**Mind Over Matter: Malebranche and Materialism**

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“After the Fall, the mind became, as it were, material and terrestrial…” (*Search* V.1, OCM II 130/LO 339)

**Introduction**

Materialists hold that giraffes, octopuses, orchids, stars, rocks, mucus, dust, human beings, and their minds are all made of the same basic material stuff—swirling vortices of corpuscles, for example, or atoms in the void. Different materialists might identify the human mind or soul with the organizationor harmony of the human body, a specific bodily organsuch as the heart or brain, or a subtle vapor that permeates the limbs. They will agree, however, that we are nothing above and beyond bodies or matter. We contain no spark of the divine, no echo of the angel, no immaterial thinking subject or ego. Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715)—the Cartesian philosopher and Catholic priest, famous for his views that God is the cause of all things and the focal point of all our thoughts—sees materialism as a dangerous and widespread mistake. Among the materialists Malebranche counts ancient Greek materialists,[[1]](#footnote-1) the church father Tertullian,[[2]](#footnote-2) Montaigne,[[3]](#footnote-3) unnamed Libertines,[[4]](#footnote-4) and ordinary people whose understanding of themselves has been clouded by the Fall.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Malebranche’s attitude towards materialism is a resounding *no, absolutely not*. His inclusion in a history of materialism, then, might be surprising. But the history of materialism does not just include figures who call themselves or were materialists. It is also the history of those who fruitfully theorize matter and explainmany natural phenomena, if not all, in terms of matter. René Descartes, for example, belongs in the history of materialism for these reasons. And so too for Malebranche. In a famous letter to Mersenne, Descartes confesses that his *Meditations on First Philosophy* is a Trojan horse containing “all the foundations of [his] physics.” He urges Mersenne not to tell anyone, however, in hopes that his readers will accept his new account of matter before realizing that it “destroys the principles of Aristotle” (*28 January 1641, Letter to Mersenne,* AT III 298/CSMK III 173).[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, Descartes reconceives *life* as a material or corporeal principle.[[7]](#footnote-7) Whereas a living body’s vital functions—nutrition, respiration, growth, etc.—had previously been assigned to the soul by Aristotle and his followers, Descartes explains these functions in terms of the body’s mechanical structure. Non-human animals become mindless or soulless automatons.

Descartes’s *Treatise on Man* converted Malebranche to philosophy. This work’s austere conception of matter and the mechanization of life likely impressed the young Malebranche, who develops both themes in his own writings. First, Malebranche builds on the Cartesian account of matter as extension to emphasize the thoroughgoing relational character of its modes or states. Second, he continues Descartes’s reductive project by defending the view that animals are complex patterns of matter in motion, but with a distinctly Malebranchean twist. Whereas we might expect some form of parsimony or naturalism to drive this reductive project, Malebranche argues that non-human animals are soulless automatons from theological premises: because God would not permit innocent creatures to suffer and because a soul is too noble a thing to waste on an animal’s body.

Materialism can often seem like the natural, default position. St. Augustine—Malebranche’s other main philosophical influence and a staunch opponent of materialism—admits initial difficulty understanding how anything beyond matter could exist. “I thought that whatever was not stretched out or spread forth or heaped together or swollen up in some sort of space, or whatever did not or could not contain such a thing,” Augustine explains, “was absolutely nothing” (*Confessions* VII.1.2, 99). Malebranche develops a phenomenological account, which is simultaneously a debunking, of why materialism should have this grip on us. The human mind bears the trace of matter. The mind or soul is an immaterial thinking substance whose peculiar fate is to experience itself *as if* it were material. We *feel* like material things.

**1. Against Materialism**

Materialism is not simply false for Malebranche, but dangerous. He holds that it is *false* because he is dualist in the grand tradition of Plato, Augustine, and Descartes. “The body,” Malebranche argues, is “only extension in height, breadth, and depth,” whereas “[t]he soul . . . is that self [*ce moi*] who thinks, who senses, who wills—it is the substance in which are found all the modifications of which I have an inner sentiment, and which subsist only in the soul that perceives them” (*Search* I.10.1, OCM I 122-3/LO 49). We are more than meets the eye. *“*This self *[ce toi*] to whom I speak, and who understands me,” Malebranche writes, “is a spiritual substance, who can subsist entirely whole without your body. This substance is united to a body and makes with this body what is called a man: but that which you see of man is not man” (*Christian Meditations* XVII.3, OCM X 190).

Materialism is *dangerous* because it distorts our sense of where our interests lie. Malebranche divides self-love into a love of one’s being or existence, and a love of well-being or happiness (*Search* IV.5.2, OCM II 47/LO 288). Materialism misdirects both forms towards the body. A materialist takes their continued existence to be hostage to their body. They will also mistake their well-being or happiness to consist in having a perfect body, whatever that amounts to. A mind in the grip of materialism “takes the good of the body for its own good, loves it, and attaches itself to it still more closely with its will than it had ever been attached by nature’s initial arrangement” (*Search* V.4, OCM II 163/LO 360; see also *Christian Meditations* XVII.3, OCM X 190).

Malebranche sees these distortions throughout society:

When we consider the various occupations of men, we have every reason to believe that they have such a low and crude opinion of themselves. For as they all love felicity and the perfection of their being, and as they strive only to make themselves happier and more perfect, are we not compelled to judge that they have a higher estimate of their body and the goods of their body than of their mind and its goods? For we see them almost constantly occupied with things related to the body. (*Preface* to the *Search*, OCM I 12/LO xxxv)

Most people spend their lives scrambling to satisfy their desire to exist by doing what *they* think their survival requires. They “toil and struggle only to eke out a miserable existence, and to leave to their children some of the assistance necessary for the preservation of their bodies” (*ibid*.). The privileged few do not worry about mere survival and devote themselves to perfecting their bodies through “[h]unting, dancing, gambling, and good living” (*ibid*.). Even scholars, who should care more about their minds, “spend more than half their life in purely animal actions or ones that lead one to believe they care more for their health, their goods, and their reputations than for the perfection of their mind.” They study to acquire power in the form of reputation and “spurious grandeur in the imagination of other men” *(ibid*.)*.* Knowledge, for these false scholars, is power for the body’s sake.

Society’s relentless focus on our bodies is a mistake. “We are not our body; it is a thing belonging to us,” Malebranche writes, “but without which, speaking in an absolute sense, we are able to subsist. The good of our body is therefore not our good. Bodies can be the good only of bodies” (*Search* V.4, OCM II 161/LO 359). We should focus our energy and self-concern on the spiritual substances that we really are. We perfect ourselves by perfecting our minds or souls. Materialism, then, is not just an abstract metaphysical position, a false but harmless curiosity. Materialism perverts the moral universe by setting the body above the mind.

And yet, Malebranche has a more nuanced attitude towards matter than his rhetoric might suggest. He develops a sophisticated version of the Cartesian view that extension constitutes the nature of matter, and he reduces many natural phenomena to matter thus construed.

**2. On Matter**

Consider a material thing, such as a marble statue of a young warrior. The statue has or occupies a certain volume: a three-dimensional spatial region shaped like a warrior. Although we might assume that some kind of matter or stuffing—marble, for example—fills this region, Malebranche argues that the statue *just is* the spatial region. The statue *just is* its volume. “The body,” as Malebranche writes, “is *only* extension in height, breadth, and depth” (*Search* I.10, OCM I 122/LO 49, emphasis added). The statue is a geometrical object come to life.[[8]](#footnote-8)

To be clear, the spatial region or volume constituting the statue is *not* locked into place à la the spatial regions in Newtonian absolute space. Malebranche’s spatial regions can move. The region/statue can change its location relative to other such regions. When a statue is lifted from the floor onto a pedestal, the statue-constituting-region moves from being on top of the floor-constituting-region to above the pedestal-constituting-region.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Malebranche situates his geometrical analysis of material things within the substance-mode metaphysics he inherits from Descartes. This framework has three main planks:

1. Everything is either a substance, a mode of a substance, or is wholly grounded in substances and their modes.
2. Every substance has a principal attribute that constitutes its nature or essence: what the substance most fundamentally is.
3. Every mode or state of a substance must be conceivable in terms of its principal attribute.

The statue is a material *substance* or being, rather than a mode or way of being. The *principal attribute* of the statue—its nature or essence—is extension in height, breadth, and depth, that is, three-dimensionality or volume. All the statue’s *modes*, affections, or states must be analyzable in terms of extension. The statue’s shape, for example, is simply a way of being extended in three-dimensions.

Let’s work through each of these planks in more detail.

**2.1. Substance**

Malebranche holds that individual bodies, such as a statue or a ball of wax, are substances. Malebranche’s clear endorsement of this position distinguishes him from Descartes. Commentators disagree about how many extended substances Descartes recognizes: just *one* big extended substance of which individual bodies are modes, or *many* extended substances.[[10]](#footnote-10) In his correspondence with Dortous de Mairan, in contrast, Malebranche clearly argues that there are *many*. He cites the example of two spheres to show that two extended substances can exist: “Paris is not Rome; the sphere *A* is not the sphere *B*: these are two spheres, and consequently two substances” (*Malebranche to D. De Mairan, 6 September 1714*, OCM XIX 909/WG 104).

The whole of physical nature—“created extension”—is one big material substance that includes an infinity of smaller material substances as parts. These substantial parts include ordinary material things such as cubes, spheres, tables, chairs, statues, and balls of wax. “If created extension were but an unformed mass without movement,” Malebranche explains, “it would have an infinity of different parts of which one could form Paris, Rome, cubes, spheres, which would be particular substances of that infinite substance, and all of the same attribute, that is to say, all extended and of the same nature, all substances, but larger or less large” (*Malebranche to D. De Mairan, 12 June 1714*, OCM XIX 886/WG 85).

**2.2. Principal Attribute**

Every substance has a principal attribute that constitutes its nature or essence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Malebranche argues that extension is the principal attribute of bodies because a material thing’s extension is both necessary and sufficient for its existence. A material thing just is its extension. As Malebranche writes, “[m]atter is nothing but extension in length, width, and depth” (*Three Letters* I.15, OCM VI 242), and “[e]xtension and matter are but a single substance” (*Dialogues* I.2, OCM XII 34/JS 7).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Consider, again, the statue. If we take its extension away, the statue vanishes. If we posit the statue’s extension, then the statue exists. The latter, sufficiency claim presupposes that a statue-shaped volume—a pure geometrical solid—can exist all on its own, without anything further to *fill* this volume, such as marble, bronze, or any other intrinsic qualitative nature. As Malebranche writes, “God can create extension without creating anything else” (*Dialogues* III.12*,* OCM XII 75/JS 41). The sufficiency claim also presupposes that a geometrical solid with the right shape would be enough for the statue to exist—a controversial claim, since someone might not recognize the solid as the statue we started with.

Malebranche runs this argument for the human body. Extension is necessary: “If God destroyed the extension of your body, would you still have a brain, arteries, veins, etc.? Do you think a body can be reduced to a mathematical point? … Certainly, where there is no extension—I say none—there is no corporeal substance” (*Dialogues* I.2, OCM XII 33/JS 6). Extension suitably organized is also sufficient: “Do you believe that your body is composed of some substance other than extension? Do you not understand that extension is sufficient for the mind to form a brain, a heart, and hands, and all the veins, arteries, nerves, and so on, of which your body is composed?” (*ibid*.). Once God has created a geometrical solid with the right dynamic spatial structure, He does not need to create anything further to create a human body. His work is done.

Malebranche generalizes this argument to all material things: “by means of extension itself and the properties everyone attributes to it, we can sufficiently explain all natural effects. That is, we observe no material effect whose natural cause we cannot discover in the idea of extension, provided this effect is clearly known” (*Dialogues* III.12, OCM XII 76/JS 42).

**2.3. Modes**

The principal attribute of bodies—extension—restricts the range of modes or states a body can have. All a body’s modes must be analyzable in terms of, or somehow reducible to, extension.

Malebranche articulates this constraint in terms of the principle that “[a]ll the modifications of extension consist simply in relations of distance” (*Dialogues* I.2, OCM XII 34/JS 7). Bodies are made up of infinitely many extended parts, which are themselves bodies made up of infinitely many parts, and so on and so on. A body’s modes consist in the spatial relations— “next to,” “on top of,” “five feet away from,” etc.—of these parts. As Malebranche writes:

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 [i.e., location/position] is a mode of the second sort, for it consists in the relation the wax has to bodies surrounding it. (*Elucidation* XII, OCM III 174/LO 640)

The shape of the statue consists in the spatial relationships or relative locations of the parts that make it up, whereas the statue’s motion consists in its changing spatial relations to other, external parts.

Size is conspicuously absent from these passages. Malebranche distinguishes the absolute and relative sizes of bodies (*Search* I.6, OCM I 79-93/LO 25-32; III-II.6, OCM I 444/LO 234; III-II.10, OCM I 474-5/LO 252). In general, the absolute is the non-relational: “what is absolute . . . can be conceived alone and without relation to anything else” (*Elucidation* XII, OCM III 174/LO 639-40). A body’s absolute size, then, is its non-relational size or magnitude. The non-relational character of a body’s absolute size implies that it is not a mode, which are all relational. Rather, a body’s absolute or non-relational size is the body itself. The statue’s absolute size *just is* its extension: the statue *just is* its absolute size. A body’s relative size, in contrast, is a mode that depends on its relation or comparison to other things, much as a body’s position or motion depends on its relations to other things. The statue is smaller than the Empire State Building but bigger than a mouse. Absolute size grounds relative size. A body is bigger than some things and smaller than others in virtue of their respective non-relational sizes or magnitudes.

Malebranche’s geometrical account of matter entails that the mind and its modifications are *not* material and, hence, that materialism is false. “[I]t is obvious,” he writes, “that my pleasure, my desire, and all my thoughts are not relations of distance. . . . Thus my soul is not material. It is not the modification of my body” (*Dialogues* I.2, OCM XII 34/JS 7; see also *Search* I.10.1, OCM I 122-3/LO 49). When we compare a mental state—a searing pain, for example—to our idea of extension, we can tell that pain does not reduce to any relation of distance, i.e., any complex spatial relationship between extended parts (*Elucidation* 11, OCM III 165/LO 634).[[13]](#footnote-13) Malebranche’s account of matter as pure spatial structure underwrites his confidence that the mind is not material. Thought is not what we study in geometry class. Minds are not geometrical structures. If matter had a richer nature than just extension, then materialism about the mind *would* be more plausible, as Malebranche recognizes. He writes: “*if* the nature of body consists in something other extension, then as I have no idea of this thing I cannot prove to you that it does not think” (*Dialogues* III.10, OCM XII 73/JS 39, emphasis added; see also *Search* III-II.8, OCM I 460-4/LO 243-5). Thus, Malebranche *needs* extension to exhaust the nature of matter. His case for dualism hangs in the balance.

Malebranche’s account of matter also entails that material things lack sensible or secondary qualities like colour, smell, taste, sound, etc.[[14]](#footnote-14) Consider, again, the marble statue. Malebranche focuses on the whiteness—the colour—that we *see* or *experience* when we look at it (*Response to Regis*, OCM XVII-I 281). When we compare *apparent* or *experienced* whiteness to the idea of extension, we recognize that this colour does not reduce to the spatial relations of extended parts and, hence, is not a mode of matter. The statue is similarly silent, odorless, and tasteless.

Emeralds are not green, the sky is not blue, sugar is not sweet, and oboes do not sound like anything. All that remains is spatial structure: a crystal palace of extended parts standing in dynamic spatial relations. These spatial relations change in regular and law-like ways, governed by a few “constant and immutable” laws—viz., the laws governing the motions and collisions of bodies-cum-volumes (OCM V 31). But that is all there is to material nature.

**3. Material Reduction in Malebranche**

Malebranche reduces many natural phenomena—namely, the complex behaviors of plants, animals, and the vital functions of the human body—to matter construed as the crystal palace. Whereas human beings contain an immaterial soul that distinguishes us from the rest of nature, plants and animals do not contain anything (no soul, no spark) beyond the matter of their bodies. In defending this view, Malebranche focuses on animals as the best non-human candidates for possessing souls. When we look into a dog’s deep brown eyes, we struggle not to see another soul looking back. According to Malebranche, however, the appearance of a soul is an illusion stemming from our tendency to “humanize all causes” (*Search* V.3 OCM II 151/LO 352). He writes:

in animals, there is neither intelligence nor souls as ordinarily meant. They eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it; they desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing; and if they act in a manner that demonstrates intelligence, it is because God, having made them in order to preserve them, made their bodies in such a way that they mechanically avoid what is capable of destroying them. (*Search* VI-II.7, OCM II 394/LO 494-5)

Malebranche argues, first, that animals lack immaterial souls or, more generally, souls that are nobler or more perfect than matter.[[15]](#footnote-15) Second, he argues that the complex organization of the animal body does the work previously assigned to the soul.

**3.1. Eliminating the Animal Soul**

Malebranche weaves philosophy and theology together to show that dogs are soulless automatons who feel and desire nothing. He runs a theological *reductio ad absurdum* on the hypothesis that animals have souls.[[16]](#footnote-16)

First, this hypothesis conflicts with animal innocence. Even when a dog destroys a favorite pair of shoes, we do not hold the dog morally responsible. How could we? They are just being a dog; dogs are free of sin. If dogs had souls, however, they would feel pain when their bodies are damaged. Innocent creatures would suffer, which God’s justice does not permit.[[17]](#footnote-17) So, dogs cannot have souls or suffer. As Malebranche writes: “if [animals] could feel, this would mean that under an infinitely just and omnipotent God, an innocent creature would suffer pain, which is a penalty and punishment for some sin” (*Search* IV.11.3, OCM II 104/LO 323; see also *Defense Against La Ville*, OCM XVII-1 514).

Second, the hypothesis that animals have souls perverts the hierarchical order of reality by making the higher serve the lower. A dog’s soul, for example, would be more perfect or noble than the noblest of bodies (*Defense Against La Ville,* OCM XVII-1 515). But, Malebranche contends, the only purpose a dog’s soul could have would to be to serve its body’s needs. “[T]he soul of a dog is made for its body,” Malebranche writes, “it has no other end or well-being besides the enjoyment of bodies” (*ibid*.). God would not create the higher to serve the lower: he would not pervert the order of nature in this way.

Malebranche’s Aristotelian opponents plausibly accept that a dog’s soul is created *for* its body, since the soul is the principle of life for them. The soul of an oak tree, for example, explains its ability to draw nourishment from the sun and soil, to grow, and make more oak trees. The soul of a dog explains the abilities it shares with the oak (growth, nourishment, etc.), as well as its abilities to perceive and move. Malebranche’s Aristotelian opponent might object, however, to the assumption that a dog’s soul would be *higher than* its body on their view. The Aristotelian might argue that a dog’s soul is simply the organization of the body that allows the dog to grow, sense, and move, and that this organization need not be particularly noble. If the soul is *just* the organization of the body, understood as the dynamic spatial structure of its parts, then Malebranche has no quarrel, since he allows that “[w]e can take the soul for the motion or circulation of the blood, and for the configuration of the parts of the body” (*Search* VI-II.7, OCM II 387/LO 491). If his opponent gives the organization or soul any kind of special or exalted metaphysical status, however, Malebranche will press his objection that life-support is beneath a soul. He will object if he catches any whiff of the idea that a substantial form is higher or more perfect than the matter it organizes.

In addition to eliminating plants and animal souls, Malebranche eliminates many of the vegetable and animal functions from the human soul. On the Aristotelian approach, the human soul explains a human being’s capacities to nourish themselves, grow, reproduce, perceive, move, and intellectually understand. Malebranche denies that the human soul plays many of the biological functions traditionally assigned to it. Specifically, he denies that the human soul performs basic biological functions like breathing, digestion, the circulation of blood, as well as many of the body’s automatic or reflex responses to its environment:

Our soul does not form our body, it does not digest our food, it gives no movement . . . to our blood. It senses, wills, reasons; it animates the body in the sense that it has sensations and passions related to it. But it is not diffused in our members to communicate sensation and life to them, for our body can receive nothing from what is found in our mind. (*Search* VI-II.7, OCM II 394-5/LO 495; see also *Search* II-I.5.1, OCM I 215/LO 102)

The human soul survives in Malebranche as a principle of sensory perception, imagination, passion, understanding, and will. But it no longer operates in our blood and guts and bones to keep our bodies alive. The soul has less vital work than before.

**3.2. Replacing the Animal Soul**

Eliminating the animal soul opens an explanatory gap that Malebranche fills with clockwork. The mechanical structure of an animal or a plant’s body performs the functions formerly assigned to its soul. Malebranche explains a plant’s growing towards the sun, for example, or a dog’s relentless search for its bone in terms of the motions of their parts.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Malebranche writes, “all the parts of animals are but machines, and they can be moved without a soul merely by the impression of objects and by their particular constitution” (*Search* IV.11.3, OCM II 106/LO 324). He compares a dog to a watch:

a dog’s life is not very different from that of the motion of a watch. For the life of bodies whatever they might be, can only consist in the motion of their parts; and it is not difficult to judge that the same subtle matter that produces the fermentation of blood and animal spirits in a dog, and which is the principle of its life, is no more perfect than that which gives motion to the mechanism of watches or which causes heaviness in the weight of clocks, which is the principle of their life, or to speak as do others, of their motion. (*Elucidation* XV, OCM III 212/LO 661)

Fleshy equivalents of gears, springs and pendulums replace the animal soul as the principle of life.

The clockwork analogy tells us the kindof explanation Malebranche aims to give of complex animal behavior, namely, in terms of the body’s mechanisms. Still, we might hope for more detail—a blueprint—that explains what the mechanisms are and how they result in the apparently intelligent and purposive behaviors animals engage in. Malebranche hints at how such a story might go when he describes the way the human body responds to its environment without any help from the soul.

The human body, for Malebranche, contains a vast network of nerves or tubes radiating outwards from the principal part of the brain and leading to the body’s extremities, especially the sense organs (*Search* I.10, OCM I 123-4/LO 49). Animal spirits flow through these tubes, carrying motion back and forth between the brain and the rest of the body. Animal spirits are as material as blood or sweat. They are spirits in the same sense as whisky or gin but produced through a process of natural fermentation occurring inside the human body.

When someone looks at a cup of coffee, the animal spirits transmit motions in their eyes through the optic nerve to the principal part of the brain, imprinting a material image of the coffee. Malebranche refers to this material image as a *trace* (*Search* II-I.5.1, OCM I 215-6/LO 102). A trace is the mark an object makes in the brain, registering the object’s presence and playing the role of a material representation. Malebranche, for example, frequently refers to traces *of* an object or situation, such as a trace *of* a great elevation, or *of* a large object (*Search* II-I.5.2, OCM I 223/LO 106).[[19]](#footnote-19) A brain trace is the physiological correlate of a sensory or imaginative perception in the soul.

When a brain trace represents an object as good or bad for the body, animal spirits wash through the body. This flow of animal spirits is the physiological correlate of passions like love, hate, desire, and fear. As Malebranche writes, “[t]he traces or disturbances of the brain are to the flows of animal spirits as the sensations of the soul are to the passions; and the traces of the brain are to the sensations of the soul as the movement of the animal spirits is to the movements of the passions” (*Treatise* I-I.10.17, OCM XI 123/W 118). The animal spirits unleash a cascade of physiological effects that collectively produce an appropriate behavioral response to the object.

First, the flow of animal spirits keeps itself alive via feedback loops that run through the human body. The animal spirits fortify the original trace, which in turn keeps the animal spirits flowing (*Treatise* I-I.13.3, OCM XI 147/W 135). This keeps the body focused on and oriented towards the object in question. Second, the animal spirits produce additional, ancillary traces in the brain that tend to support the original flow. As Malebranche writes, “as soon as the spirits have been formed, they are first determined towards that trace, primitive cause of all these movements, to support it, and also to awaken all the accessory traces capable of fortifying it” (*Treatise on Morality* I-I.13.6, OCM XI 148/W 136). Third, animal spirits pour down into the heart, lungs, liver, and other viscera to ensure that the body has enough bodily fluids—more animal spirits, but also blood and other humors—required to respond appropriately. Some of these animal spirits bubble back up through the nerves to the brain where they fuel the feedback loops mentioned above. Others prepare the limbs for action. Fourth, the flow of animal spirits transmits motions to the limbs to initiate an appropriate behavioral response. As Malebranche writes, “the principal part is never touched or disturbed in an agreeable or disagreeable manner without exciting in the animal spirits a movement appropriate to transport the body towards the object acting in it, or to separate the body from it” (*Treatise* I-I.10.17, OCM XI 123/W 118). In the case of a cup of coffee, for example, the body will move towards it and drink it. “The human body,” as Malebranche observes, “is a wondrous machine” that can ably deal with its environment (*Treatise* I-I.13.5, OCM XI 147-8/W 136).

Animals are similarly equipped with nerves, brain traces, and animal spirits that determine their behaviour. Indeed, Malebranche assumes that animal brains are so much like ours that he happily draws conclusions about how our imaginations work from premises about the brains of partridges (*Search* II-I.5.2, OCM I 224/LO 106). Some of a partridge’s behavioral responses are hardwired, whereas its aversion to men with guns, for example, are learned through a process of conditioning, much as human beings build up imaginative associations through experience. Our brains differ from the birds, however, because our traces and animal spirits are accompanied by feelings and desires in the soul. Malebranche suggests that animals preserve their bodies more successfully precisely because they lack minds interfering in their machines (*Search* V.3, OCM II 150-1/LO 352). Though nobler than body, a mind can be a liability.

**3.3. The Limits of Mechanism**

Malebranche’s reductive ambitions run up against a hard limit. He argues that the complex material structures of plants, animals, and human bodies cannot *originate* in purely mechanical processes. If the initial conditions do not already include material structures organized as living bodies, the laws of motion will never produce them. A single-celled organism, for example, can never spontaneously emerge from the swirling vortices of non-living matter. This might be surprising given Malebranche’s view that *life* is a purely mechanical phenomenon, describable solely in terms of matter in motion—and, more specifically, in the changing spatial relations of extended parts (*Elucidation* XV, OCM III 212/LO 661). Nevertheless, he insists that the patterns of motion characteristic of living things cannot be *generated* from any combination of non-living materials moving in accordance with the laws of motion. Life, even when mechanically conceived, cannot come from the dead.

The problem lies in the interdependence of a living body’s parts.[[20]](#footnote-20) An eye cannot register an animal’s surroundings unless linked to the brain, the heart cannot pump blood unless hooked up with the circulatory system, a hand cannot grip without being connected to the tendons and muscles of the arm. None of these bodily organs *work* unless they are integrated into a reasonably intact organism. As Malebranche writes, “a machine can only work when it is finished . . . hence the heart cannot live alone” (*Search* VI-II.4, OCM II 343-44/LO 465). The dependence of bodily organs on the whole implies that an organism cannot come into existence one organ at a time. A heart or an eye on its own could not survive long enough for the rest of the body to grow around it. The organism can only come into existence all at once. But no purely mechanical process can achieve this. The laws of motion operating on non-living parts could never get all the parts of a living body to coalesce simultaneously. Instead, Malebranche traces life back to the initial moment of creation. God creates every living thing that will ever live at the beginning of the world, in one fell swoop, with subsequent generations packed like nested dolls inside seeds and semen (*Search* I.6.1, OCM I 82/LO 27). This is Malebranche’s infamous doctrine of preformation.

**4. The Feeling of Embodiment**

Although Malebranche purports to explain “all natural effects” in terms of extended parts bouncing around, he makes an exception for the human soul (*Dialogues* III.12, OCM XII 76/JS 42). The human soul—“that self [*ce moi*] who thinks, who senses, who wills”—is distinct from body (*Search* I.10.1, OCM I 123/LO 49). And yet, even the human soul bears the mark of matter. We do not experience ourselves—we are not given to ourselves—as immaterial, spiritual substances. We experience ourselves *as if* material. When my body is battered and bruised, I do not observe it coolly from a distance. I suffer with and through my body. Malebranche does not treat our feeling of materiality as a brute or ineffable fact, however. He analyses its structure.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**4.1. Feeling Pain**

Consider feeling pain in a body part, such as the back or knee. Malebranche distinguishes two aspects to this feeling. On the one hand, I experience *myself* as being in pain. “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” (*Dialogues* III.6, OCM XII 66/JS 34). Similarly, Malebranche argues that “the soul can hardly prevent itself from recognizing that strong and lively sensations [i.e., pleasurable or painful sensations] belong to it in some way” (*Search* I.12.5, OCM 138-139/LO 58). On the other hand, I experience pain as a state of *the body*. I feel pain as modifying my knee or back. I can point to my pain or rub where it hurts. “[W]e fix pain and pleasurable sensations in the parts of our body,” Malebranche explains, “which receive certain changes from the movement of [external] bodies they encounter” (*Search* V.6, OCM II 178/LO 370). He echoes this point in the *Dialogues*: “it seems to me that it is my finger which feels the pain of a prick” (*Dialogues* I.1, OCM XII 33/JS 6). Together, these two aspects of feeling pain result in feeling like I have a bodily mode or state, viz., a painful modification of a body part. Though an immaterial substance, I *feel* modified by material ways of being.

Malebranche often suggests that feeling oneself to have a bodily pain is tantamount to feeling oneself as having a bodily part (*Search* I.12.5, OCM I 138-139/LO 58). Here’s why. Modifications are not free-floating entities. They are always the modifications or ways of being of a substance. We cannot represent a modification without representing the substance to which it belongs, though perhaps only confusedly and obscurely. “As the modification of a substance is but the substance itself in a particular way,” Malebranche explains, “it is obvious that the idea of a modification necessarily contains the idea of another being” (*Dialogues* I.2*,* OCM XII 34/JS 7; see also *Search* III-II.8.2, OCM I 462/LO 244). This point applies to any form of mental representation, including the kind of bodily awareness or affective experience involved in feeling pain. Thus, when I feel myself to modified with a painful bodily mode, I thereby experience myself as partially constituted by the substance-–the body part—that appears to bear this mode.

This explains why feeling painful sensations in the back or knee results in feeling that the back or knee is a part of myself (*Search* I.12.5, OCM I 138-139/LO 58; see also *Search* V.5, OCM II 172/LO 365–366). If I were to feel pain in a wall, I would feel myself to be modified by one of the wall’s states and, hence, as partly constituted by the wall:

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. (*Dialogues on Death* II,OCM XIII 408)

Feeling pain implies feeling composite, as becomes vivid when we feel multiple pains throughout the body simultaneously.

**4.2. Error and Survival**

Experiencing oneself as having bodily modes or parts invites a materialist understanding of ourselves. But this experience does not *force* this conclusion upon us. First, sensory experiences, unlike clear and distinct perceptions, never command or force our assent. No matter how persuasive the feeling of pain, we can refrain from consenting to the picture of ourselves this feeling presents. Second, even if this experience were veridical, even if we do in fact have bodily modes or parts, this does not imply that we are *wholly* material. We might be partly material and partly immaterial, as Malebranche himself sometimes suggests (*Search* I.5.1, OCM I 72/LO 20).

Nevertheless, we can easily fail to distinguish having bodily parts from having *only* bodily parts, given how elusive the idea of a non-bodily part can be. Feeling pain thus leads people to mistakenly endorse materialism and organize their lives around their bodies. When we “blindly follow the judgments of the senses,” Malebranche writes, “it seems to us that these two parts of us are but one and the same substance’ (*Preface* to the *Search*, OCM I 11/LO: xxxiv; see also *Search* I.12.3, OCM I: 137/LO: 57 and *Search* III-II.10, OCM I 476/LO 253).

Feeling material might therefore seem like a liability that is difficult to square with the fact that God created our minds. Malebranche tries to soften this tension by arguing that our senses were “given to us for the preservation of the body” (*Search* I.5, OCM I 76/LO 23).[[22]](#footnote-22) The senses may grossly misrepresent the nature of reality. But at least their misrepresentations are useful. The feeling of materiality—the feeling that *we* are material—makes us careabout our bodies:

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 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. *(Search* I.10.5, OCM I 127-128/LO 51-52)

Although Malebranche has reservations about channelling self-love towards the body, he recognizes that this can help preserve the body, especially since our bodies—complex geometrical objects that they are—hold little intrinsic interest for our minds. Our delusions of materiality keep our bodies alive.

Still, we might worry that a biological justification of sensory error is inadequate. When campaigning against animal souls, Malebranche argues that serving a body’s needs would be beneath a dog’s soul. But now he appears to be saying that the human soul’s sensory faculties—even if not the whole soul—serve the body’s needs. Why isn’t this beneath us? We might think that preserving the body *is* beneath the human soul, but that we are condemned to this task as punishment for Original Sin. That solution does not work, however, since Malebranche holds that Adam before the Fall was equipped with senses much like ours so that he could preserve his body (*Search* I.5.1, OCM I/LO 22). Adam even felt partly material: he “had a body… which he regarded as part of himself” (*Search* I.5.1, OCM I 70/LO 19). Presumably punishment does not precede the crime.

Malebranche holds that we should care for our bodies not for their own sakes, but so that we have a sacrificial victim to offer God:

Apparently God desired to give to us, as He gave to His Son, a victim we could offer to Him. He desired to have us merit the possession of eternal goods, through a kind of sacrifice and annihilation of ourselves. (*Dialogues* IV.12, OCM XII 97/JS 60)

Our bodies can only serve their sacrificial purpose if we identify with them. God demands that we sacrifice ourselves. Our bodies satisfy this need because materialism feels true. “[T]he body of man is his own victim,” Malebranche explains, “since it *seems* to him that he sacrifices himself through pain, and that he *annihilates* himself through death” (*Treatise* I.10.5, OCM XI 118/W 115, emphasis mine). In the *Christian Meditations* XI.15, the Word of God—i.e., the second person of the Trinity—reiterates the importance of identifying with our bodies: “you regard your body as your own substance because of the laws of the union of soul and body. Thus when you sacrifice your body to the love of order, it seems to you that you sacrifice yourself” (OCM X 122).

Materialism—or, better, the feeling of materiality—is a necessary evil. It is necessary for survival and for salvation too.

**5. Conclusion**

Malebranche’s materialist tendencies live on in the anonymous *L’Âme Matérielle*.[[23]](#footnote-23) As we saw above, Malebranche argues that the human body can deal with its environment without any help from a soul. When the human body encounters an object relevant to its survival, animal spirits flow through the nerves to carry motion or information from the extremities of the body to the brain, where the spirits imprint traces or images of the object. These freshly printed traces trigger the brain’s associative tendencies to conjure up additional traces, while simultaneously dispatching animal spirits through the body to prepare it for action. This process culminates in an adaptive behavioural response. The body drinks the coffee or flees a bear, without any spiritual intervention.

Malebranche *insists* that these physiological mechanisms are notmental. The fresh traces in the brain are not sensations; the rush of animal spirits is not desire. The interior of the human body is dark. He writes:

It is true that there are some people stupid enough and others imaginative enough to constantly take the soul for a certain configuration of the parts of the brain, and for the motion of spirits. . . . For what do we reply to a man who imagines that a desire, for example, is nothing but the movement of spirits; that a thought is but a trace or image of objects where spirits have formed in the brain; and that all reasonings of men consist only in the different placement of certain tiny bodies diversely arranged in the head? (*Search* VI-II.7, OCM II 388-9/LO 492)

According to Malebranche, the physiological changes are the *occasions* of genuinely mental modifications that exist only in the immaterial substance that perceives them. Light dawns only in the soul.

The author of *L’Âme Matérielle* disagrees. They suggest that Malebranche has sketched a materialist account of the soul *malgré lui*. This authorappropriates and repurposes Malebranche’s physiology of animal spirits. They adopt, for example, Malebranche’s account of sensory processing:

The sense organs really act on the animal spirits . . . their action consists in pushing them into certain little canals rather than others. . . . Hence, we must treat the relation between thesenses as material or, which is the same, as a mechanical action of the sense organs on the animal spirits, which I consider strictly as the most subtle parts of the blood and other bodily fluids, and as the rarefied and highly purified essence of the various matters which compose the human body. (2003, 230)

This author then twists Malebranche’s physiology towards their own materialist ends by reducing mental states to the physiological changes that Malebranche identifies as their occasions. Why not imagine a desire as a movement of spirits or a thought as a trace? This author concludes that “the soul of man is material” (2003, 228).

The history of materialism contains as many bends and turns as the labyrinth of nerves through which the animal spirits flow. Malebranche provides the material for materialism, though no materialist himself.

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1. *Search* III-II.2, OCM I 389/LO 20; I.13.4, OCM 146/LO 62–63;VI-II.6, OCM II 370/LO 480. Compare *M2*, AT VII 27/CSM II 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Search* I.12, OCM I 137/LO 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Search* II-3.5, OCM I 368/LO 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Dialogues* III.10, OCM XII 73/JS 39; and *Defense against La Ville*, OCM XVII-I 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Preface* to the *Search*, OCM I 11/LO xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Garber (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, MacKenzie (1975), Bitbol-Héspériès (1990), Hatfield (1992), Des Chene (2000), and Detlefsen (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I adapt this phrase from Garber (1992, 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Admittedly, Malebranche recognizes something like Newtonian absolute space in the form of God’s *immensity*, i.e., God’s omnipresence. As Malebranche writes, “the divine substance is everywhere, not only in the universe, but infinitely beyond. For God is not contained in His work; rather, His work is in Him and subsists in His substance” (*Dialogues* VIII.4, OCM XII 178/JS 131). Hence, there are two kinds of space in Malebranche (three if we count intelligible extension): the system of moveable spatial regions constituting the world of bodies *layered on top of* or *inside* God’s immensity. A statue-shaped region, for example, exists inside and overlaps God’s immensity. The statue-shaped region that constitutes a body, however, is extended in the sense of having *partes extra partes*: the statue is spread out like butter on toast, partly here, partly there. God’s immensity, in contrast, is holenmerically present: God exists wholly in the whole and wholly in each of the parts. He is never spread thin. See Reid (2003, 584-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For discussion of whether Descartes recognizes one or many material substances, see Schmaltz (2019, ch.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As Malebranche writes, “we ought to regard as the essence of a thing what we recognize as primary in that thing, what is inseparable from it, and what all the properties belonging to it depend on” (*Search* III-II.8.2, OCM I 459/LO 243). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See also *Search* III-II.8.2, OCM I 459-60/LO 243-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Schmaltz (1996, ch.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Schmaltz (1996, ch. 2), Simmons (2008), and Ott (2017, ch.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This qualification is important, given that Malebranche’s Aristotelian opponents often identify the souls of animals with a *material* substantial form, i.e., a substantial form that—unlike the human soul—cannot exist in separation from the body. Nevertheless, they plausibly hold that these material substantial forms are more perfect or noble than the matter they actualize. See Schmaltz (1996, 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Harrison (1993, 521-4) and Strickland (2013, 299-300). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Are human babies not innocent, and do they not suffer? Malebranche denies the innocence of human infants: they are initiated into Original Sin while still in the womb (*Search* II-I.7.5, OCM I 247-8/LO 120). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Again, like Descartes. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Malebranche distinguishes the ersatz representation of these material traces and the genuine representation of divine ideas or archetypes. Whereas scholars such as Hatfield (1992), Gaukroger (2002, ch. 7), and Clarke (2003, ch.2 ) have investigated Descartes’s attempts to mechanize aspects of our psychological apparatus, commentators have paid less attention to Malebranche’s continuation of this mechanizing project. Sutton (2007), Kolesnik-Antoine (2011), and Wolfe and van Esveld (2014) are important exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Detlefsen (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Chamberlain (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Simmons (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Dated to roughly 1725-30. I am indebted to Wolfe and van Esveld’s (2014) discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)