Malebranche's Occasionalism: The Philosophy in the Garden of Eden

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ABSTRACT: According to Malebranche, Adam should be considered as an occasionalist philosopher. Not only did philosophy originate in paradise, but it in fact originated as Malebranchian occasionalism. It was in order to be able to persist in his occasionalist belief that Adam was given exceptional power over his body, that is, the power to detach the principal part of his brain (i.e., the seat of the soul) from the rest of the body. It was only in continually detaching the principal part of his brain from the rest of the body that Adam was able to persist in his occasionalist belief despite the unmistakable testimony of his sense to the contrary. Having once sinned, he thereupon lost his psychophysical privilege. Whereas pre-lapsarian physiology made Adam's belief in the causal efficacy of God possible, post-lapsarian physiology, in contrast, necessarily engenders and sustains belief in the causal efficacy of bodies. It was only as a result of the post-lapsarian physiology that some of the central problems of early modern philosophy arose. Contingent upon Adam's psychophysical privilege, occasionalism was possible only in paradise.

Malebranche observes that, before the Fall, Adam knew that "only God was capable of acting on him." (1) Knowing "more distinctly than the greatest philosopher ever" (2) that God was the only true cause, the first man should thus be considered as an occasionalist philosopher par excellence. Not only, then, did philosophy originate in Paradise, but it in fact originated as Malebranchian occasionalism. However, whereas Adam knew through the light of reason that God was acting upon him, "he did not sense it." (3) What he sensed was, on the contrary, "that bodies were acting upon him"; and although he sensed that bodies were acting upon him, "he did not know it." (4)

Thus, even the first occasionalist philosopher, Adam, would most likely have agreed with modern critics of occasionalism: that not only is there no sensible proof for occasionalism's central tenet, that God is the only causal agent, but that this tenet is also directly contrary to all sensible experience. Although, upon tasting a fruit with pleasure, Adam, as an occasionalist, knew that it was the invisible God who was causing this pleasure in him, his senses were persuading him to the contrary, namely that it was the fruit that he saw, held, and ate, that was causing this pleasure in him. Thus, the first and most firmly convinced
occasionalist philosopher was without sensible knowledge of God's continual acting upon him, and his own philosophy must have already been, in his eyes, directly contrary to the testimony of his senses.

Since, as an occasionalist philosopher, Adam undoubtedly knew that he could know nothing unless God enlightened him, and sense nothing unless God modified his mind, the fact that what he knew was never what he sensed, and vice versa, must have, in his eyes, reflected a certain contradiction in God's conduct: First, since what Adam knew was that God was acting upon him, and since what he sensed was that bodies were acting upon him, it must have been God Himself who wanted Adam's sensible experience to be contrary to his knowledge of God's causal efficacy, that is, to that which God Himself was making Adam see through the light of reason. Second, since Adam never sensed that which he knew, it was of course God Himself who withheld from Adam sensible proof of what He was making Adam see through the light of reason; or, in other words, it was God Himself who was hiding His omnipotent hand from Adam, God Himself who made His causal efficacy imperceptible in Adam's eyes. And third, since Adam never knew that which he sensed, it follows that he could not have expected to see, through the light of reason, that bodies were acting upon him. In short, just as, on the one hand, Adam had no sensible proof of the causal efficacy of God, that is, of occasionalism, so on the other hand, neither did he have any rational knowledge of its direct opposite, that is, of the causal efficacy of bodies.

Why was it, then, that despite "a very clear knowledge of God's continual acting upon him," (a) Adam did not sense that God was acting upon him? And why was it that he sensed that it was, in fact, bodies that were acting upon him? It was because "the sensible knowledge of God's continual acting upon him" would have invincibly, (b) invincibly, attached him to God. Or, in other words, had Adam sensed that God was acting upon him, it would have made him love through instinct, that good which he was to love only through reason. Insofar, then, as occasionalism is itself nothing other than a free and rational love of God, Adam's lack of sensible knowledge of God's continual acting upon him, far from being a weakness of occasionalism, is rather its constitutive feature.

Where, on the one hand, God expects us to love Him through a free and rational love, on the other hand, by causing all our sensations, it is precisely the blind and instinctive love for Himself that He constantly awakens in us. The difficulties that the God of occasionalism faced, then, were not in making Adam love Him, but rather, in keeping Adam from loving Him blindly and instinctively. This was not an easy matter for God, since He had to remain imperceptible to Adam, despite the fact that God Himself was the cause of all of Adam's sensations; His hand had to remain invisible, despite its being present behind all of Adam's ideas, sensations, and bodily movements.

And it was for this reason that God lent, as it were, His own causal efficacy to otherwise causally insensible bodies. In disguising, for Adam's sake, God's own causal efficacy as that of bodies, that is, in making Adam sense that bodies were acting upon him, God did succeed in keeping Adam from blindly and instinctively loving Him; however, at the same time, God thereby exposed Adam to the attraction of bodies. And it was in order for Adam to be able to resist the blind and instinctive love of bodies, aroused in him by sensible objects or rather, God acting through sensible objects that God gave Adam his psychophysical privilege. While our senses "shut our ideas" and "hike our attention," (c) in short, while our senses "tyrannize" (d) us, Adam's senses still "respectfully" informed and warned
him. Whether sensible objects would act upon his mind, was completely dependent upon his will. According to Malebranche, sensible objects act on the mind only when the motion of the animal spirits, occurring in the body as a result of its contact with sensible objects, is communicated to "the principal part" of the brain, to the part to which the soul is immediately joined. The affections of this part of the brain are the only modalities of the body that are always followed by corresponding modalities of the mind. In other words, it is the affections of this part of the brain that determine the efficacy of the laws of the union of mind and body. Since, prior to the Sin, the motion of the animal spirits was "perfectly submissive" to his will, Adam was capable of arresting this motion immediately after it reached and affected the principal part of his brain, that is, immediately upon feeling a certain sensation (e.g., a pain). As the motion of the animal spirits no longer affected the principal part of his brain, Adam simply did not feel the pain. Thus, he was able to silence his senses at will. He was capable of detaching, as it were, the principal part of his brain from the rest of his body. Thus, by detaching the principal part of his brain (i.e., the seat of the soul) from the rest of his body, Adam was able literally to separate his soul from his body.

Thus, by virtue of the power he had over his body, Adam was able to "eat without pleasure, look without seeing, sleep without dreaming..." (1) Life in Paradise, it seems, must have been rather dreary and unappealing. But such a reaction on our part to Malebranche's description of life in Paradise betrays precisely our own corruption, that is, our own subjection to "the law of concupiscence" our own bodies have enslaved us to the extent that we find it absolutely inconceivable that we should rely on pleasure exclusively in discerning whether a certain body is suitable for the preservation of our own body and that we should, upon joining ourselves to that body, renounce the pleasure completely.

It was only in continually detaching the principal part of his brain from the rest of the body and silencing his senses, that Adam was able to see, deep in the apparent acting of bodies upon him, that God was the only true cause, and love God through reason. It was, then, precisely in order to be able to persist in his occasionalist belief, despite the unmistakable testimony of his senses to the contrary, that Adam was given his psycho-physical privilege. Thus, it was nothing less than Adam's belief in God's causal efficacy, that is, his enlightened love of God, his occasionalism, that was ultimately contingent upon the power he had over his body.

Wherein, then, lies the first man's sin? What was it that Adam did? Or, more precisely, what was it that he did not do? What was he guilty of? What Adam did not do was to make use of the power he had over his body: upon joining himself to a certain body, that is, to "the forbidden fruit," Adam did not suppress the sensation of pleasure that God was producing in his mind, but rather, abandoned himself to it. And it was precisely by not renouncing the pleasure immediately after it fulfilled its advisory function, that Adam crossed the line between innocence and sin. In failing to silence his senses, that is, in failing to detach the principal part of his brain from the rest of the body, Adam allowed his mind's capacity to be exhausted by the sensation of pleasure, to the extent that the darkness of modifications entirely obscured the light of reason. Having thus been distracted, Adam never regained his mind's attention. What the sensation of pleasure, which Adam was unwilling to renounce, erased from his mind, was the mind's "clear perception, which informed him that God was his good, the sole cause of his pleasure and joy, and that he was to love only Him." (2) It was, therefore, nothing less than the very truth of occasionalism that was erased from Adam's mind. And therein lies Adam's sin.
Adam, no longer seeing through the light of reason that only God was capable of acting upon him, still, unintermedially seized that the body he had joined himself to, "the forbidden fruit," was acting upon him; thereupon he came to recognize that the cause of his pleasure was the body, in the presence of which, God was producing pleasure in his mind. In short, he came to believe in the causal efficacy of bodies; his enlightened love of God yielded to the love that the sensation of pleasure necessarily brings about for the object that seems to produce it, that is, to the blind and instinctive love of bodies.

Having failed to make use of the power he had over his body, Adam thereupon lost it, and his mind, once simply united to his body, became dependent upon it. Consequently, since all of the motions of "the rebellious animal spirits" were now communicated to the principal part of his brain, Adam's mind was subject to its many modifications. In stripping him of his psycho-physical privilege, God, then, appears to have punished Adam for radically shifting his philosophical position, by readjusting his physiology to conform to his newly discovered philosophy. Having voluntarily relinquished his occasionalist belief for a belief in the causal efficacy of bodies, Adam was thereafter condemned to non-occasionalism. Having voluntarily announced his love of God, he was thereupon doomed to love bodies.

Whereas pre-lapsarian physiology made Adam's belief in the causal efficacy of God possible, that is, his love of God post-lapsarian physiology, in contrast, necessarily engenders and sustains belief in the causal efficacy of bodies, that is, the love of bodies.

What is more, it was only as a result of the post-lapsarian physiology that some of the central problems of early modern philosophy arose. It was precisely because of the exceptional power Adam had over his body that, in essence, the existence of the external world and the distinction between appearance and reality presented no difficulties for him at all. The course of the animal spirits having been "perfectly submissive to his volitions," Adam could tell whether his brain was affected by an external or internal cause—thus, says Malebranche, "he was not like the mad or the feverish, nor like us while asleep, that is, liable to receive phantasms for realities." So it was, then, God's stripping Adam of the power he had had over his body, that gave rise to these questions in philosophy. Or, in other words, through these unanswerable questions in philosophy, we are all punished for the first man's sin, that is, for his having relinquished his occasionalist belief.

Having lost power over our bodies, that is, the power to direct the principal part of the brain from the rest of the body, we inevitably lose bodies. After the first man's loss of the power over his body, the love of bodies, as the direct opposite of occasionalism, that is, the belief that bodies are our good and that they can act upon us, is inscribed, as it were, into the very bodies we animate. The mind contracts this love immediately upon being united to the body it still filters animates; thus, it is even before birth, that a child loves bodies.

According to Malebranche, it is by virtue of the conscription between the brain of the mother and that of a fetus by way of the animal spirits, that the child's soul is "necessarily turned toward bodies" and, consequently, turned away from God. Hitherto, the mother has traces in her brain, representing sensible objects: it suffices simply that she see a body or nourish herself on it, for if she is to survive, she must eat; yet she cannot eat without at the same time receiving at least some brain matter. Every brain matter is followed by a certain motion of the animal spirits, inclining her mouth and to love the object,
present to her mind at the time of the impression. Since only bodies can act upon the brain, the causing love can only be a love of bodies. Malebranche observes that there is no woman without at least some brain traces and subsequent motions of the animal spirits, inclining her towards sensible things. 16

As a result of the communication between its brain and that of its mother, during the period of gestation, the child has "the same traces and the same motions of animal spirits as its mother", (17) therefore, although created "to know and love God", (18) it is already inside its mother's body that the child, "knows and loves bodies." (19) Having thus, already as fetuses been turned away from God and toward bodies, we are all invariably born believing in the causal efficacy of bodies, that is, born as non-occasionalists.

Love of bodies, that is, the belief in their causal efficacy, is thus propagated by the very bodies we animate. However, whereas the love of bodies, as the direct opposite of occasionalism, can be said to result directly from post-hapsarian physiology-the mind contracts this love immediately upon being united to the body, "it will thereafter animate-the love of God, that is to say, the belief in God's causal efficacy; or, in a word, occasionalism, cannot be communicated to the mind without the animal spirits, from one mind to another. This is simply because God is not sensible, and consequently, there is no trace in the brain representing, by the institution of nature, God, or any other purely intelligible thing. Thus, for example, a mother, loving God "with a voluntary love," as may well imagine Him in the form of "a venerable old man," can, however, in this way, she can only communicate to the unborn child her own brain traces and the idea joined to it by the institution of nature, that is, the idea of an old man; in contrast, she can never communicate to her unborn child the idea that she herself has learned to associate with the trace of an old man, that is, the idea of God. Therefore, not even the most pious mother can communicate the love of God to the infant in her womb, whereas, through the brain traces giving rise to ideas of sensible things and knowing passions, she necessarily communicates the love of bodies to her child. Thus, while the mother may well be thinking of God, the child will think of an old man; while the mother loves God, the child only loves bodies; though she herself might be saintly, she cannot fail to give birth to sinners. (20)

Occasionalism, then, cannot be passed on by way of the animal spirits, to a child from its mother before it is born. Or, more precisely, occasionalism can only be inherited in the form of its direct opposite, that is, a love of bodies. Loving God "with a voluntary love," and therefore an occasionalist philosopher herself, the mother cannot help but engender non-occasionalist offspring. Thus, in a sense, occasionalism itself, as a love of God, can be said to contribute to the growth of a love of bodies.

Let us conclude. While Adam may well have been an occasionalist philosopher, God Himself clearly did not act as such by fitting for the God of occasionalism, one who prides Himself on the simplicity and generality of His ways. Adam's power over his own body, this is, the power that made the belief in the causal efficacy of God possible, was due to the fact that, in certain cases, God was suspending the laws of the communication of motion and making exception to the laws of the union of souls and bodies in Adam's fever. (21) Thus, it was only at the cost of God's violating His own law that Adam was able to persist in his occasionalist belief.

However, after the Fall, when God began to behave as an occasionalist; God, one worthy of the name, that is, in itself following His general law, occasionalism itself became an
utterly untenable philosophy. As a result of the loss of the power over our bodies, our virtuous actions appear to be punished through the pain God produces in us when we strive after Him, our only true good, and our sinful acting rewarded through the pleasure He produces in us when we strive after false goods. In the eyes of the occasionalist philosopher, God, as the only causal agent, then, turns out to be utterly perverse; yet, any occasionalist philosopher worthy of the name, must love God as his only true good. Not even in the realm of grace will the God of occasionalism be willing to abandon the simplicity and generality of His way—the God of occasionalism holds to the simplicity and generality of the laws governing our salvation even at the cost of the damnation of most of us. Contingent upon an exception to, and suspension of, the laws of nature, occasionalism is thus possible only in paradise—it is a philosophical reflection on an anomalous world.

Notes


(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.


(5) Ibid., 97.

(6) Ibid.


(8) The expression "cette puissance qu'ils [les sens] ont de tyranniser des pecheurs" (OC 1:75) is somewhat imprecisely rendered by Lennon and Olscamp as "their power of victimizing sinners"; see The Search after Truth, 22.

(9) Dialogues on Metaphysics, 217.

(10) See Conversations chrétiennes, in OC 4:40.

(11) Dialogues on Metaphysics, 194.

(12) Elucidations of the Search after Truth, 581.

(13) Dialogues on Metaphysics, 214.

(14) Ibid., 217.
(15) *Conversations chretiennes*, in *OC* 4:98.

(16) See ibid., 98-99.

(17) Ibid., 99.

(18) *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, 237.


(20) *The Search after Truth*, 123.


(22) See ibid., 99-100; see also *The Search after Truth*, 123.

(23) See *Meditations chretiennes et metaphysiques*, in *CC* 10:113; see also *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, 193.