
H-France Review Vol. 20 (November 2020), No. 197

Alain Badiou, *Malebranche: Theological Figure, Being 2*, trans. Jason E. Smith with Susan Spitzer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xxxvii + 193 pp. Notes and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-231-17478-7.

Review by Colby Dickinson, Loyola University Chicago.

This second publication in a series of the lectures of the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou brings with it a host of introductory apparatuses that detail the context of Badiou's seminars, by both the series editors and Badiou himself, as well as general introductions to this particular seminar by both the translator and Badiou. The ample context provided for Badiou's seminar is subsequently paralleled by the somewhat lengthy historical context provided for the Oratorian priest and Christian philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) and his key work, the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, given by Badiou throughout the first two sessions among the seven that comprise this book. The lectures themselves are stocked with helpful comparisons and contrasts between Malebranche and his philosophical interlocutors, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza and Pascal, as well as Malebranche's dealings with his critics and contemporaries, such as Antoine Arnauld, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet and François Fénelon. There are also some highly intriguing and illuminating tensions between the Jansenists and the Jesuits that provide a good deal of insight into Malebranche's thought on the whole.

Essentially, as we are quick to discover, Malebranche's originality lay in his attempts to bring Cartesian thought into Christian belief, providing a fitting analogy for Badiou: "Hegel was to Marx what Descartes was to Malebranche" (p. 8). Whereas, for Pascal, the route toward saving Christianity was directed solely through alternatives to the hyper-rationality of modernity, for Malebranche it was only by identifying Christianity *with* reason itself--by "interweaving Christianity directly into the Cartesian axiomatic" (p. 11)--that it might be saved. Philosophy, by this count, was always already "Christian philosophy," and the only conclusion Malebranche wished to draw in the end was that "Without Christ, there is no meaning, and not just for Christians: there is no meaning, period, no meaning for thought" (p. 12).

Badiou repeatedly emphasizes two basic principles that guided Malebranche's theoretical system, and which emanated wholly from Descartes' philosophy: first, that all human visions are really visions perceived only "in God," so that whatever we see can only truly be perceived as the idea of a thing "as it is in God, for in God there are ideas of everything" (pp. 20-21). For Malebranche, Badiou finds, this first and irreducible principle was "only a radicalization of Cartesian dualism" (p. 21). The second axiom to which he scrupulously adhered, and which was also directed toward answering those Cartesian problems regarding what takes place outside of the mind, was

occasionalism, or the belief that only “God alone has any efficacy” (p. 21). In other words, only God causes things to happen. Both views were, Badiou notes, the result of keeping a strict Cartesian dualism between thought and the body.

What Malebranche eventually creates is an “ontological legalism” (p. 24), as Badiou phrases matters, where everything is subsumable under these two essential axioms. Because of this rigid schema being imposed on Christian belief, moreover, the entire world is organized into a political ontology geared toward God’s glory, with everything needing to be balanced accordingly. Providing such a balancing, or “counterbalancing”, act is the source of Malebranche’s creative genius, according to Badiou, but it is also what allows his entire Christian philosophical system to be little more than a Baroque ornament in the end.

As Badiou will outline matters, Christ henceforth becomes a “necessary concept” within a rational system and “not only, or even mainly, a revealed fact” (p. 31), a situation that led, in turn, to the perception that it was not a narrative or a story that was being defended by Malebranche, but rationality itself (p. 32). This realization furthermore leads Malebranche to some startling conclusions, such as that the world we inhabit is more or less a fiction or a fantasy brought about by God wherein the only true reality we perceive as our world lies in the manner by which Scripture tells us that a world exists at all. Christianity obtains a true universality in his thought because everything, including the Church itself, follows necessarily from the principles of rationality.

The abyss that lies between the finite world and the infinite God, for Malebranche, is such that there is simply no comparison between them, meaning that the world does not glorify God in any way (p. 58). A theological system is thereby constructed wherein “maximum glory is obtained provided there is a minimum of world” (p. 88). In Badiou’s words, “The gap between the finite and the infinite can only be bridged by the infinite” (p. 63), allowing for a theory of Incarnation, but also of glory, to be a rational principle accessible to all of humankind. These formulations will ultimately allow Malebranche to construct what Badiou will term an “immanentist ontology” that is also “an ontology of the subject” (p. 63), and it is within this last proposition—that an ontology of the subject best illuminates the divine being—that we are able to glimpse something of our human subjectivity as well. What becomes fascinating in Badiou’s reading of Malebranche precisely on this point is the way in which God becomes the great “calculator of himself. Even when he calculates with regard to grace or the world, ultimately he reckons only with himself” (p. 65). God’s autonomy, which eventually becomes difficult for Malebranche to distinguish from human autonomy, as his fiercest critics pointed out at the time of his writing, is what supports God’s subjectivity through God’s desire, which itself functions as law and the order that springs to life from it.

Malebranche’s tautological statement that “God has the desire to be God” as the definition of God (p. 94) is extended by Badiou to suggest that “God desires to produce this meaning that is God” (p. 95), which is really, by turns, how humanity sees itself. By portraying things this way, a dimension of moral laws and their universality thus appears as a consequence of God’s desires, which God has himself to obey. As one might expect, there are many significant theological questions that Malebranche has to try to balance by taking such views, such as how sin and evil permeate this order, as well as how Christ brings salvation to the world. In terms that echo some of the strongest theological presentations of God’s indifferent grace, which falls where it happens to, like the rain, upon those who have been indiscriminately chosen from among those who dwell

in a forever-fallen world, God's glory is what humanity is engineered to desire. Having grace fall indiscriminately upon whomever it does is likewise a reflection of "the intrinsic beauty of this law itself" for Malebranche (p. 120). Christ, however, functions as a mediator of grace insofar as one can "seduce" him to advocate on their behalf with the universal, indifferent law of God's grace (p. 126). What Malebranche ultimately does, Badiou wagers, is reinforce the idea of the world as God's fantasy (p. 95), "Because it is, in fact, the world that seduces God, the world that is, ultimately, the scene of his desire. The world is God's fetish" (p. 104). Watching Malebranche attempt to "balance" these theological matters--such as how Christ fits into this scheme of a rationalized God, how miracles as transgressions of the law fit into his scheme or how to account for lack in the desires of God--becomes an engrossing exercise that mirrors so many modern theological efforts to do similar things.

Turning to the subjectivity that is in play within these formulations of divine being helps us to understand, not only how many of these historical-theological configurations of the divine subject portray grace as "God's neurosis", God's sadism, his narcissism or his masochism (pp. 99, 174), but also how they actually present human neurosis (a "neurotic undecidability" in Badiou's phrasing) in various shapes and sizes. Seeing God *as* subject also allows us to realize how Malebranche's God is divided in two *by* the world (p. 105), how Christ is the unconscious dimension of God's consciousness (p. 153) and how the Fall is the story that announces to humanity the "status of existence" as "objects of God's desire" (p. 108), hence the necessity of the Church, or the community that intends to be part of God's desire. As Badiou will describe this state of things: "In effect, to desire to be the proper object of God's desire is to desire to be part of his Church since, ultimately, the Church, with Christ as its head, is really the object of God's desire. It is therefore to desire to contribute to the glory of God" (p. 110). To be saved means therefore to desire this state of existence and so to exhibit the grace of God (a very Calvinistic proposition that merely potentially justifies a given order or status quo).

We sense at this point, too, the unending work of grace in our world, as Malebranche contemplates the incompleteness that arises from the "arbitrariness of grace" that is its temporal nature. "The definition of grace is that grace is related to whether a man desires to be the object of the other's desire, and therefore whether he desires to incorporate himself into the Church" (p. 144). Though such formulations echo many theological sentiments made since the Reformation, what we are also witness to in this theological effort is a perpetually modern dilemma: "if God exists as a subject, man does not exist", and, vice versa, "if man exists, God does not exist as a subject" (p. 157). According to Badiou, this is the reality that Malebranche's Christian philosophy ultimately forces us to confront. Through certain theological formulations from Malebranche that blur the boundaries of divine-human existence--"The human subject's desire is the desire of God" (p. 160) or "the thought of God ultimately amounts to the desire for desire" (p. 173)--we drift steadily closer and closer to the realization that modernity has only revealed to us the theological-historical mechanisms through which humanity (mis)understands nothing more than itself.

This is perhaps the main reason why Badiou concludes his seminar with the declaration that Malebranche's theological system is little more than an "intellectual monument" with little purpose for us today and certainly no one to inhabit it: "He was not someone who saved the Church, but someone who built an intellectual monument to it. So he, too, built a Church, but a Church that probably had no services" (p. 176). Like a gigantic Baroque statue, his was a monument for which "there is no use other than visiting and admiring it, or attempting

fragmentary uses of its ornaments” (p. 176). As Badiou will summarize matters, Malebranche’s rational, Cartesian system was a Baroque ornament, one that sought to mathematize Christianity and faith itself: “Malebranche tried to do for Christianity what Galileo did for nature: that is to say, he attempted to establish the integral transmissibility of its laws” (p. 28).

One of the more unique aspects of this seminar is the way in which Malebranche’s thought has had almost no impact upon Badiou’s own original philosophical contributions. Indeed, toward the end of the work—and all-too-briefly—Malebranche’s thought is countered by Pascal and the courage of the latter’s wager in the face of rational critique, a modern legacy that Kierkegaard too had continued. Despite the distance that Badiou takes with regard to Malebranche’s thought, however, it is precisely this distance that makes these lectures so appealing and insightful, in my opinion, allowing us to access a critical model for modern thought that contains many significant and relevant reminders of just how humanity wields theological propositions in order to speak indirectly, and politically, about itself. If Badiou’s short book on Saint Paul and universality—which was also one of his seminars—was a positive incorporation of particular religious insights for his own formulations of a philosophy of the event, his seminar on Malebranche makes for an excellent counterpoint that illuminates both why Badiou found Paul much more helpful to utilize, as well as just how important it is to keep track of modern theological developments and the political ontologies they frequently engender in our world.

Colby Dickinson
Loyola University Chicago
cdickinson1@luc.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172