

Susan Peppers-Bates

Nicolas Malebranche: Freedom in an Occasionalist World.

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In the 335 years since the publication of the first volumes of *The Search After Truth*, in which Malebranche first affirmed both occasionalism and human free will, most of Malebranche's readers have concluded that he is not entitled to both. If correct, this judgment would be devastating for Malebranche's philosophy, for his commitment to both doctrines is non-negotiable. Moreover, Malebranche also maintains that finite agents may control their attention, which he takes to be the occasional cause of knowledge, and this claim, too, seems to be incompatible with occasionalism.

Relatively few of Malebranche's readers have explored what philosophical resources Malebranche might have to reconcile his commitments to occasionalism and to human agency. In the first English monograph on this topic—the first book on this topic since Ginette Dreyfus's 1958 classic, *La Volonté selon Malebranche*—Susan Peppers-Bates takes up this challenge: 'the aim of the book as a whole is to gain a detailed philosophical understanding and evaluation of Malebranche's efforts to provide a plausible account of human intellectual and moral agency in the context of his commitment to an infinitely perfect being possessing all casual [*sic*] power' (2). She concludes by claiming that 'contemporary...theorists could build profitably upon his construction' (112).

Peppers-Bates begins, in Chapter 1, by setting up 'the problem space' (2) of the book, and giving clear overviews of Malebranche's occasionalism (4-10) and his account of cognition, the 'Vision in God' (10-23). In Chapter 2, she presents Malebranche's account of God's operation in the realms of nature and grace, explaining the 'Order' by which God governs Himself in creating the world (25-32), according to which He must operate in the realms of nature and of grace in accordance with general laws (32-45). Peppers-Bates then turns, in Chapter 3, to Malebranche's account of intellectual cognition, the 'Vision in God', which she explores through a consideration of certain of Arnauld's challenges to that doctrine. Peppers-Bates focuses on Arnauld's claims that Malebranche makes the human mind passive and that in locating ideas in God, instead of the mind, he was confused about the ontology of ideas. Peppers-Bates implies that Malebranche and Arnauld talk past each other, since they have different conceptions of the mind: Malebranche replaces 'the purported God-given ability to give ourselves perceptual modifications with God-given ability to focus our attention' (65). This claim sets the stage for Peppers-Bates's treatment of Malebranche's attempt to account for human intellectual and moral agency in the final two chapters of the book, Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, which I consider in more detail.

Chapter 3 begins somewhat oddly, for a book chapter, because it opens with a general claim about seventeenth-century rationalism. This may reflect the fact that the chapter reproduces *verbatim*, albeit with a new title, an article published in the *Journal of History of Philosophy* 43:1 (2005): 83-105. It seems to me that some reworking would have fit the chapter better into the overarching argument of the book. The chapter engages the issue of whether Malebranche can account for human intellectual agency by considering whether Malebranche's adoption of the view that ideas can act on the mind—in Malebranche's terms, that ideas are efficacious—renders the mind passive. Peppers-Bates attempts to rebut the claim that efficacious ideas imply a passive mind, adducing the fact that throughout his career Malebranche maintains that humans, in virtue of their capacity for attention, can occasion intellectual cognitions, and so 'not only does Malebranche believe that the mind has knowing powers, but...his specific conception of our will's "attention" or ability to desire and therefore occasion further knowledge renders causally efficacious ideas superfluous' (68).

This discussion constitutes an important contribution to Anglo-American Malebranche scholarship in highlighting the significance of 'attention' for Malebranche's philosophy, which has received too little attention from Anglo-American scholars, despite the fact that Malebranche emphasized its importance throughout his career. According to Malebranche, in virtue of a general law that links human acts of attention with the presence of ideas in the mind, acts of attention occasion the perception of ideas, and so it is in virtue of acts of attention that human beings can exercise intellectual agency. But what *is* attention? What is the ontological status of acts of attention? And how can the capacity for attention be attributed to human beings, in light of Malebranche's commitment to occasionalism? These questions need to be answered if one is to have a complete account of Malebranche's conception of intellectual agency.

While Peppers-Bates is absolutely correct that Malebranche remains committed throughout his career to the idea that human beings have a capacity to occasion intellectual cognition, Malebranche is also committed—at least in his later writings—to the doctrine of efficacious ideas. Peppers-Bates's discussion thus raises questions that have received little attention from Malebranche scholars: what is the precise role of efficacious ideas, why does Malebranche invoke them, and how do they fit into his metaphysics of mind? These questions merit attention if we are to understand Malebranche's ultimate conception of cognition.

In the book's final chapter, Peppers-Bates engages the questions about moral and intellectual agency that motivated her project. She focuses mainly (though not exclusively) on Malebranche's last work, the *Reflections on Physical Premotion*, which has received very little sustained attention from Anglo-American commentators. After laying out Malebranche's moral psychology, with special attention to Malebranche's conception of consent, and after a brief detour through Malebranche's account of grace—

which to my mind is somewhat orthogonal to the question of reconciling Malebranche's commitments to intellectual and moral agency with occasionalism—in the final twelve pages of the book Peppers-Bates examines just how Malebranche can attribute moral and intellectual agency to human beings.

She claims that 'according to Malebranche...human free choices do not fall within the ambit of occasionalism' (91): although the mind does have a genuine causal power to bring about acts of attention and free choices, 'this power...does not violate the occasionalist tenet that God is the one true efficient *transeunt* cause' (108, italics added). Medieval philosophers distinguished transeunt and immanent causation: transeunt causation takes place when the agent differs from the patient; in immanent causation, the agent is also the patient (not, of course, at the same time and in the same respect). According to Peppers-Bates, Malebranche too draws this distinction, and since free choices and acts of attention are effects that an agent brings about in herself, they do not fall within the ambit of occasionalism, and she concludes that Malebranche advances an agent causal conception of freedom (110).

Peppers-Bates adduces just one passage in support of her interpretation of occasionalism—very slight textual basis for an interpretation. She does not engage passages that seem to assert that occasionalism rules out the possibility of any created being causing anything and which therefore rule out the possibility, not only of finite transeunt, but also immanent, causation. I give one example, derived from her star text, the *Reflections on Physical Premotion*: 'God is the only efficacious cause of *all* the modifications, and the real changes that occur in substances' (italics added). The deep problem with Peppers-Bates's interpretation isn't, however, that it conflicts with other passages in Malebranche's *œuvre*, but that it seems to undermine the very point of occasionalism, which is to safeguard divine sovereignty by restricting genuine causal power to God.

Because Peppers-Bates takes free choices and acts of attention to constitute exceptions to occasionalism, she sidesteps both the problem that has baffled commentators, namely that of explaining how agents can determine their acts of consent despite not having any causal power, as well as the structurally similar, albeit distinct question—that has received almost no scholarly attention—of how agents can determine their acts of attention despite occasionalism. This question is all the more pressing, since in various texts Malebranche maintains that the capacity to consent or suspend consent depends on occasionalism. (Peppers-Bates does not address the relationship between consent and attention.) If Peppers-Bates's interpretation is incorrect, as I think it is, then in order to determine whether Malebranche can indeed reconcile occasionalism and human freedom, these issues must be engaged, and considerable more attention needs to be paid to the metaphysics of consent and attention. Only then will we be in a position to assess what implications Malebranche's account of agency might have for recent philosophy; and until then, the jury must remain out on the question of whether 'contemporary

theorists', as Peppers-Bates claims in the final sentence of the book, 'could build profitably upon his [Malebranche's] construction' (112).

Although ultimately unsuccessful, Peppers-Bates' interpretation highlights issues that any interpretation of Malebranche's account of freedom must address. This constitutes scholarly progress. As a whole, however, the book is uneven. While the first few chapters might be useful for advanced undergraduates or beginning graduate students, they do not contribute much to Malebranche scholarship. Since the penultimate chapter reprints a journal article, and the last chapter is somewhat thin, the work doesn't warrant its \$120 entrance fee, and given that steep price, it's disconcerting to find the book riddled with typographical errors.

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