



## Nicolas Malebranche

Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) is known for his profoundly Christian philosophy and theocentric metaphysics that was nonetheless thought through the lens of rationalism. Malebranche synthesised Augustinism and Cartesianism to ultimately develop distinct philosophical themes such as ‘occasionalism’ (i.e. all natural things are caused by God) and ‘vision in God’ (i.e. ‘we see all things in God’). Lesser known is his contribution to **intercultural philosophy** and his encounter with **Chinese thought**. In his lifetime, his work was widely read throughout Europe and even reached China with the Jesuit missionaries. On his return to France, one missionary introduced Malebranche to Chinese thought, and in particular to the Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi (朱熹 1130-1200). The outcome was a ‘dialogue’ that the former published in 1707 under the title *Entretien d'un Philosophe chrétien et d'un Philosophe chinois sur l'existence et la nature de Dieu*. Although this text can come across as a gross Western-centric misinterpretation of aspects of Chinese thought or even as instrumental to Malebranche’s aversion against Spinozism, it does contain dimensions pertinent to the practice of intercultural philosophy.

### **Li (理) and the transcendent God**

The point of the *Entretien* is not to convert the Chinese philosopher by imposing a Christian theology; rather, Malebranche attempts to convince his Chinese interlocutor from his projected and therefore partial perspective of the fundamental notion of *li* (理) as conceived in Chu Hsi’s Neo-Confucianism (i.e. natural law, rational principle). As the *li*, for Malebranche, is that which gives form to matter it cannot be the perfect God, which can only be conceived in transcendent terms. The *li* amounts to some natural necessity at work that precludes therefore any causal intervention by a transcendent God. Moreover, Malebranche strives to prove that the infinite perfection of such a God is the only plausible explanation for the cause of all beings, against which the Chinese philosopher questions the very existence of infinity for it can only be the illusion arising from the mind perceiving itself.

From an intercultural point of view and regardless of Malebranche’s dogmatism and alleged orientalism, the method used in the *Entretien* has the merit of considering the perspective of otherness, albeit with the aim at proving its own point.

**Gerald Cipriani**

## **Bibliography**

Nicholas Malebranche, *Entretien d'un Philosophe chrétien et d'un Philosophe chinoise sur l'existence et la nature de Dieu*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, ed. André Robinet (Paris: Vrin, 1958), Vol. XV.

Nicholas Malebranche, *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher on the Existence and Nature of God*, trans. D. A. Iorio (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1980).

David Mungello, 'Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41, 4 (1980): 551-178.

Gregory M. Reihman, 'Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy: A Reconsideration', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, 2 (March 2013): 262-280.

Gregory M. Reihman, 'Malebranche's Influence on Leibniz's Writings on China', *Philosophy East and West* 65, 3 (2015): 846-868'

Yuen Ting Lai, 'The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23, 2 (1985): 151-178.