

## Arnauld's God Reconsidered

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#### Abstract:

In this paper, I defend a novel interpretation of Antoine Arnauld's conception of God, namely a 'partially hidden' conception of God. I focus on divine simplicity and whether God acts for reasons. I argue that Arnauld holds the view that: God, God's action, and God's attributes are (i) identical, and (ii) conceptually distinct, but that (iii) there are no conceptual priorities among them. Next, I argue that Arnauld's view about whether God has any type of reasons is agnosticism, but that there are certain types of reasons we know that God does not have, for example, practical reasons.

Keywords: Antoine Arnauld, divine simplicity, conception of God

#### Body of paper:

In the 1680s and 1690s, Antoine Arnauld and Nicolas Malebranche engaged in a heated and public dispute concerning the nature of ideas, providence, grace, and, not least, the proper account of God and God's *modus operandi*.<sup>1</sup> The genesis of the dispute was Malebranche's *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (hereafter, *Traité*). Therein, Malebranche defends a highly original theodicy—an attempt to reconcile the existence of (at least apparent) evil with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God. Central to the account in the *Traité* is Malebranche's claim that: "God, loving himself by the necessity of his being, and wanting to procure for himself an infinite glory...consults his wisdom concerning the accomplishment of his desires."<sup>2</sup> Malebranche's theodicy relies on a conception of God according to which God acts for reasons and has distinct attributes that, in some sense at least, perform different functions in creation. Malebranche's theodicy relies not only on the claim that God has reasons but also on the claim that finite creatures have access to these reasons. He states this: "If I were not persuaded that [20] all men are reasonable only because they are enlightened by eternal wisdom, I would be, no doubt, quite presumptuous to speak of the plans of God."<sup>3</sup> For Malebranche, in virtue of our being enlightened by God, it is not presumptuous to speak of the plans of God.

There is much about Malebranche's theodicy that Arnauld finds audacious. Two of Arnauld's central objections are clear. First, he argues that Malebranche's account of God's activity violates a proper understanding of God's nature, including divine simplicity—the view that God is absolutely simple. Second, Arnauld objects to Malebranche's claim that finite beings can give reasons for God's action.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the precise nature of Arnauld's rejection of Malebranche's system, and of his own position on divine simplicity and God's relation to reasons, is less clear.

In *Deux cartésiens*, Denis Moreau attributes to Arnauld an "integral [*intégrale*] conception of God and his attributes" (1999, 280). This account includes a conception of divine simplicity that precludes conceiving of any conceptual priorities (*hiérarchisations*) between God's attributes but allows conceptual distinctions among them. All of God's attributes "functionally interpenetrate" such that it is

perfectly appropriate to say that God's will wills and knows and that God's understanding knows and wills.<sup>5</sup> On this view, "the action of God is reasonable and reasoned," and God is a rational agent.<sup>6</sup> God's will acts by reasons internal to the will itself, but these reasons are obscured by our finite perspective. Thus, Moreau suggests that the central objection to Malebranche's account is not that God does not have reasons but that we, as finite beings, cannot have access to them.

Steven Nadler (2008), responding to Moreau's account, argues that Arnauld not only denies that finite beings have access to God's reasons but also claims that God does not have reasons. Arnauld's God, in Nadler's words "transcends practical rational agency altogether" and "is a deity who does not act for reasons at all."<sup>7</sup> According to this interpretation, which Nadler calls a voluntarist conception of God, Arnauld refuses "to distinguish wisdom from will in God—even by what Descartes calls a 'distinction of reason,'" that is, by a conceptual distinction.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere Nadler elaborates on this claim, adding that Arnauld thinks it mistaken "to distinguish wisdom from will in God—even by a 'distinction of reason,' grounded not in reality but in the way things are conceived—and have wisdom guide will by providing compelling reasons for its choices" (2011, 172). On this reading, then, it is a mistake to distinguish between God's faculties even in our conception of God.

Here I defend a novel interpretation Arnauld's God, particularly his account of divine simplicity and God's relation to reasons, and I call this his *partially hidden* conception of God.<sup>9</sup> While my account shares some [21] features both with Moreau's *integral* conception and with Nadler's *voluntarist* conception, it differs from both by focusing on certain aspects of Arnauld's account of our restricted epistemic access to God – aspects that are inseparable from his metaphysical conception of God. With respect to divine simplicity, I argue that Arnauld's account has these three components:

- 1: God, God's action, and God's attributes are identical (the identity thesis).
- 2: God, God's action, and God's attributes are conceptually distinct (the distinctness thesis).
- 3: There are no conceptual priorities among God, God's action, and God's attributes (the nonpriority Thesis).

With respect to God's relation to reasons, both Nadler and Moreau suggest that Arnauld holds that we are in an epistemic position to know whether God has reasons (though they disagree about whether God has reasons). I argue that Arnauld denies that we are in a position to know whether God has reasons and that his considered view about whether God has reasons, in any sense, is agnosticism. However, he holds that we can know that, *if* God has reasons, they are not practical ones. In section 1, I consider divine simplicity. In section 2, I consider God's relation to reasons. Then, I make some concluding remarks.

My discussion focuses on divine simplicity and whether God acts for reasons – whether God can be understood in a rationalist way. But I also introduce a conception of God that is neither a rationalist nor a voluntarist model, and is potentially novel on Arnauld's part. I also address his larger philosophical commitments, the nature of the debate between him and Malebranche, and other issues at the heart of Cartesianism. These include method (not least, the relation between faith and reason), epistemology (the nature and use of clear and distinct ideas), and central problems of metaphysics (as I understand Arnauld, his account at least seems to preclude God playing the metaphysical role that many other systems ascribe to God).

## 1. Arnauld and Divine Simplicity

Throughout Arnauld's many attacks on Malebranche's system, it can be difficult to determine when he is embracing Malebranche's positions or another philosopher's (Aquinas or Descartes, for example) for rhetorical effect and when he is genuinely stating his own opinion. Nevertheless, throughout these objections, it is clear that Arnauld holds a strong version of the identity thesis—that God, God's action, and God's attributes [22] are identical. In his *Réflexions philosophiques et théologiques sur le nouveau système de la nature et de la grâce* (henceforth, *Réflexions*), Arnauld makes all of the following claims:

Nothing is more essential to an infinitely perfect being than to will...and that his action and his will are the same thing. (*Réflexions I.8*, OA 39 237)

The word 'wisdom' can be taken either actively, for the wisdom which is in God, or rather which is God himself; or passively for the wisdom which is in the works of God. (*Réflexions I.8*, OA 39 245)

His [God's] will is his essence itself. (*Réflexions II.31*, OA 39 625)

And, commenting directly on Malebranche's position:

Can one have thoughts more unworthy of God than to imagine such a disagreement between his wisdom and his will? As if his wisdom and his will were not the same thing. (*Réflexions III.10*, OA 39 748)

In another work in the debate with Malebranche, the *Neuf Lettres*, Arnauld claims that "The immensity of the divine being, and the substance of God are the same thing," (*Neuvième Lettre*, OA 39 143).

From just these passages it is clear that Arnauld held that God's action, God's will, God's wisdom, God's immensity, God's essence and God are all identical. While he does not consider all of God's attributes in these passages, they offer compelling evidence for the identity thesis.

Whether Arnauld endorses the distinctness thesis—that God, God's action, and God's attributes are conceptually distinct—is a more difficult question. Nadler's suggestion that Arnauld denies this thesis is motivated primarily by several passages in the *Réflexions* where Arnauld criticizes Malebranche's conception of God as "consulting" God's wisdom in creation. I shall examine Arnauld's objections and argue that they provide compelling evidence that Arnauld endorses the nonpriority thesis—that there are no conceptual priorities among God, God's action, and God's attributes—but that, contrary to Nadler's suggestion, they provide no evidence that Arnauld *denies* the distinctness thesis. In fact, I shall argue these passages suggest that Arnauld *holds* the distinctness thesis. Nadler comments on this passage:

Did he [Malebranche] really think that it was an expression perfectly conforming to the idea of a perfect being, to say of God that He consults His wisdom? One consults only when one is in doubt; and one consults about how to accomplish one's desires only when there may be some difficulty in achieving what one desires. Neither the one nor the other can be said about the

perfect being, whose knowledge is infinite and whose will is all-powerful. (*Réflexions II.5*, OA 39 449)<sup>10</sup>

[23] Here Arnauld claims that Malebranche's description of God's activity as consulting "does not conform to the idea of a perfect being" (*Réflexions II.5*, OA 39 447). Later in the *Réflexions*, in a passage also cited by Nadler, Arnauld asks rhetorically whether it is appropriate to say of God

'that he consults his wisdom', and it is from there that it happens that all that he wills is wise; as if the word *consult* could pertain to an infinitely perfect being, when we profess that we do not speak according to common parlance? As if God needs to consult his wisdom so that what he wills is wise? As if his will is not his wisdom? As if everything that he wills is not essentially wise as soon as he wills it. (*Réflexions II.24*, OA 39 578)<sup>11</sup>

In these passages, Arnauld objects to Malebranche's claim that God consults God's wisdom in creating and acting, and he gives several reasons for objecting. In the *Réflexions II.24* passage, he cites the identity of God's will and wisdom as a reason that God does not consult. But this does not end the debate about whether the distinctness thesis is true. While I know of no text where Arnauld offers a detailed treatment of conceptual distinctions, when he does mention them, it is clear that they can obtain between identicals. In the *Port Royal Logic* (hereafter, *Logic*), Arnauld and his co-author Pierre Nicole discuss abstractions of the mind:

We should remark, however, that the mind, accustomed to knowing most things as modified since it knows them almost always by accidents or qualities that strike the senses, often divides the essence of the substance itself into two ideas, viewing [*dont il regarde*] one as subject and the other as mode. For example, although everything in God is God himself, this does not prevent us from conceiving him as an infinite being, regarding [*de regarder*] infinity as an attribute of God and being as the subject of this attribute. Thus a human being is often considered as the subject of humanity [*l'humanité habens humanitatem*] [possessing humanness], and consequently as a modified thing.

In these cases the essential attribute, which is the thing itself, is taken for a mode because it is conceived as in a subject [*parce qu'on le conçoit comme dans un sujet*]. This is properly speaking an abstraction of substance, such as humanity, corporeality, and reason (*Logic I.2*, OA 41 134–5/B 31/CG 47–8).<sup>12</sup>

In this passage, Arnauld and Nicole hold that the essential attribute of a substance is the thing itself – a substance and its essential attribute are identical, in other words. Arnauld and Nicole offer two examples: God and everything in God, and a human being and a thing that has humanness or the property of being human. In both cases, Arnauld and Nicole [24] claim that these are really identical, even though the mind regards or conceives them in different ways. The distinction between God and God's attribute of infinity, for example, is the result of mental abstraction. As finite beings, we view or regard the same thing in different ways. We do this, Arnauld and Nicole suggest, by dividing the essence into two ideas.<sup>13</sup> So, while everything in God is identical to God, when conceiving of God we turn our idea of the essence of God into two distinct ideas: God as a subject and infinity as an attribute, and we conceive of infinity as an attribute of God, though in God they are one and the same. Later in the *Logic*, Arnauld and Nicole continue their discussion of abstraction:

That it is possible to consider a mode without reflecting distinctly on the substance of which it is

a mode, provides an opportunity to explain what are called *abstractions of the mind*....The third way of conceiving things by abstraction takes place when, in the case of a single thing having different attributes, we think of one attribute without the other even though they differ only by a distinction of reason [*distinction de raison*]. Here is how this happens. Suppose, for example, I reflect that I am thinking, and, in consequence, that I am the I who thinks. In my idea of the I who thinks, I can consider a thinking thing without noticing that it is I, although in me the I and the one who thinks are one and the same thing. The idea I thereby conceive of a person who thinks can represent not only me but all other thinking persons (*Logic I.5*, OA 41 141–43/B 37–38/CG 55–56).

While the main topic of this passage is the creation of general ideas, Arnauld and Nicole consider abstractions of the mind and refer to a distinction of reason, that is, a conceptual distinction.<sup>14</sup> While they do not explicitly claim that there is no ontological distinction in any sense between “I” and “the one who thinks,” they do claim that the “I” and “the one who thinks” are “the same thing.” They add that the various attributes of a substance differ only by a distinction in reason. These passages suggest that conceptual distinctions obtain when we form two ideas of the same thing, even though these ideas are only different ways of regarding the same thing.

With the discussion from the *Logic* in hand, we can now return to the *Réflexions* and ask whether Arnauld holds the distinctness thesis. Arnauld’s claim that God’s various attributes are identical does not preclude their being conceptually distinct. In fact, in the *Réflexions II.5* passage, Arnauld’s argument seems to require something like conceptual distinctions among God’s attributes. Arnauld cites two reasons to deny that God consults God’s wisdom. First, one consults only when one is in doubt, and an infinitely perfect being could never be in doubt. Second, one desires something only when there may be a difficulty in achieving what one desires, which cannot be true of God. The former [25] is inconsistent with God’s knowledge, which is infinite, and the latter with God’s will, which is all-powerful. Arnauld’s objection relies on (a) making a conceptual distinction between God’s all-powerful will and God’s infinite knowledge in order to support claims about God’s various attributes and also (b) making true predications about these attributes in order to ground knowledge about God. This process requires conceptual distinctions among God’s attributes. To develop the point, we can turn to the *Logic* again, where Arnauld and Nicole claim that

we can also say that the idea we have of God in this life is clear in one sense, although in another sense it is obscure and quite imperfect.

It is clear in being sufficient to make us know a great many attributes in God which we are sure of finding in God alone. It is obscure, however, when compared to the idea had by the blessed in heaven. And it is imperfect because the mind, being finite, can conceive of an infinite object only very imperfectly. But being perfect and being clear are different conditions in an idea. For it is perfect when it represents everything in its object, and it is clear when it represents enough of it to conceive of the object clearly and distinctly. (*Logic I.9*, OA 41 157/B 49/CG 71)

In this passage, the Port Royalists explicitly claim that we can know a great many attributes of God: this alone suggests distinctions among them. But my main interest here is what Arnauld and Nicole tell us about our idea of God: although this idea is clear enough to tell us much about God, it is far from a perfect idea. We are finite and so can conceive of an infinite being only imperfectly. Elsewhere, they defend this axiom: “It is the nature of a finite mind not to be able to understand the infinite” (OA 41 383/B 251/CG 322). Hence, as finite beings, we can know attributes of God in virtue of our clear idea of

God. But our knowledge of God cannot be comprehensive. Conceptual distinctions among God's attributes are results of our finiteness, not of any nonidentity in God.

In the *Réflexions II.5* passage, Arnauld relies on conceptual distinctions among God's attributes to object to Malebranche's account. Although God is supremely simple, we can consider our innate idea of God, focus on certain aspects of it, and then form new ideas about God. The result is having a variety of ideas about a simple being. We can form an idea of God as a being with infinite knowledge and with a will that is all-powerful. From these ideas, we can know that God is never in doubt and that God has no difficulty achieving what God desires.

My point here is that, for Arnauld, although we can know God only very imperfectly, our process of knowing God by reflecting on our idea of God preserves epistemic validity insofar as we can justifiably believe things about God because of this idea. But we should not form ideas of [26] God according to which one of God's attributes is excluded by another. We should not think of God's understanding as acting independently of God's will, since they are one and the same. This independent action is what Malebranche seems to embrace when he conceives of God as consulting; he conceives of God's understanding as operating prior to and, in some way, exclusive of God's will. This projects a *modus operandi* of finite beings onto God.

Arnauld describes the appropriate process for reflecting on the idea of God in *Réflexions II.2*: "I will consult, with all the attention and respect of which I am capable, the vast and immense idea of the infinitely perfect being," adding that "perfect being, being itself, and the plentitude of being, form in us the same idea." Having this idea, he finds that the perfect being "has nothing to desire, then, since he has everything," and "among the goods God possesses, I see in him an infinite power, which enables him to do all that he wills" (OA 39 429). Arnauld examines his idea of an infinitely perfect being, and, by focusing on different aspects of this idea and then forming news ideas, he draws a variety of conclusions about it. Just before the *Réflexions II.24* passage, he mentions Malebranche's claim that one ought "not to speak of God like common men and according to the common parlance." Instead, one should speak of God, as Malebranche tells us, in a manner worthy of the "vast and immense idea of the infinitely perfect being" (OA 39 578).

In *Réflexions II.24* cited above, Arnauld objects to the claim that God "'consults his wisdom' and *it is from there* that it happens that all that He wills is wise," explicitly rejecting temporal or conceptual priority between God's will and wisdom. This seems to make a strong distinction between God's will and understanding, as it assumes that we can conceive of God in such a way that God's understanding is independent of God's willing. Presented with God's simplicity, we can still form a variety of ideas about God by abstracting from our idea of God's essence. But we should not think that God's various faculties have different roles in creation. Our idea of God precludes this.

All told, the passages cited by Nadler (and Arnauld's many objections to Malebranche on similar issues) suggest that God is radically different from creatures. God's essence, God's attributes, and God's activity are all identical. Yet we can come to have knowledge of God by abstracting from our idea of God and examining its content. We must be careful, however, not to anthropomorphize God by attributing to God human features. All of God's attributes are identical (the identity thesis), and we should not suppose that God's different faculties or attributes have functions that are different from and/or prior to one another (the nonpriority thesis). Denying the latter makes God operate like a finite being. Finally, while [27] all of God's attributes are identical, they are still conceptually distinct (the distinctness thesis), and abstracting from our idea of God, when done properly, can help us arrive at (limited) knowledge of

God's nature. So, *contra* Nadler, I suggest that we treat Arnauld as allowing for conceptual distinctions – but not conceptual priorities – among God's various attributes.

The account of divine simplicity defended here is in some ways a defense of Moreau's interpretation against Nadler's objections. Nevertheless, my account is substantially different from Moreau's. I do not think he pushes the identity thesis hard enough.<sup>15</sup> On his account, God's various attributes are identical and functionally interpenetrate.<sup>16</sup> Moreau relies on the integration, identification, and interpenetration of God's attributes. He points to passages that might support his interpretation that God's will wills and knows and that God's understanding knows and wills.

Moreau cites this passage from Arnauld, for example: "God wills only wisely [*Dieu ne voulant rien que sagement*], he wills nothing that his wisdom does not will" (OA 39 748). I agree that, for Arnauld, God's will reasons and God's understanding wills. Yet this seems not to be because God's attributes are integrated or interpenetrate. Acts of God's understanding and God's will are not in any way distinct in God. To claim that God reasons with God's will makes sense – not because various faculties interpenetrate, however, but because we grasp God's action imperfectly and God's act of understanding and of willing is the same act. God's will understands because God's will is only conceptually distinct from God's understanding.

While I know of no passage where Arnauld makes such a claim explicitly about God's attributes, he says this about another pair of conceptually distinct things: extension and matter. In the *Neuf Lettres*, he writes: "Extension and matter being the same thing, everything that we can say of that thing which has two names under one of these names, can and will have to be said of it under the other name."<sup>17</sup> God's will understands not because of a functional interpenetration of the two attributes but because these attributes are identical and merely conceptually distinct. The importance of the difference between these two accounts can be further illuminated by turning to the question of God's reasons.

## 2. God's Reasons

With Arnauld's account of divine simplicity in mind, we can now consider whether his God acts for reasons. As noted above, Moreau treats [28] Arnauld's God as an agent who acts for reasons, whereas Nadler thinks that Arnauld's God transcends reason altogether. Nadler's interpretation focuses on two themes in Arnauld's criticisms of Malebranche: the nature of divine simplicity and the nature of God's freedom. Nadler claims that "Arnauld wants to defeat Malebranche's whole way of conceiving the relationship between will and wisdom in God" (2008, 529). As we saw in the previous section, Arnauld strongly identifies God's will with God's understanding, and he rejects Malebranche's claim that God consults God's own wisdom. Nadler also cites this passage on divine freedom:

By following Malebranche in the manner in which he conceives God, I do not see how He can be indifferent to creating or not creating something outside Himself, if He was not indifferent to choosing among several works and among several ways of producing them. (*Réflexions II.26*, OA 39 600)<sup>18</sup>

In Nadler's words, "Malebranche's God, Arnauld claims, cannot possibly satisfy what he sees as St. Thomas's legitimate demand that the will of God remain perfectly self-determining, never willing anything external to itself *ex necessitate*" (2008, 530). In the end, according to Nadler, Arnauld's insistence on God's radical simplicity and his account of divine indifference entail that God is a being beyond reason. Nadler makes a strong argument: if Arnauld's God is thoroughly simple, such that all of

God's attributes are identical, and if God's complete freedom is indifferent to creating anything other than God, then it is unclear how Arnauld's God could act from reasons.

Yet Moreau has pointed to passages that seem to suggest that Arnauld's God does, in fact, act for reasons. Moreau claims that Arnauld "never wrote 'God acts without reason,'" adding that "he even says the opposite" (1999, 295). He offers two passages to substantiate this claim: one from the *Réflexions*, and one from another text in the Malebranche-Arnauld polemic. The latter passage occurs in the second of the *Neuf Lettres*: "for how will you prove that God had no reason to distribute to human beings all the prosperity or adversity that happens to them by particular volitions?"<sup>19</sup> Moreau also cites Book II, Chapter II of the *Réflexions*: "Who would dare to say that God created all things without reason?"<sup>20</sup>

What should we make of Arnauld's various discussions of whether God acts for reasons? The contexts make it clear that his questions are rhetorical and that he is actually sympathetic to the claim that we cannot prove that God does not have reasons. Accordingly, Moreau has highlighted passages where Arnauld is explicit about not denying that God acts for reasons or that God's actions have ends. Nonetheless, Nadler has presented systematic and compelling evidence for concluding that Arnauld's God does not act for reasons. [29]

In fact, Arnauld offers a consistent position about whether God acts from reasons. He is agnostic about whether God acts for reasons *absolutely* – whether God acts for reasons *in any sense at all*. But he also thinks we can know that certain types of reasons do not apply to God. Something like this, in fact, is suggested by the passages that Moreau cites: Arnauld does not claim in either of them that God acts from or for reasons, as Moreau suggests.<sup>21</sup> Arnauld's claim in each case is that we dare not state or could not prove a denial that God acts for reasons. As I shall argue, Arnauld's considered view is that we are not in an epistemic position to know whether God acts for reasons. I shall also argue that claiming that God does not act for reasons is, in Arnauld's opinion, audacious because it is well beyond our epistemic means. Yet Malebranche's account of how God acts for reasons is also objectionable because it treats God as a finite being – and this makes his account unacceptable and false. This reading is supported by the contexts of the passages cited by Moreau, as well as by Arnauld's larger epistemological project, which I will now discuss before examining Moreau's passages more extensively.

To understand Arnauld's epistemological project, it will help to turn to the *Logic* again. Arnauld and Nicole make an important distinction between two legitimate epistemic sources: faith and reason. Arnauld often invokes this distinction with an Augustinian slogan: "What we know, we owe to reason; what we believe, to authority."<sup>22</sup> The *Logic* develops this distinction:

[T]here are two general paths that lead us to believe something is true. The first is knowledge we have of it ourselves, from having recognized and examined the truth either by senses or by reason. This can generally be called *reason*, because the senses themselves depend on a judgment by reason, or *science*. (*Logic IV.12*, OA 41 395/B 260/CG 335)

The authors continue:

The other path is the authority of persons worthy of credence.... This is called faith or belief [*foi, ou créance*]....[T]his authority can have two sources, God or people, there are always two types of faith, divine and human. Divine faith cannot be subject to error, because God can never deceive us nor be deceived. (*Logic IV.12*, OA 41 395/B 260/CG 335-36)<sup>23</sup>



Reason is grounded in our use of reason and the senses. Faith is grounded in authority. There is some ambiguity in terminology worth pausing over. Arnauld and Nicole suggest that believing based on reason and the senses as well as believing based on authority can produce knowledge. Believing of the former kind is reason or science; the latter is faith or belief.<sup>24</sup> Hence, “belief” signifies knowledge had through faith, [30] which the Port-Royalists claim “often is no less certain” than reason or science. But they also use “belief” for the mental state of taking something to be true (OA 41 395/B 260/CG 335).

Arnauld and Nicole offer a modest view of the scope of reason for questions about God. Things knowable through reason are of three kinds:

Some things can be known clearly and certainly. Some things we do not in fact know clearly, but we can hope to come to know them. Finally, some are virtually impossible to know with certainty, either because we lack the principles to lead us to them, or because they are too disproportionate to the mind. (*Logic IV.1*, OA 41 357-58/B 230/CG 295)

As for things virtually impossible to know, they add that

the best way to limit the scope of the sciences is never to try to inquire about anything beyond us, which we cannot reasonably hope to be able to understand. Of this type are all questions concerning God’s power, which it is ridiculous to try to confine within the narrow limits of the mind, and generally anything having to do with infinity. Because the mind is finite, it gets lost in and is dazzled by infinity, and remains overwhelmed by the multitude of contrary thoughts that infinity furnishes us. (*Logic IV.1*, OA 41 358/B 230/CG 295)

Since God is infinite, our finite minds cannot understand God. While this might seem predictable in a seventeenth-century theology, Arnauld employs this claim subtly, consistently, and effectively.

One constraint on human knowing comes up in Arnauld’s *Examen d’un ecrit qui a pour titre: Traité de l’essence du corps, et de l’union de l’ame avec le corps, contre la philosophie de M. Descartes*, which defends Cartesian philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Arnauld claims there that

nothing would be less reasonable than to expect that philosophers, who are entitled in the human sciences to follow the lights of reason, are obliged to take what is incomprehensible in the mystery of the Incarnation as a rule for their sentiments when they must explain the natural union of the soul with the body....We would not have those thoughts which only serve to confuse [*brouiller*] everything in Philosophy and Theology, if we were more convinced of the clear and certain maxim that Cardinal Bellarmine used against the quibbles of the Socinians: “No inference can be made from the finite to the infinite,” or as others put it “there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite.” (OA 38 175/E 141)<sup>26</sup>

In this passage, Arnauld defends the maxim, which I shall call the *no-proportion principle*, as “clear and certain.” He offers two ways of understanding the principle: “No inference can be made from the finite to the infinite” and “There is no proportion between the finite and infinite.”[31] On its face at least, this principle undermines any inference from the way finite creatures reason to the way God might reason.

From this discussion, it might seem that our prospects for knowing God by reason are poor. However, Arnauld makes one exception. As we saw in the *Logic I.9* passage above, Arnauld and Nicole embrace the view that finite beings have an innate and clear idea of God. Arnauld also holds what we

can call the 'clear idea principle.' His first polemic aimed at Malebranche, *Des vraies et des fausses idées* (henceforth, *VFI*), states the principle:

Whatever is contained in the true idea of a thing (i.e., in the clear perception which we have it) can be affirmed of it with truth. It must be God who gave us an invincible inclination to accept it and to take it as the foundation of all human certainty. (*VFI VI*, OA 38 210/K 30-31)

Combine our clear idea of God with the clear idea principle, and we can know through reason what our clear idea of God contains. From this account of method, however, we seem incapable of further inferences from or about this idea – analogical inferences least of all (more on this later).

The two passages cited by Moreau concerning God and reasons illuminate this discussion of Arnauld's epistemology. Chapter 2 of Book 2 of the *Réflexions*, for example, begins with this title:

That we do not in any way find in the idea of the perfect being, that He could will to act outside himself only in order to procure an honor worthy of him: but that S. Augustine, S. Thomas, and all the master Theologians find just the opposite. (*Réflexions II.2*, OA 39 428).

Arnauld refers to Malebranche's claim that God can create only for God's glory.<sup>27</sup> First, he denies that such a claim is included in the idea of God, adding that no reputable Catholic authorities make such a claim about God. He mentions two grounds for claiming that God can act in order to procure a worthy honor, (i) the idea of a perfect being and (ii) teachings of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas. This reflects his method and view that there are two sources of knowledge about God: reason (in this case, only our idea of God) and faith (authorities in the Catholic tradition).

The pattern of this chapter of the *Réflexions* is the same. First, Arnauld asks whether one can learn from the idea of God that God acts outside God to procure an honor. Arnauld not only denies this, but he also calls it "manifestly contrary to the vast and immense idea of the infinitely perfect being" (OA 39 430). He claims the idea of a perfect being is the same idea as "being itself" and "the plentitude of being." Since such a being lacks nothing, as he tells us, it can desire nothing. He adds that the idea of God includes an "infinite power" and that God [32] can do or make anything that God wills (OA 39 429). So, he concludes, not only does the idea of God *not include* the idea that God can act only for God's glory, but it is also incompatible with such a claim since an infinite being lacks nothing – glory included.

Arnauld then moves on to what Augustine and Aquinas have to say. He concludes that neither supports Malebranche's position. In fact, Arnauld quotes Augustine in the passage used by Moreau – as Moreau notes. Arnauld examines what both luminaries say about the issue, concluding that neither underwrites Malebranche's claim. In fact, he invokes both Augustine and Aquinas to confirm his own claim that Malebranche's account treats the Creator like a creature.

In the passage cited, then, Arnauld denies Malebranche's claim about God's action by first denying that it is grounded in the idea of God and then charging that it is contrary to that idea. He also goes on to deny that Malebranche's claim is grounded in Catholic tradition, pointing to Augustine and Aquinas. Given the framework of his epistemological project, Arnauld's considered view is that, for most questions about God, there are only two epistemic grounds: the clear idea of God and Catholic tradition, including scripture. Arnauld takes the same approach elsewhere in the *Réflexions*. When he examines Malebranche's claim that God acts by general volitions and very rarely by particular volitions, he declares that

this grand maxim, that God acts in the order of nature only as a universal cause who does not have particular volitions, since it is not supported either by scripture nor by tradition, could be accepted as a principle only because it is contained clearly in the idea of a perfect being, and this is what cannot be said. (OA 39 185)<sup>28</sup>

In addition, just before *Réflexions II.2*, Arnauld considers Malebranche's claim that "God, being able to act only for his glory, and being able to find it only in himself, cannot have had any other end [*dessein*] in the creation of the world than the establishment of his Church."<sup>29</sup> Arnauld distinguishes between the claims that (i) God, in fact, created the world only for Jesus Christ and (ii) that God *could* create the world only for Jesus Christ. He insists that since the second restricts God's will in a way found "neither in Scripture nor in Tradition" it could "be based only on clear notions, manifestly contained in the idea of the perfect being."<sup>30</sup>

There are two possible sources for knowledge of whether God acts according to reasons: faith and reason. With respect to the former, we have scripture and tradition to inform us. With respect to the latter, we only have the idea of God. Furthermore, guided by Arnauld's epistemic project and the no-proportion principle, we can examine this idea and unpack what it contains. But we are not in an epistemic position to make analogical inferences from this idea (or perhaps any inferences at all). [33]

In order to examine Arnauld's position in detail, we can distinguish practical rationality from rationality in general. R. Jay Wallace (2014) suggests that practical rationality is the

capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do. Deliberation of this kind is practical in at least two senses. First, it is practical in its subject matter, insofar as it is concerned with action. But it is also practical in its consequences or its issue, insofar as reflection about action itself directly moves people to act.

Arnauld holds, I argue, that it is within our epistemic means to deny that God acts according to practical reasons so defined. Our idea of God precludes thinking of God as a being who needs to resolve, by reflecting on it, any question about what to do. Arnauld tells us that this pertains only to beings who lack knowledge and that God lacks nothing. Moreover, nothing can constrain God's will, and any reasons in the relevant sense would constrain it. Both these facts are within our epistemic means because they result just from unpacking our innate idea of God.

Does rationality of any kind apply to God, however? Again, Arnauld has two sources to answer this question: he can appeal to the idea of God or to authority and scripture. As his discussion of divine simplicity confirms, he takes our innate and clear idea of God as evidence that God is wise: in fact, God *is* wisdom. However, to ask what it is for God to be wise is a question we must approach with caution. We can deny that God's wisdom consists in what Malebranche describes not just because his account exceeds our epistemic means but also because we can know it to be false since it is at odds with God's infinity. But it would be a mistake to infer, simply from our idea of God, what it is for God to be wise. God is infinite and beyond our capacity: given the no-proportion principle, we lack the principles to discover what God's wisdom consists in. Perhaps it involves reasons of some sort – albeit reasons that are nonmotivating and do not resemble reasons that creatures act on.

The other possible sources of knowledge about God's wisdom is authority: scripture and Catholic tradition. In the chapter from the *Réflexions* discussed above, in addition to arguing that neither

Augustine nor Aquinas supports Malebranche's account, Arnauld considers a different reason offered by Augustine and Aquinas about why God creates: to communicate goodness to the world. Arnauld treats this as better since it does not saddle God with needing the world to bring God glory. He notes Augustine's remark that "if we ask why God created the heavens and the earth, we must respond only, because he willed it: and if we ask again why he willed it, it must be said that this question is impertinent, because there can be no cause of the will of God." He continues: "We can nevertheless assign a final cause, for which God has willed to [34] make the world that he willed to make and that he made. For, as it is said in Proverbs, 'God has made all things for himself,' one can also say that God willed to create the world for himself" (OA 39 434). Although Arnauld warns that it is impertinent or audacious even to ask whether God's will has a cause, he also relies on Augustine and Proverbs to support the belief in some purpose in God's action or at least permit finite beings to assign some purpose to God's action.<sup>31</sup>

So Nadler is correct: Arnauld does not think that God acts according to practical reasons. And yet Arnauld takes care to preserve the possibility of God's having reasons, though this possibility is grounded in faith, not reason. While acknowledging that nothing can constrain God's will, Arnauld is careful not to conclude that there is no sense in which God's will is rational. I believe Moreau is correct to focus on Arnauld's insisting that God is not capricious or arbitrary and on his never directly denying that God acts for reasons. However, I think that Moreau's account of what it would mean for God to act for reasons exceeds Arnauld's conception of the limits on our epistemic means. We have evidence that God is wise and that, in some sense, there is purpose in God's actions. But we cannot know whether God's will has any reasons – even reasons internal to God's will.

### *3. Concluding Remarks*

I have argued that Arnauld holds a "partially hidden" conception of God. He endorses a conception of divine simplicity whereby God, God's action, and God's attributes are identical, even though God, God's action, and God's attributes are conceptually distinct. Moreover, there are no conceptual priorities among God, God's action, and God's attributes. As to whether God acts for reasons, I have argued that Arnauld's considered position is that we lack the epistemic means to determine whether there is any sense in which God acts for reasons, although we can know that some conceptions of how God acts for reasons – like Malebranche's – are mistaken. Arnauld's account of our epistemic access to God is central to his metaphysical account of God's nature.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moreau (1999, 25-28) offers an excellent timeline for the debate.

<sup>2</sup> OC V 38/R 121. See also, OC V 28-29/R 116-17; OC V 180; and OC XI 18-19. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

[35]

<sup>3</sup> OC V 24-25/R 114. For a discussion of Malebranche's theodicy in general, see Rutherford (2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Nadler (2008, 534); and Moreau (1999, 295).

<sup>5</sup> See Moreau (1999, 280-86) and Moreau (2000, 102-04, 107).

<sup>6</sup> Moreau (1999, 295). See also, Nadler (2008, 534 and 538) and Schmaltz (2016, 156-59).

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<sup>7</sup> Nadler (2008, 538) and Nadler (2011, 174).

<sup>8</sup> Nadler (2008, 530). See also Nadler's claim that for Descartes, "in an absolutely simple and omnipotent being such as God, will and understanding are one and the same thing, distinguishable *ne quidem ratione*" (532). Ndiaye (1991, 335); and Nelson (1993, 685-9) offer similar accounts of Arnauld's conception of simplicity. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes discusses this type of distinction, which he calls a '*distinctio rationis*' (AT VIIIa 30/CSM I 214). This is often translated 'conceptual distinction' as in CSM, or as 'distinction of reason'. Nadler uses 'distinction of reason.' Both English expressions refer to the same type of distinction.

<sup>9</sup> In the middle of the seventeenth century, Arnauld was associated with and a leading spokesman for Jansenism. The conception of God prevalent among Jansenists was the *Dieu caché* or hidden God. This conception of God denies any epistemic access to God through reason. This is not Arnauld's position, but his account is in some ways a moderate version of it—hence, my use of 'partially hidden'.

<sup>10</sup> Following Nadler's translation (2008, 529-30). See also, Kremer (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Some of the translation is from Nadler (2008, 531).

<sup>12</sup> Translation slightly modified.

<sup>13</sup> See Pearce (2019) for more on Arnauld on abstraction.

<sup>14</sup> I take the Port Royalist use of '*distinction de raison*' to mean a conceptual distinction. See note 8 above. See also Pécharman (1995, 68), for conceptual distinctions in the *Logic*, and Murdoch (1993) for an insightful discussion of abstraction and exclusion in Descartes.

<sup>15</sup> Moreau holds that, for Arnauld, all of God's attributes are identical and that conceptual distinctions are grounded in us, not in God, (1999, 280 and 284).

<sup>16</sup> See Moreau (1999), especially 280-6 and Moreau (2000), especially section 4.3.

<sup>17</sup> OA 39 147. Ndiaye (1991, 324), points to this passage.

<sup>18</sup> Following Nadler's translation, (2008, 530).

<sup>19</sup> OA 39 30, cited by Moreau at (1999, 295, note 2). See also, Nadler (2008, 534).

<sup>20</sup> OA 39 431, cited by Moreau at (1999, 295, note 2).

<sup>21</sup> Both Nadler (2008) and Schmaltz (2016, 158, note 171) seem to agree that Arnauld claims in these passages that God acts for reasons.

[36]

<sup>22</sup> For example, at OA 38 94/E 17 and OA 41 395/B 260/CG 336. Compare, OA 40 153. See also Gouhier (1978, 128); Ndiaye (1991, 272-83); and Schmaltz (2002, 63). In the *Logic*, the Port Royalists outline a third source, "intelligence," which grounds our knowledge of "first principles." OA 41 354/B 227/CG 291-92. For some discussion, see Hunter (1996, 117-18).

<sup>23</sup> Hunter (1996, 117-18) suggests that '*foi*' should sometimes be 'testimonial' and sometimes 'faith'.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Hunter (1996, 117).

<sup>25</sup> See Faye (2000) for a discussion of the *Examen*.

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<sup>26</sup> Some of the translation is from Carraud (1996, 95) who offers a nice discussion.

<sup>27</sup> For example, at OC V 12/R 112.

<sup>28</sup> In an insightful paper, R.C. Sleigh calls attention to this passage (1996, 77). He attributes a view called ‘theological restraint’ to Arnauld and offers a summary: “Arnauld's position of restraint may be summarized this way: If a purely philosophical proposition appears to generate new theological knowledge, then it needs to have its wings clipped”; at 84. My interpretation is much indebted to Sleigh’s insights. I follow Sleigh’s translation. Compare, Moreau (1999, 217-22).

<sup>29</sup> OA 39 424. Arnauld cites Article 1 of Book One of the *Traité* OC V 12/R 112, translation slightly amended.

<sup>30</sup> OA 39 424. Compare, Bouillier (1868, 201).

<sup>31</sup> Compare Malebranche’s *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, at OC XIV 11, where, worried about Quietism, he warns against confusing ‘les motifs’ with ‘la fin’—motives/reasons with ends in actions by finite creatures. See the discussion by Walsh and Lennon (2012) of Malebranche’s position.

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