

The Most Dangerous Error: Malebranche on the Experience of Causation

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OUR REASON SHOULD constantly recognize this invisible hand that fills us with goods, and is hidden from our minds under sensible appearances. (OC ii. 83–4/LO 311)

1. Introduction

Consider a perceiver watching a yellow billiard ball roll across a table. This yellow billiard ball collides with a red ball, which then starts to move. Does the perceiver see the yellow ball as *causing* the red ball to move or merely a *succession* of events? At stake here is whether sight – and the senses more generally – represent causal properties and relations. David Hume famously argues that we lack any sensory impression of causation. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume writes:

When we look about us toward external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the *outward* senses. ... The scenes of the universe are continually shifting, and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession; but the power or force, which actuates the whole machine, is entirely concealed from us, and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of body. (E 63–4)¹

We see that one thing happens after another, according to Hume, but not that there is any causal connection between events.

There is widespread scholarly consensus that Nicolas Malebranche anticipates Hume's position. Ralph Withington Church reads Malebranche as holding that "in our perception of one ball as it impinges

1. For an explanation of abbreviations, please see the works cited at the end of the paper.

on another, we discover nothing more than appears in sense-perception. And those appearances exhibit no real causation" (1938, 154). Beatrice Rome agrees that for Malebranche, "perception does indeed disclose no necessary connection and hence no true causes" and that "we do not perceive this efficacy sensuously" (1963, 234, 235). Charles McCracken concurs:

Malebranche thought, of course, that we must turn away from the senses if we are to have a clear idea of the properties of bodies; but he believed as firmly as Hume that the senses can show us no *powers* in bodies. ... Malebranche and Hume both thought that all that the senses show us when we take ourselves to perceive some causal transaction is that two objects, as Hume put it, "are *contiguous* in time and place, and that the object we call cause *precedes* the other we call effect." (1983, 258–9)

More recently, Steven Nadler has argued that, according to Malebranche, "experience, whether of a single or multiple instances, reveals only a sequence of events, what Hume more famously called 'succession' and 'constant conjunction.' It does *not* exhibit necessary relations between those events" (2000, 118). And Peter Kail holds that Malebranche and Hume "agree that no necessary connection is observable in the transaction of observable objects" (2008, 62; see also 68).² This reading suggests a tidy story about Malebranche's influence on Hume: namely, that Hume adopts Malebranche's view that we lack a sensory impression of causation and then works out the implications of this view in his own empiricist framework.

I think the scholarly consensus presents a distorted picture of Malebranche. I will try to show that, for Malebranche, the senses represent material things as causes. On my reading of Malebranche, we see the yellow billiard ball as *causing* the red ball to move.³ In the *Elucidations*

2. See also Doxsee (1916, 697), Hendel (1963, 56), Hankins (1967, 206), Buckle (2001, 191), and Pyle (2003, 118).

3. Thus, Malebranche anticipates views in the philosophy of perception

to the *Search after Truth*, for example, Malebranche writes that "it appears to the eyes" that "a ball that collides with another has the *force* to set it in motion" (OC iii. 207/LO 659, emphasis added). When I stub my toe or feel the heat of a fire, Malebranche argues that "my senses tell me that sensible objects act on me" (OC x. 47). Given his view that God is the only true cause, Malebranche insists that the sensory experience of causality is an illusion. God moves billiard balls around. And He is the cause of pleasure and pain. But this illusion is part of what makes the senses so dangerous. "The most dangerous error of the philosophy of the ancients" — that is, the attribution of causal powers to finite things — is not merely the product of bad philosophy (OC ii. 309/LO 447). This "most dangerous error" is woven into the fabric of sensory experience itself.

2. Malebranche on the Cognitive Structure of Sensory Experience

The target thesis for this paper is that sensory experience represents material things — like billiard balls — as if they were the *causes* of various effects. The terms "sensory experience," "represents," and "cause" each come with philosophical baggage and can be taken in various ways. In this section, I will clarify the thesis I am attributing to Malebranche by reviewing his account of the cognitive structure of sensory experience, paying special attention to the role of natural judgments. Along the way, I will explain how I am using each of the terms that figure in the target thesis.

(a) *Sensory Experience*

Consider, again, our perceiver looking at a yellow billiard ball as it rolls across a felt-covered table. Malebranche distinguishes four grades of sensory response, or, as he puts it, "four things we confuse in each sensation" (OC i. 129/LO 52). At the first and second grades, Malebranche offers a mechanistic account of the billiard ball's stimulation of the perceiver's visual system and the resulting motions in her nerves and

defended by Anscombe (1993) and Siegel (2009).

brain (OC i. 129/LO 52). At the third grade, a psycho-physiological law coordinates states of the principal part of the brain with sensory modifications of the perceiver's soul. Alterations in the brain give rise to "the *passion*, the sensation, or the perception of the soul" (OC i. 129–30/LO 52). As I use the term, *sensations* are the immediate conscious effects that occur in the perceiver's soul. Visual sensations make the perceiver aware of a shifting two-dimensional pattern of color and light, whose spatial articulation corresponds to the retinal image (OC i. 158/LO 68). When the perceiver looks at the billiard ball as it rolls across the green felt, for example, she undergoes various sensations that make her aware of a circular patch of yellow gliding through a field of green.

Third-grade sensations do not fully account for the richness of visual experience. We see a world of three-dimensional objects with more or less constant shapes and sizes rather than a two-dimensional kaleidoscope of colored patches. When the billiard ball rolls across the table, it visually appears to the perceiver as a shiny voluminous yellow sphere spinning across a fuzzy green surface that it partially occludes. At the fourth and final grade of sensory response, Malebranche introduces *natural judgments*, which "occur in us, without us, and even in spite of us," to explain the ways in which visual experience outstrips the impoverished awareness afforded by sensations alone (OC i. 119/LO 46). For Malebranche, visual experience is a complex mental state, made up of third-grade sensations *and* fourth-grade natural judgments, which jointly explain the way things visually appear to the perceiver. I use the terms "sensory experience," "sensory perception," and related expressions such as "visual experience" to refer to the overall conscious result of combining sensations and natural judgments.⁴ Similarly, when I talk about "what the senses represent," I am referring to what sensory experience represents.

Sensory experience — that is, the combination of sensation and natural judgment — is "almost always followed by another, free judgment

4. Here I follow the terminological conventions established by Simmons (2003a, 2003b, 2008).

that the soul makes so habitually that it is almost unable to avoid it" (OC i. 130/LO 52; see also OC xii. 93–4 and OCM xv. 15, 17). A *free judgment* is a belief that typically accompanies the four grades of sensory response. Malebranche analyzes free judgment in terms of the will's consent, by which the perceiver endorses her sensory experience as true (OC i. 156/LO 68). If the perceiver takes her sensory experience at face value, she will come to believe — that is, freely judge — that there really is a yellow billiard ball in front of her.

Whereas free judgments are downstream from sensory experience, natural judgments *partially constitute* sensory experience. Natural judgments help construct the way things sensorily appear to the perceiver.⁵ As Émile Bréhier (1938) helpfully points out, Malebranche distinguishes at least two broad classes of natural judgments. First, some natural judgments determine the spatial properties — like size, shape, position, etc. — objects sensorily appear to have. These judgments contribute a third dimension to visual experience, which would otherwise present a two-dimensional array of color and light. The addition of depth helps explain the phenomenon of size-constancy (OC i. 109–20/LO 41–7). These judgments explain, for example, why the sides of a cube look equal in size despite projecting unequal images on the retina (OC i. 96–7/LO 34; OC i. 158–9/LO 68–9). When a man walks towards me, such that he looms larger in my visual field, natural judgments explain why I see him as getting closer, not as ballooning in size (OC i. 97/LO 34; OC xv. 15; OC xvii–1. 264–5).⁶ Second, natural judgments are responsible for the fact that sensuous or sensible qualities — like color, smell, taste, sound, etc. — appear to be "in" objects (OC iii. 55–6/LO 569; see also OC xii. 100/JS 63). When I look at the billiard ball, I do not merely enjoy a free-floating sensation of yellow. *The ball* looks like it is yellow. Natural judgments explain this aspect of the way things sensorily appear as well (OC i. 133/LO 55; see also OC i. 166/LO 73

5. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer at *Philosophers' Imprint* for pressing me to clarify this point.

6. For more detailed discussion of Malebranche's account of spatial perception than is possible here, see Smith (1905) and Simmons (2003b).

and OC i. 138/LO 58).⁷ In these examples, Malebranche explains the fact that a perceiver has a visual experience that such and such is the case — for example, that the sides of a cube are equal or that snow is white — in virtue of a natural judgment with this very content. This suggests that if a perceiver naturally judges that *p*, she will thereby have a sensory experience that *p*. In other words, it will sensorily appear to her that *p*. Natural judgments *inject* their contents into the way things sensorily appear to the perceiver.

My central proposal is that Malebranche recognizes a third class of natural judgments that represent objects as causes. When a perceiver sees a yellow billiard ball collide with a red one, she forms a natural judgment that the yellow ball *causes* the red ball to move. As a result of this natural judgment, she thereby has a sensory experience of the yellow ball causing the red ball to move. The sensory world constructed by natural judgments is, on my reading, a world of causes and effects.

Malebranche is clearer about the *role* natural judgments play in helping construct sensory experience than he is about the *kind* of mental state natural judgments are supposed to be. Malebranche's insistence on the sensory character of natural judgments underscores that these mental states partially constitute sensory experience and contribute their contents to the appearances (OC i. 97/LO 34; OC i. 130/LO 52; OC i. 158/LO 69; OC i. 119–20/LO 46–7; OC xv. 17).⁸ But we already knew that. Malebranche also characterizes natural judgments negatively by distinguishing them from free judgments, that is, judgments “properly speaking” (OC i. 97/LO 34). As I mentioned above, a free judgment is a belief. Malebranche, then, is saying that natural judgments are not beliefs. A perceiver need not take a natural judgment to be true, whereas a perceiver's free judgment is her taking something to be true. When a perceiver has a natural judgment to the

effect that there is a yellow billiard ball in front of her, for example, she will thereby have a visual experience of a yellow billiard ball, but she need not take this experience to be true. This is part of what Malebranche is getting at with his refrain that natural judgments “occur in us, without us, and even in spite of us” (OC i. 119–20/LO 46, emphasis added). Seeing is *not* believing.

Once we have severed the connection between natural judgments and taking something to be true, we might wonder why Malebranche characterizes these mental states as judgments at all.⁹ The answer to this question is that Malebranche distinguishes two kinds of judgments, corresponding to the two basic faculties of the mind: understanding and will.¹⁰ Although judgment “properly speaking” — that is, free judgment, or taking something to be true — is an act of will, Malebranche also recognizes a kind of judgment that belongs to the understanding alone. The defining feature of this latter kind of judgment is having propositional content. Whereas a “simple perception” is the perception of “a single thing without any relation to anything else whatsoever,” Malebranche holds that a “*judgment* on the part of the understanding is only *the perception of the relation found between two or more things*,” such as the relation between objects or an object and its properties (OC i. 50/LO 7). A simple perception — say, of the number four — lacks the complexity to be true or false. Merely thinking of the number four is not yet to entertain a proposition. In contrast, a judgment on the part of the understanding — say, that two times two *equals* four — can be evaluated as true or false and, hence, has propositional content. Indeed, Malebranche defines truth as “the relation between two or more things” (OC i. 52/LO 9). The propositional content characteristic of these judgments is formed prior to any exercise of the

7. For more discussion of Malebranche's account of sensible quality perception, see Simmons (2008).

8. Bréhier (1938) is helpful on this point. See also Merleau-Ponty (1968, ch. 4), Alquié (1974, 168–9, 178n1), Atherton (1990, 37), Nolan (2012, 38–45), and Ott (2017, chs. 8, 9).

9. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer at *Philosophers' Imprint* for pressing me to clarify this point. Bréhier (1938) provides an illuminating discussion of “the sense one must give to the word judgment” in this context (145; see also 149). See also Nolan (2012, 39) and Ott (2017, 184) for discussion of Malebranche on this point and Marušić (2017) for helpful background.

10. Malebranche arguably inherits this dual sense of judgment from Descartes. See Simmons (2003a, 553–4, 563–7; 2008, 85–6).

will and does not imply any endorsement on the part of its subject. One might consider the proposition that narwhals exist, for example, without yet endorsing this claim.¹¹

In referring to this compositional operation—namely, forming a mental state with propositional content—as a judgment, Malebranche tears apart the two strands of what Jennifer Smalligan Marušić (2017) calls the Traditional Aristotelian Theory of judgment.¹² According to the Aristotelian Theory, a judgment is a mental state (a) with propositional content, such that this complex content is formed (b) through an act of affirmation or denial. Judgments on the part of the understanding are judgment-like in having propositional content, while judgments on the part of the will are judgment-like in being free acts of affirmation or denial. This departure is a feature rather than a bug. As Peter Geach (1980, 51) points out, we can entertain a proposition—such as in the antecedent of a conditional or when we wonder whether narwhals exist—without affirming this content. Malebranche’s notion of a “judgment on the part of the understanding” captures this insight.

Natural judgments, then, are judgments on the part of the understanding. They represent the relations between two or more things and, hence, are truth-apt or have propositional content.¹³ The visual experience of a yellow billiard ball, for instance, is grounded in a natural judgment with at least four terms: that there is *an object* that is *spherical* and *yellow* located *some distance in front of her*. Malebranche alludes to this complexity when he describes natural judgments as compound sensations. “Natural judgment,” Malebranche writes, “is but a compound sensation *that consequently can sometimes be mistaken*” (OC i. 97/LO 34, emphasis added). If natural judgments “can sometimes be

11. This example is dedicated to Ben Hall, once a narwhal skeptic.

12. See also Simmons (2003a, 566).

13. See Nolan (2012, 39–40). Ott (2017, 189) raises doubts about the coherence of Malebranche’s conception of natural judgments and whether natural judgments can have propositional content independently of the mind’s volitional activity. I am inclined to agree with Nolan that Malebranche’s attribution of propositional content to some sensory states isn’t *especially* problematic.

mistaken,” then, *a fortiori*, they can be evaluated as true or false.¹⁴ Thus, Malebranche classifies natural judgments as *judgments* because they have propositional content.

Up to this point, I have used the terms “sensory experience” and “sensory perception” more or less interchangeably to refer to the compound mental state made up of sensations and natural judgments. A word about Malebranche’s use of *perception* will be useful here. Whereas present-day philosophers sometimes assume that perceiving that *p* implies that *p*, Malebranche rejects this assumption. For Malebranche, perception is not factive. Perception does not imply success. Someone might sensorily perceive that grass is green even though it isn’t. Any representational mental state that makes content available to the mind counts as a perception for Malebranche, regardless of its accuracy or truth.

This terminological point suggests an objection to my characterization of the interpretive debate sketched above in the introduction. If present-day philosophers sometimes use “perceive,” “see,” “reveal,” “observe,” and so forth as success terms, perhaps present-day interpreters should be read in the same way. When Nadler says that experience “reveals only a sequence of events,” maybe he’s saying that for Malebranche, experience does not *successfully* reveal anything more than the sequence. Nadler’s reading would then be consistent with mine (2000, 118). And similarly for McCracken’s claims about what the senses “show” us (1983, 258–9).

This construal trivializes my opponents’ readings. If Nadler and McCracken are just saying that the senses fail to *successfully* reveal any true causation, then they would not be saying anything interesting or surprising. Malebranche is an occasionalist. He denies that there are any true causes in the sequence, and so there is nothing for the senses to *successfully* reveal (besides God, that is). Presumably Nadler and

14. In the next sentence, Malebranche offers an alternative explanation for why he calls natural judgments “compound sensations”: namely, because a natural judgment “depends on two or more impressions occurring in the eye at the same time” (OC i. 97/LO 34). Malebranche is here referring to the process that determines the contents of natural judgments, which I discuss below.

McCracken are not making that trivial claim. I think they are saying something false but not something boring!

(b) Representation

My central claim in this paper is about what sensory experience *represents* for Malebranche: namely, causation. The topic of sensory representation in Malebranche is fraught. Commentators disagree about whether third-grade sensations — like a sensation of red — are intentional and/or representational for Malebranche. Some commentators argue that Malebranchean sensations are non-intentional mental states,¹⁵ whereas others argue that sensations have a primitive form of intentionality.¹⁶ The debate about whether third-grade *sensations* are intentional is orthogonal, however, to whether *sensory experiences* or *perceptions* — that is, the conscious result of combining sensations and natural judgments — are representational. Sensations and sensory experiences are different kinds of mental states, with correspondingly different properties. Premises about whether sensations are intentional and/or representational do not straightforwardly imply conclusions about whether sensory experiences are intentional and/or representational.

Moreover, as I use these terms, intentionality and representation are different features of mental states.¹⁷ A mental state is *intentional* just in case it is directed towards any kind of object whatsoever, such as a physical object, a soul, a mental state, an abstract object, a state of affairs, or whatever. The mere claim that a mental state is intentional in this sense is not yet to say that this state is truth-apt, has propositional content, or has satisfaction conditions. In contrast, a mental state is *representational* just in case it is truth-apt, has propositional content, or,

15. See, for example, Nadler (1992, 199), Jolley (1995, 131), and Schmalz (1996, 99, 107–8).

16. See, for example, Radner (1978), Reid (2003, 584), Simmons (2009), and Ott (2017, ch. 7).

17. I follow Simmons (2009) in teasing these notions apart and in her gloss on intentionality.

more generally, has satisfaction conditions. That is, a mental state is representational just in case there is some way the world must be for the mental state to be true, accurate, or satisfied. A belief that a mug is on the table is representational because this belief takes a stand on what the world is like — there is a mug on the table! — and, hence, is assessable for truth.

Whatever he might think about the intentionality of sensations, Malebranche clearly holds that sensory experience — that is, the combination of third-grade sensations and natural judgments — is intentional and indeed representational. He uses unmistakably representational language when he talks about the senses. He refers to the “testimony” or “reports” of the senses (OC xii. 30/JS 4). He claims that the senses “speak” (OC i. 16/LO xxxvii; OC x. 113), “represent” (OC i. 177–8/LO 79–80), “inform us” (OC i. 92/LO 32), and are “witnesses” (OC xi. 133; OC xii. 100/JS 62). Moreover, his doctrine of natural judgment implies that sensory experience is representational. As we saw above, natural judgments inject their contents into sensory experience. But natural judgments have propositional content. That’s precisely what makes them judgment-like. So natural judgments inject sensory experiences with propositional content, which suffices for being representational.

Furthermore, sensory experience’s role in our cognitive economy requires that these experiences have representational content. Malebranche holds that sensory experience — that is, the conscious result of combining sensations and natural judgments — makes proposals about what the world is like to the subject’s point of view. Someone’s experience might present a picture of the world in which grass is green and rubies are red. It is then up to her to decide whether to assent to this picture (or not). If sensory experiences make proposals about what the world is like, then sensory experiences will have accuracy conditions corresponding to the content of the proposals they make and, hence, be representational.¹⁸

18. We might ask about what grounds, or metaphysically explains, the representational contents of sensory experience. Malebranche holds that representational content is *not* an intrinsic or non-relational feature of human mental

Still, we might wonder what kinds of representational content sensory experiences have for Malebranche and, more specifically, what kinds of properties they represent. One key insight governs his approach: that the senses are “given to us for the preservation of the body” (OC i. 76/LO 23; see also OC i. 376/LO 195).¹⁹ The senses are not designed for abstract metaphysical speculation. They are rough and ready tools for survival. “[T]hrough pleasure and pain, through agreeable and disagreeable tastes, and by other sensations,” Malebranche explains, the senses “quickly advise the soul of what ought and ought not to be done for the preservation of life” (OC i. 76–7/LO 23; see also OC xi. 131 and OC i. 127–9/LO 51–2). Their polestar is usefulness not truth. As Malebranche writes in the *Elucidations* to the *Search*, “the senses are determined toward certain natural judgments that are *the most useful* that can be conceived of” (OC iii. 185/LO 646–7, emphasis added). This biological function dictates the properties represented by sensory experience.

In a bit more detail, the perceiver’s sensory system — or, better, the occasional law governing the mind-body union — takes the current state of the perceiver’s body as input, makes various probable inferences about her surroundings on this basis, and then yields the sensory experience whose representational content is optimized for the purposes of preserving her body. “Imagine that your soul knows exactly everything new that happens in its body, and that it gives itself all the most suitable sensations possible for the preservation of life,” Malebranche explains in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*. “That

states. Instead, representational content is an extrinsic or relational feature that mental states have in virtue of being appropriately related to a Divine Idea or Archetype existing in God’s mind. When Malebranche claims that the human mind does not represent, he is saying that the human mind does not represent intrinsically, non-relationally, or essentially. But that is compatible with the human mind representing extrinsically, relationally, or accidentally. A full exploration of Malebranche’s account of the metaphysics of representation would take us beyond the scope of the current paper. For discussion, see, for example, Nadler (1992), Simmons (2009), and Ott (2017).

19. See Simmons (2003b, 2008) for more discussion of the way the senses fulfill their function.

will be exactly what God does in the soul” (OC xii. 284/JS 222; see also OC i. 119–20/LO 46–7, OC iii. 327/LO 733, and OC xvii–1. 264, 268–9).²⁰ The biologically optimal sensory experience often distorts the nature of the perceiver’s surroundings. When a perceiver looks at a billiard ball, seeing the ball as yellow allows her to distinguish the ball from its surroundings, even though the ball isn’t really yellow. If seeing objects as causally efficacious would help the perceiver to preserve her body, as seems plausible, Malebranche’s view predicts that sensory experience will represent objects as causally efficacious. The fact that objects are *not* causally efficacious for Malebranche is neither here nor there. If seeing material things as causally connected helps us get around in the world, then that is how we will see them.

(c) *Causation*

Malebranche distinguishes true and occasional causes. A true cause is an efficient cause: a productive or creative cause, a source of being, which necessitates its effects (OC ii. 316/LO 450). Malebranche holds that God is the only true or genuine cause. God is the only creator and hence the only cause. An occasional cause provides the opportunity for God to act as a true cause, typically in law-like ways (OC ii. 313/LO 448). When one billiard ball collides with another, their collision provides the occasion for God to produce their subsequent motions.²¹ Unless otherwise indicated, I use causal language to refer to *true* causation.

Malebranche slides back and forth between different ways of talking about (true) causation — referring variously to causes, powers, efficacy, forces, connections, relations, and so forth. I will also talk in these various ways, as my disagreement with other commentators is

20. See Alquié (1974, 177) for helpful discussion.

21. For more detailed discussion of Malebranche’s occasionalism than possible here, see, for example, Gueroult (1959, v. 2, ch. 7), Rodis-Lewis (1963), Rome (1963, ch. 4), Alquié (1974, ch. 6), Radner (1978, ch. 2), Freddoso (1988), Sleight (1990), Nadler (2000, 2011), Pessin (2000), Pyle (2003, ch. 5), Peppers-Bates (2009), Lee (2007, 2008), Cunning (2008), Ott (2008), Kolesnik-Antoine (2009), Fisher (2011), Adams (2013), and Walsh and Stencil (2016).

about whether Malebranche holds that the senses represent *any* such causal properties or relations.

(d) *The Target Thesis*

When I claim that sensory experience represents causation for Malebranche, I am saying that (a) the conscious result of combining sensations and natural judgments (b) has accuracy conditions that are satisfied only if (c) material things are true or genuine causes. When a perceiver sees a yellow billiard ball collide with a red billiard ball, she sees the yellow ball as *causing* the red ball to move or as *producing* the red ball's motion. The collision of the two balls and their subsequent motions do not appear, *pace* Hume, loose and separate. According to Malebranche, these events visually appear *connected*. The yellow ball looks like it is *pushing* the red one.

As I argued above, Malebranche holds that sensory experience is a compound mental state, made up of sensations and natural judgments, which jointly determine the way things sensorily appear to the perceiver. Given that a natural judgment that *p* implies a corresponding sensory appearance that *p*, my argument will be successful if I can show that perceivers (sometimes) form natural judgments about what causes what.

3. Malebranche on Aristotelian Accounts of Causation

My first argument for attributing the target thesis to Malebranche turns on the way he situates himself in relation to his Aristotelian opponents. These opponents include Aristotle himself but also Averroes and Francisco Suárez. Malebranche understands the Aristotelian account of causation as having both metaphysical and epistemic planks.²² First and foremost, the Aristotelians hold that material things are true or genuine causes. In Malebranche's terminology, they believe in

22. When I refer to "the Aristotelian position" or "the Aristotelian view," I am referring to Malebranche's understanding of positions held by Aristotle and his followers and that therefore may not be historically accurate. I will often drop this qualification for ease of exposition.

"secondary causes," that is, true causes besides God. Second, the Aristotelians hold that the senses reveal the efficacy of material things. According to the Aristotelians, we see that one billiard ball causes another to move and that the sun gives light. We feel that fire produces heat and that water cools. The Aristotelians hold that sensory experience *veridically* represents material things as efficacious.

Malebranche disagrees with much of this picture. For Malebranche, God is the only true cause. Material things — like a billiard ball, the sun, fire, or water — are not true causes and so, trivially, sensory experience cannot veridically represent material things as efficacious. Nevertheless, a careful analysis of Malebranche's discussion of the Aristotelian position reveals a surprising point of consensus: namely, that Malebranche agrees with the Aristotelians that sensory experience *represents* material things as if they were genuine causes. They differ about whether this representation is true.

Let's start with Aristotle. In *Elucidation XV*, Malebranche interprets Aristotle as endorsing both planks mentioned above: (i) material things are genuine causes, and (ii) the senses truly represent material things as such. Malebranche's Aristotle takes the first plank to be obvious:

Aristotle, in speaking of what we call *nature*, says that it is ridiculous to try to prove that natural bodies have an internal principle of motion and rest; because, says he, it is something known through itself. Nor does he doubt that a ball that collides with another has the force to set it in motion. (OC iii. 207/LO 659)²³

On Malebranche's reconstruction, Aristotle takes the first plank to be obvious because he — Aristotle — relies on his senses. The passage continues:

23. Malebranche hews closely to Aristotle's own words in the *Physics* (*Physics* II.1, 192b14–193b7, 329).

This is the way it appears to the eyes, and that is enough for this philosopher; for he almost always follows the testimony of the senses [*Cela paroît tel aux yeux, & c'en est assez pour ce Philosophe, car il suit presque toujours le témoignage des sens*] and rarely that of reason, and he is indifferent as to whether that testimony be intelligible or not. (Ibid.)

Aristotle holds that “a ball that collides with another has the force to set it in motion” because “[t]his is the way it appears to the eyes” (emphasis added). In other words, Aristotle holds that we see the one ball as *pushing* the other or as *setting it into motion*, which is the position’s second plank.²⁴

In the next paragraph, Malebranche turns his attention to Aristotle’s followers, such as Averroes and Suárez:²⁵

Those who combat the view of certain theologians who have written against secondary causes say, as did Aristotle, that the senses convince us of their efficacy; this is their first and principal proof. It is clear, they say, that fire burns, that the sun illuminates, and that water cools; one must be a fool to doubt these things. The authors of the opposite view, says the great Averroes, are out of their minds. Almost all the Peripatetics say that those who deny this efficacy must be convinced through sensible proofs and must thus be obliged to admit that they are capable of being acted upon and hurt. This is a judgment

24. This aspect of Malebranche’s reading of Aristotle is questionable, as there are passages in which Aristotle denies that the senses represent causation. In the *Metaphysics*, for example, Aristotle writes, “we do not regard any of the senses as wisdom; yet surely these give the most authoritative knowledge of particulars. But they do not tell us the ‘why’ of anything — e.g. why fire is hot; they only say that it is hot” (*Met A1*, 981b10–13, 1553).

25. Malebranche names Averroes in the text and cites Suárez. Moreover, Malebranche’s summary of the views of “certain theologians” follows the structure of Suárez’s discussion in the *Metaphysical Disputations*.

that Aristotle has already pronounced against them, and we should execute it. (OC iii. 207/LO 660)

Malebranche reiterates his reading of the Aristotelian position, according to which the senses prove that (i) bodies are causally efficacious by (ii) representing them as such.

While Malebranche’s reconstruction of Aristotle is speculative, his reading of Averroes and Suárez is on firmer ground. The observability of causation was an explicit topic of debate in medieval Islamic philosophy in the 11th and 12th centuries, with Averroes (1126–1198) defending the view that we have direct perception of causation in individual cases.²⁶ When we open our eyes, we see fire *burning* cotton. Repeated observations are unnecessary. As Averroes writes, “to deny the existence of efficient causes *which are observed in sensible things* is sophistry, and he who defends this doctrine either denies with his tongue what is present in his mind or is carried away by a sophistical doubt which occurs to him concerning this question” (*Tahafut* 318, emphasis added). A few lines down, Averroes reiterates that we at least sometimes perceive causation:

Those things whose causes are not perceived are still unknown and must be investigated, precisely because their causes are not perceived; and since everything whose causes are not perceived is still unknown by nature and must be investigated, it follows necessarily that *what is not unknown has causes which are perceived*. (Ibid., emphasis added)²⁷

Sometimes an event’s causes are hidden from us, in which case we need to engage in further investigation. But sometimes an event’s causes are out in the open — as when the fire burns the cotton — and

26. My description of this debate is indebted to Kogan’s (1985, 86–99) lucid discussion. See also Fakhry (1958), Marmura (1965), McGinnis (2003, 2006), and Richardson (2015).

27. See also *Tahafut* 131, 134, and 318.

hence *are* known to us. Thus, Averroes holds the view that Malebranche attributes to Aristotelians more generally.²⁸

Suárez also appeals to sensory experience to defend the efficacy of secondary causes. In the section of the *Metaphysical Disputations* entitled “Whether Created Things Really Effect Anything,” he argues that sensory experience reveals that material things “truly and properly bring about effects that are connatural to them and proportioned to them” (DM 18.1.5, 40). He writes:

And this is proved, first, from experience. For what is better known to the senses than that the sun gives light, fire produces heat, water cools? And if they reply that we do, to be sure, experience that these effects are brought about when the things in question are present but that we do not experience that the effects are brought about *by* those things, then they are clearly destroying the whole force of philosophical argumentation. For there is no other way in which we can experience the emanation of effects or in which we can infer causes from effects. And this experience is attested to by the common consensus and voice of all people, who hold the same view about the things in question. (DM 18.1.6, 41)

Suárez argues that we sensorily experience material things — like the sun, fire, or water — not merely as accompanied by their effects but as actively producing them: “[W]e ... experience that the effects are brought about *by* those things.” Any other position would destroy “the whole force of philosophical argumentation.”²⁹

Malebranche does not dispute the Aristotelians’ claim that the senses represent bodies as causally efficacious. Instead, he takes issue with the trust the Aristotelians place in their senses:

28. For more on Malebranche’s familiarity with the medieval Islamic debate about causation, see Nadler (1996).

29. For more discussion of Suárez on the observability of causation, see Freddoso (2002, xxxix, xlix, liii–lv).

But this alleged demonstration is pitiful. For it shows the weakness of the human mind, and it shows that even philosophers are infinitely more sensuous than they are rational. It shows that those who glory in seeking the truth do not even know what they must consult to learn of it, whether it is the sovereign Reason, who never deceives and who always discloses things as they are in themselves, or whether it is the body, which speaks only in self-interest and which discloses things only in relation to the preservation and convenience of life. For in the end, **what prejudices shall we not justify if we take the senses as judges, to which practically all prejudices owe their origin**, as I have shown in the *Search after Truth*. (OC iii. 208/LO 660, emphasis added)

Malebranche does not flag any disagreement with the Aristotelians about what the senses represent. Instead, he maintains that the Aristotelians’ fatal mistake is that they “take the senses as judges” rather than reason. The Aristotelians naively go along with the way the senses represent the world, which results in their false beliefs in secondary causes.

Malebranche’s diagnosis of the Aristotelians’ mistake presupposes that the senses represent material things as causally efficacious. Otherwise it would be unintelligible how following their senses would lead to the false belief in secondary causes. This suggests that Malebranche *agrees* with the Aristotelians that sensory experience represents material things as if they were causally efficacious. Their *disagreement* is about whether this representation is true.

I suppose that Malebranche *could* just be granting the Aristotelians their analysis of what the senses represent for the sake of argument, in which case he might disagree with them both about what the senses represent *and* whether we should trust the senses. But if Malebranche disagreed with the Aristotelians on both these fronts, his failure to mention the former point of disagreement would be odd. Moreover,

Malebranche would need an explanation not merely of why the Aristotelians falsely believed that material things are causally efficacious but *also* of why the Aristotelians mistakenly took their sensory experience to represent material things as such. He would need an explanation of their confusion about the sensory appearances. But he doesn't provide anything like the second kind of explanation in this context. On the contrary, Malebranche uses the experience of causation to *explain* the Aristotelians' metaphysical errors, which presupposes that there is such an experience.

This pattern of explanation occurs in Malebranche's famous discussion of "the most dangerous error of the philosophy of the ancients" in *Search* VI–II.3, which is the belief in secondary causes (OC ii. 309/LO 446). This belief is dangerous because Malebranche connects causality with divinity:

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. (OC ii. 309–10/LO 446; see also OC iv. 20)

Malebranche's primary goal in this chapter of the *Search* is to correct this "most dangerous error" by arguing that God is the only true cause. He also makes revealing remarks about this error's sensory origins.

Malebranche claims that "our senses **represent** the Sun [*nos sensus representent*] as the universal cause, which gives life and movement to all things" (OC ii. 311/LO 447, emphasis added). When a sunbather basks in the sun, for example, he experiences the sun as the true cause of warmth and light. This passage is evidence for my reading as Malebranche uses explicitly representational language in his own voice.

Malebranche also suggests that the senses represent leeks and onions as the causes of the sensations they produce and, hence, as lesser divinities: "certainly men, who listen to the reports of their senses, think that vegetables are capable of doing them good," that is, of causing them pleasure (OC ii. 312/LO 447). People who "listen to the reports of their senses" form free judgments by assenting to the deliverances of their senses. Hence, if they believe that leeks and onions are the true causes of pleasure, this is presumably because their senses represent these vegetables that way. Drunks, similarly, fall into the trap of believing that wine is the true cause of their pleasure when they "follow the impressions of the senses" (OC ii. 312/LO 448).

Let me sum up. "The most dangerous error of the philosophy of the ancients" is tempting, according to Malebranche, because the senses represent a world of secondary causes. Sight and touch represent the sun as the cause of light and warmth, whereas taste represents leeks, onions, and wine as causes of the gustatory pleasures we enjoy. To fall into this "most dangerous error," all we need to do is give our consent to these kinds of sensory experiences and go along with the all-too-persuasive testimony of the senses, as Aristotle, Averroes, and Suárez apparently did. The temptation is real. And so, too, for Malebranche, is the experience of causality that is its source.

4. Sensory and Intellectual Visions of the World

Malebranche often alludes to the fact that the senses *conflict* with our intellectual grasp of occasionalism. Malebranche argues, for example, that "we must therefore say that there is nothing but God's will that can move bodies, if we want to say things as we conceive them, **and**

not as we sense them [*si nous voulons dire les choses comme nous les concevons, & non pas comme nous les sentons*]” (OC ii. 313/LO 448, emphasis added; see also OC ii. 315/LO 450). The intellect tells us that God alone is the true cause of the movement of bodies. The senses say otherwise. This conflict presupposes that the senses represent things besides God — namely, material things — as true causes.

In *Elucidation XV*, for example, Malebranche contrasts the testimony of the senses with that of the intellect or reason:

When I see one ball strike another, my eyes tell me, or seem to tell me, that the one is truly the cause of the motion it impresses on the other, for the true cause that moves bodies does not appear to my eyes. But when I consult my reason I clearly see that since bodies cannot move themselves, and since their motor force is but the will of God that conserves them successively in different places, they cannot communicate a power they do not have and could not communicate even if it were in their possession. For the mind will never conceive that one body, a purely passive substance, can in any way whatsoever transmit to another body the power transporting it. (OC iii. 208/LO 660)

When Malebranche writes that his eyes “tell me, or seem to tell me” that “the one is truly the cause of the motion it impresses on the other,” he is saying that the senses misrepresent bodies as causally efficacious, whereas reason accurately represents God as the only true cause.³⁰ The next paragraph continues in a similar vein:

When I open my eyes, it seems evident to me that the Sun is brilliant with light [*Quand j’ouvre les yeux, il me paroît évident que le Soleil est tout éclatant de lumière*], that not only

30. The point of the qualification “seem to tell me” is that his eyes only *seem* to provide knowledge of what causes what. Malebranche is emphasizing that the expression “the senses tell me” is *not* a success term for him. See Pyle (2003, 99) for an alternative reading of this passage.

is it visible through itself, but that it makes all the bodies surrounding it visible, that it covers the earth with flowers and fruits, gives life to animals, and, penetrating by its heat even to the bowels of the earth, produces stones, marble, and metals. But when I consult Reason, I see nothing of all this; and when I consult Reason faithfully, I clearly recognize that my senses seduce me, and that it is God who does everything in all things. (OC iii. 209/LO 660; see also OC i. 184/LO 83–4)

The senses make it seem evident that the sun is causally efficacious by representing this state of affairs in a compelling or persuasive way. They seduce through seductive representations. Reason, in contrast, represents God as the one “who does everything in all things.” Given that the senses and reason *disagree* about who or what is a true cause, then the senses must represent causality.

Malebranche emphasizes the genuineness of this disagreement. Later in *Elucidation XV*, Malebranche opposes “the sensible conviction in the efficacy of secondary causes” to what “reason tells” us. People fail to recognize that “God alone acts in them,” Malebranche explains, “because this reason speaks so softly that men can hardly hear it, and **the senses which contradict** [*contradisent*] **reason** shout so loud that their noise stuns them” (OC iii. 250–1/LO 684; see also OC iii. 127–8/LO 612, OC iv. 21, OC iv. 77–8, OC iv. 177, OC x. 56, and OC x. 108). The senses don’t just incline us to form beliefs that contradict reason. The senses *themselves* contradict reason, and at a shout not a whisper. If the senses contradict reason’s claim that “God alone acts in them,” then the senses *must* themselves make a contradictory claim, to the effect that bodies *also* act in them. Only a representation can contradict a representation. Only a representation of what causes what can contradict reason’s representation of God as the only true cause. Malebranche describes a similar clash in the *Christian Conversations*:

As soon as you taste a fruit with pleasure, your philosophy tells you that there is a God you do not see who causes

in you this pleasure. Your senses tell you the *opposite*, that it is the fruit you see, that you hold in your hands, and that you eat, which *causes* in you this pleasure. (OC iv. 177, emphases added)

The senses disagree with the true philosophy — occasionalism — about the causes of pleasure. “Your senses tell you the *opposite*” of the truth, Malebranche insists, namely, “that it is the fruit you see, that you hold in your hands, and that you eat, which *causes* in you this pleasure.”

Malebranche’s claim that the senses contradict reason might sound odd.³¹ But he is *not* claiming that *mere sensations* contradict reason. Third-grade sensations presumably lack propositional content and so cannot contradict anything. Rather, he is claiming that *sensory experience* — that is, the conscious result of combining third-grade sensations with natural judgments — contradicts reason. When a perceiver bites into a peach, his overall sensory experience is constituted by (a) pleasurable sensations of sweetness and stickiness and (b) various natural judgments, including a natural judgment that the fruit is the cause of the pleasure he feels. Because natural judgments infuse their contents into sensory experience, the perceiver will experience the fruit as the cause of his pleasure.

Let me mention one last piece of textual evidence, from the *Christian Meditations*. This work describes an internal dialogue between a meditator and the Word or Reason. The meditator describes a conflict between sensory and intellectual perspectives on the material world:

As soon as I open my eyes to contemplate the Universe, I discover thousands and thousands of beauties, and I find, as it were, in the parts composing the universe an infinite number of little Divinities, who through their proper powers produce all the marvelous effects that dazzle me and enchant me. But as soon as I close my eyes, and enter into myself, then your [i.e., Reason’s] light makes all

31. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer at *Philosophers’ Imprint* for pressing me to clarify this point.

that disappear. I see nothing besides impotent matter; the earth becomes sterile and without beauty; all the colors and other sensible qualities evaporate, and even the sun loses its brilliance and heat. (OC x. 56; see also OC xii. 166/JS 121 and OC iv. 177)

Malebranche holds that the senses systematically misrepresent the material world. This misrepresentation is familiar in the case of sensible qualities. We experience the world as brimming with colors, smells, tastes, hot and cold, and so forth, even though it isn’t really. The grand illusion produced by the senses includes a causal dimension as well. We see a world of causes and effects, even though we live in an occasionalist world. We see a pagan world containing “an infinite number of little Divinities,” even though there is really only One.

By emphasizing that the senses conflict with occasionalism, Malebranche follows Averroes. In the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Averroes criticizes medieval Islamic occasionalists for assuming that God is the only true cause, because this assumption “*contradicts* the evidence of the senses that things act upon other things” (*Tahafut* 134, emphasis added).³² Averroes and Malebranche agree that the senses are at odds with occasionalism. They disagree about where the truth lies.

In contrast, my opponents — like Church, Rome, McCracken, Nadler, Pyle, and Kail — deny that the senses and reason conflict. If the senses do not represent causation, then the senses cannot disagree with reason about what acts on what. Andrew Pyle makes this aspect of their reading crystal clear: “[I]n fact, of course[!], occasionalists do not deny the manifest evidence of their senses” (Pyle 2003, 99). Hence, my opponents need to explain away all the passages we looked at above in which Malebranche describes a clash between sense and reason on this point.

Pyle argues that although the senses do not themselves represent causation, the senses incline us to freely judge that material things are true causes. More specifically, the sensory experience of constant

32. See Kogan (1985, 93) for discussion of Averroes on this conflict.

conjunction inclines us to form this belief (OC i. 426/LO 224; see also OC x. 59).³³ My opponents could then locate a conflict between this sense-based belief about the efficacy of material things and occasionalism. But the content of this sense-based belief would go beyond anything represented by the senses. As Pyle writes, “[w]e need to consult reason, not to correct sense itself, but to correct an all-too-human prejudice, a naïve tendency to confuse constant conjunction with genuine causation” (2003, 99). At most the senses would be guilty of a sin of omission.

This alternative account does not fit the texts. The texts suggest that Malebranche — like Averroes — takes occasionalism to clash with “the manifest evidence” of the senses (Pyle 2003, 99). Let’s take another look at some of the passages we saw above:

- We must therefore say that there is nothing but God’s will that can move bodies, if we want to say things as we conceive them, *and not as we sense them*. (OC ii. 313/LO 448, emphasis added)
- Only reason tells them that God alone acts in them ... the senses ... *contradict* reason. (OC iii. 250/LO 684, emphasis added)
- As soon as you taste a fruit with pleasure, your philosophy tells you that there is a God you do not see who causes in you this pleasure. Your senses tell you the *opposite*, that it is the fruit you see, that you hold in your hands, and that you eat, which *causes* in you this pleasure. (OC iv. 177, emphases added)³⁴

In these passages, Malebranche says that the senses, and not merely sense-based beliefs inspired by experiences of constant conjunction,

33. I say more about how this inclination might work in section 5 below.

34. See also OC iii. 127–8/LO 612, OC iv. 21, OC iv. 77–8, OC iv. 177, OC x. 56, and OC x. 108.

conflict with occasionalism. The senses say “the opposite” of the true philosophy. We need to correct sense itself. My reading takes these passages at face value. My opponents do not.

Pyle objects that *if* the “most dangerous error of the philosophy of the ancients” were built into the deliverances of the senses, then God would be to blame for this error (2003, 100). But presumably God would not deceive us in this way, which might seem to count against my reading.

Pyle’s objection is a specific instance of a more general problem for Malebranche: namely, of reconciling rampant sensory misrepresentation with God’s goodness. As Alison Simmons (2003b, 2008) has shown, Malebranche addresses the more general problem by arguing that sensory misrepresentation helps us preserve our bodies. Seeing the world in color allows us to discriminate and interact with objects more easily, even though objects are not really colored (OC i. 155/LO 66). This suggests that Malebranche can reconcile God’s goodness with the sensory illusion of creaturely causality by arguing that this illusion also helps human beings preserve their bodies. Consider, for example, a perceiver who experiences a peach as the cause of the pleasure he enjoys when he bites into it (OC iv. 177). His natural love of pleasure will combine with this experience to motivate him to continue eating the peach and so get the nourishment he needs. Or consider someone who experiences a hot coal as the cause of the pain she feels when she touches it. This painful experience will motivate her to pull her hand away.

Indeed, Malebranche suggests that the preservation of the body *requires* that we experience material things as the causes of pleasure and pain. He writes:

If the mind saw in bodies only what is really in them, without being aware of what is not in them, it would neither love objects nor make use of them without great pain; **thus it is necessary, as it were, that objects should appear to be agreeable, by producing sensations they**

themselves lack [*ainsi il est comme nécessaire qu'ils paroissent agréables, en causant des sentimens qu'ils n'ont pas*]. (OC i. 73/LO 21, emphasis added; see also OC i. 171–2/LO 76 and OC xii. 98/JS 61)

When Malebranche writes that “it is necessary, as it were, that objects should appear to be agreeable, by producing sensations they themselves lack,” he is saying that it is practically necessary (in both senses of the term) that material things appear to produce sensations of pleasure: that is what it is for material things to appear agreeable.³⁵

According to Malebranche, we are hardwired to have intense emotional reactions to the apparent causes of pleasure and pain. We naturally love the cause of pleasure and fear the cause of pain (OC ii. 76–84/LO 307–11). Experiencing material things as causing pleasure and pain hijacks these emotional reactions and channels them towards the preservation of the body. Although morally and theologically dangerous — for God is, in fact, the only true cause and so the only appropriate target of these emotions — loving and fearing material things helps preserve the body. And the senses will say whatever it takes to achieve that goal.

5. Humean Arguments

In light of the passages we have looked at so far, why might someone — such as McCracken, Nadler, Pyle, or Kail — read Malebranche as rejecting any sensory impression of causality? There are four main sources of textual evidence for my opponents’ reading: (a) Malebranche’s claim that experiences of constant conjunction lead to judgments about causality, (b) his explanation of such judgments in terms of projection, (c) his view that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect, and (d) his apparent denial in the *Christian Meditations* that we see causation. In this section, I will defend my interpretation by showing that the case for my opponents’ reading is

35. Although Simmons (2008, 83) discusses this passage, she does not emphasize Malebranche’s claim that experiencing bodies as *causing* pleasure and pain is practically necessary for the preservation of life.

much weaker than it might initially seem by dismantling each of these arguments in turn.

(a) Constant Conjunction

In defending the Humean reading of Malebranche, commentators — including Church (1938, 154), Rome (1963, 233–4), McCracken (1983, 264), Pyle (2003, 99–100), and Kail (2008, 68) — appeal to Malebranche’s psychological explanation for *why* people mistakenly attribute causal powers to finite things. Malebranche writes:

The cause of their error is that 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 movements in the arms, and other such prejudices — because it always happens that a ball moves when struck by another, and that our arms move almost every time we want them to, and we do not sensibly perceive what else could be the cause of these movements. (OC i. 426/LO 224; see also OC x. 59)

Malebranche suggests that human beings have a natural tendency to confuse constant conjunction with causal connection.³⁶ If someone sees a ball move every time another strikes it, then she will be disposed to judge that a billiard ball *causes* another to move. This passage seems to locate the confusion at the level of belief, rather than at the level of sensory experience, which suggests that the senses do not of themselves represent causal connections.

36. Commentators disagree about how to understand this tendency. McCracken, for example, suggests that “this error [of believing in necessary connection] is the work of the imagination” (1983, 264), Rome (1963, 234) blames habit, whereas Pyle (2003, 99–100) attributes the error to natural judgments. I say more about this point below.

We can resist my opponents' reading of this passage, however, by pointing out that the concept of judgment is equivocal for Malebranche. As I explained above, he distinguishes natural and free judgments. Natural judgments partially constitute sensory experience. Free judgments constitute a person's beliefs. This ambiguity infects his claim that "men never fail to judge that a thing is the cause of a given effect when the two are conjoined" (OC i. 426/LO 224). He could be talking exclusively about free judgments, in which case my opponents could plausibly claim that the confusion is non-sensory, a matter of belief rather than experience. But he could also be talking about natural judgments, in which case he would be saying that the confusion of constant conjunction and causation is built into the contents of sensory experience itself.³⁷ In other words, Malebranche could be saying that our sensory systems are hardwired to represent cases of constant conjunction as if they were cases of true causation. So it looks like this first argument is neutral between my opponents' reading and mine. Moreover, the claim that we are inclined to freely judge that two events are causally conjoined after observing constant conjunction between them is compatible with the claim that we also experience a causal connection in some cases. Perhaps there are two routes to the false representation of secondary causes.

(b) Projection

In the opening sentences of *Elucidation XV*, Malebranche argues that many philosophers attribute "a purely imaginary power" to material

37. Pyle (2003, 99–100) classifies the judgment in question as natural but mischaracterizes natural judgments in two ways. First, Pyle describes natural judgments as "resistible," as if we could choose not to make them. But Malebranche holds that natural judgments are unavoidable. That's the point of describing natural judgments as occurring "in us, without us, and even in spite of us" (OC i. 156/LO 68; see also OC i. 133/LO 55). Our experiences come pre-packaged in propositional form. Admittedly, natural judgments are resistible in the sense that we can refrain from consenting to them. But that's just to say that the free judgments accompanying natural judgments are free. Second, Pyle locates natural judgments on the *non-sensory* side of the distinction between "what is actually presented to the senses, and what is added by the mind of the observer" (Pyle 2003, 99). But natural judgments are sensory.

things because of the human mind's tendency to "spread" itself (OC iii. 203/LO 657). He writes:

Since the sin of the first man, the mind constantly spreads itself externally; it forgets itself and Him who enlightens and penetrates it, and it lets itself be so seduced by its body and by those surrounding it that it imagines finding in them its perfection and happiness. (OC iii. 203/LO 657)

Malebranche's claim that "the mind constantly spreads itself externally" is somewhat unclear. My opponents argue that the metaphor of "spreading" suggests that the senses do not of themselves represent causality but that this representation is added by the mind of the observer. If the representation of causation were already there, given in experience, then why would the mind need to project or spread anything onto it?³⁸

Malebranche does not recognize any opposition between the mind's projection of a quality, however, and the representation of this quality by the senses. This is clearest in the case of sensible or sensuous qualities like color, smell, taste, sound, and so forth. Malebranche uses the metaphor of projection or "spreading" to explain the way sensory experience refers sensations of color, light, smell, taste, sound, hot, cold, pleasure, and pain to objects:

Here then are the judgments our soul makes concerning these [sensible quality] sensations: we can see here that it almost always blindly follows sensible impressions or the natural judgments of the senses, and that it is content, as it were, to spread itself onto the objects it considers by clothing them with what it has stripped from itself. (OC i. 138/LO 58)

38. Kail (2001, 47) argues that the talk of projection is among the key continuities between Malebranche and Hume. For discussion of projection in Hume, see also Stroud (1977), Blackburn (1990), and Marušić (2014).

When Malebranche claims that objects are clothed with sensations, he is saying that natural judgments represent objects as modified by sensations. This point emerges even more clearly in the previous chapter, in *Search I.11*:

It should not be imagined that it is up to us to assign the sensation of whiteness to snow or to see it as white, or to assign the pain to the pricked finger rather than to the thorn that pricks it. *All this occurs in us independently of us and even in spite of us as the natural judgments I spoke of in the ninth chapter.* (OC i. 133/LO 55, emphasis added)

Malebranche uses the projection metaphor to describe the way natural judgments construct the representational content of sensory experience. The mind's projection of sensible qualities isn't added on top of or downstream from sensory experience. The mind's projection of sensible qualities partially constitutes sensory experience.

Hence, Malebranche's claim that people attribute causal powers to material things because "the mind constantly spreads itself externally" does *not* imply that the mind layers a representation of causality on top of an already given sensory experience (OC iii. 203/LO 657). In light of the way Malebranche uses the projection metaphor in Book I of the *Search*, this passage suggests that a representation of causality is built into sensory experience itself. So, in fact, the opening of *Elucidation XV* favors my reading over my opponents' reading.

(c) Necessary Connection

Malebranche's view that causation requires necessary connection might seem to entail that we lack a sensory impression of causality. As Church writes:

Malebranche makes the point, both in the chapter to which Hume refers and in its *Éclaircissement*, that in our perception of one ball as it impinges on another, we discover nothing more than appears in sense-perception.

And those appearances exhibit no real causation. ... The true cause does not appear to our eyes **because** [1] no necessary connection is disclosed by sense-perception, and [2] necessary connection is the defining characteristic of the causal relation. (Church 1938, 154, emphasis added; see also Rome 1963, 234; Nadler 2000, 118; and Kail 2008, 62)

Church attributes the following two-step argument to Malebranche:

(1) The senses do not represent that events are necessarily connected.

(2) Necessary connection is a defining feature of causal relations.

Therefore,

(C) The senses do not represent that events are causally related.

I'm not convinced that Malebranche accepts (1). Admittedly, Malebranche writes that "there is nothing but the infinitely perfect being between whose will and the effects the mind perceives a necessary connection" (OC ii. 316/LO 450). But he is referring to intellectual perception in this passage, which leaves open the possibility that we have a confused sensory experience of necessary connections between finite things. Moreover, Malebranche writes that "our senses tell us [*nos sens nous le disent*]" that the collision of bodies "is **absolutely necessary** for their motion [*soit absolument nécessaire à leur mouvement*]" (OC iii. 215/LO 663, emphasis added). This passage suggests that Malebranche rejects (1): the Humean view that we never experience events as necessarily connected. Experience, for Malebranche, is *not* always loose and separate.

Even if Malebranche did accept (1) — the claim that the senses do not represent events as necessarily connected — Church's formulation of this argument is invalid and so does not show that Malebranche

endorses the conclusion. The problem with Church's formulation is that it overlooks the possibility that the senses might represent something — such as a causal relation — without representing its defining or essential features. The senses might represent a clear liquid as *water*, for example, without representing the clear liquid as H_2O , even though being H_2O is the defining or essential feature of water.³⁹ To make the argument valid, we need to add a premise that says that representing causal relations requires representing the defining or essential features of these relations. The argument would then go something like this:

- (1) The senses do not represent that events are necessarily connected.
- (2) Necessary connection is a defining or essential feature of causal relations.
- (3) If the senses represent that events are causally related, then the senses represent the defining or essential features of causal relations, namely, that these events are necessarily connected.

Therefore,

- (C) The senses do not represent that events are causally related.

This argument is valid. But Malebranche would not accept premise (3), since, in general, he denies that the senses reveal the true natures of the properties and relations they represent. Malebranche holds that sensible qualities like color, smell, taste, and so on are *really* modifications of the perceiver's soul (OC iii. 166/LO 634; see also OC xix. 564). But when someone sees an apple as red, her senses do *not* represent the apple's redness as a modification of the soul and, hence, do not reveal the true nature of redness (OC i. 139/LO 58). Thus, Malebranche's

39. Siegel (2009, 536–40) makes a similar point in a present-day context.

commitments do not rule out a sensory impression of causality, and my opponents' third argument fails.

(d) *The Word of God*

In support of his Humean reading of Malebranche, Nadler (2000, 99) points to the *Christian Meditations*, in which the Word of God urges the meditator to rely on the authority of the intellect in forming beliefs or, failing that, to hew more closely to what the senses actually tell him:

Close the eyes of your body, my son, and open the eyes of your mind; or at least believe only what the senses tell you [*ou du moins ne crois en cela que ce que tes sens te disent*]. Your eyes, in truth, tell you that when a body at rest is struck by another, it begins to move [*Tes yeux à la vérité te disent, que lors qu'un corps en repos est choqué, il cesse d'être en repos*]. Believe what you see here: for it is a fact and the senses are good enough witnesses when it comes to such facts. But do not judge that bodies have in themselves some motive force, or that they can communicate such a force to other bodies when they strike them, for you see nothing like that [*tu n'en vois rien*]. (OC x. 48)⁴⁰

We see that when a body at rest is struck by another, it begins to move. But, the Word suggests, we are mistaken to think that we see the exercise of any power or motive force. We misinterpret the testimony of sight when we take ourselves to see finite things as standing in genuine causal relations. And presumably the Word expresses Malebranche's considered position.

The final sentence of this passage might seem to clinch the case for my opponents' reading, when the Word says that "you see nothing like [*tu n'en vois rien*]" motive force. But claims about what we "see" and about what the senses "tell" us are ambiguous between representational and epistemic readings. On the representational reading, we see

40. See also Doxsee (1916, 697).

that p just in case visual experience represents that p . On the epistemic reading, in contrast, we see that p just in case visual experience puts us in a position to know that p .⁴¹ If we read “see” representationally, then the Word would be saying that we should not judge that bodies have causal powers because the senses do not so much as *represent* one body as causing another to move, which would support Nadler’s reading. But we can also read “see” epistemically, in which case the Word would be saying that we should not judge that bodies have causal powers because the senses do not *put us in a position to know* that the one ball causes the other to move. The senses could fail in this regard for many reasons, for example, because the testimony of the senses is obscure and confused or simply because the ball doesn’t, by Malebranche’s lights, cause the other to move.⁴² The epistemic reading of the Word’s claim that we do not “see” causation leaves open the possibility that the senses represent causal connections, so long as this sensory representation is defective in some way and fails to yield knowledge. Thus, the passage from the *Christian Meditations* does not provide my opponents with the proof text they need.

41. Someone might object that this ambiguity applies to Malebranche’s frequent claims that the senses “tell us” that material things are causes and, hence, that I should not have assumed a representational reading of the passages I discussed in sections 3 and 4. Actually, the ambiguity does not apply in this case, since the epistemic reading is only available for cases in which the senses tell us something knowable and, *a fortiori*, true. Given Malebranche’s view that material things are *not* causes, his claims that the senses tell us otherwise do not admit of the epistemic reading.
42. Malebranche sometimes uses “see” in what is clearly an epistemic sense, albeit when he is discussing rational or intellectual perception. In the *Search*, for example, Malebranche writes that we “see [*voit*] that God is not a deceiver, because, **knowing** [*sçachant*] that He is infinitely perfect and that the infinite cannot lack any perfection, we clearly see [*voit clairement*] that He does not want to beguile us” (OC ii. 372/LO 481–2, emphases added) and that “we clearly see [*voit*] that it is absolutely necessary that twice four be eight and that the square of the diagonal of a square be double that square” (OC iii. 133/LO 615, emphasis added). Admittedly, these passages do not establish that Malebranche uses the literal, sense-based sense of “see” epistemically, but they are suggestive nonetheless.

Moreover, Malebranche’s characterization of the senses as “good enough witnesses” suggests that this passage is about the epistemic credentials of the senses rather than their representational contents. We can read Malebranche as saying that the senses make claims about — that is, represent — the ways bodies move *and* their causal relations. But the senses are only “good enough witnesses” — they are only trustworthy — with regards to the movements of bodies.

If the Word of God were to unambiguously say that the senses do not represent causation, then that would be a problem for my reading. But the Word of God is not unambiguous. What’s more, although this is an important passage, since the Word is speaking, it is only *one* passage. We need to weigh this one passage against the many others in which Malebranche commits himself to a sensory impression of causality. My opponents may want to treat this one passage as the key to Malebranche’s view and read away conflicting passages in its light. But they are not entitled to treat this passage as the one passage to rule them all, not without some further argument. And even if my opponents were correct that Malebranche denies any sensory appearance of causality in this one passage from the *Christian Meditations* (1683), it does not follow that he denies such an appearance in the *Search after Truth* (1674–5) or in the *Elucidations* to that work (1677–8), which contain his most systematic discussions of sensory experience. Maybe Malebranche changed his mind or is simply inconsistent across these works. My opponents need to do more to show that Malebranche rejects a sensory appearance of causation *tout court*, especially in light of the many, many passages we saw in sections 3 and 4 and given that Malebranche appeals to a sensory experience of causation to explain why Aristotelian philosophers and others struggle to recognize occasionalism’s truth.

6. Conclusion

Many commentators interpret Malebranche as anticipating Hume’s view that the senses do not represent causation. But these commentators have Malebranche backwards. Indeed, we might worry that these

commentators make the mistake of reading the history of philosophy backwards, interpreting Malebranche in light of Hume rather than, say, Averroes and Suárez. On the reading defended here, Malebranche holds that the senses are dangerous precisely because they misrepresent finite things as causally efficacious. He agrees with Averroes and Suárez that the senses represent a world in which occasionalism is false, in which fire is the true cause of the pain that we feel when we burn our hand and fruit the true cause of the pleasure we experience when we eat it. The senses represent a world in which a billiard ball that collides with another is the true cause of the second ball's motion. He agrees that the senses disclose a world made up of "an infinite number of little Divinities" (OC x. 56). But Malebranche departs from the Aristotelians in holding that the experience of causality is false and deceptive. This sensory misrepresentation is part of what Malebranche means when he writes that "the mind of man is completely pagan" (OC ii. 318/LO 451).

Even if we come to recognize occasionalism's truth, we will be like astronomers who know that the sun is much larger than the earth but who cannot help but see the sun as small or like a psychologist who knows that the lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion are the same length but cannot help but see them as different. Even if we come to know — through reason — that God is the only true cause, we won't be able to help seeing objects as true causes, any more than we can help seeing snow as white or grass as green. "The most dangerous error of the philosophy of the ancients" — that is, the belief in secondary causes — is an error of the senses, which results from unreflectively assenting to the way the senses represent the world, in much the same way as the false belief that bodies are colored, smelly, tasty, and so forth arises from sensory experiences that represent bodies as such (OC ii. 309/LO 446).

This is not to deny that Malebranche influenced Hume. As commentators like McCracken (1983) and Kail (2008) have shown, Hume adapts many of Malebranche's arguments for his own purposes. But Malebranche's influence on Hume is more nuanced than has been

widely appreciated. Hume does not inherit from Malebranche the view that we lack a sensory impression of causality. If there is a connection here, Hume sensualizes Malebranche's view that we lack an intellectual perception of creaturely causality. As Malebranche writes, "whatever effort I make in order to understand it, I cannot find in me any [intellectual] idea representing to me what might be the force or the power they attribute to creatures" (OC iii. 294/LO 658; see also OC ii. 316/LO 450).

Given that Malebranche's alternative account of sensory experience was available to Hume, it is much less clear that Hume can take his own account for granted. In fairness to Hume, he does not merely appeal to introspection to show that we lack a sensory impression of causality, as Kail (2008, 63–4) shows. Hume argues for this lack on the grounds that we can always conceive a cause without its characteristic effect. Maybe Hume is correct that the conceptual separability of two events shows that there isn't a necessary connection between them. But even if two events are conceptually and metaphysically separable, it does not follow that the senses cannot falsely represent these events as causally and necessarily connected, as Malebranche contends. Hume therefore needs some further reason for rejecting Malebranche's view that the senses represent causation.⁴³

Malebranche can seem like an otherworldly philosopher with his head in the clouds. His metaphysical views — for example, that we see all things in God, our souls take on all the colors of the rainbow, and God does everything — are, as Hume observes, "remote from common life and experience" (E 72). And so we might be tempted to agree with Hume's assessment that Malebranche has "got into fairy land, long ere we have reached the last steps of our theory" (E 72). As outlandish as his metaphysical views may seem, Malebranche does not wholly leave the everyday world behind. He preserves a commonsense view of

43. For more recent criticism of Hume's view that we do not perceive causation by means of the senses, see Anscombe (1993). One difference is that Anscombe rejects, while Malebranche accepts, the view that necessary connection is a defining feature of causation. As we saw above, Malebranche allows that the senses (mis)represent necessary connections between events.

the world by building it into the contents of sensory experience. The world of common sense is the world of sense. Although philosophical reflection might tell us that grass isn't green and that bodies are causally inefficacious, the senses represent a world in which grass is green, fire produces heat, and, more generally, bodies causally interact in the hurly-burly of everyday life. Malebranche's careful descriptions of what the senses represent show that he still has his feet on the ground. Perhaps Malebranche's system is metaphysically strange. But it's sensibly sensible too.⁴⁴

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