Introduction to the Seminar on Malebranche: Malebranche's "Political Ontology"

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I do not enter into the detail of all this: because I take no pleasure in walking in darkness, nor in guiding others to the precipice.

—Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*

Alain Badiou's *Le Séminaire. Malebranche: L'être 2. Figure théologique*, 1986 [*The Seminar: Malebranche: Being 2. Theological figure*, 1986] represents the corrected transcript of a seminar Alain Badiou gave on the subject of Nicolas Malebranche's philosophy. As the subtitle of the seminar indicates, it was given in 1986; more precisely, the seminar consisted of seven sessions that met over the span of roughly two and a half months, from March 11 to May 27 of that year. Though the course presented a synthetic overview of the entirety of Malebranche's thought, it was primarily devoted to a reconstruction of the line of thinking presented in what is perhaps Malebranche's signature philosophical work, the *Traité de la nature et de la grâce* [*Treatise on Nature and Grace*](1680).¹

The Seminar: Malebranche was originally published in 2013 by Librairie Arthème Fayard, as the second installment of what will eventually be a complete edition of Badiou's seminars published under the title *Le Séminaire*. Chronologically, the series opens with his 1983–84 seminar on the philosophical category of the "One" and

its development in the thought of Plato, Descartes, and Kant;² it will continue up to 2012. The order of publication is not, however, chronological. The seminar on Malebranche is, according to the order established by Badiou, the second installment in the sequence that will constitute *The Seminar*, though it was in fact published simultaneously with the volume Badiou chose to initiate the series with: his 1994–95 seminar on Jacques Lacan (*Le Séminaire. Lacan: l'antiphilosophie 3, 1994–95*), which appeared in English with Columbia University Press in 2018.³

As the subtitle of this seminar on Malebranche also indicates, the trimester spent examining *Treatise on Nature and Grace* forms a part of one cycle within the seminar series, dedicated to the thought of being. This cycle examines three moments or “figures” of Being: an inaugural, “ontological” figure (Parmenides, 1985⁴), a second, “theological,” figure (Malebranche), and a final variation, the modern “withdrawal” of Being (Heidegger, 1986–87⁵). This cycle can be seen, in turn, as part of a larger group of seminars, conducted between 1983 and 1987, devoted to the history of the thinking of being. This grouping includes, in addition to the cycle on Being and the seminar on the One, still another seminar dedicated to the category of the Infinite as it is articulated in the thought of Aristotle, Spinoza, and Hegel (1984–85).⁶

Readers familiar with Badiou’s oeuvre will observe that the five years during which these seminars on Being, the One, and the Infinite were conducted coincide with the years, following the publication in French of *Théorie du sujet* in 1982, during which he was also composing his 1988 philosophical masterpiece, *L’Être et l’événement* (published in English as *Being and Event*).⁷ These readers will also note that the transformation of the categories of the One and the Infinite are central axes structuring the radical revision of ontology undertaken in the first three parts of that same book. All of the proper names evoked in the titles of the seminars given between

1983 and 1987 will warrant considerable analyses in *Being and Event*, often entire chapters. All except one: the name *Malebranche* does not appear once in its hundreds of pages.

Indeed, in his short preface to the seminar on Malebranche, Badiou writes that this “seminar is the only one in my entire career which, from the point of view of the construction of my own system, has been of no use to me.” However emphatic this claim might be, it should be underlined all the same that within the economy of Badiou’s philosophical archaeology, the “theological figure of being” plays a crucial, mediating role: it sutures the power of the Infinite to the category of the One. The ontotheological synthesis of the One and the Infinite is, in this sense, the exemplary figure of what Badiou calls on several occasions in *Being and Event* “the ontology of Presence.”⁸ If the examination of Malebranche’s particular variation on this synthesis was of no use to Badiou from the perspective of the elaboration of his own philosophical work, the *disintrinsication* of these two categories is nevertheless a pivotal achievement of this system. It is the foundation on which the doctrine of the event and the theory of the subject are built.

The choice of Malebranche—an author largely unknown outside of France—is indeed, at first glance, a curious one. Badiou indicates in his preface to this seminar that he initially considered Leibniz’s ontotheological ambitions to have been the self-evident choice, and that the decision to devote the seminar to Malebranche was a more or less contingent one. The timing of this decision is significant. Leibniz, we should remember, was the subject of a seminar given by Gilles Deleuze just a year later, in the first half of 1987; he would publish a book on Leibniz as a “Baroque” thinker of the “fold” in 1988.⁹ Badiou, in his turn, similarly characterized Malebranche throughout his seminar as a philosopher of the Baroque; in this volume, both Malebranche and Leibniz are grouped with Spinoza to form a network of paths taken in the wake of the Cartesian rupture in philosophy.

In his preface to his 1985–86 seminar on Parmenides, Badiou reminds us that this long cycle of seminars initiated in 1983–84 began at a very specific political conjuncture. This was a period marked by the victory of the Left in France, with the election of François Mitterrand: a victory that would paradoxically usher in a period of defeat and dejection for the revolutionary left and its “new forms of political emancipation.” It was during this period that the Maoist political organization Badiou belonged to and had led since 1969—the Union of Communists of France, Marxist-Leninist (UCFML)—was disbanded. This was a period of “intellectual and material counter-revolution,” he writes, one during which the word “communism” was not simply discredited but “criminalized,” and the term “democracy” became the watchword of the so-called *pensée unique*. In the shadow of Mitterrand’s triumph, much of the French Left found it opportune to renounce their own post-1968 militancy and rally to the Socialist Party and eventually to the virtues of the market and formal freedoms of parliamentarism. In this frigid climate, Badiou explains, the construction of an elaborate philosophical apparatus functioned as something of a defense, a shelter, against the chill and snap of these winter years. “Without ever giving up participating in all the localized experiments that kept the thought-practice of a transformed political life alive,” he writes, “I began to build a protective philosophical shell within which it would become impossible to fall prey to giving up, let alone to be complicit with capitalo-parliamentarism . . . So, in 1983 I humbly began the journey that was to lead, five years later, to the publication of *Being and Event* by way of a fresh examination of the great history of philosophy.”¹⁰

Though Badiou with a few of his comrades from the UCFML went on to form what they referred to elliptically as The Political Organization in 1985, this group explicitly presented itself as “post-Leninist and post-Maoist.” It was founded on the premise that

political parties of the type that emerged with the communist Third International were, as they put it, “saturated”: finished, exhausted, through. Though this small group would produce many analyses and polemical brochures and broadsheets over the next three decades, its establishment marked the conclusion of what Badiou sometimes calls his “red years,” a decade and a half during which his philosophical ambitions were largely put on hold in favor of political writing and activism. His writings between 1969 and 1982 were almost entirely publications written for and in the name of the UCFML. Many took the form of violent polemics against groups and tendencies ostensibly to the left of Badiou and his comrades—groups and tendencies he did not hesitate to tar with the brush of “fascist.”¹¹ The publication, in 1982, of his *Theory of the Subject* marks a pivot in his work.¹² This book is thoroughly transitional in nature, more a summation and a synthesis of his thought in the late 1970s—an elaborate braiding together of late Lacan and French Maoism—than an opening onto the philosophical project that would occupy him for the next three decades.

This political and ideological setting should be kept in mind by the reader of Badiou’s Malebranche seminar. Malebranche’s own writing was, as Badiou underlines in the book’s opening chapters, deeply marked by the “ideological and political turmoil of the age” (Session 2), with much of his published work consisting of polemics against other philosophical camps of the period, and mounted defenses against their attacks. Antoine Arnauld, for example, was one prominent and formidable adversary of Malebranche’s, and appears early in Badiou’s account. Arnauld, a figure even more obscure to our eyes than Malebranche, but a towering philosophical presence of the late seventeenth century—he is primarily known today through Descartes’s responses to his objections to the *Meditations*—is presented in Badiou’s seminar not as a singular, solitary thinker, but primarily as a polemicist and leader of the

Jansenist “party.” In Session 2 of the present volume, says Badiou, “Arnauld launched scathing attacks, polemics, and questions in an absolutely nonstop intellectual activity typical of a party leader”. Like Arnauld, Malebranche is himself cast in the figure of the philosophico-religious partisan. He, too, is a leader of a group or order—the Oratorians—that is not simply a school of thought but a strong institutional presence, competing with other parties for influence and leverage not only within the Church, but with State power as well. Opposed to these smaller “groupuscules” was the hegemonic “party” of the period, the Jesuit order. The great religious debates of the seventeenth century in France on grace and predestination were dominated by the radical Jansenist party and the hegemonic Jesuits, with the former condemned by the Church on multiple occasions for their positions, and pursued relentlessly by the Jesuit orthodoxy. The latter party, in its turn, had managed not only to stake out largely unassailable positions within the Church, but to position its own personnel as confessors to French kings.

The Oratorian order to which Malebranche belonged was a pronouncedly minor one by comparison. If we were to keep Badiou’s own experience of the 1970s in mind here, the Jesuit order would clearly occupy the position of the French Communist Party on the Left, with both Arnauld’s and Malebranche’s parties situated to the latter’s left. It is perhaps in this sense that the portrait of Malebranche drawn in the first sessions of this seminar has a special resonance for Badiou: it is the “committed” quality of his writing, as with that of Arnauld and others, that accounts in part for Badiou’s admiration. And yet Malebranche is most clearly set off in these pages less against the Jesuits or Arnauld than that other great Jansenist of the epoch, Pascal, who plays foil to Malebranche throughout this seminar, especially in its first and second sessions, and in its very last pages.

Pascal remains a fundamental, if often overlooked, precursor in Badiou's thought: in his status as one of four French "dialectical" thinkers (alongside Rousseau, Mallarmé, and Lacan) in whose lineage Badiou situates himself, and in the place his thought assumes in the construction of Badiou's philosophical conceptuality in *Being and Event*. It is Pascal's thought that supplies the matrix for developing the two crucial subjective operators that provide the first mediations between the category of the event and the theory of the subject: intervention, and fidelity. Time and again, Pascal's name appears in this seminar on Malebranche's theory of grace. In turn, certain passages from the seminar here are closely echoed in the chapter in *Being and Event* on Pascal. The use to be made of this beautiful reconstruction of Malebranche's theory of grace is therefore the portrait it draws of a thought that shares with Pascal's the conditions of modern philosophy: the Galilean revolution in the natural sciences. Pascal and Leibniz both harbor an ambition to think what a subject, a modern Christian subject, might be in a world that is "infinite and senseless" (Session 2 in this volume).

In his response to this question, Malebranche is opposed to Pascal at every turn. It is down this path said to lead nowhere—at least for modern philosophy and contemporary thought—that Badiou wanders, and explores, on the way to building one of the most powerful philosophical apparatuses of our time.

Readers of *Being and Event* will recall not only the special place Pascal assumes in that work, but also the important epigraph from the *Pensées* heading the chapter devoted to his thought there: "The history of the Church should, properly speaking, be called the history of truth."¹³ This paradoxical formulation, whose unpacking orients much of *Being and Event's* Twenty-First Meditation, appears in the seminar on Malebranche as well, set off against an equally striking proposition in the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Indeed, this work's

first sentence: “God, being able to act only for his own glory, and being able to find it only in himself, cannot have had any other plan in the creation of the world than the establishment of his Church.”¹⁴ As with Pascal, Badiou underlines, here “we clearly find this connection between the truth of being and the Church once again.” In each case, then, we are dealing with two variations on a single philosophical ambition: the construction of a “political ontology.” In each case, the “truth of being” (ontology) is inseparable from the existence of the Church (“political”). In the thought of Malebranche as in that of Pascal, being *per se* is unthinkable without the mediation of the Church; it opens itself to thought only through the intercession of what Badiou will refer to in this seminar in more abstracted terms as *organization*. In the case of Malebranche, his opening proposition means that God’s glory cannot be drawn from the mere creation of the world from “scratch.” The world barely exists, argues Malebranche, and without the presence of the Church such a world is worth next to nothing, and exists on the “edge of the void” (Session 3 in this volume).¹⁵ Without the mediation of the Church, which alone attests to God’s glory, being is separated from nothing by the merest of thresholds. For the world to exist, there must be more than the world. There must be the Church.

But the relationship between Church and world is for Malebranche understood only *architectonically*, Badiou stresses; in Pascal’s gnomic formulation, it unfolds *historically*, “displayed or set out in the dialectic of time” (Session 1 in this volume). “With Pascal,” he writes, “we are dealing with an historico-temporal interpretation that validates things—relationships between the Old and the New Testaments, retroactions and anticipations—and it is in the warp and weave of time that this consubstantiality of the history of truth and the history of the Church is established; whereas for Malebranche, it is not historical but structural, insofar as the Church is a given of being itself” (Session 1). What separates these two

articulations of ontology and politics is the presence or absence of the Christian “event.” Badiou reiterates throughout this seminar that Malebranche’s conception of Christianity—his synthesis of the categories of Christianity and the revolution in the natural sciences, and the Cartesian geometrization of extension—avoids at all costs the specter of the crucified God, the drama of Christ’s agony. It is this minimization of the event of Christ’s sacrifice that cleaves apart the tragic vision of Pascal—and Badiou’s subsequent reinscription of his theory of the subject—from the eventless, deductive rationalizations of Malebranche.

If Christ in Malebranche’s philosophy does not play the role of the Crucified, what role does this conceptual *personnage* play instead? In this seminar’s penultimate session, Badiou explores this question at length. There he notes that the *Treatise* assigns Christ two specific conceptual functions: “One can consider Jesus Christ in terms of two qualities: one, as Architect of the Eternal Temple, and the other, as Head of the Church.”¹⁶ As architect, Christ endeavors to build a magnificent monument to the glory of God; in his “zeal,” as Malebranche describes it, he aspires to create a structure, a Church, with a maximal degree of beauty and splendor. This is not a physical edifice, but a spiritual one: it is built not of stones, but of souls. And yet Malebranche is eager to utilize this metaphor. The souls that are incorporated into the Church are so many “squared stones”—of which Peter was the first, after all—chosen less for their innate virtue or goodness than for their durability, size, shape, or hardness:

For the soul of Jesus, thinking to raise a temple of vast extent and of infinite beauty, can wish that grace be given to the greatest sinners: and if at that moment Jesus Christ actually thinks of misers, for example, then misers will receive grace. . . . Jesus Christ having need of minds of a certain character in order to bring about certain effects in his Church, he can in general apply to them, and by that application

diffuse in them the grace that sanctifies them—just as the mind of an architect thinks in general of squared stones, for example, when those sorts of stones are presently necessary to his building.¹⁷

It is these considerations of structure, extent, and “infinite beauty” that, according to Malebranche, spur Christ’s desire to incorporate this or that soul into the edifice of the Church; it is the aesthetic imperative he zealously pursues that determines to whom his attention turns, and therefore upon whose behalf he intercedes, so as to trigger the bestowal of grace. This process is an open-ended one, unfolding in time. Christ cannot, first of all, think of all souls at once; his thoughts are, like those of the finite creatures whom he harvests for his Church, subject to the conditions of space and time. The Church is therefore built stone by stone; it is never finished. And because many of the misers whom he elects to incorporate into his Church will be incapable of receiving his grace—their hearts are too hard, their souls too stingy—they will be rejected, cast aside. The construction of the Church entails many failures and much waste. In its margins, so much spiritual rubble.

Though Badiou would have us believe that not a trace of his seminar on Malebranche finds its way into his own systematic philosophical labors, there is nevertheless a remarkable passage from his short book on ethics (*Ethics*, 1994) that echoes this extraordinary moment in Malebranche’s thought. He is considering the operative distinction in his own thought between a “subject,” which for Badiou always means a subject *of truth*, and what he calls the human “some-one,” any singular biological body as yet untouched by some truth. When a some-one, this or that human animal, is “convoked and seized” by a truth process, he writes, that some-one is incorporated into a—necessarily collective—subject. He or she can continue to participate in this truth only through an active “fidelity.” Now, what is compelling about this passage for our purposes is that Badiou, like

Malebranche, here characterizes the hodgepodge of “human multiplicity” as so much raw material to be shaped and fitted into the “consistency” of a “subject-of-truth”:

To the consistency of the subject that he is in part become, having been convoked and seized by a truth-process, this particular “some-one” will contribute his anguish and agitation, this other his tall stature and cool composure, this other his voracious taste for domination, and these others their melancholy, or timidity. All the material [*matériel*] of human multiplicity can be fashioned, linked, by a “consistency”—while at the same time, of course, it opposes to this fashioning the worst kinds of inertia, and exposes the “some-one” to the permanent temptation of giving up, of returning to the mere belonging to the “ordinary” situation . . . ¹⁸

Where Christ as architect of the eternal Temple will unhesitatingly confer grace upon the hardest of hearts—the impenitent miser, the concupiscent, the prideful—should he judge these souls worthy of adorning the edifice he’s constructing, so too the subject of truth might derive its strength, paradoxically, from the array of apparent vices that make up its raw material: the taste for domination, cowardice, neuroses, and so on. Where the soul that is incorporated into the Church is tempted by sin, the some-one who composes a part of the subject can in his or her turn be tempted: not by desire, but by giving way on his or her desire (“giving up,” “returning to . . . mere belonging”).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Badiou considers Malebranche’s doctrine of the Church a formidable “theory of organization” (Session 6). In the passage from his *Ethics* that we’ve just considered, Badiou speaks not of organization but of the “consistency” of a subject of truth, a philosophical formalization constructed on the basis of a set of concrete processes: love, science,

art, and politics. However, a subject of truth in the political field is understood by Badiou, from around the mid-1980s onward, simply as an “organization” (as is evidenced by the name of the group he forms after the dissolution of the UFCML). Just a few years before, he would have spoken of “the Party,” by which he meant the “party of a new type” first conceived by Lenin at the turn of the century (the party typical of the Third International, and embodied most ferociously by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the 1930s). It is not without a touch of humor that Badiou claims that Malebranche’s conception of the Church makes him a “formidable thinker of the Party, in the sense of communist parties at the time of Stalin” and that his “theory [is] extremely valuable for better understanding the functioning of the parties of the Third International” (Session 6). But in what sense?

Let me quickly sketch, in conclusion, one way to read this claim not explicitly spelled out by Badiou. The seminar on Malebranche not only draws a parallel—Badiou is hardly the first to establish this connection, moreover—between the Church and the Party, it characterizes Malebranche’s ontology as a “political ontology”: being is truly only insofar as it is supplemented by the Church. The world exists for the Church, just as—let us play out the analogy—history, the truth of history, requires the mediation of the party. The party is, in this sense, the truth of history. Now, it is precisely this figure of the party that Badiou was taking his distance from in the mid-1980s, indeed, at the very moment he gave this seminar. The schema of the classical Party was replaced with a subject of truth embodied in, incorporated into a political “organization.” This theory of the subject will receive its doctrinal form with the publication of *Being and Event*, in 1988. There, the weave of truth and subject will assume a patently Pascalian cast. Understood in these terms, we can say that if Pascal is the theorist of the “organized,” faithful subject, Malebranche’s Church is made to stand in

for the Party of the Third International. Pascal's theory of the subject proposed a dialectical composition of truth and organization, threaded together "in the warp and weave of time"; Malebranche's Church and Stalin's Party would present two figures of "political ontology," for which party and church are "a given of being itself."

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