How To Eat a Peach: Malebranche on the Function of the Passions

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Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) holds that the senses, imagination, and passions serve the body's needs. In this paper, I explain how the passions keep us alive by situating them in Malebranche's account of ordinary bodily action. Malebranche holds a consent-based view of action. An agent translates her inclinations or motives into action only when she consents to them. The passions contribute to the preservation of life by helping the agent close the gap between inclination and action. The passions, according to Malebranche, are complex psychophysiological phenomena whose various elements—perceptions, shifts of attention, evaluations, bodily preparation, feelings, and so on—work together to elicit the agent's consent.

> At a restaurant in Italy (on my first trip there), the diners at the next table didn't have a fancy dessert, they just had a bowl of peaches and a bottle of cold Moscato…This was not a complicated dish.
> —Diana Henry, *How To Eat a Peach*

1. Introduction

Many thoughts or mental states function to preserve the body. 'Everything happening to the mind by way of the body', Malebranche writes, 'is only for the sake of the body' (*Treatise on Morality* I.13.8, OCM XI 149/W 137; hereafter *Treatise*). If a mental state arises from the mind's union with the body, then, according to Malebranche, the state circles back and serves the body's needs.

Malebranche applies this principle to the senses, imagination, and passions. '[T]he imagination as well as the senses, speaks only for the body', Malebranche explains, 'since naturally everything which comes to the mind by way of the body is only for the body' (*Treatise* I.12.10, OCM XI 139/W 129-30). He similarly holds that '[t]he passions are well governed if they are considered only in relation to the preservation of the body' (*Search After Truth* V.1, OCM II 131/LO 340; hereafter *Search*), and he refers to the 'remarkable economy of the passions and senses, so precisely designed for the preservation of the body' (*Search* V.1, OCM II 130/LO 339). When

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an agent *sees* a delicious peach, *fantasizes* about how good it will taste, and *passionately desires* a bite, these responses arise from the body and aim to preserve it.[1] The precise division of labour between the senses, imagination, and passions is unclear, however, and it is not immediately obvious what each of these faculties contributes to survival nor why all three are needed.[2] The contribution of the passions—love, hate, fear, joy, sadness, desire, and so on—to survival is particularly perplexing.[3]

While a burning desire for a peach might seem to make an obvious contribution to survival by motivating one's pursuit of nourishment, motivating action—or, at least, giving the original push towards it—is not the main role desire and the other passions play in Malebranche's system. Without any help from the passions, the senses and imagination can incline an agent to perform an action by redirecting the will's orientation towards the good.[4] When something good or pleasing catches one's eye, one's 'irresistible impression towards the good in general' is channelled towards this thing (*Elucidation* I, OCM III 18/LO 547). The sweet taste of a peach, for example, taps into one's interest in the good in general and pushes one to eat the peach. No passions are seemingly required.

If the passions are not primarily about furnishing motives or inclinations, then it is unclear what they are meant to do for us.[5] Malebranche

[1] Contemporary philosophers sometimes distinguish a thin notion of desire as a pro-attitude or disposition to bring something about from a more robust notion of a passionate desire, such as an all-consuming desire to spend time with one's beloved. See, for example, Schapiro (2021, pp. 17-18). I focus on the robust notion of desire in this paper as my central example of a passion.

[2] Simmons (2003, 2008) and Chamberlain (2024) examine the senses and imagination's contributions to survival, respectively. While commentators such as Greenberg (2010, pp. 199-200) note *that* the passions are for preserving the body, they have not adequately explained *how*.

[3] Sometimes Malebranche uses the term 'passion' narrowly to refer to a movement of the will occasioned by a disturbance in one's animal spirits (*Search* V.1, OCM II 127/LO 337; and *Treatise* I.13.2-3, OCM XI 146/W 135). He also uses the term 'passion' more broadly to refer to the complex psychophysiological processes in which such movements are characteristically embedded (*Search* V.4, OCM II 158/LO 357; see also *Search* V.10, OCM II 221/LO 395). The distinctively passionate character of these complex processes arises from the body-dependent movement of the will at their heart, so that these two senses of 'passion' are intimately connected. I follow Malebranche by focusing on passions in the broad sense.

[4] When I describe human action using causal expressions such as *generating*, *producing*, and so on, I refer to the mind's role as an occasional cause, with one important exception. A human agent is the true and not merely an occasional cause of her consent. As Malebranche writes, 'the soul is the true cause [*vraye cause*] of its free acts', that is, acts of consent (*Prémotion Physique* X, OCM XVI 42). See the commentators in note 7 for discussion of whether Malebranche can reconcile this claim with his occasionalism.

[5] Greenberg suggests that the 'job that the passions are supposed to perform' is 'that they dispose human beings to seek out the goods of the body' (2010, p. 202). See also Chamberlain (2024, pp. 2-3). This job description cannot be the whole story, since it fails to differentiate the passions from the motives resulting from the interaction between the senses, imagination, and the will's orientation towards the good, which are in principle available to a mind without passions.

will be in trouble if human beings can get along without the passions, since that will imply that God[6] has made us vulnerable to passionate error and strife without any pressing biological need for these experiences. Malebranche's theodicy of the passions hangs in the balance.

Malebranche can address the worry that the passions are unnecessary. He has a rich and subtle view of the passions that makes it clear what they contribute to survival and why their contribution is plausibly indispensable. Malebranche's presentation of this view in Book Five of the *Search After Truth* and in the *Treatise on Morality* is bewilderingly complex, however, so that the contours of his view are difficult to make out. In the *Search*, Malebranche analyses the passions as sequences of psychophysiological states involving five, six, seven stages or more. As Hoffman notes, Malebranche's analysis 'appears to be extravagant in a way that is not clearly motivated and so calls out for explanation' (1991, p. 187). Recognizing the passions' distinctive role in the preservation of life helps explain their complexity.[7]

My reading of Malebranche has three main planks. To explain what the passions contribute to survival, I situate them in Malebranche's account of voluntary movements or ordinary bodily actions, such as eating a peach, drinking coffee, or running away.[8] I argue, first, that

[6] Malebranche's God is simultaneously an abstract, philosopher's God *and* the Christian God of a devout Catholic. On the one hand, Malebranche describes God as the 'infinitely infinite infinite' or 'Being in general' to indicate God's nature as unrestricted, unlimited, or unqualified Being (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* II.3, OCM XII 52/JS 22, hereafter *Dialogues*; *Search* III-II.8, OCM I 456-7/LO 241). Malebranche's God is the voice of Reason that one hears in the privacy of one's own thoughts (*Elucidation* X, OCM III 129-30/LO 613-4), and the storehouse of the ideas and concepts one thinks with (*Search* III-II.6, OCM I 437-447/LO 230-5). Malebranche's God is also the Good in general towards which the will strains (*Search* III-I.4.1, OCM I 404-405/LO 211), and the wellspring of all causal activity and power (*Search* VI-II.3, OCM II 309-20/LO 446-52). On the other hand, Malebranche's commitment to Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Fall is unwavering and fundamental to his system. Malebranche identifies Reason with the second person of the Trinity (*Christian Meditations* II.13, OCM X 22), and he takes the Incarnation to be a precondition on God's creation (*Treatise on Nature and Grace* I.3, OCM V 15). The story of the Fall organizes Malebranche's investigation of the human mind as the prelapsarian state models the mind's proper functioning (*Search* I.5, OCM I 69-78/LO 19-24). Gouhier (1926a, 1926b) is an important source on the ways Malebranche's religious commitments inform his philosophy. See also Reid (2003) for a more recent discussion that shows how thoroughly Malebranche weaves philosophy and theology together.

[7] Commentators such as Gardiner et al. (1937, pp. 175-180), Rodis-Lewis (1963, pp. 218-221), Hoffman (1991, pp. 186-192), James (1997, pp. 113-117), Bowditch (2010, pp. 368-371), Greenberg (2010, pp. 193-200), Walsh (2018, p. 122), and Schmitter (2021) describe the complexity of Malebranche's account of the passions without adequately explaining its rationale.

[8] Commentators investigating human agency in Malebranche typically focus on whether he can reconcile the mind's free power to consent with his view that God causes everything. See, for example, Schmaltz (1996, ch. 6), Kremer (2000), Greenberg (2008; 2016), Peppers-Bates (2009), Adams (2013), and Walsh and Lennon (2019). Commentators largely ignore Malebranche's

Malebranche endorses a consent-based view of bodily action. When an agent perceives something appealing—like a peach—she feels inclined to interact with it by eating it. The agent's inclination to eat the peach does not move her all the way to action. She acts on this inclination—she takes a bite—only when she consents to it.[9] Motives require the agent's *authorization* to generate action.[10] I argue, second, that the passions encourage the agent to consent to her inclinations to perform the bodily actions survival requires.[11] As a result of the mind-body union, an agent's bare inclination to eat the peach is transformed into a passionate desire: an obsessive, relentless yearning of the kind one might feel for a forbidden fruit or a beautiful body. This desire encompasses a constellation of psychophysiological changes—perceptions, modulations of attention, evaluations, bodily preparation, feelings, and so on—that cluster around the agent's inclination to eat the peach and collectively pressure the agent to consent to it.[12] Rather than merely furnishing an agent with inclinations or motivations to act, the passions encourage the agent to *authorize* her motives via consent. In a slogan: the passions are consent-eliciting machines.[13] This consent-eliciting function unites the various elements of the passions into an integrated psychophysiological

account of ordinary bodily action or voluntary movement, that is, his account of what happens when an agent occasions her body's movements. Kremer, for example, claims that Malebranche 'almost totally disregarded the freedom of overt, bodily, human actions' (2000, p. 191). Kolesnik-Antoine (2009) is an important exception to this scholarly neglect.

[9] By attributing the consent-based view of action to Malebranche, I situate myself in opposition to Greenberg's (2010) view that inclinations—and, more specifically, passions—can generate behaviour *without* the agent's consent or endorsement. James (1997, p. 113) and Walsh (2018, pp. 121-122) similarly hint that passions can lead to behaviour without the agent's consent.

[10] The consent-based view I attribute to Malebranche has historical antecedents in Stoic accounts of human action. See Vogt (2010) and Schwab (2020). It also has currency in the present-day Kantian tradition in the work of Korsgaard (1996, pp. 92-94) and Schapiro (2021), who similarly emphasize the importance of endorsing one's inclinations when acting on them. Malebranche's picture of human motivation thus remains a live philosophical option, at least in its broad outlines.

[11] Malebranche's account of the passions builds on Descartes's claim that the 'natural function [of the passions] is to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body' by developing a sophisticated and systematic account of how exactly the passions elicit consent and why consent matters for survival (*Passions* II.137, AT XI 430/CSM I 376). Malebranche thus picks up one of the many threads in Descartes's account of the passions and weaves it into a full-fledged account.

[12] The passions are not mere accompaniments to inclinations, however. Rather, the passions are complex psychological processes that *incorporate* inclinations into themselves, much as a more intricate and encompassing melody might incorporate a simpler theme. Passions thus relate to inclinations as psychological whole to part, such that the character of the surrounding whole pressures the agent to consent to the inclination.

[13] Though describing a mental process as a machine might seem jarring, Malebranche writes that the passions occur 'naturally and mechanically [*naturellement & machinalement*]' (*Search* V.4, OCM II 158/LO 357).

whole, which might otherwise seem like an unprincipled hodgepodge or mishmash of states.[14]

This account of the passions' function might seem to conflict with Malebranche's insistence that agents should refrain from consenting to their passions. In response to this problem, I argue, third, that Malebranche's considered view is that an agent should *consent selectively* to the inclination towards bodily action, while simultaneously withholding consent from all the other passion-constituting elements (perceptions, shifts of attention, evaluations, feelings, and so on). An agent should use her passions to close the gap between inclination and action, while simultaneously rejecting the evaluative perspective the passions encode. The agent's sense of a peach as desirable, for example, is a useful fiction that the agent can use to convince herself to eat the peach, but she should not mistake the fiction for reality. This way of using the passions allows an agent to reap maximal practical benefit while minimizing error.

2. Malebranche's consent-based view of action

An agent's will is her love of the good in general (*Search* I.1.2, OCM I 46-7/LO 5; IV.1.3, OCM II 12/LO 267). Her will drives her to search for good things, much as hunger or thirst propels her to search for food or drink. As Malebranche writes, the human will is 'parched by a burning thirst, always driven by anxieties and desires for the good it does not possess' (*Search* III-I.4.2, OCM I 405/LO 212). The will 'continuously urges the mind to consider other objects' until 'the mind encounters an object bearing the mark of goodness' (*Search* III-I.4.2, OCM I 406/LO 212). When an agent sees a ripe peach sitting on a sunny windowsill, she perceives the peach as a good that just might satisfy her thirst, and her perception channels her love of the good towards it.[15] When the agent

[14] Malebranche's account of the passions incorporates many of the elements—thoughts, perceptions, feelings, dispositions to attend and act, and so on—discussed in the current philosophical literature about the emotions. But Malebranche fits these diverse elements together into a coherent package. Thus, Malebranche solves Prinz's (2004) 'problem of plenty' that arises when philosophers build many different aspects of emotional experiences into their accounts of the emotions. As Prinz writes, 'by including everything, one can lose sight of what emotions are all about. One can also lose sight of how the different components hang together' (Prinz 2004, p. 18). On my reading, the passions are 'all about' eliciting consent; this function makes their 'components hang together' (*ibid.*).

[15] *Elucidation* I, OCM III 18/LO 547-8.

perceives a bad thing, like a rotting fruit, her perception diverts her love away from it.

One aspect of the will's movement towards an object is an *inclination* to physically interact with and use the object in accordance with its attractive features (*Treatise* I.3.8, OCM XI 42/W 62). When an agent feels drawn towards a peach, she feels inclined to eat it. I use the term *inclination* more narrowly than Malebranche himself to refer to the will's tendencies towards these kinds of bodily actions.[16] The agent's overall movement of the will—an attraction or an aversion—is directed towards an *object*, whereas an inclination is directed at a *bodily action* the agent might perform in response to this object. In addition to this inclination, the will's movement or attraction towards the object will encompass a disposition to attend to its object, a characteristic feel, and so forth.

The will's attraction towards the peach and the resulting inclination to eat it are voluntary states for Malebranche. They are volitional reactions that arise naturally and automatically because of the psychological laws governing the mind. They need not express the agent's freedom. Only some operations of the will—notably, its acts of consent—are free in a basic or non-derivative sense.[17] Thus, Malebranche distinguishes the voluntary and the free. A mental state is voluntary or volitional when it is a state of attraction, aversion, approval, disapproval, acceptance, rejection, or even just interest, as in the cases of attention and wonder, whereas a mental state is free in the basic sense just in case it is truly under the mind's control. Whereas the mind cannot typically choose its attractions and aversions, it is up to the mind whether to consent. For Malebranche, the mind's free power to consent is the nexus of its agency, the vanishingly small kingdom where the mind is king. An agent can make her attractions, aversions, and inclinations free in a derivative sense by consenting to them. By consenting to her inclination

[16] Sometimes Malebranche uses the term 'inclination' generically for any movement or operation of the will, as when he defines the will as the mind's faculty 'of receiving *inclinations,* or of willing different things [*de recevoir plusieurs inclinations, ou de vouloir differentes choses*]' (*Search* I.1.1, OCM I 41/LO 2, emphasis original). Malebranche also uses the expression 'natural inclinations' (*inclinations naturelles*) to refer to the mind's standing interests or motives that occur independently of the body and that are common to angels and men (*Search* IV.1, OCM II 9-15/LO 265-8). Someone's natural interest in pleasure, for example, is a natural inclination in this sense.

[17] Though Malebranche suggests that both acts of consent and attention are basic or non-derivative exercises of freedom, I focus on consent as most relevant to his account of bodily action. For consent, see *Search* V.4, OCM II 158/LO 357; *Elucidation* I, OCM III 19-20/LO 548; *Réponse à la Dissertation,* OCM VI-VII 566; and *Prémotion Physique*, OCM XVI 42. For attention, see *Réponse aux Vrayes & des Fausses Idées*, OCM VI-VII 127, *Treatise* I.5.3, OCM XI 60/W 75; *Dialogues* XII.10, OCM XII 289-90/JS 227.

to eat the peach, the agent commits herself to what otherwise would have been a natural and automatic volitional reaction. Consent sets natural love free.[18]

2.1 Practical volition or willing-to-do: inclination with consent

When an agent raises her arm, God is the true cause of this movement. But the human agent may nevertheless be its occasional cause. Malebranche's account of human action describes the states of an agent's will that occasion her voluntary movements or bodily actions, much as the natural sciences investigate occasional causes in nature. Malebranche distinguishes an agent's voluntary movements—such as eating a peach or walking away—from automatic and convulsive movements like breathing or sneezing (*Search* VI-II.8, OCM II 407/LO 502).

Where philosophers of action might now use the term 'intention', Malebranche refers to practical volitions (*volontés pratiques*), practical desires (*désirs pratiques*), or willing-to-do (*vouloir faire*) to pick out the states of an agent's will that generate her voluntary movements.[19] One may be inclined or motivated to do many things, like eating a peach or going for a walk. But only some of these inclinations become practical volitions and, hence, generate behaviour. In the *Dialogues on Death*, for example, Malebranche notes that only a subset of one's volitions—one's practical volitions or desires—are the 'occasional causes of the body's transport' (*Dialogues on Death* III, OCM XIII 432).[20] He similarly distinguishes simply willing from willing-to-do: 'It is clear that simply willing is not to act; it is not willing to do [*vouloir simplement, ce n'est pas agir; ce n'est pas vouloir faire*]' (*Réponse aux Réflexions*, OCM VIII 652).

Malebranche holds that practical volitions or willings-to-do—the conduits through which the mind influences the body's movement—are compound mental states: they are inclinations *with* the agent's consent. As Malebranche writes:

> It is clear that we have the power to jump out the window only on the supposition that we have the power of willing to do so. Now, we cannot will anything without some motive appealing to the natural and invincible desire we have to be happy; *for to will something is only to consent to the motive leading us to will it,* and we must know

[18] *Treatise* I.3.18, OCM XI 49/W 66. See Schmaltz (2008) and Greenberg (2010, pp. 203-205).

[19] Assuming the necessary conditions obtain: the agent is awake, not paralyzed, not tied to a chair, no one else is pulling her strings, and so on.

[20] See also *Elucidation* XV, OCM III 227/LO 670.

> or sense before consenting. (*Elucidation* XII, OCM III 176-7/LO 641, emphasis added)

Jumping out a window is something the agent *does*—it is a voluntary movement or action—if and only if this movement results from her willing or having a practical volition to perform it. To will an action, according to Malebranche, is 'only to consent to the motive leading us to will it', that is, to consent to the inclination to perform the action (*ibid.*). Thus, a willing-to-do or a practical volition is an inclination *with* consent.

An agent's inclination to eat the peach does not occasion behaviour on its own. She eats the peach—bodily action results—only when she freely consents to her inclination to do so. Withholding consent neutralizes an inclination's ability to occasion bodily actions. To be clear, an agent's consent does not truly cause her body's movements. Rather, when God institutes the occasional law governing the mind-body union, God establishes the mind's free consent as a necessary condition—or valve—for inclinations to occasion the body's movements.

Malebranche's consent-based view contrasts with a hydraulic picture of motivation, on which an agent's inclinations—or, perhaps, her strongest inclinations—lead to action without any need for the agent's consent or endorsement.[21] On the hydraulic model, one's desire for a peach *on its own* carries one all the way to eating it so long as nothing else interferes, such as a physical impediment or a stronger desire for something else. Whereas the hydraulic picture takes a single kind of mental state (inclination) to suffice for the generation of action, the consent-based view insists that human action springs from the combination of two different kinds of mental states: a *motive* the agent *freely authorizes*, or, equivalently, an *inclination* with *consent*.

Malebranche thus extends Descartes's account of judgment to bodily action. According to Descartes's account, which Malebranche accepts, a judgment is a perception with assent/consent.[22] One judges that there is a peach on the windowsill by freely consenting to a perception with this content.[23] Similarly, for Malebranche, a practical volition is an inclination to which the agent consents. An agent forms a practical volition to eat the peach by consenting to her inclination to perform this action. By harnessing one's judgments and bodily actions to one's free

[21] Schapiro (2021, pp. 33-34) nicely describes the hydraulic model.

[22] Malebranche uses 'assent' (*acquiescement/assensus*) and 'consent' (*consentement/consensus*) interchangeably (*Search* I.2.2, OCM I 51-3/LO 8-9).

[23] Compare *Meditation 4*, AT VII 56/CSM II 39 and *Search* I.2.1, OCM I 49/LO 7.

power to consent, Malebranche explains one's responsibility for both. Although one cannot choose whether to see a peach in an appealing light nor whether to feel like eating it, one *can* choose whether to consent to one's perceptions and inclinations and so whether to judge and act. This makes all the difference. The human ability to freely consent or not makes human beings and not God the authors of their errors and sins. Human beings are responsible for their false judgments and for eating forbidden fruit.[24]

3. The passions

Malebranche's consent-based view implies a gap between inclination and action. Even if an agent's inclinations move her some of the way towards the actions conducive to survival, these inclinations will not take her all the way there unless she consents. Suppose, for example, that an agent is inclined both towards eating a peach and towards eating a slab of cake. If she does nothing, she will starve. Paralysis—inaction—equals death. The problem is to encourage the agent to choose the peach by consenting to her inclination to eat it.

Malebranche's version of the guise of the good—which is really a guise of the best thesis—exacerbates this problem. Malebranche holds that *when* or *if* an agent consents, she invariably consents to what seems like the best option on the table at the time. 'When two or several goods are present in the mind at the same time', Malebranche explains, 'and it is deciding about them, it never fails to choose the one which in that moment seems better to it, supposing all other things equal' (*Treatise* I.6.15, OCM XI 79/W 89).[25] Once an option has emerged as the best one available in her situation, the agent's only real freedom is to decide *whether* to consent to it or not. Thus, an agent deliberating between eating a peach or eating a piece of cake will consent to her inclination to eat the peach if and only if (1) the peach seems like the best option in this situation, and (2) she decides to consent to the best option currently available, rather than waiting for something better to come along. In other words, the agent will eat the peach just in case it seems like the *best* thing to do, and *she* decides to do *something* in this situation.[26]

[24] See, for example, *Elucidation* I, OCM III 30/LO 554; and *Treatise* I.11.14, OCM XI 133/W 125.

[25] *Treatise on Nature and Grace* III.31, OCM V 139-40. See Adams (2013, p. 97) for discussion.

[26] These conditions are distinct. Even when eating the peach seems like the best option available, an agent might not eat the peach because she cannot bring herself to commit or because she refuses to commit, like Bartleby the Scrivener.

The passions help fulfil these conditions. The passions—love, hate, desire, fear, joy, and sadness—help (1) *shape* an agent's sense of what's best and (2) *persuade* her to consent to the best option currently available. The passions can malfunction and misfire at every stage. But this is how they are supposed to work.

3.1 The structure of the passions

Consider, again, an agent gazing at a delicious peach as the morning light streams in through the window. When she sees the peach, her will moves towards it. Because of her mind's union with a human body, the movement of her will occurs embedded within a host of psychophysiological responses, which collectively constitute her passionate desire for the peach.[27] Because of the union, perceiving something as good or evil redirects the will—the mind's love of the good in general—into a *passion*. As Malebranche writes:

> The will, insofar as it is the will of man, depends essentially on the body, for only because of motion in the blood, or rather in the animal spirits, does it feel excited by any of the sensible emotions. … Here I call *passions* all the emotions that naturally affect the soul upon occasion of extraordinary motion in the animal spirits. (*Search* V.1, OCM II 127/LO 337)[28]

While the reference to 'extraordinary motion in the animal spirits' might suggest that passions occur only in exceptional circumstances, Malebranche holds that passions infuse all the movements of the human will: '[G]iven that man is not a pure spirit, he cannot have an entirely pure inclination unmixed by some passion, whether great or small' (*Search* V.2., OCM II 139/LO 345). Passions are the rule for the embodied mind.

Malebranche analyses the passions into complex sequences of psychophysiological states, with the senses, imagination, and intellect initiating passions of varying character and complexity.[29] Commentators typically focus on the seven-stage analysis Malebranche presents in Book Five of the *Search,* which applies most clearly when an intellectual perception initiates a passion, as when the mere thought of a peach stirs up desire.[30] While it is striking that merely thinking about something can make one hot and

[27] *Search* V.4, OCM II 158/LO 357 and *Search* V.10, OCM II 221/LO 395.

[28] See also *Search* V.1, OCM II 128/LO 338.

[29] *Search* V.3, OCM II 146/LO 349; see also *Search* V.12, OCM II 241/LO 407.

[30] As Malebranche writes, '[1] [t]he view of some good is naturally followed by [2] an impulse of love, [3] a sentiment of love, [4] a disturbance of the brain and movement of the animal spirits, [5] a new emotion of the soul that increases the first impulse of love, [6] a new sentiment of love that increases the first sentiment of love, and finally by [7] a sentiment of delight that rewards the soul because its body is in its proper state' (*Search* V.4, OCM II 158/LO 357).

bothered, the interaction between intellectual and sensible capacities complicates this case, as Malebranche recognizes.[31] I will concentrate on the simpler case in which the senses initiate a passionate desire in order to tease out the ways the passions promote survival. Similar analyses should apply to love, hate, joy, and sadness when they arise from the senses.

When seeing a peach stirs up desire, the desire begins, first, with the *sensory perception* of the peach that makes it seem initially appealing. Second, this perception channels one's love of the good in general towards the peach, which leads to a *movement of the will* or *attraction* towards the fruit. Third, one aspect of this movement of the will is an *inclination* to interact with and eat the peach. As Malebranche writes:

> A brutal man loves the object of his passion with love *as union* because, regarding this object as the cause of his happiness, he wishes to be united to it in order that that object might act in him and make him happy. He approaches it by the movement of this heart, i.e., by his affections, *as well as by the movement of his body*. (*Treatise* I.3.8, OCM XI 42/W 62, emphasis added)

When a man feels desiderative love for a peach, he feels inclined to eat it to enjoy the pleasure it promises.

To this point, these elements follow from Malebranche's background picture of the will. The distinctively passionate character of desire emerges in the subsequent stages. Fourth, desire makes one *attend* to the features of the peach—its pleasing shape, colour, fuzz, and smell—that made the peach seem initially attractive. As Malebranche writes, 'if the senses produce the passions, the passions in exchange unite the senses to their objects' (*Treatise* I.13.2, OCM XI 146/W 135). Similarly, 'each of the passions ... applies the mind' (*Search* V.8, OCM II 204/LO 385) and 'supports the cause that gives birth to them' (*Treatise* I.13.3, OCM XI 147/W 135). Seeing a beautiful peach stirs up passionate desire; the desire then fuels the seeing—vivifying, foregrounding, or highlighting the visual perception of the peach, as well as keeping one's gaze fixed upon the fruit—so that it continues stirring up this passion.[32] As Malebranche explains, 'this is nothing but a continual circulation of feelings and movements which sustain and reproduce themselves' (*Treatise* I.13.1, OCM XI 146/W 135).

[31] *Search* V.3, OCM II 146/LO 349. See Hoffman (1991, pp. 190-1).

[32] The sensations accompanying the passions underwrite this increase in salience. As Malebranche writes, '[t]he will's impulses are the natural causes of the mind's sensations, and these sensations of the mind in turn support the determination of the will's impulses' (*Search* V.3, OCM 147/LO 350; see also *Search* V.3, OCM II 142-3/LO 347). These sensations infuse the initial perception with vivacity or salience.

Fifth, desire recruits *reinforcements* in the form of justifying thoughts and images. The passion conjures up additional representations that support the assessment of the peach as good and further fuel one's desire. An agent might be initially drawn towards the peach because it looks and smells good. But soon enough she will find herself thinking how healthy and delicious peaches are, and, anyway, she deserves a little treat. As Malebranche puts it, 'the passions all seek their own justification; they unceasingly represent to the soul the object agitating it in the way most likely to maintain and increase its agitation' (*Search* V.10, OCM II 225/LO 397).[33] As the peach seems better and better, one's passionate desire grows stronger and stronger, and one is even more inclined to eat it.

Sixth, desire for the peach *prepares the body* to act in the way it suggests. '[T]he [animal] spirits are driven into the muscles of the arms, legs, and face and all the exterior parts of the body', Malebranche explains, 'in order to suit it to the dominating passion, and to give it the bearing and motion necessary to acquire the good or flee the evil presenting itself' (*Search* V.3, OCM II 144/LO 348). Similarly, the animal spirits 'produce and maintain in the body a disposition appropriate to the object we perceive' (*Search* V.1, OCM II 128/LO 338), and 'dispose the body with regard to the object' (*Search* V.10, OCM II 220/LO 394).[34]

Seventh, desire produces an overarching *feeling of delight* that 'makes all our passions pleasant' (*Search* V.3, OCM II 145/LO 349; see also OCM II 156/LO 355). 'The passions', Malebranche explains, 'are always accompanied by a certain feeling of mildness which corrupts their judge and pays him well if he will favour them .... What gift could be offered more agreeable or charming than pleasure, to creatures who invincibly will to be happy?' (*Treatise* I.13.9, OCM XI 150/W 138). Sweetness infuses all the passions, even negative emotions like hatred, sadness, or fear.

All these elements are built into the burning desire for a peach.[35]

3.2 The function of the passions

When confronted by Malebranche's analysis of the passions, one might wonder how all the various elements hang together and whether anything

[33] See also *Treatise* I.13.8-9, OCM XI 149-150/W 137-8.

[34] See also *Search* V.9, OCM II 217/LO 391.

[35] It is a coincidence that this breakdown of sense-based passions has the same number of stages—seven—that Malebranche distinguishes in the intellect-based case. I am carving the stages more finely than Malebranche himself in *Search* V.3, though the inclusion of all these elements is well grounded in Malebranche's texts. In addition to *Search* V, my reconstruction draws on Malebranche's analysis of the passions in *Treatise* I.13, which has a somewhat different shape.

unifies these elements into a coherent psychophysiological whole.[36] On my reading, a shared purpose unifies the various elements of the passions: they work together to elicit the agent's consent. Ultimately, the agent must freely close the gap between inclination and action. That is the whole point of Malebranche's consent-based view of action, as compared to a hydraulic model. But the passions encourage the agent to prioritize her body's needs.

The first three stages of the passion—(1) the perception of an object as good or attractive, (2) the movement of the will towards it, and (3) an inclination to interact with the object according to its attractive features—put a bodily action on the table as a live option. The latter four stages of the passion—(4) attention to the object's attractive features, (5) reinforcing thoughts and images about additional attractive features the object might have, (6) bodily preparation, and (7) delight—encourage the agent to consent to her inclination to perform this action. More specifically, the latter four stages help satisfy the pair of conditions Malebranche's guise of the best thesis imposes on an agent's consent: (4)-(6) make the bodily action seem like the *best* option available, while (7) *encourages* her to consent to the best option currently available, rather than waiting for something better. Thus, the passions offer precisely the kind of help an agent needs whose will is structured in the way described by Malebranche's consent-based view of bodily action and his version of the guise of the best.

When an agent passionately desires a peach, the fourth and fifth stages of her desire—her increased attention to the peach's attractive features and the reinforcing thoughts about the peach—cast the peach in a flattering light. Attention makes the peach's attractive features salient, whereas the reinforcing thoughts and images conjure up additional attractive features. '[I]f we are moved by an attractive desire', Malebranche writes, 'clearly it will not fail to justify itself through the favourable judgments it forms of its object' (*Search* V.11, OCM II 230/LO 400).[37] Desire makes its object appear even more desirable. The sixth stage of desire—the bodily preparation—further contributes to the agent's sense that eating the peach is the best available option by making it the easiest thing to do. The bestness of a course of action partly depends not merely on what it would achieve but also on an agent's ability to perform it. By making the peach seem like the best option available, these stages of desire—(4) attention to the peach's attractive features, (5) reinforcing thoughts and

[36] This is Prinz's (2004) 'problem of plenty' mentioned above.

[37] See also *Search* V.6, OCM II 178/LO 370. See Le Jallé (2012) for discussion.

images, and (6) bodily preparation—ensure that *if* the agent consents to anything, then she will consent to her inclination to eat the peach.

At this point, the agent still faces the question of whether the best current option is good enough. Should she go for the best option currently available or wait for something better to come along? The final stage of desire—(7) the culminating feeling of delight—encourages her to go for it. 'This delight makes all our passions pleasant', Malebranche explains, 'and leads us to consent to them and give ourselves up to them' (*Search* V.3, OCM II 145-6/LO 349). This feeling of delight encourages the agent to consent by assuring her that it would be proper or appropriate to do so. As Malebranche writes, 'a certain sensation of joy, or rather of inner delight, fixes the soul in its passion and assures it that it is in the proper state with regard to the object it is considering' (*Search* V.3, OCM II 145/LO 349).[38] The culminating feeling of delight works like the opposite of a guilty conscience: it makes consenting feel right.

With the passionate desire exerting all this pressure on the agent's will, she gives in. She consents. She eats the fruit.

The desire's pressure on the agent is not invincible. The agent *can* resist. Withholding consent prevents her inclination from generating action. But the agent will still feel desire's pull. So long as the peach continues to look appealing, the agent's impression towards the good will continue stirring up desire for the peach. Her desire will continue focusing her attention on the peach's appealing features, conjuring justifications for eating the peach, and so on. Whereas prelapsarian Adam could switch off his desires when they did not serve him well, human beings no longer have this power.[39] Thankfully, one need not remain in the grip of the fruit forever. Even in humanity's Fallen state, suspending consent awakens one's attention and leads one to think about other things (*Treatise* I.6.16, OCM XI 79/W 89).[40] Adopting this wider perspective will eventually redirect the agent's insatiable drive for the good away from the peach and towards something else.

4. Using the passions

One might object that my reading of the passions' function conflicts with Malebranche's insistence that agents should refrain from consenting in

[38] See also *Treatise* I.13.9, OCM XI 150/W 138.

[39] *Search* I.5, OCM I 75/LO 22; *Search* V.1, OCM II 130/LO 339-40; V.4, OCM II 164/LO 360; and *Elucidation* VIII.6, OCM III 74/LO 580-1.

[40] See also *Elucidation* II, OCM III 39–40/LO 559–60.

the ways the passions suggest. As Malebranche writes, '[o]nly our consent is truly ours. This consent must be regulated and kept free despite all the efforts of the passions' (*Search* V.4, OCM II 158/LO 357; see also *Search* I.2.3, OCM 55/LO 10). Sometimes Malebranche formulates the prohibition on consenting to the passions by saying that one should avoid *freely* loving, hating, desiring, and fearing material things. A free love is a movement of the will to which an agent consents, whereas a natural love is a movement of the will without consent (*Treatise* I.3.18, OCM XI 49/W 66). Hence, to avoid freely loving and hating material things just is to avoid consenting to the love, hate, and so on, that one feels towards material things. As Malebranche writes, '[y]ou can eat a fruit, but it is not permitted for you to love it with a free love. For a mind in movement towards bodies, substances inferior to it, degrades and corrupts itself' (*Christian Conversations* II, OCM IV 38). The real fruit, for Malebranche, is an inert hunk of extension that is beneath the mind's concern. While Malebranche's prohibition on consenting to the passions is puzzling on *any* account of the passions, it is especially problematic if the whole point of the passions is to elicit the agent's consent.[41] The passions would then be a tool for preserving the body that one can never permissibly use. What good is that?

Malebranche thinks he can have it both ways. In the very passages where he exhorts one to avoid freely loving, hating, desiring, and fearing material things, Malebranche notes that one may nevertheless perform the bodily actions necessary for survival:

> For all things being absolutely powerless, we must not love them at all. When I say love, I also mean fear, or hate; the soul must remain unmoved in their presence. It is permitted for the body, by local movement to approach fire or avoid a collapsing building [*Que le corps par le movement local s'approche du feu, ou évite une maison qui s'écroule*: *cela est permis*]. But let the soul love and fear only God, if by love we mean a free love, a love by choice, a reasoning love. (*Treatise* I.3.9, OCM XI 42/W 62)

Similarly, he writes:

> The senses are therefore instituted to furnish man with quick and certain ways for discerning bodies in relation to the conservation of life and health. That we use the senses therefore to unite ourselves by

[41] Both Hoffman (1991, p. 193) and Greenberg (2010, p. 204) formulate versions of this problem. Whereas Hoffman (1991) argues that this problem renders Malebranche's account incoherent, Greenberg (2010) is more optimistic on Malebranche's behalf.

> means of the body to sensible objects, or to separate ourselves; that is in order [*Qu'on s'en serve donc pour s'unir par le corps aux objets sensibles ou pour s'en séparer: cela est dans l'ordre*]. I say unite or separate ourselves; I do not say love, nor I do say fear; because love and hate are movements of the soul which should never be determined by confused feelings. It is reason and not instinct that should be their guide. That the mind loves or does not love bread; this is indifferent to the body. If we eat without loving, the body will not fail to nourish itself; and if we love without eating, the body will not grow... But what! Can we unite ourselves to bodies without loving them? Can we flee our persecutor without fearing him? Yes, without a doubt, we can—for I am speaking chiefly of free movements [of the will]... (*Treatise* I.11.11 OCM XI 131/W 124)

Malebranche initially suggests that one should refrain from loving, fearing, and hating material things. As the passages continue, he clarifies that one should not *freely* love, fear, and hate material things, that is, one should not consent to these passions. Malebranche insists that this prohibition is compatible with performing ordinary bodily actions required for the conservation of life, such as eating bread or fleeing a persecutor.

Malebranche's point is that an agent should avoid consenting to *almost* every aspect of the complex cluster of psychophysiological states that constitutes her passionate desire for a peach. She should withhold consent from the sensory perception that initially stirs up her desire, the reinforcing thoughts and images that shore up her assessment of the peach as the best, much of her will's movement towards the peach, and the feeling of delight that convinces her of the rightness of her passions. These elements wildly overstate the value of the peach, and it is thus a mistake to endorse them. The exaggeration of the peach's value is necessary, however, given Malebranche's guise of the best, which sets a high bar for action. An agent can bring herself to eat a peach only if it seems like a precious, wonderful thing—which an inert hunk of extension is not.

The only aspect of the passion she *should* consent to is her inclination to eat the peach—the action-directed aspect of her will's movement towards it. The agent should consent narrowly and with surgical precision to her inclination to physically interact with the peach without consenting to any of the other elements of her passion. She may lean on the other elements of the passions to help her commit to the inclination to eat the peach. But she should only consent to the inclination. As Malebranche writes, '*it is permitted* for the body, by local movement to

approach fire or avoid a collapsing building', and that 'to unite ourselves by means of the body to sensible objects, or to separate ourselves; *that is in order*' (*Treatise* I.3.9, OCM XI 42/W 62; *Treatise* I.11.11 OCM XI 131/W 124, emphases added). Malebranche clearly holds that it is *permissible* to perform the bodily actions the passions recommend. Given Malebranche's consent-based view of action, this must mean that it is permissible to consent to the inclinations to perform these actions.[42]

The inclination to perform a bodily action is not a passionate desire for the peach. It is a component of the desire. Hence, the proposal that one should consent to the inclination is compatible with Malebranche's prohibition on consenting to the passions. One may freely consent to the inclination and, hence, freely eat the peach. But one should not freely desire the fruit. The bulk of one's desire—everything besides the inclination to eat—should remain natural and unendorsed. This way of using the passions allows an agent to reap maximal practical benefit while minimizing error.

Consenting narrowly to the inclination is difficult, admittedly, because the mind experiences passions as undifferentiated wholes. The mind blurs the distinctions between mental states—such as the grades of sense—that always go together (*Search* I.10.5, OCM I 129/LO 52). This tendency towards phenomenological confusion afflicts the welter of psychophysiological states constituting the passions. Though reflection on one's passions reveals their complexity, one typically experiences the passions as undifferentiated wholes. Desire feels like a unified upswelling or surge towards its object. The phenomenology of the passions makes it challenging to separate the inclination to perform a bodily action from the rest of the desire, requiring careful reflection and practice. But no one—certainly not Malebranche—ever said it would be easy.

Someone might object that consenting narrowly to the inclination is not just difficult but psychologically impossible. On my reading, the other aspects of the passions—the initial perception, the reinforcing thoughts and images, the feeling of delight, and so on—are supposed to help the agent consent by making eating the peach seem like the best

[42] In contrast, Greenberg (2010) reads Malebranche as saying that an agent can use her passions—that is, allow herself to be guided by them—while entirely withholding consent from her passions (2010, p. 204). According to Greenberg, an agent can allow her passions to flow through her and produce action without any need for consent. On his reading, an agent sees the peach, she desires to eat it, and she does. Stimulus generates response. But this does not work for Malebranche. His consent-based view of action implies that an agent's inclination for a peach can generate action only if the agent freely authorizes this inclination. Allowing one's passions to flow through oneself *just is* a way of consenting to them.

currently available option, even though the agent does not endorse the assessment of this action as the best. But, the objection goes, one cannot act as if eating the peach is the best thing to do unless one genuinely believes that it is. One consents either to the whole passion none of it. One cannot pick and choose.

Malebranche can reply by pointing out that his guise of the best thesis states that an agent consents to the option that *seems* best in the moment, if she consents to anything, not the option that she *freely judges* best. As Malebranche writes, the mind 'never fails to choose the one which in that moment seems [*paroît*] better to it, supposing all other things equal' (*Treatise* I.6.15, OCM XI 79/W 89). So long as withholding consent leaves the appearances intact, so that the peach still *seems* like the best, the agent can rely on the appearance of bestness to consent to her inclination for the peach. This coheres with Malebranche's insistence that the sensory appearances of things remain fixed regardless of what one makes of them (*Search* I.11.3, OCM I 133/LO 55). Malebranche is not just dodging this objection on a technicality. Appearances can move an agent even when she sees through them. An agent's desirous sense that eating the peach is her best option can serve as a useful fiction whereby she convinces herself to eat it, much as she might pretend she is being chased by monsters to convince herself to run faster when training for a marathon. But she should not mistake the useful fiction for reality. That is the crux of Malebranche's prohibition on consenting to one's passions.

5. Conclusion

Even before the Fall, Adam confronted the gap between inclination and action. Though Adam controlled his mind more fully than human beings now do, his inclinations did not translate into actions unless he consented to them, and the guise of the best constrained his power to consent. Adam needed the passions as much as Fallen human beings do. This explains why Malebranche attributes passions to prelapsarian Adam despite their dangers. When Malebranche considers whether the 'relation or connection between the thoughts of man's mind and the movement of his body is a punishment or a gift of nature', he argues that the passions are a gift:

> I can hardly convince myself that the body of the first man did not urge his soul to look for things conducive to the preservation of life. I can hardly believe that before his sin Adam did not find fruit

> pleasant to his sight and delicious to his taste according to what Scripture says on the matter, or that this remarkable economy of the passions and senses, so precisely designed for the preservation of the body, should be a corruption of nature rather than its initial state. (*Search* V.1, OCM II 130/LO 339)

Adam was a man of passion from the beginning. The passions may have become unruly since the Fall. But they are still useful and, indeed, indispensable for survival. As Malebranche writes:

> We ought to use the good and flee the bad, and **almost always follow** the movement of the passions [*suivre presque toujours les mouvemens des passions*]. All this is true, but it only has to do with the body. One must almost always **let oneself be led** by one's passions and desires [*Il faut presque toujours se laisser conduire à ses passions & à ses desirs*] to preserve one's body, and to continue for a long time a life akin to that of animals. The senses and the passions are only given to us for the good of the body. (*Search* V.4, OCM II 161/LO 359, emphases added)

When Malebranche says that one should 'let oneself be led' by one's passions, he is saying that one should consent to the actions they recommend, selectively and with surgical precision. Our lives depend on it.[43]

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