

# Malebranche's Causal Concepts

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Nicolas Malebranche is the most famous occasionalist. His is also the most richly developed account of causality in early modern philosophy before Hume.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I aim to bring out some of the often overlooked diversity of the broadly causal concepts that play fundamental roles in his philosophy. The headline claims of his occasionalism, as it is introduced in his *Search after Truth* in 1675, are two, and introduce two main causal concepts: “there is nothing but God that is a genuine cause,” and “all natural causes are not *genuine* causes, but only *occasional* causes”<sup>2</sup> (OCM II.316, 312/LO 450, 448). But these are not his only fundamental causal concepts. Others are found especially in his theory of free will. Part 1 of this paper will deal principally with his conception of occasional cause, part 2 with his conception of genuine cause, and part 3 with causal concepts involved in his account of free will.

## 1. Occasional Causes and Laws of Nature

The closest we get to a definition of “occasional cause” in *The Search after Truth* may be the statement that

A natural cause is not a real and genuine cause, but only an occasional cause, which determines the Author of nature to act in such and such a way, in such and such a situation. (OCM II.313/LO 448)

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<sup>1</sup> In saying this I do not count Francisco Suárez as an early *modern* philosopher, though his last works were written in the seventeenth century. I do not mean to imply that Malebranche's writing on causality surpassed or even equaled, in comprehensiveness and thoroughness, the treatment of causality in the twelfth to twenty-seventh of the *Metaphysical Disputations* of Suárez.

<sup>2</sup> That the second claim applies to *all* natural causes must be emphasized. Seventeenth-century occasionalism used often to be discussed mainly as an attempt to solve a supposed Cartesian difficulty with causal interaction between mind and body. In fact it had a much larger scope, especially but by no means exclusively in the work of Malebranche.

This characterizes occasional causes both negatively and positively. Negatively, an occasional cause is not a “genuine” (*véritable*) cause. In Malebranche’s conception, as we shall see in part 2, genuine causation is distinguished first of all by the kind of *necessity* with which created effects follow from divine volitions. Occasional causes do not in the same way necessitate their effects. Positively, “an occasional cause [. . .] determines [God] to act in such and such a way, in such and such a situation.” The underlying idea, no doubt, is that one occurrence in nature (the natural or occasional cause) is an *occasion* for God to cause (genuinely) another occurrence (the effect). But this is far from being a complete account of the matter. It tells us neither what makes an occurrence such an occasion for God to act, nor how the occasion “determines” God to act.

### 1.1. GENERAL VOLITIONS AND LAWS OF NATURE

To fill out the picture, Malebranche adds that God “has willed [. . .] certain laws according to which [for example] motion is communicated upon the collision of bodies” (OCM II.314/LO 449). Malebranche’s theory of occasional causes cannot be understood apart from his theory of laws of nature.

We must think of the laws as conditional in form. For instance, at the time he first published the passage I have been quoting, Malebranche accepted the first of the seven rules that Descartes had proposed as governing the motion of bodies in collision: that

if [. . .] two bodies B and C were exactly equal, and moved with equal velocity, B from right to left, and C toward B from left to right, when they collided, they would rebound and afterwards continue to move, B toward the right and C toward the left, each losing none of its speed.<sup>3</sup>

The “occasional cause” (in this example, the collision) is what satisfies the condition stated in the antecedent clause of the law. And when the condition is satisfied, a divine volition causes the result to occur as specified in the consequent clause of the law (in this case, the rebounding of the bodies). In this way occasional causes do contribute, in Malebranche’s view, to explaining why things happen; but the genuine cause, which necessitates the effect, is to be found only in the divine will.

Malebranche presented a fuller account of laws of nature in 1680 and 1681 in his most important theological work, his *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, and further in the lengthy controversy with Antoine Arnauld occasioned by that work. He explains laws of nature in terms of *general volitions* of God. Indeed he sometimes *identifies* them with general volitions of God. “It is clear,” he says, “that the laws of Nature are nothing but the general laws, or the general

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<sup>3</sup> OCM XVII-1.40; Descartes, Pr II.46, AT VIII 1, 68.

practical volitions of [Nature's] Author" (OCM VIII.704).<sup>4</sup> And "the laws of Nature are nothing but the practical and always efficacious volitions of [Nature's] Author" (OCM VIII.654). We may wonder how clear Malebranche was in his own mind as to whether the laws are strictly identical with the general volitions, or are merely their intentional content. Early modern philosophers were often not careful with such distinctions about intentionality. What is most significant on this point, perhaps, is that he ascribes to laws of nature the efficacy, and the simplicity, that belongs to God's practical volitions.<sup>5</sup>

General volitions are contrasted with particular volitions:

I say [Malebranche declares] that God acts by *general volitions*, when he acts in consequence of the general laws that he has established. [. . .] 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. (TNG E1, §§1–2: OCM V.147–48/R 195, italics added)

It was one of Malebranche's main, and most controversial, theological theses that God prefers to act almost always by general rather than particular volitions, and thus by universal laws. He held that this preference follows from the very nature of God—specifically from God's wisdom. God, he says, is "obliged to act always in a manner that is worthy of him, by ways that are simple, general, constant, and uniform" (TNG I.43: OCM V.49–50/R 128). And "God's *ways*," according to Malebranche, "are his practical volitions" (OCM VIII.673).<sup>6</sup> And "the laws of Nature are nothing but the practical and always efficacious volitions of [Nature's] Author" (OCM VIII.654). As such, in his view, they are not part of the world, which is God's *work*. For Leibniz, simplicity of the laws of nature is a feature of the best possible world; it is one of its main perfections. For Malebranche, on the other hand, the laws of nature are so identified with divine volitions that their simplicity is a perfection, not of the created world, but of the Creator's "ways" of working. Martial Gueroult declared that "The principle of the simplicity of ways is [. . .] that in which resides the originality of Malebranchean occasionalism."<sup>7</sup> It is certainly one of the driving principles, and one of the most distinctive features, of Malebranche's view.

Malebranche at least twice says flatly that "God does not act by particular volitions" (TNG I.19, 59: OCM V.32, 63/R 118, 137); but that is an incautious exaggeration. He explicitly allows an exception for miracles. Defining miracles

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is from a response to Arnauld, of 1686. We will come in due course to the significance of the addition of "practical" to the phrase "general volitions."

<sup>5</sup> Compare OCM VIII.703 and 758 (both responding to Arnauld), where Malebranche speaks equivalently of the efficacy of "general laws" and of "general volitions" as "determined" by occasional causes.

<sup>6</sup> Italics added. Cf. OCM VIII.758.

<sup>7</sup> Martial Gueroult, *Malebranche*, 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1955–1959), vol. 2, p. 218.

as “effects that are not *natural*, or that are not consequences of the natural laws,” in one of his responses to Arnauld, he develops and defends the thesis that “God does not act by particular volitions except when he performs *miracles*” (OCM VIII.696). Similarly he states in the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* that “miracles are not such except because they do not happen in accordance with the general laws” (TNG I.59: OCM V.63/R 137), and that “everything that God does by particular volitions is certainly a miracle, since it does not occur by general laws which he has established” (TNG E1, §13: OCM V.160/R 206). But miracles in Malebranche’s opinion are rare (TNG I.59: OCM V.63/R 137).

The largest miracle, in the sense defined, that Malebranche ascribes to God is the creation of the world in its initial state (OCM VIII.759). The complexity of the initial state required an enormous number of details to be settled by particular volitions (or by one very complex particular volition).

When God created the world, the human beings, the animals, the plants, the organized bodies that include in their seeds what is needed to provide all the centuries with their species, he did it by particular volitions. For that was appropriate for several reasons; and it could not even have been done otherwise.<sup>8</sup> For particular volitions were needed to begin the determination of motions. (OCM VIII.759)

What Malebranche says about the exceptionality of this case is suggestive. He continues:

But this manner of acting was base and servile, so to speak, because it was similar in a way to the manners of acting of a limited intelligence. God abandoned it as soon as he was able to dispense with it, as soon as he was able to adopt a more divine and simpler way of governing the world. Now he *rests*—not that he ceases to act, but that he no longer acts in a manner that is servile, and similar in a way to that of one of his ministers. It’s that he acts in a manner that bears more divinely the character of his attributes. (OCM VIII.759)

Why would acting by particular volitions be *servile*? If Malebranche did not elsewhere in the same publication reject indignantly the “thought” that “the reason why I believe that God acts by general laws is that he is like a Sovereign who ought not to busy himself with a thousand petty cares” (OCM VIII.665), we might think that is exactly the thought about servility suggested in the passage quoted above. That thought being rejected, Malebranche’s motivation should probably be found in the thought that “his foreknowledge being infinite, [God] ought not ordinarily to act by particular volitions as limited intelligences do” (OCM VIII.1112). God does care about everything in particular, and takes all the particulars into account in his general volitions. But acting

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<sup>8</sup> For fuller explanation of the rationale, see OCM VIII.779–81.

too often by particular volitions would make God too much like beings whose cognitive and computational limitations oblige them to make decisions on a case-by-case basis.

After the creation, generally speaking, if miracles occur, “it is because of the order of Grace, which that of Nature must serve, that miracles happen in certain circumstances” (TNG I.21: OCM V.34/R 119). This is not to say that the order of Grace is an order of particular divine volitions whereas the order of Nature is an order of general divine volitions. It is a main thesis of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* that God also has general (practical) volitions that constitute laws for the order of Grace. The same principles of divine perfection that demand general divine volitions in the order of Nature make it “necessary that in the order of Grace there be some *occasional* cause which serves to establish the laws [of that order] and which determines their efficacy” (TNG II.3: OCM V.67/R 139). It is Malebranche’s view that within the Christian dispensation of the order of grace, at any rate, “it is those continual desires of the soul of Jesus, which tend to sanctify his Church and render it worthy of the Majesty of his Father, that God has established as occasional causes of the efficacy the general laws of Grace” (TNG II.11: OCM V.71/R 142). Thus the laws of Nature are for Malebranche not all of God’s general (practical) volitions, but only a proper subclass of them.

## 1.2. TWO MODELS OF OCCASIONAL CAUSATION

What happens, according to Malebranche, in cases of occasional causation, when God does act by a general volition and *not* by a particular volition? Two different interpretations, or models, of occasional causation, have been advanced and can find some support in the texts. According to the less ambitious of the two, when God acts by general volitions, God considers in each case what the circumstances are, and applies his general laws or policies to that situation by deciding to do something quite particular. On this reading Malebranche will not call that a particular volition. Only decisions in which God does *not* “act in consequence of” general laws that he has adopted—that is, only decisions in which there is no general divine law that God is following—will be called “particular” volitions of God. This model (or something less strictly law-governed) may, I suppose, be what is implicit in the view of experienced regularities as merely manifestations of God’s habit or custom (*‘ādat Allah*), in the thought of Islamic theologians of the ninth to eleventh centuries CE who have been called “occasionalists.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Dominik Perler and Ulrich Rudolph, *Occasionalismus: Theorien der Kausalität im arabisch-islamischen und im europäischen Denken* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), pp. 44–46.

It is tempting, to say the least, to read Malebranche as embracing this model in his response to the claim, which he quotes from Arnauld, “that in the conduct of God for the conservation of the sensible and purely corporeal world, he does nothing by general volitions that he does not also do by particular volitions” (OCM VIII.685). Malebranche replies,

When I say that God acts in consequence of his general laws, I am not claiming that he does not have in particular the will to follow them, but only that it is rare that he acts if the occasional causes do not determine him to act in accordance with his laws. I feel pain when I am pricked; otherwise I don't feel that, because God acts in me in consequence of the general laws of the union of soul and body. Therefore it's the pricking that determines God, as universal cause, to make me feel that pain [. . .] I believe that in this I am *speaking precisely* and without equivocation. (OCM VIII.685, Malebranche's italics)

I believe that Malebranche does imply here, sincerely and unequivocally, that whenever a person feels a pain on the occasion of something happening to his or her body, God is active in causing that particular pain. But there is reason to believe that Malebranche does *not* agree that in all such cases God wills by a *particular practical volition* that the person feel that pain.

For in the same publication of 1686 that I have just quoted (his *Response to Arnauld's Reflections on TNG*), in a much more fully developed account of the matter, Malebranche endorses a very different model of occasional causation, which assigns more causal work to laws of nature and occasional causes. In this model, when God acts by general volitions in the order of nature, what God wills—the object of God's will—is a law of nature. Suppose God wills that whenever two bodies collide in way  $w_1$ , they rebound from each other in way  $w_2$ . This is a general volition, and is necessarily efficacious. It *brings it about* that whenever two bodies collide in way  $w_1$ , they rebound from each other in way  $w_2$ . And when two bodies do collide in way  $w_1$ , that is an occasional cause that determines the efficacy of the law<sup>10</sup> to cause the bodies to rebound from each other in way  $w_2$ . The efficacy of God's willing the law to be a law is manifested in the rebounding of the bodies, *without any further divine volition*. It is God that efficaciously acts on the bodies and genuinely causes the rebound, but there is no need for God to make an additional decision to cause the bodies to rebound in a particular case. For God's general practical volition by itself is sufficient to necessitate the occurrence of the rebound when the occasional cause occurs.

Several of Malebranche's commitments support, or indeed require, this interpretation of occasional causation. One is how he proposes to explain that

<sup>10</sup> As Malebranche puts it, for instance, in TNG II.3: OCM V.67 and in OCM VIII.703.

God only *permits* various bad effects that do occur in a world in which God is the only genuine cause. Malebranche's treatment of this subject, in his 1686 *Response* to Arnauld, involves the concept of a *practical volition*, which is developed in terms of a distinction between *vouloir simplement* ("simply willing" in the sense of "just willing" or "merely willing") and *vouloir faire* (willing to make or do, or as I shall put it, to *effect*). He says, "It is clear that merely willing is not acting; it is not willing to effect" (OCM VIII.652). Willing to effect is what Malebranche calls a "practical" volition (cf. OCM VIII.651). For example,

When a thorn pricks me, God makes me feel pain in consequence of the general laws of the union of the mind and the body, in accordance with which he acts in us ceaselessly. It's not that God acts in me by a particular volition. [ . . . ] I do not claim that God has no particular volition with regard to that pain that I suffer, but only that that is not the effect of a particular volition, or that God does not have in this a particular *practical* volition. Having particular volitions is not in God the same thing as acting by particular volitions, or having particular practical volitions. (OCM VIII.651, Malebranche's italics)

What can the difference be? I take it that Malebranche's vocabulary here reflects a scholastic tradition in which "the will" is a rational appetitive faculty that has a variety of acts in its repertoire. In each of them one wills something in the sense of being *for* it, but not all of these acts are (as we might say) *executive* volitions. One might *wish*, for example, that the price of gasoline were lower, and in that sense "will" it, without intending to do anything about it, or even thinking one could do anything about it. One might *want* to make a large charitable contribution, and in that sense "will" to do it, while intending not to do it because of other needs and obligations. In such a sense medieval theologians spoke of God having an "antecedent" but not a "consequent" volition for things that would be good considered narrowly, apart from other relevant concerns that in fact outweigh them.<sup>11</sup> It will be important, also, for Malebranche's theory of free will, that *loving* is seen there as an act of the will, though it is more clearly a *doing* than a willing to do something distinct from the willing. The *vouloire faire* that Malebranche ascribes to God appears in the texts to be an executive willing, a willing not merely to do something distinct from the willing, but to bring about an effect in things distinct from the divine agent. "Merely willing," for Malebranche, is not such an executive willing.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (many editions and translations), I q. 19, a. 6, ad 1, is a classic discussion of this distinction, for which Thomas credits John Damascene. It should be noted, however, that Malebranche's terminology is opposite to Thomas's in his use of the term *vouloir simplement*. *Simplement*, of course, corresponds to the Latin *simpliciter*; and for Thomas it is not the antecedent but the consequent will that is a case of willing *simpliciter*. He says, "What we will antecedently, we do not will *simpliciter*, but in a certain respect [*secundum quid*]" (ibid.).

Malebranche illustrates his distinction with another helpful example:

God wills in particular that I make a certain charitable donation. But he does not will to act in me to make me do it. He does not have in regard to that a particular *practical* volition. God *wills* in particular everything that is in conformity with Order, everything that perfects his work. But God does not always *do* [or make or effect, *faire*] it, because the same Order demands that he follow the general laws that he prescribed for himself, so that his conduct may bear the character of his attributes. (OCM VIII.651)

In this example, I take it, God has a particular volition, but not a particular *practical* volition that Malebranche make a charitable donation. That charitable action is something that the divine will is *for*, or in favor of, in particular; but God does not will to *effect* it.

The Order referred to in the quoted passage is undoubtedly “the immutable Order, the divine law” (OCM VIII.651), “the immutable order [that] is the inviolable rule of the divine volitions” (OCM VII.485) and “consists in the necessary relation that exists among the divine perfections” (OCM VIII.753). While God’s volitions regarding creatures, including the laws of Nature and of Grace, must *conform* with this necessary law or Order among the divine perfections, they are not similarly necessary but are “arbitrary” (TNG I.20 *addn*: OCM V.34); that is, they are free acts of God’s *arbitrium* (power of choice).

In these terms we can understand Malebranche’s claim that “God does not *will* in particular directly and positively the bad effects of which it has always been said that he *permits* them, rather than that he has a plan [*dessein*] to produce them” (OCM VIII.654). That implies, at a minimum, that God has no *practical* volition whose object or content is that there actually occur a particular event such as a murderer’s striking a lethal blow. But I think the implication is broader. A “mere,” or antecedent willing, which could be overruled by overriding considerations, could presumably count as willing an event in particular directly and positively, though not practically or efficaciously. But some events are of sorts that a morally perfect deity would not will even antecedently—would not wish for them at all. Malebranche says that “God will move [a murderer’s] arm, since he has established the laws of which that motion is a consequence. But it’s not that he wills positively and directly that criminal action” (OCM VIII.653). I think Malebranche must mean here that God has *no volition at all*, whether practical or merely antecedent, that is positively and precisely an act of willing that a particular act of murder (for example) should occur. It remains, then, that the efficacy of the divine will by which God does in fact move a murderer’s arm must be exclusively the efficacy of God’s *general* volitions, an efficacy that the general laws of nature have in themselves as divine volitions.

This conclusion agrees with other things that Malebranche says. (1) That God causes most events *only* by general volitions—that is, only by willing the

laws as such—seems to be important, in Malebranche's view, for the simplicity of God's "ways," because it enables God to avoid "multiplying volitions." Developing one of his favorite themes in theodicy, Malebranche declares that "it would be unworthy of [God's] wisdom to multiply his volitions to prevent certain particular disorders," which God would have prevented "if he could have [done so] by ways as simple" as those of his actual laws (TNG I.22: OCM V.35/R 119–20). Similarly, in a lengthy discussion of God's use of angels as occasional causes, in a 1685 response to Arnauld, Malebranche speaks of the ministry of angels as "sparing" God particular practical volitions (OCM VII.605).

Parsimony with regard to particular *practical* volitions, even though other sorts of particular volitions are freely multiplied, is important to Malebranche because "God ought to act by the simplest ways, and the ways of God are his *practical* volitions" (OCM VII.597, 600). And if "the ways of God are his practical volitions," it follows that "among [God's] ways, those are the simplest that include fewer practical volitions." God "ought not, for example, to employ two practical volitions when one suffices" (OCM VIII.673–74; cf. *ibid.*, p. 758). Malebranche evidently infers that the simplest way for God to act is by general practical volitions, very rarely having particular practical volitions, because it would take hugely more particular practical volitions to produce the effects that God can produce by relatively few general practical volitions, whose efficacy is determined in particular cases by occasional causes which are not efficacious of themselves.

(2) Malebranche repeatedly characterizes God's general laws as "efficacious" (e.g., TNG E1, §1: OCM V.147/R 195), and actually says of the laws of the communication of motion in collisions, that "because these laws are efficacious, they act, and bodies cannot act" (RV VI.ii.3: OCM 314/LO 449). Laws of nature, in Malebranche's theory, are not mere generalizations over observed patterns of events or over powers and liabilities of particular created things. They have "oomph," as we might say colloquially. They have it, not as free-standing realities, but as exercises of the power of God.

Such a theory of laws of nature is a major attraction of Malebranchean occasionalism in an early modern context. Whereas Aristotelian natural philosophers had sought causal explanations of natural phenomena in powers intrinsic to particular natural beings, their early modern successors tended to prefer more holistic explanations in terms of laws of nature governing the whole natural universe. But how can laws, as such, be a source of explanation? Doesn't their efficacy itself stand in need of explanation? The nominalism or conceptualism generally professed by early modern philosophers would not allow to laws, as abstract objects, a metaphysically independent being, force, or efficacy. The obvious alternative to a scholastic Aristotelian grounding of causal relations in substantial and accidental forms inhering in objects, was to seek the grounding of the being and efficacy of laws of nature where

Malebranche sought it, in the mathematically omniscient intellect and all-powerful will of God.

(3) This theory enables Malebranche to articulate a sense in which creatures, as “secondary causes,” do have power to bring about effects. They do not have this power of their own efficacy, but by being able as occasional causes to determine to particular effects the efficacy of God’s general volitions (TNG II.3: OCM V.67/R 139; OCM VII.496; VIII.703). Malebranche alludes to this when he speaks of “the power that has been given [to a murderer, to move his arm] by the general laws of the union of the soul and the body” (OCM VIII.653). More fully, he states his view of “the power of secondary causes” as that

[creatures] cannot in any way act by an efficacy of their own, but only by the efficacy of the divine power, in consequence of the general laws of Nature, or the general and always efficacious volitions of [Nature’s] Author, by which God gives them a share in his power, without giving them any part in his independence. (OCM VIII.700; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 703–4)

Malebranche says repeatedly (e.g., in OCM VIII.651, 703–4) that God does this, going even so far, at least once, as to say that “[n]ow God no longer acts as in the creation, immediately and by himself. [. . .] He acts through the creatures, in consequence of the power he has given them by establishing his general laws” (OCM VIII.758).

It is explicitly part of Malebranche’s position that “in order for the general cause to act by laws or by general volitions, [. . .] it is absolutely necessary that there be some *occasional cause that determines the efficacy of those laws, and that serves to establish them*” (TNG II.3: OCM V.67/R 139). Similarly he says that it is because “God cannot act by [. . .] general laws before there are occasional causes,” that in the beginning of the created world “the first motions of the parts of matter in different directions must be produced by particular volitions” (OCM VIII.780).<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, it is a “metaphysical principle” of Malebranche’s theology that created causes *had* to play such a part in *how* the world is created and governed, if it was to be done in a way acceptable to God’s wisdom, a way befitting the infinity of God and the limitedness of creatures as such. “God does not will, and ought not, to construct immediately and by himself” the work that he plans, but “should make use of a creature”—most eminently, of the human soul of Christ.

[I]n order that [God’s] work should be worthy of him, if he made it by himself alone, it would have to have been infinite as he is. God had therefore to make use of finite means, [. . .] since he needed to give his work the character that is appropriate to a creature.

<sup>12</sup> See also EMR X.16: OCM XII.246/JS 190.

And this limitation of the effects of the divine causality could only be “drawn from a finite occasional cause” (OCM VII.579–80).

In this model of causation creatures, as occasional causes, have a more robust and central role than Malebranche's emphatic denials of their “genuine” causal efficacy might have led us to expect. They do not merely constitute reasons for God to decide to cause a particular effect. They are part of *how* God's general volitions, as efficacious laws of nature, *necessitate* particular effects. What necessitates the effect, in occasional causation, is the conjunction of God's efficaciously willing a general law, and the occurrence of the occasional cause which satisfies a condition laid down in the law as sufficient for the occurrence of the effect.

Malebranche's occasionalism is still not a theory according to which God winds up the clock of nature and sets its hands at the beginning, and does not act directly in it thereafter, except in rare miracles. Malebranche insists on the religious value of God's intimate causal involvement in all that conditions our lives, and emphasizes that as an argument for occasionalism (RV VI.ii.3). But neither is Malebranchian occasionalism a view according to which God is constantly correcting and resetting the hands of nature's clock, so to speak, as Leibniz famously charged.<sup>13</sup> It is rather a theory according to which God acts immanently and directly in every event (with very limited exceptions) by general rather than particular volitions which do not require readjustment.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.3. DIVINE SIMPLICITY: A PROBLEM

Much of this theory seems to depend, however, on distinctions that Malebranche draws among kinds of divine volition: general as distinct from particular, practical as distinct from simple, willing as distinct from merely permitting. How real are these distinctions in the divine will? That could be a problem for Malebranche. I will articulate the problem, and comment on it briefly, but will not try to resolve it here.

Malebranche holds a very strong version of the typical scholastic doctrine of divine *simplicity*, declaring that

it is a property of the infinite, incomprehensible to the human mind, to be at the same time one and all things, composed, so to speak, of an infinity of perfections, and simple in such a way that each perfection that it possesses includes all the others without any real distinction. For

<sup>13</sup> GP IV, pp. 498–99, translated in AG, pp. 147–48.

<sup>14</sup> The very limited exceptions to this generalization are for miracles on the one hand, and, as we shall see, for exercises of human free will on the other.

as each perfection is infinite, it constitutes [*fait*] the whole divine Being. (OCM VI.52*n*)<sup>15</sup>

Similarly he holds that God is not only immutable, but *eternal* in such a sense that he “is always all that he is without succession in time. [. . .] There is in his existence neither past nor future; all is present, immutable, eternal” (EMR VIII.4: OCM XII.179/JS 132). These theses of simplicity and eternity both apply to God’s willing, insofar as it is an action internal to God. “[W]hat he wills, he wills without succession by a simple and invariable act,” and “by an eternal and immutable act [I think one single act is meant] he knows everything and wills everything that he wills” (EMR VIII.2: OCM XII176–77/JS 130).

God has created the world; but the will to create it is not past. God will change it; but the will to change it is not future. The will of God which has effected [*fait*] and will effect is an eternal and immutable act, whose effects change without there being any change in God. (EMR VIII.4: OCM XII.179/JS 132)

In this context Malebranche refers to “that simple, eternal, invariable act which contains both the general laws of his ordinary providence and also the exceptions to those same laws” (EMR VIII.3: OCM XII.177/JS 131). In other words, one “simple, eternal, invariable act” contains both God’s general volitions and God’s particular volitions.

That being so, how should we understand the difference Malebranche sees between God’s general and particular volitions? And how would that difference affect the simplicity of God’s ways? Given Malebranche’s conception of divine simplicity, he is probably best understood as supposing that God’s volitions can be distinguished from each other by distinguishing the different external, finite objects of the one internal act of the divine will. What we can distinguish in God’s willing are the relations in which the act of God’s will stands to different created objects. God’s general volitions are the divine will as it takes general laws as its objects; God’s particular volitions are the divine will as it takes more particular objects.

But why should it matter to the perfection of God’s willing how many external objects of “practical” or efficacious willing it has, given that there is in

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<sup>15</sup> This is a prominent Malebranchean formulation. It occurs in almost the same words, quite intentionally, in three places in Malebranche’s works, the first in RV E10 (OCM III.148/LO 624) from 1683 on, and the last in EMR II.6 (OCM XII.54/JS 24) from 1688 on. I quote the second version, from a polemical publication of 1684, fiercely attacked by Arnauld and defended and explained by Malebranche (OCM VI.247–53). The phrase “one and all things,” which occurs in all three versions, might be read in a pantheist sense, but is explained by Malebranche as meaning no more than the phrases that follow it; specifically, “all things” refers to all perfections, not to all substances (OCM VI.251). See also OCM XV.19, a text of 1708, which partially repeats the formula.

God, in any case, just one simple act of willing? It appears that the simplicity of God's "ways" is not a simplicity internal to God, but a simplicity of the relations in which the incomprehensible divine simplicity stands to external, created things. And it is not obvious why God's loving his own attribute of wisdom more than he loves his work should lead to his giving an almost always decisive priority to simplicity of such relations. This aspect of Malebranche's theodicy may be even harder to defend than the high priority that Leibniz assigns to the simplicity and constancy of the laws of nature, as features of the *world*, in constituting the bestness of the best possible world.

Doubts may arise also, from Malebranche's commitments regarding divine foreknowledge and providence, about the distinction implied by his conceptions of *willing* and merely *permitting*. "God's foreknowledge is infinite" (EMR XI.10: OCM XII.268/JS 208). "His Providence is not blind and subject to chance. For by his infinite wisdom he knows all the consequences of all possible general laws." Similarly, "By his quality of Examiner of hearts, he foresees all the future determinations of free causes" (OCM VIII.716). And all that God foresees or eternally knows is taken into account in God's one "simple and invariable" free act of will regarding creatures. In language that treats relations of explanatory priority as if the priority were temporal, Malebranche declares that "[t]he first step that [God] takes is regulated by the foreknowledge of all that must follow from it." Indeed,

God determines himself to take that first step only after he has compared it not only with everything that must follow from it, but also with an infinity of other first steps in an infinity of other suppositions, and all kinds of other combinations of the physical with the moral and the natural with the supernatural. (EMR XI.11: OCM XII.269/JS 209)

God's single simple and invariable act of will regarding the world is made, therefore, on the basis of full knowledge that it will and does result in the whole history of the actual world, exactly and in every detail as it has been, is, and will be (and similarly complete knowledge of infinitely many other possible world histories). It is based on a judgment of infinite wisdom that that action, considered together with all its consequences in comparison with alternatives, is maximally consonant with the divine perfection. In the context of such a simple and holistically motivated act of will, what can be the distinction involved in Malebranche's claim that some of the events that God causes are *willed* (directly or indirectly) by God and others are not willed in any way by God, but are merely *permitted* by God? I presume it is roughly the distinction between *intending*, and knowingly causing as a *foreseen consequence* of one's voluntary act, which is important in theories of double effect. It is a controversial distinction in that context, and the theological analogue is an obvious target for similar controversy. But perhaps the distinction needn't be any more controversial in regard to divine than to human choices.

## 2. Genuine Cause

Malebranche offers what appears to be a definition of “genuine cause” as the first premise of a succinct but sweeping argument for occasionalism. For obvious reasons it has been called his No Necessary Connection argument. It will be convenient to refer to it by that name.

(NNC) (1) A genuine 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 genuine cause. (OCM II.316/LO 450)<sup>16</sup>

For anglophone philosophical readers of Malebranche this argument fairly leaps off the page, for there is nothing in Malebranche’s writing about causation that seems to present him more clearly as a forerunner of Hume. The appearance of the argument is somewhat misleading in this respect, for Malebranche is content in the end with a perception of necessary connection that has nothing like the clarity and content that Hume demanded. The role of *perceiving* a necessary connection in Malebranche’s view of genuine causation will be more closely examined in section 2.2. Malebranche certainly is a forerunner of Hume, however,<sup>17</sup> in conceiving of causal connection (or at any rate, *genuine* causal connection) as *necessary* connection, a connection in which the effect follows necessarily from the cause. It is tempting to take this, as formulated in proposition (1), as a *definition* of “genuine cause,” but I have come to believe the temptation should be resisted. It is not adequate for the purpose, and does not in fact express Malebranche’s complete conception of genuine causation. A fuller account of the kind of necessary connection that is involved in genuine causation will emerge in section 2.1.

### 2.1. NECESSITY AND EFFICACY

For while Malebranche certainly regarded necessary connection as *required* for genuine causation, it is not *sufficient* for a satisfying definition of being a genuine cause, and is not in fact the only condition that Malebranche imposes on being a genuine cause. Proposition (1) is not the only formulation in Malebranche’s work that could be taken for a definition of “genuine cause.” Indeed, in the very same chapter with proposition (1), we find him referring to “the idea that one has of cause or power to act” as a single idea, which seems to imply that cause and power to act are at least roughly equivalent. And in this

<sup>16</sup> For ease of reference to them I have numbered the steps of the argument.

<sup>17</sup> And Hume may well have been indebted to Malebranche’s No Necessary Connection argument.

context he certainly means the idea of *genuine* cause, which applies only to the divine will, for he goes on to say that the idea “represents something divine” (RV VI.ii.3: OCM II,309/LO 446). Quoting this passage, Steven Nadler rightly says that for Malebranche, “The necessity of the [genuine causal] connection has to be grounded in a real power or nature in the agent.”<sup>18</sup>

Here, however, I want to focus especially on Malebranche's concept of efficacy (*efficace* in French). No doubt efficacy is a kind of power; but, as we shall see, it is not the only kind of power that plays a part in Malebranche's thinking. And it is a kind of power that he explicitly invokes in explaining the notion of a genuine cause. He claims “to have demonstrated in the *Search after Truth* that there is nothing but God that is a *genuine* cause, or that acts by its own efficacy” (TNG E I.11: OCM V.155/R 202). Here the clause “or that acts by its own efficacy” may plausibly be taken as expressing, if not an alternative definition, at least a supplementary necessary condition of being a genuine cause.

What this adds to the notion of “power to act” is not just the specification of the power as *efficacy*, but even more crucially, that the genuine cause acts *by its own* efficacy, in contrast with occasional causes, which act by an efficacy that is not their own but belongs to the genuine cause. What makes the genuine cause's efficacy its own? In Malebranche's view the genuine cause acts *by its own* efficacy inasmuch as the efficacy follows from the divine nature of the genuine cause. In his *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* of 1683, Malebranche writes,

God is an infinitely perfect being; his volitions [*volontez*] therefore are efficacious by themselves [*par elles-mêmes*], for it is a great perfection that everything one wills comes to pass by the very efficacy of one's will [*volonté*]. (OCM X.48)

Here Malebranche explicitly states that God's acts of will (*volontez*, in the plural) are efficacious by themselves; he says much the same in many places. But it is also clear that the plural divine volitions are not seen here as having separately grounded efficacy. Rather the efficacy of each and every one of them is grounded in a single “great perfection” that Malebranche thinks must belong to an infinitely perfect being—a perfection that is commonly called “omnipotence,” but that is here described as what we might call *omni-efficacy* or unlimited efficacy. This efficacy that the genuine cause possesses as its own is of course closely connected with the necessity of the genuine causal connection.

Why do I say that the requirement of necessary connection is not sufficient of itself to define “genuine cause,” and that it needs to be supplemented by some such notion as that of a cause acting *by its own* efficacy? Perhaps the most compelling as well as the simplest reason is that necessary connection is not

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<sup>18</sup> Steven Nadler, “Malebranche on Causation,” in Steven Nadler, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 115.

enough to assure a logical property—a sort of asymmetry—that seems to be entailed by causal connection. If *e* follows necessarily from *c*, then by contraposition not-*c* follows necessarily from not-*e*. But is one of *c* and *e* dependent and the other independent? And if so, which? That is not settled by the facts that *e* follows necessarily from *c*, and not-*c* from not-*e*. But if the necessary connection between *c* and *e* is a causal connection in which *c* is the cause, there should be an asymmetrical dependence relation between the truth value of *c* and the truth value of *e*. The truth value of *e* should *depend causally* on the truth value of *c*, and *not vice versa*.

In some modern treatments of causality, time-relations are brought in at this point to supplement relations of necessary or law-like conditionality. The cause occurs *before* the effect, the effect *after* the cause. What comes after is asymmetrically dependent on what comes before. This is a feature of Hume's treatment of causality, for example. But I know of no reason to suppose that Malebranche did or would explain the asymmetry of genuine causal dependence in this way. For one thing, he regards his genuine cause or causes, God and God's volitions, as eternal, and therefore not exactly as preceding their effects in time.

Perhaps he could argue that if something temporal follows necessarily from something eternal, the temporal must depend on the eternal and not vice versa. He does in fact say "nothing can be independent without being eternal." But this is not presented as an explanation of the causal relation (TNG I.4 *addn*: OCM V.19).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in his last publication the question "What relation [is there] between an eternal act of the will of God and the creation of the Universe in time?" is presented as one of the points on which we cannot comprehend divine omnipotence (RPP §23: OCM XVI.132).

We may be confident, however, that in Malebranche's view the genuine cause's *acting by its own efficacy* does introduce an asymmetry of dependence into the causal relation. If God had willed the existence of centaurs, the existence of centaurs would have followed necessarily and by the efficacy of God's will. God's will would have been the ground of the necessary connection. That surely follows from Malebranche's view. In fact, we may plausibly assume, no centaurs ever have existed or ever will exist—from which it follows necessarily that God has not willed the existence of centaurs. But it is not by the efficacy of the non-existence of centaurs that it follows that God has not willed their existence; for non-existences have no "efficacy of their own" in the relevant sense. In Malebranche's view centaurs could not exist except by the efficacy of God's will. If they do not exist, that is because God has not willed that centaurs exist. Whether there exist centaurs or not depends entirely, and asymmetrically, on God's will. Malebranche invokes such an asymmetry of dependence when

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<sup>19</sup> See also EMR IX.7 (OCM XII.208/JS 157).

he states his view of “the power of secondary causes” as that creatures “can by no means act by an efficacy that is their own, but only by the efficacy of the divine power.” It is only inasmuch as God has made them occasional causes that “God has given them a share in his power, without giving them any share in his independence” (OCM VIII.700).

A further qualification on the role of necessary connection that is required in Malebranche's conception of genuine causation is that *conceptual* necessity of a connection, even when it is grounded in the nature of the supposed cause, is not sufficient for *genuine causal* efficacy. This point is underlined by an objection to his thesis that bodies cannot be genuine causes. The objection was raised in 1686, in Fontenelle's *Doutes sur le système physique des causes occasionelles*. Fontenelle pointed out that according to Descartes's conception of the essence of corporeal substance as defined by extension, bodies are necessarily impenetrable, and that it follows necessarily that when bodies collide, “they change each other's motion.” From this he concluded that in affecting each other's motion, colliding bodies satisfy Malebranche's definition of “genuine cause,” by having a necessary connection with the effects—and, indeed, having it precisely because they are impenetrable “by their nature.” Fontenelle's apparent definition of “genuine cause” is this: “A genuine cause is that between which and its effect one sees a necessary connection, or, if you will, [that] which, precisely because it is, or is such, makes a thing to be or to be such.”<sup>20</sup> Both the definition and the argument pick up clearly the necessary connection requirement for genuine causation—and also the requirement that the necessity be grounded in the nature of the cause.

Malebranche had already affirmed some of the premises of Fontenelle's argument. In Book III of *The Search after Truth* he lists impenetrability as one of the properties “inseparable from matter,” and given as soon as extension is given (OCM I.460/LO 243). And in Elucidation 15 of the *Search*, published in 1678, he declared, “But bodies being impenetrable, and their motions taking place along opposing or intersecting lines, it is *necessary* that they collide, and that they consequently cease to move in the same way” (OCM III.217/LO 664). That certainly seems to imply that there is a necessary connection by which certain facts about collisions and changes in states of motion (and rest) of bodies follow from an essential property of bodies, their impenetrability. Why is that not an instance of genuine causation, in the sense intended by Malebranche?

Malebranche's fullest response to Fontenelle's argument is in his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* of 1688. The main line of argument there is that the impenetrability of bodies does not determine anything to happen at all. For there would be no motion at all if God did not efficaciously will it to happen,

<sup>20</sup> Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Doutes sur le système physique des causes occasionelles* (Rotterdam: Acher, 1686), chap. 3; reprinted in Fontenelle, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Fayard, 1989-), vol. 1, pp. 533–35.

and will it to happen in certain ways. That bodies are essentially impenetrable merely restricts the patterns of motion available for God's choice—in much the same way, I suppose, as necessary truths of geometry constrain God's choice, though Malebranche does not invoke that analogy in this context. Malebranche deploys the language of efficacy in this argument. "It is clear," he says, "that impenetrability has no efficacy of its own." It does not introduce into the nature of extension a power to make anything happen. Bodies are moved only by "the efficacy of the will of the one who created them, or who conserves them successively in different places," and "one body cannot shake another by an efficacy that belongs to its nature" (OCM 163–64/JS 118–19).<sup>21</sup>

Tad Schmaltz rightly comments that "the sort of necessity this bodily property [impenetrability] imposes on collision is conceptual rather than causal. Conceptual necessity itself does not involve the production of anything actual, but merely constrains what can be produced." As he also notes, Malebranche is committed anyway to such a distinction of causal from conceptual necessity.

In opposition to the doctrine in Descartes that the divine will is the cause of the eternal truths, Malebranche insists that such truths derive rather from uncreated ideas in the divine intellect that serve as immutable archetypes for his creation of the world.<sup>22</sup> The necessitation of the truths is therefore an instance not of causal necessitation grounded in divine volitions, but rather of conceptual necessitation grounded in divine ideas.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2. NECESSITY AND KNOWABILITY

As I noted at the outset of part 2, Malebranche did not have the same interest that Hume did in the possibility of *perceiving* the necessary connection involved in (genuine) causation. My aim in section 2.2 is to sort out what Malebranche does and does not claim about our perceiving and not perceiving necessary connection, in his account of genuine causation—and to what extent his views on this subject changed during his long career. Let us return to the No Necessary Connection argument:

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<sup>21</sup> Dialogue VII, paragraph 12. Fontenelle is not mentioned in this passage, but that is not to be expected in the *Dialogues*. Both Fontenelle's *Doutes* and the main publication attributable to Malebranche that is explicitly focused on the *Doutes* (OCM XVII-1.579–86) were published anonymously, perhaps to avoid personal harshness, from reasons of friendship (see André Robinet's introduction in OCM XVII-1.567–70). In the latter publication the argument from impenetrability is not explicitly addressed, though fragments of a reply to it may be discerned (see OCM XVII-1.580–81).

<sup>22</sup> RV E10: OCM III.136–37/LO 618–19.

<sup>23</sup> Tad Schmaltz, "Occasionalism and Mechanism: Fontenelle's Objections to Malebranche," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16 (2008): 293–313, pp. 300–301. Schmaltz's discussion of the interaction between Fontenelle and Malebranche is very illuminating.

(NNC) (1) A genuine 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 genuine cause. (OCM II.316/LO 450)

There is a strict reading of propositions (1) and (2) according to which Malebranche must take the mind's (indeed, the *human* mind's) *perception* of necessity as essential to genuine causal connection, and must take our inability to perceive a necessary connection between two events as sufficient for there not being a genuine causal connection between them.

That reads too much into this text. There are plenty of indications in Malebranche's writings that whether there *is* a necessary connection was a more fundamental issue for him than whether we *perceive* one, and that he held that we don't just fail to perceive a necessary connection between finite or "natural" causes and effects, but actually perceive that there isn't one.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, just three pages before the above-quoted formulation of NNC, Malebranche states that "the idea that we have of all bodies lets us know that they cannot move themselves" and that "when one examines the idea that one has of all finite spirits, one sees no necessary connection between their will and the motion of any body whatever; one sees on the contrary that there isn't any, and that there can't be any" (OCM II.313/LO 448).

In the first editions of the *Search after Truth* and the *Elucidations* to it, however, Malebranche does seem to treat our *not perceiving* a necessary connection between created causes and their effects as a decisive reason for not regarding them as genuine causes. There is the presentation of NNC itself in chapter (VI.ii.3), and the artful buildup to it in the previous chapter (VI.ii.2), which is devoted to the Cartesian rule "that we must reason only on [the basis of] clear ideas." And near the beginning of *Elucidation 15*, which Malebranche added to the *Search* in 1678 to reinforce his arguments for occasionalism, he declares,

There are plenty of reasons that prevent me from attributing to *secondary* or *natural* causes a force, a power, an efficacy to produce whatever it may be. But the principal one is that that opinion does not seem even conceivable to me. Whatever effort I make to comprehend it, I cannot find in myself any idea that represents to me what could be the force or power that is attributed to creatures. (OCM III.204/LO 658)

However, there is also clear evidence that by 1683 at the latest, Malebranche did not believe that a genuine cause must be such that we have a clear idea of its

<sup>24</sup> On this point see also Sukjae Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation: Malebranche's Two Arguments for Occasionalism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 539–65, particularly pp. 542–43.

necessary connection with its effect. For in that year he published his *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, in the form of a dialogue with Christ, in which he represents Christ as saying,

I give human beings no distinct idea that corresponds to the word power or efficacy [. . .] For even if you believe that God does [or makes, *fait*] 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 absolute volitions remained inefficacious. (MCM IX.2: OCM X.96)

In other words, we have no distinct idea of power or efficacy at all, in God or in creatures. And the necessary connection we in fact perceive is not between God's volitions and their effects, but only between the doctrine of divine omnipotence and the claim that God's volitions are efficacious. The latter connection, which we do perceive, exemplifies what we may call a *conceptual* necessity. The former necessary connection, which we do not clearly perceive, may be of some other, more distinctively causal sort.

This is a very significant passage. By granting that we do not see clearly any necessary connection between *any* cause (even God's will) and any effect, Malebranche seems to undermine his No Necessary Connection argument for occasionalism. For this seems to leave him with a parity rather than an asymmetry between divine and created causes as regards our having or lacking a distinct idea of necessary connection between them and their effects. And then what force does our not seeing clearly any such necessity in the case of supposed created causes have as evidence for the thesis that God's will is a genuine cause and nothing created is?<sup>25</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, Malebranche's 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 in conserving the created world in being, God is continuously creating it at every instant (MCM V.7–9, VI.11: OCM X.49–51, 62–63). And that is quite generally the main occasionalist argument in the works that Malebranche first published in 1683 or later. It is tempting to suppose that Malebranche himself abandoned the No Necessary Connection argument as fatally flawed.

I am a convert to the view that this temptation must be resisted. The first reason for resisting it derives from the publication history of *The Search after*

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<sup>25</sup> A similar point is made by Fontenelle (though without explicit reference to what Malebranche had said in MCM IX.2). See Fontenelle, *Doutes*, chap. 3, in Fontenelle, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 536–37. See also Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation," p. 553, and the discussion by Andrew Pyle quoted there.

*Truth*. It appeared in six different editions in Malebranche's lifetime, each of them carefully revised by the author, with changes large and small, stylistic and substantive, with long Elucidations being added and subtracted. Many of the changes certainly reflected changes in viewpoint. The *Search* appears to have been regarded by Malebranche himself and by most of his contemporaries as his *chef-d'œuvre*; and he wanted to keep it up to date, reflecting the best current science and his own current views.<sup>26</sup> It is significant, then, that the passages first published before 1683 that I have quoted as presenting and defending the No Necessary Connection argument<sup>27</sup> remained substantially unchanged in the last two editions, of 1700 and 1712. Indeed I have quoted them in translations that follow the text of 1712. This history of publication makes it hard to deny that Malebranche continued to the end of his life to believe that there was something importantly right about the No Necessary Connection argument.

Particularly interesting in this connection is an anonymous publication of 1686 that is generally thought to have been written by Malebranche himself. On the one hand this document incorporates a version of his acknowledgment that we do not understand the efficacy of God's will even though we see that such efficacy follows from God's omnipotence. It conjoins the statements, "I do not conceive how the will of God produces bodies or sets them in motion," and "I see that there is a necessary connection between the will of God and its effect." (OCM XVII-1.581).<sup>28</sup> At the same time the document includes something that looks very like a reaffirmation of the No Necessary Connection argument:

Moreover one ought to judge only about what one sees, and agree only to what one conceives. Now when two bodies collide, I see nothing but the collision. So I ought to judge only that they collide. I do not conceive of any necessary connection except between divine volitions and their effects. So I ought not to agree that it is easy to draw extremely unwelcome consequences from [ . . . ] the principle [ . . . ] that there is nothing but the will of God that is the moving force of bodies. (OCM XVII-1.584–85)

And the author (whom I suppose to be Malebranche) adds something suggesting that the views thus expressed can be reconciled. He says, "it is not necessary, in order to establish the *System* of occasional causes, to know *in what way* God gives existence to creatures" (OCM XVII-1.585, italics added).

This implies a distinction between knowing or "seeing" *that* something is true and knowing or understanding *how* it is true. I believe that at least from 1683, and possibly from his first proposing it, Malebranche understood the

<sup>26</sup> See the editor's introduction by Geneviève Rodis-Lewis in OCM I.xxix–xxxv.

<sup>27</sup> In particular, in RV VI.ii.3 (OCM II.316/LO 450) and E 15 (OCM III.204/LO 658).

<sup>28</sup> Here Malebranche is evidently responding to an argument of Fontenelle that is discussed in section 2.1 above (but ignoring essential features of that argument). My present concern is only with what the statements quoted here (which I assume to be Malebranche's) imply or suggest about his views.

No Necessary Connection argument in the framework of such a distinction, as an argument that turns on knowing-that rather than on understanding-how. Hume's relation to Malebranche should not control our reading of Malebranche. Malebranche's treatment of causality is not primarily driven, as Hume's is, by philosophical puzzlement about causal concepts, but rather by a religious vision.

There are two claims about knowledge in the No Necessary Connection argument that largely explain its permanent importance for Malebranche. One is negative, the other positive. The negative claim is that we do not know, or "see," that there is any necessary connection between created causes and effects. In some contexts (as already in 1678 in RV E15: OCM III.204/LO 658) what is targeted as not known, or not even understood, by us is the fuller and more precise thesis that created causes have an efficacy of their own by which effects necessarily follow from them. Malebranche does not cease to make the negative claim in 1683. He must continue to claim it, for to grant that we know that there are necessary connections of the indicated sort is to grant that occasionalism is false.

As a mere denial of knowledge, however, the negative claim is weak. Not knowing that a proposition is true does not amount to knowing that it is false. That created causes have no efficacy of their own is precisely the claim that opponents of occasionalism, as such, were most inclined to deny. Malebranche had reason to want an argument for the *truth* of that claim, and not merely an argument that we do not know it to be false. We may plausibly take that to be a main reason why the argument from continuous creation, which is an argument for the *truth* of that claim, eclipsed the No Necessary Connection argument in Malebranche's writing in 1683 and afterwards.<sup>29</sup>

The positive claim about knowledge in the No Necessary Connection argument is that we do know that there is a necessary connection between God's volitions and their effects, such that God's will is efficacious of itself. That it is *true* that God's will is efficacious in that way is one of the most essential tenets of Malebranche's occasionalism. And Malebranche certainly claimed to *know* that it is true. That it is true, and that we know it to be true, are *not* claims for which the idea of continuous creation provides any justification; but its truth is a presupposition or premise of the continuous creation argument—sometimes implicitly, but it is explicit at OCM VII.513–14, where Malebranche's argument for the thesis "that the action by which God conserves his creatures is the same one by which he creates them, and that their conservation is nothing but their continuous creation" begins with the premise that "as God is an

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<sup>29</sup> Another reason (plausibly the main reason) is that the requirement of a strictly necessary connection in all genuine causation would not have been taken for granted by typical opponents of occasionalism, as it is in the No Necessary Connection argument; see Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation," pp. 546–49.

infinitely perfect being, there is a necessary connection between the efficacy of his volitions and everything that he intends to make or do [*tout ce qu'il prétend faire*].” That we should know this is still important for Malebranche’s case for occasionalism.

But how can he defend the positive claim about knowledge? There is no thorough defense of it in the context of the No Necessary Connection argument. And the question is all the more pressing when he has said in 1683 that we have “no distinct idea” of “power or efficacy” in either God or creatures. Fortunately, his works contain a good deal of discussion of what he thinks we do and don’t understand regarding God’s power. And whereas he claims to have no understanding of any way in which a created cause could have an efficacy of its own (RV E15: OCM III.204/LO 658), he does provide an account of the knowledge he claims to have of the all-powerful efficacy of the divine will.

This is one of the main points on which a religious vision drives Malebranche’s argument. It is a point at which the most famous aspect of his epistemology, the doctrine of vision in God, sheds important light on his occasionalism.<sup>30</sup> The title of chapter 6 of Part 2 of Book III of the *Search* expresses it as the doctrine “*That we see all things in God*” (OCM I.437/LO 230), and posterity has often phrased it in that form. But that is misleading. As Malebranche explains in the following chapter, “while one *can* see all things in God, it does not follow that one does see all of them there. One sees in God only the things of which one has ideas, and there are things that one sees without ideas, or knows only by sensation” (OCM I.450/LO 237).<sup>31</sup>

Important both for his epistemology and for his arguments for occasionalism is the way Malebranche distinguishes between our knowing things by perceiving ideas of them, and knowing them in other ways. In the former case, “when one sees a creature, one does not see it in itself or by itself,” but only “by viewing certain perfections that are in God, which represent it.” Such perfections are what Malebranche calls the “ideas,” in the strictest sense, of creatures. By them “God [. . .] discovers [in his substance] all the ways in which it can be participated in [or imitated<sup>32</sup>] by creatures” (RV IV.11: OCM 96–98/LO 318–19). Knowing a creature by its *idea* is thus knowing it through something distinct from itself<sup>33</sup> that represents it in God. Because it is knowing the creature by the perfect representation in God by which God knows it, knowing a creature by its idea enables us to “know all the properties of which it is capable”

<sup>30</sup> This is a point in favor of following Gueroult’s *Malebranche* in treating the doctrine of vision in God as a more central feature of Malebranche’s philosophy than occasionalism.

<sup>31</sup> Italics added. “Or knows only by sensation” was added in Malebranche’s last edition of the *Search*, in 1712.

<sup>32</sup> As Thomas Aquinas puts it in a passage (from *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 15 a. 2) which Malebranche quotes in a footnote at this point.

<sup>33</sup> Treated as definitive of knowing things through their ideas in RV III.ii.7 (OCM 448/LO 236).

(RV III.ii.7: OCM 550–51/LO 237–38). It will advance our understanding of Malebranche’s occasionalism to draw out these views somewhat further as regards (1) knowing God, (2) knowing bodies, and (3) knowing human souls.

### 2.2.1. Knowing God

In Malebranche’s view, knowledge of God’s essential omnipotence or omnificacy is given with and in knowledge of God’s existence. And that knowledge is a matter of vision in God, or vision of God.

The most beautiful proof of the existence of God [Malebranche declares in the *Search*], the most sublime, the most solid, and the first one, or the one that presupposes the least, is the idea that we have of the infinite. For it is certain that the mind perceives the infinite, though it does not comprehend it, and that it has a very distinct idea of God, which it cannot have except by union with him. (RV III.ii.6: OCM I.441/LO 232)

This proof is developed further in a later chapter of the *Search*. Reminding the reader of his doctrine that “when one sees a creature, one does not see it in itself or by itself,” but only by seeing in God the idea that represents it, Malebranche says,

But it’s not the same with the infinitely perfect being. One cannot see it except in itself, for there is nothing finite that can represent the infinite. Therefore one cannot see God unless he exists. One cannot see the essence of an infinitely perfect being, without seeing its existence. One cannot see it simply as a possible being. Nothing can contain it. Nothing can represent it. So if one thinks of it, it must exist. (RV IV.11: OCM II.96/LO 318)

The two main explicit premises of this proof are that to think of God is to think of the absolutely infinite, as such, and that nothing finite can represent the infinite. It is obviously presupposed, further, that one cannot think of any thing except by perceiving a representation of it, or else by perceiving the thing itself. A final premise, occasionally made explicit in Malebranche’s discussions of the argument, is that “the non-existent [*le néant*] cannot be perceived” (RV IV.11: OCM II.99–100/LO 320–21). From these premises or assumptions it follows that one cannot think of God unless God does exist. For God is the absolutely infinite, and one cannot perceive the infinite itself if it does not exist, and one cannot perceive a representation of the infinite in any case because there cannot be one, and there is no other way of thinking of God.<sup>34</sup>

It does not serve clarity that in discussing this topic Malebranche uses the word “idea” in two different senses that are far from equivalent. In his strictest

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<sup>34</sup> I have translated the above passages from RV III.ii.4 and IV.11 from the French text as it appeared in the fourth edition, of 1678, the last edition before 1683.

sense, the idea of any thing is an entity, distinct from that thing, that represents it accurately. In this sense of idea, according to Malebranche, the only ideas are in God, and we perceive them, if at all, in God. So when he says that “the infinite does not have and cannot have [. . .] any idea distinct from itself that represents it” (RV IV.11: OCM II.101/LO 321), it follows that in his strictest sense of ‘idea’, there is no idea at all of the infinite or of God. When, on the other hand, he says, as quoted above, that our mind “has a very distinct idea of God,” he is obviously using “idea” in a looser sense in which it counts as having an idea of God if we perceive God as the infinite being in such a way as to understand with some clarity something of the divine nature, even if our perception of the infinite is “infinitely small in comparison with an infinitely perfect comprehension” (RV IV.11: OCM II.101/LO 321).

Malebranche himself comments on this point. Noting that he has said that “we have no ideas of our [religious] Mysteries,” though he has also said that the Mysteries could not be believed “if one did not have some idea” of them, he acknowledges that

this word, *idea* is equivocal. I have taken it sometimes for everything that represents some object to the mind, whether clearly or confusedly. I have taken it even more generally for everything that is the immediate object of the mind.<sup>35</sup> But I have also taken it in the most precise and most restricted sense—that is to say, for that which represents this to the mind in a manner so clear that one can discover by simple vision whether such and such modifications belong to them. (RV E3: OCM III.43–44/LO 561)<sup>36</sup>

When the infinite, the infinitely perfect being, is seen in itself, one sees not only its existence, but also its perfection, which is its essence. “We will never be mistaken,” Malebranche declares, “provided we attribute to God only what we clearly and distinctly see belongs to the infinitely perfect Being.” He adds that this is to be “only what we discover, not in an idea distinct from God, but in his substance itself”; it is to be part of the mind’s vision in God, its seeing the infinitely perfect in itself. From these claims Malebranche derives the principle, “Let us therefore attribute to God, or to the infinitely perfect Being, all perfections, however incomprehensible they seem to us, provided we are certain they are realities or genuine perfections, [. . .] which do not participate in non-being, and are not limited by imperfections or limitations like those of creatures” (EMR VIII.1: OCM XII.175/JS 128).

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<sup>35</sup> Anglophone philosophical readers will be reminded of John Locke’s explanation of “idea” as “that term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks” (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I.i.8). I assume that Locke had read Malebranche’s formulation.

<sup>36</sup> The phrases, “in the most precise and most restricted sense—that is to say” were added in the 1712 edition (the sixth) of RV.

One of the perfections attributed to God on this basis is omnipotence, or the omni-efficacy of God's will.

God is an infinitely perfect being; his volitions [*volontez*] therefore are efficacious by themselves [*par elles-mêmes*], for it is a great perfection that everything one wills comes to pass by the very efficacy of one's will [*volonté*]. (MCM V.6: OCM X.48)

That God's volitions are efficacious of themselves, always and necessarily, is precisely what is required if they are to be genuine causes in Malebranche's sense. And that is something that he claims to see follows from the infinite perfection of the divine being, even if he has no distinct idea of how the effects follow from the divine volitions.

### 2.2.2. Knowing Bodies

It is only of bodies that Malebranche claims that we know them by seeing the ideas of them in God. And he holds that we therefore have a more complete knowledge of their nature than of the natures of any other things. He follows Descartes in his conception of the nature of bodies, maintaining that the idea of their nature that we see in God is the idea of extension. He says,

the idea that we have of extension suffices to let us know all the properties of which extension is capable, and we could not wish to have a more distinct and more fruitful idea of extension, of shapes, and of motions than the one that God gives us. (RV III.ii.7: OCM I.450/LO 237)

He thinks we know in this way that extension in three spatial dimensions, and its Cartesian "modes" of size, shape, and motion and rest, which "only consist in relations of distance," are the only properties of which bodies are capable.

This provides him, in work of the 1680s and later, with a very direct argument, from a Cartesian conception of extension as constituting the whole essence of body, which yields the conclusion that bodies cannot possibly have any inherent power at all. He asks, "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. (EMR VII.2: OCM XII.150–51/JS 106–7)

The question under discussion is whether bodies can have a power or efficacy of their own by which they could act on minds. But the argument clearly generates a more general conclusion: that Malebranche's Cartesian conception of the essence of body does not allow bodies to have any inherent power or efficacy at all, and that they therefore cannot be *genuine causes* at all. And Malebranche will say that we can *know* this by seeing the idea of extension in God.

### 2.2.3. Knowing Human Souls

Malebranche's occasionalism is a theory according to which genuine causal efficacy is efficacy of a *will*—specifically, God's will. It is thus tied to a psychological concept, the concept of will. And Malebranche's readiness to affirm that he knows that God's volitions are necessarily efficacious by themselves although he grants that we “do not even know what the will of God is,” and have no “distinct idea” of its power or efficacy (MCM IX.2: OCM X.96), mirrors his epistemological views about human psychology. He is committed systematically to working with psychological concepts that he regards as quite imperfect, inasmuch as he holds, of our own soul, that

we do not know it through its idea: we do not see it in God; we know it only through *consciousness*, and because of this the knowledge we have of it is imperfect. We know of our soul only what we sense taking place in us. [. . .] But if we saw in God the idea that corresponds to our soul, we would at the same time know, or could know, all the properties of which it is capable, as we know or can know all the properties of which extension is capable because we know extension through its idea. (RV III. ii.7, §IV: OCM I.451/LO 237–38)

Similarly he declares that “one does not know what the dispositions of the soul consist in that make it readier to act and to represent objects to itself”; nonetheless, he implies that he has “good reasons that lead me to believe that I in fact have such dispositions” (RV E11: OCM III.169/LO 636–37).

Malebranche's view of the narrow limits of our self-knowledge also limits the arguments he can consistently deploy for his thesis that our souls cannot be genuine causes. He cannot appeal in this case to an argument parallel to his argument from our supposed complete knowledge of the nature of bodies to the conclusion that we can know they cannot be genuine causes. Here it will be useful to divide the problem into the questions whether a human soul can genuinely cause anything in bodies (including its own body), and whether a human soul can genuinely cause anything in itself or in other souls. We turn next to the first of these questions.

As was noted above, from 1683 on, an argument from continuous creation became Malebranche's favorite argument for occasionalism. The argument starts from the widely accepted thesis that

(CC1) the action by which God conserves his creatures is the very same action by which he creates them, and that their conservation is nothing but their continued creation (OCM VII.514)

or, as Descartes put it in his third Meditation, that "just the same force and action is needed to conserve any thing in the individual moments of its duration, as would be needed to create it new if it did not yet exist" (AT VII 49). To this Malebranche adds the more distinctive thesis,

(CC2) Only the one that gives being could give the modes [or ways, *manières*] of being, since the modes [*manières*] of beings are nothing but the beings themselves in such and such a fashion. (TM II.ii.6: OCM XI.160/W 147)

The indicated conclusion is that

(CC3) Since creatures are receiving their being at every instant of their existence from the same action of God as at the first instant of creation, God must also determine and cause ("give") everything about the manners or ways or modes in which they exist at every instant.

Malebranche's expositions of this argument are usually focused mainly or entirely on causation of modes of bodies. Thus in his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* he argues:

Now God cannot conceive, and consequently cannot will, that a body exist nowhere, or that it not have certain relations of distance with other bodies. Thus God cannot will that this armchair exist, and by that volition create it or conserve it, without placing it here or there or elsewhere. (EMR VII.10: OCM XII.160/JS 115)

But no creature can overpower God, and therefore if God has placed a body at a certain place at a certain time, no creature can cause it not to be at that place at that time.

It is therefore a contradiction for one body to be able to move another. Moreover I say it is a contradiction for you to be able to move your armchair. Even that's not enough; it is a contradiction for all the Angels and Demons joined together to be able to disturb a wisp of straw. (EMR VII.10: OCM XII.160/JS 115–16)

Since all that can be caused in Cartesian bodies is existence and spatial relations (or changes in those respects), this is an argument that no creature, not

even the most powerful soul or spirit, can be a genuine cause of anything in bodies. Whatever objections we might think to raise against the argument, it is at any rate understandable that Malebranche would think we can know that conclusion to be true.

His claim to know that human souls cannot be genuine causes of anything in themselves or each other is more problematic. (CC2) is explicitly intended to apply to “the modes [*manières*] of being of minds”<sup>37</sup> as well as of bodies; and that might well lead us to expect that Malebranche would argue that created mental substances and their acts and states cannot be genuine causes even of mental events, on the ground that God must completely determine all modes or states of created minds in recreating them afresh at every instant.

In fact, however, Malebranche explicitly maintains, in controversy with Arnauld, that “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 continued creation” (OCM VII.569).<sup>38</sup> This effectively leaves his argument from continuous creation without force to establish the thesis that created minds and their properties cannot be genuine causes of mental events. That they are not in fact genuine causes may still be part of an account of the causal order of the world which grounds causal connections in laws of nature and interprets laws of nature as general volitions of God whose efficacy is grounded in the divine perfection; and that account may have considerable plausibility apart from the support of the continuous creation argument. But why would Malebranche deny that the particular motions of human souls are “invincible”? The main motive for this denial is undoubtedly to be found in his theory of human free will, which is the topic of the final part of this essay.

### 3. Free Will

Throughout Malebranche's publishing career he maintained that humans sin or refrain from sin by free voluntary decisions that are not causally determined—not determined by other acts or states of their own, and not even by God. This is not an afterthought or a peripheral thesis for Malebranche. Yet such a view of human free will seems at first glance to be in tension, to say the least, with his

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<sup>37</sup> OCM XI.160. Such an explicit application of the claim to minds is relatively rare in Malebranche's work. I owe this reference to Lee, “Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation,” p. 559.

<sup>38</sup> This 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), pp. 226–27.

occasionalism. He says that “God is not the author of sin” because God leaves it undetermined, and up to us to determine, in some respects, in which direction we will turn our wills (RV E1: OCM III.17–21/LO 547–49). Is that consistent with saying, as he also does, that God is “the one who does [*fait*] everything in all things” (RV E15: OCM III.203/LO 657)? It is clear that Malebranche was concerned about this, and labored to render his views on these points consistent with each other. His treatment of free will is a context in which additional broadly causal concepts emerge. I believe that attention to these concepts will show that his free will theory is indeed at least formally consistent with his occasionalism.

### 3.1. THE LIMITS OF CREATED FREEDOM

It is important first of all to recognize that although Malebranche says that our will is “in a sense [. . .] active [*agissante*]” (RV I.1: OCM I.46/LO 4), he allows it only an extremely limited scope for action that is free in the sense that concerns us. He conceives of our free will as a power that God enables us to exercise only within a *narrowly limited intramental* context—a context that is causally determined by God. This is built into his conception of the human will. He uses the word *volonté* (“will”) in at least two senses, though without making a point of distinguishing them.

In one sense it is used, often in the plural, to signify acts of will that are individuated by their objects, by what is willed. When it is used in this sense, I render *volonté* as “volition.” This is the usual sense of the word in Malebranche’s discussions of occasional causation.

But he also uses the word, generally not in the plural and often with the definite article (“the will”), to signify a faculty or capability from which many acts of will can arise. In the first chapter of *The Search after Truth* “the will” appears first as one of the principal faculties of the human mind, which is that the mind “is capable of receiving several *inclinations*.” But within a few paragraphs he is redefining this faculty or capability, or identifying it with a specific inclination that he regards as the basis of all other inclinations that we can have. This is “the pressure [*impression*] or natural motion that carries us toward indeterminate good, the good in general.” He adds that this carries us “toward God, who alone is the general good because he alone contains in himself all goods” (RV I.1: OCM I.45–47/LO 4–5). This inclination or pressure defines “the will” because without it we would have no motivation, and hence no will at all, according to Malebranche.

He holds that this pressure is caused in us by God: “God pushes us ceaselessly and by an invincible pressure [*impression*] toward the good in general” (RV E1: OCM III.18/LO 547). Indeed, it is the love by which God loves himself that is being continually impressed in us (*l’impression continuelle de l’amour*

*qu'il porte à lui-même*),<sup>39</sup> and only by it are we enabled "to love any good" (TM II.iv.1: OCM XI.176–77/W 157). This inclination is "invincible" in the sense that we cannot lose it and cannot fail to be moved by it to desire some good or other (cf. RV III.i.4: OCM I.405/LO 211–12). But *which* goods we will in fact consent to love, and in what way, is the province of our free will. How do we control it?

What our free will can choose directly is limited, in Malebranche's view, by our total dependence on God for the materials of thought, as well as by the nature of God's pressure in us toward the good in general. According to Malebranche all our perceptions are (genuinely) caused in us by God, and God alone. So since we choose only among real or apparent goods, it is a presupposition of our choosing freely that God gives us a perception of some particular good. And in doing that, God gives us some inclination toward this particular good, "since God leads us toward everything that is good" (RV E1: OCM III.18/LO 547–48).

Furthermore, Malebranche holds, "when two or more goods are actually present to the mind, then when it determines itself in regard to them, it never fails to choose the one that at that moment seems to it the best." That it "infallibly" does so, he infers from his thesis that "the soul is not capable of loving except by the natural movement that it has toward the good." What room does that leave for our free will to determine which goods we will love or desire? Just this: that the soul "can [. . .] suspend its consent, and not determine itself" either way at the moment in question (TM I.vi.15–16: OCM XI.79/W 89).<sup>40</sup> It is by this ability to suspend our consent that according to Malebranche we are free to sin and free to refrain from sinning, so that God is not the author of sin.

For we can suspend our consent to resting in the particular good, at least as long as we can see some "reason to doubt that we ought to love it"; and Malebranche believes that we always can see some such reason. In suspending one's consent to a particular good, one awakens one's attention, and wills to think about other goods (TM I.vi.16: OCM XI.79/W 89). "It is a *law of nature* that the ideas of objects are presented to our mind as soon as we will to think about them," provided that we are not too distracted (RV E1: OCM III.19/LO 548, italics added). In this way our suspending consent is an *occasional cause* of our perceiving a wider range of goods, in view of which it will seem best to

<sup>39</sup> I have quoted three of the many texts in which Malebranche uses the French word *impression* in a sense which is clearly not one in which we would use the English word "impression" in a psychological context. In most contexts I render it as "pressure," which I think is justified by the connection with God's "pushing" in the quotation in this paragraph from RV E1. But perhaps there is always in the background the metaphor of God's love for himself *imprinting* in us an image of itself.

<sup>40</sup> With a few verbal refinements, this is essentially what Malebranche had said in TNG III.31 (OCM V.139–40/R 188).

us not to rest in any of them at the expense of our love for the good in general (RV E2: OCM III.39–40/LO 559–60).

Our consent or suspending consent is not a *genuine* cause of anything (RV E15: OCM III.225–26/LO 669). It does not of its own efficacy produce *any* effect distinct from itself, in our own mind or body or anywhere else. Only by the efficacy of God’s general volitions does it have any effect on the world beyond itself.

Moreover, it is *not* Malebranche’s view that our will, in its freedom, “makes a decision” by doing something that *causes* the decision. Rather 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. Or as Malebranche puts it, “consent is only an *immanent* act of the will” (RPP §8: OCM XVI.22, my italics).

### 3.2. CONCEPTS OF POWER AND INCLINATION OF THE WILL

Malebranche’s theory of free will introduces concepts of broadly causal properties of two different sorts which he ascribes to created minds. One is the concept of a *power* of freely self-determining action, and of a substance (a mind) being in some sense a cause by exercising such a power. The other is a family of dispositional concepts discussed most comprehensively by Malebranche under the heading of *inclinations*. These concepts are deeply different from his concepts of genuine and occasional causes in that they are concepts of mental properties that always or sometimes issue in outcomes that are not necessitated in any way. This has two consequences that might seem at first to pull in opposite directions: that these mental properties cannot be analyzed in terms of genuine and occasional causation, and that the ascription of these properties to created minds is not inconsistent with Malebranche’s theories of genuine and occasional causation. I will discuss first Malebranche’s conception of the power of free action, and then his conception of inclinations, particularly including habits.

#### 3.2.1. The Power of Free Action

In passages present in all editions of *The Search after Truth*, Malebranche says that, unlike bodies, which have no ability to determine themselves, the human mind has a “power [*force*]” to determine the direction of its God-given inclination toward the good in general. He also calls it “the power [*puissance*]” to will or not will “that toward which our natural inclinations lead us” (RV I.1: OCM I.46–47/LO 4–5; cf. OCM VII.569). That is to say, in certain contexts we *can* give our consent and *can* suspend our consent, and which we do is determined only by our doing it and not by anything else—not even by God.

From such an indeterminist power of free action no stronger modality follows than that of *ability* or *possibility*. In this it may be contrasted with the *efficacy* that belongs to Malebranchean genuine causes, which is a ground of *necessity*, or of something *having to* be one way rather than another. These two quite different types of power share a home in Malebranche's conception (and perhaps in any typical conception) of the omnipotent will of God. The latter includes both the enabling power of acting in ways that are not necessitated or causally determined, and the compelling power of being necessarily efficacious.

So far as I can see, what Malebranche says about our power of freely giving or suspending our consent is formally *consistent* with everything we have noted thus far about his theories of genuine causation and occasional causation. In particular, it is consistent with the thesis that only God or a volition of God can be a genuine cause. In his last book, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique* (1715), Malebranche does say that “the soul is the true cause [*vraye cause*] of its free acts” (OCM XVI.42). Perhaps significantly, he does not say it is a genuine cause (*véritable cause*). In any event it cannot be a *genuine* cause of its free acts in the Malebranchean sense of “genuine cause” discussed above. For a genuine cause in that sense must *necessitate* its effect. And it is a central thesis of Malebranche's theory of free will that free acts are not necessitated by anything. So neither the human mind as agent of those acts, nor its power to perform them, can be a Malebranchean genuine cause. Indeed, free acts cannot have Malebranchean occasional causes either, because in occasional causation too the effect is *necessitated*—necessitated by the efficacy of a general volition of God, as determined to the effect by the occasional cause. So the *power* of free choice is neither a genuine cause nor an occasional cause, though human *acts* of free choice are occasional causes of anything that results from them.

### 3.2.2. Inclinations and Habits

The *inclinations* that Malebranche describes the human will as a faculty of receiving seem in general to be dispositions or tendencies, and may therefore be viewed as broadly causal properties. Typical examples of inclinations in Malebranche's writing are cases of loving something or desiring something. They are not free acts. All of them have a *genuine* cause in God. “All our inclinations are nothing but pressures [*impressions*] of the Author of nature that lead [*portent*] us to love him and all things for him” (RV IV.1: OCM II.14/LO 268).

They themselves may operate in some cases as *occasional* causes determining the efficacy of a divine law to necessitate an effect. But in other cases no effect is necessitated; and for that reason the causal character of Malebranchean inclinations is not fully explicable in terms of genuine or occasional causation. Our most important and most dominant inclination, the general inclination that God gives us toward the good as a somewhat incompletely specified (“indeterminate”) goal, is “invincible,” according to Malebranche. We cannot lose it and are

necessitated to be moved by it to desire goods in general. When we freely consent, or suspend consent, to resting in some finite good, we will be motivated by that invincible inclination. But because of the absence of necessitation, in cases of free choice, that motivation will not fit the pattern of occasional causation.

Moreover, in Malebranche's view, inclinations can be stronger or weaker (RV IV.1: OCM II.13/LO 267), and this happens in many cases by virtue of habit (*habitude*). Good and bad habits are one of the main topics of Malebranche's *Treatise on Ethics*. He argues for two "essential truths" about them. One is that "habits are acquired and strengthened by acts." The other is that "the habit that dominates does not always act; one can perform acts that have no relation to it, or in some cases are even opposed to it" (TM I.iv.13: OCM XI.56/W 72). In some cases, the stronger or weaker operation of the habit cannot be explained as operation of an occasional cause because the effect, or what is made easier, is a free consent, which cannot be necessitated. In any event, whether Malebranchean inclinations and habits of creatures operate as occasional causes, or are not involved in necessitating anything at all, they do not operate as *genuine* causes, and therefore are no exception to the thesis that there is no genuine cause in creatures.

### 3.3. FREE WILL, CAUSATION, AND BEING

I have argued that Malebranche's theory of human free will is consistent with his thesis that there is no *genuine cause* except in God. That is because a Malebranchean genuine cause must necessitate its effect, but a Malebranchean free act cannot be necessitated at all, and so cannot have, and does not need, any genuine cause. There remains, however, a broader question about the consistency of Malebranche's account of human free will with his conception of God's causal action in the world. In all his editions of the *Elucidations to The Search after Truth*, he refers to God as "the one who does [or makes (*fait*)] everything in all things" (RV E15: OCM III.203/LO 657). Can that really be true about God if there are acts of consenting or suspending consent that have no genuine cause? Well, it can, if 'everything' does not range over free acts of consenting or suspending consent when Malebranche says that God does everything. And in fact there are passages in his writings on free will, early and late, that suggest just such a solution.

The strategy, minimizing the ontological status of human free consents, appears already in the first *Elucidation* to the *Search*, where Malebranche says, "So here is what the sinner does. He stops, he rests, he does not follow<sup>41</sup> God. He does [or makes (*fait*)] nothing, for sin is nothing." Similarly he says, "Our consent, or our resting, at the sight of a particular good is nothing real or positive on our part." What about our *not* consenting or *not* resting? That too should be nothing

<sup>41</sup> Later editions, beginning in 1683, add: "the pressure (*l'impression*) of."

real or positive on our part, if this line of thought is to be part of an account of human freedom to sin or not to sin. And by 1712, when Malebranche produced his last edition of the *Search*, he was clear on the point, declaring, “it seems to me that there is no more reality in the consent which one gives to the good than in that which one gives to the bad.”<sup>42</sup> He also, in 1712, goes on to explain his denial of reality to those consents by saying, “But I do not see that our restings, ordered or disordered, which render us just or criminal, change by themselves, physically, the substance of our soul” (OCM III.25–26/LO 551).<sup>43</sup> This can be read as grounding an argument that our free consenting and withholding of consent is not inconsistent with Malebranche’s assertion, in the same Elucidation, that “God makes [*fait*] everything that is.”

“Is” in this last assertion certainly has a metaphysically heavy sense. It was changed to “is real” in Malebranche’s last two editions of the Elucidation.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, if a created mind’s free consent is “nothing real or positive,” its not being caused by God would be consistent with a claim that God is “the one who makes [*fait*] everything in all things,” if we read *fait* there (with some plausibility, I think) as signifying creation of whatever is real or positive (OCM III.19–20, 36, 203/LO 548, 557, 657).

Arguably, such minimization of the ontological status of human free consents became even more important to Malebranche as an argument from continuous creation became over time his favorite argument for occasionalism. A tempting but fallacious argument might suggest that the continuous creation argument is altogether inconsistent with his doctrine of free will. The temptation is to think that if the world is, as it were, created anew at *t*, no created thing can be more than an occasional cause of its own being determined in one way rather than another at *t*, because being created anew 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 own action or state at *t* is by doing something else (making a decision, perhaps) before *t*.<sup>45</sup> But there an infinite regress lurks. If causally undetermined

<sup>42</sup> In editions of RV prior to 1712 that contain Elucidation 1, the corresponding passage does not include the affirmation of the ontological parity of virtuous and sinful choices. It speaks almost exclusively of what happens when we do *not* sin.

<sup>43</sup> Here and in many other places, Malebranche uses the words *physique* and *physiquement* in a sense derived from the Aristotelian tradition and from the Greek word *physis* (nature), in which they have nothing to do with corporeality or materiality. Even an immaterial soul has (or is) a nature.

<sup>44</sup> And the assertion (in all the editions) is given as a reason for the claim that although “God is not the cause of concupiscence” as such, “what is positive and real in the feelings and motions of concupiscence is made by God.”

<sup>45</sup> Such an assumption is made in an argument from continuous creation, against causation by creatures, quoted in Leibniz’s *Theodicy* from a piece written or reproduced by Pierre Bayle. The assumption there is that in order to act causally at the first moment of their existence, creatures would have to act before existing. Leibniz’s response, that even if the indivisibility of an instant “excludes all priority in time, [ . . . ] it does not exclude priority in nature,” is on the track that I am

self-determination by an agent is possible at all (as Malebranche clearly supposes it to be), 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. 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 the limited power of self-determination that Malebranche ascribes to human wills must be of precisely that sort.

It remains the case, however, that, as noted in section 2.2.3 above, the continuous creation argument involves the thesis that

(CC2) Only the one that gives being could give the modes [or ways, *manières*] of being, since the modes [*manières*] of beings are nothing but the beings themselves in such and such a fashion (TM II.ii.6: OCM XI.160/W 147)

and that this premise is explicitly intended to apply to “the modes [*manières*] of being of minds” as well as of bodies. Must it not then apply to our minds' consentings and suspensions of consent?

Malebranche's answer to this question is no. It is developed and defended, from the earliest to the latest of his works, in terms of “modifications” conceived as something much more robust metaphysically than I think Descartes meant by “modes.” In the very first chapter of *The Search after Truth*, in all editions, Malebranche distinguishes a wider and a stricter sense of “modification” (though in his intentional casualness about terminology he does not always help the reader to keep track of it). In the wider sense, “since it is certain that the inclination of the will is a manner of being of the soul, one could call it a modification of the soul.” Malebranche says that motion could be called “a

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proposing for Malebranche (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy* [1710; several editions and translations], §§386–88). The possibility of the “priority in nature” that Leibniz proposes can be debated. If the creature's “power” were an Aristotelian unactualized potentiality of which the self-determination is the actualization, then (arguably) they could not exist simultaneously. It may be thought that a thing cannot be simultaneously in potentiality and in act with regard to the same actuality. The generation of an actuality cannot be complete and incomplete at the same time. This line of thought is suggested by John Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 2 (2005): 108–9, and the debate has roots in medieval as well as ancient philosophy. (See Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987], pp. 1126–33.) But I think a supposed power of causally undetermined free choice is not plausibly identified with *that* Aristotelian sort of potentiality. It is better interpreted as the sort of ability whose existence at *t* is entailed, and demonstrated, by doing, at *t*, what the ability is an ability to do. In the latter way your speaking English at *t* demonstrates your possession, at *t*, of an ability to speak English. And the power of causally undetermined self-determination that God, on Malebranche's account, continuously creates humans as possessing must be of this latter sort, if creating them with it is to be something that God can do *instead of* creating them *as possessing* at each time the particular determinations of will that they do in fact possess.

*modification* of matter” on the same basis; this maintains the Cartesian classification of motion as one of the “modes” of extension and of material substance.

In the narrower sense, however, which is plainly not Cartesian, Malebranche will not “call the inclinations of the will, nor the motions of bodies, modifications, because those inclinations and those motions ordinarily have a relation to something external. For the inclinations are related to the good, and the motions are related to some foreign body.” Properties that “are the *modifications* of the soul strictly speaking [*proprement*]” must be such that “their being does not include any necessary relation” with other things and that “they are nothing other than the soul modified in such or such a way” (OCM I.42–43/ LO 2–3).

The passage just quoted deals with the inclinations of the will rather than its free acts; but eventually Malebranche will argue that free acts of created minds are not modifications of beings in the sense in which all modifications of beings must be determined by God in creation. This is clearest, perhaps, in his last book, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique* (1715). There he says, “I agree that God alone is the author of all substances, and of all their modalities.” In this context, however, he notes that “I understand by *modality* of a substance only what cannot change without some real or physical change in the substance whose modality it is.” In contrast with “all the modalities, and all the real changes, that are in substances,” of which “God is the only efficacious cause,” Malebranche says, “I maintain and have always maintained that the soul is the unique cause of its acts, that is to say, of its free determinations or of its morally good or evil consents.” He can hold these positions consistently because he also maintains that “[the soul’s] acts produce nothing physical.” In other words, “by themselves, by their own efficacy, they put no new modalities, no physical change, either in the body or in [the soul] itself,” though Malebranche allows that the soul’s free voluntary acts are *occasional* causes of various “physical changes” (OCM XVI.40–41).

Arguments of this sort turn on a contrast of being with nothingness. They presuppose that the claim about God to be protected in this context is that God makes (*fait*) everything that really *is* something. And that claim is protected if what we, in some sense, do, in consenting to let our desire for good rest in a particular good, has no *being*, and thus is not *something* that we make. This suggests that Malebranche has a specific concern for preserving for God a monopoly (so to speak) of causing or producing something “real or positive.” This monopoly would not necessarily be infringed by a created mind producing a merely negative fact.

This involves a distinction among acts or states of affairs that can in some sense be produced, between those that are something real or positive, or are instances of *being*, and those that are not. One might have philosophical misgivings about that distinction, for various reasons; but Malebranche was certainly not the first philosopher to think about causality in a way that presupposes it. In the monumental discussion of causation in his *Metaphysical Disputations*, for instance, Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), an important author for Malebranche,

gives as his most general definition of “cause,” that “A cause is a principle [or source] pouring being into something else [*causa est principium influens esse in aliud*].”<sup>46</sup>

A conception of God’s causal action in the world as creating being obviously goes well with Malebranche’s continuous creation argument for occasionalism. A definition of a cause as giving or producing being is not the same as a definition of a cause as something that by its own efficacy necessitates an effect. It is not obviously necessary that whatever satisfies one of the definitions must satisfy the other. However, Malebranche seems committed to claiming that both of them are satisfied by God and only by God. Indeed, he explicitly insists that the object of God’s necessarily efficacious volition is always something real or positive; it is always being rather than non-being. In 1685, in controversy with Arnauld, he writes, “God cannot have a positive and practical volition that tends to non-being, because there is nothing good or lovable about non-being” (OCM VII.514).

#### 4. Conclusion

In closing I would like to emphasize a difference between the concepts of genuine and occasional causation, on the one hand, and Malebranche’s other causal concepts, on the other hand. In both genuine and occasional causation the causes as well as the effects are *events* or *states of affairs* or (in the case of divine volitions) at least *actions*. In his theory of indeterminist free choice, however, the *cause* of the free choice is a *substance*, the soul, and the power and the inclinations and habits that Malebranche discusses are abilities and dispositions, and thus *properties*, of *substances*. Even in the theory of genuine and occasional causation, the *efficacy* of the genuine cause is understood as rooted in a broadly dispositional property of a substance, which is an aspect of the substance’s nature. In this way the occasionalist system of event causation is metaphysically derivative, grounded in a deeper commitment to substance causation. Perhaps that is to be expected in a view that gives laws of nature a central role in explanation, but refuses to regard them as free-standing primitive facts, and seeks a deeper metaphysical explanation of them.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Francisco Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations* (first published 1597; several editions), disputation XII, section ii, paragraph 4.

<sup>47</sup> This essay began as a talk presented to the Templeton-sponsored conference on “Historical Perspectives on God’s Order, Man’s Order and the Order of Nature” at the University of California, San Diego in March 2011, and in presentations to a Spring Semester seminar at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill on causation in medieval and seventeenth-century philosophy. I am grateful for comments from many participants in those excellent occasions—especially to Marilyn McCord Adams, with whom I co-taught the seminar. I am also grateful for very helpful comments that Eric Watkins sent me after a quite full but not final draft of the paper was discussed in his graduate seminar at UCSD.