For *The Oxford Handbook of Malebranche*

The Senses and Sensation

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Abstract: Malebranche argues that the senses are systematically deceptive. When we look at a field of grass, we experience its greenness as something that exists out there in the world and in the grass. According to Malebranche, however, colour and other sensible qualities exist only in the soul that senses them. Malebranche has compelling reasons for relocating sensible qualities in the soul, which flow from his austere conception of the material world in combination with his relational account of intentionality. But this relocation generates two problems. First, if sensible qualities modify the soul, how is it that we misleadingly experience them as modifying bodies? Second, why would a non-deceiving God endow us with senses that are systematically misleading in this way? Malebranche addresses the first problem by appealing to his account of natural judgments to explain the construction and contents of sensory experience. He addresses the second by arguing that the purpose of the senses is to serve as tools for acting *in* the world, rather than as instruments designed for detecting the truth *about* the world.

Key Words: Malebranche, sensory perception, sensation, contents of perception, colour

1. Introduction

Someone finding themselves in a meadow sees *green* grass stretching in all directions, hears the *buzz* of a mosquito, feels the *warmth* of the sun on their skin, *tastes* a blade of grass stuck between

their teeth, and catches the *whiff* of wet soil. They seem to live in a world of colours, noises, hot and cold, tastes, and smells. As Malebranche writes in *De la recherche de la vérité: Éclaircissements* (*The Search After Truth: Elucidations*; hereafter *Elucidations*):

> Our eyes represent colours to us on the surface of bodies and light in the air and in the sun; our ears make us hear sounds as if spread out through the air and in the resounding bodies; and if we believe what the other senses report, heat will be in fire, sweetness will be in sugar, musk will have an odour, and all the sensible qualities will be in the bodies that seem to exude or diffuse them. (OC.iii.55-56/LO 569)

The world of the senses is not, however, the world in which our bodies live and move. Malebranche cautions against taking our experience of sensible qualities[1] at face-value, for "these qualities do not exist outside the soul that perceives them" (*ibid.*).

Focus on a single blade of grass. Now peel back the colour. Peel back the smell, the taste. Peel back the slippery way the grass feels. All that remains of the grass is its spatial structure: its extension. This is the real grass: colourless, odourless, tasteless, lacking even any tactile feel. In the *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et la religion* (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*; hereafter *DMR*), Malebranche explains that "[o]ur senses deceive us . . . . Colour is not in the object, pain is not in my body, heat is neither in the fire nor in my body" (OC.xii.123/JS 82). The real world—the material world that exists outside and independently of our minds—is simply extension: a shifting world of shapes and sizes.

[1] I follow Malebranche in using "sensible qualities" to refer to, for example, "light and colours, and generally all sensible qualities such as heat, cold, odours, flavours, sound, pain, pleasure" (OC.i.129/LO 52).

Malebranche relocates colour and the other sensible qualities in the mind or soul. As Malebranche writes, "your soul is green, or has a modification of green that you see, when you are in the middle of a meadow, your eyes open" (OC.xix.564). The greenness that sight wrongly attributes to the grass is a modification of the soul, not in a metaphorical or representational sense but literally as can be. "[T]he soul *actually* becomes blue, red, yellow," Malebranche writes in *Elucidation* XI, and "the soul is stained with the colours of the rainbow when looking at it" (OC.iii.166/LO 634, emphasis added). He similarly maintains that "when we smell carrion the soul becomes formally stinky [*formellement puante*], and that the taste of sugar, or of pepper or salt, is something belonging to the soul" (*ibid.*). Malebranche's claim that the soul is "formally stinky" alludes to Descartes's distinction between formal and objective reality, according to which things possess formal reality insofar as they actually exist and objective reality insofar as they are represented by an idea (AT VII 41/CSM II 28). Malebranche's point is that the soul is *actually* stinky.

One difficulty with this view is that colours and other sensible qualities appear to be intrinsically spatial. We cannot imagine a pure or disembodied case of green, for example, stripped of all spatial characteristics. We invariably picture a green *patch* or *expanse*. But nothing could be further from the truth for Malebranche. For him, sensible qualities are the non-extended, non-spatial modifications of a non-extended soul. The true colours of the rainbow do not arc across the sky. The smell that seems to fill the room does not take up any space. The sound that seems to be coming from over there is strictly nowhere. This may strain credulity.

In this chapter, I show that Malebranche has compelling reasons for his doctrine of the rainbow-coloured and stinky soul, which flow from his austere conception of the material world in combination with his relational account of intentionality. But even if Malebranche has his

reasons, this counter-intuitive doctrine generates two further problems. First, if sensible qualities modify the soul, how is it that we misleadingly experience them as modifying bodies? Second, why would a non-deceiving God endow us with senses that are systematically deceptive? Malebranche addresses the first problem by appealing to his account of natural judgments to explain the construction and contents of sensory experience. He addresses the second by arguing that the senses are tools for acting *in* the world, rather than instruments designed for detecting the truth *about* the world. Bad as they are for metaphysics and morals, the illusions of the senses serve the body's needs.

2. Exiling Sensible Qualities from the Material World

How do we find out whether grass is green? Instead of just looking at some grass, Malebranche recommends turning inwards and up. We must reflect on the idea of matter or extension to discover the features material things can have:

> We discover by simple view [*simple vûë*], without any reasoning and merely by applying the mind to the idea of extension, that roundness and every other figure is a modification belonging to body, and that pleasure, pain, heat, and all other sensible qualities are not modifications of body. (OC.iii.165/LO 634)

Consulting the idea of extension allows us to exclude sensible qualities from matter. To confidently say *this* is not *that*, however, we need some understanding of the sensible qualities we are excluding.

Malebranche holds that we grasp sensible qualities by *sensing* them. Even a peasant knows what green is when they see it (OC.i.141/LO 59), whereas green will elude the grasp of anyone who has not seen it (OC.i.145/LO 62). Malebranche thus consistently orients his investigation of sensible qualities towards our sensory experience of them: towards *apparent* colour, for example, or the colour *that we see*. "By the word *colour*," Malebranche explains, "we do not understand the configuration of little parts of which the paper, for example, is composed, which is insensible. We understand by colour that which we see in looking at the paper, that is, its apparent whiteness" (OC.xvii-i.281). Excluding sensible qualities from matter, then, requires comparing our sensory awareness of these qualities to our intellectual idea of extension. Simple view reveals the mismatch.

Malebranche's account of matter underwrites his confidence in the "simple view." The idea of matter/extension represents (a) something that can be divided into extended parts, which can themselves be divided into extended parts, and so on to infinity, (b) which parts stand in various "relations of distance" (OC.i.122-3/LO 49). The modes or states of bodies consist in the relative positions of extended parts, relations like "next to," "on top of," "five feet away from," etc. As Malebranche writes:

> All the properties of extension can consist only in its diverse ways of being. They are simply relations of distance. . . . Therefore, all the properties or possible modalities of extension are nothing but figures, or stable and permanent relations of distance, or motions, successive and constantly changing relations of distance. (OC.xii.72/JS 38)

He elaborates in *Elucidation* XII:

> there are two kinds of modes: some consist in the relation of the parts of some whole to some part of the same whole, the others consist of one thing to another that is not part of the same whole. The roundness of wax is a mode of the first sort, because its roundness consists in the equality of distance all the parts of the surface have from that part which is its centre. The motion or situation is a mode of the second sort, for it consists in the relation the wax has to bodies surrounding it. (OC.iii.174/LO 640)[2]

These relations of distance fully specify the wax's modifications.

The question of whether colour, sound, smell, etc. are modes of matter boils down to whether these sensible qualities are relations of distance. If green were a feature of the grass, then green—*apparent* green, the green *that we see*—would consist in the spatial "configuration of little parts" making up the grass, i.e., something like surface texture (OC.xvii-i.281). Our visual experience of green tells us enough about the nature of this quality to assure us that no such reduction is possible:

> If it be assumed that extension is divided into such parts as may be imagined, at rest or in motion near each other, the relations [of distance] among these parts will be clearly conceived: but one will never conceive these relations to be joy, pleasure, pain, heat, taste, colour, or any of the other sensible qualities. (OC.i.123/JS 49)

Sensible qualities are not relations of distance. In fact, we cannot recognize any exact or quantitative relations between them. We speak loosely when we say that one shade of violet is

[2] See also OC.xii.34/JS 7. Size is conspicuously absent from a body's list of modes. Malebranche plausibly holds that a body *just is* its size, i.e., its extension.

twice as vivid or bright as another (OC.iii.168/LO 636). The incommensurability of sensible qualities points to another difference from the geometrical modes of body, which typically stand in well-defined relations.[3]

Sound might seem to be a counterexample to the incommensurability of sensible qualities, since we might think that we can "discover exact relations between sounds, that the octave, for example, is two to one, the fifth three to two, the fourth four to three" (OC.iii.168/LO 636; see also OC.xii.79/JS 44). Malebranche is alluding to a mathematical approach to musical theory and harmony stretching back to antiquity.[4] On a stringed instrument, like a lyre or a guitar, the ratios between the lengths of strings correlate to the relative pitches they produce. Halving the length of a string produces the note an octave up. If a string produces middle C when plucked, dividing the string in half will produce the C one octave higher. Other musical intervals—a fourth, a fifth—correspond to different ratios of the lengths of strings. Although these mathematical ratios primarily apply to the *causes* of sounds, namely, to the strings that produce different notes, we might hold that the ratios apply equally to the sounds themselves (OC.xii.80/JS 45). *If* that were correct, if the ratio between middle C and the C an octave above were 2:1, then sounds *themselves* would stand in quantifiable relations and, hence, be commensurable.

In response to this objection, Malebranche denies that effects invariably stand in the same numerical ratios as their causes. Though rubbing someone's hand may give them pleasure, doubling the pressure or speed does not always double their pleasure (OC.xii.80-1/JS 45-6). Even if the *causes* of sounds—namely, the lengths of strings—stand in well-quantified relations, the *sounds themselves* do not (OC.iii.169/LO 636).

[3] See Schmaltz (1996, 74-5).

[4] See Romagni (2023).

3. Relocating Sensible Qualities

Because sensible qualities do not exist in bodies, Malebranche infers that they must exist in the soul. In one sense, this inference is unobjectionable. Malebranche's starting point is that we experience bodies as colourful, smelly, tasty, and so forth. Further investigation reveals that this sensory experience is deceptive. Grass is not in fact green nor sugar sweet. This starting point presupposes that colours and other sensible qualities exist "in the soul" to the extent that the soul experiences or represents them, in roughly the same way that we have something "in mind" whenever we think about it. Malebranche's view, however, is that sensible qualities have a more robust existence in the soul than that. The soul is actually or formally green and blue, sweet and salty, hot and cold.

Open your eyes and the world comes rushing in. The greenness of the grass strikes you forcefully and vividly. The reality of greenness seems impossible to deny. Malebranche takes this phenomenon seriously despite his arguments showing that matter is colourless. On Malebranche's view, sensory experience of a sensible quality implies that the perceiver is related to an actual instance of this quality. "When we feel heat, when we see light, or colours," Malebranche writes, "we do in fact see them, even in delirium" (OC.i.160/LO 69-70). If someone sees green, they are in the presence of something actually or genuinely green. Otherwise, the greenness they see could not be so vividly present. The greenness cannot be in the grass, however, for the reasons outlined above. Therefore, Malebranche concludes, "*your soul is green*, or has a modification of green that you see" (OC.xix.564, emphasis added). *Something* must be green, and the soul is the only viable option. Malebranche sweeps colours and other

sensible qualities into "the dustbin of the mind," where he dubs them sensations.[5] "These colours, smells, tastes, and an infinity of other sensations," Malebranche writes, "are nothing but modifications of your substance" (OC.x.104). A sensation of green does not merely represent or indicate green. It *is* green.

Malebranche flirts with the more radical view that *all* thought and perception imply the existence of their objects, so that if someone so much as *thinks* of a circle, then a circle must exist to provide the object of their thought (OCM.xii.35/JS 8). This view absurdly implies that "[e]verything you think of exists," which Malebranche rejects. Nevertheless, Malebranche retains the insight that all thought and perception has a relational structure. If someone has a thought or perception of a certain object, there must be some actually existing thing—a reality—that this person is related to that makes this object available to them and helps explain the object-directedness of their thought or perception (OCM.xii.35/JS 8).[6] As Malebranche writes, "when I think of a circle, of a number, of being or of infinity, of a particular finite being, I perceive realities. For if the circle I perceived were nothing, in thinking of it I would be thinking of nothing" (OCM.xii.35/JS 8).[7] When someone sees a circle, the reality that makes available the object of their perception is a representative idea existing in the mind of God. Whereas other philosophers in the period characterize ideas as private, psychological entities, Malebranchean ideas are more akin to Platonic Forms or archetypes folded into God's substance. Ideas are "eternal, immutable and common to all intelligences" (OC.iii.140/LO 620). When someone sees a circle, they are acquainted with an intersubjectively available archetype of circularity, rather than

[5] See Cook (1996).

[6] For discussion of Malebranche's relational account of intentionality, see Alquié (1974, 204), Radner (1978, 13-4), Nadler (1992, 81), Pyle (2003, 47), and Simmons (2009, 112).

[7] See also OC.ii.99/LO 320, OC.ii.103/LO 322, and OC.ix.946-7.

a private mental image or a particular round thing. When someone sees green, in contrast, the relevant reality is a green modification of their soul, a green sensation. In both cases, a person's *relation* to some actually existing thing—a reality—explains the object of their awareness. In the case of the circle, the mind is perceptually related to something outside itself, whereas in the case of green, the relation is the reflexive consciousness the mind has of its own modifications. Both cases of seeing, however, have an act-object structure. Malebranche's relational account of intentionality leads to the rainbow-coloured soul.

Commentators like Nadler (1992, 64) and Jolley (1995, 135) suggest that Malebranche's view of sensations amounts to a kind of adverbialism, according to which the soul senses "greenly" when they look at grass.[8] Though Malebranche's characterization of the soul's modifications or states as *ways of being* has an adverbial ring, the label may be somewhat misleading. Whereas sense datum theorists like Price (1932) argue that seeing green entails a confrontation with an actual instance of greenness, adverbialism was introduced to avoid reifying the objects of sensing in this way. According to the adverbialist, when someone sees green, they sense "greenly," where the point of this locution is to avoid incurring ontological commitment to an actual instance of greenness. But Malebranche does not share the adverbialist's ontological squeamishness. He agrees with the sense datum theorists that if we see green, then we must confront something that is actually green: "the soul *actually* becomes blue, red, or yellow, and the soul is stained with the colours of the rainbow when looking at it" (OC.iii.166/LO 634, emphasis mine).[9]

[8] See also Pyle (2003, 63-5). Crane and French (2021) helpfully overview the debate between sense-datum theorists and adverbialists.

[9] On this point, I depart from Nadler (1992, 64). Ott (2014, 695; 2017, 161-6) and Nolan (2012, 42-3) similarly argue against reading Malebranche as an adverbialist.

4. Sensible Quality Sensations and Perceptions of Shape

When someone sees a green circle, greenness and circularity enter the perceiver's awareness by different routes. She sees *green* because she is conscious of a green modification or sensation of her soul, whereas she sees a *circle* because she perceives the archetype or essence of circularity existing in God's mind. From the perceiver's point of view, however, greenness and circularity are joined seamlessly together in a single object, a green circle. Somehow Malebranche needs to weave these threads—sensible and spatial, human and divine—into a single experience. He needs to explain how the green sensation relates to the perception of circularity.

Commentators divide on Malebranche's solution to this problem depending on whether they think sensations are themselves intentional for him. On the non-intentional reading, sensations are like mental bruises, raw feels, or blank effects.[10] They are *objects* of consciousness or inner sentiment but not themselves intentional *acts*. A sensation of green exemplifies greenness. But it's not *of* or *about* anything. It just is. Defenders of the non-intentional reading typically argue for a "duplex view,"[11] on which a perceiver's visual experience of a green circle is a composite of an intellectual perception of a circle akin to a geometer's understanding, accompanied by a non-intentional green sensation. Jolley (1995, 131) reads Malebranche as endorsing a duplex view in the following passage:

[10] Defenders of the non-intentional reading include Rodis-Lewis (1963, 103, 139), Alquié (1974, 505), Nadler (1992, 23-5), Jolley (1995, 131), Schmaltz (1996, 107-8), Pyle (2003, 61), and Ott (2017, 164-6). I borrow the image of a "mental bruise" from Simmons (2009, 107).

[11] I borrow this label from Simmons (2009).

> When we perceive something sensible, one finds in our perception *sensation* and pure *idea*. The sensation is a modification of our soul, and it is God who causes it in us […] As for the idea that is found together with the sensation, it is in God and we see it because it pleases God to reveal it to us. (OC.i.445/LO 234)

If the duplex view is to explain what binds the sensible and spatial aspects of experience, as opposed to merely labelling the problem, it must clarify the sense in which a perception is "accompanied" by a sensation and, more specifically, what binds *this* sensation with *that* perception. This is an intra-mental union problem, faced with explaining how intellectual and sensory states can be compounded to form complex experiences despite their heterogenous natures.[12]

According to the intentional reading, in contrast, even the simplest sensation is simultaneously an object of consciousness and an intentional act. A sensation of green exemplifies greenness, but it also points towards something beyond itself, namely, an idea in the mind of God.[13] On this reading, someone's visual experience of a green circle consists in a green sensation that is itself a perception of circularity. Identity binds *this* sensation and *that* perception. Malebranche invites the intentional reading by identifying sensible qualities—which just are sensations—with perceptions: "if I look at my hand, I will have the perception of it, colour; if I regard it in water, I will have the perception of it, coldness, and if I have gout at the same time I regard it in cold water, I will have the modification or perception of it, pain" (OC.xix.884; see also OC.ix.961-2).

[12] Ott (2017, 193) discusses the difficulties involved.

[13] Radner (1978, 87), Reid (2003, 584), Simmons (2009) and Nolan (2012, 41-2) defend the intentional reading.

Still, we might wonder how a perception's sensational tint mixes with its object in our overall experience. How does the soul turn itself inside out?

5. Natural Judgments

The combination of sensations and perceptions results in the perceiver's awareness of spatially articulated patches of sensible qualities, such as green circles, smelly regions, and patches of hot and cold. Sensory experience is richer, however, than the fragmentary awareness of such patches. Someone's visual experience of a lime sitting on a yellow plate outstrips the rudimentary awareness of a green circle afforded by the fusion of their green sensation with a perception of circularity (however that fusion occurs exactly). They see a pebbled green sphere in their vicinity, roughly hand-sized, located on top of a yellow surface, and some distance away from their point of view. To capture the complex structure of the sensory world, Malebranche argues that a person's visual experience of a lime is partially constituted by natural judgments (OC.i.129-30/LO 52). Sensations explain the perceiver's awareness of various shades of green. Perceptions explain their awareness of various shapes. Natural judgments—formed in the soul by the Author of Nature—knit everything together into an experience of the three-dimensional world in which the perceiver is apparently a denizen.[14]

[14] The precise division of labour between sensations, perceptions, and natural judgments is murky. Sometimes Malebranche identifies sensations and perception (OC.xix.884; see also OC.ix.961-2). In other passages, he suggests that natural judgments bind sensations and perceptions together by representing sensations as features of material things, which suggests that sensations and perceptions are distinct (OC.i.138/LO 58). A proponent of the duplex view

Natural judgments help explain the fact that sensory experience represents the world as being a certain way. Seeing *green*, or even seeing *a green circle*, is not yet to see *that* something is the case, for example, *that* there is something green, spherical, hand-sized, etc. located some distance away. Natural judgments bridge the gap between seeing *something* and seeing *that* by imbuing sensory experience with propositional content. Malebranche often describes the senses as having a voice. The senses "speak to" and "inform" the mind (OC i. 16/LO xxxvii; OCM I 92/LO 32; OC x. 113). He refers to their "testimony" and "reports" (OC xii.30/JS 4; OC.xii.70-1/JS 37-8; OC.xii.75/JS 41). He personifies the senses as "false witnesses," making their case in a court over which the mind presides (OC xii.90/JS 54, OC xii.100/JS 62; 82, 184; OC xi. 133/W 125). The non-metaphorical significance of these claims is that sensory experience—the combination of sensations and natural judgments—makes proposals to the perceiver about the way world is, which the perceiver must decide whether to accept as true, reject as false, or hold in a state of suspense. A perceiver's visual experience of a lime, for example, proposes to her that there is something round and green in front of her. The perceiver must then decide whether to take this proposal at face value. Crucially, if the perceiver can accept her sensory experience *as true*, or reject it *as false*, then her sensory experience must be *truth-apt*. In other words, sensory experiences must have propositional content. Natural judgments imbue sensory experience with this content and give the senses their voice.[15]

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might thus appeal to natural judgments as the glue that unites non-intentional sensations and perceptions.

[15] Nadler (1992, 21-4) and Nolan (2012, 38-40, 43-4) rightly emphasize this point. Ott (2017, ch.9) recognizes that Malebranche *needs* natural judgments to play this role, but he is pessimistic about whether they can.

Malebranche distinguishes natural judgments from free judgments (OC.i.156/LO 68). These different kinds of judgment fall on either side of the line between a perceiver's *sensory experience* and *the beliefs* she forms based on this experience. Natural judgements are operations of the senses that occur "in us and independently of us, and even in spite of us," whereas free judgments are operations of the will (OC.i.119/LO 46).[16] Natural judgments help construct the senses' proposals about the way the world is; free judgments consist in the perceiver's acceptance (or rejection) of these sensory proposals via a free act of consent. The different kinds of judgment are subject to different forms of assessment. Natural judgments may be assessed as true or false, accurate or inaccurate. But the perceiver is not responsible for whether their natural judgments are true or false, since these judgments are imposed upon her by God. The perceiver *is* responsible, by contrast, for what she makes of her natural judgments. She is responsible for whether she freely consents to them and whether *she* takes them to be true. The perceiver may be appropriately praised or blamed for her free judgments because they are up to her.

In furnishing the soul with natural judgments, God brackets his omniscience and confines Himself to the perceiver's finite, bodily perspective. God infuses the perceiver's soul with the natural judgments she *would* make for herself if she knew the affections of her sense organs and could infer the likely state of her surroundings from this basis, reasoning from bodily effects to their probable environmental causes.[17] Natural judgments correspond to the conclusions of these

[16] Some commentators worry that the natural/involuntary character of natural judgments conflicts with their status as judgments. See, for example, Smith (1905, 202-3), Church (1931, 37-42), Bréhier (1938), Merleau-Ponty (2002, 25-30), and Ott (2017, ch. 9).

[17] Although some of Malebranche's language might suggest that the soul voluntarily and freely makes natural judgments, his considered view is that this process occurs involuntarily and automatically. Malebranche's views about whether the soul actively forms natural judgments

hypothetical inferences (OC.i.119-20/LO 46-7; see also OC.iii.327/LO 733). When the perceiver looks at the lime, for example, the contents of her visual experience are constructed roughly as follows: "An elliptical shape is projected on my retina; my head is turned to the left; the muscles in my eyes are accommodating themselves just so; therefore, there is something spherical located off to the left." God draws this inference on the perceiver's behalf by instituting the law of the union in such a way that sensory perceptions are formed in the soul in accordance with this type of inferential process. From the perceiver's perspective, rudimentary sensations—a visual sensation of the elliptical shape, the feeling of muscular accommodation, etc.—spontaneously crystallize into an overall sensory experience of the lime, which encodes the conclusions of the Divine inference.[18]

6. The World According to the Senses

The senses, according to Malebranche, are *false* witnesses. Despite their divine origin, their testimony is systematically at odds with the truth. One example is the sensory misrepresentation of material things as colourful, noisy, smelly, and tasty. The projection of these sensations is not the most troubling error of the senses, however. The internal senses—feelings of pleasure, pain, hunger and thirst—also obscure the truth about *us* by misrepresenting our relationship to matter.[19]

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evolved through the various editions of the *Search*. See Rodis-Lewis (1963, 46-53) and Ott (2017, chs. 8-10).

[18] See Alquié (1974, 177).

[19] See Simmons (2008) for more on projective error and Chamberlain (2018) for bodily awareness.

Though we are immaterial, thinking substances, simple and devoid of parts, our senses tell a different story. My hands feel like parts of myself when I hold a piece of paper, as does my whole body when I stretch myself out by a fire and feel its warmth on my skin. A sharp stabbing pain rivets me to my body, concentrating my sense of self in the knee where it hurts. Malebranche recognizes this dimension of bodily awareness, focusing particularly on the way sensations of pleasure and pain force us to identify with our bodies:

> Through the instinct of sensation, I am persuaded that my soul is joined to my body, or that my body is part of my being; I have no evidence for this. I do not know it through the light of reason, but only through the pain or pleasure I sense when objects strike me. (OC.ii.172/LO 365–366)

On the one hand, we feel pleasure and pain as belonging to us and as modifying ourselves, which they do. The soul can "hardly help realizing" that pleasurable and painful sensations "belong to it in some way" (OC.i.139/LO 58). When feeling pain, there can be no question about whose pain it is. "To feel pain," Malebranche writes, "is to feel oneself unhappy, without knowing what one is, nor what this modality of our being is that makes us unhappy" (OC.xii.66/JS 34). On the other hand, as Malebranche observes, "we locate pain and pleasurable sensations in the parts of our body" (OC.ii.178/LO 370). Natural judgments "assign pain to the pricked finger rather than to the thorn that pricks it" (OC.i.133/LO 55). When Malebranche says that we feel pleasure and pain "in" the body, his point is not simply that these sensations have bodily coordinates. We experience pleasure and pain as modifications or states of the body. "It seems to me," Malebranche writes, "that it is my finger which feels the pain of a prick" (OC.xii.33/JS 6). These two aspects of pleasure and pain—the inescapable consciousness of ownership and their felt bodily location—stitch self and body together. The stabbing pain in my knee simultaneously

feels likes a modification of *me* and of *the knee*, with the result that I experience the knee as *part* of myself (OC.i.138-9/LO 58). As Malebranche writes, "I am jabbed at the end of my finger, and *I* suffer" (OC.xii.100/JS 63, emphasis added).

In the *Entretiens sur la mort (Dialogues on Death*), Malebranche illustrates how pain fosters bodily identification by imagining what it would be like to feel pain in a wall. In this scenario, he predicts, we would feel that the wall was a part of ourselves:

> if the idea that you have of that wall struck you with a sentiment of pain, instead of touching you only with a sensation of whiteness, you would regard that wall as part of yourself: because you cannot doubt that pain does not belong to you, as you can now with regards to whiteness. (OC.xiii.408)

Both pain and whiteness are modifications of the soul projected onto matter. But only pain confers a sense of self. This might seem puzzling since both confuse soul and matter. The key difference is that "you cannot doubt that pain does not belong to you, as you can now with regards to whiteness" (*ibid.*). Pain cannot be divorced from the self. Pain reveals itself to consciousness as a modification of the self or soul; sensations of colour do not. When someone sees whiteness, they may have no inkling that whiteness is a modification of their soul, for they are not conscious of whiteness *as* one of their own states.

In the *Search*, Malebranche traces this asymmetry to differences in vivacity. Because pleasure and pain are "strong and lively," they "startle and forcefully rouse the mind" (OC.i.137/LO 57). Malebranche suggests that, in commanding the mind's attention, "the soul can hardly help realizing that [strong and lively] sensations belong to it in some way" (OC.i.138-9/LO 58). Sensations of colour, in contrast, are "weak and languid" and so the soul is not conscious of

them as its own. This explanation may seem implausible, however, as there are dull aches and vivid shades of neon.[20] In the *Dialogues on Death*, Malebranche takes a different tack. He explains the asymmetry in terms of differences in valence: "You feel that pain belongs to you *because* it makes you unhappy; and you do not feel that colour belongs to you, *because* it neither does you good nor evil" (OC.xiii.408-9, emphasis added).[21] Whatever we think of Malebranche's underlying mechanisms, his more basic point is plausible: pleasure and pain incorporate a sense of ownership that anchors them to the self.

Each ache and twinge weaves another part of our bodies into our sense of ourselves. This can lead to the impression not simply that our bodies are *parts* of ourselves, but that *we* are our bodies. In the *Search*, Malebranche writes that "Original Sin has so strengthened our soul's union with our body" that we "blindly follow the [natural] judgments of the senses" (OC.i.11/LO xxxxiv). As a result of these judgments, "it seems to us that these two parts of us are but one and the same substance" (*ibid.*). Later in this work, he similarly argues that "being continually affected by bodies" leads people to identify the soul with the body:

> Yet since the majority of men pay so little attention to the properties of thought, and since they are continually affected by the body, most men have viewed the soul and the body as one and the same thing; they have fancied a resemblance between two so different things. They have made the soul out to be material, i.e., extended throughout the entire body and figured like the body. (OC.i.476/LO 253)

[20] As Simmons (2008, 91) points out.

[21] See Andrault (2024, 57-8).

Swamped by bodily feelings, we believe that we are our bodies. This belief has dangerous consequences for our understanding and pursuit of our interests.

Self-love, which divides into a drive towards self-preservation and a desire for happiness, is one of our fundamental motivations (OC.ii.47/LO 288). Enlightened self-love—that is, self-love informed by an understanding of what we are and where our interests lie—*can* be a force for good. But failure to know ourselves can corrupt this motive. Because we identify with our bodies, we confuse our continued existence with the preservation of the body, so that we "toil and struggle to eke out a miserable existence" (OC.i.12/LO xxxv). We mistakenly seek our happiness in our bodies. As Malebranche writes in the *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* (*Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*; hereafter *Christian Meditations*):

> You almost always act as if your body were part of your own being, as if your food and your life were the material bread by which you nourish yourself, and as if you could find your good among the objects which impinge on your senses. Seduced and blinded by the body to which you are united, you naturally think that its goods and evils are your own. (OC.x.190; see also OC.ii.163/LO 360)

We convince ourselves that we will be happy if only we have the perfect hair, the perfect skin, the perfect bodies. And we waste our lives away on trivial, bodily pursuits.

We feel swirls of change and motion occurring inside our bodily selves, embedded—seemingly—in a complex web of causes and effects. In the *Christian Meditations*, Malebranche describes the drama we feel inside our bodies:

> I sense in myself an infinity of changes, and I judge by these changes that all of nature is in continual movement. And since there can be no effect or change without a cause or without the actual action of some power, I imagine that all the objects which surround me have in themselves some force, since they act effectively on one another, and because they often act on me despite all my resistance. I am also strongly inclined to believe that I myself have a true force or power, since I produce in my body at least those movements that we call voluntary . . . *My senses tell me that sensible objects act on me; I say to myself that it's me who moves my arm.* (OC.x.46–47, emphasis added)

I feel pain when I approach fire, and the fire appears to be the cause of my pain. I seem to produce "those movements that we call voluntary," as when I move my arm, and I seem to cause this motion. Various faculties—sense, imagination, judgment, thinking—weave this rich tapestry of cause and effect, making it difficult to isolate each faculty's contribution to our representations of causal relations. But Malebranche is clear that the senses represent material things as causing many of the changes we experience in ourselves: that fire, for example, causes me pain when I get too close. As Malebranche writes, "my senses tell me that sensible objects act on me" (*ibid.*).

The most dangerous error of the senses is the illusion that material things are causally efficacious. This illusion is as much a part of the testimony of the senses as when they tell us that grass is green, or that pain belongs to the pricked finger.[22] When God constructs the contents of a perceiver's sensory experience through natural judgments, He does so with a

[22] At least, according to my reading of Malebranche, which I defend at greater length in Chamberlain (2021). See also Bozovic (1998, 161-3). Many commentators—such as Church (1931, 154), McCracken (1983, 258-9), Nadler (2000, 118), and Kail (2008, 62)—interpret

striking disregard for truth. As Malebranche writes, "the senses are determined toward certain natural judgments that are *the most useful* that can be conceived of," not the natural judgments that are *the most true* (OC iii. 185/LO 646-7). And the most useful natural judgments will include sensory misrepresentations of causation. I feel that fire causes me pain, and that fruit causes me pleasure, because I need these feelings to successfully navigate my environment. Why Malebranche holds these feelings to be necessary is a question I return to below.

In Malebranche's occasionalist system, God is the only true cause. Neither the fire nor the fruit cause anything to happen. Material things are impotent and lacking power. The senses insist otherwise; they bear false witness. As Malebranche writes:

> As soon as you taste a fruit with pleasure, your philosophy tells you that there is a God you do not see who causes in you this pleasure. Your senses tell you the *opposite*, that it is the fruit you see, that you hold in your hands, and that you eat, which *causes* in you this pleasure. (OC.iv.177, emphasis added; see also OC.iii.209/LO 660 and OC.i.184/LO 83-4)

Reason tells us that God is the only cause; the senses tell me that fruit causes me pleasure.

Malebranche as anticipating the Humean view on which the senses are silent about cause and effect. According to their reading, the senses tell us that one event happens after the next but without making false claims about the causal connections between events.

Causal power is a mark of divinity (OC.ii.309-10/LO 446). By attributing causal powers to material things, the senses depict them as little gods. Malebranche draws this conclusion in a striking passage from the *Christian Mediations* addressed to the Word or Reason:

> As soon as I open my eyes to contemplate the Universe, I discover thousands and thousands of beauties, and I find, as it were, in the parts composing the universe an infinite number of little Divinities, who through their proper powers produce all the marvellous effects that dazzle me and enchant me. But as soon as I close my eyes, and enter into myself, then your [Reason's] light makes all that disappear. I see nothing besides impotent matter; the earth becomes sterile and without beauty; all the colours and other sensible qualities evaporate, and even the sun loses its brilliance and heat. (OC.x.56)

When fire seems to cause me pain, I inchoately experience the fire as a vengeful little god raining punishment down upon me. When the fire warms me, I feel that the fire is a merciful god who gives me succour. An instinctive form of paganism or animism is baked into the contents of sensory experience itself.

7. The Function of the Senses

Why would a benevolent, non-deceiving God create us with senses that deceive us so profoundly about the nature of ourselves and the material world? If the world is colourless, why do we see it through rainbow-tinted glasses? If dualism is true, why does materialism feel so right? And if there is only one God, why do we see and feel little gods everywhere? This is a sensory version of the problem of evil. In response, Malebranche argues that the proper purpose of the senses is

to help us preserve our bodies, not to form true beliefs.[23] As Malebranche writes, "the senses were given us *only* for the conservation of our bodies and *not* to teach us the truth" (OC.i.129/LO 52). Similarly, he writes that the senses are "false witnesses in respect of the truth," but "faithful instructors in respect of the conservation and conveniences of life" (OC.xii.100/JS 62; see also OC.xii.30/JS 4). The senses tell us whatever it takes to keep us alive, and this is only sometimes the truth. An accurate sense of the spatial lay-out of one's surroundings is useful, for example, to avoid bumping into things. But the senses' interest in the truth is instrumental and always subordinate to the goal of preserving the body. They tell the truth only when it serves their interests.

Against this background, Malebranche argues that the illusions of the senses are crucial to fulfilling the senses' purpose. Light and colour divide the world into objects that we can interact with. Tastes and smells tell us what we should eat and drink. Feeling pleasure and pain in our bodies makes us care about them (OC.xii.100-1/JS 63). Our lives depend on the false testimony of the senses. "For if it be considered that the senses are given us for the preservation of our body," Malebranche explains, "it will be seen that they fulfil their purpose admirably well, and that they conduct us in so faithful and appropriate a fashion to their end that it seems wrong to accuse them of being corrupt and disordered" (OC.i.76/LO 23).

[23] Malebranche adapts and systematizes Descartes's solution to the problem of sensory error, according to which the "proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part" (AT VII 83/CSM II 57). Simmons (2003, 2008) examines Malebranche's development of this Cartesian insight.

Malebranche needs to show not merely that the errors of the senses have some practical utility but that these errors are *necessary* for the preservation of life. Specifically, he needs to explain why we need the most troubling illusions of the senses: the false feelings that we are material things, and that material things like the fire and the fruit are little gods.[24] Otherwise, we might worry that God could have equipped us with more perfect senses: just as effective at keeping us alive but less error prone.

Malebranche can answer this challenge by appealing to the motivational structure of our kind of agency. Two main inclinations or motives structure our will: love of the good in general, and self-love. Our love of the good motivates us to seek good things and to avoid the bad. Self-love motivates us to care about the preservation of our own being and our own happiness, which Malebranche equates with pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Malebranche can plausibly argue that the illusions of the senses are necessary for performing the actions required by the preservation of life *given* the need to engage these motives, i.e., *given* the kinds of agents we are.

Although experiencing ourselves as material things can lead to a dangerous obsession with our bodies, this illusion is necessary to channel self-love towards our bodies so that we care about them. Just imagine what it would be like *not* to experience the stitching of self and body that occurs through feeling pain:

> If the soul perceived only what happens in the hand when it is being burned, if it saw in it only the motion and separation of some fibres, it would hardly take any notice; it might even take some whimsical and capricious satisfaction from it, like those fools who amuse

[24] Though Simmons (2003, 2008) explains how many sensory errors contribute to the preservation of life, she does not examine the illusion of causal efficacy.

> themselves by breaking everything in their frenzies and debauchery. Or just as a prisoner would hardly be bothered if he were to see the walls enclosing him being demolished, and would even rejoice in the hope of soon being freed, so too if we perceived only the separation of the parts of our body when we were being burned…we would…be very content to see it destroyed. (OC.i.127-128/LO 51-52)[25]

If we didn't love our bodies as we love ourselves, we would be indifferent to their destruction.

The pagan character of the senses—our experience of material things as the causes of pleasure and pain—is necessary to tap into our love of the good in general, which is God (OC.i.443/LO 233). When our will propels us to search for good things, we are searching for Him. We are looking for God in the sweetness of fruit, in the bottom of a wine glass, or in the beautiful body of another. The senses can engage this motive only by pretending that their objects—material things—can satisfy its thirst for the divine. As Malebranche writes, "we can love particular goods only by directing toward these goods the impulse of love that God gives us for Himself" (*ibid.*). The senses feign the requisite resemblance by misrepresenting material things as the causes of pleasure and pain. "Our mind becomes mobile, as it were through pleasure," Malebranche explains, "just as a ball rolls through roundness; and because it is never without an impression toward the good, the mind immediately sets itself in motion toward the object *causing or seeming to cause this pleasure*" (OC.iii.198/LO 652, emphasis added). Given the will's orientation towards God, the senses can get the mind moving towards material things only by misrepresenting them as little gods with the power to reward and punish us. "It is necessary," according to Malebranche, "that objects should appear to be pleasant by causing sensations they themselves

[25] See Andrault (2024, 54-55).

lack [*qu'ils paroissent agréables, en causant des sentimens qu'ils n'ont pas*]" (OC.i.73/LO 21). The paganism of the senses is a motivational necessity for God-parched minds like ours.

8. Conclusion

Malebranche offers two conflicting pictures of reality. He opposes the colourful, pagan world of the senses with the colourless, Christian world of reason, often to the detriment of the senses. "I shall teach you," Malebranche writes, "that the world you live in is not as you believe it to be, because actually it is not the way you see or sense it. You judge on the basis of the relation of your senses to all the objects surrounding you, and your senses beguile you infinitely more than you can imagine" (OC.xii.30/JS 4). And yet, our bodies could not survive in the desert landscape revealed by reason without help from the senses. Following his cautionary note about the senses, Malebranche admits that they serve the body's interests: "They are faithful witnesses only in respect of what concerns the good of the body and the preservation of life" (*ibid.*). We can only live in the world revealed by reason if we also live and move in the world of the senses. Living between and in both these worlds is our peculiar and inescapable fate.[26]

Works Cited

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