

# Malebranche and Knowledge by Instinct

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**ANNALS of the University of Bucharest  
Philosophy Series**

Vol. LXX, no. 2, 2021  
pp. 88 – 106.

**ANALELE  
UNIVERSITATII  
BUCURESTII**

## MALEBRANCHE AND KNOWLEDGE BY INSTINCT

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### *Abstract*

In *La Recherche de la vérité*, Malebranche succeeds Descartes in entitling the affections of pleasure and pain to a practical role. However, he also speaks of instinct as “knowledge” and “proof”. This vocabulary is all the more surprising as it keeps opposing *knowledge*, based on ideas, to *feeling*, which only consists of obscure perceptions. It will thus be about examining the cognitive range that affectivity receives in this philosophy yet known for its rationalism and its intellectualism.

*Keywords:* Malebranche, passions, metaphysics, God, sentiment.

### **Introduction**

Amongst the Cartesians, Malebranche was one of those who most insisted on the union of the body and soul. Although his theory of knowledge and moral philosophy embody an intellectualist ideal, he took the submission of the mind to the body very seriously and understood it as a relationship of true dependence. In recent years, scholars such as Delphine Antoine-Mahut and Angela Ferraro (2019) have accordingly been able to identify materialist re-appropriations of Malebranche in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to Descartes, who was unable to complete his *Treatise on Man*, it is as if Malebranche succeeded in proposing a comprehensive “science of man” in the *Recherche de la vérité*, in that it brings together a theory of the sciences as well as a

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description of human passions and inclinations. His examination of moral issues forced him to acknowledge the limits of intellectualism in his theory of the mind: for the man who applies himself to the sciences and to the vision of God is subject to his own body<sup>2</sup>. Malebranche's anthropology of the fall determines and alters his theory of knowledge.

Malebranche was interested in the specific way in which the soul knows itself and its own modifications or affections. He understands consciousness as an inner sentiment marked by confusion and obscurity. In contrast to Descartes, he views consciousness as the privileged medium of the relationship to oneself, similarly to La Forge and Desgabets<sup>3</sup>. This relationship is not representative and mediated by ideas – it is immediate and without distance. On the one hand, it establishes the impossibility for the soul united to the body to know itself in this life. On the other hand, it allows for the particular way the soul has of apprehending its interiority and “flow of consciousness”, in spite of everything: it does so by internal experience. Inner sentiment tells us with certainty what goes on within us. It is in its affections and emotions that the soul knows itself, even if knowledge here takes on a broad meaning which is ill-adjusted to Malebranche's thought.

Malebranche was the first to designate “sentiment”, that is to say an affection or passive impression, as a *sui generis* mode of knowledge. As Jean-Christophe Bardout writes, recalling Michel Henry's interpretation, Malebranche “rediscovered the original phenomenality of a true psychic universe freed from the constraints of a mathematisation of reality as well as from the epistemic structures of metaphysics” (Bardout 1999, 271). Malebranche does not see this as a great discovery, however, but as the mark of an irremediable flaw.

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<sup>2</sup> On this point we refer to Gouhier 1926; Alquié 1974, in particular, part. III, chap. VII; Simonetta 2018, part. II, chap. IV.

<sup>3</sup> The expression “inner sentiment” rather suggests that the influence is exerted from La Forge and Desgabets on Malebranche: indeed, as Jean-Christophe Bardout points out, the addition of the phrase “inner sentiment” to that of “consciousness” is mainly due to the later editions of the *Recherche*. The first two editions most often mention only “consciousness” to designate the mode by which the soul knows itself. See note 6, in Lanion 2019, 85-86.

In theorising sentiment in this way, Malebranche breaks new ground in comparison to Descartes. In §189 of the fourth part of the *Principles of Philosophy*, sentiment refers to the perception in the mind of movements transmitted by the nerves<sup>4</sup>. “Sentiment” is thus a generic term for all the perceptions of the soul arising from the senses – the term “sensation” not yet being in use<sup>5</sup>. The word translates the Latin word “sensus”, which is found for example in the Latin text of the *Principia*, and which indiscriminately refers to all sensitive perceptions. Senses can be internal, when sentiments refer to natural appetites and passions, or external, when sentiments are the sensitive perceptions caused by the impression of external bodies on our organs.

Malebranche takes up this terminology while introducing a distinction between sentiment and sensation that had only been sketched by Descartes in the Latin version of the *Principles*: sensation refers to the perceptions of the senses, i.e. those impressions in the soul that are mixed with a judgement relating to the objects distinguished from the soul, that is the body or bodies. Sentiments simply refer to the states that the soul immediately experiences in itself. Malebranche emphasises the intentionality contained in sensations on the one hand, and the inner character of sentiment on the other<sup>6</sup>. He thus opens up a new space for knowledge, that of affective interiority. Yet he concomitantly puts it beyond the reach of rational knowledge. It is literature that will take it upon itself to explore affective interiority from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>4</sup> “The movements which thus pass, through the nerves, to the place in the brain to which our soul is closely joined and united, cause it to have various thoughts, by reason of the diversities which are in them; and finally, that it is these various thoughts of our soul, which come immediately from the movements which are excited through the nerves in the brain, that we properly call our sentiments, or the perceptions of our senses”, Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, IV, §189, AT IX-2, 310.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see De Calan, Ronan 2012, 16-22.

<sup>6</sup> See *Answers to the Sixth Objections*, AT IX-1, 238: “[...] although this sense makes us judge that a stick is straight, and that by that way of judging to which we are accustomed from our childhood, and which consequently can be called *sentiment*, nevertheless it is not enough to correct the error of sight”. Descartes therefore does not distinguish between deceptive sensations and sentiment: both refer to a sensitive impression mixed with a judgment.

For Malebranche, however, inner sentiment does not mean a sentiment that relates solely to the properties of the soul considered independently of the body. To associate consciousness with a sentiment, even if it is interior, is to insist on the impossibility of knowing the soul independently of its relationship to the body. Malebranche uses the notion of sentiment, following La Forge, to speak of the soul's knowledge of itself. He thus manifests his awareness of the soul's constant relationship with the body, which Arnauld, and Locke after him, will precisely disregard when speaking of consciousness.

This new approach to sentiment renews how classical philosophy thinks about the relationship between knowledge of the soul and affectivity. Alongside it, Malebranche retains the Cartesian idea that sentiments, understood as modalities of pleasure and pain ranging from sensations to passions, are institutions of nature useful for the preservation of the body – but which we must not project into objects insofar as they are always relative to us. It is this second aspect that we will further explore.

Malebranche's ideas lead us to pose two problems regarding the relationship between sentiment and knowledge. Firstly, starting from the idea of consciousness or inner sentiment: should we generalise to all sentiment this essential inability to turn us away from ourselves and make us know something other than ourselves? Secondly, is the relative character of the affections, which is useful for the preservation of our being, an absolute obstruction to objective knowledge? In this case, would emotions, passions and sentiments only be obstacles to knowledge or, at best, adjuvants, without ever delivering knowledge in themselves?

We will first recall Malebranche's pessimistic view of the capacity to know of the soul united to the body, and the way in which the passions accompany and often hinder knowledge, going beyond their initial function of practical guidance. We will then examine how sentiment delivers a knowledge that does not only concern the soul and its interiority (in which case this knowledge would remain purely psychological), but also the relationships that structure man's existence, even though it is opposed to the light of reason. Sentiment generically designates here the modalities of affective life such as pleasure, pain,

and passions. Such relationships cannot be known otherwise than in the affective life.

### **I. The observation of fallen nature or the troublesome presence of passions in cognitive life**

It is because Malebranche takes very seriously the incarnation of the soul – the fact that man is not a pure spirit and the fall of Adam – that he gives a great deal of space in his thinking to the relationship between affectivity and knowledge. The analysis of the passions is an essential part of the presentation of the conditions for the search for truth, insofar as the passions are one of the main reasons why individuals pay little attention to the divine truth that always speaks in themselves. Malebranche defines them in a general way as emotions or impressions which men experience on the occasion of the movements of the animal spirits and which attach them to their bodies and to the goods which are useful for their preservation.

Far from being a corruption, these are willed by God for the preservation of his creatures; it is sin that transforms this natural union into a bondage. Sin has made us subject to our bodies, and through our bodies has made us dependent on all things sensitive. Henceforth, the understanding depends on the will. It receives its direction from the will, it is the will that determines it and applies it to certain objects rather than others. The mind has become so material, writes Malebranche, that it cannot be touched by abstract truths that do not touch it (Malebranche, 1979-1992, t. I, 489)<sup>7</sup>. Man “[...] often believes that these [things] are the truest, the most useful, the most agreeable, and the most affecting” (RV, IV, II, §iii, 394).

The major problem for the search for truth is therefore the tendency to confuse the truth of things with their usefulness, the relationship they have with each other with the relationship they have with him. The passions corrupt reason: they represent things to it not according to what they are in themselves or according to the truth, but

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<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, we will cite Malebranche’s works in this edition as RV, then the book and chapter in Roman numerals. See RV, IV, XI.

according to the relationship they have with us. This explains the inability of men to reach certain truths which are obvious to the mind that applies itself to them: the truths of geometry, of metaphysics but also of morality. The moral principle that one must love God in order to be virtuous and happy is unknown to most “because they do not taste it, or because they become disgusted with it too soon after they have tasted it. This principle is abstract, metaphysical, purely intelligible; it cannot be felt or imagined” (452).

The same is true of the immortality of the soul, a truth that is too abstract, impossible to taste, and yet of interest to our existence. *A fortiori*, how ignorant men must be of truths that have no relation to them, such as algebra and arithmetic! It is therefore the tendency to relate everything to ourselves through our sensibility, to relate everything to ourselves, that deepens our ignorance. Malebranche deplores the extent to which “we judge all things according to our passions, and consequently we are mistaken in all things; the judgments of the passions never agreeing with the judgments of truth” (RV, V, VI, 533). The Oratorian denounces here for the passions the tendency already revealed by Descartes concerning sensations in relation to the objects that cause them, i.e. we attribute to the objects that seem to cause our passions all the dispositions of our heart: our goodness, our gentleness, our malice, our love or our hatred, *etc.* We project onto the objects properties of our passions, which are not the same as those of the objects that cause them. We project onto the objects properties of our soul. Malebranche thus contrasts two models for relating to objects: that of knowledge proper, which examines by reason the ideas of objects and their relations in themselves in divine wisdom, and that of inner sentiment, containing sensations, passions, and sentiments, according to which we always judge in relation to ourselves, from what we experience, without being able to establish distinct relations between the changes we experience. We are then reduced to a confused and obscure experience.

This second point of view is, however, legitimate for the conduct of life, for what concerns our existence. First, concerning the inner sentiment: the inner testimony of the conscience is certainly insufficient to make us know the essence of our soul, its substance, but it is sufficient

to know “immortality, spirituality, freedom, and some other attributes which it is necessary for us to know”. When it is confined to the properties of the soul itself that are useful for salvation, the inner sentiment is neither false nor misleading<sup>8</sup>, unlike the confused sentiments that manifest the changes that take place in the soul on the occasion of the movements of the bodies.

Secondly, concerning the sentiments resulting from the movements of the bodies, Malebranche assimilates them to an instinct warning man of what is good for his preservation. In a development aimed at explaining the disorders of sin, Malebranche reminds us that man is marked by a double union and is thus destined for two types of goods, respectively known by the spirit and by the sentiment. We then read that the pains and pleasures caused by physical objects and felt in the body – even if they are only modifications of the soul – are willed by God in accordance with the natural laws of the union of soul and body, so that the mind is warned “by the short and unmistakable voice of sentiment”<sup>9</sup> of what is useful to the body to which it is united.

In this, Malebranche is faithful to Descartes<sup>10</sup> (pleasant or unpleasant sentiments allow men to know the relationships of convenience which they entertain with bodies). But he underlines the ambivalence of this physical sensitivity, which he says is also the cause of sin and the ensuing perversion<sup>11</sup>: from being informative, pleasures and pains

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<sup>8</sup> See also *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, III, II, XXXVIII, *Works* II, 136: “But I cannot bring myself to push metaphysics to the expense of morality, to assure as unquestionable truths, opinions contrary to the inner sentiment I have of myself, or finally to speak to the ears a certain language, which, it seems to me, says nothing clear to the mind.”

<sup>9</sup> “The goods of the body do not deserve the application of a mind, which God made only for itself: it is necessary, therefore, that the mind should recognise such goods without examination, and by the short and incontestable proof of sentiment.” (*Ibid.*, I, V, 49).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* In this Malebranche is merely developing what Descartes already set out in the Sixth Meditation: “Moreover I felt that this body was placed between many others, from which it was capable of receiving various conveniences and inconveniences, and I noticed these conveniences by a certain sentiment of pleasure or delight, and these inconveniences by a sentiment of pain”, AT IX-1, 59.

<sup>11</sup> We will not return to Malebranche's explanation of sin. Let us quickly recall that God wanted to be loved with a free love and not with a love of instinct. He did not give Adam any preventive sentiments with regard to spiritual goods. The vivacity of



become prescriptive. Man must obey them<sup>12</sup>, insofar as his adherence to sensitive goods no longer concerns only his body but also gains his soul, deceived by what Malebranche calls “proofs of sentiment”<sup>13</sup>. These make him believe that bodies, and not God, are the true cause of the pleasures or pains he feels.

If he recognises that these sentiments have a usefulness, as in Descartes, he also thinks that they have a metaphysical value, if one may say so, in that they dispense us from devoting the capacity of our minds to bodies. Far from pointing to a defect in creation, they remain a proof of divine wisdom insofar as they are instituted to make us know quickly and efficiently the composition of bodies and their usefulness to us<sup>14</sup>. Hence, the short and sure way of sentiment makes us know which bodies we should unite with without needing to develop our knowledge of them. Understood as shortcuts to knowledge, pleasure and pain are, it is true, a form of deprivation in relation to the knowledge of light. What is commendable when it comes to bodies, becomes regrettable when it comes to our relationship with Order.

In the *Treatise on Morals*, the Oratorian also acknowledges the power and advantage of the short and sure voice of sentiments of joy or remorse to instruct us when we follow or abandon the unchanging order of perfections in the absence of light on this moral order, but then he deplores that we are not able to apply our reason to the truths contained in divine wisdom. In morality – as in metaphysics and mathematics – rational knowledge by ideas remains the model of knowledge<sup>15</sup>.

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sensitive pleasures gradually occupied all of Adam's attention, turning him away from Adam's attention, distracting him from the union with God which was known to him only by the light of reason.

<sup>12</sup> “Thus the senses and the passions do not derive their birth from sin, but only that power which they have to tyrannise sinners: and this power is not so much a disorder of the senses, as of the mind and will of men [...]”, RV, I, V, 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, V, V, 528.

<sup>14</sup> See *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et la religion*, IV, XIV, *Œuvres* II, 731-732.

<sup>15</sup> “Nothing, therefore, is more certain than the light: one cannot dwell too much on clear ideas; and although one may allow oneself to be animated by sentiment, one must never allow oneself to be led by it. We must contemplate the Order in itself, and only suffer sentiment to sustain our attention by the movement it excites in us”, *Treatise on Morals*, I, V, XXI, *Works* II, 470.

Is affectivity, then, only a stopgap to the knowledge of light? We endeavour to show that the passions have more than just a practical role and that their cognitive value is not limited to the power they have to apply the mind to certain truths. There is more to it than that, and the texts indicate that a certain relationship to truth is also played out *in* our passions and sentiments, inaccessible by any other means than the affective one. To show this, we will be particularly attentive to the lexicon of conviction and persuasion that runs through the texts when Malebranche speaks of instinctual knowledge.

## II. Exploiting the relativity of affects for the knowledge of our unions

Sensibility, understood in the broad sense of the faculty of being affected by the presence of external bodies, in addition to playing a role in the conservation of man, occupies, in Malebranche's philosophy, a function in the metaphysical knowledge that man has of himself. In Malebranche's philosophy, sensibility, in addition to playing a role in the preservation of man, has a function in the metaphysical knowledge that man has of himself: it reveals to him what he is united with, what he is part of. It reveals to him *his existential relationships*, and in the first place, those of his union with bodies in general and with his body in particular. This union, however, remains accidental and secondary to the union that essentially unites him to God through his spirit, as Malebranche explains in the preface to the *Recherche*<sup>16</sup>. Here lies one of the great breaks in his philosophy in relation to that of Descartes: the Oratorian begins his philosophical research by placing man in the order of Creation. To know man, the goal Malebranche gives to the *Research* in the preface, is to study him in his relationship with his Creator on the

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<sup>16</sup> "It is true that it [the soul] is united to the body. It is true that it [the soul] is united to the body, and that it is naturally its form; but it is also true that it is united to God in a much closer and more essential way", RV, Preface, 4.

one hand, and in his relationship with other creatures on the other<sup>17</sup>. It is in this perspective that sentiment is called upon to go beyond its function as a guide to conservation.

### *II. 1. The passions and the union with bodies*

Malebranche develops the theme of union with bodies in Book V of the *Research* dealing with the passions. He distinguishes between the natural inclinations, studied in Book IV, and the passions. The natural inclinations are the natural movements of the mind received independently of the body and common to all intelligences: the inclination for the good in general, for being and well-being, for other creatures useful to our preservation. The passions, on the other hand, reinforce the union we have with the bodies. They designate all the emotions that the soul naturally feels on the occasion of the extraordinary movements of animal spirits.

They incline us to love our bodies and everything that is useful for their preservation. The human world is described as a chain of bodily dependencies, from the body itself to the surrounding bodies – living bodies (relatives, friends, neighbours, prince, animals) and inanimate bodies (homeland, wealth, physical world) – on which man relies for his existence (V, II). Chapter II thus deals with the union of the mind with sensitive objects, or the force and extent of the passions in general.

“But God has given us a body and through this body has united us to all sensitive things. It is the order of nature, it is the will of the Creator, that all the beings he has made should hold to one another. We are united in some way with the whole universe, and it was the sin of the first man that made us dependent on all the beings to which God had only united us. Thus there is no one at present who is not in some way united and subject to his body, and through his body to his parents, his friends, his city, his prince, his country, his dress, his house, his land, his horse, his dog, the whole earth, the sun, the stars, and all the heavens.”  
(V, II, 493)

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<sup>17</sup>“The spirit of man is by its nature situated between its Creator and corporeal creatures [...]”, *ibid.*, 3; “The subject of this work is the spirit of man as a whole. It is considered in itself, in relation to the bodies and in relation to God”, *Ibid.*, 13.

There is indeed a union to be known, “a natural union” which does not depend on our will and which is the will of God. The economy of the senses and passions for the preservation of the body is, according to Malebranche, “just and marvellous” (*Ibid*, 491) and should not be taken as a corruption of nature but rather as its first institution. The order of grace is not intended to destroy this order of nature. God still wants the will that makes the order of nature. So God wants the passions, because in their trial the knowledge that man takes of himself is ultimately at stake. This realist anthropology denigrates those who diminish the importance of the passions, like the Stoics<sup>18</sup>.

It is as ridiculous to tell us not to feel pain when we are hit, as it is to tell us not to be distressed by the death of a father: Stoic philosophy is a philosophy that tries to ignore the unions of which we are a part (with our body and bodies). Unlike them, Christians consider what the passions teach them, they recognise that the soul depends on its body:

“This is not how Christians philosophise. They do not deny that pain is an evil; that there is pain in the disunion of things to which we are united by nature, and that it is difficult to free ourselves from the slavery to which sin has reduced us. [...] True Christians or true philosophers say nothing that is not in accordance with common sense and experience; but the whole of nature constantly resists the opinion or pride of the stoics.” (495)

According to Malebranche, “[...] almost all the actions of men are sensitive and demonstrative proofs of this” (*Ibid*. 495), i.e. prove this truth that men are united by nature to all sensitive things – and are dependent on them since sin. Among these practical proofs, one could mention our reactions to the misfortune of others. Malebranche speaks of this in relation to the natural inclination of friendship for other men. For Malebranche, it is “the strongest natural union that God has put between us and his works” (IV, XIII, 477).

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<sup>18</sup> “It is therefore ridiculous to tell men that it depends on them to be happy, to be wise, to be free; and it is a mockery to seriously warn them not to grieve over the loss of their friends or their property.” (*Ibid.*, 494).

The love of choice by which we love others is sustained by a natural love that God imprints in us. According to him, we are bound by invisible ties which “oblige us as necessarily to love them; to look after their preservation as if it were our own; to regard them as necessary parts of the whole which we compose with them, and without which we could not subsist” (477). The natural connection between the cry we make when we feel pain and the inclination of others to help us without thinking about it proves this. Pity, thus described, is a passion that reveals to us the invisible link we have with other men.

“It is principally through the passions that the soul spreads outwards, and feels that it is indeed connected with all that surrounds it; just as it is principally through sentiment that it spreads into its body, and recognises that it is united with all the parts that compose it.” (476)

Whether it is the passions that bind us to other bodies or the sentiment that binds us to our own body, which we will discuss below, the logic is the same: these affections have not only a dynamic, practical effect of attaching us to the wholes of which we are a part (society and the body) – “spreads outwards and into one’s own body” – but also a cognitive value, if we understand this term in a non-rational sense. Passions and sentiment respectively make the soul *feel* that it is attached to everything around it and *recognise* that it is united with it. It is in the affective experience that man recognises the relationships that structure his existence.

## ***II.2. Union with our body***

In addition to the knowledge that we are united with other bodies, whether those of other men or those of inanimate objects, there is the even more useful knowledge that we are united with *our* body. When Malebranche distinguishes these two orientations in the union that our soul has with the body in general, he reserves the notion of sentiment for the second, that which turns the soul towards its individual body to distinguish it from the passions that turn its being towards external bodies. For Malebranche we relate without fail the sentiments of pleasure and pain to an inner state by virtue of the liveliness that

characterises them (*Ibid.* I, XII, 103-104)<sup>19</sup>. It is not surprising that it is also through these affective modalities that sentiment makes the soul aware of the union it has with the body that belongs to it. Thus, it is “by the instinct of sentiment that I am persuaded that my soul is united to my body or that my body is part of my being: I have no evidence of this” (*Ibid.* V, V, 528-529).

The place given to instinct introduces the same difficulty as when it marked man’s union with external bodies: it is both vital and It is both vital for the life of the individual and a source of error. Let us remember here its persuasive character: through the modalities of pleasure and pain, I know by sentiment the union of my soul with my body. But instinctual knowledge is at the same time depreciated in relation to the evidence of reason: it makes one believe in what is not. Malebranche insists on the error into which the instinct of sentiment makes us fall: through it we extend our being to parts that are nevertheless distinct from it and go so far as to apprehend this heterogeneous whole as a whole, even though the part that is really essential to us is an indivisible spiritual unity. However, even the wise, according to him, must surrender to this sensitive proof, at the risk of speaking against experience, like the Stoics. As far as our existence is concerned, it seems wiser to surrender to what our sentiment shows us.

At this stage, sensibility and its power of persuasion are opposed to reason and its power of conviction, like error to truth<sup>20</sup>. This semantics seems to be in line with the one used at the time, if we rely on the dictionary of the Académie Française from 1694. Persuade is defined as “to carry, induce, determine someone to believe, to do something” and

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<sup>19</sup> “But for vivid sensations like pain and pleasure, we easily judge that they are in us, because we feel that they touch us; and that we do not need to know them by their ideas, to know that they belong to us”.

<sup>20</sup> See also: “Now, of all the pleasures we enjoy here below, the most sensitive are those which we imagine we receive through bodies. We therefore judge without much reflection that bodies can be and are indeed our good. For it is very difficult to fight against the instinct of nature and to resist the proofs of sentiment: we do not even notice them. One does not think of the disorder of sin; one does not reflect that bodies can only act on the mind as occasional causes [...] These truths, though very obvious to attentive minds, are not so powerful in convincing us as the deceptive experience of sensitive impression”. *Ibid.*, 528.

the examples in the article suggest that persuasion makes one believe in something false or act in a wrong way. Thus, “our heart easily persuades us of what it desires. He who persuades another to do a crime is hardly less guilty than he who commits it. We naturally blame our faults on the one who persuaded us to do them”.<sup>21</sup>

To convince, on the other hand, is to “reduce someone by reasoning, or by sensitive, obvious evidence, to agree with a truth he could not understand, with a fact he wanted to deny”<sup>22</sup>. To convince is to accept a truth, whereas to persuade has less of a theoretical dimension than a practical one, and can lead to action, even if it is in the direction of error and evil. Precisely, the instinct of sentiment, in the form of pleasure or even more so of pain, will appear to be very effective in making man aware of the relationships that are essential to his existence in this life, but above all in *attaching* men to the other beings with whom he is linked. If the passions are, in this respect, indispensable to make society possible and to bind men together, they are also an essential means for fallen man to convert to God. While the lexicon of persuasion may lead one to believe that Malebranche deplores this use of the passions and of “instinctual knowledge”, we shall see that it reveals above all the determining value of the affections for knowledge.

### ***II.3. Union with God and physical and supernatural sensitivity: the grace of sentiment***

In the continuation of Book V of the *Recherche*, in which Malebranche insists on the importance of the instinct of sentiment to persuade the soul of its union with the body, he states that of sentiment to persuade the soul of its union with the body. In the continuation of Book V of the *Recherche*, in which Malebranche insists on the importance of the instinct of sentiment to persuade the soul of its union with the

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<sup>21</sup> See the article “Persuader” in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* of 1694, available at: <https://artfl.atilf.fr/cgi-bin/dico1look.pl?strippedhw=persuader&dicoid=ACAD 1694&headword=&dicoid=ACAD1694>, last time accessed on December 1, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> See the article “Convaincre” on the same site.

body, it appears that the instinct is also decisive in making man know his essential union with God:

“It is not by the instinct of sentiment that we are persuaded that God is our all, if it is not the grace of Jesus Christ, which causes this sentiment in certain persons, in order to help them to overcome the contrary sentiment by which they are united to the body. For God as the Author of nature brings spirits to his love by a knowledge of light, and not by a knowledge of instinct: and according to all appearances, it is only since sin that he adds as the Author of grace the instinct, the prevenient delight to the light, because our light is now much diminished, and is incapable of bringing us to God, and the effort of pleasure or of the contrary instinct constantly weakens it and renders it ineffective.” (RV V, V, *Oeuvres* I, 529-530)

The union that man must have with God presents this dialectic that runs through the whole of Malebranche’s work: on the one hand, God must be known by a knowledge of light, that is to say by reason. On the other hand, sin makes man only attentive to what is sensitive to him and loves what provokes pleasure in him. In the order of nature instituted at the outset, man’s union with God is not sensitive, unlike the union he has with the bodies. It is only intelligible and apprehensible by reason. *In fact*, it remains mostly unnoticed, given the liveliness of the sentiment that unites man with physical realities. It is only by virtue of the order of grace established by God after sin for the salvation of man that man receives the sentiment of his union with God through the intermediary of a pleasure called “prevenient delight”. Through it he receives a sensitive impression of spiritual goods.

This sentiment, described as “instinctual knowledge”, even if it is devalued in comparison with “knowledge of light”, is necessary to bring the fallen man back to God. If Malebranche denounces proofs of sentiment or warned against instinctual knowledge concerning bodies, he does not consider sensitive experience or proofs of sentiment to be misleading when it comes to union with God. This passage allows us to consider that instinctual knowledge is not necessarily false and that the sensibility/reason, persuasion/conviction, error/truth split is not always true. The interest of instinctive knowledge when it takes the form of the grace of sentiment is to reveal our union with God while *bringing us to it* (Alquié 1974, 320-324). Affective knowledge has a dynamic as well as a



cognitive virtue, with the meaning of persuasion coming close here to its Ciceronian meaning of adherence to a truth through non-rational motives.

The cognitive value of sentiments through the notion of persuasion appears in the chapter dealing with admiration. It is a passion that is an exception in the search for truth, insofar as it is the only one of the passions that applies the mind and enlightens it at the same time. If we do not admire the object we are studying, we cannot apply our mind to it:

“No matter how much we are told to be attentive, we cannot be, or we cannot be for long, even though we are convinced, from a certain abstract persuasion that does not agitate the mind, that the thing is very much worth our attention.” (RV, V, VIII, 557-558.)

We understand that what essentially defines persuasion in relation to conviction is not the possibility of error but the fact that judgment is aided by the passions. An “abstract persuasion”, as we can see, is only a conviction that does not move us. That is why, when the will is pure reason and the animal spirits are subjugated by the passions, we need “a special grace to know the truth” (558) which gives us the power to resist the weight of the body. This is of such force in Malebranche’s eyes that only a grace can bring persuasion to the will of pure reason, for it brings with it the force of passion and its positive valence<sup>23</sup>, and thus the movement of minds. In *contrast*, the defect of conviction is that it is not accompanied by passion and lacks the movement of animal spirits. Thus, although “everyone [is] *convinced* that the knowledge of truth and the love of virtue make the mind more perfect” (*Ibid.*, V, V, 524)<sup>24</sup>, we nevertheless seek only union with sensitive things. A mere conviction, even if it is complete, remains a vain idea, without effect on our mind.

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<sup>23</sup> Passion has the advantage of always conveying sweetness and pleasure: “Passions always try to justify themselves, and they insensibly persuade us that we are right to follow them. The sweetness and pleasure they give to the mind, which must be their judge, corrupt it in their favour” (*Ibid.*, 560).

<sup>24</sup> Emphasis added.

Just as the fibres of the brain must be shaken to bring about the movement of animal spirits, “thoughts in which the body has some part”, in other words “sentiments”, are needed to give rise to passions. This is why, writes Malebranche, only sentiments “sensitively convince that one holds to certain things for which they excite love” (532). The phrase “to convince sensibly” is the counterpart of “to persuade abstractly”, which we encountered above. To convince sensibly means to persuade; when the heart is inclined to love the truth which it recognises at the same time, love appears to be the condition for the recognition of this truth.

These passages confirm that it is not so much the criteria of truth and falsity that distinguish persuasion and conviction as the presence or absence of the liveliness of evidence and desire. To be persuaded of the truth of something is not only to recognise its truth by non-rational means (sensation or imagination) but to recognise it by loving, to be carried body and soul towards a reality, to the point that we desire to strengthen our union with it. This is why it was necessary, according to Malebranche, for the Truth to be made sensitive in Jesus Christ; this explains why we find, at the heart of the treatise on the passions that constitutes book V of the *Recherche*, considerations on incarnation (531). If the passions are one of the greatest obstacles to the mind’s attention and to the search for truth, *access* to the truth *par excellence* – in the sense of both knowledge and attainment – cannot be achieved without passions.

### **Conclusion**

Sentiment unites sinful men with God as well as with bodies, with spiritual goods as well as with sensitive goods. For Malebranche, to know the soul by sentiment is therefore to feel its inner modifications and discern them in relation to each other, and also to feel the soul’s relations with the beings that are superior or inferior to it. Understood under this last aspect, its sentiments teach the soul that it is united and even dependent, for its existence, on God on the one hand and on bodies on the other. From a theoretical point of view, Malebranche distinguishes sentiment from understanding by the former’s incapacity

to establish relationships. From a point of view that could be called "existential", however, he makes the instinct of sentiment an organ of perception through which man feels his relations with bodies, his body, and, finally, God.

The human condition thus consists of a set of dependencies which man does not know by clear idea but which he knows by sentiment. By this very fact, and in spite of himself, Malebranche exploits that property of sentiment which at the same time disqualifies it for objective knowledge: its relative character. This makes sentiment a form of primitive notion intended to apprehend relationships, whether between God and man or between external bodies and our body, and not only between body and mind. Nevertheless, sentiment only makes man aware of these relationships that structure his existence in the affective modalities of pleasure and pain. In conferring this power on sentiment, God is merely adapting to the fallen nature of man whose attention depends on sensitive interest.

In the post-lapsarian state, sentiment is thus a yardstick of man's double union. Since union is nothing other than a relationship, the sentiments of pleasure and pain that accompany sensations and passions are given a privileged status in order to indicate the different forms of union that structure human existence. Insofar as they indicate that an object is good or bad for us who experience them, pleasure and pain indicate *par excellence* the existence of a relationship between this object and ourselves, as well as its value. The pleasure or displeasure that they provoke arouses in us the desire to strengthen or weaken our relationship with the object in question. In this movement by which we seek an object appears the union we have with it. Therefore, the knowledge of the unions that constitute man is a knowledge of a special kind, which cannot unfold in a purely theoretical way and outside of him, but relies to a great extent on his affectivity and on the persuasive force of passions and sentiments. Only affectivity can *persuade* us of certain truths which, without the passions, would remain unknown to us.

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