"Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Ethics of Evil"
Samuel Newlands for *Oxford Handbook on Malebranche*

Many early modern philosophers believed that God, a perfectly good and all-powerful person, exists and created the world. They were also very aware that our world contains a lot of suffering, misery, and death. These commitments do not fit together very easily. Surely a perfectly good and all-powerful creator could and would make a better world than this. Malebranche nicely captures the tension: "Therefore, the universe is the most perfect God can create? What! So many monsters, so many disorders, the great number of impious people; does all this contribute to the perfection of the universe?" (OC.xii.211/JS 161).[1]

These questions point to what we now call "the problem of evil," which is really a tangle of philosophical and theological issues lumped together under a convenient label. Thanks largely to the work of Leibniz, the seventeenth century is often regarded as a kind of Golden Age for theistic reflections on evil, during which sophisticated metaphysical and theological machinery was deployed to defend the goodness of God in the face of undeniable facts of evil.

Although his contributions have been overshadowed by Leibniz's work, Malebranche has quite a lot to say about God's relationship to evil.[2] Much of it is quite striking: Malebranche embraces tradition where one expects innovation, and he breaks with centuries of Christian reflection at other key junctures. Malebranche's accounts of evil also weave together several of his central commitments in metaphysics, theology, and ethics, and so exploring Malebranche on evil opens a window into the heart of his philosophical and theological outlook. After presenting a basic framework for understanding Malebranche's views on evil, I examine both his traditionalism and his innovations.

1. The Metaphysics of Evil

Augustine opens his early dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will* with a bang: "Please tell me, isn't God the cause of evil?" Rather than answer straightaway, Augustine's character replies that we first need to get clear on the nature of evil: "I will tell you once you have made clear what kind of evil you are talking about" (FW 1). To a contemporary reader, investigating the

[1] See works cited for abbreviations and editions of primary texts.
[2] Leibniz himself acknowledged his own closeness to Malebranche's views (Leibniz T 208). For recent discussion of Leibniz's contributions, see Jorgensen and Newlands 2014.

problem of evil by first considering God's relation to the causes of evil may seem odd. Since at least Hume, the philosophical problem of evil is usually framed as a potential defeater for rational belief in the existence of God in the first place.[3] If so, it is strange to begin a philosophical discussion of evil by tacitly assuming that God exists and focusing on God's role in producing evils.

But from at least Augustine through the 17th century, theistic reflections on evil in the Latin West were less about epistemology and more about metaphysics. They wondered much more about the ontological nature of evil and how it fit into the broader metaphysical and causal structure of the world. There might be epistemic upshots to these metaphysical explorations, but those upshots are mostly kept in the background of a millennium-long effort to understand the nature, role, and place of evil in a divinely created cosmos.[4] As we will see, Malebranche continues this metaphysics-heavy approach to questions about evil, though he also appeals to principles in ethics to help address justification questions that his metaphysics of evil raise.

In Malebranche's day, evils were generally divided into three categories: (1) *moral* evils, often called "sins"; (2) *physical* evils, sometimes called "natural evils"; and (3) *metaphysical* evils or "evils of imperfection." The category of *moral* evils is the most familiar, and it includes blameworthy commissions and omissions of free agents. Whereas moral evils were categorized by their cause, *physical* evils were classified by their effects on agents. The most common examples are pain and suffering, regardless of whether those states were brought about by natural events like a hurricane or by the activities of free agents. *Metaphysical* evils are species-specific creaturely limitations: that bears can't compose music, that humans can't breathe underwater, and so forth. There was some debate over whether such creaturely limitations ought to be counted as evils at all, but all sides agreed that theists should try to explain why these limitations exist in the first place, especially since some of them make creatures capable of causing moral evils and vulnerable to suffering physical evils.[5]

This classification was used in explaining God's causal and moral roles in evil. In very broad outline, a common account ran something like this. By their very nature, creatures have limitations. The only completely unlimited being is God. Hence, by creating a world at all, God

[3] For more on Hume's contribution to this shift, see Newlands 2015.
[4] For an overview of this trajectory, see Newlands 2008.
[5] Aquinas argues, for example, that such limitations should not be called "evils" (Aquinas ST*:* I, qu. 48, a.3), whereas Leibniz claims that they should (Leibniz G/3/574).

brings about some metaphysical evils. But the great good of creating a diverse world like ours renders God's creation of metaphysical evils blameless. However, God is neither causally nor morally responsible for any moral evils. As this point was usually put, God is not the author of sins. Theists developed rich accounts of creaturely freedom, God's causal contributions to the world, and the nature of evil to explain our guilt and God's innocence when we sin.[6] Physical evils like pain and suffering were taken to be either a necessary consequence of metaphysical and moral evils, or else a justly deserved punishment for moral evils. Hence, it was argued, God's roles in bringing about physical evils were as blameless as God's roles in metaphysical and moral evils. For ease, I'll refer to this as "the traditional Augustinian account."

Although Malebranche broadly agrees with this account, his distinctive philosophical and theological commitments put pressure on him to reject or modify certain elements. And even where Malebranche retains traditional answers, he offers interesting and sometimes startling elucidations. I will begin with Malebranche's account of moral evils and attendant physical evils, and then turn to other physical and metaphysical evils.

2. Malebranche on Moral Evils

On the traditional Augustinian account, all moral evils ultimately stem from creatures misusing their freedom. This, in turn, explained why God bears no moral responsibility for the existence of such evils. As the sole causes of moral evil, creatures bear all the blame, and God is both causally and morally absolved in our sinning.

The causal and ethical components of this account raised questions that occupied philosophers and theologians for centuries, of which I will mention only a couple. One general worry was that even if creatures, by misusing their freedom, bear some responsibility for sin, God seems to bear some of the blame too. For example, even if God was not directly involved in the production of sin, clearly God was responsible for bringing about some of the background conditions for sin. After all, a world without any free creatures would be a world without any moral evil. Theists typically responded that the goods tightly associated with creaturely freedom, such as moral responsibility and the capacity for developing virtues, outweigh the costs of

[6] An apt 17th century summary of this machinery is found in Descartes' Fourth Meditation (for discussion of Descartes' traditionalism here, see Newlands 2017).

potential misuse. That is, such greater goods help explain and justify God's role in bringing about metaphysical evils like free creatures with the capacity for sinning.

But even if God is blameless for bringing about some of the background conditions for moral evil, it was unclear how God was not causally, and hence morally, responsible for our *actual* sinning as well. According to the Augustinian account, God is not causally distant from the events of our world, like someone who spins a top and then sits back to watch it go. God was thought to be so deeply involved in the world that nothing happened without God's active causal cooperation.[7] Without God's continued causal contribution, the top wouldn't keep spinning – in fact, it would cease to exist altogether. But if God causally cooperates in everything that happens, and moral evils happen, how is God not causally and perhaps also morally involved in our sinning, after all?

One traditional answer that will be relevant for Malebranche circles back to the ontology of moral evils. According to the Augustinian tradition, strictly speaking, moral evils are not positive elements in the world.[8] They are *privations*, absences of perfections that things, by their natures, ought to have. This opens up the following possibility: God causally cooperates in bringing about all the positive aspects of free actions, including of sins. But perhaps God does not need to contribute to any of the privative aspects of sinning. After all, privations are lacks or absences, and perhaps God need contribute only to bringing about positive reality. As this was sometimes put, God contributes to the *material* or positive aspects of sinning, but not to the *formal* or privative aspects, which are due entirely to creatures. Descartes nicely summarizes the basic move:

> Finally, I must not complain that the forming of those acts of will or judgments in which I go wrong happens with God's concurrence. For insofar as these acts depend on God, they are wholly true and good…as for the privation involved – which is all that the essential definition of falsity and wrong consists in – this does not in any way require the concurrence of God, since it is not a thing" (CSM II 42).

Whatever be the merits of this account, one might expect Malebranche to reject most of it. After all, Malebranche famously espouses *occasionalism*, according to which "the nature or power of each thing is nothing but the will of God [and] all natural causes are not *true* causes but

[7] In rough form, this is the thesis of *concurrence*. For a lucid overview, see Freddoso 2001.
[8] Augustine FW 69. For further discussion of the privation theory of evil in Malebranche's context, see Newlands 2014.

only *occasional* causes" (OC.ii.312/LO 448). This seems to undermine the Augustinian account of moral evil at its very root: if creatures have no true causal powers, how can the source and responsibility for moral evils be traced entirely to their misused freedom?

And yet, Malebranche wholeheartedly embraces the Augustinian account of moral evil. He claims that we are certain of our freedom: "We are convinced of our freedom by the same reason that convinces us of our existence," namely an inner sensation "which never deceives us" (OC.iii.27/LO 552).[9] Malebranche also accepts that creatures alone are responsible for their sinning: "I also grant that man alone commits sin" (OC.iii.225/LO 669). This, in turn, absolves God from causing and bearing any responsibility for our sinning: "Only in moral evil, or the disorder of the sinner's love, does God have no part" (OC.iii.34/LO 556).

I noted that the Augustinian account invited further questions about God's responsibility for moral evils. Those concerns become even more pressing for Malebranche, since he thinks God is the only true cause in the world. God doesn't merely *cooperate* with creatures—God does everything! If so, it is unclear how Malebranche could still embrace the traditional account of moral evil.

Malebranche's solution is to double-down on the Augustinianism and embrace the privative ontological nature of moral evils as well. After claiming that man alone sins, Malebranche explains, "But I deny that in [sinning] he does something; for sin, error, and even concupiscence are nothing. They are only lacks of something" (OC.iii.225/LO 669). *Prima facie*, this sounds incredible. How can we fail to do anything at all when we sin?

To appreciate Malebranche's answer, we need to understand exactly what happens when people sin. According to Malebranche, God regularly presents our souls with a series of subordinate goods that are intended to draw our attention and affections up to the supreme good, God Himself. When this process works as intended, we examine and use these subordinate goods as helpful means to orient our devotion to their source, God. But all too often, we stop this process prematurely and continue focusing on the subordinate goods themselves, as if they were worthy of our worship. "Now principally what makes us sin is that since we prefer enjoying things to examining them…we cease using the impulse given to us to seek out and examine the

[9] Nevertheless, Malebranche's readers have long wondered how occasionalism could be consistent with human freedom. For a helpful discussion, see Greenberg 2008.

good, and [instead] we stop at the enjoyment of things we ought only to use" (OC.iii.24/LO 550).[10]

According to this account, whenever we focus on a finite thing, there remains a restless tugging in the back of our minds, urging us to keep our attention moving. *This painting, this relationship, this job is good, but it is not the ultimate good. Keep searching, don't stare too long, don't obsess over it, it cannot provide true happiness*. While this restless impulse is steady, it is not invincible, and herein lies the root of sin for Malebranche. We can ignore that impulse. We can fail to consent to its pull, with the result that our attention remains fixed on the things of this world. We can stop searching and merely enjoy.

But—and this is Malebranche's key move here—stopping an impulse is not really *doing* anything, at least in the sense of bringing about a new mental state. In fact, it is almost the opposite of producing something new: it *prevents* something new from coming to our attention:

> And what do we do when we sin? Nothing. We love a false good that God does not make us love through an invincible impression. We give up seeking the true good and frustrate the impulse God impresses in us. *All we do is stop and rest.* This is certainly done by an act, but *by an immanent act that produces nothing material in our substance*…by an act that does nothing…thus, when we sin, we produce in ourselves no new modification at all (OC.iii.24-5/LO 551, my emphases).

Whether this account of sinning is consistent with occasionalism depends on whether our failing to yield to God's restless impulse counts as an exercise of a true causal power. Clearly our resting and enjoying a finite good is an action in some broad sense, one that makes a difference and grounds our moral responsibility. Malebranche admits as much in the passage above: we do act when we sin. But our failing to consent is not an act that produces a new state in us. It is "an act that does nothing," one that "produces in ourselves no new modification." It is a special kind of action, described here as "immanent," one that does not involve bringing about a distinct effect. Other mental actions like forming intentions, deciding, loving and understanding something might be more familiar examples of immanent acts that also do not essentially involve producing distinct effects.

At the same time, this class of non-productive actions is supposed to be the source and content of all that is evil in sinning, from genocide to adultery. This requires every kind and

[10] For a more expansive account of this process, see OC.v.117-130/R 169-181.

dimension of moral evil to be derivable from a failure to consent to God's impulse to not fixate on finite goods. Malebranche faces a difficult balancing act here. The more he thins out sinful actions to make them consistent with his occasionalism and God's innocence, the harder it becomes to exhaustively ground all the relevant aspects of moral evil in them alone.[11]

Nevertheless, Malebranche relies on this account of sinning to explain God's blamelessness for moral evils, even under the assumption of occasionalism:

> I answer that God creates us as speaking, walking, thinking, willing, that He causes in us our perceptions, sensations, impulses, in a word, that He causes in us all that is real or material…But I deny that God creates us as consenting or resting with a particular good, whether true or apparent. God merely creates us as always being able to stop at such a good (OC.iii.31/LO 554).

Malebranche argues further that God is blameless for giving us the capacity to stop, since God "constantly impresses the impulse to continue on whoever sins or stops at some particular good, because He gives the sinner the power to think of other things and to proceed to goods other than the one that is actually the object of his thought and love" (OC.iii.21/LO 549). Here we see just how closely Malebranche tries to hew to the traditional Augustinian account of moral evils.

3. Malebranche on Physical Evils: The Negative

If misused creaturely freedom accounts for moral evils, what explains and justifies physical evils like pain and suffering? A tempting thought in the Augustinian tradition was that creaturely freedom might be able to do the heavy lifting here too. Perhaps all physical evils are direct or indirect consequences of misused creaturely freedom. According to one reading of the Genesis narrative, original humans were morally blameless and lived in an environment that was free from suffering and death. Perhaps as a punishment for freely sinning, God subjected them, their descendants and the rest of their environment to much of the widespread death and suffering that is now a part of the world. If so, then according to what I will call the *expanded*

[11] Obviously, distinct changes often do follow our forming intentions, and presumably this is true of our immanent acts of sinning as well. So it might be that some of the more robust "consequences" of moral evil – like the death of an innocent in murder – are not brought about by sinning *per se*, though the root sin *is* the occasion for God's bringing about the death of an innocent. As we will see later, Malebranche thinks God has good and compelling reasons to bring about such changes on the occasion of our willing them, even when doing so causes harm.

freewill account of evil, God is as blameworthy for physical evils as God is for moral evils—namely, not at all.

Despite his Augustinian leanings, Malebranche mostly rejects this line of reasoning and offers an alternative account of God's role and justification in producing physical evils. But he only *mostly* departs from tradition here. Malebranche accepts a limited version of the expanded freewill account, and he even adds a speculative twist.

Malebranche suggests that prior to sinning, Adam and Eve experienced unpleasant sensations, like a mild stomach rumbling, that helped them get around in the world and also gently warned them about what life could be like if they disobeyed God. However, prelapsarian humans were able to avoid lasting pain by instantly turning off their pain-producing nerve impulses.[12] As part of the punishment for human sinning, God no longer stops the nerve impulses responsible for pain merely on the occasion of our willing pain to end (just try!). In this way, Malebranche echoes the expanded freewill account by claiming that at least some physical and associated metaphysical evils are caused by God as justly deserved punishments for moral evils. However, we will see that Malebranche denies that *all* physical and associated metaphysical evils are the result of God's punitive response to creaturely moral evils.

Before turning to Malebranche's alternative, let us consider a second and related point of departure from the Augustinian tradition. We saw that Malebranche accepts the privative nature of moral evils. Some evils are lacks of appropriate perfections. But Malebranche denies that *all* evils are privative.

Malebranche focuses on one of the toughest cases for privation theory: pain. He argues that experiences of pain are not deprivations of an appropriate good, such as pleasure:[13]

> Pain is a real and true evil, and that it is no more the privation of pleasure than pleasure is the privation of pain, for there is a difference between not feeling pleasure or being deprived of the sensation of pleasure and actually suffering pain. Thus, not every evil is an evil just because it deprives us of good (OC.ii.143-4/LO 348).

He adds a few chapters later that pain "is always a real evil to those who suffer it, as long as they suffer it" (OC.ii.218/LO 392). That is, some physical evils like pain and suffering are not merely absences of an appropriate good. The evil of pain is sometimes quite positive and real, suggesting that the evil of pains has an intrinsic, positive character, *pace* privation theory.

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[12] See OC.iii.94/LO 592 and OC.v.95/R 150.
[13] See similar claims in Leibniz A II.i.488 and Bayle HCD "Paulicians," rem. E.

Of course, privation theorists affirm the existence of *something* real in all evil, namely the subject of the privation.[14] This absolved them from having to make the absurd claim that there is nothing real to the evils of our world (although they are sometimes caricatured as saying just this[15]). There *is* something positive, real, and hence good in both the subject and source of every evil, according to privation theory. Even so, pains are especially difficult for privation theorists to handle, since some pains seem to be both real and evil in themselves, which is what Malebranche points out in his objection.

In reply, a privation theorist could concede that some experiences of pain are intrinsically evil, but only by also accepting that either (a) the painful *qualia* of those experiences are privative and hence unreal in themselves (to put it awkwardly) or (b) there is more intrinsic structure to pain, beyond its qualitative character, on which to hang the privation. Either option faces challenge: the *qualia* of pain sure seem as real as anything, and, arguably, the intrinsic nature of pain is exhausted by its phenomenal character.

A better reply for privation theorists would be to deny that pain *qualia* are ever intrinsically evil. Consider the case of someone suffering from dystonia, a chronic neurological disorder that causes uncontrollable and sometimes quite painful muscle spasms. According to one version of privation theory, the pain caused by this condition is not itself a physical evil. The very real pain is caused by the patient's malfunctioning nervous system, and this malfunctioning is the relevant evil, not the pain itself. As we saw Malebranche claim about Adam's state before the Fall, the experience of unpleasant sensations in a properly functioning organism can serve important, life-enhancing functions. The hope for privation theory is that every pain can be similarly traced back to an appropriate response – and hence a good – to an inappropriate condition – a privative physical evil.

Malebranche objects that this strategy is unconvincing, though he casts his net too widely in the passages above by suggesting that every pain is intrinsically evil. But what about extremely intense pains, what Malebranche calls "violent pains" (OC.iii.94/LO 595), pains whose intensity or duration goes well beyond what is needed for proper function, as in the ceaseless agony of the cancer patient or, to use a favorite early modern case, phantom limb pains? A stouthearted privation theorist could insist that the pain-generating mechanism is

[14] E.g., Aquinas E qu. 1, a.1 and Suarez MGE XI.iii.6.
[15] For an early modern version of this caricature, see Bayle HCD "Euclid," rem. B.

functioning improperly in all these cases and *that* is the physical evil, not the pain itself. Malebranche should concede that privation theorists can always re-describe the cases in this way. His deeper objection is that such re-descriptions are unconvincing. Some pains far outstrip functional utility and their status as evils is not plausibly traced back to a broken or mismatched pain-generator. Some pains are intrinsically real and evil in themselves, *pace* privation theory.[16]

Whether or not one agrees with Malebranche, his verdict that at least some pains are intrinsically evil is now the dominant view in contemporary discussions of evil. By criticizing privation theory as extensionally inadequate, Malebranche also joined a growing chorus of progressive early moderns in challenging traditional privation theory.[17] Even though his criticisms did not go as far as others, Malebranche's departure from tradition here meant that he needed an alternative account of the nature and source of physical evils like phantom limb pains. Malebranche's further refusal to explain all physical evils as punishments for moral evils meant that he also needed an alternative explanation for God's blamelessness in the face of the widespread and unevenly distributed suffering in the world. Fortunately, Malebranche thought he had the resources to provide just such an alternative.

4. Malebranche on Physical Evils: The Positive

In this section, we will explore Malebranche's alternative account of the source and justification of many physical and metaphysical evils. He relies on several important theses in metaphysics, theology and ethics, which culminate in a systematic and creative—though not wholly convincing—contribution to the problem of evil. I will treat the metaphysical, theological, and ethical elements in turn.

Metaphysics and Theology

In the background of Malebranche's account is a metaphysical view about God's relation to modality. *Pace* rare modal voluntarists like Descartes, Malebranche thinks modal facts are not determined by God's will.[18] God's will determines what is actual, but necessities, possibilities,

[16] For a Scholastic reply, see Suarez MGE XI.i.9. For more recent discussions of pain and privation theory, see Swenson 2009 and Samit 2012.
[17] For more on this early modern legacy, see Newlands 2017.
[18] For more on early modern accounts of God's relation to possibility, including Descartes, see Newlands 2013.

and impossibilities are not under God's volitional control. If God decides to create, God chooses from among what is antecedently possible. "From all eternity God saw all possible works and all the possible ways of producing each of them, and…determined to will that work which…would honor Him more than any other work produced in any other way" (OC.xii.214/JS 163).[19] Hence, if there are necessary truths about how or why God acts, God cannot violate them. Similarly, if there are necessary consequences of God's actions, God cannot avoid them if God so acts. "For, take note, God cannot do the impossible, or that which contains a manifest contradiction" (OC.xii.156/JS 111). God could not, for example, create a triangular object in Euclidean space without thereby creating a three-sided figure.

With this modal backdrop in place, let us look at what Malebranche takes to be some of the necessary conditions for why and how God acts. Malebranche thinks that God cannot act for the sake of anything distinct from God; God can only act for God's own sake. "The reason, the motive, the end of His decrees can be found only in Him" (OC.xii.201/JS 151). Malebranche reasons that no other possible good or reason is sufficiently worthwhile to motivate an infinitely perfect being to act for its sake.[20] "The infinitely perfect being is fully self-sufficient, and thus He invincibly and necessarily loves only His own substance, only His divine perfections" (OC.xii.208/JS 157). But if God would be wholly perfect and self-sufficient without creating, and if God's only motivation for acting must lie wholly in God's own nature, it is unclear why God would ever be motivated to create anything.

Malebranche thinks there is one possible motive for God's creative action that neither necessitates acting nor implies insufficiency: God creates in order to display God's own nature back to God, a kind of Divine self-celebration that still counts as acting for God's own sake. Malebranche illustrates:

> When architects have constructed a comfortable and architecturally excellent building, they derive a secret satisfaction from it, because their work bears witness to their skill in the art. Thus, we can say that the beauty of their work does them honor, because it bears the character of the qualities in which they take pride, qualities they esteem and love and are pleased to possess (OC.xii.202/JS 153).

[19] Malebranche defends this account in many places; e.g., OC.iii.84-5/LO 586; OC.x.75; OC.xii.220-1/JS 168; OC.v.27-8/R 116 and OC.v.109-10/R 161.
[20] Another metaphysical assumption here is that God always acts for a reason (OC.xii.201/JS 152).

Malebranche characterizes this self-regarding motive as acting for the sake of *glory*, and he concludes that God acts only for the sake of God's own glory. "God can act only according to what He is, and He can absolutely and directly will only His glory" (OC.xii.215/JS 164). I will call this the *Glory Principle* (GP).

As with the architect, God's actions bring glory by manifesting God's own attributes in the world God brings about:

> Thus, His work bears the character of the attributes by which He glorifies Himself and does Himself honor. As God esteems and loves Himself invincibly He finds His glory and takes gratification in a work which in some way expresses His excellent qualities. Here, then, is a sense in which God acts for His glory (OC.xii.203/JS 153).

Hence, God's work – our world – must manifest the divine nature in various respects if it is to be worthy of God's creation. Malebranche reasons that it will need to be sufficiently beautiful, unified, fertile, intelligible, and so forth.[21]

It is tempting to conclude from this that if God creates at all, God will choose, from among all the possible worlds, the world that most perfectly reflects God's attributes. Aristes reasons like this in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics*: "God wills to make the most perfect possible work. For the more perfect it is, the more it will honor Him. That appears evident to me" (OC.xii.211/JS 161). However, Aristes continues, it is hard to see how our world represents the most perfect possible display of God's attributes:

> But I clearly conceive that [God's goal] would be more accomplished if it were free of the thousands and thousands of defects which disfigures it. That is a contradiction which stops me short. It seems that God has not executed His plan or has not adopted the plan most worthy of His attributes (OC.xii.211/JS 161).

Given the widespread physical and metaphysical evils in our world, how can Malebranche plausibly believe that our world is the best possible manifestation of God's perfect nature?

Malebranche's spokesman responds that GP informs not only the *product* of God's will but also the *way* in which God brings that product about:

[21] Malebranche also thinks that God's *infinity* should be manifested in creation, which happens only in worlds that include God's Incarnation in the second person of the Trinity (OC.xii.205/JS 155). For further discussion of the Incarnation and its relation to the problem of evil in Malebranche, see Rutherford 2000.

> You are not deceived in believing that the more perfect a work is, the more it expresses the perfections of the workman…but you grasp only half the principle…God wills that His action as well as His work bear the character of His attributes (OC.xii.213-4/JS 162-3).

That is, God wants to display God's attributes both in created things *and* in the way in which God creates, sustains, and causally interacts with those things.

If the world itself displays God's beauty, creativity, and richness, what perfections does God display in God's manner of acting? "Not content that the universe honors Him through its excellence and beauty, He wills that His ways glorify Him through their simplicity, their fecundity, their universality, through the characteristics which express the qualities He is glorified in possessing" (OC.xii.214/JS 163). Elsewhere, Malebranche connects God's ways of acting with the natural laws that God establishes and follows. God "constantly follows the same laws. He always acts by the ways that best display the character of His attributes. And since the simplest ways are the wisest, He always follows them in the execution of his designs" (OC.x.74).[22]

These characteristics of God's volitions – a simplicity and uniformity of means that produces a great variety of effects – are most vividly displayed in what Malebranche took to be the two fundamental physical laws that govern the behavior of all bodies:

> These two laws are so simple, so natural, and (at the same time) so fruitful that even if one were to have no other reasons for judging that it is they which are observed in nature, one would still have every reason to believe that they are established by Him who always acts in the simplest ways – in whose action there is nothing that is not law-governed, and who proportions it so wisely to his work that he brings about an infinity of marvels through a very small number of wills (OC.v.31/R 117-18).

In order to satisfy GP in this way, God acts by what Malebranche describes as "general volitions," as opposed to "particular volitions." Although there has been some interpretative debate over exactly how to characterize the difference, the above passage describes the simplicity of God's willing both in terms of the *number* of tokened volitions and the *contents* of

[22] All translations from *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* are my own. Nowadays, metaphysicians include nomological structure in possible worlds themselves, which is to side with Leibniz over Malebranche here. For exposition, I will follow Malebranche in distinguishing possible works from possible ways of structuring those works, setting aside the larger issue of whether causal structure floats as freely from objects and events as Malebranche (*qua* occasionalist) believed.

those acts.[23] Combining all this together, we reach the thesis that if God creates, God must create and sustain the possible world that will "honor Him more than any other work produced in any other way" (OC.xii.214/JS 163). The modal strength of this thesis follows from the necessity of GP and God's own character: "The love He bears Himself does not allow Him to choose the plan which does not honor Him the most" (OC.xii.215/JS 164).[24]

Malebranche uses this thesis to account for many of the physical and metaphysical evils in our world. These evils, though unfortunate, are necessary biproducts of God's self-glorifying general volitions. "It is the uniformity of his action which, in certain cases, necessarily have unfortunate or useless consequences" (OC.x.75). Malebranche frequently gives agricultural examples of these "useless" consequences, such as rain falling over the ocean or fruits falling from trees before they are ripe (e.g., OC.v.36-37/R 120). In one sense, God could prevent these consequences, as presumably there are possible worlds in which it rains only when and where people want it to rain. But, *ex hypothesi*, God could bring about that pattern of rain only by acting in less simple, regular, and uniform ways than GP allows.[25]

Malebranche draws a similar conclusion in harder cases. Though there may be equally rich and beautiful possible worlds that do not contain evils like stillborn births, the natural laws or general volitions governing such worlds would (*ex hypothesi*) need to be more complex and/or less uniform than the laws in our world. If so, Malebranche reasons, creating and sustaining a world without stillborn births would less aptly display the character of a perfectly simple and constant Being. But that, Malebranche thinks, would involve a sacrifice in glory that God would not, cannot, and ought not make:

> God does not multiply His volitions in order to remedy the true or apparent disorders that are the necessary consequences of natural laws. God must not correct or change these laws, although they sometimes produce monsters. He must not upset the uniformity of His conduct and the simplicity of His ways (OC.iii.219/LO 665).

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[23] For more on this topic, see Walsh and Stencil 2016.

[24] If there were a tie among the top candidates, Malebranche claims that God would be "indifferent" (OC.xii.215/JS 163) among them. Following Leibniz (T 8), I take this to be a sufficient Malebranchean basis for concluding that there are no such ties at the top, on the grounds that (a) God in fact created a world and (b) God would better manifest God's perfection as a rational agent by choosing to create nothing rather than choosing arbitrarily among equally good alternatives. (Similar reasoning cuts against there being an infinite hierarchy of ever better possible world/ways combinations.)

[25] Malebranche extends this reasoning to matters of grace and election, claiming that God distributes grace through general, not particular volitions, even though it sometimes has the unfortunate consequence that it "falls on hardened hearts" (OC.v.50-1/R 129).

In a bold gambit, Malebranche even cites the existence of all these evils in our world as evidence *for* his account. He argues that if there had been a better possible world that could have been structured in equally glorifying ways, then obviously God would have created it instead:

> He wills not at all that children perish in the womb of their mothers; He does not love monsters; He did not make the laws of nature to engender them; and if He had been able (by equally simple ways) to make and to preserve a more perfect world, He would never have established any laws, of which so great a number of monsters are necessary consequences (OC.v.35/R 119-20).

Alas – ***ALAS!!!*** – modal space was not so kind to us. There were no better combinations of possible creatures and laws than what our world contains.[26]

Given the vast extent of modal space and the creative resources of an omniscient and omnipotent being, it boggles the mind to consider just how modally unlucky we are, by Malebranche's lights. Even so, Malebranche steadfastly holds the line:

> And if a world more perfect than ours could be created and conserved only in ways which are correspondingly less perfect…I am not afraid to say this to you: God is too wise, He loves His glory too much, He acts too exactly according to what He is, to prefer this new world to the universe He has created…His wisdom protects Him against adopting, from all possible plans, that which is not the wisest. The love He bears Himself does not allow Him to choose the plan which does not honor Him the most (OCxii.214-5/JS 163-4).

This may strike some readers as an intolerably cruel portrayal of God, and later we will consider how Malebranche might try to mitigate that reaction. Still, Malebranche does not flinch from wholeheartedly embracing the conclusions of his reasoning (see, for example, his explanation of why God does not save animals who fall off cliffs (OC.iii.89/LO 589)).

Malebranche also appeals to our world's physical and metaphysical evils to defend his theological and metaphysical principles in turn. He claims, for example, that if God acted mostly by particular rather than general volitions, then the problem of evil would become insoluble and God would be blameworthy for causing most physical evils. But since God is not blameworthy, Malebranche reasons, it is not the case that God usually acts by particular volitions.[27] Similarly, Malebranche argues that the problem of evil actually becomes much harder if occasionalism is

[26] Malebranche's reasoning is best seen as a form of what Leibniz describes as reasoning *ab effectu*, namely reasoning *from* the bestness of our world *to* its structure and contents, rather than the other way around (T 10).
[27] OC.x.77.

rejected, and he claims that modal voluntarism would imply that there is no such thing as genuine evil in the first place.[28]

Ethics

Even if Malebranche's account explains why many physical and metaphysical evils exist, it remains unclear why God is blamelessness for their production. To see why Malebranche thinks it is permissible for God to bring about physical and metaphysical evils in non-punitive cases, we will need to shift from metaphysics to ethics.

In the Augustinian tradition, there is a heavy emphasis on the moral distinction between *doing* harm versus merely *allowing* harm. The basic idea in comparative terms is that actively causing a harm is, *ceteris paribus*, morally worse than merely allowing that same harm to happen (DA). I suspect that much of the ethical appeal of the expanded freewill account is that it puts God on the *allowing* side of DA for most evils (save those that God *does* for purposes of punishment, discipline, or diversity).

Malebranche is dubious of applying DA to God, at least for many instances of non-moral evil.[29] "'God permits': I do not really understand this expression. Whom does God permit to freeze the vines and ruin the harvest He made grow?" asks Theotimus in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* (OC.xii.212/JS 161). Malebranche argues elsewhere that if God merely allows such evils to happen, God would be like "a prince [who] lets his ministers act and *allows* disorders that he cannot prevent." But, Malebranche counters, "it is God who does everything, both good and evil: He makes the ruins of a house fall on a just man who is going to rescue a wretch, as well as on the scoundrel who is going to kill a good man" (OC.x.74-5). Theotimus affirms this as well: "Certainly it is only God who makes monsters" (OC.xii.212/JS 162).

Although Malebranche denies that DA applies to God in these cases, I think he tries to show that God falls on the appropriate side of a different ethical distinction. This distinction is captured in what is now known as the Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE), an anti-consequentialist

[28] OC.iii.90/LO 589-90; OC.xii.220-1/JS 168; and OC.iii.84-5/LO 586.
[29] For reasons we have already seen, he is willing to apply it in cases of moral evils (e.g., OC.iii.99/LO 595; OC.iii.220/LO 666; and OC.xii.212/JS 161-2).

moral principle that is often featured in Roman Catholic ethical teaching.[30] Unlike DA, DDE applies only to cases in which agents actively cause harm. But, according to DDE, whether the harm is *intended* or is merely a foreseen but unintended *side-effect* can make a morally salient difference. The core background idea is that bringing about an overall good effect by intentionally causing harm is, *ceteris paribus*, morally worse than bringing about that good by means of which the same harm follows as a foreseen but unintended consequence.

This presents DDE as a loose comparative claim, but it is sometimes thought that getting on the right side of this distinction can justify an otherwise impermissible action. According to a rough approximation of this stronger version, an agent is morally permitted to bring about a state of affairs that includes both good and bad effects (hence "Doctrine of *Double* Effect") in cases in which (a) the bad effects, even if foreseen, are unintended side-effects of the intended good; (b) the same or relevantly similar good effects could not have been brought about without bringing about relevantly similar or worse bad effects; and (c) the benefits of the good effects sufficiently outweigh the harms of the bad effects.

Since DDE is much more controversial than DA, clear intuition pumps are harder to come by. Still, we can often detect a moral difference between some DDE-satisfying cases and cases that fail to meet these conditions. Consider two military plans for defeating a terrorist group.

Plan A calls for bombing the building that the terrorists currently occupy. The building is in a crowded neighborhood, and it is reasonable to expect that 50 nearby innocents will be killed if the building is bombed. We might need to cook up some details to make Plan A seem even *prima facie* permissible, such as: there is no feasible way to bomb the building without causing this collateral damage; the terrorists are about to detonate a device that will destroy the entire city, and so forth. (In favor of DDE, notice that by adding in these kinds of details, we seem to be making it explicit that conditions like (a)-(c) are satisfied.)

Plan B calls for quickly killing 50 innocent relatives of the terrorists, as (we will just stipulate) it is reasonable to expect that the terrorists will become so demoralized that they will

[30] For a notable Catholic source, see Aquinas ST II-II, qu. 64, a.7. For a broader overview, see Woodward 2001. The reason for describing it as "anti-consequentialist" will become clear shortly, even though many non-consequentialists also reject DDE (for a recent example, see Scanlon 2008 and for a critical reply, see Wedgewood 2011). Although my rough sketch does not correspond exactly to the official Catholic version, I think it captures the intended force of the principle.

commit suicide without setting off their bomb. It may be hard to have perfectly clear moral intuitions here, but Plan B seems more morally bankrupt than Plan A. DDE offers an explanation: although both plans include the same good effects (preventing terrorists from detonating the bomb) and the same bad effects (the death of 50 innocents), in Plan B, those bad effects are part of the means for achieving the good effects. In Plan B, we are *using* the death of innocents in order to accomplish our intended goal, *pace* DDE condition (a). By contrast, in Plan A, although the death of 50 innocents is foreseen, that consequence is unintended and is not part of the means for bringing about the intended good. Although the line between intended and mere side effects can be hard to draw, evidence for intent here is that Plan A would still work if the anticipated bad outcome did not occur, whereas Plan B would fail if the bad outcome didn't occur.[31]

Notice that under both plans, we would be actively killing innocents. Hence both plans put us on the *doing* side of DA, and perhaps any unsettledness we feel about both options tracks that fact. But as we saw, this is precisely what Malebranche is committed to with respect to God: God is fully on the *doing* side for many non-moral evils. However, rather than conceding moral defeat, Malebranche suggests that God nevertheless remains on the right side of something like DDE, and he offers this as evidence for God's blamelessness in causing so many harms to creatures.

In support of this interpretation, notice that Malebranche frequently points out that although God brings about many disorders, they are merely the foreseen but unintended consequences of God's infinitely good goal of manifesting God's attributes. Here are representative passages from four different works in which Malebranche leans on this reasoning:

- God, having foreseen everything that had to follow from natural laws even before their establishment…has not established the laws of the communication of motion with the design of producing monsters, or of making fruits fall before their maturity; he willed these laws because of their fruitfulness, and not of their sterility (OC.v.32/R 118-9).

- He does not allow monsters; it is He who makes them. But He makes them only in order to alter nothing in His action…only to follow exactly the laws of nature which He has established…not for the monstrous effects they must produce but for those effects more

[31] This simple counterfactual test will be too coarse-grained to cover all possible cases, but as we will see, it is the kind of evidence for God's intent that Malebranche offers.

worthy of His wisdom and goodness. For He wills them only indirectly, only because they are the natural consequences of His law (OC.xii.215-6/JS 164).

- It is because God wills order that there are monsters. [However] God does not will positively or directly that there should be monsters, but He wills positively certain laws of the communication of motion, of which monsters are necessary consequences (OC.iii.89/LO 589).

- He does good because He wants His work to be perfect; He does evil, not because he positively and directly wants to, but because he wants his way of acting to be simple, regular, uniform and constant, because he wants his conduct to be worthy of Himself and to clearly manifest the character of its attributes (OC.x.77).

Malebranche even claims that this structure of divine intentions makes God *praiseworthy* for causing some evils:

> If rains are sometimes harmful to our lands, *since it is not to render them barren that God has established the laws which make it rain*, since drought suffices to make them sterile, it is clear that *we must thank God* and adore the wisdom of his Providence, even at the time that we feel not at all the effects of the laws which he has established for our benefit (OC.v.153/R 200, my emphases).

Malebranche even offers the standard DDE counterfactual (though for God it will be a counterpossible) as evidence that the bad effects are unintended, even if foreseen, since God would have avoided them, if God could have:

> It is the beauty and regularity of the work that God positively wants. Concerning the irregularity that one finds in it, He foresaw it as a necessary consequence of natural laws, but he did not want it. *For if the same laws had been able to make His work more perfect and more regular than it in fact is, He certainly would have established them* (OC.x.77, my emphasis).

This suggests that God's causing physical evils is not part of the intended means by which God brings about the intended good of being appropriately glorified. God would have avoided all these bad side effects, had God been able to do so while still being appropriately glorified. Hence, Malebranche concludes, God is justified in bringing about these physical evils in virtue of satisfying something like DDE. Malebranche's rejection of modal voluntarism, his commitment to GP and its consequences, and his ethical reasoning here elegantly coalesce.

5. Evaluating Malebranche on Evil

Let us conclude by evaluating Malebranche's accounts of evil. I indicated one point of possible internal tension in section three: his privative account of our failure to consent to God's impulse must be both consistent with occasionalism and still sufficiently robust to capture all the relevant aspects of moral evils. One might also challenge some of the metaphysical, theological, or ethical principles from the previous section. I will raise two such related concerns, one theological and one ethical, and gesture at ways Malebranche might respond.

One worry concerns Malebranche's account of how God's character is manifested in the world. Malebranche states his view in unflinching terms: "God could convert all people and prevent all disorders. But He must not thereby upset the simplicity and uniformity of His action" (OC.xii.215/JS 164). But even if we concede that God's ways of acting in the world need to reflect God's own nature appropriately, why do simplicity and uniformity play such overriding roles? If God told us that God could save a drowning baby, but only by acting in a slightly more complicated way than usual, I suspect many of us would respond: *then act in a slightly more complicated way, God!*

In other words, Malebranche's account seems to prioritize God's display of simplicity and constancy over other possible character traits that God also possesses, such as mercy, love, and justice. Couldn't God display simplicity and constancy in other ways (such as by creating a world containing some everlasting metaphysical simples), while also manifesting God's love and mercy by acting through more complicated laws that are better for his creatures?

Malebranche is unmoved. "Would justice and order have it that God change His general volitions for this particular case? This surely does not seem very likely" (OC.iii.89/LO 589). However, he admits that God's other attributes do trump God's desire for simple and uniform action sometimes, namely whenever God performs a miracle:

> God produces miracles only when the order He always follows requires it…only when the simplicity and uniformity of His conduct honor His immutability and foreknowledge less than miraculous conduct would honor His wisdom, justice, goodness, or some other of His attributes (OC.iii.219-20/LO 666).[32]

Hence, according to Malebranche, God sometimes trades a display of simplicity and constancy for a display of justice and goodness. We might then wonder, well, why doesn't God do that more often?

[32] See also OC.v.34/R 119; OC.xii.177-8/JS 131; and OC.x.81.

Although Malebranche does not explain in any detail why miracles are so rare, at least he is in good company here. Surely all theists must wrestle with the question of why God does not perform more miracles than they think God does. At least Malebranche has the broad outlines of an answer in terms of GP and uniformity of acting. And when pushed, Malebranche joins most theists in appealing to mystery: "Although we are all joined to the order or wisdom of God, we do not know all its rules" (OC.iii.220/LO 666).[33]

A different kind of challenge might focus on ethical principles like DDE. I mentioned that DDE is controversial. It has proven difficult to motivate the doctrine independently (apart from special pleading and concerns of casuistry), and many of the key distinctions, such as intended vs. merely foreseen effects, face a barrage of putative counterexamples.

However, DDE is usually discussed with respect to human action, as in self-defense, medical ethics, or just war theory. Some of the concerns might be mitigated if the relevant agent is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent. For such an agent, we need not worry about inscrutable intentions or the relevant scope of the "could" in condition (b). Still, other early moderns argued about whether God's intentions were closed under known entailment, a relevant question for Malebranche's strategy that he never, to my knowledge, addresses.[34]

Nevertheless, even if we accept something like DDE, we might still question whether it applies to God's actions by Malebranche's own lights. After all, there are other conditions to DDE besides not intending foreseen harms. I could not, for example, use DDE to justify cutting off someone's hand on the grounds that I was only *intending* the good of removing their hangnail, with the rest being a foreseen but unintended side effect of my axe-wielding. For one, there are other readily available means for bringing about the good without the harm (condition b). For another, the good of removing a hangnail pales in comparison to the harm of losing a hand (condition c). We might wonder how Malebranche's account of God's actions fare with respect to these other conditions.

As we have seen, Malebranche claims that God couldn't have brought about a better world than ours without acting in less perfect ways. This implies that we are almost inconceivably unlucky, but I claimed that Malebranche is arguing *from* the fact that God always acts in the best, most glorifying way *to* the existence and character of our world. As for how

[33] For a theistic account that tackles this concern head-on, see Van Inwagen 2008.
[34] See Leibniz's early wrestling with such closure principles and the problem of evil in Leibniz CP 23, 63, and 111.

antecedently unlikely it seems that this is the best God could do, Malebranche might appeal to our deep ignorance, at any serious level of detail, over the contours of modal space. For all we know, it may even be that every possible world with similar diversity and intelligibility as ours that could be realized by simpler physical laws contains many *worse* physical evils for us – in which case we should thank God for easing back on the simplicity criterion!

The proportionality condition of DDE raises much tougher questions. Is the good of God's display of simplicity and constancy good enough to sufficiently outweigh the harms of the side effects? According to Malebranche, the value of such a display is infinite, since by his extension of GP, God could never be directly motivated to act by anything of merely finite value. If so, the infinite value of God's acting will swamp *any* finite amount of harm left in its wake.

At a certain level of abstraction, one can see how Malebranche reaches this conclusion through GP. But when we consider particulars, it is very hard to endorse. Does the value of God's displaying simplicity and constancy in our world really swamp all the harms brought about by droughts and famines and earthquakes and cancer and smallpox and dysentery and malaria and tuberculosis and miscarriages and infertility and depression and schizophrenia and dementia and nearly everything one finds in the local children's hospital?

Even if the math worked, does God really have so little regard for the harmful consequences of self-glorification that God was unwilling to sacrifice some or at least a bit more of it for our sake? Or if not for our sake in particular, at least for the sake of *some* of God's creatures? Malebranche's account might be a sobering rejoinder to those who would confine God's interests to the welfare of a tiny group of creatures in an almost unfathomably small and late-developing pocket of the universe. But as a hedge against theological anthropocentrism, it goes much further than needed by portraying God's interests as *completely* non-agent centered – at least, for every agent besides God.

In reply to these worries, Malebranche might appeal back to his more traditional account of moral evils, though this does not strike me as a very promising strategy. Malebranche insists that God established a way for early humans to avoid most of the pain and suffering that now plagues our world. But even if we set aside the vast extent of non-human suffering, if this form of prelapsarian occasionalism is consistent with God's display of simplicity and constancy—God once caused the abrupt end of unpleasantness on the occasion of an agent simply wishing it to end—then why doesn't God sustain the world like that anymore? Malebranche often gives the

Augustinian reply that God is meting out consequences for the Fall, but this raises yet harder questions about how well the punishment fits the crime.[35]

An alternative Malebranchian defense is more forward-looking. My focus in this chapter has been on Malebranche's account of God's causal and moral relation to moral and physical evils from creation until now. But like most Christians, Malebranche believes that our marred present age is not the final state of things:

> The present world is not created to remain such as it is; lying and error, the injustices and the disorders we see, make us understand well enough that it must end. The future world in which truth and justice will live, is that world which God has set on solid foundations, and which, being the object of divine love, will last eternally (OC.v.112/R 164).

Whether the realization of this great hope could help account for the moral and physical evils of the present is a question for another day.[36] But it at least reassures us that while Malebranche's God acts solely for God's own glory, Malebranche also thinks that the fullest and ultimate manifestation of that glory includes eternally happy creatures whose vices and miseries have been fully redeemed.

[35] Malebranche discusses this issue at length in the eighth *Elucidation* (OC.iii.84ff/JS 579ff).
[36] For Malebranche's suggestion of how this might go, see OC.xii.205/JS 155.

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