



The great guide to the preservation of life: Malebranche on the imagination

Colin Chamberlain

To cite this article: Colin Chamberlain (13 Jun 2024): The great guide to the preservation of life: Malebranche on the imagination, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2024.2349086](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2024.2349086)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2024.2349086>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 13 Jun 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 121



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The great guide to the preservation of life: Malebranche on the imagination

Colin Chamberlain

Department of Philosophy, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) holds that the senses, imagination, and passions aim at survival and the satisfaction of the body’s needs, rather than truth or the good of the mind. Each of these faculties makes a distinctive and, indeed, an indispensable contribution to the preservation of life. Commentators have largely focused on how the senses keep us alive. By comparison, the imagination and passions have been neglected. In this paper, I reconstruct Malebranche’s account of how the imagination contributes to the preservation of the body by compensating for the limitations of the senses. First, the imagination represents non-actual states of affairs, such as probable or possible future states. Second, the imagination forges new and often helpful associations based on past experiences. Third, the imagination (mis)represents that objects *will* cause pleasure and pain, thereby imbuing them with emotional significance they would otherwise lack. Together, these features flesh out Malebranche’s view that the imagination is necessary for the preservation of life.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 5 January 2023; Revised 10 July 2023 and 10 February 2024; Accepted 25 April 2024

KEYWORDS Malebranche; imagination; embodiment; sensory perception; Hume

The body never speaks except on its own behalf ...
–Malebranche, *Treatise on Morality*

1. Introduction

Our bodies often dominate our mental lives. Although we might prefer to contemplate the true and the good, our needy and fragile bodies demand our attention. A hunger pang, an unpleasant smell, or a searing pain pull us away from lofty pursuits and keep us focused on survival. Despite the otherworldly tenor of his philosophical system, Nicolas Malebranche (1638–

CONTACT Colin Chamberlain  colin.chamberlain@ucl.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

1715) recognizes that many aspects of our mental lives serve the body's agenda and work to satisfy its needs. "[A]ll the thoughts the soul has through the body, or through dependence upon the body", Malebranche writes, "are all for the sake of the body" (*Search After Truth* II-III.6.2, OCM I 376/LO 195; see also *Treatise on Morality* I.13.8, OCM XI 149/W 137). If a mental state arises *from* – or, better, is occasioned by – the body, then its proper function is to promote the preservation of the body, much as the function of the heart is to pump blood or the stomach to digest food.

Malebranche applies this principle to the senses, imagination, and passions. Seeing an apple, imagining how good it will taste, and desiring the apple all work to keep a person alive and healthy. The body occasions all three types of mental state and so all three serve the body's needs. As Malebranche writes, "the imagination as well as the senses, speaks only for the body, since naturally everything which comes to the mind by way of the body is only for the body" (*Treatise on Morality* I.12.10, OCM XI 139/W 129-30; see also *Search After Truth* I.5.1, OCM I 76/LO 23). "The passions", he similarly explains, "are well governed if they are considered only in relation to the preservation of the body" (*Search After Truth* V.1, OCM II 131/LO 340).

Each of the senses, imagination, and passions contributes to the preservation of the body in its own way. Each has its own job to do. Indeed, Malebranche holds that each of these faculties is *necessary* for survival. We need all three – the complete package of body-dependent faculties – to survive.¹ A person's senses furnish them with a representation – a map – of the current state of their surroundings (*Search After Truth* I.5.1, OCM I 76-77/LO 23). Pleasure and pain indicate what to seek out and what to avoid. An unpleasant smell, for example, tells someone to avoid a rotting apple (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* IV.14, OCM XII 98/JS 61; see also *Elucidation* VIII.4, OCM III 72-73/LO 580 and *Christian Conversations* X, OCM IV 209–10). Merely smelling the unpleasant odour is insufficient to move a person to act, however, as someone might smell the rotting apple and simply not care. Acting in this situation – avoiding the apple – requires an additional inclination or movement of the will to bridge the gap between perception and action (*Elucidation* XII, OCM III 176-7/LO 641; *Elucidation* XV, OCM III 227/LO 670; and *Dialogues*

¹Malebranche writes that the senses are "as if necessary [*comme nécessaire*]" for the preservation of the body (*Search After Truth* I.5.1, OCM 73/LO 21). Moreover, he indicates the indispensability of the senses by constructing thought experiments in which someone without senses allows their body to be destroyed (*Search* I.10.5, OCM I 127-128/LO 51-52; and *Dialogues* IV.14, OCM XII 98/JS 61). See Simmons ("Spatial Perception"; "Guarding the Body") for discussion. Malebranche writes that the imagination and passions are "necessary [*nécessaire*]" for the conservation of life, apparently without qualification (*Search After Truth* II-I.5.2, OCM I 223/LO 106; see also II-I.7.4, OCM I 250/LO 121 and II-III.6.2, OCM I 377/LO 195). These faculties form an integrated whole: "[t]he senses, imagination, and passions always go together; they cannot be examined and condemned separately" (*Treatise on Morality* I.1.13.7, OCM XI 149/W 137; see also *Search After Truth* V.1, OCM II 130/LO 339). This suggests that these faculties can function correctly only when they all work together. Hence, if any one of them is necessary for survival, so too for the others.

on *Death* III, OCM XIII 432).² The passions provide the requisite motive (*Search After Truth* V.1, OCM II 128/LO 338; see also *Treatise on Morality* I.13.7, OCM XI 148/W 136-7). The unpleasant smell stirs up hatred for the rotten apple, which motivates the agent to avoid the fruit.

It is less clear what the imagination is supposed to contribute to the preservation of life, and why Malebranche might hold that the imagination is *necessary* for this task.³ Our ability to imagine castles in the sky does not seem immediately relevant to survival, especially compared to the urgent and searing pain we feel when we get too close to a fire. Even if the imagination can sometimes be helpful, it might seem that the senses and passions *can* get the job done on their own. In the case of the rotten apple, a person's senses tell them what they need to do – avoid the apple! – and their passions provide the motive to do it. The senses and passions seem perfectly well-equipped to deal with this type of situation without any help from the imagination. Generalizing somewhat, we might conclude that we can always get along without the imagination even if it is nice to have. Hence, we might conclude that the imagination is *not* necessary for the preservation of life, despite Malebranche's claims to the contrary.

Malebranche further deepens the impression that the imagination is superfluous by emphasizing how effectively the senses keep us alive. "Through our senses", Malebranche writes, "God has *sufficiently* provided for the preservation of our life, and *nothing* could be any better" (*Elucidation* XIII, OCM III 185/LO 646-7, emphasis added). Both the senses and imagination are operations of the understanding that equip the mind with perceptions that things are thus and so.⁴ The worry, then, is that if the senses tell us everything we need to know to survive, then there is nothing left for the imagination to tell. Malebranche writes, for example, that "the senses quickly advise the soul of *what ought and ought not to be done* for the preservation of life" (*Search* I.5.1, OCM I 76-77/LO 23, emphasis added). If the senses tell us what

²I use the term 'perception' to refer to any kind of mental state that makes an object or content available to the mind. Perceptions can be sensory, imaginative, or intellectual (*Search After Truth* I.4.1, OCM I 66/LO 16). I use the terms 'inclination', 'volition', and 'movement of the will' to refer to the will's attractions and aversions to perceived goods and evils.

³Commentators – such as Simmons ("Spatial Perception"; "Guarding the Body") and myself (Chamberlain, "Our Body is the Measure"; "Let Us Imagine"; "Most Dangerous Error") – have focused on the way the senses contribute to the preservation of life. By comparison, they have neglected the body-preserving functions of the imagination and passions. Rodis-Lewis (*Nicolas Malebranche*, 206–7), McCracken (*Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 278–9), and Kail ("Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche", 66) note in passing that the imagination helps preserve the body. But they do not dig into the details of how the imagination does its work, nor how the imagination complements the senses. Similarly, although Hoffman ("Three Dualist Theories"), James (*Passion and Action*), and Greenberg ("Malebranche on the Passions") recognize *that* the passions contribute to the preservation of the body, they do not provide as much detail about *how* the passions keep us alive as we might hope for. I unpack the function of the passions in other work.

⁴Sometimes Malebranche suggests that the difference between the senses and imagination is merely one of degree (*Search* II-I.1, OCM I 192/LO 88).

survival requires of us, we do not obviously need any further advice from the imagination.⁵

The problem posed by the Malebranchean imagination is two-fold. We need to explain, first, how the imagination's contribution to the preservation of life *differs* from that of the senses, given that they are both operations of the understanding and, hence, sources of perceptions. Second, we need to explain what makes the imagination's contribution *indispensable* or *necessary* to survival.

Malebranche cannot dodge this problem by simply abandoning his view that the imagination is necessary for preserving the body, as this view plays an integral role in his system. In the *Search After Truth* and the *Treatise on Morality*, Malebranche catalogues the imagination's errors and distortions. "The imagination", Malebranche notes, "has its own particular malignity" (*Treatise on Morality* I.12.1, OCM XI 135/W 127; see also I.12.11, OCM XI 139/W 130). I might puff myself up with pride, for example, by imagining that I am a better philosopher than I really am. Malebranche reconciles the negative effects of this faculty with God's goodness by arguing that the imagination is useful and indeed necessary for the preservation of life. Malebranche would no longer have a compelling explanation of why God bestows this faculty upon us if we could get along just fine without it. His theodicy of the imagination hangs in the balance.

I think Malebranche can answer these challenges. He has a compelling explanation, I argue, of why we need the imagination in addition to the senses and passions. Despite some of Malebranche's rhetoric, his considered view is that the senses are more limited than he sometimes presents them as being. The imagination contributes to the preservation of the body by compensating for these limits. I discuss three contexts in which the imagination picks up the slack for the senses. First, the senses can represent things as present or actual but not as absent or merely possible. We can see that an apple is in front of us but not that an apple *might* be there next week or in the next room. The imagination, in contrast, can represent absent and merely possible things. Second, the senses do not take past experiences into account. An apple seen in good light and under similar conditions will always *look* basically the same, no matter how many experiences with apples a person may have had and what those experiences were like. The imagination, by comparison, affords a more flexible set of responses. A person may learn to form positive or negative imaginative associations depending on their experiences with apples. Third, the senses cannot tell us – or even *purport* to tell us – which objects *will* cause us pleasure and

⁵Simmons' ("Spatial Perception"; "Guarding the Body") work on the senses in Malebranche raises the stakes on this problem. The more she can establish that the senses are powerful guardians of the body, the less we obviously need the imagination in addition to the senses. This paper takes its inspiration from Simmons' ground-breaking work on the senses but is also intended as a corrective. My goal is to show that the senses cannot protect the body alone; we need the imagination too.

pain, whereas the imagination can.⁶ This is important not merely because we want to seek pleasure and avoid pain, but because Malebranche holds that we are hard-wired to have emotional or passionate responses to the apparent causes of these feelings. The imagination imbues objects with an emotional significance they would otherwise lack.

These features do not exhaust the ways the imagination helps keep us alive for Malebranche. The imagination plays a role in foetal and early development (*Search After Truth* II-I.7.3, OCM I 242/LO 117; OCM I 377/LO 195). It also helps us navigate our social world by underwriting capacities for imitation and sympathy (*Search After Truth* II-I.7, OCM I 233-4/LO 112; II-III.1.1, OCM I 320-1/LO 161-2; *Treatise on Morality* I.12.20, OCM XI 144/W 132-3). The imagination's social function is especially important because, as social beings, our survival often hinges on our ability to live with others, especially when the most serious threats to our safety wear velvet gloves and powdered wigs.⁷

For the purposes of this paper, however, I will largely bracket the social function of the imagination to focus on the three features mentioned above. I concentrate on these features because I think they best explain why Malebranche takes the imagination to be *necessary* for survival. In each of the three cases, the imagination allows us to do something fundamental to our ability to act effectively in the world: represent absent things, learn from past experiences, and encounter the world through an emotional lens. We could not plausibly get along without these abilities. Hence, they are good candidates to underwrite Malebranche's claim that the imagination is *indispensable* for the preservation of the body. The social functions of the imagination have a different status. Although imitation and sympathy may be necessary to live *in society*, they are not necessary to live *tout court*, since someone might live outside of society, as a hermit in the woods or alone on a desert island.

Other commentators have explored the Malebranchean imagination from different angles,⁸ focusing on Malebranche's influence on Hume (McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 263–67, 277–83; James,

⁶Malebranche holds that God is the only true cause. Thus, the imaginative representation of causal efficacy is a (useful) misrepresentation. For more on Malebranche's occasionalism, see Freddoso ("Medieval Aristotelianism"), Sleigh ("Leibniz on Malebranche"), Peppers-Bates (*Nicolas Malebranche*) and Adams ("Malebranche's Causal Concepts").

⁷Another complication is that the imagination, like the passions, plays a dual role in our mental economy. Whereas the senses focus exclusively on the preservation of the body, the imagination preserves one's own body *and* society – the body politic, in other words (*Search After Truth* II-I.7.2, OCM I 236/LO 113; *Treatise on Morality* I.12.22, OCM XI 145/W 133). The imagination thus aids the individual in navigating their social world but also helps preserve the social world of which the individual is a part. The relationship between these two ends is somewhat unclear. Is one end more fundamental than the other? Are they subordinated towards a higher, theological purpose? See Gueroult (*Cinq Abimes*, 104–8), James (*Action and Passion*, 117–20), Moriarty (*Early Modern French Thought*, 177–83), and Hamerton ("Fashion on the Brain", 432–5) for discussion of the ways the imagination helps keep society together.

⁸For overviews of Malebranche's account of the imagination, see Rodis-Lewis (*Nicolas Malebranche*, 204–13), Moriarty (*Early Modern French Thought*, 170–209), Carbone and Vermeir ("Malebranche et les pouvoirs"), and Antoine-Mahut ("Malebranche on Imagination").

“Sympathy and Comparison”; Kail, “Hume’s Appropriation of Malebranche”, 63–8, 73–6; and McIntyre and Walsh “Self-Love or Diffidence?”), the physiological underpinnings of the imagination and memory (Sutton, *Philosophy and Memory Traces*, 106–13), the imaginations of women (Broad, “Impressions in the Brain”), witches and werewolves (Antoine-Mahut, “Somme-nous tous des lycanthropes?”), and the imagination’s social role (Lennon, “Contagious Communication”; James, *Action and Passion*, 117–23; “Grandeur and the Mechanical Philosophy”; “Sympathy and Comparison”; Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought*. 186–201; McIntyre and Walsh, “Self-Love or Diffidence?”; and Hamerton, “Fashion on the Brain”). But these commentators have not explored how the imagination protects the body. The body-preserving function of the Malebranchean imagination remains understudied and poorly understood. This paper fills the gap in the literature by explaining why Malebranche holds that we cannot survive without an ability to imagine our way beyond the narrow world of our sensory impressions.

2. The bounds of sense

Some preliminaries about the senses are in order. Once we see where the senses give out, we can better appreciate how the imagination compensates for their limits. Suppose that someone looks at a shiny red apple. Motions transferred through the air trigger a cascade of changes in the perceiver’s body. Motion flows from the exterior parts of their body, through their nerves, to the principal part of their brain – Malebranche’s version of the pineal gland (*Search After Truth* I.10.2, OCM I 123-4/LO 49). All the changes so far are mechanical, consisting of matter in motion. The next stage marks a radical break as the sensory process continues into the perceiver’s soul, leaping from matter to an immaterial mind or soul. States of the principal part of the perceiver’s brain are type-type correlated with sensory and imaginative modes of their soul (*Search After Truth* II-I.5.1, OCM I 215-6/LO 101-2).⁹ The motions in the brain *occasion* a visual experience of the apple.

The perceiver’s visual experience of the apple is a compound of *sensations* and *natural judgements* (*Search After Truth* I.10.6, OCM I 129-30/LO 52). Sensations explain the perceiver’s awareness *of* various shades of red, pink, green, etc. Natural judgements explain their awareness *that* there is something in their vicinity – the apple – that is red, pink, green, etc. More generally, sensations imbue sensory experiences with qualitative richness; natural

⁹Malebranche refers to the relevant states of the brain as “traces”. An occasional or natural law – God’s will, in other words – underwrites the correlation between brain traces and sensory and imaginative perceptions (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* VII.13, OCM XII 165-6/JS 120-121). Traces and perceptions always go together: the physiology and psychology move in lockstep. When two brain traces are associated, the corresponding perceptions will be too.

judgements inject these experiences with propositional or representational content. Malebranche commits to sensory experiences having propositional content – and, more specifically, conveying this content to the perceiver’s point of view – when he describes the senses as *testifying, speaking, or addressing claims* to the mind about what is the case (though often with a disconcerting disregard for the truth). He refers to the “testimony” or “reports” of the senses (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* I, OCM XII 30/JS 4). He claims that the senses “speak” (*Preface to the Search After Truth*, OCM I 16/LO xxxvii, OCM X 113), “represent” (*Search After Truth* I.18.1, OCM I 177-8/LO 79-80), “inform us [*nous apprennent*]” (*Search After Truth* I.6.3, OCM I 92/LO 32), and are “false witnesses” (*Treatise on Morality* I.11.15, OCM XI 133/W 125; and *Dialogues on Metaphysics* IV.16, OCM XII 100/JS 62). Natural judgements are the vehicle by which the senses make their testimony available to the mind. In general, then, sensations afford awareness of colours, lights, sounds, smells, tastes, hot, and cold, whereas natural judgements explain a perceiver’s awareness *that* there are material things with these sensible qualities, distributed in three-dimensional space around their body, as well as whatever other representational content their sensory experiences may have.

Sensory experience, i.e. the conscious result of combining sensations and natural judgements, is “almost always followed by another, free judgement that the soul makes so habitually that it is almost unable to avoid it” (*Search After Truth* I.10.6, OCM I 130/LO 52). A *free judgement* is a belief that typically accompanies the deliverances of the senses. Malebranche analyses free judgement in terms of the will’s consent to an experience (*Search After Truth* I.14.1, OCM I 156/LO 68). If the perceiver takes her sensory experience at face value, she will believe, i.e. freely judge, that there really is an apple in front of her.

Malebranche’s use of the term ‘judgment’ (*jugement*) for both natural and free judgements can be confusing. But the two forms of judgement play quite different roles in our mental lives. The understanding proposes that things are thus and so, whereas the will endorses these proposals (or not). Natural and free judgements fall on opposite sides of this divide. Natural judgements are operations of the understanding that propose to the mind that such and such is the case by means of a persuasive sensory appearance. Free judgements are acts of will by which the mind assents to the understanding’s proposals. Natural judgements provide the material for belief; free judgements are beliefs.

When a perceiver sees an apple, their visual experience aims at survival rather than truth. This follows from Malebranche’s more general view, mentioned above, that “all the thoughts the soul has through the body, or through dependence upon the body, are all for the sake of the body” (*Search After Truth* II-III.6.2, OCM I 376/LO 195). The point of our sensory experiences is to keep us *breathing*, not to yield insight into the true

natures of things. As Malebranche writes, “the senses were given to us *only* for the preservation of our bodies and *not* for the acquisition of truth” (*Search After Truth* I.10.5, OCM I 129/LO 52, emphasis added). Sometimes the truth serves the practical goal of preserving the body. A reasonably accurate sense of the spatial lay-out of one’s surroundings is useful to avoid bumping into things (*Search After Truth* I.10, OCM I 121-2/LO 48). But the senses’ interest in the truth is incidental and instrumental, and it is always subordinate to the goal of preserving the body. The senses will say whatever it takes to protect the human body in their care and that is only sometimes the truth. We see the apple as bright red and shiny, for example, because this colourful appearance allows us to pick the apple out from its surroundings, when in fact the apple is a colourless portion of extension. We taste sweetness when we bite into the apple because this encourages us to eat it, whereas, according to Malebranche, the real apple is tasteless and odourless (*Elucidation* VI, OCM III 55-56/LO 569; *Dialogues on Metaphysics* V.10, OCM XII 122/JS 82). The senses, as Malebranche puts it, are “false witnesses in respect of the truth, but ... faithful instructors in respect of the preservation and conveniences of life” (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* IV.16, OCM XII 100/JS 62; see also I, OCM XII 30/JS 4).

As we saw above, Malebranche sometimes gives the impression that the senses provide us with all the information we need to stay alive (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* XII.5, OCM XII 284/JS 222; *Elucidation* XIII, OCM III 185/LO 646–7). But the senses do not fulfil all our practical needs. They have their limits. I will concentrate on three.

First, the senses invariably represent objects *as present*. When the soul senses, “it judges <by a natural judgement, of which I have frequently spoken in the preceding book> that what it senses is outside, i.e. it perceives an object as present” (*Search After Truth* II-I.1, OCM I 191/LO 88). When I see an apple, it seems to be right in front of me. If I reach out to touch the apple, it feels *real*. The senses *seem* to provide us with a window onto the actual objects in our vicinity. Whether the senses really do provide such a window is another question: I am concerned here with the *feeling* of presence or reality. The inescapability of this feeling in sensory experience points to the first limitation of the senses: that we cannot sense absent or merely possible things – or, rather, we cannot sense things *as absent* or *as possible*. We cannot see the missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle but only the surrounding pieces. We cannot see a merely possible apple. We cannot see what is going to happen. Malebranche motivates the claim that the senses are restricted to representing present things by contrasting the senses to the imagination. Consider how *seeing* an apple differs from *imagining* one (*Search After Truth* II-I.1, OCM I 191/LO 88). Seeing an apple plausibly involves a feeling of presence – a sense of being confronted by an apple in the flesh – lacking in the imaginative case.

Second, the senses do not take past experiences into account. An apple seen under similar conditions – in similar lighting, from a similar angle,

when the perceiver is in a similar bodily condition, etc. – will always look basically the same, no matter how many experiences a person may have had with apples. Suppose, for example, that whenever someone sees an apple, they eat it and receive a jolt of pleasure. Eventually, they will learn that apples taste good. They will learn to anticipate the pleasure. Malebranche argues, however, that the visual appearance of the apple will remain unchanged despite the learned association with pleasure. The apple looks the way it looks. No amount of experience changes that, assuming the viewing conditions and the state of the perceiver's body remain the same. Past experiences do not shape present experience. The senses never learn.

This feature of the senses emerges in Malebranche's discussion of sensory processing. The contents of a person's sensory experiences, i.e. the contents of their natural judgements, are determined via a sub-personal or unconscious inferential, predictive process. The perceiver's sensory system takes the state of their sense organs, e.g. the affection of their retina, the position of the head, etc., as input, and then on this basis forms a prediction about the probable state of their surroundings. This prediction determines the contents of their sensory experiences. Suppose, for example, that light reflecting off an apple produces an apple-shaped image on the perceiver's retina. The perceiver's sensory system will infer that if an image with that shape appears on their retina, and the head is turned just so, then an apple is probably located *there*. The conclusion of this sub-personal inferential process is a sensory experience. They *see* the apple as located *there*.¹⁰ Malebranche expresses this view in characteristically theological terms: "Imagine that your soul knows exactly everything new that happens in its body, and that it gives itself all the most suitable sensory perceptions possible for the preservation of life. That will be exactly what God does in the soul" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* XII.5, OCM XII 284/JS 222). In this passage, Malebranche alludes to his view that God is the true cause of the changes occurring in the soul. Malebranche's account of *the way* God produces sensory perceptions in the soul is tantamount to a description of the sub-personal processes that culminate in a person's sensory experiences or natural judgements, which "occur in us, without us, and even in spite of us" (*Search After Truth* I.9.3, OCM I 119/LO 46; see also I.11.3, OCM I 133/LO 55).

Now here is the crucial point: when a perceiver's sensory system constructs the contents of their sensory experiences, the sub-personal predictive process occurs independently of anything the perceiver might have learned through their previous experiences. A perceiver's sensory system is

¹⁰This is somewhat of an oversimplification. A perceiver's sensory system does not merely aim to *predict* the state of their surroundings; their sensory system also tries to figure out what sensory perceptions will be *most useful* given its predictions about the probable state of their surroundings. We can ignore this complexity for the point I am currently making, as both these stages of sensory processing occur independently of the perceiver's previous experiences.

hard-wired with a set of principles about optics, geometry, physics, and human physiology that it uses to interpret the affections of the sense organs and to form predictions about the probable state of the perceiver's surroundings (*Elucidation on Optics*, OCM III 327/LO 733). A perceiver's hard-earned knowledge about how the world works, e.g. that apples usually taste good, does *not* get added to the stock of principles the sensory system uses to make its predictions. The sensory system *ignores* anything the perceiver may have learned from past experiences. As Malebranche writes:

To speak only about what concerns vision, God through this general law gives us precisely all those perceptions we would give ourselves **if we had [1] an exact knowledge, not only of what takes place in our brain and in our eyes, but also of the situation and movement of our bodies, if in addition we knew optics and geometry perfectly, and if we could, on the basis of this actual knowledge, and [2] not of other knowledge we might have drawn from elsewhere**, instantaneously produce an infinity of precise inferences, and at the same time act in ourselves according to these precise inferences and give ourselves all the different perceptions, whether confused or distinct, that we have of objects we see at a glance—perceptions of their size, figure, distance, motion or rest, and all their various colours.

(*Elucidation on Optics*, OCM III 327/LO 733; see also *Search After Truth* I.9.3, OCM I 119-20/LO 46-7, OCM XV 15 & 17, and OCM XVII-I- 268-9)

When a perceiver's sensory system constructs the contents of their sensory experience, this system considers "what takes place in our brains and in our eyes, ... the situation and movement of our bodies", as well as the principles of "optics and geometry" (OCM III 327/LO 733). Their sensory system does *not* consider "other knowledge we might have drawn from elsewhere", namely, whatever knowledge the perceiver may have acquired from their experiences (OCM III 327/LO 733).

By denying that past experiences shape present experience, Malebranche is not saying that an apple will necessarily look the same to a perceiver every time they see it. The apple may look different because they see the apple under different conditions: the lighting may vary, their eyesight may have degraded in the interim, or their body may simply be in a different state. Malebranche recognizes that such sensory variability is common. "Sauces must be altogether different to be equally pleasing to different people, or to be equally pleasing to the same person at different times", Malebranche writes. "One likes the sweet, another likes the sour. One finds wine pleasant, another abhors it; and the same person who finds it pleasant when he is well finds it bitter when in a fever – and so on for the other senses" (*Search After Truth* I.13.5, OCM I 150/LO 64; see also *Dialogues on Metaphysics* IV.15, OCM XII 99/JS 62). The very same bucket of tepid water feels warm when someone's hand is cold and cold when their hand is warm. Malebranche's point is that sensory variability results from the different circumstances in which

perception occurs, or differences in the perceiver's sense organs and their bodily state, and *not* because of the past experiences they have had. Malebranche embraces sensory variability but denies sensory learning.

Third, the senses cannot represent that objects *will* cause us pleasure and pain. No matter how many times someone experiences pleasure when eating an apple, they will never *see*, i.e. visually experience, that an apple will cause them pleasure if they bite into it. They may anticipate pleasure (to anticipate), but they will never *see* or *feel* the pleasure coming. This limitation of the senses follows from what has been said already. First, the senses' inability to represent absent and future things rules out sensing that objects *will* cause pleasure and pain. Second, if the senses cannot learn, then they cannot represent that objects *will* cause us pleasure and pain. Upon first inspection, we cannot see how an object will feel to interact with it. A jellyfish's wobbly appearance gives no clue that it will sting when we touch it. A dog's fur might look coarse but feel wonderfully soft. We discover through trial and error which objects will (apparently) cause us pleasure and which pain by putting the objects, and ourselves, to the test. The senses, however, cannot benefit from this process of trial and error because, as I argued above, they cannot learn. If we cannot see that a jellyfish *will* sting us upon first viewing, or that an apple *will* taste good when we bite into it, we can never learn to see it this way.

According to a traditional reading of Malebranche – defended by Church (1938, “Malebranche and Hume”), McCracken (1983, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*), Nadler (2000, “Malebranche on Causation”), and Kail (2008, “Hume’s Appropriation of Malebranche”) – he anticipates the Humean view that the senses do not represent cause and effect. We see billiard balls collide, for example, but not any causal connection between them. The traditional reading implies that the senses cannot represent that objects *will* cause pleasure and pain because the senses cannot represent causation at all. Thus, this reading offers additional support for the third sensory limitation. I have recently defended an anti-Humean reading of Malebranche, according to which the senses represent – or, better, misrepresent – causes and effects (Chamberlain, 2021, “The Most Dangerous Error”). On my view, when someone bites into an apple, their sense of taste misrepresents the apple as the cause of the pleasure they enjoy (*Christian Conversations* VIII, OCM IV 177). For the reasons outline above, I have come to think that although the senses can represent an object as *currently causing the perceiver pleasure or pain*, the senses *cannot* represent that an object *will* cause pleasure or pain, a limitation I had not previously recognized. For the purposes of this paper, I will remain neutral between the traditional reading and my (admittedly controversial) anti-Humean reading to focus on this point of agreement: namely, that we cannot see nor feel into the future. We cannot sense that objects *will* cause pleasure or pain.

The senses' inability to represent that an object *will* cause pleasure or pain might seem like an advantage rather than a liability. According to Malebranche's occasionalism, material things are not the true causes of anything. Hence, this supposed inability protects the senses from *misrepresenting* material things as possessing illusory powers to cause pleasure and pain. This limitation of the senses may serve the interests of truth and the avoidance of error. But it is a liability for the purposes of preserving the body. Misrepresenting material things as future causes of pleasure and pain is often quite useful, for reasons I will explain below.

To sum up: the senses are powerful tools for preserving the body that are nevertheless limited in these three ways. Fortunately, we needn't rely on the senses in all things. We are imaginative creatures too.

3. The mechanics of the imagination

Malebranche's account of the imagination builds on his account of the senses. Suppose a state of the brain occasions a visual experience of an apple. Similar states of the brain will result in similar states of the soul. When a perceiver's brain is affected in a similar, but less intense version of the brain state that occasioned their visual experience of the apple, a fainter correlate of the experience of the apple modifies their soul. In this case, the perceiver *imagines* the apple. As Malebranche writes:

If the agitation [of the brain fibres] originates through the impression made by objects on the exterior surface of our nerve fibres, then the soul senses, and it judges <By a natural judgment, of which I have frequently spoken in the preceding book> that what it senses is outside, i.e. it perceives an object as present. But if the internal fibres alone are lightly disturbed by the flow of animal spirits, or in some other way, then the soul imagines, and judges that what it imagines is not outside, i.e. it perceives an object as absent. This is the difference between sensing and imagining.

(*Search After Truth* II-I.1, OCM I 191/LO 88)

Intense changes in the brain produce vivid sensory experiences that represent their objects "as present". Weaker changes in the brain produce fainter imaginative experiences that represent their objects "as absent" (OCM I 191/LO 88). When I imagine an apple, I do not seem to be confronted with an apple in the flesh. The apple does *not* seem real. The feeling of presence is lacking.

Like sensory experiences, imaginative experiences are compounds of sensation-like states – faint echoes of sensations – and natural judgements. Malebranche alludes to this dual structure in the passage above. When someone has a sensory experience, "the soul [1] senses, and it [2] judges <By a natural judgement, of which I have frequently spoken in the preceding book> that what it senses is outside" (OCM I 191/LO 88). Similarly, when

someone has an imaginative experience, “the soul [1] imagines, and [2] judges that what it imagines is not outside, i.e. it perceives an object as absent” (OCM I 191/LO 88). When someone imagines an apple, their imaginative experience is a compound of faint images of red, green, and pink that imbue this imaginative episode with its qualitative character, as well as natural judgements *that* there is something red, green, and pink, though not necessarily in their vicinity nor anywhere else in reality. The sensation-like images explain the qualitative character of the imaginative experience, whereas the natural judgements imbue the experience with propositional content. Imaginative experiences – the compound of sensation-like images and natural judgements – provide the material for beliefs without being themselves beliefs. Someone only forms a belief when they assent to the imaginative experience via an act of will, namely, a free judgement.¹¹

When a perceiver imagines an apple, the point of their imaginative experience – its proper function or end – is not truth, recreation, or creativity. The point is survival. Like the senses, the imagination aims at the preservation of the body. “[T]he imagination”, Malebranche writes, “speaks only for the body, since naturally everything which comes to the mind by way of the body is only for the body” (*Treatise on Morality* I.12.10, OCM XI 139/W 129-30; see also *Search After Truth* I.5.1, OCM I 76/LO 23). This is another application of Malebranche’s view that mental states arising from the body circle back and serve the body’s needs. In the following sections, I will argue that the imagination contributes to, and is indeed necessary for, the preservation of the body because it compensates for the three sensory limitations described above.

4. Imagining absent things

In the *Search After Truth*, Malebranche writes that the imagination represents its objects as *absent* (*Search* II-I.1, OCM I 191/LO 88). His considered view,

¹¹This account of belief contrasts with Hume’s. Whereas Hume argues that the associative powers of the imagination can produce beliefs directly (*Enquiry* V.2), Malebranche denies this. For Malebranche, the imagination – like the senses – generates persuasive experiences that incline the will to assent, often quite powerfully. But the imagination never *forces* the will’s assent. The imagination does not bring a person all the way to belief: they must decide whether to assent (or not). Malebranche’s view that imaginative experiences are less vivid than sensory experiences suggests that the imagination typically exerts less influence on the will than the senses, which seems right. We can more easily doubt what we imagine than what we see with our own eyes. One important question is when or under what circumstances we should consent to the reports of the senses and imagination. Sometimes Malebranche suggests that we should *never* consent to the senses and imagination, which presupposes – intriguingly – that we can use these faculties to preserve our bodies without believing their testimony (*Search After Truth* I.20.2, OCM I 187-8/LO 85; II-III.6.2, OCM I 378/LO 195; and V.4, OCM II 161/LO 359). In other contexts, Malebranche suggests that we should consent to the senses and imagination cautiously and in circumscribed domains, which indicates that some modicum of belief is required to make good use of them: “Our sensations and imaginings must be carefully distinguished from our pure ideas, and the former must guide our [free] judgements about the relations external bodies have with our own, without using them to discover the truths they always confound” (*Search After Truth, Conclusion of the First Three Books*, OCM I 491/LO 263).

however, seems to be that the imagination is less constrained than the senses: it is *not* bound to representing its objects as present or real. As Malebranche writes in *Treatise on Morality* I.12.13, the imagination “joins the mind to the past, present, and future; to realities and chimeras; to possible beings, and to those even God could not create and the mind could not comprehend” (OCM XI 140/W 130).¹² When Malebranche writes that the imagination “joins the mind to past, present, and future”, he is saying that the imagination can represent objects *as* past, *as* present, or *as* future. Similarly, the imagination can represent things *as* realities, *as* possible beings, and perhaps even *as* impossible beings (i.e. “chimeras”).¹³ Admittedly, the imagination’s free-wheeling nature can be problematic. In the continuation of *Treatise on Morality* I.12.13, Malebranche observes that the imagination “draws terrible phantoms from its own resources and then is terrified by them. It brings pleasing objects into being, and then enjoys them. It changes and destroys the natures of all beings, and shapes a thousand extravagant plans in the world it has composed out of realities and pure phantasies” (OCM XI 140/W 130). Losing ourselves in imaginary worlds is hardly a good survival strategy. Still, the imagination’s expansive modal and temporal palette has its uses.

Sensory *presence* and imaginative *absence*, i.e. the imagination’s more flexible modal and temporal palette, satisfy different practical needs. Because our survival in the present moment hinges on dealing with the *actual* situation our bodies confront in the *here* and *now*, we need a grasp of our immediate situation that indicates its significance. We need to recognize when an actual bear, and not just a figment of our imagination, is ambling down a forest path towards us so that we can respond with the appropriate urgency. The senses are perfect for this task. By representing their objects as *present*, the senses tell us: *this is the situation you are currently in*. *This* is what you need to deal with right now.

Because our longer-term survival – that is to say, our survival beyond the present moment – depends on the situations that our bodies *will* confront as we move through the world, we also need to anticipate what is coming. When we are considering whether to go for a walk in the woods, we will be more likely to stay alive if we anticipate the possibility of encountering a bear. Whenever we deliberate about what to do, we must have some grasp of the likely outcomes of our actions to have any hope of surviving.

¹²Note that Malebranche uses *present* in two related but different ways, one referring to *presence*, the other referring to the *current moment*, i.e. the temporal present.

¹³While we can plausibly represent the same thing – like an apple – as past or future, as real or as merely possible, it is unclear that we could represent an arbitrary apple as impossible. How would we go about doing that? When Malebranche refers to imagining chimeras, maybe he is thinking that imaginative experiences can have contradictory contents, which they may or may not wear on their sleeve. An Escher drawing, for example, might provide a model. I am grateful to a referee for encouraging me to consider this point.

The senses are ill-equipped for this anticipatory task because they cannot represent possibilities, probabilities, or future states. This is where the imagination steps in. The imagination allows us to anticipate the likely consequences of going for a walk in the woods in grizzly country. Precisely because the imagination is free to represent things as possible, probable, or future, the imagination affords the ability to anticipate.

The imagination underwrites our capacity to anticipate by bundling or associating perceptions.¹⁴ The imagination associates a perceiver's sensory perceptions of their current situation with imaginative perceptions of what is likely to happen. As Malebranche writes:

There are traces in our brains that are naturally tied to one another, and even to certain emotions of the spirits, because that *is* necessary to preservation of life; and their connection cannot be broken, or at least cannot easily be broken, because it is good that it be always the same. For example, the trace of a great elevation one sees below oneself, and from which one is in danger of falling, or that of a large body, about to fall on us and crush us, is naturally tied to the one that represents death to us, and to an emotion of the spirit that disposes us to flight and to the desire to flee. This connection never changes, because it is necessary that it be always the same, and it consists in a disposition of the brain fibres that we have from birth.

(Search After Truth II-I.5.2, OCM I 223/LO 106)

When someone sees a great height from the edge of a cliff, they imagine their own death. They anticipate that if they are not careful, they will fall. This increases their chances of their survival by breeding caution. Imagining their own death disposes them to “flight and the desire to flee” (OCM I 223/LO 106). The senses cannot do this on their own. Consider what would happen if, when standing on the edge of the cliff, someone saw or felt their own death rather than imagining it. A hallucination of their own death would be paralyzing or dangerously destabilizing: the opposite of useful. To get the survival benefit, this person needs to recognize that their death is *a possibility not yet actual*. The imagination's ability to represent absent or merely possible things is key.

5. Imaginative learning

Malebranche holds that some associations are hard-wired into the imagination, whereas others need to be learned. Let's consider, first, the hard-wired associations. There is a range of standard or typical situations that *all* human beings will likely confront at some point in their lives, whether they live in the mirrored halls of Versailles or as a hermit in the woods. People

¹⁴McCracken (*Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 278–9) and Kail (“Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche”, 65–7) outline Malebranche's associationist psychology in comparison to Hume. See also Rodis-Lewis (*Nicolas Malebranche*, 205–6). Descartes' accounts of habituation and association, developed in the *Passions of the Soul*, may well have influenced Malebranche. See Shapiro (“Descartes' Passions”) and Hatfield (“Descartes's Machine Psychology”).

in all times and places are likely to find themselves at a great height at some point in their lives, or standing before a water source when they need drink. The imagination has a stock of hard-wired associations that allow human beings to navigate these *typical* or *standard* situations successfully. Thus, the imagination is hard-wired so that people imagine falling to their death, and to anticipate that drinking water will quench thirst. These innate connections, Malebranche argues, are “necessary to preservation of life” (*Search After Truth* II-I.5.2, OCM I 223/LO 106).¹⁵ Every human being needs them.

Not every situation a human being encounters is one of the standard or typical situations. When a human being encounters an unusual situation, by which I just mean a situation that does not belong to the standard or typical set, they cannot rely on the imagination’s stock of hard-wired responses. The imagination, for example, is not hard-wired to respond to a situation in which someone is carrying a gun. While guns may be depressingly common in some contexts, they are a human invention that appear only in some times and places. The imagination is not hard-wired to anticipate the likely outcomes of encountering locally and historically contingent threats such as these. Fortunately, the imagination can learn. Through repeated experiences with a certain type of situation, the imagination can build new associations. It can add to its set of pre-programmed responses to deal with a broader range of challenges and opportunities. As Malebranche writes:

All the connections that are not natural can be and should be broken, because different circumstances of time and place are bound to change them so that they can be useful to the preservation of life. It is good that partridges, for example, flee from men with guns in places and times they are being hunted, but it is not necessary that they flee at other times and places. Thus, it is necessary for the conservation of animals that there be certain connections of traces that can easily be formed and destroyed, and that there be others that can be broken only with difficulty, and, finally, still others that can never be broken. It is very useful to seek with care for the different effects that these various connections are capable of producing, because these effects are very numerous and of very great importance for the knowledge of man.

(*Search After Truth* II-I.5.2, OCM I 223-4/LO 106)¹⁶

The imagination is hard-wired to deal with a certain range of standard situations that are likely to be relevant to all human beings no matter when and where they live. The imagination can also learn to cope with new situations. More specifically, the imagination can forge new associations to help an individual deal with the types of situations that commonly arise in

¹⁵Malebranche’s view that many of the imagination’s anticipatory associations are hard-wired distinguishes him from Hume, who seems to think that these types of connections must always be learned.

¹⁶Descartes also uses partridges as an example of habituation and training, though he discusses dogs being trained to retrieve partridges after they have been shot (*Passions* I.50, AT XI 370/CSM I 348).

their context – in the time and place they live, in their neighbourhood and their point in history – even if, from a broader perspective, these types of situations are not so common.

Imaginative learning occurs through repetition and built-up association. If multiple perceptions are imprinted together, reviving one perception will tend to revive the others. If someone hears a bell and receives a cookie, then the next time they hear a bell, they will tend to imagine a cookie. These connections are quick to form and slow to extinguish. The more repetitions, the stronger the connection or tendency. As Malebranche writes, “[t]he cause of this connection of many traces is the *identity* of the times at which they were imprinted in the brain. For it is enough that many traces were produced at the same time for them to all rise again together” (*Search After Truth* II-I.5.2, OCM I 223/LO 106). Here Malebranche refers to traces in the brain. But traces are type-type correlated with sensory and imaginative perceptions. Thus, if a group of brain traces tends “to all rise again together”, so too for the corresponding perceptions.¹⁷ The imagination takes past experiences into account.

The imagination’s ability to learn and build new associations is crucial to the preservation of the body, since many of the threats we encounter are local and historically contingent. A man with a gun can be as dangerous, if not more so, than a great height. But we must learn to recognize the man as a threat.¹⁸ We must learn to imagine the possibility of our death when we see a man with a gun. The imagination’s plasticity compensates for the senses’ inability to learn. No matter how many bad experiences someone has had with men with guns – how many shots fired, how much violence done – they will never *see* the man with the gun as dangerous, not in the way they see colours and shapes. They will never *see* the possibility of their own death. The imagination, in contrast, can wreath the present scene with the requisite images of death.

The imagination’s learning becomes even more powerful when combined with its tendency to associate perceptions based on resemblance. When the imagination confronts an unfamiliar object, it often confuses the unfamiliar object with a similar, more familiar one. We assimilate the new to the old:

For the animal spirits that were directed by the action of external objects, or even by orders of the soul, to produce certain traces in the brain often

¹⁷The body’s tendency to heal and revert to its natural state balances its tendency to build associations (*Search After Truth*, II-I.7.6, OCM I 250-1/LO 121). The hard-wired associations, in contrast, have “secret alliances with other parts of the body, for all the organs of our machine help maintain themselves in their natural state They cannot be completely erased” (*Search After Truth*, II-I.7.4, OCM I 250/LO 121).

¹⁸This process of learning will presumably be more complex than being conditioned to expect a cookie whenever we hear a bell. Someone might learn to associate the sight of a gun with a loud bang, which might then be associated with various forms of danger and harm. The key point, for Malebranche, is that the imagination makes these connections.

produce other things that truly resemble them in some things, but that are not quite the traces of these same objects; nor those the soul desired to be represented, because the animal spirits, finding some resistance in the parts of the brain when they should pass, and being easily detoured crowd into the deep traces of the ideas that are more familiar to us.

(*Search After Truth*, II-II.2, OCM I 275/LO 134-5)

We see a man in the moon, for example, because we are accustomed to looking at faces:

When those who are slightly near-sighted look at the moon, they ordinarily see two eyes, a nose, a mouth, in a word, they seem to see a face. However, there is nothing on the moon corresponding to what they think they see there. Many persons see something else there. . . . Now, the reason we normally see a face in the moon, and not the irregular blotches that are there, is that our brain traces of a face are very deep, because we often look at faces, and with much attention.

(*Search After Truth*, II-II.2, OCM I 275-6/LO 135)

When someone looks at the moon, their visual experience of the mottled silver disk triggers an imaginative perception of something *like* the moon: a face. This imaginative perception layers on top of the original visual experience. This imaginative perception then triggers *other* associations, such as the likely outcomes of encountering something (or someone) with a face.

In the *Search After Truth*, Malebranche emphasizes the dangers of this associative tendency. He argues that “this is the most ordinary cause of the confusion and falsity of our ideas” (*Search After Truth* II-II.2, OCM I 275/LO 134), and he bemoans the way “the mind judges things in relation to its first thoughts” (*Search After Truth* II-II.2, OCM I 278/LO 136). When we imagine that the moon has a face, we are likely to anthropomorphize and regard the moon as a human agent. We might jump to the conclusion that the moon is stalking us because it watches us all night long. Assimilating the new to the familiar is often helpful, however. It is often useful to treat the next apple like the apples we have previously encountered. Despite Malebranche’s pessimism, this principle of association helpfully extends the imagination’s capacity for associative learning. Once someone has learned that *this man with a gun* is dangerous, they can recognize that other men are dangerous too. Generalizations of this form help us survive even with the occasional false positive.¹⁹

¹⁹Malebranche’s confidence that nature is uniform and regular – grounded in the uniformity and regularity of God’s will – suggests that the imagination’s tendency to treat similar things similarly will be generally reliable (*Treatise on Nature and Grace* I.43, OCM V 49). Still, we might hope for more guidance about when exactly we can trust the imagination’s tendency to associate similar things and treat them similarly. Clearly this is a mistake in the case of the man in the moon. Malebranche hints that further investigation can help us decide whether apparently similar things really are similar. Thus, he writes that “those who believe the moon is really as it appears to them [i.e., as having a face] will be easily corrected if they look at it through a telescope, no matter how small, or if they consult the descriptions of Hevelius, Riccioli, and others have given to the public” (*Search After Truth* II-II.2, OCM I 276/LO 135; see also II-II.8.4, OCM I 318/LO 159).

Malebranche holds that true generality is the province of the Divine intellect or reason. When we think of a circle in general, we think of the infinity of possible circles to which this thought applies by accessing God's archetype of a circle. "The idea of a circle in general or the essence of a circle", Malebranche writes, "represents or applies to an infinite number of circles" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* II.4, OCM XII 53/JS 22).²⁰ The imagination's tendency to associate perceptions based on resemblance underwrites a form of generality-lite by extending the results of associative learning to new cases, even if Malebranche himself would not classify this as true generality.

6. The apparent causes of pleasure and pain

Finally, the imagination contributes to survival by representing – or, rather, by misrepresenting – that objects *will* cause pleasure and pain. Here again the imagination compensates for the limitations of the senses. The senses cannot represent that an apple *will* taste delicious when we bite into it. We cannot see into the future no matter how much practice we get. More specifically, the senses cannot represent the apple as something that *will cause* pleasure, or a fire as something that *will cause* pain. For ease of exposition, I will sometimes say that the senses cannot represent things as causes of pleasure and pain. But this expression is meant to be elliptical for the future-looking claim that the senses cannot represent that things *will* cause pleasure and pain.²¹ (And similarly for the parallel claims about the imagination.)

Again, the senses' inability to misrepresent material things as future causes of pleasure and pain may seem like a point in the senses' favour, rather than a limitation. Malebranche holds, however, that the mind naturally has intense emotional reactions to the apparent causes of pleasure and pain. The mind is drawn to the apparent causes of pleasure and repelled by those of 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*" (*Elucidation* XIV, OCM III 198/LO 653). Because the senses cannot misrepresent objects as the causes of pleasure and pain – or, more precisely, that objects *will* cause pleasure and pain – the senses cannot elicit these emotional reactions. This sensory limitation is especially clear in the case of desire, given the

²⁰See Radner (*Malebranche*, 50, 54; "Malebranche and Individuation", 60).

²¹As mentioned above, I disagree with most commentators about whether the senses can represent causation for Malebranche. Proponents of the traditional reading, such as Nadler ("Malebranche on Causation") and Kail ("Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche"), argue that the senses cannot represent causation in any shape or form. I oppose the traditional reading by arguing that the senses are hard-wired to produce rudimentary representations of cause and effect, at least when we bump up against objects (Chamberlain, "Most Dangerous Error"). I agree, however, that the senses cannot represent future things and, hence, that they cannot represent that material things *will* cause pleasure and pain.

forward-looking character of this passion. As Malebranche writes, “the idea of a good **we do not possess but hope to possess**, i.e. that we judge ourselves **capable** of possessing, produces a love of desire [*un amour de desir*]”, and “[t]he pain **we do not suffer but fear to suffer** produces an aversion of desire [*une aversion de desir*] whose object is the nonbeing of that pain” (*Search After Truth* V.9. OCM II 217/LO 391, OCM II 215/LO 292, emphasis added). Someone only feels attractive or aversive desire when they *anticipate* pleasure or pain. Thus, desire’s orientation towards the future implies that the senses on their own, locked as they are into the present, *cannot* elicit this passion.

For example, when someone is looking at an apple, they cannot see that it *will* cause them pleasure when they bite into it. The visual appearance of the apple does not reveal the promise of pleasure. For Malebranche, therefore, the apple’s visual appearance cannot elicit desire. Merely seeing the apple is emotionally neutral: it does not motivate the agent to approach. For the agent to desire the apple, they require a forward-looking representation of the pleasure the apple will bring. Desiring the apple and being motivated to seek it out requires that the agent (mis)represent that the apple *will* cause them pleasure. This is precisely what the senses cannot do.²² Fortunately for the body, though perhaps unfortunately for the mind, the imagination compensates for this limitation of the senses.

Once we strongly associate two things – such as guns and death, or the sight of an apple and a pleasurable taste – we imagine a causal connection between them. We imagine that a gun *will* cause death, and that an apple *will* cause pleasure. As Malebranche writes:

Men never fail to judge that a thing is the cause of a given effect when the two are conjoined, given that the true cause of the effect is unknown to them. This is why everyone concludes that a moving ball which strikes another is the true and principal cause of the motion it communicates to the other, and that the soul’s will is the true and principal cause of movement in the arms, and other such prejudices—because it always happens that a ball moves when struck by another, that our arms move almost every time we want them to, and that we do not sensibly perceive what else could be the cause of these movements.

(*Search After Truth* III-II.3, OCM I 426/LO 224; see also IV.10.2, OCM II 82-3/LO 310; *Christian Meditations* VI.5, OCM X 59)

Although Malebranche does not name the imagination in this passage, his reference to constant conjunction and repetition (“it always happens”)

²²My anti-Humean reading does not help with this problem (Chamberlain, “Most Dangerous Error”). The most plausible version of my view, I think, says that when someone *currently* experiences pleasure or pain, in that moment their sensory experience can misrepresent a material thing as causing the pleasure or pain they currently feel. But the senses, even on my reading, cannot *anticipate* pleasure and pain in the way desire requires.

suggests that the imagination's associative tendencies are at play. Once we have seen enough apples and learned that we will experience pleasure when we eat them, we will build up a strong association between the visual appearance of the apple and the expected pleasure. In this passage, Malebranche suggests that if the association is tight enough, the imagination will take an extra step by transforming the anticipation into a representation of causal connection. This person will imagine not merely that eating the apple will be *accompanied* by pleasure: they will imagine that the apple will *cause* them pleasure. The imagination substitutes causation for constant conjunction.

This allows the imagination to compensate for the senses' inability to represent the causes of pleasure and pain. The imagination can represent that an apple *will* cause pleasure, or that a fire *will* cause pain. As a result, the imagination can elicit a person's emotional reactions more effectively than the senses on their own. Once someone has had enough experiences with apples, their imagination will supplement the emotionally neutral visual appearance with the forward-looking representation that the apple *will* cause them pleasure if they eat it. They will imagine the apple causing them pleasure. This imaginative representation of causality stirs up the person's desires and motivates them to approach and eat the apple. The imagination makes the apple seem desirable. As Malebranche writes:

We are inwardly convinced that pleasure is good, and this inner conviction is not false, for pleasure is indeed good. We are naturally convinced that pleasure is the mark of good, and this natural conviction is certainly true, for whatever causes pleasure is certainly quite good and worthy of love. ... But because we judge that a thing is the cause of some effect when it always accompanies it, we imagine that sensible objects act in us, because at their approach we have new sensations, and because we do not see Him who truly causes them in us. We taste a fruit and at the same time we sense sweetness; then we attribute this sweetness to the fruit; we judge that it causes it; and even that it contains it. ... pleasure seduces us and makes us love [sensible things] ...

(*Search After Truth* IV.10.2, OCM II 82-4/LO 310-1; see also *Treatise on Morality* I.10.8, OCM XI 119/W 116)

By representing material things as the causes of pleasure and pain, the imagination hijacks the mind's emotional reactions and channels them towards the preservation of the body. The imagination makes objects seem loveable, desirable, hateful, and frightening: it imbues them with an emotional charge that the senses cannot provide on their own. Thus, the imagination mediates between the senses and passions to get an agent moving.

Still, we might worry that this system trades in more misrepresentation than strictly necessary. Someone might object, for example, that the imagination could imbue material things with the requisite emotional change

without misrepresenting them as the true causes of pleasure and pain. Perhaps the imagination could simply represent an apple as desirable and a blazing fire as frightening, without grounding the representations of emotional salience in more basic representations of any kind, let alone misrepresentations of causes.

This objection is especially pressing given the seriousness of the imaginative misrepresentation at play. Malebranche's occasionalism implies that imaginative experiences of causation are illusory or false. God is the only *true cause*; material things are at best *occasions* for the exercise of God's efficacy. Imagining that an apple has the power to cause us pleasure is a much more serious error, however, than seeing the apple as red. Causal power is a mark of divinity. When we imagine that material things are causes of pleasure and pain, we are imagining them as little gods with the power to reward and punish us. As Malebranche writes:

If we next consider attentively our idea of cause or of the power to act, we cannot doubt that this idea represents something divine. For the idea of a sovereign power is the idea of sovereign divinity, and the idea of a subordinate power is the idea of a lower divinity, but a genuine one, at least according to the pagans, assuming that it is the idea of a genuine power or cause. We therefore admit something divine in all the bodies around us when we posit forms, faculties, qualities, virtues, or real beings capable of producing certain effects through the force of their nature; and thus we insensibly adopt the opinion of the pagans because of our respect for their philosophy. It is true that faith corrects us; but perhaps it can be said in this connection that if the heart is Christian, the mind is pagan.

(*Search After Truth* VI-II.3, OCM II 309-10/LO 446; see also *Christian Meditations* VI.1, OCM X 57)

The objection, then, is that God has baked a tendency towards paganism into the imagination without any good reason. The imagination could just as well represent material things as loveable, desirable, and frightening without misrepresenting them as little gods.

To reply to this objection, Malebranche needs to show that the imagination could not elicit desire, love, hate, and fear without misrepresenting material things as the causes of pleasure and pain. I think Malebranche can meet this challenge. But it requires that we ascend from philosophy to theology. The will, for Malebranche, is love for the good in general or an infinite good, which is God (*Search After Truth* IV.1.3, OCM II 12/LO 267). This love of the good in general is the source of all the dynamism within the mind, of all the mind's attractions and aversions to things (*Elucidation* I, OCM III 18/LO 547-8). Desire, love, hate, and fear are expressions of this love for God and, derivatively, of God-like things (*Treatise on Morality* I-I.3.9, OCM XI 42/W 62; see also *Search After Truth* V.9, OCM II 215/LO 391). Hence, a material thing – like an apple – can engage the mind's emotions only if the apple bears a resemblance to the only thing the mind really cares about: God.

And that is just to say that the imagination can only channel the mind's emotional reactions – desire, love, fear, and hate – towards material things by misrepresenting these things as somehow divine. The imagination forges the requisite resemblance by misrepresenting material things as causes of pleasure and pain. In short: if material things did not seem like little gods, they would not move us.

7. Conclusion

The imagination, for Malebranche, is one of the great guides to the preservation of life. Along with the senses and passions, the imagination is necessary for the preservation of the body and the satisfaction of its needs. First, whereas the senses are trapped in the here and now, the imagination allows us to anticipate what is coming. We can imagine possible and future things. Second, whereas the senses do not learn from their mistakes, the imagination brings the past to bear on the present and makes it useful. Through a process of conditioning, the imagination forges new associations to deal with the challenges and opportunities we confront in the times and places we live. Third, the imagination imbues material things with emotional significance by casting them as true or genuine causes. The imagination gilds material things with divinity to interest a mind that only really cares about God in the material things, on which its life depends. Together, these features help explain why Malebranche holds that the imagination is necessary for the preservation of life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgements

For helpful questions and comments, I would like to thank audiences at Queen's University, University of Florida, and University College London. I would especially like to thank Tim Button, Stewart Duncan, Lyndal Grant, David Grant, Sean Greenberg, Elliot Paul, and Tom Stern for their help. I would also like to thank three anonymous reviewers at the *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* for their comments.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- AT: Descartes, René. *Œuvres Complètes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. 10 vols. Paris: Vrin, 1996.
- CSM: Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated and edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–5.

- JS: Malebranche, Nicolas. *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*. Translated and edited by Nicholas Jolley and David Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- LO: Malebranche, Nicolas. *The Search After Truth*. Translated and edited by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- OCM: Malebranche, Nicolas. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Edited by André Robinet. Paris: J. Vrin, 1958–84.
- W: Malebranche, Nicolas. *Treatise on Ethics*. Translated and edited by Craig Walton. Dordrecht: Springer, 1993.

Secondary Sources

- Adams, Robert. “Malebranche’s Causal Concepts”. In *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature: Historical Perspectives*, edited by Eric Watkins, 67–104. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Antoine-Mahut, Delphine. “Sommes-nous tous des lycanthropes? Imagination, folie, et vision en dieu dans *De la recherche de la vérité* de Malebranche”. [Are we All Werewolves? Imagination, Madness, and Vision in God in Malebranche’s *Search After Truth*.] *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 71, no. 4 (2016): 677–92. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24875791>.
- Antoine-Mahut, Delphine. “Malebranche on Imagination”. In *The Oxford Handbook to Malebranche*, edited by Colin Chamberlain, Eric Stencil, and Julie Walsh. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.
- Broad, Jacqueline. “Impressions in the Brain: Malebranche on Women, and Women on Malebranche”. *Intellectual History Review* 22, no. 3 (2012): 373–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2012.695187>.
- Carbone, Raffaele, and Koen Vermeir. “Malebranche et les pouvoirs de l’imagination”. [Malebranche the Powers of the Imagination.] *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 67, no. 4 (2012): 661–9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44025736>.
- Chamberlain, Colin. “Our Body is the Measure: Malebranche and the Body-Relativity of Sensory Perception”. *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 9 (2020a): 37–73.
- Chamberlain, Colin. “‘Let Us Imagine that God has Made a Miniature Earth and Sky’: Malebranche on the Body-Relativity of Visual Size”. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 2 (2020): 206–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2019.44>.
- Chamberlain, Colin. “The Most Dangerous Error: Malebranche on the Experience of Causation”. *Philosophers’ Imprint* 21, no. 10 (2021): 1–23. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0021.010>
- Church, Ralph Withington. “Malebranche and Hume”. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 1, no. 1 (1938): 143–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23932642>.
- Freddoso, Alfred. “Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature”. In *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, edited by Thomas V. Morris, 74–118. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501746123-004>
- Greenberg, Sean. “Malebranche on the Passions: Biology, Morality and the Fall”. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2010): 191–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608781003643527>.
- Guéroult, Martial. *Les cinq abîmes de la providence: La nature et la grâce* [The five abysses of providence: nature and grace]. Vol. 3 of *Malebranche*. Paris: Aubier, 1959.

- Hamerton, Katharine. "Fashion on the Brain: The Visible and Invisible Bonds of the Imagination in Malebranche". *French Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2022): 415–49. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-9746587>
- Hatfield, Gary. "The *Passions of the Soul* and Descartes's Machine Psychology". *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 38, no. 1 (2007): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2006.12.015>.
- Hoffman, Paul. "Three Dualist Theories of the Passions". *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1 (1991): 153–200. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43154093>.
- Hume, David. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- James, Susan. *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- James, Susan. "Grandeur and the Mechanical Philosophy". In *Humanism and Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Jill Kraye, and Martin Stone, 172–92. Milton Park: Routledge, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203016077>
- James, Susan. "Sympathy and Comparison: Two Principles of Human Nature". In *Impressions of Hume*, edited by Marina Frasca-Spada, and Peter Kail, 107–24. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199256525.003.0006>
- Kail, Peter. "On Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche: Causation and Self". *European Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2008): 55–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2007.00254.x>.
- Lennon, Thomas. "The Contagious Communication of Strong Imaginations: History, Modernity and Scepticism in the Philosophy of Malebranche". In *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension Between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, edited by Tom Sorell, 197–211. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- McCracken, Charles. *Malebranche and British Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- McIntyre, Alison, and Julie Walsh. "Self-Love or Diffidence? Malebranche and Hume on the Love of Fame". *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2022): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.25894/jmp.2075>.
- Moriarty, Michael. *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Nadler, Steven. "Malebranche on Causation". In *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, edited by Steven Nadler, 112–38. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Peppers-Bates, Susan. *Nicolas Malebranche: Freedom in an Occasionalist World*. London: Continuum, 2009.
- Radner, Daisie. *Malebranche: A Study of a Cartesian System*. Van Gorcum, 1978.
- Radner, Daisie. "Malebranche and the Individuation of Perceptual Objects". In *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Kenneth Barber, and Jorge Gracia, 59–72. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Rodis-Lewis, Geneviève. *Nicolas Malebranche*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963.
- Shapiro, Lisa. "Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* and the Union of Mind and Body". *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 85, no. 3 (2003): 211–48. <https://doi.org/10.1515/agph.2003.012>.
- Simmons, Alison. "Spatial Perception from a Cartesian Point of View". *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2003): 395–423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43154420>.

- Simmons, Alison. "Guarding the Body: A Cartesian Phenomenology of Perception". In *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor Vere Chappell*, edited by Paul Hoffman, and Gideon Yaffe, 81–113. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2008.
- Sleigh, Robert. "Leibniz on Malebranche on Causality". In *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy: Essays Presented to Jonathan Bennett*, edited by J. A. Cover, and Mark Kulstad, 161–94. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990.
- Sutton, John. *Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.