



The Problem of Continual Creation

Nathan Hutchinson

Malebranche argued that God recreates the world in every instance, and that this is how the world is conserved in being. This thesis of continual creation is seen by Malebranche as the only explanation of being that preserves God as a necessary feature of reality, which was considered a mandatory and undeniable requirement to any ontological position during Malebranche's time of writing. However, I argue that the thesis of continual creation suffers a problem which renders it metaphysically impossible, and so should be denied despite its appeal to this requirement.

Keywords: Continual Creation, God, CCC Thesis, Conservation of Universe, Malebranche.

In discussions of the causal role of God, Malebranche, and most others at the time, held that at the very minimum, God conserves the universe in being. There are, however, different ways to conceive of conservation. In the first section of this paper, I will outline two conceptions of conservation, conservation through inaction, and a version of conservation through action, namely conservation through continual creation (hereon CCC thesis). Following, I will present Malebranche's arguments against the former and in favor of the latter. In the second section, I will argue that the CCC thesis is metaphysically impossible, and in so doing defend conservation through inaction.

The first conception of conservation, conservation through inaction, states that God does not do anything to conserve the world, rather, He merely refrains from annihilating it with His will¹. Because He can choose to destroy the world at will, not doing so is, in a way, conserving the world in being. On this conception, God creates the world *ex nihilo* and the world is sufficient to preserve itself. The second conception of conservation states that God creates the world *ex nihilo* and then actively wills the world's continued being. On this view, annihilating the world only requires that He ceases this will². Malebranche holds this latter view, but crucially, he holds that the act of willing on the part of God is an act of creation, he writes, "the conservation of creatures is simply their continued creation", and later, "... creation does not pass away because, in God, conservation and creation are one and the same volition which consequently is necessarily followed by the same effects"³. That is, on Malebranche's account, conservation through action is God recreating the world in every instant through some act or acts of volition (my argument works on single or multiple volitions, so it does not matter which one). This latter conception of conservation is referred to as the CCC thesis⁴. Malebranche gives two arguments against conservation through inaction, specifically, he aims to show why conservation of the world cannot merely be the absence of God's volition to destroy it. In so doing, he argues for the CCC thesis. In the next few paragraphs I will present these arguments, starting with a brief defense of conservation through inaction.

¹ Nicholas Malebranche. "Selections from Dialogues on Metaphysics" In *Philosophical Selections*, 1992, 222-238.

² Malebranche., 228.

³ Malebranche., 228.

⁴ Heide.

Consider the following analogy (adapted from an analogy presented by Malebranche, 228). A skilled watchmaker does not make a watch that he must continually recreate in order to keep its operation going. He creates a watch, which, after the moment of creation, can continue to be on its own, unless he chooses to destroy it. It might seem that continually acting to preserve the watch would be a waste of effort on part of the watchmaker, for, as Malebranche's objector puts it, "there is no necessity of a volition when nothing has to be done"⁵. One might think the only reason the watchmaker would have to conserve the watch through action would be if he had built a poorly designed watch. Of course, we cannot attribute poor design to God, so Malebranche must give an account as to why the perfect Creator would build a world that could not exist on its own.

Malebranche argues that the world is such because it, and the creatures within it, are essentially dependent on God⁶. Specifically, since God created the world *ex nihilo*, the world is dependent on God in a special way in which the watch is not dependent on the watchmaker⁷. The watchmaker does not create the watch from nothing, he creates the watch from nature. So, as Malebranche's argument goes, the watchmaker could disappear, and the watch would persist – the watch derives its being from nature, not the watchmaker. The world, however, comes directly from God, out of nothing, and so is essentially dependent on God⁸. At the time of Malebranche's writing, this claim (referred to as the essential dependence thesis), which essentially states that without God the world could not exist, was universally agreed upon, and so, Malebranche must only show

⁵ Malebranche., 228.

⁶ Malebranche., 228-29.

⁷ Malebranche., 228.

⁸ Malebranche., 228.

his objector's conception of conservation conflicts with it⁹. He does so with the following reasoning.

Just as the watchmaker can disappear and the watch remains, God, under conservation through inaction, could disappear, and the world would remain. If the world is conserved in being merely through His inaction, then we may presuppose that God ceased to exist after the moment of creation and observe that the world would continue to exist¹⁰. The criterion for conservation under conservation through inaction (that God does not willfully annihilate the world) holds in the scenario in which God ceases to exist (being non-existent, He cannot willfully annihilate anything). Thus, the world would be conserved in the absence of God, and so the world would not depend on God at all for its existence. Clearly, conservation through inaction conflicts with the essential dependence thesis. And so, the conception fails.

Next, Malebranche shows that the very idea of God willfully annihilating the world is contradictory. He first notes, "an infinitely wise God can will nothing which is not, so to speak, worthy of being willed: He can love nothing which is not lovable"¹¹. This simply follows from the nature of God. Given God's nature, then, God cannot will the annihilation of the world, for the annihilation of the world is equivalent to nothingness, and nothingness, Malebranche holds, is not lovable (there would be nothing to have the property of being lovable). Thus, for God to will the annihilation of the world, He would have to contradict His own attribute, namely the attribute of being infinitely wise¹². Such

⁹ Heide.

¹⁰ Malebranche., 229

¹¹ Malebranche., 229.

¹² Malebranche., 229.

is, as Malebranche points out, a contradiction¹³. And so, since under conservation through inaction God must annihilate the world to stop conserving it, rather than merely cease willing its existence, and since He cannot do such a thing, the world's existence, after its initial creation, follows necessarily¹⁴. That is, whether it exists or does not exist is out of God's hands, so to speak, and so once again, under this conception of conservation, the world is in being independently of God, and so, once again, the conception conflicts with the essential dependence thesis.

It is clear, then, that Malebranche rejects the idea that God could conserve the world through inaction, and by hypothesis, accepts the idea that God conserves the world through action, or on Malebranche's conception, continual creation. In the rest of my paper, I aim to show that the CCC thesis is metaphysically impossible. Once again, the CCC thesis states that (in conserving the world) God creates the world in every *instant*. On my view, Malebranche, and anyone who adopts the CCC thesis, fails to fully consider the mechanics of such an operation. Namely, how God would go about recreating the world in every instant. Specifically, what I think is important to consider, is how we are conceiving of an 'instant'. I believe there are two ways to conceive of what an instant is, and that these two ways are exhaustive: of duration, and not of duration.

Of Duration

¹³ Malebranche., 229

¹⁴ Malebranche., 229

In the first way, an instant is extended through time, so to speak. We may conceive of an instant as a length of time with some non-zero value. Conservation is to preserve the universe across a span of time. If God conserves the universe since the beginning, then the act of conservation has spanned some four billion years, let's just say. If conservation is continual creation, then God must have been continually creating the universe throughout this span of time. We may ask, how many creations is that? Of course, the exact number is not needed (and impossible to know, as we will see), but the point is there is some number that, presumably, God would know (if it were possible), for if an instant has duration, of any length, then the number of creations from the first creation to now is finite. Let's say, then, for arguments sake, that the duration of an instant is two billion years. Then, of course, there will have been two creations during the act of conserving the universe (one per instant). Now we can look inside the first instant of two billion years and ask how the universe was conserved during it. Since we can ask this question, it must be the case that an instant cannot have a duration as long as two billion years, for conservation is continual creation, and so conserving this instant requires more creations, each creation taking place in an instant, each instant, then, necessarily shorter in duration than two billion years. Perhaps, then, an instant is one million years. Then in conserving that two billion-year period there would be two-thousand creations. But then, we may look inside one of those one million-year instants, and ask, what conserved the universe during it? More creations, of course. As you are probably guessing, we can continue this *ad infinitum*. We can get to the point where an instant is one millisecond, and we may ask, how is the universe conserved during this one millisecond? Well, it must, too, be composed of more instants of creation. And so on. That is, as long as an instant

has duration, we can always ask the question of how the world is conserved during it, which necessitates the existence of even shorter instants, under the supposition that conservation requires continued creation every instant.

One might argue here that, if an instant is, for example, one millisecond in duration, then conserving the universe during a millisecond period simply requires one creation, a creation every millisecond is enough. This solution is only tempting given that we perceive a millisecond as a very small amount of time. But this is just a matter of perspective. If one sped up the universe sufficiently, a year's worth of content could pass in a millisecond, and slowing the universe down enough could stretch a millisecond's worth of content into a year. A single millisecond and a single year both involve the passage of time. Time of which requires conservation. Surely, God could see the events unfolding in the smallest unit of time. Under the CCC thesis He would have to conserve those events. As such, I maintain that conserving a world where instants have duration leads to an infinite regress.

The result of such a regress is that God could never conserve anything, because He could not conserve a second without first conserving a millisecond, which He could not do without first conserving a nanosecond, but He cannot do that until He conserves a picosecond, and so on. Given the infinite regress, there is no foundation for which God could begin to conserve the universe in time. In fact, if an instant is of duration than conserving the universe is inconceivable, under this account, and as Malebranche notes, "... [God] cannot will what cannot be conceived"¹⁵. A second way in which one might

¹⁵ Malebranche., 227.

object is to claim that an instant is a fundamental building block and is thereby indivisible, or to put it another way, the regress will eventually bottom out on a unit of duration that cannot be divided into smaller parts. However, one can always conceive of its divisibility, which is to say that an indivisible instant is inconceivable. And, reverting to Malebranche, God cannot will what is inconceivable. And so, given the CCC thesis, it must be the case that an instant is not of duration.

Not of Duration

In the second way, where an instant is not of duration, we run into a different problem. That which is not of duration is timeless, or to put it another way, is not of or in time. If you were to stick sixty seconds together, you would get a minute. A second is of time, and so the accumulation of seconds is of more time. An instant without duration is not, and so sticking sixty such instants together will only get you an instant. Sticking a million instants together will be just the same. And so, one instant could not come after the other. Without duration, then, there could not be successive instants, and so, under the CCC thesis, there could not be successive creation. That is, God could not continually create the universe, and therefore not conserve it. Even worse, though, is that under this constraint, only the last instant of the universe could exist, and, paradoxically, it would have to be the first instant to occur. In effect, the creation and annihilation of the universe would be the same event. So, it is not just that God could not conserve the world, but that there would be nothing there for Him to conserve.

Even worse still, under this constraint there could be no creation whatsoever. The above picture served to illustrate the problem, but nothing like what I have attempted to illustrate could occur. An instant is a unit of time, and so an instant without duration is not a thing at all, just as a centimeter without length is nothing. We would not call it a lengthless centimeter, for it would not exist without its length. If an instant is the measurement of change in the world, and the instant is without time and so never occurs, then the change it is measuring never occurs. If an instant does not exist, then neither does the world. It appears God could not create *ex nihilo* without duration.

A natural objection to this argument is to disentangle an instant as a conceptual unit of measurement from the real phenomena that it measures. But this cannot be done on the CCC thesis, for, under the thesis, an instant is the unit of time in which creation occurs. Really, an instant here is just a placeholder for an act of creation, but in terms of duration. Thus, to say there are no instants is to say there are no creations. Given the above considerations, it is my final position that on Malebranche's view, either God could not conserve the universe or could not create the universe.

I believe the above reasoning strongly suggests that the CCC thesis is metaphysically impossible, that there is no way in which continual creation can work. Consequently, if there is conservation at all, I hold that it must be of the very kind that Malebranche rejects: God created the world *ex nihilo*, and the world is sufficient to exist in itself, and will do so given God does not willfully destroy it, and this is how He conserves it. Under this conception, an instant may have duration.

Bibliography

Malebranche, Nicholas. "Selections from Dialogues on Metaphysics" In *Philosophical Selections*,

translated by Willis Doney, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992, 222-238.

Heide, Dai. "PHIL 352." Class Lecture, Simon Fraser University, January 2018, Burnaby, British

Columbia.