

**Our Body Is the Measure: Malebranche and the Body-Relativity of Sensory  
Perception**

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**Abstract:** Malebranche holds that sensory experience represents the world from the body's point of view. I argue that Malebranche gives a systematic analysis of this bodily perspective in terms of the claim that the five familiar external senses and bodily awareness represent nothing but relations to the body.

**Key Words:** Malebranche, contents of perception, embodiment, body-relativity, sensory experience

‘[O]ur body is not an absolute standard against which we should measure other things...’

(OC i. 91/LO 31)

Consider someone walking along a forest path and seeing a bear. When she sees the bear, her visual experience tells her that the bear is a certain way. Suppose, for example, that the bear looks to the perceiver to be bigger than her, to be located off to the right and some distance ahead of her, and to be moving closer. Its teeth and claws look sharp, its fur dark brown and glossy. The bear looks like it is dangerous. The perceiver's visual experience would then convey or represent to her that the bear has these properties.<sup>i</sup> If her visual experience is illusory, then the bear will lack some of the properties it is represented as having. Maybe the bear is not really quite as big or as dangerous as it

looks. Nevertheless, the perceiver's visual experience will still represent the bear as having these properties. The *representational content* of the perceiver's visual experience is what this experience is telling her the bear is like.<sup>ii</sup>

There is room for debate about how things look, and, more precisely, about which properties an object can look to have. In other words, there is room for disagreement about which properties visual experience can represent something — such as a bear — as having: just colors, illumination properties, shapes and motion, for example, or a richer set of properties, like being dangerous, or the property of being a bear. In the Second Meditation, Descartes's meditator illustrates the possibility of this kind of disagreement by arguing that people often mischaracterize the deliverances of sight because they are 'tricked by ordinary ways of talking' (AT vii. 32/CSM ii. 21). The meditator suggests that although we *say* that we see that there is a piece of wax (or a bear) in front of us, in fact we merely *believe* that this is the case, on the basis of the visual appearance of its color and shape. Though we *say* that we see 'men crossing the square', in fact we merely *believe* that they are men on the basis of *seeing* their 'hats and coats' (AT vii. 32/CSM ii. 21). At stake here is whether the testimony of sight is restricted to describing the world in terms of colors and shapes, or whether it uses a richer vocabulary of properties.<sup>iii</sup>

The possibility of this kind of dispute arises because the representational content of visual experience is not always clear to the perceiver having the experience. Introspection does not reveal precisely *which properties* a perceiver's visual experience represents to her, for example, 'men crossing the square', or merely shifting patterns of light and color (AT vii. 32/CSM ii. 21). Moreover, the *nature* of the visually represented properties is not introspectively transparent either. As Descartes writes in the Third

Meditation, our sensory ideas of light, color, smell, taste, and so on are ‘very confused and obscure . . . to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things’ (AT vii. 43/CSM ii. 30; see also AT vii. 232-4/CSM ii. 162-4). When a tomato looks red to a perceiver, an inward glance does not tell the perceiver what kind of property this redness really is, whether it is a real thing or a non-thing, a non-relational property of the tomato or a relational one. Sensory ideas are ‘representationally obscure’, to borrow Simmons’s apt phrase, in that introspection does not fully reveal ‘what the ideas are ideas of’.<sup>iv</sup> The testimony of sight can thus be muffled and hard to discern.

Descartes’s follower Malebranche defends a bold account of the representational contents of visual experience, on which the *only* properties represented by visual experience are relations to the perceiver’s body. ‘Our sight’, he writes, ‘does *not* represent extension to us as it is in itself, but *only* as it is in relation to our body’ (OC i. 84/LO 28, emphasis added). Malebranche’s view is not just that visual experience is only veridical or accurate with respect to relations to the perceiver’s body. His view, rather, is that visual experience only makes claims about — and, hence, is only *assessable* for accuracy with respect to — the way objects are related to the perceiver’s body.<sup>v</sup>

Otherwise visual experience is silent. In fact, Malebranche’s commitment to the body-relativity of sensory perception extends to all five familiar external senses (sight, touch, hearing, taste, and smell), as well as bodily awareness.<sup>vi</sup> The only properties represented by both the external senses and bodily awareness are relations to the perceiver’s body, or, equivalently, body-relative properties.<sup>vii</sup> When the perceiver looks at the bear, her visual experience does not represent it as having an absolute or non-relational size, but that the

bear is bigger than her body. When she feels the ocean's spray against her skin, she does not experience its temperature in Celsius, Fahrenheit, or Kelvin, but that the ocean is colder than her body's temperature. A painful feeling tells the perceiver that the nail she is stepping on is harmful to her foot.

In defending the view that the senses represent the world from a distinctively embodied perspective, Malebranche is following Descartes, who writes in *Principles* II.3 that sensory perceptions 'normally tell us of the benefit or harm that external bodies may do to this combination [of the human body and mind], and do not, except occasionally and accidentally, show us what external bodies are like in themselves' (AT viiia. 42/CSM ii. 224; see also AT v. 271/CSMK iii. 362). To say that the senses represent the world from an embodied point of view can of course mean different things. One thing it means for both Descartes and Malebranche is that the proper function of the senses is to help us preserve our bodily selves.<sup>viii</sup> Descartes argues that the senses 'have been given to me by nature in order to signify to the mind what is beneficial or harmful to the composite of which it is a part' (AT vii. 83/CSM ii. 56), while Malebranche claims that the senses were 'given to us for the preservation of the body' (OC i. 76/LO 23). Malebranche departs from Descartes, however, in his analysis of how the senses implement their function. Whereas Malebranche holds that the senses contribute to survival by representing only relations to the body, Descartes maintains that the senses 'occasionally and accidentally show us what external bodies are like in themselves' (AT viiia. 42/CSM ii. 224). When we are in ideal viewing conditions, Descartes holds that the senses can accurately represent the non-relational properties of objects. As Simmons writes, for

example, ‘if I happen to view my mug from directly above . . . its top would look simply circular’.<sup>ix</sup>

Admittedly, Malebranche’s body-relative view has counterintuitive implications. The view implies that a perceiver’s visual experience does not represent objects as having any non-relational or intrinsic properties, or, in Malebranche’s terminology, any ‘absolute’ properties (OC i. 91/LO 31). It implies that visual experience does *not* represent the tomato as having a non-relational or intrinsic qualitative property of redness when the tomato visually appears to be red. His view might also seem to imply that the perceiver does not see the tomato as *on top of* the table it is sitting on, since the perceiver’s body is not a relatum in this two-place relation. The view also raises puzzles about bodily awareness. A perceiver’s proprioceptive awareness of her own body’s dimensions, or a splitting headache, does not seem to represent relations of any kind, let alone relations to her body. I will have more to say about these cases below. But let me mention here that Malebranche shares Descartes’s commitment to the representational obscurity of sensory experience, such that a cursory inward glance does *not* tell us what the senses are *really* saying (OC. xii. 75/JS 41; see also OC. xii. 90/JS 54). So we should not be too surprised if Malebranche is skeptical about introspectively based intuitions about what the senses represent.

My plan for the paper is as follows. In Section 1, I situate my reading in relation to the literature. Commentators such as Martial Gueroult and Alison Simmons recognize that sensory experience, for Malebranche, represents the world from a bodily perspective.<sup>x</sup> The distinctive feature of my interpretation is my analysis of this perspective in terms of the claim that the senses represent *only* relations to the perceiver’s

body. In Section 2, I argue that the external senses – and most notably sight – represent only relations to the body, and then, in Section 3, that bodily awareness is similarly restricted. In Section 4, I draw my discussion together by reconstructing a general argument that justifies and explains Malebranche’s commitment to the thoroughgoing body-relativity of the representational content of sensory experience.

## 1. PRELIMINARIES

Malebranche holds that sensory experience is a compound mental state, resulting from the combination of sensations of sensible qualities (sensations of colors, smells, tastes, tactile qualities, pleasures, pains, etc.) with natural judgments, which occur ‘in us and independently of us, and even in spite of us’ (OC i. 119-20/LO 46). I will use the terms ‘sensory experience’ and ‘sensory perception’ to refer to the overall conscious result of this combination. When the perceiver looks at the bear, for example, her visual experience is a compound of grey and brown sensations supplemented by natural judgments, hard-wired into her visual system. Natural judgments transform the grey and brown sensations into a visual experience as of a three-dimensional bear, scaled, oriented, and located relative to the perceiver’s body.

Scholarly discussions of sensory experience in Malebranche typically have focused on metaphysical questions about its structure and genesis. There are rich debates about whether sensations are representational and/or intentional for Malebranche,<sup>xi</sup> whether he has a coherent notion of natural judgment,<sup>xii</sup> how the human mind’s relation to God’s ideas imbues sensory experiences with content,<sup>xiii</sup> and how sensations particularize God’s inherently general ideas so as to result in sensory experiences of

particular material things, like *this* bear.<sup>xiv</sup> However we answer these questions, Malebranche is clear that the overall product of sensory processing, i.e. sensory experience or perception, informs the perceiver about various properties of objects in her vicinity. Malebranche commits himself to the view that sensory experiences have representational content in the many passages where he refers to the ‘testimony’ or ‘reports’ of the senses (OC xii. 30/JS 4), when he claims that the senses ‘speak’ (OC i. 16/LO xxxvii), ‘represent’ (OC i. 177-8/LO 79-80), ‘inform us’ (OC i. 92/LO 32), and are ‘witnesses’ (OC xii. 100/JS 62). Malebranche’s account of the contents of sensory experience, which is downstream from the metaphysical issues mentioned above, is the topic of this paper.

French commentators have attended more to Malebranche’s account of sensory content than their Anglo-American counterparts, emphasizing the way the biological function of the senses shapes this content. Bréhier, for example, writes that ‘the natural judgments given to us by Providence are *not* for knowledge [*la connaissance*], but for the conservation of our body; the solutions to the problems of optics which are contained in these judgments are thus limited to what is necessary for that end’.<sup>xv</sup> Gueroult similarly argues that the contents of sensory experience are relativized to the biological needs of the human body: ‘[b]y the introduction of the senses, the collection of existing things, instead of being related to the world of clear and distinct ideas in God, is related and reduced to the little universe of biological needs of which my body is the center, that is, to the world of sensations, or of the obscure modifications of our soul’.<sup>xvi</sup> Alquié picks up this body-relative theme in his discussion of natural judgments, as does Merleau-Ponty in his lectures on Malebranche.<sup>xvii</sup>

Although Gueroult recognizes that the senses are restricted to representing biologically significant properties of material things, he does not specify in any detail which properties have the requisite significance. Simmons is one of the few Anglo-American commentators to pay close attention to Malebranche's account of what the senses represent, and she is clearer on this point than Gueroult. Simmons *denies* that the senses represent *only* relations to the body. On her reading of Malebranche, the senses sometimes represent non-relational properties as well. According to Simmons, when a tomato visually appears red to the perceiver, the senses represent the tomato as having a simple, non-relational property of redness.<sup>xviii</sup> Moreover, Simmons hints that a perceiver's proprioceptive awareness of her own body's dimensions represents non-relational or absolute size.<sup>xix</sup> Simmons holds that many of the properties represented by the senses are body-relative. She argues, for instance, that sensory experience represents the location, size and orientation of external objects relative to the perceiver's body.<sup>xx</sup> Nevertheless, Simmons allows for important exceptions to the body-relativity of sensory perception in her interpretation of Malebranche.

I argue that Malebranche's position is more systematic than Simmons suggests. According to my reading of Malebranche, sensory experience always represents the world from a bodily point of view, such that the *only* properties represented by the senses are relations to the perceiver's body. To borrow Gueroult's apt phrase, 'my body is the center' of 'the world of sensations' in so far as the senses represent a system of relations in which one's body is always and invariably a *relatum*.<sup>xxi</sup>

Before getting into the arguments for my interpretation, let me say a word about how I read Malebranche. When a philosopher advances a counterintuitive thesis (e.g. the



senses represent nothing but relations to the body), while also making reasonable claims that apparently conflict with it (e.g. the moon looks bigger than the stars), the principle of interpretive charity might recommend privileging the reasonable claims over the counterintuitive thesis. Malebranche recommends the opposite procedure:

When an author seems to contradict himself, and natural equity or some stronger reason obliges us to make him agree with himself, it seems to me that we have an infallible rule to discover his real view. When a man speaks as do others, that does not always signify that he is of their opinion. But when he positively says the opposite of what is customarily said, though he might say it only once, we have reason to judge that it is his view — provided that we know that he is speaking seriously, and after having given careful thought. (OC iii. 231/LO 672)

If Malebranche sometimes describes the senses as representing more than just relations to the body, then he ‘speaks as do others’, and these statements should be discounted accordingly. In contrast, when Malebranche claims that the senses represent exclusively relations to the perceiver’s body, he ‘says the opposite of what is customarily said’, and, hence, ‘we have reason to judge that it is his view’ (OC iii. 231/LO 672). If we read Malebranche as he tells us to read him, then we should privilege passages where he advances the counterintuitive view that the senses are restricted to representing various relations to the perceiver’s body. And that is what I am going to do.

## 2. THE EXTERNAL SENSES

In the conclusion to Book I of *The Search after Truth* (hereafter *Search*), Malebranche commits himself to the body-relativity of the external senses: '[o]ur senses are very faithful and exact for informing us about the relations our body has with all the bodies surrounding it, but they *cannot* tell us what these bodies are in themselves' (OC i. 186/LO 85, emphasis added). As I read this passage, the external senses cannot tell us what 'bodies are in themselves' because the senses are silent on the non-relational properties of material things; the only properties they represent are 'the relations our body has with all the bodies surrounding it' (OC i. 186/LO 85; see also OC i. 488-9/LO 261). Now, an alternative reading might claim that the senses are only *accurate* with respect to relations to the perceiver's body, which is compatible with the senses (mis)representing bodies as having various absolute or non-relational properties. But the problem with this alternative reading is that it does not explain why Malebranche insists that the senses *cannot* get the absolute or non-relational properties of bodies right, not even 'occasionally and accidentally', as Descartes says (AT viiia. 42/CSM ii. 224).

Malebranche is even more explicit that the external senses represent only the way objects are related to the perceiver's body in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (hereafter *Dialogues*). '[A]s the soul is united to the body and must interest itself in its conservation', Malebranche argues, we 'must be informed by instinctive proofs — I mean short but convincing proofs — of the relation that the bodies surrounding us have to the one we animate' (OC xii. 98/JS 61). For Malebranche, 'instinctive proofs' are sensory experiences.<sup>xxii</sup> So he is saying that because the soul is responsible for conserving its body, the soul needs sensory experiences that inform it about 'the relation that the

bodies surrounding us have to the one we animate' (OC xii. 98/JS 61). He elaborates a few lines down:

[I]t is evident that God, desiring to unite minds to bodies, had to establish as the occasional cause of the confused knowledge we have of *the presence of objects and of their properties in relation to us*, not our attention, which merits a clear and distinct knowledge of them, but the various disturbances of these bodies themselves. He had to give us instinctive proofs *not* of the nature and properties of the bodies around us *but of the relation they have to ours*, so that we could work successfully for the preservation of life without being incessantly attentive to our needs. . . . *Note, however, these were confused but certain proofs, not of the relation between objects, in which the evidence of truth consists, but of the relation they have to our body according to its disposition at the time.* (OC xii. 99/JS 62, emphasis added; see also OC xii. 30/JS 4 and OC x.

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When Malebranche claims that 'instinctive proofs' do *not* tell us about 'the nature and properties of the bodies around us', *nor* about 'the relation between objects', but *only* about 'the relation they have to our body', he is describing the testimony of the external senses. The external senses represent only 'the relation [things] have to our body' (OC xii. 99/JS 62). And that is precisely what my reading insists upon. He echoes this claim later in the *Dialogues*, summarizing his approach to the senses as follows: '[o]ur senses . . . indicate to us confusedly the relation the bodies surrounding us have to our own body

and this they do sufficiently well for the conservation of life; but there is nothing exact in their testimony' (OC xii. 239/JS 184; see also OC iv. 158).

Up to this point, we have looked at passages where Malebranche talks about the external senses at a high level of generality. When Malebranche descends to the details of what sensory experience is like, he continues to describe its content in body-relative terms. In the *Search*, Malebranche lists all the properties represented by sight: '[o]ur eyes generally deceive us', he writes, 'in *everything* they represent to us: in the size of bodies, in their figure and motion, and in light and colors, which are the *only* things we see' (OC i. 79/LO 25, emphasis added). In general, the external senses represent only spatial properties (size, location, figure, and motion) and sensible qualities (hot and cold, taste, odor, color, etc.) (OC i. 121-2/LO 48). My strategy for the remainder of this section will be to work through these lists and to argue that when objects sensorily appear to have spatial properties and sensible qualities, the external senses represent these objects as standing in various relations to the perceiver's body. I will follow Malebranche in focusing on vision in my discussion of spatial perception, but since vision is supposed to serve as a proxy for the other senses, similar points should apply to them as well (OC i. 79/LO 25).

### 2.1 *Spatial Properties: Size, Location, Figure, and Motion*

In the *Search*, Malebranche's discussion of spatial perception begins with size (*la grandeur*), or, in Cartesian terminology, extension (*l'étendue*). He argues that we do not see the non-relational or absolute sizes of objects. Instead, we see only the dimensions of objects in comparison to the size of our own bodies: 'it is a groundless prejudice to

believe that we see bodies as they are in themselves. For our eyes, which were given to us only for the preservation of our body, perform their duty quite well by providing us with ideas of objects proportioned to the idea we have of the size of our body' (OC i. 87/LO 29).<sup>xxiii</sup> And again:

Let us learn, then, that . . . we are quite uncertain of the true size of the bodies we see, and all we can know about the size of bodies by means of sight is *the relation between their size and our size*, a relation by no means exact — in a word, that our eyes were not given us to judge the truth of things, but only to let us know which things might inconvenience us or be of some use to us. (OC i. 88/LO 30, emphasis added)

When the perceiver looks at a bear, she does not see its absolute or non-relational size, but that the bear is bigger than her body. This visual experience is accurate, as it would be if she were a denizen of Lilliput confronted by a miniature bear or a giant faced with an enormous bear, so long as the experience gets the proportion or ratio between her body and the bear right (OC i. 87-8/LO 29-30).

Someone might object that there are also passages where Malebranche describes seeing external objects as bigger or smaller relative to one another. In the *Search*, for example, he writes that 'the same moon visually appears to us as much larger than the largest of stars' (OC i. 92/LO 32-3; see also OC i. 102/LO 38). These passages *seem* to conflict with my reading, since 'larger' and 'smaller' are two-place relations that do not involve the perceiver's body as a relatum. But, upon closer inspection, these passages are not genuine counterexamples. A perceiver never just sees that the moon is bigger than a star, but, rather, sees that the moon is *small* whereas the star is *vanishingly tiny*, where

*small* and *vanishingly tiny* are determined relative to the size of the perceiver's body. Thus, when a perceiver sees that the moon is bigger than the stars, her visual experience in fact represents a three-way comparison of the relative sizes of the moon, the stars, and the perceiver's body. This three-place relation includes the perceiver's body as a relatum, and, hence, is compatible with the view that sight represents size or extension in terms of a relation to the perceiver's body. As Malebranche writes, '[w]e can sometimes judge through sight *the approximate relation bodies have to our own as well as among themselves*', but, he cautions, 'we must never believe that they have the size they seem to us to have' (OC i. 92/LO 32, emphasis added). Even when we measure an object using a putatively more objective standard, like a ruler or a yardstick, our visual experience of this measurement relates it back to the perceiver's body. Giants and denizens of Lilliput might use yardsticks scaled to their vastly different bodies, and yet have indistinguishable sensory experiences of their respective sticks.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Size or extension is the first example Malebranche considers in his taxonomy of the 'errors of sight', and his view that visual extension is body-relative has sweeping implications for the contents of visual experience. Malebranche accepts the orthodox Cartesian position that the nature or essence of body consists in extension in length, breadth, and depth. All bodies are extended, and extension is all it takes to be a body (OC i. 460/LO 243). He also holds that every other property or modification of body is simply a 'way of being extended' or 'a relation of distance' (OC xii. 34/JS 7). According to Malebranche, it is 'entirely obvious that all the properties of extension can consist only in relations of distance' (OC xii. 150/JS 106; see also OC i. 122-3/LO 49 and OC xii. 72/JS 39). Malebranche's claim that visual extension is body-relative thus implies that sight

misrepresents *the nature or essence* of the physical world as if it were relative to the perceiver's body.

The body-relativity of visual extension implies that sight represents all modes of extension – such as location, figure, and motion – as more or less complicated relations to the perceiver's body. The argument goes like this. 'As the modification of a substance is but the substance itself in a particular way', Malebranche writes, 'it is obvious that the idea of a modification necessarily contains the idea of another being' (OC xii. 34/JS 7). A representation of a mode or property just is a representation of a substance's essence or nature existing in a determinate way. Applied to the case of body, a representation of a bodily mode is a representation of a determinate way of being extended, or a particular 'relation of distance' (OC xii. 34/JS 7). 'We cannot conceive of roundness, for example, unless we conceive of extension', Malebranche explains, '. . . because given that a mode of a being is only that being (existing) in a certain way, we clearly cannot conceive the mode without the being' (OC i. 462/LO 244). Thus, if a representation of a bodily mode is a representation of a determinate way of being extended, and if sight invariably represents extension relative to the body, then sight will represent modes of body as determinate ways of being extended *relative to the perceiver's body*. The body-relativity of visual extension thus infects the way we experience all spatial properties represented by sight.

In Elucidation XVII of the *Search*, for example, Malebranche characterizes the visual experience of location in body-relative terms: 'I open my eyes in the middle of the countryside and in an instant I see an infinity of objects . . . Among other things I see *at about a hundred steps from me* a large white horse *running toward the right* at a great

gallop' (OC iii. 343-4/LO 744-5, emphasis added; see also OC iii. 345/LO 745 and OC x. 113). The perceiver does not see the horse's location in a 'cosmic coordinate system'.<sup>xxv</sup> Rather, the perceiver sees the horse's location in terms of a vector relative to the perceiver's body: that is, in terms of a *direction* determined relative to the axes and orientation of the perceiver's body ('toward the right'), as well as in terms of *distance* measured relative to the perceiver's body ('at about a hundred *steps* from me') (OC iii. 343-4/LO 744-5, emphasis added). Given that the perceiver's visual experience of the horse's location presupposes a representation of distance, and given that the visual experience of distance always involves an implicit reference to the perceiver's body, so too for location. The perceiver's visual experience of the horse's location would be accurate if the perceiver and the horse were in rural France, Australia or on the far side of the moon, so long as her experience accurately represents the way the perceiver and the horse are located relative to each other.

Now, we might worry that Malebranche's account of visual location is inconsistent with the fact that visual experiences represent how external objects are located relative to one another, for example, when a bear looks *next to* a tree. Malebranche, however, can use a similar strategy as for the corresponding worry about size. A perceiver never just sees that the bear is *next to* the tree, but sees that the bear is *to the left* or *to the right* of the tree, where *left* and *right* are determined by where things stand relative to the perceiver's body. When the perceiver sees that the bear is *next to* the tree, she sees a *triangle* describing the relative locations of the bear, the tree, and her body. And this three-place spatial relation includes the perceiver's body as a relatum.<sup>xxvi</sup>



A perceiver sees an object's figure in virtue of seeing the way the object's parts are located relative to one another (OC i. 94/LO 33). The sides of a square, for example, stand in different locations relative to one another than the sides of a rectangle or triangle. If the perceiver sees an object's figure in virtue of seeing the way the object's parts are located relative to one another, and if the perceiver sees the way these parts are located relative to one another in virtue of seeing the way they are located relative to one another *and* to her body, then the perceiver's visual experience of an object's shape will be of a complicated spatial relation involving her body. When a perceiver sees a bear, she sees some parts of the bear as closer to her and other parts as farther away, resulting in her overall visual experience of the bear's shape as it is oriented relative to her body. Shape perception thus reduces to seeing relations to the perceiver's body.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Malebranche commits himself to the body-relativity of perceived motion as well. Motion, in this context, is 'the continual transport of a body approaching or receding from another object taken to be at rest' (OC i. 101/LO 37). Because an object's motion depends on the distance travelled over time, the body-relativity of size perception infects the perception of motion as well:

It seems to me that I have demonstrated in the sixth chapter that sight never informs us of the size of bodies in themselves, but only of the relations they have with one another. From this I conclude that we are also unable to know the true or absolute magnitude of their motion, that is, of their swiftness or slowness, but only the relation these motions have to one another *and especially to the motion that ordinarily occurs in our body.*  
(OC i. 102/LO 38, emphasis added)

In this passage, Malebranche says that we only see relative motion, i.e. the way one object is moving relative to some other object. But he does not say that visual experience represents only the way external objects are moving *relative to the perceiver's body*: 'especially', yes, but not 'only'. Nevertheless, Malebranche's claims about the visual perception of size and location commit him to the view that perceived motion is body-relative.

Malebranche's characterization of what was 'demonstrated in the sixth chapter' is inexact (OC i. 102/LO 38). With regards to size, the perceiver always sees size — and, hence, distance — measured relative to her body (OC i. 88/LO 30). From this it follows that an object looks to be moving in virtue of appearing to cover a certain distance *measured relative to the perceiver's body* over a given period of time. Hence, our eyes 'do not enable us to know the true magnitude of motion' (OC i. 103/LO 38).

Malebranche also hints at another argument for the conclusion that perceived motion is body-relative. If the perceiver sees an object's motion in virtue of seeing the way the object changes its location over time, and if the perceiver's body is the origin relative to which she sees the locations of things, then the perceiver's experience of motion will consist in part in seeing the way an object changes its location *relative to her body*.

'When, for example, one is seated aboard a quickly and steadily moving vessel, the land and towns appear to recede', Malebranche writes, 'they appear to be in motion and the vessel seems to be at rest', because the perceiver's visual experience represents the land and town as changing their location vis-à-vis her body, while the vessel does not (OC i. 105/LO 39). When the perceiver sees the 'swiftness or slowness' that external bodies 'have to one another', Malebranche can analyze this experience in terms of seeing

changes in how these external bodies are located relative to one another *and* to the perceiver's own body, that is, in terms of seeing the way the *triangle* changes (OC i. 102/LO 38).

To sum up: Malebranche holds that the external senses represent size, location, figure, and motion as more or less complicated relations to the perceiver's body. A perceiver's visual experience of a bear coming towards her represents how much bigger the bear is than her body, where the bear is located relative to her, the bear's orientation relative to her body, and finally, the rate at which the bear is approaching. This visual experience is accurate, as it would be for a denizen of Lilliput or a giant, so long as the experience gets all the relations right; the bear's absolute size, location, figure, and motion are irrelevant. The biological function of the senses explains why they always relate things back to the perceiver's body. For the purposes of survival, it is no good being informed about external objects — for example, there is an enormous bear with gnashing teeth and sharp claws! — unless we are also informed about our relation to these objects — right around the corner!

## 2.2 *Sensible Qualities: Hot and Cold, Taste, Odor, Color, etc.*

In addition to representing their spatial properties, the external senses represent material things as having sensible qualities like hot and cold, pleasure and pain, taste, odor, color, etc. As Malebranche writes:

[O]ur eyes represent colors to us on the surface of bodies and light in the air and in the sun; our ears make us hear sounds as spread through the air and in the bodies that reverberate; and if we believe what the other senses

report, heat will be in fire, sweetness in sugar, odor in musk, and all the sensible qualities in the bodies that seem to exude or diffuse them. (OC iii. 55-6/LO 569; see also OC xii. 100/JS 63)

When a tomato sensorily appears to be red, tasty, and cool, for example, it is tempting to assume that the senses attribute various non-relational or intrinsic qualities to the tomato. As I mentioned in Section 1, Simmons interprets Malebranche as holding a view along these lines. According to Simmons's reading, when the tomato looks red to the perceiver, the perceiver's visual experience represents the tomato as having a non-relational or intrinsic qualitative property of redness. This would amount to an *exception* to Malebranche's commitment to the body-relativity of sensory content. To be fair, Simmons rightly notes that *which* sensible qualities a perceiver experiences an object as having depend on, and are relative to, the current state of a perceiver's body. The very same bucket of water might feel hot or cold depending on the temperature of a person's hands. Someone might find wine pleasant when healthy, bitter when they have a fever (OC i. 149/LO 64). But this familiar kind of perceptual variability is consistent with the view, which Simmons endorses, that sensible qualities are represented *as* non-relational or absolute properties of bodies.<sup>xxviii</sup> I disagree with Simmons on this point. I think that Malebranche's commitment to body-relativity extends to the sensible quality aspect of sensory experience. On my reading, when the tomato sensorily appears red, tasty, and cool, the senses do not represent the tomato as having any non-relational qualitative properties, but as being related to the perceiver's body in various ways.

Before making the case for my reading, let me explain what I'm up against. Malebranche endorses a *sensationalist* account of sensible qualities, according to which

colors, smells, taste, and so forth are really properties of the soul (sensations), which get *projected* onto bodies in sensory experience. '[T]he soul is painted with the colors of the rainbow when looking at it', Malebranche argues, and 'when we smell carrion the soul becomes formally rotten, and that the taste of sugar, or of pepper or salt, is something belonging to the soul' (OC iii. 166/LO 634). '[Y]our soul is green, or has a modification of green that you see', he writes, 'when you are in the middle of a meadow, your eyes open' (OC xix. 564). Thus, when the tomato looks red, visual experience misrepresents the tomato as having a mental property (a red sensation) that is in fact instantiated by the perceiver. As Malebranche writes, 'we habitually attribute our own sensations to objects, and [naturally] judge colors, odors, tastes and other sensible qualities to be in the bodies we call colored, odiferous, and flavored' (OC i. 166/LO 73; see also OC i. 138/LO 58).

Malebranche's projectivism *might* seem to imply that the senses represent bodies as having intrinsic or non-relational sensible qualities. The argument would go like this. Sensible quality sensations are non-relational properties of the soul. Thus, in representing sensible quality sensations as properties of bodies, the senses represent bodies as having non-relational properties. There are two problems with this argument, however. First, Malebranche denies that sensible quality sensations are *non-relational* properties of the soul. On the contrary, he defines sensation as 'a *modification of our soul in relation to what takes place in the body to which it is joined*' (OC i. 143/LO 61). Second, even if sensible quality sensations *were* non-relational or intrinsic properties of the soul, it does not follow that sensory experience would *represent* these sensations as non-relational or intrinsic properties of bodies. Malebranche's projectivism takes us deep into the realm of misrepresentation. If the senses can misrepresent properties of the soul as if they were

properties of body, then presumably the senses can also misrepresent non-relational properties as if they were relational. Still, although Malebranche's projectivism may not *entail* that sensible qualities are represented as absolute properties of bodies, Simmons might argue that this is the natural or default position, and so presumably Malebranche's view. I disagree.

Let us consider, again, Malebranche's endorsement of body-relativity in the *Dialogues*. The senses provide instinctive proofs 'not of the nature and properties of the bodies around us . . . [and] not of the relation between objects . . . but of *the relation they have to our body according to its disposition at the time*' (OC xii. 99/JS 62, emphasis added). The passage continues as follows:

I say, "according to its disposition at the time" because, for example, we find and should find lukewarm water hot if we touch it with a cold hand, and we find it cold if we touch it with a hot hand. We find and should find it pleasant when we are overcome by thirst, but when our thirst is quenched we find it bland and distasteful. (OC xii. 99/JS 62)

Malebranche uses an experience of sensible qualities to illustrate his view that the senses represent only 'the relation [objects] have to our body according to its disposition at the time' (OC xii. 99/JS 62). Thus, when he describes someone who experiences lukewarm water as *hot* when she touches it with a cold hand, and as *cold* when she touches it with a warm hand, we should interpret Malebranche as describing tactile experiences that represent *relations* the water has to the perceiver's body 'according to its disposition at the time' (OC xii. 99/JS 62). Similarly, when Malebranche describes someone who experiences the water as 'pleasant' in one situation, and as 'bland and distasteful in

another', he is describing gustatory experiences that are supposed to represent relations to the perceiver's body (OC xii. 99/JS 62). Malebranche's decision to use sensible qualities to illustrate his thesis that the senses represent nothing but relations to the body makes it clear that this thesis is supposed to apply to our experiences of these qualities.

It is somewhat less clear, however, what kinds of relations Malebranche has in mind. My proposal is that when material things sensorily appear to be colored, smelly, tasty, and so forth, sensory experience represents these things as having various causal powers to produce sensations of color, smell, and taste in the perceiver, where these causal powers operate *by acting on her body*. In addition to the many passages where Malebranche describes the senses as representing sensations as being 'on' or 'in' material things (OC iii. 55-6/LO 569; see also OC i. 73/LO 21 and OC i. 161/LO 70), there are also passages where he describes the senses as representing material things as *producing* or *causing* sensations in the perceiver. In Chapter 17 of Book I of the *Search*, Malebranche argues that the 'errors of our senses' include not merely 'the prejudice *that our sensations are in objects*', but also '*that the objects of our senses are the true causes of our sensations*' (OC i. 171/LO 76). Both these prejudices can be traced back, and indeed are generalizations from, the testimony of the senses. As Malebranche writes 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, emphasis added)

He reiterates this point in the *Christians Meditations*: '[m]y senses tell me that sensible objects act on me', and, more specifically, that fire has a 'force' to produce in me sensations of pain (OC x. 47; see also OC i. 42-3/LO 3, OC iii. 63/LO 574, OC iv. 93, OC iv. 95, OC x. 51, OC x. 55, and OC xii. 100/JS 63).<sup>xxix</sup> This pair of prejudices – that sensations are both *in* and *caused by* objects – might seem odd, since together they suggest that the senses represent sensations as being in two places at once, both *in* the object *and* the perceiver. We can reconcile these strands by reading Malebranche as saying that the senses represent sensible qualities as *causing* experiences of these very qualities. When a tomato looks red, for example, the perceiver experiences the tomato's redness as producing a copy of itself in her in the form of a red sensation. In other words, the perceiver experiences the tomato's redness as being a causal power to produce a red sensation in her. This means that sensible qualities are represented as *relational properties* of bodies that essentially involve the perceiver.

We are now only a short step away from vindicating the body-relativity of sensible quality experience. The perceiver experiences the tomato's redness as a causal power to produce a red sensation in her *by impressing itself on her sense organs*. That is to say, the senses represent a causal link between the tomato's redness and the perceiver's experience that is *represented* as running straight through the perceiver's body. This point comes out in the *Dialogues*, when Malebranche argues that people who 'consult only their senses' end up (falsely) believing that their own body is the immediate or true cause of their sensory experiences (OC xii. 149/JS 105). The naïve Aristes speaks for the senses here:



[T]here is nothing to which I am more closely united than my own body. For my body cannot be touched without my being disturbed. As soon as it is wounded, I am aware of being injured. Nothing is smaller than the proboscis of those troublesome gnats that bother us on an evening walk and yet, however faintly they push the imperceptible tip of their venomous proboscis into my skin, I am aware in my soul of being pierced. The very sound they make in my ears alarms me — a sure sign that I am united to my body more closely than to anything else. Yes, Theodore, this is so true that it is only by means of our body that we are united to all these objects surrounding us. If the sun did not disturb my eyes, it would be invisible to me; and were I unfortunate enough to fall deaf, I would no longer find as much pleasure in the company I keep with my friends. It is even through my body that I hold to my religion. For through my eyes and my ears faith has entered my mind and my heart. In short, it is by means of my body that I am connected to everything. I am, therefore, united to my body more closely than to anything else. (OC xii. 148/JS 105; see also OC xii. 70/JS 37)

Given that this passage describes the opinions of those who ‘consult only their senses’, we can read it as a phenomenological text describing the representational contents of sensory experience: viz. that the senses represent all sensory experience as occurring through, and causally mediated by, the body. Thus, when objects sensorily appear to be hot, cold, colored, smelly, tasty, and so forth, sensory experience represents these objects as having various causal powers to make themselves manifest to the perceiver *by acting on her body*. This explains why Malebranche focuses on sensible qualities to illustrate his view that the senses represent nothing but relations to the body.

This brings us to the next layer of body-relative content conveyed by sensible quality experience. In virtue of representing objects as colored, smelly, tasty, hot, and cold, the senses tell the perceiver how she can and should interact with the bodies in her vicinity. An experience of an apple as sweet, for example, tells the perceiver to eat the apple. Malebranche hints at this approach to sensible quality experience in the *Dialogues*:

[I]f we had to examine all the relations which the bodies surrounding us have with the current dispositions of our body, in order to judge whether, how, and how much we should have commerce with them, this would divide — what am I saying! — this would completely fill the capacity of our mind. And surely our body would be no better off. It would soon be destroyed by some involuntary distraction, for our needs change so frequently and sometimes so suddenly that for us not to be surprised by some unpleasant accident would require a vigilance of which we are incapable. For example, when would we decide to eat? What would we eat? When would we stop eating? What a fine occupation for a mind which walks and exercises its body, to know with every step it has the body take, that it is in a fluid air which cannot injure or bother it by cold or heat, wind or rain, or by some malignant and poisonous vapor; that on every place it goes to step there is not some hard and sharp body capable of injuring it; that it must suddenly lower its head to avoid a stone, and still maintain its balance for fear of falling. (OC xii. 98/JS 61)

If we were not equipped with senses, we wouldn't know 'whether, how, and how much, we should have commerce with' the bodies surrounding us (OC xii. 98/JS 61; see also OC iii. 72-3/LO 580 and OC iv. 209-10). But if that is what we would be missing without

senses, then presumably the senses fill this gap, by telling us how we *should* engage with the bodies surrounding us. Malebranche does not specify here that the *sensible quality* aspects of sensory experience provide the requisite practical information. But this point comes out more clearly in other texts. ‘[T]hrough pleasure and pain, through agreeable and disagreeable tastes, and by other sensations’, Malebranche writes in the *Search*, 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). He reiterates this point in the *Treatise on Morality*:

Taste is a short and incontestable proof that certain bodies are or are not proper food. Without knowing the structure of a stone or an unknown fruit, it suffices to present it to the tongue, faithful gatekeeper (at least before Original Sin) of everything that should enter into the house, to ensure that it won’t cause any disorders. *And it’s the same thing with the other organs of our senses.* Nothing is more prompt than touch to alert us that we are being burned, when we imprudently touch a hot iron. (OC xi. 131, emphasis added)

A perceiver’s experience of an apple as sweet tells her to eat it; her experience of a rotten egg as smelly represents the egg as to be avoided. A pleasurable feeling of warmth emanating from a fire beckons a perceiver in from the cold; a burning sensation tells her to step back when she gets too close. And, Malebranche claims, ‘it’s the same thing with the other organs of our senses’ (OC xi. 131; see also OC i. 127-9/LO 51-2).

Color experience does not tell the perceiver how she *should* interact with bodies, since, unlike taste and smell, ‘sensations of color are not given to us for judging whether

bodies are nourishing or not' (OC i. 153/LO 66). Instead, color experience represents how the perceiver *can* interact with bodies in her vicinity, by representing which routes through her environment are *passable* or *accessible* to her. For Malebranche, the physical world is a plenum. Some regions of extension, such as air, are sufficiently fluid for the perceiver to move through them with ease, while others, such as granite, resist her body's movements, where the degree of resistance depends on the particular constitution of her body. Color experience marks these differences. Consider, again, Malebranche's description of what it would be like if we were *not* equipped with senses:

What a fine occupation for a mind which walks and exercises its body, to know with every step it has the body take, that it is in a fluid air which cannot injure or bother it by cold or heat, wind or rain, or by some malignant and poisonous vapor; that on every place it goes to step there is not some hard and sharp body capable of injuring it; that it must suddenly lower its head to avoid a stone, and still maintain its balance for fear of falling. (OC xii. 98/JS 61)

If we lacked senses, we would need to figure out which regions of extension were fluid or yielding enough for our bodies to move through safely. Hence, we may surmise that the senses provide the requisite information. Touch conveys this kind of information, by representing bodies as soft or hard when the perceiver makes contact with them. But sight tells the perceiver from a distance that a region of extension is accessible to her by representing this region as transparent, and impassable or solid by representing it as having a solid color. This is one sense in which color sensations are 'only for the purpose of picking out one body from another' (OC i. 155/LO 66). Color experience divides the world into objects based on the body's capacities to interact with these objects.

To sum up: a perceiver's sensory experience of a tomato as red, tasty, and cool represents the tomato as having causal powers to produce sensations of red, tastiness, and coolness in the perceiver, by acting on her body. In virtue of representing the tomato as having these causal powers, the senses thereby represent how the perceiver can and should engage with the tomato, for example, by eating it. The perceiver's sensible quality experience does *not* tell her anything about what the tomato is like apart from these relations to her body. Our perceiver might be liable to jump to conclusions about what the tomato is like independently of her body — non-relationally or absolutely red, tasty, and cool, for example — in roughly the same way that she might draw inferences about the tomato's absolute size on the basis of seeing its size relative to her body. But these kinds of inferences are a mistake. As Malebranche reminds us, 'the body is not an absolute standard against which one should measure other things' (OC i. 91/LO 31).

### 3. BODILY AWARENESS

Whereas the external senses represent the spatial properties and sensible qualities of external objects, bodily awareness represents spatial properties of one's own body (its shape, dimensions, the position of its limbs, etc.), as well as a distinctive category of sensible qualities which one typically only feels in one's own body (bodily pleasure and pain, tickles and itches, hunger and thirst, etc.). To show that Malebranche holds that bodily awareness represents nothing but relations to the perceiver's body, I will adopt a similar procedure as in Section 2. I will argue that the spatial properties of one's own body, as well as the distinctive sensible qualities associated with bodily awareness, are represented as relations to the body.

### 3.1 *Spatial Properties of One's Own Body*

When discussing bodily awareness, Malebranche does not focus on the way the perceiver experiences the spatial properties of her own body (cf. OC i. 112-3/LO 43, OC i. 133/LO 55, and OC iii. 345/LO 745). But he does make a few suggestive remarks. We should distinguish two cases. Consider, first, the way bodily awareness represents the spatial properties of a *part* of the perceiver's body, like a hand. Bodily awareness does *not* represent the absolute or non-relational spatial properties of the hand, e.g. its absolute size, anymore than sight reveals the absolute or non-relational spatial properties of external objects: '[i]n vain do I touch my face or my head. I feel my body and those surrounding me only *with hands whose length and figure I do not know*' (OC iii. 58/LO 571, emphasis added). Although Malebranche does not offer a positive characterization of the way bodily awareness represents the size and shape of the perceiver's hands, we may surmise, in light of his discussion of spatial perception in Book I of the *Search*, that bodily awareness represents the 'length and figure' of the perceiver's hands in relation to her body as a whole (cf. OC xii. 240/JS 184). A perceiver feels that her hand is *smaller than* her body. She feels the *location* and *orientation* of her hand in relation to the other parts of her body, as well as the way her hand *moves* away from the rest of her body when she reaches for a glass of water. In the *Dialogues*, Malebranche argues that the human body counts as a single thing, distinct from surrounding bodies, in virtue of the various relations between the human body's parts: '[y]our head, for example, maintains the same relation of distance to your neck and other parts of your body, all the parts of which comprise but one body' (OC xii. 240/JS 184). My suggestion, then, is that bodily

awareness acquaints us with this system of relations. It is worth pausing to consider the contrast between the external senses and bodily awareness. Whereas the external senses represent objects located relative to a privileged bodily origin, there does not seem to be an analogous *origin* in the case of bodily awareness. A perceiver's experience of a body part's location just is an experience of its location in the system of relations that make up the human body, without any one position in this system being privileged. In bodily awareness, then, the perceiver is aware of her body from no particular perspective: as if she had a sensory view from nowhere, as it were.

Consider, next, the way a perceiver experiences the spatial properties of her body as a whole. Again, Malebranche is clear that bodily awareness does *not* represent the body as a whole as having absolute or non-relational spatial properties: 'our body is not an *absolute* standard against which we should measure other things' (OC i. 91/LO 31, emphasis added). Given this constraint, Malebranche can accommodate the spatial properties of one's body as a whole in two ways. First, Malebranche could argue that the perceiver experiences the spatial properties of her body as a whole in relation to other things, either a part of her body or an external object. When a perceiver feels that her hand is *smaller than* her body, she would also have a sense of her body as a whole as *bigger than* her hand. On this proposal, the perceiver's sensory experience of the spatial properties of her body as a whole would simply be an aspect of her experience of other things, corresponding to the body-pole of the relations the senses represent. The second possibility is that a perceiver's bodily awareness represents the spatial properties of her body as a whole in relation to itself: she experiences her body as the same size as itself, and as located where it is located. This would make a perceiver's awareness of her body

as a whole a limiting case, and an admittedly uninformative one, but it need not be an exception to Malebranche's body-relative view of sensory perception.

Someone might object that the perceiver's awareness of her own body cannot be restricted in this way, on the grounds that her external senses could represent relations to her body only if she had some prior sense of the non-relational or absolute properties of her body, presumably through bodily awareness. According to this objection, a perceiver's visual experience of a doorframe as *bigger than* her body presupposes a sense of her body as having an absolute or non-relational size, since her visual experience represents the doorframe as being some multiple of the absolute or non-relational size of her body. Malebranche's claim that sight provides us with 'ideas of objects proportioned *to the idea* we have of the size of our body' might suggest this kind of dependence of external perception on bodily awareness (OC i. 87/LO 29, emphasis added).<sup>xxx</sup> But this cannot be Malebranche's considered position. If bodily awareness represented the perceiver's body as having an absolute size, and if sight represented the door as some multiple of this size, then the perceiver would be in a position to work out the absolute or non-relational size of the door, through a simple calculation. This result conflicts with Malebranche's claim that 'our body is not an *absolute* standard against which we should measure other things', and his insistence that we are completely in the dark about the absolute sizes of things (OC i. 91/LO 31, emphasis added; see also OC iii. 58/LO 571).

This objection gets its appeal by generalizing from the plausible *metaphysical* claim that relations are grounded in the non-relational features of their relata to the claim that representations of relations are grounded in representations of the non-relational features of their relata. Even if Malebranche were to accept the metaphysical constraint



on relations, there is no reason to think that he would also accept the representational constraint, at least not without further argument. As I read Malebranche, the sensory representation of the relations is fundamental. When a perceiver sees that a doorframe is *bigger than* her body, she simply sees the *fit* or *proportion* between them, without any prior or independent awareness of her body's dimensions.

### 3.2 *Sensible Qualities Unique to One's Own Body*

Although Malebranche's discussion of the spatial properties represented by bodily awareness is sketchy, he has more to say about the sensible qualities — viz. bodily pleasure, pain, tickles and itches, hunger and thirst — that we feel to be located uniquely in our own body. Just as a perceiver's visual experience of an apple as red represents the redness as a causal power to produce a red sensation, so too does a perceiver's bodily experience of her foot as painful represent this foot as having a power to produce a pain sensation in her, which depends on the affection of her body. In addition to this basic layer of body-relative content, bodily awareness conveys at least two other kinds of relations to the body, in virtue of representing various parts of one's body as sources of bodily sensations.

First, Malebranche argues that bodily sensations of pleasure and pain convey information about the health and well-being of one's body. When a perceiver falls off her bike and feels that her hip is causing her pain, she experiences that her hip is in a bad state. Pleasure represents part of her body as in a good state. The perceiver does not experience these bodily states as good or bad relative to a cosmic system of values, however, anymore than she experiences objects as located in a 'cosmic coordinate

system'.<sup>xxx</sup> Rather, she experiences these bodily states relative to, and as contributing to or detracting from, her body's health. As Malebranche writes, the soul 'must be advised of all [the body's] changes and must be able to distinguish those that are agreeable to our body's constitution from those that are not, because it would be of no use to know them absolutely and without this relation to its body' (OC i. 126/LO 51).

Second, Malebranche argues that bodily awareness represents the ways the perceiver is related to her own body. Sometimes pleasure and pain represent the perceiver as *having* a body, or, equivalently, that this body is *her own* or *belongs to her* (OC xii. 118/JS 78). 'God discloses creatures to us', Malebranche explains, 'as belonging to us . . . when the perception is very interesting and very lively, as is pain' (OC iii. 66/LO 575). In other passages, Malebranche claims that bodily sensations represent the body as *part* of ourselves (OC i. 138-9/LO 58). In the *Dialogues on Death*, for example, he argues that *if* a perceiver were to experience a wall as an immediate source of bodily pain, she would thereby experience the wall as part of herself: 'if the idea that you have of that wall struck you with a sensation of pain, instead of touching you only with a sensation of whiteness, you would regard that wall as part of yourself; because you cannot doubt that pain does not belong to you, as you can now with regard to whiteness' (OC xii. 408-9). And sometimes he even claims that pleasure and pain represent the perceiver as being identical to her body (OC i. 476/LO 253). Although Malebranche is not fully explicit about how these various characterizations hang together, he seems to think that a perceiver can experience her relation to her body in different ways in different situations, which is a point other commentators have not sufficiently emphasized (OC i. 146/LO 62-3).<sup>xxxii</sup> Thus, whereas the external senses represent the ways external objects are related to

the perceiver's body, bodily awareness represents the ways *the perceiver* is related to her body.

#### 4. MALEBRANCHE'S ARGUMENT FOR BODY-RELATIVITY

To this point, I have argued that Malebranche holds that both the external senses and bodily awareness represent nothing but relations to the body. We might wonder why Malebranche endorses this view. In this section, I reconstruct Malebranche's central argument for the body-relativity of sensory perception, which will serve to both explain and justify his commitment to this position.

The senses, Malebranche argues, were 'given to us for the preservation of our body' (OC i. 76/LO 23). This claim follows from his view that 'all the thoughts the soul has through the body, or through dependence upon the body, are all for the sake of the body' (OC i. 376/LO 195). Every mental state occasioned by the body — sensory, imaginative, and passionate — has the function of preserving the body, albeit in different and complementary ways (OC ii. 130/LO 339; see also OC xi. 146).<sup>xxxiii</sup> The biological function of the senses shapes their contents, and dictates the kinds of properties the senses represent.

The function of the senses suggests that a property is apt to be represented by the senses only if it is relevant to the preservation of the body. This constraint does not fully determine the contents of sensory experience, however. It expresses a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. If a hostile nation were to launch nuclear warheads from thousands of miles away, this piece of information would be relevant to preservation of the body. But we do not typically see incoming warheads until it is too late. In addition to

this biological constraint, Malebranche endorses two further constraints on the contents of sensory experience: (a) *a bodily constraint*, according to which the content of sensory representation is partially determined by the actual state of one's sense organs, and (b) *a generality constraint*, according to which sensory experience represents only properties that are generally relevant to the preservation of the body.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As I show in what follows, Malebranche uses this pair of more specific constraints to argue for his view that the senses represent only relations to the body.

#### 4.1 *The Bodily Constraint*

A perceiver's overall sensory experience as of three-dimensional objects is a compound of sensations and natural judgments. Natural judgments are operations of the senses, prior to any judgmental or volitional activity on the perceiver's part: 'as the senses can only sense and never judge, properly speaking, it is certain that this natural judgment is only a compound sensation that can consequently be mistaken' (OC i. 97/LO 34). When the perceiver looks at a bear, for example, various brown and grey sensations occur in her. As a result of the divinely instituted law of the union of mind and body, natural judgments are produced in the perceiver, thereby resulting in her visual experience as of a bear coming towards her, scaled, oriented, and located relative to her body.

In producing natural judgments, God confines Himself to the perceiver's finite, bodily perspective. God institutes the law of the union so that the perceiver receives the natural judgments that she *would* make for herself, if she could inspect the state of her sense organs, and make inferences about her surroundings on this basis, reasoning from

bodily effects to their probable causes. Natural judgments correspond to the conclusions of these hypothetical inferences:

[T]o speak only about what concerns vision, God through this general law gives us precisely all those perceptions we would give ourselves if we had an exact knowledge, not only of what takes place in our brain and in our eyes, but also of the situation and movement of our bodies, if in addition we knew optics and geometry perfectly, and if we could, on the basis of this actual knowledge, and not of other knowledge we might have drawn from elsewhere, instantaneously produce an infinity of precise inferences, and at the same time act in ourselves according to these precise inferences and give ourselves all the different perceptions, whether confused or distinct, that we have of objects we see at a glance — perceptions of their size, figure, distance, motion or rest, and all their various colors. (OC iii. 327/LO 733; see also OC xii. 284/JS 222)

When the perceiver looks at the bear, she receives the natural judgments the perceiver would make about her surroundings if she knew everything happening in her body. As Alquié writes, ‘[t]hese judgments are given to me, but they are given to me according to what I am, in which we meet the primacy of the individual being constituting the union of my mind with a body occupying a particular location in space’.<sup>xxxv</sup> This yields Malebranche’s *bodily constraint* on sensory content: sensory experience is restricted to representing properties that can be inferred from the state of the perceiver’s body at the time, using only principles drawn from human physiology, optics, and geometry.

#### 4.2 *The Generality Constraint*

Changes in the perceiver's body involve a dizzying amount of information about her surroundings, which could, in principle, be reconstructed. In providing the perceiver with natural judgments, God gives her 'the most suitable sensory perceptions possible for the preservation of life' (OC xii. 284/JS 222). More precisely, natural judgments convey the type of content that is *generally* helpful for preserving the body:

[T]hrough our senses, God has sufficiently provided for the preservation of our life, and nothing could be any better. Since order would have it that the laws concerning the body and soul should be simple, they must be very general: and God ought not to have established particular laws for cases that hardly ever occur. In these instances reason must come to the aid of the senses, for reason can be of use in all things. But the senses are determined toward certain natural judgments that are the most useful that can be conceived of . . . (OC iii. 185/LO 646-7)

The senses might fail to represent that a piece of fruit is poisonous, for example, if this species of fruit is otherwise quite similar to healthful species, and, moreover, is 'very rare' (OC iii. 184/LO 646). The senses are tools for preserving the body, but they are coarse-grained, calibrated to the kinds of situations we encounter in ordinary life. This yields Malebranche's generality constraint on the content of sensory experience: sensory experience represents a property only if information about this property is generally required by the perceiver for preserving her body.

### 4.3 Malebranche's Argument

Now that we have Malebranche's constraints on the table, we can formulate his central argument for the view that sensory experience exclusively represents relations to the perceiver's body. It goes like this:

- (1) Sensory experience represents a property only if information about this property
  - (a) can be inferred from the state of the perceiver's body at the time, using principles drawn from human physiology, optics, and geometry, and
  - (b) is generally required by the perceiver for preserving her body.
- (2) The only properties satisfying (a) and (b) are relations to the perceiver's body.

Therefore,

- (3) Sensory experience represents only relations to the perceiver's body.

Malebranche, in short, takes his generality and bodily constraints to entail the view that the senses tell us about relations to our body, and are otherwise silent.

In the *Search*, Malebranche uses this form of argument to show that visual experience represents only body-relative size:

[I]t is a groundless prejudice to believe that we see material things as they are in themselves. For our eyes, which were given to us only for the preservation of our body, perform their duty quite well by providing us with ideas of objects proportioned to the idea we have of the size of our body, although there are in these an infinite number of parts that they do not disclose to us. (OC i. 87/LO 29; see also OC i. 88/LO 30)

Visual experience *includes* information about the body-relative sizes of things, because this kind of information is generally required for survival. When someone is running

away from a bear, her eyes ‘perform their duty quite well’ by telling her whether her body will fit through a gap in the rocks. But visual experience excludes information about the absolute sizes of things, i.e. ‘bodies as they are in themselves’, because this information is generally irrelevant (OC i. 87/LO 29). A few pages later, Malebranche employs another iteration of this argument to show that sight is restricted to representing the *approximate* sizes of things relative to the body: ‘[i]t must not be imagined, however, that our senses correctly inform us of the relation that other bodies have to our own, for exactitude and precision are not essential to sensory cognition [*connoissances sensibles*], which need serve only for the preservation of life’ (OC i. 92/LO 32). When someone is running away from a bear, she does not need to know the *exact* ratio between her body and the gap in the rocks, but only that she will be able to slip through.

In the *Dialogues*, Malebranche argues for his body-relative view of sensory perception in its full generality. We have already seen this passage, but it is worth revisiting: ‘God had to give us instinctive proofs not of the nature and properties of the bodies around us but of the relation they have to ours, so that we could work successfully for the preservation of life without being incessantly attentive to our needs’ (OC xii. 99/JS 62; see also OC i. 78/LO 24). Malebranche then defends this thesis by appealing to the fact that information about ‘the relation [bodies] have to ours’ allows us to ‘work successfully for the preservation of life, without being incessantly attentive to our needs’ (OC xii. 99/JS 62). That is, Malebranche argues that the senses represent nothing but relations to the body, on the grounds that the perceiver generally needs to be informed about these sorts of relations in order to successfully preserve her body. His bodily constraint is an implicit premise in this argument, however, since it establishes the



domain of possible contents for natural judgments.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Malebranche explicitly appeals to the way sensory experience is constrained by the current affection of the perceiver's body in the *Christian Meditations*, when he explains why the senses represent nothing but relations to the body. 'Remember well what I tell you, God gives you all at once the sensory perceptions of objects which you would give to yourself, if you were capable of acting in yourself, *if you knew perfectly everything that happened in your body*', from which it follows, Malebranche suggests, 'that you know by short sensory proofs the relations bodies have with your body' (OC x. 113, emphasis added). Malebranche thus moves from his bodily and generality constraints to the conclusion that the senses represent exclusively relations to the perceiver's body.

#### 4.4 *An Objection: The Bear Strikes Back*

Someone might object to Malebranche's argument by rejecting its second premise: namely, the claim that relations to the body are the only properties that can be inferred from the state of one's body, and that are generally required for survival. Working through this objection will clarify Malebranche's view of the distinctive way the senses contribute to the preservation of the body, as compared to the imagination.

Suppose, for example, that a bear is chasing our perceiver, and this time there is no gap in the rocks.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Fortunately, there are lots of stones scattered about. The perceiver decides that her best option is to try scaring the bear away, by pelting it with these stones. In this scenario, some of the properties she needs to perceive are body-relative: for example, how far away the bear is from her, whether the stones are within reach, whether she will be able to pick them up and throw them, and so forth. But some

of the properties she needs to be informed about are relative *to the bear's body*. It would be helpful to know, for example, whether a rock is big and heavy enough to harm the bear. The objection, then, is that bear-relative properties satisfy Malebranche's bodily and generality constraints, which would imply that premise (2) is false.

In response, Malebranche can argue that this case is not really a counterexample to (2) because the bear-relative properties — e.g. being big and heavy enough to harm the bear — do not actually satisfy either of his constraints. In this particular situation, it would be helpful for the perceiver to know whether the rocks are big and heavy enough to harm the bear. But the generality constraint says that the senses only inform the perceiver of properties that are *generally* required for survival, and bear-relative properties fail to meet this condition. Suppose that our perceiver is wandering through a rock garden, without any bears on the horizon. It would be distracting for her to see every rock and stone as a weapon to be used against a hypothetical bear. Sensory experience is not designed to deal with 'cases that hardly ever occur' (OC iii. 185/LO 647). When confronted by unusual cases, 'reason must come to the aid of the senses, for reason can be of use in all things' (OC iii. 185/LO 647).

Moreover, the bear-relative properties do not satisfy Malebranche's bodily constraint either. Natural judgments construct a picture of the perceiver's surroundings based on the state of her body, as well as principles drawn from human physiology, optics, and geometry. Principles of bear physiology, in contrast, are not hard-wired into the sensory system, and do not inform the contents of sensory experience. Assuming that a basic knowledge of bear physiology would be required to work out that a rock is big and heavy enough to harm the bear, this kind of bear-relative information will be

excluded from the contents of sensory experience. Sensory experience provides us with a limited view of reality, constrained by the perceiver's body. Natural judgments are made 'on the basis of this actual knowledge [of what is occurring in our bodies], and not of other knowledge we might have drawn from elsewhere' (OC iii. 327/LO 733). Knowing how to deal with a bear is something that one must learn to do, and is not something one can just see.

Fortunately, the senses are not the perceiver's only tools for preserving her body: God also equips her with imagination and passions. If the perceiver has previously encountered bears, her imagination, which includes memory for Malebranche, might bring this past experience to bear on her current plight. Although the perceiver cannot *see* that a rock is big and heavy enough to harm the bear, her imagination might allow her to *associate* the rock with the idea of a weapon, thereby providing her with the information she needs to defend herself (OC i. 222-4/LO 105-6).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Malebranche provides a systematic analysis of the Cartesian insight that the senses, in contrast to the intellect, represent the world from a human or bodily perspective.

Malebranche holds that the senses represent nothing but relations to the body. This thesis applies to the five familiar external senses, as well as to bodily awareness. The external senses represent relations between external objects and the perceiver's body. Bodily awareness represents relations between parts of the perceiver's body and her body as a whole, and the way *she* is related to her body. The senses thus represent the perceiver's body as standing in two very different sets of relations. The external senses relate the

body to a world of external objects, while bodily awareness relates this very same body to the perceiver herself. The perceiver's body, for Malebranche, is the center of the system of relations that make up her sensory world, bridging the gap between self and external objects. Protagoras is said to have made the human being the measure of all things. Malebranche does him one better. According to Malebranche, the human body is the measure, at least for all sensible things.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> I use 'properties' to include both monadic (e.g. Fa) and polyadic properties (e.g. aFb), so that relations count as properties.

<sup>ii</sup> For more extensive discussion of representational content than possible here, see Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience [Contents]* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chs. 1-2.

<sup>iii</sup> For present day examples of this kind of disagreement, see Siegel, *Contents*, chs. 4-5; Mohan Matthen, 'Image Content', in Berit Brogaard (ed.), *Does Perception Have Content?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 265-90; and Susanna Siegel and Alex Byrne, 'Rich or Thin?', in Bence Nanay (ed.), *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 59-80.

<sup>iv</sup> Alison Simmons, 'Cartesian Consciousness Reconsidered', *Philosopher's Imprint*, 12(2) (2012), 1-21, at 12.

<sup>v</sup> In Siegel's terminology, this thesis is about the 'contents of perception', i.e. the accuracy or veridicality conditions that characterize the way things sensorily appear to the perceiver. Siegel, *Contents*, esp. chs. 1-2. The claim that sensory experiences have contents, represent, or tell the perceiver that the world is a certain way is meant to be

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metaphysically neutral about how it is that sensory experience is capable of having representational content, as I explain in Section 1 below.

<sup>vi</sup> By ‘bodily awareness’, I mean the sense of one’s own body ‘from the inside’, which results from bodily sensations like pleasure and pain, hunger and thirst, as well as kinesthetic or proprioceptive sensations of the position and movement of one’s limbs.

<sup>vii</sup> In describing sensory experience, Malebranche does not distinguish between experiencing *body-relative properties* and experiencing *relations to the perceiver’s body*. He does not distinguish, for example, seeing that a palm tree is *tall relative to the perceiver’s body* ( $V_1$ ) from seeing that a palm tree is *taller than* the perceiver’s body ( $V_2$ ). This equivalence makes sense if we think of an experience’s content in terms of its accuracy conditions. Since the palm tree has the body-relative property ‘tall relative to the perceiver’s body’ in precisely the same circumstances that a palm tree stands in the ‘taller than’ relation to her body, it follows that  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  will be accurate in precisely the same circumstances.

<sup>viii</sup> For extensive discussion and defense of this interpretive claim, see Alison Simmons, ‘Spatial Perception From a Cartesian Point of View’ [‘Spatial Perception’], *Philosophical Topics*, 31 (2003), 395-423; and Alison Simmons, ‘Guarding the Body: A Cartesian Phenomenology of Perception’ [‘Guarding the Body’], in Paul Hoffman and Gideon Yaffe (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Vere Chappell* (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2008), 81-113.

<sup>ix</sup> Alison Simmons, ‘Sensory Perception of Bodies: Meditation 6.5’, in David Cunning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes’s Meditations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 258-76, at 274.

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<sup>x</sup> Martial Gueroult, *Malebranche III: Les Cinq abîmes de la providence. 2. La Nature et la grâce* [*Cinq abîmes*] (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1959); Simmons, ‘Spatial Perception’; and Simmons, ‘Guarding the Body’.

<sup>xi</sup> Commentators defending the view that sensations are *not* intentional include Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *Nicolas Malebranche* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1963), 103 and 139; Ferdinand Alquie, *Le Cartésianisme de Malebranche* [*Cartésianisme*] (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 505; Steven Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* [*Ideas*] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 199; Nicholas Jolley, ‘Sensation, Intentionality and Animal Consciousness: Malebranche’s Theory of the Mind’, *Ratio*, 7 (1995), 128-42, at 131; Tad Schmaltz, *Malebranche’s Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 99 and 107-8; and Walter Ott, *Descartes, Malebranche, and the Crisis of Perception* [*Crisis*] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 7. Commentators defending the view that sensations *are* intentional include Daisie Radner, *Malebranche: A Study of a Cartesian System* [*Study*] (Van Gorcum, 1978); Daisie Radner, ‘Malebranche and the Individuation of Perceptual Objection’ [‘Individuation’], in Kenneth Barber and Jorge Gracia (eds.), *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 59-72; Jasper Reid, ‘Malebranche on Intelligible Extension’ [‘Intelligible Extension’], *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 11 (2003), 581-608, at 584; and Alison Simmons, ‘Sensation in the Malebranchean Mind’ [‘Sensation’], in Jon Miller (ed.), *Topics in Early Modern Philosophy of Mind* (Springer Press, 2009), 105-29.

<sup>xii</sup> Émile Bréhier, ‘Les Jugements naturels chez Malebranche’ [‘Jugements naturels’], *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger*, 125 (1938), 142-50; Maurice

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Merleau-Ponty, *L'Union de l'âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran, et Bergson* [*L'Union*] (Paris: Vrin, 1968), ch. 4; Lawrence Nolan, 'Malebranche on Sensory Cognition and "Seeing As"' ['Seeing As'], *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 50 (2012), 21-52; and Ott, *Crisis*, chs. 8 and 9.

<sup>xiii</sup> Alquié, *Cartésianisme*, 204; Radner, *Study*, 13; Nadler, *Ideas*, 81; and Simmons, 'Sensation', 112.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bréhier, 'Jugements naturels', 149; Radner, 'Individuation'; Reid, 'Intelligible Extension', 582-4; Nolan, 'Seeing As', 24-7 and 30-7; and Ott, 'Crisis', 167-76.

<sup>xv</sup> Bréhier, 'Jugements naturels', 146.

<sup>xvi</sup> Gueroult, *Cinq abîmes*, 63.

<sup>xvii</sup> Alquié, *Cartésianisme*, 177; and Merleau-Ponty, *L'Union*, 22-3.

<sup>xviii</sup> Simmons, 'Guarding the Body', 87. In addition to the ring of the passage cited here, Simmons accepted this construal of her view in private correspondence.

<sup>xix</sup> Simmons, 'Spatial Perception', 400-1 and 407-8.

<sup>xx</sup> Simmons, 'Spatial Perception', 399-404.

<sup>xxi</sup> Gueroult, *Cinq abîmes*, 63.

<sup>xxii</sup> Malebranche identifies 'instinctive proofs' with 'confused knowledge' occasioned by 'disturbances' in the body, which implies that they are sensory experiences (OC xii. 99/JS 62; see also OC i. 67/LO 17, OC i. 143/LO 61, OC ii. 126/LO 337, and OC xi. 117).

<sup>xxiii</sup> When Malebranche refers to 'true size', 'absolute extension', or 'extension in itself' in *Search* I.6, he is referring to the non-relational sizes, dimensions, or extension of objects, i.e., the size they would have independently of their relations to any other object,

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and, more specifically, to the perceiver's body. This gloss is inspired by Langton's reading of Kant's use of the phrase 'in itself'. Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>xxiv</sup> We might thus see Malebranche as anticipating Bennett's view that 'size is experienced in body-scale units'. David Bennett, 'How the World Is Measured Up in Size Experience', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 83(2) (2011), 345-65, at 345.

<sup>xxv</sup> Simmons, 'Spatial Perception', 400.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Granted, seeing this triangle is not like seeing a triangular configuration of external objects. One important difference is that although visual experience implicitly ascribes a location to the perceiver's body, vision does not thereby represent the perceiver's body as having any particular color, at least in so far as the perceiver's body is the perceptual origin relative to which things are represented. When we look in the mirror, or just look down, we of course see our bodies as variously colored, but in that case our bodies serve double-duty, occupying both ends of the relations represented by sight. The perceiver's body *qua* perceptual origin is thus visible in one sense – in so far as vision represents its spatial relations to external objects, e.g. its relative size, location, etc. – but invisible in another sense – in so far as vision does not represent the perceiver's body *qua* perceptual origin as having any particular color.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Simmons suggests an argument along these lines. Simmons, 'Spatial Perception', 402 and 416.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Simmons, 'Guarding the Body', 104.

<sup>xxix</sup> Malebranche, of course, is an occasionalist, who holds that God is the only true or genuine cause. A perceiver's sensory experience of sensible qualities is thus misleading



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to the extent that this experience suggests that objects are the true or genuine causes of sensations, as Schmaltz points out. Tad Schmaltz, 'Malebranche's Cartesianism and Lockean Colors', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 12 (1995), 387-403, at 392.

<sup>xxx</sup> Simmons proposes a reading along these lines. Simmons, 'Spatial Perception', 407-8.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Simmons, 'Spatial Perception', 416.

<sup>xxxii</sup> I take up this aspect of Malebranche's view in Colin Chamberlain, 'Our Bodies, Our Selves: Malebranche on the Experience of Embodiment', *Ergo*, 5(19) (2018), 507-39.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> For discussion of the harmony between the senses, imagination, and passions, see Sean Greenberg, 'Malebranche on the Passions: Biology, Morality, and the Fall', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 18 (2010), 191-207, at 196.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> What I am calling Malebranche's 'generality constraint' has nothing to do with Gareth Evans's principle of the same name: they involve different kinds of generality. Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Alquié, *Cartésianisme*, 177.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> At this point in the *Dialogues*, Malebranche has not yet explained the way God confines himself to the perceiver's bodily position in producing natural judgments (OC xii. 284/JS 222). So it is unsurprising that he glosses over the role played by the bodily constraint in this argument.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> I am indebted to Eugene Chislenko for raising this objection.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the University of Rochester, and I am grateful to the audience there for many helpful suggestions and criticisms. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to a number of people for help and comments along the way: Paul Audi, Eugene Chislenko, Sean Greenberg, Andrew Hamilton, Jeffrey McDonough,

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Sam Newlands, Elliot Paul, Alison Peterman, Donald Rutherford, Alison Simmons, Eric Stencil, Julie Walsh, and Ziqian Zhang, as well as two anonymous reviewers for *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*.