{228} Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth* (1674–75)[1]

Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) was a philosopher and priest. He had a traditional scholastic education, including three years at the Sorbonne. He entered the Congregation of the Oratory in 1660 and was ordained in 1664. The Oratory was surely responsible for the Augustinian influence on his philosophy, but an accidental discovery in 1664 of Descartes' Treatise on Man *provided him with his other major influence. His first and most significant work*, The Search after Truth, *was published initially in 1674–75 and subsequently printed with an increasingly long set of* Elucidations. *The work elicited critiques by Foucher and Arnauld; although he denied having a taste for polemics, Malebranche engaged in lengthy debates with these two critics, as well as others (Leibniz and the Cartesian Pierre-Sylvain Régis, for example). In* The Search after Truth, *Malebranche presents and defends the two doctrines for which he is best known, the occasionalism that denies causation between any finite substances and the claim that we see all things in God.*[2]

Book III. Part II: The Pure Understanding. The Nature of Ideas

Chapter 1

I. What is understood by ideas. That they truly exist and are necessary to perceive all material objects. I think everyone agrees that we do not perceive objects outside of us by themselves. We see the sun, the stars, and an infinity of objects outside of us; it is not likely that the soul leaves the body and, as it were, goes wandering about the heavens in order to contemplate all these objects. It does not therefore see them by themselves; the immediate object of our mind when it sees the sun, for example, is not the sun, but is something intimately united to our soul, and this is what I call an *idea*. Thus, by the word *idea*, I understand here nothing other than the immediate object, or the object closest to the mind, when it perceives {229} something, namely, what touches and modifies the mind with the perception it has of an object.

It must be noted that for the mind to perceive an object, it is absolutely necessary for the idea of that object to be actually present to it—it is not possible to doubt this—but it is not necessary for there to be something similar to that idea outside it. For it very often happens that we perceive things which do not exist and even which have never existed; thus, we often have in the mind real ideas of things that have never existed. When, for example, a man imagines a golden mountain, it is absolutely necessary that the idea of this mountain be really present to his mind. When a madman, or someone with a high fever or who is sleeping, sees some animal as if before his eyes, it is certain that what he sees is not nothing, and that, thus, the idea of this animal really exists—but this golden mountain and this animal have never existed.

However, since men are led as if by nature to believe that only corporeal objects exist, they judge of the reality and existence of things in a completely different way than they should. For once they perceive an object, they want it to be quite certain that the object exists, even though it often happens that there is nothing outside. They want, in addition, for the object to be exactly as they see it, which never happens. But, with respect to the idea that exists necessarily and that cannot be other than as it is seen, they ordinarily judge without reflection that it is nothing—as if ideas did not have a great number of properties—as if the idea of a square, for example, were not quite different from that of a circle or of a number and did not represent completely different things—which can never happen for nothingness, since nothingness has no properties. It is therefore indubitable that ideas have a very real existence. But now let us examine what their nature is, and their essence, and let us see what in the soul can be capable of representing all things to it.

All the things the soul perceives are of two kinds: they are either in the soul or outside the soul. Those in the soul are its own thoughts, that is, all its different modifications, for by the words *thought, manner of thinking*, or *modification of the soul*, I

understand generally all those things that cannot be in the soul without the soul perceiving them through the internal sensation it has of itself—such as its own sensations, imaginings, pure intellections, or simply its conceptions, even its passions and natural inclinations. Now, our soul does not need ideas in order to perceive all these things in the way it perceives them, because these things are inside the soul, or rather because they are only the soul itself in this or that fashion, just as the actual roundness and motion of a body are only that body shaped and moved in this or that fashion.

But as for things outside the soul, we can perceive them only by means of ideas, assuming that these things cannot be intimately united to the soul. There are two kinds of these, spiritual and material. As for the spiritual ones, it seems that they can be revealed to the soul without ideas and by themselves. For although experience teaches us that we cannot communicate our thoughts to one another immediately and by ourselves, but only through speech or other sensible signs to which we have attached our ideas, it might be said that God has decreed it thus only for the duration of this life, in order to prevent the disorder that would happen if people could communicate as it pleased them. But when justice and order reign and we are delivered from the captivity of our body, we shall perhaps be able to communicate through the intimate union among ourselves, as the angels seem to be able to do in heaven. Thus, it does not seem to be absolutely necessary to have ideas represent spiritual things to the soul, because it can happen that they are seen through themselves, though in a very imperfect fashion.

I shall not examine here how two minds can be united to one another and whether they can in this way reveal their thoughts to each other. I believe, however, that there is no purely intelligible substance other than God's, that nothing can be discovered with evidence except in its light, and that the union of minds cannot make them visible to each other. For although we are closely united to ourselves, we are and will be unintelligible to ourselves until we see ourselves in God, and until he presents to us the perfectly intelligible idea he has of our being contained in his being. Thus, although it seems I am here allowing that angels can by themselves make known to one another both what they are and what they are thinking—which at bottom I do not believe to be true—I warn that {230} this is only because I do not want to argue about it, as long as you grant me what is incontestable, namely, that material things cannot be seen by themselves and without ideas.

In the seventh chapter I will explain my opinion on the way we know minds and I will show that for now we cannot know them completely by themselves, even though they might be able to be united with us. But I am speaking here primarily about material things, which certainly cannot be united to our soul in the way it is necessary for it to perceive them, because, since they are extended and the soul is not so, there is no relation between them. Moreover, our souls do not leave the body to measure

the size of the heavens and, as a result, they cannot see bodies on the outside except through the ideas representing them. This is what everyone must agree with.

II. Division of all the ways according to which objects can be seen from the outside. We assert, therefore, that it is absolutely necessary that the ideas we have of bodies and of all the other objects we do not perceive by themselves come from these very bodies or from these objects; or else that our soul has the power of producing these ideas; or that God has produced them with it while creating it or produces them every time we think about some object; or that the soul has in itself all the perfections it sees in these bodies; or finally that it is united to a completely perfect being which contains generally all intelligible perfections, or all the ideas of created beings.

We are not able to see objects except in one of these ways. Let us examine which of these is the most likely without prejudice and without fearing the difficulty of the question. Perhaps we will resolve it clearly enough, even though we do not claim here to give incontestable demonstrations for all people, but rather very persuasive proofs for those who will at least meditate about them with serious care, for we would perhaps appear presumptuous if we were to speak otherwise.

Chapter 2

That material objects do not transmit species resembling them. The most common opinion is that of the Peripatetics, who claim that external objects transmit species which resemble them, and that these species are carried by the external senses to the common sense. They call these species *impressed* because objects impress them on the external senses. These impressed species, being material and sensible, are made intelligible by the *agent* or *active intellect* and are capable of being received in the *passive intellect*. These species, thus spiritualized, are called *expressed* species, because they are expressed from the impressed species, and through them the *passive intellect* knows all material things.

We shall not pause here to explicate further these fine things and the various ways different philosophers conceive of them. For although they do not agree about the number of faculties they attribute to the interior sense and to the understanding, and there are even many of them who strongly doubt whether an *agent intellect* is needed to know sensible objects, still they almost all agree that external objects transmit species or images resembling them; and it is only on this foundation that they multiply their faculties and defend their *agent intellect*. Since this foundation has no solidity, as we will show, it is not necessary to pause further in order to overthrow everything that has been built on it.

We assert, then, that it is not likely that objects transmit images or species resembling them; and here are some reasons why. The first is derived from the impenetrability of bodies. All objects, such as the sun, the stars, and all those close to our eyes are unable to transmit species of another nature than theirs. This is why philosophers commonly say that these species are gross and material, in contrast to

the expressed species, which are spiritualized. These impressed species of objects are therefore little bodies; thus, they cannot penetrate each other or all the spaces from the earth to the heavens, which must be full of them. From this it is easy to conclude that they must rub against and damage each other from every side, and that thus they cannot make objects visible.

Moreover, a great number of objects in the heavens and on earth can be seen from the same place or the same point; therefore, the species of all these objects would have to be capable of being reduced to a point. {231} Now since they are extended, they are impenetrable; therefore, *etc.*

But not only can we see a great number of very large and vast objects from the same point, there is even no point in all these great spaces of the world from which an almost infinite number of objects cannot be discovered, even objects as large as the sun, moon, and heavens. There is therefore no point in the whole world where the species of all these things cannot meet—which goes against all semblance of truth.

The second reason is taken from the change that happens in the species. It is certain that the closer an object is, the larger its species must be, since we see the object as larger. Now, we do not see what can make this species diminish or what can happen to the parts composing it when it was larger. But what is even harder to conceive of according to their view is how, if we look at this object with a telescope or a microscope, the species suddenly becomes five or six hundred times larger than it was, for still less do we see with what parts it can be so greatly increased in an instant.

The third reason is that when we look at a perfect cube, all the species of its sides are unequal, and yet we still see all its sides as equally square. And, similarly, when we consider ovals and parallelograms in a picture, which can transmit only species of the same shape, we see only circles and squares there. This clearly shows that it is not necessary for the object we are looking at to produce species similar to it in order for us to see it.

Finally, we are not able to conceive of how it can happen that a body which does not sensibly diminish can always emit species in all directions and continually fill the great spaces around it—and do this with inconceivable speed. For a hidden object can be seen at the very instant of its discovery, from several million leagues away and from all sides. And, what seems even more strange, very active bodies, such as air and some others, do not have the force to emit images resembling them—which coarser and less active bodies, such as earth, stones, and almost all hard bodies do.

But we do not wish to linger further and bring forth all the reasons opposed to this opinion, because it cannot be done, since the least mental effort yields such a great number of them that they cannot be exhausted. The reasons we have just related are enough; they were not even needed, given what we have said about this subject in Book I, where we explained the errors of the senses. But such a great

number of philosophers hold this opinion that we thought it necessary to say something about it in order to make them reflect upon their thoughts.

Chapter 4

That we do not see objects by means of ideas created with us. That God does not produce ideas in us at each moment we need them. The third opinion is held by those who claim that all ideas are innate or created with us.

To recognize the implausibility of this opinion, it should be considered that there are many completely different things in the world of which we have ideas. But to mention only simple figures, it is certain that their number is infinite, and even if we attend only to one, such as the ellipse, we cannot doubt that the mind conceives of an infinite number of different kinds of them when it conceives that one of the diameters may be lengthened to infinity while the other remains always the same.

In the same way, since the height of a triangle can be increased or decreased to infinity while the base remains always the same, we conceive that there can be an infinite number of different kinds of triangles; moreover, and this is what I beg to

have considered here, the mind perceives this infinite number in some way, even though we can imagine only a very few and cannot at the same time have particular and distinct ideas of many triangles of different kinds. But what should be especially noted is that the mind's general idea of this infinite number of different kinds of triangles sufficiently proves that if we do not conceive of all these different triangles by particular ideas—in short, if we do not comprehend the infinite—it is not through our lack of ideas or because the infinite is not present to us, but only through the mind's lack of capacity and scope. If a person applied himself to considering the properties of all the different kinds of triangles, and even if he should forever continue this kind of investigation, he would never lack new and particular ideas, but his mind would exhaust itself uselessly.

What I have just said about triangles can be applied to figures of five, six, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand sides, and so on to infinity. And if the sides of a triangle can have infinite relations with one another, making an infinity of kinds of triangles, it is easy to see that figures of four, five, or a million sides can have even greater differences, since they can have a greater number of relations and combinations of their sides than simple triangles.

The mind, therefore, sees all these things; it has ideas of them. It is certain that these ideas will never be unavailable to it, even if it should spend infinite centuries considering even a single figure; and if it does not perceive these infinite figures all at once, or if it does not comprehend the infinite, it is only because its scope is quite limited. It therefore has an infinite number of ideas—I do not mean just an infinite number: it has as many infinite numbers of ideas as there are different figures, such that, since there is an infinite number of different figures, in order to know the figures alone, the mind must have an infinity of infinite numbers of ideas.

Now, I ask whether it is likely that God has created so many things along with the mind of man. It does not appear to me to be so, mainly because all this could be done in another very simple and very easy way, as we shall see shortly. For as God always acts in the simplest ways, it does not seem reasonable to explain how we know objects by assuming the creation of an infinity of beings, since this difficulty can be resolved in an easier and more natural fashion.

But even if the mind had a store of all the ideas necessary for it to see objects, nevertheless it would be impossible to explain how the soul could choose them to represent them to itself—how, for example, the soul could make itself perceive all the different objects whose size, figure, distance, and motion it discovers the instant it opens its eyes in the countryside. It could not even perceive by this means a single object, such as the sun, when it is present to the eyes of the body. For, since the image the sun impresses in the brain {235} does not at all resemble the idea we have of it (as we have proved elsewhere) and the soul does not perceive the motion the sun produces in the back of the eyes and in the brain, it is not conceivable that it can rightly predict, among the infinite number of its ideas it would have, which one must

be represented for the sun to be imagined or seen, and seen as having this or that determinate size. We cannot therefore say that the ideas of things are created with us and that this suffices for us to see the objects surrounding us.

Nor can we say that God produces at every moment as many new ideas as we perceive different things. This view is sufficiently refuted by what we have just said in this chapter. Moreover, it is necessary that at all times we actually have in us the ideas of all things, since we can at all times will to think about all things—which we could not do if we did not already perceive them confusedly, that is to say, if an infinite number of ideas were not present to our mind; for, after all, we cannot will to think about objects of which we have no idea. Moreover, it is evident that the idea or immediate object of our mind, when we think of immense spaces, or of a circle in general, or of indeterminate being, is not a created thing. For created reality can be neither infinite nor even general, such as what we perceive there. But all this will be seen more clearly in what follows.

[…]

Chapter 6

That we see all things in God. In the previous chapters we have examined four different ways in which the soul might see external objects, none of which appears to us likely. There remains only the fifth way, which alone appears to conform to reason and to be most appropriate for allowing us to know the dependence that minds have on God in all their thoughts.

To understand this fifth way adequately, we must remember what we have just said in the previous chapter: It is absolutely necessary for God to have in himself the ideas of all the beings he has created, since otherwise he could not have produced them, and thus he sees all these beings by considering those perfections he contains to which they have a relation. We must know, further, that God is very closely united to our souls through his presence, so that we can say that he is the place of minds in the same way that spaces are, in a sense, the place of bodies. Assuming these two things, it is certain that the mind can see what in God represents created beings, since the latter is very spiritual, intelligible, and present to the mind. Thus, the mind can see in God the works of God, assuming that God does indeed will to reveal to the mind what it is in him that represents them. Now, here are the reasons that seem to prove that he wills this rather than the creation of an infinite number of ideas in each mind.

Not only is it in strict conformity with reason but also it is apparent in the economy of all of nature that God never does by very difficult means what can be done by very simple and easy means. For God never does anything in vain and without reason. What shows his wisdom and his power is not his doing small things with great means—this goes against reason and indicates a limited intelligence—on the contrary, it is doing great things with very simple and easy means. Thus, it was

with extension alone that he produced everything we see that is admirable in nature and even what gives life and motion to animals. Those who absolutely insist on substantial forms, faculties, and souls in animals to perform their functions (different from their blood and bodily organs) at the same time would have it that God lacks intelligence or that he cannot make all these admirable things with extension alone. They measure the power and supreme wisdom of God by the smallness of their mind. Thus, since God can reveal everything to minds simply by willing that they see what is in their midst, that is to say, what is in him which is related to and represents these things, there is no likelihood that he does it otherwise and that he produces for this as many infinities of infinite numbers of ideas as there are created minds.

But it should be carefully noted that we cannot conclude that minds see the essence of God from the fact of their seeing all things in God in this way. God's essence is his own absolute being, and minds do not see the divine substance taken absolutely but only as relative to creatures or as they are able to participate in it. What they see in God is very imperfect, and God is most perfect. They see matter shaped, divisible, {236} and so forth, but in God there is nothing divisible or shaped, for God is all being, because he is infinite and comprises everything; but he is no particular being. However, what we see is only one or several particular beings, and we do not understand this perfect simplicity of God, which contains all beings. In addition, it might be said that we do not so much see ideas of things as we see things themselves represented by ideas; when we see a square, for example, we do not say that we see the idea of the square united to the mind but only the square outside it.

The second reason for thinking that we see beings because God wills that what is in him representing them be revealed to us—and not because we have as many ideas created with us as we can see things—is that this puts created minds in a position of complete dependence on God, the most complete possible. For, this being so, not only would we see nothing unless God wills that we see it, but we would see nothing unless God himself made us see it. […]

For, after all, it is difficult enough to understand distinctly the dependence that our minds have on God in all their particular actions, assuming that they have everything we distinctly know to be necessary for them to act, or all the ideas of things present to their mind. And that general and confused word *concourse*, by means of which we claim to explain the dependence of creatures on God, does not awaken any distinct idea in an attentive mind; and yet it is good that people know very distinctly that they can do nothing without God.

But the strongest argument of all is the way the mind perceives all things. It is certain, and everyone knows it from experience, that when we want to think about some particular thing, we first glance over all beings and then apply ourselves to considering the object we wish to think about. Now, it is indubitable that we could not desire to see a particular object we had not already seen, though confusedly and in general. Thus, since we are able to desire to see all beings, sometimes one,

sometimes another, it is certain that all beings are present to our mind; and it seems that all beings cannot be present to our mind without God—he who contains all things in the simplicity of his being—being present to it.

It even seems that the mind would not be capable of representing to itself universal ideas of genus, species, etc., had it not seen all the beings contained in one. Since every creature is a particular being, we cannot say that we see something created when, for example, we see a triangle in general. Finally, I do not think that we can account for the way the mind knows abstract and general truths, except through the presence of him who can illuminate the mind in an infinity of different ways.

Finally, the most beautiful, highest, most solid, primary proof of God's existence (or the one that makes the fewest assumptions) is the idea we have of the infinite. For it is certain that the mind perceives the infinite, though it does not comprehend it, and that it has a very distinct idea of God, which it can have only by means of its union with him, since we cannot conceive that the idea of an infinitely perfect being—the one we have of God—should be something created.

But not only does the mind have the idea of the infinite, it even has it before that of the finite. For we conceive of infinite being merely by conceiving of being, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite. But in order for us to conceive of a finite being, we must necessarily subtract something from this general notion of being, which consequently must come first. Thus, the mind perceives nothing except in the idea it has of the infinite; and as for this idea being formed from the confused assemblage of all our ideas of particular beings, as philosophers think, on the contrary, every particular idea is only a participation in the general idea of the infinite: In the same way, God does not derive his being from creatures, while every creature is only an imperfect participation in the divine being.

Here is a proof that may constitute a demonstration for those accustomed to abstract reasoning. It is certain that ideas are efficacious, since they act in the mind and illuminate it, and since they make it happy or unhappy through the pleasant or unpleasant perceptions by which they affect it. Now nothing can act in the mind immediately unless it is superior to the mind; nothing but God alone can do this. For only the Author of our being can change its modifications. Therefore, it is necessary that all our ideas are located {237} in the efficacious substance of the divinity, which alone is intelligible or capable of illuminating us, because it alone can affect intelligences. […]

Finally, it is not possible for God to have any other principal end for his actions than himself. This is a notion common to all people capable of some reflection; and Sacred Scripture does not allow us to doubt that God has made all things for himself. It is therefore necessary that not only our natural love—I am referring to the impulse he produces in our mind—tends toward him, but also the knowledge and light he gives the mind must allow us to know something in him, for everything coming from God can only be for God. If God made a mind and gave it the sun as an idea or as an

immediate object of knowledge, it seems to me that God would be making this mind and the idea of this mind for the sun and not for himself.

God, therefore, cannot make a mind in order for it to know his works without that mind in some way being able to see God in seeing his works. Thus, it might be said that if we did not see God in some way, we would not see anything, just as if we did not love God—I mean if God did not continuously impress upon us the love of good in general—we would not love anything. For, this love being our will, we cannot love or will anything without it, since we cannot love particular goods except by determining toward these goods the motion of love God has given us for himself. Thus, in the same way that we do not love anything except through the necessary love we have for God, we do not see anything except through the natural knowledge we have of God; all the particular ideas we have of creatures are only limitations of the idea of the Creator, just as all the motions of the will toward creatures are only determinations of the motion toward the Creator. […]

Therefore, we think that truths, even the eternal truths such as "twice two is four," are not absolute beings, much less do we think that they are God himself. For, clearly, this truth consists only in the relation of equality between twice two and four. Thus, we do not say, as does Saint Augustine, that we see God in seeing truths, but in seeing the *ideas* of these truths—for the ideas are real, whereas the equality between the ideas, which is the truth, is nothing real. When we say, for example, that the cloth we are measuring is three ells long, the cloth and the ells are real. But the equality between the three ells and the cloth is not at all a real being; the equality is only a relation holding between the three ells and the cloth. When we say that twice two is four, the ideas of the numbers are real, but the equality between them is only a relation. Thus, according to our view, we see God when we see eternal truths, not because these truths are God but because the ideas on which these truths depend are in God; perhaps Saint Augustine also understood it that way. We also believe that we know changeable and corruptible things in God, even though Saint Augustine speaks only of immutable and incorruptible things; it is not necessary to posit some imperfection in God for this, since it is sufficient, as we have already said, that God should reveal to us what in him is related to these things.

But although I may say that we see material and sensible things in God, we must take note that I am not saying that we have sensations of them in God, but only that it is God who acts in us; for God surely knows sensible things, but he does not sense them. When we perceive something sensible, two things are found in our perception: *sensation* and pure *idea*. The sensation is a modification of our soul, and God causes it in us. He can cause this modification even though he does not have it himself, because he sees in the idea he has of our soul that it is capable of it. As for the idea united to the sensation, it is in God, and we see it because it pleases God to reveal it to us. God unites the sensation to the idea when objects are present so that we may

believe them to be thus and enter into the sensations and passions we should have in relation to them.

We believe, finally, that all minds see the eternal laws, as well as other things, in God, but with some difference. They know order and the eternal truths and even the beings that God has made according to these truths or according to order, through the union these minds necessarily have with the Word, or wisdom of God, which enlightens them, as we have just explained. But it is through the impression they constantly receive from the will of God, who leads them toward him and who tries, so to speak, to render their will entirely similar to his own, that {238} they realize that the order is a law; that is, that they know the eternal laws, such as that we must love good and shun evil, that justice must be loved more than all riches, that it is better to obey God than to command men, and an infinity of other natural laws. For the knowledge of all these laws is not different from the knowledge of this impression, which they always feel in themselves, though they do not always follow it through the free choice of their will, and which they know to be common to all minds, though it is not equally strong in all minds. […]