx \wedge Gx)$ ". Therefore, " $\exists xGx$ " is contained in 5 and, consequently, Father Malebranche's argument begs the question on behalf of God's being.

Alternatively expressed, the truth of premise 5 guarantees the superfluity of so proving God's existence.

#### V

Formalization makes easy our discovery of logical lapses, for example the begging of the question inherent to Malebranche's argument. In consideration of this shortage of Malebranche's reasoning, we can transform the Oratorian's proof in an argument for a different *demonstrandum*, that is, "God is directly known by at least one of his cognizant creatures". Proceeding in this way, we can transfigure —if we are genuinely interested in a rational reconstruction of Malebranche's theoretical proposal— an ostensible argumentative weakness in a valid argumentative expression of the Oratorian's metaphysics of knowledge, that is, Father Malebranche's gnoseology —usually

characterized, in the manuals of history of philosophy, as a typical version of ontologism.

0.  $\text{God} =_{Df.} \text{the infinite being (i. e., the infinitely perfect being).} = \forall x(Gx \leftrightarrow \neg FBx)$
1. Every idea is finite.  $= \forall y(Iy \rightarrow Fy)$
2. The finite does not represent the infinite being.  $= \forall x\forall y\{Fy \rightarrow [\neg FBx \rightarrow \neg(yRx)]\}$
3. If no idea represents God then if there is at least one knowing creature  $w$  that knows God, then God is directly known by at least one of his cognizant creatures.  $= \forall x\forall y\{Iy \rightarrow [Gx \rightarrow \neg(yRx)]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwKx \rightarrow \exists wwK_{Dir.}x)$
4. Théodore knows God.  $= aKb \wedge Gb$   
 $\Downarrow$   
 God is directly known by at least one of his cognizant creatures.  
 $= \exists wwK_{Dir.}b \wedge Gb$
5.  $Ic \rightarrow Fc$  (1 [UI])
6.  $\forall y\{Fy \rightarrow [\neg FBb \rightarrow \neg(yRb)]\}$  (2 [UI])
7.  $Fc \rightarrow [\neg FBb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (6 [UI])
8.  $Ic \rightarrow [\neg FBb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (5 & 7 [HS])
9.  $Gb \leftrightarrow \neg FBb$  (0 [UI])
10.  $Ic \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]$  (8-9 [by the principle of substitutivity])
11.  $\forall y\{[Iy \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(yRb)]] \rightarrow (\exists wwKb \rightarrow \exists wwK_{Dir.}b)\}$  (3 [UI])
12.  $\{Ic \rightarrow [Gb \rightarrow \neg(cRb)]\} \rightarrow (\exists wwKb \rightarrow \exists wwK_{Dir.}b)$  (11 [UI])
13.  $\exists wwKb \rightarrow \exists wwK_{Dir.}b$  (10 & 12 [MPP])
14.  $aKb$  (4 [simplification])
15.  $\exists wwKb$  (14 [EG])
16.  $\exists wwK_{Dir.}b$  (13 & 15 [MPP])
17.  $Gb \wedge aKb$  (4 [commutation])
18.  $Gb$  (17 [simplification])
19.  $\exists wwK_{Dir.}b \wedge Gb$  (16 & 18 [conjunction]). Q.E.D.

## VI

One relevant (epistemic) reason for the use of logical formalization in the philosophical history of philosophy, is that (a) it contributes to a better comprehension of the logical structure of the argument. To this extent, logical formalization ameliorates the comprehension of the logical structure of the argument. From this point of view, logical formalization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the comprehension of the logical structure of the argument —if by comprehension we understand a superior intelligence of the logical structure of the argument—.

In connection with item a, we must remark that (a.a) formalization allows us to establish the identity of meaning between two or more declarative sentences<sup>9</sup> and, to this extent, to obliterate a plurality of sentences that from a logical point of view are entirely otiose —therefore, to simplify the enunciation of the argument. So too, (a.b) logical formalization of inferences makes possible to identify premises that do not play a role in the argument —premises, so to say, that play a rhetorical role, not a logical role in the argumentative construction—.

Additionally, (b) logical formalization facilitates the detection of logical shortcomings in the argument. To this extent, logical formalization makes an important contribution to the systematic suppression of errors, which constitutes the third phase according to K. R. Popper's (1902–1994) schematic representation of the process of human knowledge, that is, (I) problem, (II) conjecture, (III) systematic suppression of errors and, finally, (IV) a new problem (1984, p.149).

Finally, (c) if our aim is to rationally reconstruct a philosophical *Weltanschauung*, then the recourse to logical formalization (not only of claims but arguments) is a powerful tool to identify the propositions we must introduce in order to obviate logical flaws, *ex.g.* the rupture of the logical continuity in an argumentative chain.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Both additions are mine.

<sup>2</sup>The following one is my translation of Father Malebranche's text.

[...] By the Divinity we all understand the infinite, the Being without restriction, the infinitely perfect Being. However, no finite being can represent the infinite being. Therefore, thinking God is sufficient to know that God exists. Don't be surprised, Théotime, if Ariste has conceded me that. He agreed with me concerning this topic, before you came here.

<sup>3</sup>Here is my English translation of the second paragraph of article 1.

Yes, Théotime, I am convinced that nothing finite can have enough reality for representing an infinite being; that looking in the finite, we can discover the infinite being it does not contain. Indeed, I am certain that I see the infinite being. Therefore, the infinite being exists, because I see it, and I can't see it but in itself. Because my spirit is finite, the knowledge I have concerning the infinite being is finite. I don't comprehend the infinite being, I don't measure it. I am certain that I could not measure it. Not only I don't find in it any boundary, but I see that it does not have any boundary. In a word: the perception I have concerning the infinite being is limited. However, the objective reality in which my spirit goes astray —so to say—, does not have any limit. That's, meanwhile, what is impossible for me to doubt.

<sup>4</sup>That is, the object God in itself is infinite. In this place, Malebranche's concept of *realitas objectiva* is similar, if not identical, with Francisco Suárez's (1548–1617), S.I., concept of *conceptus obiectivus*, i.e., the conceived reality in itself. Concerning Suárez's distinction, *vd. Disputationes metaphysicae* (1597), II (*De ratione essentiali seu conceptu entis*), section I, 1 (L. Vivès' Edition XXV, 64, 65). Concerning Suárez's metaphysics of the objective concept, *vd. G. Fraile Martín* (1909–1970), O.P 1978: 448 (F. Suárez, *De Anima* III, 5, 17).

<sup>5</sup>This logical formalization and the corresponding proof of formal validity (or formal cogency) have been proposed in my research project "El argumento ontológico. Exposición y examen" (The Ontological Argument. Exposition and Evaluation), pages 19 & 20. (*N. b.*: Unfortunately, this research project has not been published yet. It was thought, in 2021, for the Institute of Philosophical Investigations of University of Costa Rica, and I have not enrolled it).

Additionally, this formalization (and the formal proof) has been proposed in my unpublished paper "Una versión del argumentum a simultaneo en favor de la existencia de Dios" (Moya 2018, p.3–4).



<sup>6</sup>Or, according to Bonevac's system of natural deduction (Chapter 4 [Natural Deduction]), from 11 & 12 by the rule of Biconditional Exploitation (Vd. Bonevac 1987, p.102).

<sup>7</sup>Because of Malebranche's monotheistic conviction (according to monotheism, God simultaneously satisfies the conditions of [I] existence and [II] uniqueness), it's necessary to construct a proof of God's uniqueness. This demonstration is relatively simple, but it's not my task to provide, in this parsimonious contribution, the French philosopher's proof of God's uniqueness.

<sup>8</sup>According to Saint Thomas, "[...] imago proprie dicitur quod procedit ad similitudinem alterius. Illud autem, ad cuius similitudinem aliquid procedit, proprie dicitur exemplar; improprie vero imago". Vd. *Summa Theologiæ*, First Part, *Quæstio 35*, Article 1, Answer to the first Objection (Aquinas 1939, 1, 239, column 2). Identically, "[a]d primum ergo dicendum, quod licet creaturæ non pertingant ad hoc quod similes Deo secundum suam naturam, similitudine speciei, ut homo genitus homini generanti; attingunt tamen ad ejus similitudinem secundum repræsentationem rationis intellectæ a Deo [that is, the exemplar that preexists in God's archetypal intellect]; ut domus quæ est in materia, domui quæ est in mente artificis". Vd. *Summa Theologiæ*, First Part, *Quæstio 44*, Article 3, Answer to the first Objection (Aquinas 1939, 1, 302, column 2). To that extent, the relation of similitude does not presuppose identity in species, but some proportion between, for example, the principle ( $=_{Transl.} principium$ ) and the thing that metaphysically depends on the principle ( $=_{Transl.} principiatum$ ).

<sup>9</sup>For example, "Jesus Christ loves Saint John the Divine" and "Saint John the Divine is loved by Jesus Christ". It's notorious that both sentences express one and the same proposition — therefore, logically considered the first one is identical to the second one—.

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