

After the Fall: Malebranche on the Law of the Body

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1. Introduction

In Malebranche's retelling: the Fall changes our relationship to our bodies from *union* to *dependence*.

- This change is supposed to be obvious (“needs no proof”), and the key to our experience of being fragmented, divided selves. But it is *not* so clear what this change amounts to.

My question: what is the nature of the mind’s postlapsarian *dependence* on the body?

My answer: the Fall changes the way we experience the body’s needs, such that we experience ourselves as being *obliged* to meet them. The senses, before *and* after, offer the mind much needed guidance about what to do for the preservation of the body (eat this, not that, etc.). *After* the Fall, we experience the senses’ guidance as having the force of *law* or *obligation* for us.

2. Senses of Dependence

The change from union to dependence involves:

1. *Loss of Control*: the mind’s loss of control over its brain and, hence, its sensations.
(Uncontroversial, widely recognized by commentators)
2. *Normative Reversal*: a reversal of the *normative relations*—*viz.* the relations of ruler and subject, command and obedience—between mind and body. (?? Surely metaphorical somehow ??)
 - a. Before: the mind was the master/ruler, the body the servant/subject
 - b. After: the body is the master/ruler, the mind its servant/subject
3. *Faculty Reconfiguration*: the mind’s dependence on the body alters normative dynamics that play out *within* the mind and between its various faculties. Specifically, the senses and passions work together to *rule*, *dominate*, or *enslave* the mind on the body’s behalf. (My view)

We *might* take the (2) *Normative Reversal* passages as simply metaphorical restatements of (1) *Loss of Control*. I think we should read them as also expressing (3) *Faculty Reconfiguration*.

- *The Body’s Representatives*: the senses and passions “speak for” the body within the mind.
- *Specification*: Malebranche glosses the change in the mind’s relationship to the body *in terms of* the tyranny of the senses and passions.

3. Descartes on Judgment

- Judgment = perception (understanding) with assent (will)
- Clarity = the (phenomenal) quality of a perception that makes it persuasive or inclines the will to assent, by making its content seem *more plausible*, *more true-seeming*
- Clarity and Distinctness = the highest degree of clarity, at which point a perception seems *obviously true*, *maximally persuasive* (see Elliot Paul (2018, 2020) for more detail!)

CDP that $p \rightarrow$ maximal persuasion (?) \rightarrow will’s assent \rightarrow judgment that p

Is the *maximal persuasion* of a CDP *normative*, *psychological*, or *both*? Commentators disagree!

4. Malebranche on Judgment

Normative: Malebranche is much more explicit than Descartes that CDPs (=clear and distinct perceptions) *obligate* the will’s consent (=assent). Synonyms: evident perceptions, clear perceptions

If someone has a CDP that $1+1=2$, their will is moved to consent on two fronts:

1. *Pull*: the CDP entices the will by making its content seem obvious, evident, true.
2. *Push*: the CDP is enforced by the reproaches of reason that make it painful to withhold consent.

Why does Malebranche think he needs the *reproaches of reason*? Because an obligation requires *teeth*.

Three views about what makes a directive (e.g., consent to this CDP!) a *law/obligation/command*:

1. *Authority*: because the directive is issued by an appropriate *authority*, e.g., by reason, the boss
2. *Power*: because the directive is enforced by sanctions, violation is punished; e.g., by the bully
3. *Hybrid*: because the directive is (a) issued by an appropriate authority, *and* (b) enforced by sanctions

Commentators (Lennon, Watson, Schmaltz) have tended to assume that Malebranche accepts an *Authority* view, according to which CDPs derive their authority solely because of their source in Reason.

But (I claim) he accepts a *Hybrid* view: CDPs *oblige* the will to consent *partly* because of (a) their source in Reason, and *partly* because (b) their violation is punished by the reproaches of reason.

5. Passions and the Law of the Body

My proposal: after the Fall, sensory perceptions *feel* like they have the force of law/obligation, because they exhibit a similar psychological architecture as CDPs (which really *do* have the force of law).

When I bite into a piece of fruit—a peach, say—my senses tell me that *I should eat the fruit*. Following this directive requires consent. Again, the will is moved to consent on two fronts:

1. *Pull*: this sensory perception has some degree of plausibility or clarity: it makes eating the fruit seem like a good idea.
2. *Push*: this perception *demands* my consent because it is accompanied by painful and pleasurable feelings that *punish me* if I refuse consent and *reward me* if I go along with it. (sanctions, enforcement)

Malebranche traces these punishing and rewarding feelings to the passions:

Sensory perception → passion → feelings that *reward* consent and *punish* withholding → consent

These passionate feelings are importantly *like* the reproaches of reason:

1. They evaluate or assess the will's responses to perceptions.
2. They are often *indistinguishable* from the reproaches: indeed, Malebranche says these two sets of feelings are “of the same nature.”

But there are also important differences:

1. The passionate feelings apply different standards of assessment than the reproaches of reason: they encourage the will to consent to sensory perceptions that serve the body's interests, rather than the truth.
2. Their source is the body rather than reason.

6. Conclusion: Malebranche's Divided Mind

We experience ourselves as having two masters: reason and the body. These different masters institute competing systems of reward and punishment within our minds, oriented towards radically different ends. Pleasing one leads to punishment by the other.

Is the conflict *real* or *merely apparent*? I say (going out on a limb): it is *real*.

Passages for “After the Fall”

1. Introduction

- a. We are no longer as God made us, and the union of our soul with our body has changed to a relation of dependence, for since man disobeyed God it was right that his body ceased to be subject to him. (*Dialogues* IV.7, OC.xii.101-2/JS 64)
- b. Man is dependent upon the body to which he was merely joined and over which he had ruled before his sin. (*Elucidation* VIII.7, OC.iii.74/LO 581)
- c. Through pleasure and pain, through agreeable and disagreeable tastes, and by other sensations, the senses quickly advise the soul of what ought and ought not to be done for the preservation of life. (*Search* I.5, OC.i.76-7/LO 23)

2. Senses of Dependence

- d. When God created the first man, he united his soul to his body but he did not make it dependent. The soul was the master, and the body executed its orders, and asked for its needs respectfully . . . because of his rebellion, God subjected man to his body, the most vile and impotent of substances. . . And without changing the general laws, very wisely established, of the union of the soul and body, God deprives man of the power to command the body as master; and leaves to the body the power of involving man in its needs, and of mistreating him if it refuses them. It is through goodness that God leaves Adam his body. It is through justice that this body is in revolt, and that it is often a troublesome master. (*Prémotion*, OC.xvi.123-4)
- e. *To Depend*: to be under the authority, under the domination of someone. Subjects depend on kings, children on their fathers, servants depend on their masters, soldiers depend on their officers [*Dépendre: estre sous l'autorité, sous la domination de quelqu'un. Les sujets dependent des Roys. Les enfans de leurs peres. Les domestiques dependent de leurs maistres. Les soldats dependent de leurs Officiers.*]
- (1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*)
- f. after he had sinned, the pleasures that had served only to advise him respectfully, and the pains that, without disturbing his felicity served only to inform him that he might lose it and become unhappy, no longer had the same significance for him; they no longer obeyed his orders, and they enslaved him, as they do us, to sensible things. Thus, not the senses and passions themselves were generated by sin, but rather only their power of tyrannizing sinners... (*Search* I.5, OC.i.75/LO 22)
- g. “We know that before his sin man was not the slave but the absolute master of his passions and that with his will he could easily arrest the agitation of the spirits causing them. But I can hardly convince myself that the body of the first man did not urge his soul to look for things conducive to the preservation of his life” (*Search* V.1, OC.ii.130/LO 339)
- h. reflect on the combat you feel in yourself, of you against you, of the law of the mind against the law of your body; of you according to the interior man, against you according to the exterior and sensible man (*Christian Conversations* V, OC.iv.111)
- i. Original Sin, or the disorder of nature, therefore has no need of proof: for each of us is sufficiently aware of a law in himself that captures and disorders him, a law not established by God because it is contrary to the immutable order of justice, which is the inviolable rule for all His volitions. (*Elucidation* VIII.3, OCM III 72/LO 580)

3. Descartes on Judgment

4. Malebranche on Judgment

- j. complete consent should be given only to things that appear altogether clear, and from which we cannot withhold consent without realizing with complete certainty that we should misuse our freedom in not granting it (*Search* I.20.2, OC.i.187-8/LO 86, emphasis added)
- k. in philosophical matters, we must not believe anything till evidence [i.e. clarity] obliges us to do so [*nous y oblige*] (*Elucidation* VI, OC.iii.60/LO 572, emphasis added)

- l. “we should never give complete consent except to propositions which seem so evidently true that we cannot refuse it of them without feeling an inward pain and the secret reproaches of reason; that is, unless we clearly knew that ill use would be made of our freedom if consent were not willed” (*Search* I.2.4, OC.i.55/LO 10)
- m. “For Order, taken speculatively and only insofar as it contains the relations of perfection, enlightens the mind without striking it. But Order, when considered as the law of God, as the law of all minds, considered precisely insofar as it has the force of law . . . Order, I say, as principle and as necessary rule of all movements of the soul touches, penetrates and convinces the mind without illuminating it. Thus we see order by clear idea, but we know it also by sentiment5. . . . it is necessary that we be instructed by the short and certain means of sentiment when we follow or abandon the immutable Order.” (*Treatise on Morality* I.5.19, OCM XI 68/W 80-81, emphasis added)

5. Passions and the Law of the Body

- n. The passions are always accompanied by a certain feeling of sweetness [*sentiment de douceur*] which corrupts their judge, and keeps him happy if he favours them; but the passions treat him cruelly if he condemns them to death. What gift could be offered more agreeable or charming than pleasure, to creatures who invincibly will to be happy, if it is momentary pleasure which makes us momentarily happy? And what treatment is more rude than that which the passions give to the mind, when it wants to sacrifice them to the love of Order? (*Treatise on Morality* I.13.9, OCM XI 150/W 138)
- o. But we must note that the sin which introduced concupiscence often makes it difficult to discern Order by means of sentiment or instinct: because *the secret inspirations of the passions are of the same nature as this interior sentiment*. Thus, when we act against opinion and custom, we often feel inner reproaches that are similar enough to those of Reason and Order. Before sin the sentiment of interior reproach was not an equivocal sign: because there was only this sentiment that spoke to us as our master [*en maître*]. But since the sin the inspiration of the secret inspirations of the passions are not subject to our wills. Thus it is easy to confuse them with the inspirations of interior Truth, at least when the mind is not illuminated by some light. (*Treatise on Morality* I.5.20, OCM XI 68/W 81)

6. Conclusion: Malebranche's Divided Mind

- p. I am not more perfect than St. Paul. Sometimes I take pleasure in God's law according to the interior man, but I sense in my body another law that fights against the law of my mind. I suffer in the exercise of virtue: I taste pleasure in the enjoyment of sensible goods, despite all my resistance. And I am so much a slave to my body that I cannot even apply myself without pain and disgust to abstract things and which have no relation to the body. (*Christian Conversations* IV, OCM IV 88)
- q. it is an immutable law that inferior things serve superior ones (*Search* VI-II.3 , OC.ii.310/LO 446-7)
- r. Bodies are inferior to the mind [*les corps sont beaucoup au dessous de l'esprit*] (*Search* V.5, OC.ii.167/LO 363)
- s. As nature was first instituted, minds could not have been subordinated to bodies . . . Now, in the wisdom of God, minds are more perfect than bodies; and as a result of the necessary love that God has for Himself, He prefers the more perfect to the less perfect. Thus, minds could not have been subordinated to bodies *as nature was first instituted*. . . . It is true that the created mind is now subordinated to the body, but this is because order considered as a necessary law would have it so. This is because God, whose self-love is a necessary love and is always His inviolable law, cannot love minds that are opposed to Him; consequently, He cannot prefer them to bodies in which there is nothing that is evil or that He hates. (*Elucidation* X, OC.iii.141/LO 620, emphasis added)
- t. man, after he sinned, ought to have returned to nothingness. For since he was no longer in a state of order and could not return to that state, he ought to have ceased to be.... He should have returned, then, to nothingness (*Elucidation* VIII, OC.iii.99/LO 595)