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To cite this article: Marc De Kesel (2017) Selfless love: Pur Amour in Fénelon and Malebranche, International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 78:1-2, 75-90

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2016.1264308>



Published online: 14 Apr 2017.



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## Selfless love: *Pur Amour* in Fénelon and Malebranche

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### ABSTRACT

In the seventeenth century, when the modern Self emerged in the shape of a self-assured Cartesian *cogito*, a radically opposite movement of ‘emptying’ or ‘deconstructing’ that Self took place. The religious subject, having become modern, understood its ultimate aim as becoming selfless. The battlefield on which the new subject fought the fight with its own modern condition was the issue of ‘love’. ‘What is the status of his Self when it is involved in the act of love?’ was the central question in seventeenth century religiosity. This essay examines the early modern idea of *pur amour* and focuses only on two voices in the *Querelle Du Quiétisme*, François de Fénelon (1651–1715) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715). Fénelon vehemently defended the *pur amour*, a concept he adopted from a century-long tradition of spirituality in France and which he tried to explain and legitimize in a systematic and theoretical way. Malebranche was highly critical of that tradition, but refused neither to use the term nor to refer to the ideal of *pur amour*. His interpretation of the Self, however, forced him to draw different conclusions on the nature of pure love.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 July 2016  
Accepted 21 November 2016

### KEYWORDS

Religious violence; *Pur amour*; Fénelon; Malebranche; love; identity; self

Nous sommes-nous faits nous-même? Sommes nous à Dieu ou à nous? Nous a-t-il fait pour nous ou pour lui?

Fénelon<sup>1</sup>

The seventeenth century is in many ways the century of the Self, for in that age the status of the Self underwent radical change. Of course, the concept of the ‘Self’ is as old as Western thought,<sup>2</sup> but in the seventeenth century, it became the ‘rock’ upon which a new relation to reality began to be built. Before, the human being’s relation to reality had its foundation in the ‘Self’ of reality as such: in being, as antique philosophy claimed, or, as the Christian middle ages preferred, in the creator of that being, God. Christianity had changed the Self or ‘subject’ of all that is – its *subjectum*, bearer, ground, foundation – from being to God. In the sixteenth century, however, this God became the object of social and political disaster lasting almost 150 years. From Luther’s call for Reformation in 1517 until the Treatise of Westphalia in 1648, an atrocious series of wars ruined large parts of Renaissance Europe. Only in the middle of the seventeenth century did the European nations agree – though without literally stating it – to cease fighting one another in the name of religion, or in the name of what each of them considered to be the true God. After having been the object of war for a century and a

half, God could no longer hold his position as ‘subject’, i.e. as the common ground on which everyone – friend and enemy – could relate to one another. If the well-known expression of ‘the death of God’ that is so commonly linked to the rise of Modernity means anything, then it is precisely this: that he ceased to be the ‘subject’, or the common supposition on which the human being relates to reality.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, the human being himself became the ‘subject’. Not the subject of being (how could he? – he is definitely not the creator of being), but the subject of his relation to being. His starting point for relating to the world – the foundation for his relations with reality and with his fellows – is now nowhere else than within himself: it is himself in so far as he is *free* from the being that is around him, *free* to relate to whatever he wants and in whichever manner he pleases. It is the emergence of the free Self, the Self as free – in the sense of (epistemologically) disconnected – from the world he lives in, from the world which grounds him.

It is remarkable however that precisely in the age when the modern Self emerged, a radically opposite movement of ‘emptying’ or (anachronistically spoken) ‘deconstructing’ that Self took place. The Flemish and Rhineland mystical movements of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance that emphasized the human being’s disappearing in God as the ultimate aim of Christian life had not faded away with the emergence of Modernity in the seventeenth century. Certainly not in France. These mystical traditions, together with the more recent Spanish spirituality of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, entered France only in the course of the sixteenth century. There, in the next century, the Cartesian spirit of a strong Self-based relation to the world met a religious, spiritual movement questioning that very Self by putting forward the act of emptying this Self as its main goal.<sup>4</sup> The religious subject, having become modern, understood its ultimate aim as becoming selfless.

The battlefield on which the new subject fought the fight with its own modern condition was the issue of ‘love’. The perpetual question ‘what is love?’ was rephrased into: whom do we ultimately love when we truly love? Do we love ourselves, as loving subjects, or do we love the object of our love? And even if one were to respond that in true love, one is of course oriented towards the beloved, the question nonetheless remains what that means for the lover, the subject of love: does he realize himself in the act of loving or does he, on the contrary, lose himself? What is the status of his Self when it is involved in the act of love?

In the last decennium of the seventeenth century, this question occupied the entirety of intellectual France. It formed the centre of a huge ‘affair’, ‘*La Querelle Du Quiétisme*’, in which everyone at the Versailles royal court and in Paris, including the Sorbonne, actively participated – a quarrel concentrated on the question of the purity of love, the ‘*pur amour*’: is pure love devoid of any self-interest? Is it a love that radically ignores its Self, its subject? In order to be truly pure, does love have to give its Self completely away in favour of the beloved object, which is God? This debate touched the heart of early modern religiosity and spirituality, and it allows us to understand the fully modern character of the religious discussions of the time. But this genuine religious debate also touched the heart of early Modernity in general and shows what exactly is at stake in Modernity or, more specifically, what precisely the modern Self, the Self raised to the status of ‘subject’, consists in.

This chapter examines the early modern idea of *pur amour* and focuses only on two voices in the *Querelle du quiétisme*, François de Fénelon (1651–1715) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715). Fénelon vehemently defended the *pur amour*, a concept he

adopted from a century-long tradition of spirituality in France and which he tried to explain and legitimize in a systematic and theoretical way. Malebranche was highly critical of that tradition, but refused neither to use the term nor to refer to the ideal of *pur amour*. His interpretation of the Self, however, forced him to draw different conclusions on the nature of pure love.

## 1. Context

In 1689, Fénelon, a priest at Louis XIV's court in Versailles, became the spiritual counsellor of Madame de Maintenon (the king's unofficial wife) and tutor of the Duke of Burgundy (one of the possible heirs to the throne). It is in that function and environment that he became interested in the mystical and spiritual tendencies of his time. An encounter with Madame Guyon (1648–1717) was decisive in this.<sup>5</sup> As an independent spirit and productive writer with noteworthy influence among the members of the Royal Court, Jeanne Guyon promoted a spiritual life focused on the ideal of *pur amour*: a purification of the human being's love for God, geared towards ridding that love of any self-interest. *Pur amour*, loving (God) purely, is presented as the opposite of *amour de soi*, self-love.

The ideal of selfless love as a hallmark of the Christian life was far from new. We find it already in Saint Augustine,<sup>6</sup> and it was a central theme in the works of many representatives of the French spirituality movement of the seventeenth century. One finds it with François de Sales (1567–1622) and Jean-Pierre Camus (1584–1652),<sup>7</sup> among others, and with contemporaries of Fénelon, such as Alexandre Piny (1640–1709).<sup>8</sup>

In his enthusiasm for Guyon's writings and conversations as well as for the entire spiritual movement of his century, Fénelon felt the need to explain theoretically why this mystical intuition of the *pur amour* reveals the heart of both Christian doctrine and practice. When, in 1693, Madame de Maintenon asked Guyon to let the orthodoxy of her writings be judged by Jaques-Bénigne Bossuet, the theological authority of the time, Fénelon advised her to welcome that request. Bishop Bossuet was an older friend and had always supported him, so Fénelon was full of confidence. However, things turned out differently than expected. Bossuet, together with two other bishops and later joined by Fénelon himself, took almost an entire year to read and discuss Guyon's work, and the final judgment of these so-called Issy Conferences (June 1694–March 1695) was far from positive. A series of propositions in her work were ascertained to be unorthodox, and Guyon was ordered to cease speaking or preaching in public and not to leave Meaux, the diocese of Bossuet. Yet, at the end of the same year, she was seen in Paris spreading her message as before – which, for a while, brought her into prison.

The public scandal around Madame Guyon increasingly infected the reputation of Fénelon, who, although he had signed the document condemning some of her theses, still kept on defending her in private. His nomination as archbishop of Cambrai in 1795 was already considered by many as an elegant way to send him into exile. A few years later, he was officially eliminated from the Versailles Court, not least because of the publication of the *Explication desmaximes des saints sur la vie intérieure (Explication of the Maxims of the Saints about the inner life; 1797)*.<sup>9</sup> Therein, he defended systematically the orthodox value of the mystical and spiritual tradition, including the *pur amour* – and, consequently (though merely implicitly), the basic intuitions of Madame

Guyon. Between 1695 and 1699, a huge polemic arose around the question of the *pur amour*. The so-called Quietisme Affair, led by the protagonists Fénelon and Bossuet, was fought on every public scene in France, and even in the Vatican. It was Rome that put an end to the *Querelle*: on 12 March 1699, an apostolic letter by Pope Innocent XII, ‘*Cum alias*’, condemned 23 propositions of the *Maximes des saints* as unorthodox. Without protest, Fénelon respected the judgment of the Roman authorities and stopped writing or speaking publically on that matter. And so did everyone else in absolutist France. The question of the *pur amour* – and, in fact, the issue of mysticism and spirituality in general – remained untouched during the entire eighteenth century.

## 2. Fénelon’s *pur amour*

My God, if by impossible supposition, you should want me to be condemned to eternal torment in hell without thereby losing your love, I would not love you any less.<sup>10</sup>

This quote from Fénelon’s *Maxims of the Saints* is one of his countless evocations of *pur amour* in his oeuvre. It says that, even if, hypothetically, I am convinced that after my death, God will cut me off from the eternal beatitude of heaven and forever condemn me to hell – that even then, I am still able to love God. More still, that only then will my love be truly pure, since it is then absolutely free from any self-interest. Truly pure love requires the sacrifice of the slightest self-interest.<sup>11</sup>

Note that the whole argument is based on a hypothesis: ‘if by *impossible* supposition’, he writes. ‘Impossible’, because such a supposition is strictly spoken, misguided and sinful. Fénelon is fully aware that a Christian is not allowed to doubt God’s promise of eternal happiness in the afterlife. In the sentence immediately following the quote, we read:

But this sacrifice cannot be absolute in our ordinary state. It is only in the state of the final trials [*les cas des dernières épreuves*] that this sacrifice becomes in some sense absolute. So, a soul can be invincibly persuaded, with a well thought-out persuasion and not one of the intimate depths of conscience, that she is rightly damned by God.<sup>12</sup>

This hypothetical situation only occurs to a ‘saint’, one who has chosen to follow the mystical path of loving God and who is in the ultimate phase of it, where he inevitably encounters moments of darkness. Only in this situation, does one understandably come up with such an ‘impossible’ hypothesis. Pure love is thus not a kind of ideal that every Christian should strive for. Fénelon acknowledges that love for God as it is lived by the majority of the people – which means love without a radical purification of self-interest – is a highly valid kind of love, and that those people are absolutely fine Christians.

Before starting to develop the 45 ‘Articles’ of his *Maxims of the Saints*, he presents 5 ways in which we can love God. The first and the second – loving God for direct benefits (for his ‘blessings’, like the ‘carnal Jews [juifs charnels]’, he adds), and as the unique ‘source of happiness’ – are not really worthy of being called ‘love’.<sup>13</sup> The third and the fourth are ‘hopeful love’ and ‘charitable love’. The third is a good start, however still too self-interested. But the fourth, although ‘still mixed with some vestiges of self-interest’, is ‘nevertheless true salvific love because selfless motives predominate therein’.<sup>14</sup> The leading ideal of loving God for the Christian is the fourth way.

The *pur amour* is only the fifth kind of love, experienced – as Fénelon again stresses – ‘in the midst of trials and tribulations’.<sup>15</sup> It is for those who are called by God to follow the mystic way and live a ‘spiritual live’ (‘vie spirituelle’). And if the latter, for that reason, consider themselves better than the others, then they reveal their incapacity, their unworthiness of that path. People who purely love God know that their love is not their merit, but God’s. In number XXIII of the *Lettres et opuscules spirituels*, entitled *Sur le pur amour*, Fénelon writes:

It is true that not all just souls are capable of so explicit a preference of God over themselves: but the implicit preference is at least necessary; and the explicit one, which is the most perfect, is only suitable for the souls to whom God has given the light and the strength to prefer it in such a way that they want beatitude but for his glory.<sup>16</sup>

Not all ‘just souls’ are capable of explicitly responding to God’s preference of being loved purely, without any self-interest, without taking any notice of the eternal beatitude he nonetheless promises. But an ‘implicit preference is at least necessary’, which is to say that, implicitly, *everyone* must be open to that radical kind of love. Although not stated as a universal commandment, the *pur amour* is for Fénelon nonetheless a point of reference that every Christian should keep in mind. For only that radically selfless love brings us back to who we are: creatures, created out of nothing by God, and consequently, created out of ‘pure love’. God, in his infinite perfectness and perfect infinity, had no interest in creating us. He had no need to create us in order to be glorified, for he is himself the perfect source of his own glory. But he nevertheless did create us, so great was his love, so generous his glory. If our love for God has to be pure, then this is because of the purity of God’s own love. It is not a coincidence that the text from which the last quote was taken, *Sur le pur amour*, begins as follows:

God has made all things for himself, as say the Scriptures<sup>17</sup>; he owes all that he made to himself [...]. Essentially and profoundly, he relates back to himself alone all that is in non-intelligent creatures, and he wants intelligent creatures to relate, fully and without restriction, only to him. It is true that he wants our happiness; but our happiness is not the major goal of his work, neither is it a goal equal to that of his glory. It is for his very glory that he wants our happiness: our happiness is but a subordinate goal that he relates to the final and ultimate goal, which is his glory. He himself is the unique and essential goal of all things.<sup>18</sup>

Does God need to be glorified? Not exactly, for God is not a pagan idol like Jupiter or Apollo, who lived from the sacrifices, prayers, processions and other sacred practices by which mortals honoured them. Fénelon’s God is definitely monotheistic: he does not live of gifts, for he is himself the infinite universal gift of all that is. His grace is the source of all human gifts as well. And if the human being refused to thank him for this grace, then God would nonetheless remain the glorious perfection which he is. Yet, by refusing to thank God, the human being forgets what and who he is: God’s creature. It is for this reason that the human being does have to thank God and give Him something in return for all he has received from Him. Yet, when he does so, he has to let God know that his human gift, too, is a radically generous gift, never as generous as God’s gift to the human being, but generous anyway, for it is a gift that expects no counter-gift from God, a gift that remembers, in the very act of gift-giving, that God already gives everything, including the gift now offered to him. The cited passage continues:

In order to enter into that essential goal of our creation, we must chose God over us, and only want our beatitude for his glory; otherwise we reverse his order. It is not our own interest, our beatitude, that must make us desire his glory but, on the contrary, the desire for his glory that must make us desire our beatitude, as something to which he likes to relate his glory.<sup>19</sup>

A logic of gift-giving underlies Fénelon's argumentation and reveals the hard core of his understanding of *pur amour*. Since God has given us everything, including our life and even our self, we for our part are not able to give him any counter-gift worthy of his divine gift, his grace and 'glory' – except our very incapacity to do this. We can give him nothing except nothing, i.e. nothing except the nothing that we are. This is why we have to accept our nothingness. Only that acceptance – and our consciousness of the nothingness of that acceptance – is the counter-gift we can offer God. Only that gift recognizes him in his glory, in the fact that he 'has made all things for himself', for his glory.

The implications this has for one's behaviour towards God can be rather extreme. The following quotes come from the *Lettres spirituelles* Fénelon wrote to those who felt called to a mystical path (letters he wrote by the thousands, also because, since his condemnation in 1699, he was not allowed to publish his writings). Despite his restriction of the *pur amour* to 'saints', Fénelon's statements in these letters contain principles relevant to anyone's genuine relation to God.

Be really a nothing, in all and everywhere; but do not add anything to that pure nothing. On that nothing you have no grip. It has nothing to lose. The real nothing offers resistance to nothing, there is no I it takes care of. So, be nothing, and nothing more. Suffer in peace, abandon yourself; go, like Abraham, without knowing where to. Receive from the hands of men the comfort that God will give you through them. You must receive it not from them, but through them from him. Mix your abandonment with nothing, and do not mix that nothing with anything else either. Such wine must be drunk pure, unmixed; even one drop of water destroys its worth. One loses infinitely by willing to keep the slightest part of oneself. No, restriction, I swear.

[...]

Love the hand of God that beats and destroys us. The creature is only made to be destroyed as the one who has made it for himself sees fit [*au bon plaisir*]. What a prosperous use of our substance! Our nothing glorifies the eternal Being and the entire God. May that which our *amour-propre* likes to preserve get lost. Let us be the holocaust which love's fire reduces to ashes.

[...]

The only thing to do is to suffer, to renounce, and to lose; do not hold on to anything; never at any time stop the hand that crucifies you. Nature detests this non-resistance; but God donates it [...].<sup>20</sup>

It is rather a cruel, even sadistic universe which speaks through the many pages Fénelon dedicates to the *pur amour*.<sup>21</sup> Although Fénelon fully recognizes that 'God is love' (as the first letter of Saint John says),<sup>22</sup> he conceives of this love as so immense, so almighty, so infinite that the human being can only acknowledge it by letting himself be slashed down by it, and by confessing that he is absolutely nothing compared to the everything that is God's love.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Loving as willing

Does this mean, however, that the human being is doomed to mere passivity? It is here that Fénelon makes a surprising emphasis. *Pur amour* is not a matter of being *passively* overwhelmed by God; it is a matter of *active* willing. Even if God condemned me to the eternal pains of hell, even if (hypothetically) I knew that God will not respond to *my* love with *his*, even then can I assert my will to love him. And what is more, only that will make my love pure, i.e. radically disinterested and selfless. In number XII of the *Lettres et opuscules spirituels*, Fénelon writes:

The *pur amour* is exclusively in the will alone; so, it is not a love of sentiments, for imagination is in no way a part of it; it is a love that loves without feeling, as pure faith believes without seeing.<sup>24</sup>

Even if the Self is nothing, and embraces that nothingness by loving God purely, it does so *willingly*, and willing *rationally*. Despite its confession to be entirely dependent on God, it takes its distance from God and decides, irrespective of whatever he does or thinks, to do what it wants to do. Even if the Self is aware of being destructed by God (as Madame Guyon, for instance, writes somewhere),<sup>25</sup> the Self positions itself as free, also – and precisely – as free from God.

It is here that we encounter the undeniably modern character of Fénelon's thinking. Within a Christian spiritual framework, he repeats the Cartesian moment of hyperbolic doubt that discovers the absolute certainty nowhere else than in the Self which underlies that very doubt. In the universe of pain that constitutes the genuine *pur amour* landscape, the Self emerges as untouched by pain, by the pain it therefore embraces willingly – willingly but *rationally*, not empathically, not sentimentally. Fénelon's condemnation is doubtlessly due also to the all too radically *modern* character of the subject implied in his *pur amour* theory. Contrary to what the content of his discourse suggests, Fénelon implicitly conceives of the human subject as independent from God. Catholic authorities must have felt him to be all too close to the Protestant position.<sup>26</sup> This conceives of radical freedom as the ground of the human being's relation to God, such that this relation does not lean on the mediation of Church, sacraments, or religious position but, first and foremost, on the individual's love for God: a personal, independent, free love.

De facto, the selfless love Fénelon promotes establishes a strong, Cartesian Self. This is the paradox that is at the foundation of his entire thinking. On the face of it, and in substance, Fénelon defends the old, medieval doctrine according to which God is the 'subject' – 'subject' in the sense of the 'ground' on which the human being relates to the world. The human being has to love God because only love leads him to the ground of his being: there, with God, is the real Self which establishes the world. Covertly, however, Fénelonian love for God starts from a point which has formally dissociated itself from God and stands on its own ground – the new ground, or 'subject', which was first conceptualized in the Cartesian *cogito*, and which forms the paradigm of the modern Self.

These implicit Cartesian underpinnings of Fénelon's theory of *pur amour* will not prevent Nicolas Malebranche, Fénelon's contemporary and an explicitly Cartesian philosopher, from profoundly disagreeing with Fénelon. And yet, Malebranche does

not disagree with Fénelon profoundly enough to drop either the idea of *pur amour* itself or the idea of modernity, which is even more affirmatively present in his work than in Fénelon's.

#### 4. Willing as loving

In his polemical writings on the *pur amour*, Malebranche addresses Fénelon merely indirectly. His main target is a former friend of his, François Lamy.<sup>27</sup> But Fénelon is always in the background, if only because Malebranche must have viewed the *Querelle* as an opportunity to reply, in his turn, to an early critique of his work by Fénelon. In 1688, precisely the period of his first encounters with Madame Guyon and his introduction in the mystical, spiritual tradition, Fénelon wrote a long review – or, rather, a *Réfutation* (Refutation) – of one of Malebranche's early works, *Traité de lanature et de lagrâce* [*Treatise on Nature and Grace*], first published in 1680, more than a decade and a half before the *Querelle*.<sup>28</sup> Malebranche's book gives the background for his later criticism of the *pur amour*. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that precisely this book was the object of Fénelon's first elaborated critique. In Fénelon's *Réfutation*, one can discover the first contours of his later *pur amour* theory; just like in Malebranche's *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, the principles, on the grounds of which he will later reject the Fénelonian theory, are already clearly developed.

The first part of the *Treatise's* opening sentence is remarkably similar to Fénelon's short text discussed above: *Sur le pur amour*. The second part, however, already reveals the difference in relation to Fénelon. 'Article I' reads as follows:<sup>29</sup>

God, being able to act only for his own glory, and being able to find it only in himself, cannot have had any other plan in the creation of the world than the establishment of his Church.<sup>30</sup>

As in Fénelon, there is a focus on the glory of God as the ultimate aim of all that is. According to Malebranche, this is the foundation of our love for God. But then, we read that, consequently, as creator of the world, God could not but have created the Church. This is quite a strong and difficult statement. Malebranche must have been aware of this, for in the later editions, he starts the *Treatise* with an *Avertissement*, saying that only those who did not read his earlier work<sup>31</sup> need the clarifications given in the 'additions' he added to most 'articles' – and adding further 'additions' even to that *Avertissement*. They read as follows:

The will of God can only be the love he has for himself. And he can only want to act by his will. So, he can only act for himself. However, the world is not worthy of God: it bears no relation to God, for there is no relation between the infinite and the finite. God cannot conceive the intention [*former le dessein*] of producing it [the world]. God cannot act with the intention of doing something for the world, because he can only act for himself. And the word, in relation to God, is nothing. God cannot, therefore, resolve to do anything unless a divine person joins his work in order to make it divine and therefore worthy of his indulgence, and related to the infinite act of his will. Thus I could commence the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* with these words.<sup>32</sup>

Article I

God, being able to act only for his own glory...

In fact, these ‘additions’ to the *Avertissement* contain the heart of Malebranche’s ‘system’. Every word counts here. It is a statement about the *will* of God. If ‘God cannot but act in favour of his glory’, as *Article I* states, then this is because of his ‘will’, because ‘he cannot but act by his will’. Why must God act in favour of his glory? Because his act depends on his will. And because his will is ‘love’.

Is love then an act of the will, just like Fénelon states? Precisely not. For Malebranche, love is not an act of the will; it is the will that is an act of love. One cannot will whatever one wills, even God cannot; one can only will what one loves. The concept of love Malebranche has in mind does not base love in its agent, in the one who loves, but in its object, in what or whom one loves. One loves because the object one faces is lovable. It is the inner beauty, goodness or truth of something or someone that is the foundation of (one’s) love. And this kind of object-based love is the paradigm of the will. One cannot will what is not worth willing, i.e. what is not lovable.

That is why even God is ‘limited’ in his will: even he cannot love what is not lovable to him. And since he himself is infinite, he cannot love what is not infinite, and since only he is infinite, he can only love himself. Consequently, as the ‘additions’ state: ‘he cannot but *act* in favour of himself’.

But how, then, can God be able to love the world? How could he, being the perfection that he is, be in a position to act in favour of an imperfect world? Why has he created the universe and why is his creative activity still at the foundation of all that is and of all that the human being does? Here we meet the core difficulty Malebranche’s system has to solve: if God’s will is love, and if, infinite as he is, he can only love the infinite, how then is he able to love – and to will – the *finite*? How can a perfect God be willing to create a universe, which is by definition less perfect, marked as it is by finitude, death and sin? ‘The world is not worthy of God’, we read, ‘it bears no proportion to God, for any relation between the infinite and the finite is lacking’. In order to will (i.e. to create) the world, God has to love it, but how can he do so when ‘the world, in comparison with God, is nothing’?

This is only possible, Malebranche states, if the world gets ‘divinised’, if the infinite joins the finite, ‘if a divine person [...] joins [God’s] work [creation] in order to make it divine’.<sup>33</sup> Only then will the world be ‘worthy of [God’s] complacency’, only then can God love and will/create the world, and only then will the world be ‘proportioned to the infinite act of his will’. In other words, it is Christ who makes the world lovable, ‘proportioned’ to God’s infinity, and consequently creatable. Christ and his living body on earth, which is the Church, enable God to love and to will (create) the world.

The difficult part of *Article I* can now be clarified: God ‘cannot have had any other plan in the creation of the world than the establishment of his Church’. If the world has been creatable and is still supported by the creative God, it is thanks to Christ or, what for Malebranche amounts to the same thing, the Church.

So, already in the opening sentence of *Article I*, one meets the most controversial point in Malebranche’s entire system. For if his line of reasoning is valid, then this implies that Christ is not so much the saviour of a creature fallen into sin through Adam’s lapse. Rather, Christ was then indispensable to God’s economy even before the Fall, before the human being’s expulsion from paradise. Paradoxically, the saving of the human being’s sin *precedes* that sin. As Fénelon summarizes Malebranche in his *Réfutation*, ‘even if man had never sinned, the birth of Jesus Christ would have been

of absolute necessity' – a thesis Fénelon criticizes vehemently.<sup>34</sup> Time and space prohibit a deeper examination of this problematic but central point in Malebranche's system, which was one of the reasons why, in 1690, his *Treatise on Nature and Grace* was condemned by the Vatican and put on the 'index of forbidden books'.

## 5. Malebranche's *pur amour*

Seventeen years after the first publication of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, Malebranche gets involved in the *Quietisme Affair*. One of his major texts in this public dispute is another treatise: *Traité de l'amour de Dieu, en quel sens il doit être désintéressé* [*Treatise on the Love of God, In what Sense It Must be Disinterested*, 1697]. The subtitle reveals much about his position in this debate. He is not against *disinterested* love of God per se; he is against the 'sense' in which the *pur amour* is used by Lamy (to whom he is directly opposed) and Fénelon (his target in the background). They use the concept of *pur amour* in all too absolute, all too radical a sense, thereby denying love in its very essence.

The *Treatise on God's Love* starts with the same Malebranchian axiom as the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. God's will is love, and that love means that he 'loves his own substance in an invincible way, because he takes pleasure in himself [*parce qu'il se complait en lui-même*]'.<sup>35</sup> God has pleasure in himself; this is why he is love (as 1 John 4: 8 says). *Pleasure* is what his love is about, and it is only through pleasure that he loves his creation.

He can love nothing but through the complacency he takes in himself [*Il ne peut rien aimer que par la complaisance qu'il prend en lui-même*], nothing but through the relation to himself; because it is only in himself that he finds the cause, so to speak, of his perfection and of his happiness.<sup>36</sup>

And this has repercussions for human love, for the way the human being loves and must love:

For it is evident that God cannot give his creatures a willingness to go where his will does not go, [i.e.] not to love things to the extent that they are lovable or related to his [God's] substance, which he loves in an invincible way. So nothing is just, reasonable, and pleasing to God that is not in conformity with the unchangeable Order of his perfections.<sup>37</sup>

God, loving himself because of the lovability of 'his perfections', has created a world which, if imperfect because of human sin, is nonetheless hiding a perfect 'Order', since God's Son – who, according to the first line of the Gospel of Saint John,<sup>38</sup> is 'Logos' – has incarnated himself in it.<sup>39</sup> So, despite his finite, sinful condition, the human being takes part in the perfect Order that underlies his world. With his human will, he is willing – just like God – the perfections that God wills. In his love for God, he takes part in God's love for himself. This is why the human being cannot – and may not – love except through God's love. And since God's love is a matter of pleasure, the human being's love for him can – and may – never be without it. One must notice, Malebranche writes

that one cannot love what does not please one, neither hate what does not displease. If one loves the Order, it is because the Order's beauty pleases: if one loves sensible things, it is because they please. One must say the same about what one hates. It is absolutely impossible to will something if nothing touches us.<sup>40</sup>

We are far removed from the Fénelonian definition of love that situates love's purity in the lover's *indifference* with respect to what touches him. That indifference is simply impossible according to Malebranche; and, if taught, morally wrong. It is literally a sin, while loving God, to be indifferent with respect to whether we once will enjoy the beatitude he promises or suffer the eternal pains with which he can punish us.

The desire for [...] beatitude or for pleasure in general is the ground or essence of the will as the capacity for loving the good. This is the self-love [*amour-propre*] which those who study the human heart agree to be indestructible, and which is the principle and the motive of all our particular activities.

[...]

So love for pleasure is the motive for one's love of God [...]: it is the motive which makes one love what pleases or which provokes a pleasing perception.<sup>41</sup>

All that is, is based on pleasure; it is pleasure which makes the universe what it is, since it even makes its Creator what he is. It is pleasure which constitutes the Self of everything. Purifying my love, i.e. purifying my love for God, does not imply a destruction of the Self – a radical selflessness – but a critical treatment of the individual Self involved in the act of my loving. I have to 'deconstruct' my individual Self, I have to place that Self under critique, in such a way that it is led back to the real Self, which is not individual, which is not mine personally, but the Self of being or, more exactly, the Self underlying being – being that is held in existence by a divine Self who, fortunately, loves himself because of the infinite greatness of his very Self.

So, according to Malebranche, *pur amour* cannot be a matter of eliminating all pleasure and self-reference; it is a matter of purifying these. *Pur amour* is a matter of purifying and re-orienting the pleasure and the Self 'invincibly' involved in both our love and will. It is, so to speak, a matter of 'sublimation' (as Freud would say), of pushing our love for pleasure in the right direction in order to find our real Self, which is not our individual Self, but the Self of God, the divine Self expressed in the unchangeable Order of being. The end of that purification is a state in which the individual loves God in the same way and with the same intention as God loves himself.

Considered from that perspective, the Fénelonian *pur amour* is the exact opposite: in Fénelon's love, we relate to God by way of a formal but radical disconnection from him, detached as we feel from the pleasure God gives us and from the will we share with God. In the eyes of Malebranche, the kind of will Fénelon places at the root of the *pur amour* is nothing less than a denial of God and his creation. The Fénelonian *pur amour* piety is a thoroughly false one; its so-called overcoming of *amour-propre* is, in fact, *amour-propre* par excellence. Against the adherents of such 'selfless love', Malebranche states

that the indifference to one's beatitude, to one's perfection and happiness is not only impossible, it is also dangerous to pretend it, because it can only inspire an infinite neglect of one's salvation [...]. This indifference by which one pretends to entirely destroy the *amour-propre*, fights it only seemingly. It is an imaginary victory that flatters us even more because it costs us less.<sup>42</sup>

## 6. Self

Malebranche's line of reasoning started with a definition of God that cannot but sound somewhat strange to twenty-first-century ears: an absolute and solipsistic God, locked up in his own infinite perfection and only able to love another on account of incarnating himself in the world, which only thus becomes lovable to him. To put all this forward as the most adequate definition of *love* seems even more strange. And yet, the outcome of this somewhat odd supposition appears not entirely unrealistic. Love is a matter of pleasure: essential, indestructible or, as Malebranche often writes, 'invincible' pleasure. The pleasure one takes in loving all the good things of daily life does not fundamentally differ from one's love for God. And to aim at a state of *pur amour* for God does not imply a radical turn away from the love one feels for all that pleases in the here and now. One's daily pleasures can be perfectly compatible with the pleasure of loving God. One only has to purify that love, i.e. to bring it to its essence, its ground, which is pleasure par excellence, the pleasure God takes in himself. So, even if one dislikes Malebranche's reference to God, one might still appreciate his approach to love, since it recognizes pleasure as an indispensable component of love.

By contrast, it is precisely Fénelon's view of pleasure that makes his notion of *pur amour* sound strange to twenty-first-century ears. The sharp focus on its inherently negative nature seems to have almost unacceptable consequences. Disconnected from any reference to pleasure, his *pur amour* ends up changing love into a bizarre, almost intolerable imperative to love someone even when he is the cause of one's eternal pains in hell. And yet, on the other hand, the basic implication of that kind of love, i.e. the fact that it is based on our own free will, is something that those same contemporary ears do not seem to dislike at all. For Fénelon, we are at least free, radically free. It is his way of embracing the modern, Cartesian subject and, consequently, the axiom of a free Self.

What is at stake in the *pur amour* controversy is in fact the question of the Self. The Fénelon-Malebranche debate is very clear on this. In Fénelon's fight against the selfishness of the *amour-propre* and his promotion of radically selfless love, Malebranche detects the establishment of a secret, but extraordinarily strong Self. And that Self is solely the human being's. It is a Self which formally dissociates itself from God and, only in a (formal) second move, decides to deliver itself radically to God. That deliverance, that selfless love, in fact presupposes a strong, Cartesian subject or Self. And as Malebranche adds, promoting this kind of subject implies a straight denial of God, who according to him is the real subject of all that is, including humankind. Everything, including our love for God, is based in God, since we take part in the infinite love God has for himself, a love that is materialized in the Order underlying his creation. But what yet is love if it implies conformity to a pre-established, unchangeable Order? What is love if not free in the radical sense (as it is supposed by Fénelon)? What yet is the human subject, his Self, if not free in that sense? Malebranche thinks love as pleasure, but pleasure is finally not *my* pleasure, but the pleasure of God in whom I have to disappear, regardless of whether I will be saved by him or not. So, are the consequences of a Malebranchean *pur amour* in the end really less 'sadistic' than the ones of the Fénelonian version?

Malebranche's 'realistic' acknowledgement of love's pleasure dimension risks denying the human being's modern condition of the free Self. Fénelon's (implicit)

acknowledgement of the modern free Self implies a denial of pleasure and risks pushing the free Self into an almost ‘sadistic’ universe. Sharper than many philosophical discourses of the time, this theological dispute puts the Self on the agenda of Modernity as a *problem*. And it does so via the context of *love*. What is the Self that loves, while loving God? Is the Self located in the object of love, in God? Or is it located in love’s subject, in the loving the human being, who in that case, by his very love, has to dissociate himself from the beloved object in order to be able to purely love that very object?

What is the Self, i.e. what makes the human being a Self while relating to reality? Is reality the foundation of the human Self (Malebranche), or is it precisely on account of his Self that the human being is able to live in (and on) reality (Fénelon)? Is our selfhood grounded in reality, in the sense of that which lies outside of ourselves (Malebranche)? Or do we live in reality only on account of our selfhood, such that we are (logically) dissociated from the world we live in (Fénelon)?

Despite its denial of pleasure, the Fénelonian option, with the Cartesian subject position it supposes, has become the dominant paradigm in Modernity. Yet that option has not abandoned pleasure. On the contrary – and as most Hollywood movies indicate – pleasure inherently connected to love has become a main issue in Western modern culture. And yet, the problem is still fully present. For what if pleasure is not based in the lovable, in the inherent quality of the loved object, but in the loving subject itself? What if it is my pleasure to love the one who will never respond to my love with *his*? What if it is my *pleasure to lose* any kind of being a Self in the act of love?

There is not enough space, here, to develop the issue, but this is precisely the supposition implied in the Freudian notion of the death principle more than two centuries later.<sup>43</sup> Though pleasure is the guiding principle of the libidinal economy which results in the construction and the maintenance of the Self, the ultimate aim of that pleasure is not to behold, but to lose that Self. This is what the Lacanian version of Freud’s theory conceptualizes as *jouissance*, ‘enjoyment’.<sup>44</sup> Desire, underlying love, has its ultimate satisfaction not in the realization, but in the loss of the Self. Driven by pleasure and desire, the Self’s ultimate aim is Selflessness. It is not a mere coincidence that, as late-moderns, we are so tremendously fascinated by love, especially in its sexual shape. Precisely sexual love – the kind of love that fully acknowledges pleasure – shows that love requires an unconditional engagement of its subject, of the one who loves. At the same time, it is precisely the unconditional nature of that engagement which supposes a willingness to deliver – or to lose – one’s Self in favour of the beloved object.

As in the spiritual discourses of the seventeenth century, selflessness today appears to be the goal of love, not only of the *pur amour*, but of the *amour-propre* as well. Without that seventeenth century discussion, we would not even be able to phrase the problem. It puts the selflessness of love on the agenda of Modernity, an issue that points to nothing less than the problem of what Modernity means by conceiving of the human Self as ‘subject’.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. 'Have we made ourselves? Do we belong to God or to us? Has he made us for us or for him?' de Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 658; my translation.
2. See, in this volume, Drever's chapter on Augustine, and Raunio's on Luther.
3. See also Poljakova's discussion of the death of God in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.
4. This is the main object of the work of Michel de Certeau; see for instance: de Certeau *The Mystical Fable*.
5. Gondal, *Madame Guyon (1648–1717)*. See also Gorday, *François Fénelon*, 67–97. For an English translation of her writings, see Guyon, *Selected Writings*.
6. *de Civitas Dei XIV*, 28; Augustine, *The City of God*, 477.
7. Camus, *La défense du pur amour contre*.
8. Piny, *L'oraison du coeur*. The year of the first edition of *l'oraison du coeur ou lamanière de faire oraison parmi les distractions les plus crucifiantes de l'esprit* is 1683.
9. de Fénelon, *Maxims of the Mystics*. In 1799, without the author's consent, *Télémaque* was published, a novel Fénelon wrote in the early nineties for his pupil, the Duke of Burgundy. The book containing a lot of hidden criticism on the king and his war politics must have been one of the reasons why the king maintained the order that prohibited Fénelon to leave his diocese.
10. de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 240. For the original French text, see de Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 1035. This sentence is quoted and commented on in Terestchenko, "La querelle du pur amour au XVIIe," 177.
11. Maybe the first explicit expression of *pur amour* (without using the term) is to be found in Francis de Sales' *Treatise on the Love of God* (IX,4), first published in 1616: 'she [the 'indifferent soul', freed from any (self-)interest] would prize hell more with God's will than heaven without it; yes, she would even prefer hell over heaven if she perceived only a little more of God's good pleasure in the one than in the other, so that if by supposition of an impossible thing she should know that her damnation would be more agreeable to God than her salvation, she would give up her salvation and run to her damnation'. De Sales, *Oeuvres*, 770 (my translation,).
12. de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 240, and *Oeuvres I*, 1035. This is one of the propositions condemned by the Rome Magisterium in 1699 (de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 352, note 58).
13. de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 216, and *Oeuvres I*, 1008.
14. de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 217, and *Oeuvres I*, 1009.
15. de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 218, and *Oeuvres I*, 1011.
16. de Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 656; my translation.
17. Proverbs 16: 4: 'universa propter semet ipsum operatus est Dominus impium quoque ad diem malum' (Vulgate); 'The LORD has made all things to himself: yea even the wicked for the day of evil' (*The Bible*, 736).
18. See note 16 above.
19. Ibid.
20. de Fénelon, *Oeuvres de Fénelon Archevêque-duc*, de Cambrai, 156–57; my translation.
21. For an analysis of the sadistic component in the *pur amour* – and its parallel with, for instance, the love of O in the famous twentieth century erotic novel *Histoire d'O* (*History of O*), see De Kesel, "Pur amour."
22. 'He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love' (1 John 4: 8; *The Bible*, New Testament, 295).
23. This is illustrated in a sentence from Madame Guyon: 'Essential to God's glory is only that glory itself and the felicity that belongs to this, and which God finds in our destruction [et sa propre félicité qu'il sait trouver dans notre destruction]'. Quoted in Terestchenko, *Amour et désespoir*, 129.
24. de Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 610; my translation.
25. See the quote from Terestchenko, *Amour et désespoir*, 129.
26. This might be one of the reasons Fénelon and Guyon were widely read in Protestant countries, certainly in America where they still have a certain popularity (see Ward, *Experimental Theology in America*).

27. The text of Lamy (1636–1711) that has provoked Malebranche’s criticism is *de La connaissance de soi-même* [*On the Knowledge of Oneself*, a five volumes edition published between 1694 and 1698], and more precisely the last chapter of Volume III. It is included in the edition of Malebranche’s most important text written against Lamy’s *pur amour* theory: *Traité de l’amour de Dieu* (1697); see Malebranche, *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 122–31.
28. Malebranche, *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome V, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, and *Oeuvres II*, 1–189. For Fénelon’s review, *Réfutation Du système Du père Malebranche sur La nature et La grâce* [Refutation of Father Malebranche’s Systematic Account of Nature and Grace], see de Fénelon, *Oeuvres II*, 327–505. Bossuet was disappointed after reading Fénelon’s text: ‘I was not satisfied with it, and I think the author will rework it [l’auteur le réformera], for he is a modest man, and his intentions are pure’ (cited in de Fénelon, *Oeuvres II*, 1488). That text therefore also contains the core of the disagreement between Bossuet and Fénelon.
29. The *Traité* is composed of three ‘Discourses’, each of them containing a series of ‘Articles’, and as many ‘Additions’ (explanations). These additions are not included in the English translation (Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*).
30. Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 111, and *Oeuvres II*, 10.
31. That earlier work is *Recherche de la vérité* [*Inquiry of the Truth*], 6 volumes, published in 1674–1675; English translation: Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*.
32. Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 9; my translation.
33. For this and the following quotes, see the passage cited above; Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 9; my translation.
34. de Fénelon, *Oeuvres II*, 331.
35. Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 1049, and *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 4; my translation.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 1049–50, and *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 4; my translation.
38. ‘In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (*The Bible*, New Testament, 114).
39. This is why, according to Malebranche, God is not a voluntaristic God and neither is his will arbitrary: God ‘wills [...] not with a purely arbitrary will, but with the invincible love he has for the unchangeable Order’ (Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 1051, and *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 9, my translation).
40. Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 1051, and *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 9, my translation.
41. Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 1052–53, and *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 10–11, my translation.
42. Malebranche, *Oeuvres II*, 1067–68, and *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, tome XIV, 27, my translation.
43. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.
44. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 191–204; and De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 121–61.

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