



ORDER: GOD'S, MAN'S AND NATURE'S

Power, Cause, and Law in Malebranche's Occasionalism

I. Malebranche's Occasionalism, Version 1 (1674-81)

I begin with what I take to be the main line of Occasionalist theory and argument in Malebranche's publications of 1674-81, including the first four editions of *The Search after Truth* [hereafter the *Recherche* or RV]. Certainly it is the line of argument that had the most influence on anglophone philosophy.

A. God is the only *true* cause. The main argument (RV VI.ii.3: OM II.316/LO 450):¹

1. "A true cause is a cause between which and its effect the mind perceives a necessary connection; that's how I understand it.
2. "Now there is nothing but the infinitely perfect being between whose will and the effects the mind perceives a necessary connection.
3. "So there is nothing but God that is a true cause."

I believe that a conclusion that better fits the argument, and is indeed the operative first principle of Malebranche's occasionalism, is that only *volitions* of the infinitely perfect being (*God*) are true causes. M did not believe that there is a necessary connection in the same sense between God as a being and any effects in the world; for he held that God's freedom implies that *nothing* external to God follows *necessarily* from the *being* of God.

"God is free in the creation of the world, he is able not to make anything," and "as God is fully self-sufficient, it is indifferent to him whether to act externally [*au dehors*] or not to act" (*Abrégé du TNG*, §11; *Réponse aux réflexions*, III.iii: OM IX. 1088, 754).²

It's important to the array of varieties of causation I see in M that "true causes" are states of affairs, or perhaps modifications of substances, and not the substances as such.

B. It follows that nothing created (and specifically, no act or state of any created thing) is a true cause, from which an effect necessarily follows. This applies, in M's view, regardless of whether the "cause" is corporeal or mental; and, in each of those cases, regardless of whether the effect is corporeal or mental (and in the same or in a different individual substance). Thus we get the conclusion (RV VI.ii.3: OM II.312/LO 448) that:

"[A]ll natural causes are not *true* causes, but only *occasional* causes."

C. But what are occasional causes? Do they make a difference?

(RV VI.ii.3: OM II.313-14/LO 448-49):

1. Occasional causes do "determine the author of nature to act in such and such a way in such and such an eventuality."
2. That's "because he has willed ... certain laws according to which [for example] motion is communicated upon the collision of bodies,

¹OM = *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, ed. by André Robinet. Paris: J. Vrin, 1958-84. Cited by volume and page.
LO = Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, trans. by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), cited by page number. However, I am responsible, in principle, for the translations I give, and they are not always the same as LO.

²Cited, with other similar texts, in André Robinet, *Système et existence dans l'œuvre de Malebranche* (Paris: Vrin, 1965), p. 203.

3. "and because these laws are efficacious, they [*elles* = the laws] act."
4. The laws are conditional in form: for instance: if bodies collide in this way, they will move after the condition in that way.
The "occasional cause" (for instance, the collision) satisfies the condition; and when the condition is satisfied, the efficacy of the law produces the consequence (in this case, the subsequent motions).
5. In this way occasional causes do really contribute, in M's view, to explaining why things happen.
6. But the "true cause" to which the efficacy of the laws is due is exclusively God's volition.

D. Causal laws: What are they? What is their role in causation?

It is as volitions of God that the laws are efficacious and act. Specifically, the laws are *general volitions* of God. This theme is well developed in Malebranche's *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (hereafter TNG) in 1680-81 (OM V.27-37, 147-50).

1. "I say that God acts by **general volitions**, when he acts in consequence of the general laws that he has established"; in the same section M refers to the laws as "general and efficacious laws ... that he has established" (OM V. 147).
"I say, on the other hand, that God acts by **particular volitions** when the efficacy of his will is not determined by some general law to produce some effect" (OM V.147-48).
2. "God [is] obliged to act always in a manner that is worthy of him, by ways that are simple, general, constant, and uniform." This is required by God's "wisdom , which he loves more than his Work" (OM V.49-50).
As M sees it, God therefore prefers to act almost always by general rather than particular volitions, and thus by universal laws.
3. **Miracles** do occur, according to M, but rarely.
 - a. God's general volitions do not follow from God's nature, but are free decisions of God's will, "from which he sometimes allows himself an exception, but never ... unless order demands it." If God allows an exception to laws of Nature (such as the laws of motion in physics), that counts as a miracle, and is for the sake of "the order of Grace, which [the order] of Nature must serve" (OM V.34).
 - b. M argues that in order to act in "ways that are simple, general, constant, and uniform." God "has had to establish certain laws in the order of Grace, as ... in [the order] of Nature" (OM V.49).
Even in the order of Grace, therefore, God rarely acts by particular volitions (OM V.33).
Indeed, M sometimes says flatly that "God does not act by particular volitions" (OM V. 32; cf. *ibid.* 51).
But that overstates his view. He allows at least that "before the birth of Jesus Christ, God gave grace by particular volitions," and "the necessity of the order [presumably the order of grace] demanded it" (OM V.160).
Even in that case, however, "everything that God does by particular volitions is certainly a miracle, since it does not occur by general laws

which he has established, and whose efficacy is determined by occasional causes” (OM V.160).

E. According to M’s occasionalism, how are effects connected with their true cause? And how are the laws of nature and of grace effective? Two models/ interpretations to be considered:

1. God “acts in consequence of the general laws that he has established” (OM V. 147) in the sense that God considers in each case what the circumstances are, and what the laws imply regarding that situation, and acts accordingly. On this interpretation, the laws are policies that God has decided to follow, and the occasional causes (i.e., the circumstances) are merely considerations that God takes into account, and the real cause with which the effect is necessarily connected is the decision God makes in view of those policies and considerations. This model (or something less strictly law-governed) may be what is implicit in the view of experienced regularities as merely manifestations of “God’s habit” [*‘ādat Allah*], in the thought of Islamic theologians of the 9th to 11th centuries CE who have been called “occasionalists.”³

Read in isolation, some passages in M’s work might fit this interpretation, but I think it is not what he meant.

- a. M states repeatedly that God’s laws are efficacious. He implies that “the efficacy of God’s will” is sometimes “determined by some general law to produce some effect” (OM V.147-48).
 - b. In explaining the role of God’s general volitions, M also states that “it would be unworthy of [God’s] wisdom to multiply his volitions” (OM V.35). How is God avoiding the multiplication of volitions, on M’s view? Presumably by letting the *general* volitions by which he establishes *laws* of nature and grace be the *only* volitions by which he operates in most cases — and therefore *not* making decisions about particular cases “in view of” the laws and the circumstances.
2. So I think M’s view, with regard to typical cases is that:
God acts by a general volition, willing that *p*, where *p* has the form of a universal conditional law.
For example, one such law might have the form:
[L1] “Whenever an angel shall will that such a body be moved, that body shall be moved” (cf. OM II.316-17/LO 450).

F. Let’s return to the apparent definition of ‘true cause’ in RV VI.ii.3:

“A true cause is a cause between which and its effect the mind perceives a necessary connection; that’s how I understand it” (OM II.316).

Understood as a *definition* of ‘true cause’, this has some problems of logical structure.

1. **First problem:** The “necessary connection” intended looks like a relation of *necessary consequence*, in which the cause is a necessarily sufficient condition of the effect. That relation

³See Perler and Rudolph, *Occasionalism*, pp. 44-46.

entails a reciprocal relation, in which the effect is a necessarily necessary condition of the cause. Necessarily, if the former relation obtains, so does the latter. This is an uncontroversial point of modal logic.

But then the claim that there is a necessary connection of this sort between two events does not tell us which of them, if either, is metaphysically prior and independent of the other, and which is metaphysically posterior and dependent on the other. For events can depend, in different ways, on their necessary as well as their sufficient conditions. Of course M's language signals that the event called "cause" is metaphysically prior and independent and the event called "effect" is metaphysically posterior and dependent. But that needs to be built into an adequate definition. And a definition would be even better if it also succeeded in explaining what is meant by 'metaphysically prior', 'metaphysically posterior', 'independent', and 'dependent' in this context.

2. Other issues are connected with the fact that necessary consequence is a *transitive* relation. The validity of the inference form,

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{[T]} & \text{Nec } (p \supset q) \\ & \text{Nec } (q \supset r) \\ \text{Therefore} & \text{Nec } (p \supset r) \end{array}$$

is pretty uncontroversial in modal logic, and untouched (for example) by debates about iterated modalities. Apply this to M's occasionalist theory, in which God acts on created things almost exclusively by efficacious *general* volitions, willing that *p*, where *p* has the form of a universal conditional law. Consider, for example, the following argument in M's *Search after Truth*:

"There is a necessary connection between God's volition and the thing that he wills. God wills in this case that when an angel shall will that such a body be moved, that body shall be moved. Hence there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the movement of that body. And consequently, it is God who is the true cause of the movement of the body, and the angel's volition is only an occasional cause" (OM II.316-17/LO 450).

Here the universal conditional law is something like:

[L1] $(\forall x)(\forall y)([x \text{ is an angel} \ \& \ y \text{ is a body} \ \& \ x \text{ wills that } y \text{ be moved}] \supset y \text{ is moved})$

Assuming that "there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the thing that he wills," we get the following implications:

[S1] $\text{Nec } (\text{God wills that } [L1] \supset [L1]).$

And from [L1] it follows logically, by Existential Instantiation, that

[S2] $\text{This angel wills that that body be moved} \supset \text{that body is moved}.$

And since [S2] follows logically from [L1], the rule of Necessitation entitles us to infer

[S3] $\text{Nec } ([L1] \supset [\text{This angel wills that that body be moved} \supset \text{that body is moved}]).$

Then

[S4] $\text{Nec } (\text{God wills that } [L1] \supset$
 $\quad [\text{This angel wills that that body be moved} \supset \text{that body is moved}])$

follows from [S1] and [S3] by the valid inference form [T], or in other words, by the transitivity of the relation of logical consequence.

Here arises a problem about M's argument. For M concludes that "there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the movement of that body." Now [S4] does imply that there is a necessary connection between God's volition (that [L1]) and a fact about that body; and

by M's apparent definition, God is a true cause of that fact. But that fact is not that the body is moved, but is rather a more complex conditional fact about movement of the body. Can we find in the neighborhood a fact that is arguably prior, metaphysically, to the body actually being moved, and necessarily connected with it?

Well [S4] is logically equivalent to

[S5] Nec [(God wills that [L1] & This angel wills that that body be moved) \supset that body is moved].

So if it is a fact that God wills that [L1] & This angel wills that that body be moved, that fact is necessarily connected with (indeed, necessarily sufficient for) that body being moved. So is that conjunctive fact a true cause of that body being moved?

Moreover, both [S4] and [S5] are logically equivalent to

[S6] Nec (This angel wills that that body be moved) \supset
[God wills that [L1] \supset that body is moved]

Thus this angel's willing that that body be moved and God's willing that [L1] seem to have symmetrically necessary connections with conditional facts about the body being moved. So should this angel's willing that that body be moved count as a true cause of the conditional fact with which it is necessarily connected, as God's willing [L1] is a true cause of the other conditional fact, with which *it* is necessarily connected? M will certainly say No; but on what rationale? His apparent definition of 'true cause', in RV VI.ii.3, will not provide the needed rationale.

Nor is that all. I assume M would want to say that if that body is moved on the occasion of this angel's willing that it be moved, God, or more precisely, one of God's volitions, is the true cause of the body's movement. His assumptions do entitle him to say that—if he supposes that God wills the body's movement by a *particular* volition; but I think that is not his view. And if the only divine volition responsible for the body's movement on the occasion in question is God's *general* volition that [L1], that leaves M without a divine volition from which that body's movement necessarily follows; for no movement of the body follows necessarily from [L1] unless this angel wills that the body move, which is presumably a contingent rather than necessary matter.

I conclude that M's occasionalist theory needs a much fuller and more complex definition or conception of 'true cause'.

G. A fuller and more complex conception of true or real causality is ascribed to M by Steven Nadler. It involves not only necessary connection, but also *power*. Nadler says, "The necessity of the connection has to be grounded in a real power or nature in the agent."⁴ This invocation of the idea of power seems to me to be on the right interpretive track. In a passage quoted by Nadler, M refers to "the idea that one has of cause or of power to act" as a single idea (OM II,309/LO 446), which seems to imply that cause and power to act are roughly equivalent.

1. That is over-simple, but that's not out of character; for M is not careful to distinguish the roles of God and God's volitions in causation. The relevant power is to be sought, no doubt, "in the agent," as Nadler puts it. According to M, of course, the agent is God. But it is not from God, the existing being, or subject of action, or merely from God's possession of power, but

⁴Steven Nadler, "Malebranche on Causation," in Steven Nadler, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 115.

rather from God's acts (specifically, from God's volitions), that the effects in the created world necessarily follow. As I pointed out earlier, M does not suppose that anything in the created world follows necessarily just from God, or from God's essence or existence.

2. Stated more precisely, then, the interpretation of Malebranche toward which Nadler points us is that true causation implies an effect that follows from an act or state of an agent, with a necessity that is grounded in a real power of the agent. Which, then, is the true cause? The act or state, or the agent?⁵ The different relations in which those two stand to the effect are both naturally called "causal"; but they are different. What is most important for clarity here is to see that being necessarily sufficient for the occurrence of an effect, and being the subject that has the power by which the effect is produced are *different* relations to the effect, and do not necessarily (nor perhaps even typically) belong to the same item. In one possible precisification of M's views we might speak of God's acts (specifically, God's volitions) as true *efficient* causes of created effects, and of God as the true *agent* cause of created effects.

3. It should be noted that there is no implication in Malebranche, as there will later be quite emphatically in Kant, that *causation as such* essentially involves universal *laws*.

a. The explanatory force of *occasional* causes does depend on the lawlike conditional form of God's general volitions.

b. But the obtaining of the laws itself needs explanation, and the ultimate explanation is sought in God's *power*.

{H.⁶ Such a view is indicated when M says of God that
"His power is his will, and [for God] to communicate his power is to communicate the efficacy of his will. But communicating that efficacy to a man or an angel can only mean willing that when a man or an angel shall will (for example) that such and such a body be moved, that body shall in fact be moved. Now in such a case I see two wills that concur when an angel moves a body: God's and the angel's. And in order to know which of the two is the true cause of the movement of the body, one needs to know which one is efficacious. There is a necessary connection between God's volition and the thing that he wills. God wills in this case that when an angel shall will that such a body be moved, that body shall be moved. Hence there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the movement of that body. And consequently, it is God who is the true cause of the movement of the body, and the angel's volition is only an occasional cause" (OM II.316-17/LO 450).

This is an interesting passage.

1. M speaks of the case as one in which God's will and the will of a creature (an angel) "concur." May we see this as suggesting that M's occasionalism is not an *alternative* to "concurrentism" about the relation between God's causing and creatures causing (as it is usually taken to be), but is rather a *solution* to the difficult problem of *how* God and creatures can be seen as concurring?

2. He does imply, however, that only one of the two wills that concur is a "true" cause. For he goes on to say, "And in order to know which of the two is the true cause of the movement of

⁵We could also consider the agent's *power* as a candidate, but I think that would complicate the present discussion unnecessarily.

⁶I may not present section I.H orally if time is short.

the body, one needs to know which one is efficacious.” The true cause then will be the volition of the being whose power is efficacious and whose power is his will.

3. However, the end of this passage is the argument I quoted above at the beginning of section F.2., and shows that M did not notice the problem I discussed at length in that section. That problem may prompt us to ask why there must be just one true cause here. As I argued above, M’s account of God’s general volitions seems to imply that the movement of the body follows necessarily from the *conjunction* of God’s general volition and this angel’s particular volition. Why shouldn’t that conjunctive state of affairs also be a true cause of the body’s movement (indeed, the *complete* true cause of it), in which the angel’s volition has a part? That, of course, might seem to move M toward the concurrentist view of which his own language has given (*malgré lui*, perhaps) a hint.}

II. Free Will

M’s treatment of free will is of interest here because (i) it employs broadly causal concepts quite different from his conceptions of real and occasional causes, and

(ii) it seems to be in tension with his occasionalist doctrine. In the very first chapter of the *Recherche* M says that our will is “active” [*agissante*], and that “it has in itself the power [*force*] to determine in different ways the inclination or impression that God has given it,” whereas “matter is entirely without action; it has no power [*force*] to arrest its motion and to determine it and turn it to one side rather than another” (RV I.i: OM I.46/LO 4-5). Is our will then a *true cause*?

A. What is the “will” that is active?

1. M’s first explanation of the meaning of ‘will’ [*volonté*]: the “faculty” by which the soul “is capable of receiving several *inclinations*” (RV I.i: OM I.45/LO 2).

2. A second explanation or definition: “By the word ‘will’ [*volonté*],” M says, he means to signify “the impression or natural motion that carries us toward the good ... in general,” which he characterizes as “indeterminate good” (RV I.i: OM I.46/LO 5).

a. Is this a definition of *volonté* as **volition**, as distinct from faculty? I wouldn’t put it that way. I would render *volonté* as ‘volition’ in some contexts in M’s work (for instance, where effects are said to follow necessarily from God’s *volonté*). But in those contexts *volonté* clearly signifies something more determinate than in either of the explanations of the term that are offered in RV I.i. The will as “impression or natural motion” does, however, seem to be something more determinate than the will as faculty.

b. I take M to be speaking of a *tendency* toward what is good, as such, and thus of a sort of teleology and final causation.

3. The terms ‘impression’ and ‘natural motion’ are not very clarifying in this context. At a minimum, however, I take it that by them, and by ‘inclinations’, M is expressing a broadly *causal* conception. But it is not a conception of what he would call a *true cause*. As we will see, it is definitely *not* his view that the will’s inclinations or tendencies, even as occasional causes in conjunction with God’s general volitions, always completely determine the human will to choose one way rather than another. Though I do not see in M any *developed* conception of a power operating probabilistically, I take it to be his view that there are in human wills inclinations or tendencies that *influence*, without completely *determining*, certain actions of the will. And in M’s view, if either inclinations or actions of the human will do determine anything *else*, in mind or in body, it is not as true but only as occasional causes.

B. Freedom [*liberté*] M defines as a power to affect the direction of the God-given “impression ... that carries us toward the good ... in general.” Specifically, it is “the power [*force*] that the mind has to turn that impression toward the objects that please us, and thus to make our inclinations terminate in some particular object” (RV I.i: OM I.46/LO 5).

1. M conceives of our freedom as a power that God enables us to exercise only within a narrowly limited intramental context that is caused by God. M is particularly interested in what happens in our minds when we *sin*. M explains this particularly fully in RV E1 (OM III.18-19/LO 547-48):

a. “God pushes us ceaselessly and by an invincible impression toward the good in general.” This is that “impression or natural motion that carries us toward the good ... in general” or “indeterminate good” which defines our will in some sense for M. We do not have a power to cease having that tendency, because God’s pressure is ceaseless and invincible.

b. God causes us to perceive an idea, or have a sensation, of “a particular good.”

c. “God moves [*porte*] us toward this particular good.” Once again I think the most plausible interpretation is that what God thus causes in us is a **tendency**.

d. “That’s all that God does [*or makes, fait*] in us, when we sin.”

e. What the sinner does freely is that he “rests” in the particular good, instead of going on to other goods (and ultimately to God) in following the “natural impression” or tendency toward the good in general. That’s the sin. This is a very Augustinian conception of sin (*ibid.*).

f. God does not cause the sin. For “God does not move us necessarily or invincibly to the love of this [particular] good” (*ibid.*) Our freedom lies in having at the same time the power to rest in the particular good and the power to move beyond it following the impulse toward larger good.

g. The mention of **love** is significant. In his main discussions of free will M thinks of the will as choosing freely among loves, and not directly among external actions. He also holds that it is on the basis of their loves that God judges souls. This is very Augustinian.

h. What M thinks God has given us power to control by our indeterminist free will, is very limited indeed. It certainly does not extend, for instance, to the shaping of our own this-worldly life projects. That’s OK with M. He thinks that the limited directing of our loves that he ascribes to our free will is enough to justify the claim the we are to blame for our sins and God is not. And that seems to be what M really cares about in the matter.⁷ That’s very Augustinian too. So long as that conclusion holds, M, like Molina and Suárez, the archetypal Jesuit champions of indeterministic freedom, is more than content to regard God as totally controlling.

2. Our free choice is not a true, but only an occasional cause of any occurrence in bodies, or even of any further occurrence in our minds. We can effectively choose to think about larger goods, for example, (as a step toward not resting in one particular good), but only because God has made it a law of nature that certain types of desire are always followed by certain types of awareness (RV E1, E2/LO 548, 559-60).

⁷An extreme, and I think revealing, manifestation of this motivation, though probably not a well considered utterance, can be found in Malebranche, *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, VI.21 (OM X.67), where Malebranche represents Christ as saying to him that the consent to fixation of love on a “particular good” is “precisely where your power is,” and that “the effect of that power cannot be anything but error and sin.”

It is *not* M's view that our will, in its freedom, "makes a decision" by doing something that *causes* the decision. No; the decision itself (if that's the right word for it) is the *only* thing that our will does in exercising its freedom. It is not something the will does *by* doing something else. In Scholastic terminology, it is an "elicited" rather than a "commanded" act of the will.

3. Can M offer any explanation of our free acts of will?

a. Nothing in our mind (or anywhere else) can be a "true cause" of those acts, in the sense that M defines in RV VI.ii.3. For such a cause must *necessitate* its effect, but M holds that nothing necessitates our free choices. Like God's free choice to create a world, they have no true cause, in the sense defined.

b. No doubt we could speak of a power of free choice as a "cause," in some other sense, of the choices that are made. Indeed, M must regard God's power of free choice as (together with God's omnipotence) the deepest source of the created universe. But a power of free choice will be neither a *true* cause nor an *occasional* cause, in the senses defined by M in 1674.

C. So is M's account of free will inconsistent with his occasionalism?

1. It is perfectly consistent with M's doctrine that acts or states of any created thing are never true causes, but are at most occasional causes, of anything, in the sense that nothing distinct from themselves ever follows necessarily from them alone. That is the aspect of his occasionalism that is most fully and clearly developed in M's works of 1674-81. It is also the aspect of his occasionalism that has most interested philosophical students of M's work.

2. Even in his early writings, however, there are indications, though less well developed, of other aspects of his views about causation that may be harder to reconcile with his treatment of human free will.

a. In the *Recherche* he says that "the nature or power [*force*] of each thing is nothing but the will of God" (OM II.312/LO 448). Is that consistent with creatures having a "power [*force*]" to determine something about their loves in a way that God has not caused them to determine it? Perhaps this is an inadvertent inconsistency that M could explain away.

b. In the first paragraph of the 15th *Éclaircissement* of the *Recherche* M refers to God as "the one who does everything in all things" (OM III.203/LO 657). But is that true of God if God does not cause the sins of creatures? Unlike other issues about inconsistency discussed above, this is not an issue about what M says creatures *don't* cause. It is an issue about what he says God *does*. We can find an issue of the latter sort much more elaborately developed in M's later work.

III. Occasionalism and Continuous Creation, 1683-1715

A. By 1683 there was a major shift in M's grounds for accepting occasionalism.

M came to think that we do not in fact perceive the necessary connection between God's volitions and their effects, but only between the doctrine of divine omnipotence and the claim that God's volitions are efficacious.

"For even if you believe that God does what he wills, it is not that you see clearly that there is a necessary connection between the will of God and the effects, since you do not even know what the will of God is. But what is evident is that God would not be omnipotent if his unconditional volitions remained inefficacious."

[*Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* (1683): OM X.96]

1. Here, if not earlier, it is clear to M, and made clear to his readers, that the necessity he believes is essential to causal connection is something other, or more, than *conceptual* necessity.

2. Malebranche does not claim to understand the nature of that other sort of necessity. Thus far Hume agrees with Malebranche. But here they come to a parting of the ways.
 - a. Hume takes the lack of understanding as grounds for adopting a reductive account of causal connection.
 - b. M continues to assume that there are metaphysically necessary causal connections, and is content to say that God “do[es] not give human beings a distinct idea that corresponds to the word ‘power’ or ‘efficacy’” (OM X.96). Is this wisdom on M’s part, or laziness, or unphilosophical failure to savor a good problem? or all of the above? That’s a question of obvious interest and importance, but I won’t try to answer it here.
3. Another problem, which does seem to influence M’s development of occasionalism from 1683 on, is that if we do not perceive a necessary connection between *any* cause (even God’s will) and any effect, it may seem questionable to use non-perception of such necessity in the case of supposed created causes as a reason for the thesis that God’s volitions are true causes and nothing created is.

B. In view of this problem it is not surprising that in Malebranche’s *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* of 1683, his main occasionalist argument is not organized around our not perceiving any necessary connection between created causes and their effects, but around a different thesis: that God’s conservation of the created world is a continual recreation of it at every instant.

The “no necessary connection” argument turns on claims about what *created* beings *can’t* do—indeed, can’t even be conceived of as doing. There is a possible argument from continuous creation that is of that sort also. Consider the argument in Descartes’s third Meditation for the conclusion that there is no real difference between God’s action in creating the world and in conserving it. He says, “it is clear to anyone who attends to the nature of time that exactly the same force and action is needed for conserving any thing at the individual moments of its duration as would be needed for creating it anew.” And he prepares the way for this assertion by stating that

[S7] “every time of a life can be divided into innumerable parts, of which each in no way depends on the others,”

so that

[S8] “from the fact that I existed a little while before, it does not follow that I must now exist, unless some cause creates me again, as it were, at this moment (that is, conserves me).”

In the context, which is that of an argument about the relation of creation and conservation quite generally, both [S7] and [S8] must be understood as implying that no state or act of any created thing at any time can be a necessarily sufficient condition of anything occurring in a created world at any later time. And that seems to imply that no created causes are “true causes,” in Malebranche’s sense, of later effects.

That is not Malebranche’s argument about continuous creation, as I will point out shortly. But if it were it would be perfectly consistent with his views about human free will. There may be views about free will that ascribe to us a power to make causally undetermined decisions that have an inherent causal power to determine events at a later time. But Malebranche makes it abundantly and emphatically clear that he has no intention of ascribing a power of that sort to any created will.

But, as I've said Malebranche's actual argument for occasionalism from continuous creation is not of the sort I just described. It is an argument, not from claims about what created beings can't do, but rather from claims about what *God must do* in continuously recreating the world. The first principle of the argument in its most general form is that

[S9] "Only the one that gives being could give the modes [*manières*] of being, since the modes [*manières*] of beings are nothing but the beings themselves in such and such a fashion" (*Traité de morale*, II.ii.6: OM XI.160).

The indicated conclusion is that if God conserves or creates beings, and thus gives being to them at every instant of their existence, God also determines ("gives") everything about the manner or way or modes in which they exist at every instant. [S9] is explicitly intended to apply to "the modes [*manières*] of being of minds"⁸ as well as of bodies; but Malebranche's expositions of the argument are usually focused mainly or entirely on causation of modes of bodies.

For instance, in an example that Malebranche uses in many places, he argues from

[S10] "It is a contradiction that a body be neither at rest nor in motion,"

to the conclusion,

[S11] "Thus it would be a contradiction were God to create a body which he creates neither at rest nor in motion."

For similar reasons, according to Malebranche, in continually recreating the world, God must give each portion of matter at each instant a completely determinate set of relations of distance in relation to other bodies, and must in this way determine all the modes of the universe of bodies, conceived in broadly Cartesian terms (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* VII.6 and 10: JS 112, 115-16).

The validity of the inference from [S10] to [S11] deserves to be questioned, and the question goes to the heart of the matter. Given that in creating or recreating a body to exist at time *t*, God must create it as a body that is either at rest at *t* or in motion at *t*, must God either create it as at rest at *t* or create it as in motion at *t*? Or could God create the body as a body that has at *t* a *power to determine itself* either to be at rest at *t* or to be in motion at *t*?

At this point we must beware of a tempting but fallacious argument. The temptation is to think that if the world is created as it were anew at *t*, no created thing can be more than an occasional cause of any determination of itself at *t*, because the recreation leaves no way for anything the thing may have done before *t* to determine its action or state at *t*, except as an occasion for God to determine it. The fallacy is to assume that the only way any thing can determine its action or state at *t* is by doing something else (making a decision, perhaps) before *t*. But there an infinite regress lurks. If causally undetermined agent causation is possible at all (as Malebranche must assume, in effect, that it is), its crucial exercise must be a self-determination in which the determination and the thing's power to make it are simultaneous and the determination is not caused by a previous determination. This seems to me to apply, whether we are thinking of the agent as a free will or as a physical particle that can be in either of two places at time *t*, regardless of what happened before *t*. For this reason I doubt very much that the thesis of continuous creation should be seen as ruling out the possibility of created powers of self-determination whose exercise would be simultaneous with what gets determined. And it is

⁸OM XI.160. Such an explicit application of the claim to minds is relatively rare in Malebranche's work. I owe this reference to Sukjae Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation: Malebranche's Two Arguments for Occasionalism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46 (2008) 539–66; specifically, p. 559.

explicit and clear that the limited power of self-determination that Malebranche ascribes to human wills is of precisely that sort.

What would Malebranche say about this? I think he would agree with what I have just suggested as regards created minds, and their wills, but disagree with it as regards bodies, since he clearly means to maintain [S11]. How would he defend [S11]? Well, he might appeal to another of his arguments on this subject, a very direct argument, from a Cartesian conception of extension as constituting the whole essence of body, to the conclusion that bodies cannot possibly have a power of self-determination, or indeed any inherent power at all. He asks,

[S12] “Isn’t it evident, extremely evident, that all the properties of the extended can only consist in relations of distance?”

And he argues,

“But that bodies could be able to receive in themselves a certain power, by the efficacy of which they could act on the mind, that’s what I do not understand. For what would that power be? Would it be a substance, or a modality? If it’s a substance, the bodies won’t act, but that substance will act in the bodies. If that power is a modality, then there will be a modality in the bodies which will be neither a motion nor a shape. The extended will be able to have other modalities besides the relations of distance”⁹

—contrary to [S12]. For present purposes I need not evaluate this argument. I will just observe that it offers no defense of [S9] or of a general occasionalist argument, applicable to created minds as well as bodies, that would be based on [S9].

Malebranche offers no corresponding argument against the possibility of created *minds* possessing a power of self-determination. On the contrary, in controversy with Arnauld, he argues that minds and bodies differ in this respect. He’s discussing the hypothesis that “the soul has a true efficacy by which it can produce in itself changes as real in relation to itself as motion is real in relation matter,” and claiming that it does not follow that created things could have efficacious powers to affect bodies. He argues,

“It’s a contradiction in terms for God to move a body in an indeterminate way, or toward a body in general. But the natural motion of the soul is an indeterminate motion; it is love for the good in general. ... [A]t every moment a human being can change the determinations of his love. For that it is not necessary for him to overcome the power of God, since the particular motions of the soul are not invincible, as the particular motions of bodies are. For they are not, as those of bodies are, a necessary consequence of their conservation, or of their continual creation” (OM VII.569)¹⁰

That “the natural motion of the soul is an indeterminate motion” is a central and recurrent feature of Malebranche’s account of the human will, and it commits him to the view that God can and does give human wills a power to determine at any moment some aspects of their state that God leaves undetermined in creating or recreating them at that moment. Malebranche is so intentional about this point that I think it is less plausible to regard it as inconsistent with his argument from continuous creation than as limiting the intended scope of that argument. But I am left suspecting that the thesis of continuous creation is really less relevant than Malebranche (and many of his contemporaries) thought to the issues that most concerned him.¹¹

⁹Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* VII.2: JS 106-7.

¹⁰This passage is quoted in an interesting discussion in Tad M. Schmaltz, *Malebranche’s Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation* (New York:Oxford University Press, 1996).

Robert Merrihew Adams
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
2 March 2011