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Comments welcome <robert.adams@unc.edu>

MALEBRANCHE'S CAUSAL CONCEPTS

by Robert Merrihew Adams

1. Introduction

The most richly developed theory of causality in early modern philosophy¹ before Hume is that of Nicolas Malebranche. In this essay I aim to present a sufficiently complicated account of the diversity of broadly causal concepts that play fundamental roles in Malebranche's occasionalism. There are simpler readings of Malebranche, which seem to leave no room for some of those concepts. Though the simpler readings are not entirely without foundation in the texts, I will try to show that the more complicated account has strong textual support. In the history of philosophy, however, textual argument must be supported with philosophical argument. This is especially true of the interpretation of Malebranche, who on principle liked to vary his language, and did not try to "preserve in his expressions too rigorous an exactitude," which readers might find annoyingly tedious—as he says in so many words. He makes it explicitly clear that he would not appreciate readers holding him strictly to a literal meaning of something he said, if context and argument require something else (RV E3: OCM III.44/LO 561-62).² I take it as a more important task, then, to show that the diversity of broadly causal concepts is required for the completeness and plausibility of Malebranche's occasionalist theory, and makes it possible to see the theory as formally consistent with the views about free will to which he was strongly committed throughout his career, and which will be the focus of section 4 below.

Malebranche's occasionalism makes its first full-dress appearance in 1675 in the third chapter of Part Two of Book Six of *The Search After Truth*. There its headline claims are two, and introduce two causal concepts: "there is nothing but God that is a genuine cause," and "all natural causes are not *genuine* causes, but only *occasional* causes" (OCM II.316, 312/LO 450, 448).³ Malebranche's conception of an occasional cause is the subject of section 2 of this paper. Section 3 is devoted to his conception of a genuine [*véritable*] cause,⁴ but something preliminary needs to be said about it at this point.

¹In 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.

²Aptly cited by Martial Gueroult, making, very instructively, a similar point in his *Malebranche*, vol. 1, p. 42. Works by Malebranche are cited by abbreviations indicated in the Bibliography at the end of this paper.

³That 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.

⁴The traditional English translation of *véritable cause* or *cause véritable* in Malebranche is 'true cause'. Here, however, I reserve 'true cause' for rendering *vraie cause*, which (as we will see) Malebranche uses in later work in what is clearly a different sense.

Malebranche offers what appears to be a definition of ‘genuine cause’ as the first premise of a succinct but sweeping argument for occasionalism. Following some recent commentators,⁵ let us call it the No Necessary Connection argument (or NNC, for short).

[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).⁶

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. In this and other respects the appearance of the argument may to some extent be misleading, but it will repay careful examination.

One of the points at which we will be reminded of Hume is the apparent treatment of necessary connection as definitive of causation (or of *genuine* causation, at any rate). We will have occasion to consider critically several questions about such a definition of ‘genuine cause’, but one will do for now. Between what sorts of thing is the necessary connection supposed to obtain? The argument offers some indications. According to proposition [2], the mind perceives a necessary connection between the will of an infinitely perfect being and “the effects.” The thought behind that surely is (as we will see more explicitly elsewhere in Malebranche’s work) that, as an infinitely perfect being, God must be all-powerful or omnipotent in such a sense that the actual occurrence of whatever God wills follows necessarily from God’s willing it. The necessary connection is one in which the effect follows necessarily from the cause.

The effects Malebranche has in mind are certainly things and happenings in the created world. And according to proposition [3], the sole genuine cause is God, and thus presumably a *substance*. So does Malebranche suppose that the mind perceives a necessary connection in which the occurrence of things and happenings in the created world follows necessarily from the divine substance as such—that is, from God’s being? Certainly not. On the contrary, he holds that God’s freedom implies that *nothing* external to God follows *necessarily* from God’s *being* as such, nor indeed from God’s possessing a *faculty* of will. For “God is free in the creation of the world, he is able not to make anything,” and “as God is fully self-sufficient, it is indifferent to him whether to act externally [*au dehors*] or not to act” (OCM IX. 1088; VIII. 754).⁷

The cause from which a created effect *e* follows necessarily is not, then, the being or substance of God, but an act of God, the volition or act of willing by which God wills that *e* occur. That is the most natural interpretation of proposition [2]. In *genuine causation*, then, the effect follows necessarily, not from a substance, but from an act of a substance. Should we say then that a Malebranchean genuine cause is not a substance but an act of a substance, and that Malebranche should not, strictly speaking, have said that God is the genuine cause, but rather that God’s volitions are the genuine causes? Or should we say it is his view that God is the sole genuine cause by virtue of the necessary connection between God’s acts of will and their effects? The latter is probably closer to Malebranche’s way of thinking, but I suspect he would regard the

⁵Beginning, so far as I know, with Nadler, “‘No Necessary Connection’.”

⁶For ease of reference to them I have numbered the steps of the argument.

⁷From Malebranche’s responses to criticisms by Antoine Arnauld. Cited, with other similar texts, in Robinet, *Système et existence dans l’œuvre de Malebranche*, p. 203.

question as merely verbal and uninteresting. In any event he would doubtless point out that he does not regard God's acts of will as anything really distinct from God. Nevertheless, we must recognize here more complexity in Malebranche's view than some of his simpler formulations suggest. Both the acting substance and its act have an essential part to play in his conception of a genuine causal connection.

2. 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).

The underlying idea, obviously, 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 does not tell us what makes an occurrence such an occasion for God to act. 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.⁸

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 practical volitions of [Nature's] Author" (OCM VIII.704).⁹ 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

⁸OCM XVII-1.40; Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* II.46 (AT VIII-1.68).

⁹This 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'. The laws of Nature are for Malebranche no more than a proper subclass of God's general (practical) volitions. It is a main thesis of TNG that God also has general (practical) volitions that constitute laws for the order of Grace rather than for that of Nature.

identical with the general volitions, or are merely their intentional content. Early modern philosophers were generally not as careful as their medieval predecessors 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.¹⁰

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. "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." This is required by God's "wisdom, which he loves more than his Work" (TNG I.43: OCM V.49-50/R 128). Malebranche makes a distinction here between God's "ways" and God's "work" that we do not find in Leibniz's (in some ways similar) views about God's choice among possible worlds. "God's *ways*," Malebranche says, "are his practical volitions" (OCM VIII.673).¹¹ 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."¹² 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. He defines 'miracle' in the sense he thinks most appropriate in philosophy, as signifying "all effects that are not *natural*, or that are not consequences of the natural laws." He devotes a chapter of one of his responses to Arnauld to developing and defending the thesis that "God does not act by particular volitions except when he performs *miracles*," taking the word, as he says, in the sense thus defined (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, "although often human beings imagine that God performs miracles in their favor all the time" (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.

¹⁰Compare 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.

¹¹Italics added. Cf. OCM VIII.758.

¹²Gueroult, *Malebranche*, vol. p. 218.

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.¹³ For particular volitions were needed to begin the determination of motions.

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 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 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.

What happens, according to Malebranche, when God acts by a general volition and *not* by a particular volition in cases of occasional causation? Two different interpretations, or models of occasional causation, can find some support in the texts. I begin with the less ambitious of the two, as regards the amount of work assigned to laws of nature and occasional causes. Consider Malebranche's statement, quoted above, that “God acts by general volitions, when he acts in consequence of the general laws that he has established” (TNG E1, §1: OCM V.147/R 195). That can easily be read as meaning that in acting by general volitions, God considers in each case what the circumstances are, and what the general laws that God has adopted imply regarding that situation, and acts accordingly. On this interpretation, the laws are policies that God has decided to follow, and the occasional causes are just the circumstances that God takes into account, while the real cause with which the effect is necessarily connected is the decision God makes in view of those policies and considerations. That decision is a decision to do something quite particular (for instance, when my body has been injured, a decision to cause me to feel pain on that occasion). But on this reading Malebranche will not call that a particular volition, but a particular divine volition will be one in which God does *not* act in consequence of general laws that he has adopted. 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 9th to 11th centuries CE who have been called “occasionalists.”¹⁴

¹³For fuller explanation of the rationale, see OCM VIII.779-81.

¹⁴See Perler and Rudolph, *Occasionalism*, pp. 44-46.

It is tempting, to say the least, to read Malebranche as embracing this model in his response to Arnauld's claim "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." 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 that I have just quoted, 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, God wills a law of nature. For instance, God wills that whenever two bodies collide in way w_1 , they rebound from each other in way w_2 . This volition 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 law¹⁵ 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 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 it follows necessarily from God's general practical volition alone that the rebound occurs when the occasional cause occurs. And it is part of the simplicity and wisdom of God's ways, not to make unnecessary volitions.

Several of Malebranche's commitments support, or indeed require, this interpretation of occasional causation. One is what he proposes to say of various bad effects, "of which it has always been said that [God] *permits* them, rather than that he has a plan [*dessein*] to produce them" (OCM VIII.654). Malebranche's treatment of this subject, in a 1686 response to Arnauld, involves the concept of a *practical volition*, which is developed in terms of a distinction between *vouloir simplement* [simply willing] and *vouloir faire* [willing to make or do, or as I shall put it, to *effect*]. He says, "It is clear that simply willing is not acting; it is not willing to effect" (OCM VIII.652). 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

¹⁵As Malebranche puts it, for instance, in TNG II.3: OCM V.67 and in OCM VIII.703.

God the same thing as acting by particular volitions, or having particular practical volitions (OCM VIII.651, Malebranche's italics).

So what is the particular volition that Malebranche does not deny that God has with regard to the pain of the thorn-prick? An explanation is indicated as he continues the discussion with another 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,¹⁶ 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).

The example, I take it, is one in which 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; but God does not will to *effect* it. The particular volition that God does have in this case is, as we might say, a *prima facie* volition, or as scholastic philosophers might have said, an antecedent volition—a being *for* the charitable act considered narrowly, apart from other relevant concerns. And if (as Malebranche leaves open) God has a particular volition regarding the pain of the thorn-prick, that would be another such *prima facie* volition.

It is in these terms that Malebranche explains the relation of divine volitions to evils that God merely permits.

Certainly God ought not to disturb the simplicity and uniformity of his ways to prevent a murderer from making evil use of the power that has been given him by the general laws of the union of the soul and the body. God will move his 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. For it is not for such actions that he has established the laws of the union of the soul and the body, but for effects that are better and more worthy of his wisdom and goodness. So he *permits* these sorts of actions; but properly speaking, he has no plan to effect them, although he truly has a plan to make them serve his glory (OCM VIII.653)

This is obviously part of Malebranche's theodicy. Our concern here, however, is not with its success or failure in that role, but with its implications regarding God's volitions. It illustrates Malebranche's claim that "God does not *will* in particular directly and positively those sorts of effects of which it has always been said that he *permits* them, rather than that he has a plan 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 the murderer's striking a lethal blow. But I think the implication is broader. "Simply willing," by a *prima facie* or antecedent volition that a particular event should occur could presumably count as willing that event in particular directly and positively, though not practically or efficaciously. But murders are not the sort of event that God would will antecedently or *prima facie*. That would be contrary to divine perfections. I think Malebranche means therefore that God has *no volition at all*, whether practical or simply 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

¹⁶The Order referred to here 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).

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.

The sparing of 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. In the same vein he says,

For finally, to claim that God by particular practical volitions has always determined the Angels' will to will such and such effects ... is to render the ministry of the Angels useless in every way.

This does not make God's conduct any simpler; it does not spare him any particular *practical* volition, as his ways remain always equally composite" (OCM VII.605).

(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). Similarly, he says repeatedly that occasional causes "determine the efficacy" of general laws (TNG II.3: OCM V.67/R 139; OCM VII.496; VIII.703). This fits a model in which the divine efficacy by which particular events are caused is carried by general laws that are efficacious in their own right, and needs no further, less general divine volition to "determine" it to produce a particular effect, because an occasional cause which satisfies a condition laid down in the law is sufficient to determine the efficacy of the law to produce the particular effect.

This assignment of intrinsic efficacy to general laws of nature, as divine volitions, in this model of causation is a major attraction of 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. Prominent among the terms or variables of these laws are systemic or relational properties of pluralities of natural objects (as in Newton's law of universal gravitational attraction). 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. To seek their grounding in the natures of the many and diverse objects governed by them might seem to be, as

Malebranche would argue (cf. RV VI.ii.2-3: OCM II.305-10/LO 443-46), a relapse from modernity into scientifically unhelpful scholastic Aristotelian views about substantial and accidental forms inhering in physical objects. The obvious alternative, for the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, 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) In these terms Malebranche articulates 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. 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).

Commonly Malebranche speaks of this as God “communicating” his power, or its efficacy, to creatures, which he defines in *The Search after Truth* as follows:

[God’s] power is ... his will, and to communicate his power is to communicate his will.¹⁷ But communicating his will to a man or an Angel cannot mean anything but willing that when a man or an Angel shall will, for example, that such or such a body be moved, that body will in fact be moved (RV VI.ii.3: OCM II.316/LO 450).

He 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.67R 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).¹⁸ 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.

¹⁷Or “the efficacy of his will,” as Malebranche put it in the last two editions of the *Search*, in 1700 and 1712, with a corresponding change in the next sentence.

¹⁸See 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 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, bring about particular effects. Indeed, it is not easy to see how a modern general-law-dominated metaphysics of causation could assign to “natural” causes a more robust connection with effects than that.

All of this seems to hang, 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. He 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 as each perfection is infinite, it constitutes [*fait*] the whole divine Being (OCM VI.52*n*).¹⁹

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 XII.176-77/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

¹⁹This 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.

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 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, "[b]y 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 "The 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 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. 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.

3. Genuine Cause

In genuine causation, as conceived by Malebranche, an effect follows necessarily from an act of a substance, as I pointed out in section 1. Indeed Malebranche appears to *define* 'genuine cause' in those terms:

[1] "A genuine cause is a cause between which and its effect the mind perceives a necessary connection; that's how I understand it."

It is tempting to take [1] as a definition, 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. Even after we sort out questions about the roles that the acting substance and its act play in the causal connection, as I tried to do in section 1, important issues remain—specifically about the roles of necessary connection and of intelligibility in the conception of a genuine cause. Exploring those issues is the agenda of the present section.

3.1 Necessity and Efficacy

Malebranche certainly regarded necessary connection as *required* for genuine causation. But 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 [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 context he certainly means the idea of *genuine* cause, 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."²⁰

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. In section 11 of the first *Elucidation* to his *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, in a paragraph dating from 1683, 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" (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 not their own, the efficacy of 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

²⁰Steven Nadler, "Malebranche on Causation," in Steven Nadler, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 115.

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 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? The need for supplementation can be seen in considering two problems about defining 'genuine cause' in terms of necessary connection. Both these problems are rooted in formal logical properties of the intended relation of necessary connection.

Problem 1: One of these formal properties is that a proposition of any of the following logical forms is logically equivalent to the corresponding propositions of both of the other forms.

Necessarily [if p then (if q then r)].

Necessarily [if (p & q) then r].

Necessarily [if q , then (if p then r)].

This is pretty uncontroversial in modal logic.

Apply this to Malebranche's theory of occasional causation, as interpreted above in section 2, in which God acts on created things almost exclusively by efficacious *general* volitions, willing that p , where p has the form of a universal conditional law. Consider, for example, the following argument in Malebranche's *Search after Truth*:

There is a necessary connection between God's volition and the thing that he wills. God wills in this case that when an angel shall will that such a body be moved, that body shall be moved.

Hence there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the movement of that body.

And consequently, it is God who is the genuine cause of the movement of the body, and the angel's volition is only an occasional cause (RV VI.ii.3: OCM II.316-17/LO 450).

Here the universal law is

[L1] If an Angel wills that such a body be moved, that body is moved.

As he holds that "there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the thing that he wills," Malebranche must affirm 'Necessarily (if God wills that [L1], then [L1])' or, more fully stated,

[N1] Necessarily (if God wills that [L1],
then [if an Angel wills that such a body be moved, that body is moved]).

From [N1] Malebranche seems prepared to infer, plausibly, particular instances of [N1], such as

[N2] Necessarily (if God wills that [L1],
then [if this angel wills that that body be moved, then that body is moved]).

Here arises a problem about Malebranche's argument. For he concludes that "there is a necessary connection between God's volition and the movement of that body." Now [N2] does imply that there is a necessary connection between God's volition that [L1] and a fact about that body. But that fact is not that the body is moved, but is rather the more complex conditional fact that the body is moved if the angel wills it. Can we find in the neighborhood a fact that is arguably prior, metaphysically, to the body actually being moved, and necessarily connected with it?

Well [N2] is logically equivalent to

[N3] Necessarily (if [God wills that [L1] & this angel wills that that body be moved],
then that body is moved).

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

Moreover, both [N2] and [N3] are logically equivalent to
 [N4] Necessarily (if this angel wills that that body be moved),
 then [if God wills that [L1], then that body is moved]).

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

In constructing this problem, to be sure, I have relied on the interpretation of Malebranche's conception of occasional causation for which I argued in section 2, according to which God, in acting by general volitions, does not have any practical volition from which the particular event follows necessarily without an occasional cause. The problem would be avoided on the other interpretation, according to which every particular event that happens in the created world is necessitated by a practical volition of God of which it is directly the object, independently of any occasional cause.²¹ However, I am not persuaded that Malebranche would want to avoid the problem in this way. Indeed he himself acknowledges a derivative necessary connection between occasional causes and their effects, stating that

it can be said that fire has the power to heat, ... not that there is in fire any genuine force or power, but because in consequence of the natural laws of the communication of motion, it is a *necessity* that the fire, whose parts are in continual motion, shakes the parts of the body that is exposed to it, and thereby heats it (MCM V.16: OCM X.54, italics added).

Here the thesis that a genuine cause acts by its own efficacy is just the sort of solution that Malebranche needs for problem 1. There is a necessary connection between the fire and the warming of the body exposed to it; but the fire does not act by its own efficacy in warming it, because the necessity of the connection does not flow from the nature of the fire but from the nature of the God who willed the natural laws by which the necessary connection obtains.

Problem 2: The relation of necessary connection has yet another logical property that seems likely to prevent it from providing a sufficient basis for a definition of 'genuine cause'. And this problem does not depend on our interpretation of occasional causation. This problem is that necessary connection as such does not carry with it a sort of asymmetry that seems to be important in a 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.

²¹In an interesting article arguing for an interpretation of the latter sort, Andrew Pessin takes as the basis of an argument for his interpretation, the fact that it would avoid the problem under discussion here. See Pessin, "Malebranche's Distinction Between General and Particular Volitions," pp. 86-89.

In many 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. There is controversy about this approach to grounding an asymmetry of causal dependence. In interpreting Malebranche on genuine causation, however, we needn't engage that controversy on the merits. As noted above in section 2, he explicitly treats his genuine cause or causes, God and God's volitions, as eternal, and therefore not exactly as preceding their effects in time.

Perhaps Malebranche 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).²² Indeed, in his last work 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 the 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. Indeed, the efficacy of 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 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 how the efficacy of God's will is exercised. Malebranche invokes such an asymmetry of dependence when 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," and that by making them occasional causes "God has given them a share in his power, without giving them any share in his independence" (OCM VIII.700).

3.2 Why aren't bodies genuine causes by virtue of their impenetrability?

This question was developed as an objection to Malebranche 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: "A genuine cause is that between which and its effect one sees a necessary connection, or, if you will, [that] which, precisely

²²See also EMR IX.7 (OCM XII.208/JS 157).

because it is, or is such, makes a thing to be or to be such.”²³ Both the definition and the argument pick up clearly the necessary connection requirement for genuine causation—and also, at least suggestively, the requirement that the genuine cause act by an efficacy grounded in its own nature.

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 as given as soon as extension is given. 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?

That is not the problem about collisions that concerned Malebranche in 1678. The worry was rather that if God causes all the motions of bodies, it might seem that God must be fighting against himself when bodies collide and interfere with each other's motions. Malebranche's response to the worry is that

God has positively willed the ... collision of bodies, not because he is pleased to fight against himself, but because he had a plan to use this collision of bodies as an occasion for establishing the general law of the communication of motion, by which he foresaw that he must produce an infinity of admirable effects (OCM III.217/LO 664).

At the center of this line of thought is “the general law of the communication of motion.” Apart from such a law, it may follow from the impenetrability of bodies that if they collide, there will be *some* change in their states of motion; but what that state will be would not be necessarily determined. For as Malebranche states elsewhere, “the mind does not see any necessity that a body that collides with another must push it, since [the first] body could [instead] bounce back” (OCM IV.77, note g).²⁴ So he can conclude, “thus the actual collision is a natural or *occasional* cause of the actual communication of motions,” adding that in this way “God, without changing his conduct, produces an infinity of admirable works” (OCM 218/LO 665).

Present in this line of argument is undoubtedly the thought that the essential impenetrability of extended substance may determine necessarily that certain states of affairs *cannot* happen, but a genuine cause must determine what *does* happen. This in turn presupposes that there is a metaphysically important difference between facts of happening and facts of non-happening. Perhaps it is an instance of the difference that Malebranche certainly supposes there is between facts of being and facts of non-being (as we shall see in section 4.3). These

²³Fontenelle, *Doutes*, ch 3, in Fontenelle, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 533-35.

²⁴This statement, quoted in Gueroult, *Malebranche*, vol. 2, p. 218*n*, comes from the first three editions (1677-85) of Malebranche's *Conversations chrétiennes*. In later editions, from 1693 on, it was replaced with what Malebranche doubtless thought was a stronger argument; but I don't think we should conclude that he came to regard the earlier statement as false.

assumptions can be seen at work also his fullest response to Fontenelle's argument, in his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* of 1688 (OCM 163-64/JS 118-19).²⁵

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, and will it to happen in certain ways. That bodies are essentially impenetrable merely obliges God to make certain choices. That is, as I might put it, it 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." 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."

This is not a thoroughly satisfying response to Fontenelle. It is not clear that Malebranche perceived the full force of Fontenelle's argument. A better response is suggested by Tad Schmaltz's comment that "the sort of necessity this bodily property 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."²⁶ Something of that sort is surely implicit in the line that Malebranche takes with the impenetrability problem, provided that "conceptual necessity" is understood, not as relative to ways in which we might (or might not) conceive of things, but as grounded in God's ideas that constitute the absolute nature of all possible things.

But I think something must be added to this thought if it is to generate a response directed precisely to Fontenelle's claim that bodies are genuine causes by virtue of necessary connections derived from their essential impenetrability. What must be added is *a further requirement for being a genuine cause*. The requirement would be that in acting by its own efficacy, a genuine cause brings about a state of affairs that is in itself *contingent*, in the sense that it does not follow necessarily from God's ideas of the creatures involved in it. The essential impenetrability of bodies does not meet this requirement. The facts that follow from it alone are not only negative but necessary, following from the divine idea of body. The stipulation is one that I think Malebranche could easily embrace. In section 3.3, indeed, we will soon find him saying something that makes room for such a distinction between causal and conceptual necessitation, though without making it fully explicit.

3.3 Understanding and Not Understanding Causal Terms

Let us return to the No Necessary Connection Argument:

[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

²⁵Dialogue 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 the editor's introduction in OCM XVII-1.567-70). In the latter publication the argument from impenetrability is not addressed (see OCM XVII-1.580-81).

²⁶Schmaltz, "Occasionalism and Mechanism: Fontenelle's Objections to Malebranche," p. 301. Schmaltz's discussion of the interaction between Fontenelle and Malebranche is very illuminating.

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.²⁷ 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 seems 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. The chapter (VI.ii.3) in which he presents NNC is artfully placed after a chapter on the Cartesian rule "that we must reason only on [the basis of] clear ideas." And Malebranche concluded that chapter (VI.ii.2) arguing that the words 'genus', 'species', 'act', 'power', 'nature', 'form', 'faculties', 'qualities', 'cause *per se*', and 'cause *per accidens*', as used by Aristotelian scholastic philosophers "signify nothing" (OCM II.300, 305/LO 440, 443). Most of those terms had been used by Aristotelian philosophers to characterize causal principles or grounds of efficacy supposed to be internal to natural objects. This was surely intended to prepare the way for the argument that our mind perceives no necessary connection between any natural causes and effects, and that we should therefore not believe there is any such connection between them.

Near the beginning of Elucidation 15, moreover, 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).

It is clear that in producing the *Search* and its Elucidations in the years 1674-78 Malebranche did mean to argue that we should not believe that natural things are genuine causes because we do not have a clear idea of them having any power or necessary connection with an effect.

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

²⁷On this point see also Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation," pp. 542-43.

I give human beings no distinct idea that corresponds to the word power or efficacy ... For even if you believe that God does what he wills, it is not that you see clearly that there is a necessary connection between the will of God and the effects, since you do not even know what the will of God is. But what is evident is that God would not be omnipotent if his 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 we do not in fact perceive the necessary connection between God's volitions and their effects, but only between the doctrine of divine omnipotence and the claim that God's volitions are efficacious.

This is a very significant passage. For one thing, it implies that we can clearly perceive a necessary connection (1) between God's being omnipotent and his absolute volitions being efficacious, without having a distinct idea of (2) how those volitions are necessarily connected with their effects, as they must be in order to be genuinely efficacious. Necessary connection (1), which we do clearly perceive, exemplifies what was called in section 3.2 above a *conceptual* necessity. Necessary connection (2), which we do not clearly perceive, may be of some other, more distinctively causal sort.

In the second place, 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?²⁸

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 true in general of 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 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 and most of posterity as his *chef-d'œuvre*; and he wanted to keep it up to date, reflecting the best current science and his own current views.²⁹ It is significant, then, that the passages first published

²⁸A similar point is made by Fontenelle (though without explicit reference to what Malebranche had said in MCM IX.2), in his *Doutes*, ch. 3 (in his *Œuvres complètes*, I.536-37. See also Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation," p. 553, and the discussion by Andrew Pyle quoted there. Fontenelle's version of this argument, however, is further complicated by the fact that it presupposes the inferences that he draws, as I have discussed above, from the Cartesian thesis of the essential impenetrability of matter.

²⁹See the editor's introduction in OCM I.xxix-xxxv.

before 1683 that I have quoted as presenting and defending the No Necessary Connection Argument³⁰ 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 responding to Fontenelle's criticisms of Malebranche's occasionalism, and generally thought to have been written by Malebranche himself. On the one hand this document incorporates a version of his acknowledgement 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).³¹ 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 to 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 two 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).

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 No Necessary Connection argument in the framework of such a distinction, as an argument that turns on knowing-that rather than on understanding-how. We should not let Hume's relation to Malebranche 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.

³⁰In particular, from RV VI.ii.3 (OCM II.316/LO 450) and E 15 (OCM III.204/LO 658).

³¹Here Malebranche is evidently responding to the argument of Fontenelle mentioned in note {27} above, but ignoring essential features of that argument. My present concern is only with what these statements (which I assume to be Malebranche's) imply or suggest about his views.

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.³²

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 they are presuppositions or premises of the continuous creation argument (sometimes implicitly; explicitly in OCM VII.513-14). The positive claim about knowledge is thus a piece of the No Necessary Connection argument that never loses its importance in Malebranche's 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 perhaps the first thing to be said on this subject is that 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 never says that we totally lack understanding of God's power.

This is one of the main points on which a religious vision drives Malebranche's occasionalism. In his view, knowledge of God's essential omnipotence or omni-efficacy is given with and in knowledge of God's existence. And that knowledge is a matter of vision in God.³³

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*. Malebranche reminds the reader that he has argued that "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, which represent the creatures according to their essences or natures, perfectly and precisely as they are if they actually exist—or as they would be if they did exist, if they are merely possible creatures. For they are

³²Another plausibly main reason is that 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.

³³This is a point in favor of treating of vision in God as a more central feature of Malebranche's philosophy than occasionalism, as Gueroult does in his *Malebranche*.

God's ideas in accordance with which God creates them, if God does create them. Because of this,

one can see in God the essence of that creature without seeing its existence; one can see in God what represents it even if it does not exist. ... 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 319).

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.³⁴

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 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 says 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.³⁵ 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

³⁴I 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.

³⁵Anglophone 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" (Locke, *Essay*, I.i.8). Locke had pretty surely read Malebranche's formulation.

that one can discover by simple vision whether such and such modifications belong to them (RV E3: OCM III.43-44/LO 561).³⁶

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).

One of the perfections attributed to God on this basis is omnipotence, or the omnificacy 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).

Malebranche prefers to put this in terms of *the efficacy of God’s will*, rather than in terms of power. “It is clearer,” he says, “to say that God created the world by his will than to say that he created it by his *power*.” For it would be a mistake “to imagine that God’s power can be anything other than the efficacy of his will.” This is connected with his classification of ‘power’ as “a term of Logic, which reveals in the mind no distinct and particular idea.” He holds that “one does not give a reason for things when one explains them by terms of Logic and general ideas.” That is because “everything that exists reduces to being or ways of being,” and therefore “every term that does not signify any of those things signifies nothing, and every term that does not signify any of those things distinctly and in particular does not signify anything distinct” (RV E12: OCM III.175, 173/LO 639-40). In this sense, perhaps, Malebranche does not think that ‘power’ exactly signifies one of the “realities or genuine perfections” (EMR VIII.1: OCM XII.175/JS 128), but does think of ‘will’ (at least in the sense of actual volition rather than a mere faculty of willing) as signifying in particular a way of being. We will see in section 4.2, however, that Malebranche is committed to another conception of a power that cannot be explicated in terms of the necessitating efficacy that he ascribes to the divine will.

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 he claims to see follows from the infinite perfection of the divine being.

4. Free Will

Additional broadly causal concepts emerge in Malebranche’s treatment of free will. Throughout his writing 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. It is explained in the first two chapters of *The Search after Truth* as a fundamental principle of the Cartesian

³⁶The phrases, “in the most precise and most restricted sense—that is to say” were added in the 1712 edition (the

way of seeking truth which he recommends. Yet such a view of human free will seems at first glance to be in tension, to say the least, with Malebranche's 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. He was very committed to both doctrines, and labored in several places in his works to render them consistent. I believe that attention to the diverse concepts involved in them will show that they are indeed at least formally consistent.

4.1 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; and the context is causally determined by God. This is built into his conception of the 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, in Malebranche's view.

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, "in minds, the love of the good is produced only by the will of God, which is nothing other than the love that he bears to himself." 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*],³⁷ 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).

sixth) of RV.

³⁷In this paragraph 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.

But *which* goods it will move us to love or desire, and in what way, is the province of our free will. Having defined the will as “the pressure or natural motion that carries us toward indeterminate good, the good in general,” Malebranche then defines *freedom* as “the power [*force*] that the mind has to turn that pressure toward the objects that please us, and thus to bring it about that our natural inclinations terminate in some particular object” (RV I.1: OCM I.46/LO 5)

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. “The will is a blind power,” as Malebranche puts it; it “can be led only to things that the understanding represents to it” (RV I.1: OCM I.46-47/LO 5). So we cannot will anything unless we are given perceptions of (actual or possible) objects of choice. And according to Malebranche all our perceptions are (genuinely) caused in us by God, and God alone. Thus, 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” at the moment in question (TM I.vi.15-16: OCM XI.79/W 89).³⁸

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. “All that God does in us when we sin,” Malebranche says, is first, that “God pushes us ceaselessly and by an invincible pressure toward the good in general”; second, that “God presents to us the idea of a particular good, or gives us the sensation of it”; and third and finally, that “God us leads us toward this particular good” (RV E1: OCM III.18/LO 547-48). “But the love of creatures ought not to stop at the creatures; it ought to tend only toward God” (TM II.iv.2: OCM XI.177/W 157). If we sin in such a context, according to Malebranche's very Augustinian view of the matter, we sin by “resting” in love for the particular good, rather than allowing the inclination toward the good in general (which is God), to carry us beyond love for the particular good. But our inclination toward the universal good “is neither constrained nor necessitated to stop at this particular good” (RV E1: OCM III.18-19/LO 548). 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. He proposes as a general rule, “never to consent to anything whatever, until we are forced to, as it were, by internal reproaches of our reason,” and that “one ought never to love a good absolutely, if one can, without remorse, not love it” (RV I.2: OCM I.52, 55/LO 8, 10). 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

³⁸With a few verbal refinements, this is essentially what Malebranche had said in TNG III.31 (OCM V.139-40/R 188).

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), my italics).

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 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). It is not a *genuine* cause of anything.

I know that I will and that I will freely [declares Malebranche] ... But I deny that my will is the genuine cause of the motion of my arm, of the ideas of my mind, and of the other things that accompany my volitions (RV E15: OCM III.225-26/LO 669).

Our free consenting or suspending consent 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).

We should also note that even within the narrow boundaries of the province Malebranche assigns to the free will of created minds, he insists that their free consents do not escape God's providential *control*, although they are not necessitated by God's *causality*. As he puts it in his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, of 1688,

God's foreknowledge is infinite. He must regulate all his plans by it. Before giving matter that first push [*impression*] of motion that forms the Universe for all the ages, he knew clearly all the consequences of all possible combinations of the physical with the moral under all sorts of suppositions (EMR XI.10: OCM XII.268/JS 208).

How could God know this? Malebranche's views imply that the possible consequences of the *physical* follow necessarily from possible initial states of the physical world, and possible laws of nature, that God could will; and an omniscient God could know all about that. Foreknowledge of the possible consequences of the *moral* seems more problematic, given Malebranche's view that allows for indefinitely many possible free consents of creatures that would not follow necessarily from any fact. But Malebranche does insist that “as Examiner [*Scrutateur*] of hearts, God cannot be ignorant of the future determinations of free wills in all possible circumstances” (OCM VI.290). He equates “being *Examiner of hearts*” with “knowing the future determinations of freedom in all sorts of circumstances,” or with “using free causes to execute one's plans, without determining those causes in an invincible way” (OCM VIII.864*n*, 717). He grants, however, that it is a divine attribute that we do not comprehend (OCM VIII.826; RPP §8: OCM XVI.24).

Being Examiner of hearts as well as omnipotent, God “can produce in the soul, when he wills to, motives so proportioned to the free will that he knows perfectly that these motives will infallibly be followed by the consent of the will,” though without necessitating that consent (RPP §7: OCM XVI.21-22). That is the way in which God “had to make use of his foreknowledge, and combine the physical with the moral, so wisely that all his works constitute among themselves, and for all the ages, the most beautiful possible harmony [*accord*]” (EMR XI.10: OCM XII.268/JS 208).

This approach to harmonizing free will with God's complete providential control of the universe is largely the same as that proposed in 1588 in the famous *Concordia* of Luis de Molina (1535-1600),³⁹ which was very influential in the development of indeterminist views of free will in the seventeenth century. Like Molina's, Malebranche's approach depends on the thesis that in making decisions about creating and governing the world, God knows, independently of those decisions, what every possible free creature would freely do, without being necessitated to do it, in every context of free choice it could possibly face.⁴⁰ For Malebranche, as for Molina, one of the ways in which such knowledge can enable God to control what happens is that God can cause (or not cause) in the soul of a free creature "graces" (perhaps in the form of relevant perceptions or feelings) that are favorable to a free action preferred by God. For instance, Molina holds that it was in that way that God infallibly kept the human soul of Jesus sinless throughout his life on earth, without taking away his freedom by making it causally impossible for him to sin;⁴¹ Malebranche held a very similar view.⁴²

Given Malebranche's insistence on God's preference for acting by general volitions, and on God's willingness to accept some otherwise undesired consequences rather than act by particular volitions to prevent them, it would not be fair to say that he regards God as *maximally* controlling, or as micro-managing. But he does regard God as *completely controlling* in regard to free acts, inasmuch as the actual occurrence or non-occurrence of each possible free act of any possible created mind is infallibly controlled, in the following way, by God's practical volitions, general and perhaps also particular, in view of plans approved by God's wisdom. If the free act does actually happen, God must have knowingly willed, by efficacious practical volitions, things that would necessarily result in circumstances in which God knew, as Examiner of hearts, that the act would occur. And if the free act does *not* actually happen, the things God knowingly and efficaciously willed must have been such as God must have known would necessarily result in circumstances in which that free act would *not* occur.

³⁹Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*. In 1687, responding to a publication in which Arnauld hinted that Malebranche had had recourse to Molina's theory to harmonize free will with the efficacy of grace, Malebranche expresses agreement with a view that he says people ascribe to Molina (it is in fact Molina's), but protests that he does not know whether it is, "for I have not read that Author, whom I have been so strongly accused of having plagiarized" (OCM VII.415-16). That strikes me as a bit disingenuous. I take Malebranche at his word that he had not read Molina, but Molina's views were very well known. And they had been adopted and defended, with a few refinements, by Molina's fellow Jesuit, Francisco Suárez, whom Malebranche certainly did read. In fact the last book Malebranche published closes with an extract of several pages from a work of Suárez on the Incarnation, including a quite precise, though brief, formulation and affirmation of the Molinist view, albeit without mention of Molina (RPP: OCM XVI.169-70). Malebranche certainly had been exposed to Molinist views, and mostly agreed with them.

⁴⁰This thesis seems to me to face insuperable difficulties. The most fundamental problem is that it is difficult to see what would be the metaphysical grounding of a fact that a certain free act would infallibly be performed, without being necessitated or causally determined in any way, in circumstances that will never in fact occur. Already in the sixteenth century Molina faced objections based on this problem. On this subject, see Robert Merrihew Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," and Alfred J. Freddoso's introduction to Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, especially pp. 68-75. The nature and difficulty of the problem are such that Malebranche's appeal to the incomprehensibility of God's attribute of being Examiner of hearts, and his similar appeal to ignorance of our own nature (TNG III.38: OCM V.145/R 193; RPP §8: OCM XVI.24) do not seem to me to offer a strong, nor even an obviously relevant, defense of his basically Molinist position on this point.

⁴¹Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, pp. 270-72 (Disputation 53, part 4, section 23).

⁴²See OCM VII.553, 564, and especially OCM VIII.1106.

4.2 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, and which (I argue) he must treat as primitive concepts. 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 operate without necessitating. 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.

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 as has a "power [*force*]" to determine the direction 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). More cautiously, in passages added to the first Elucidation of the *Search* in 1712, he denies that God "even can give creatures any genuine power [*véritable puissance*]," but does speak of "the actual power [*pouvoir*] that we have to suspend our consent in regard to the motives that solicit us and press us to give it, when those motives do not fill up, so to speak, the whole capacity of the soul" (OCM III.26, 29/LO 551, 553). The minimum affirmation implied in all such passages is that in certain contexts we *can* suspend and *can* give our consent, and *can* thus determine ourselves in ways in which we have not been determined by God or by anything other than our giving or withholding our consent. Of the terms Malebranche uses, this affirmation is perhaps best suggested, etymologically at least, by *pouvoir*, which is the infinitive form of the verb that is the French of the English 'can', meaning to be *able*.⁴³ This is worth stressing because an indeterminist power of free action can only be a ground of *ability* or *possibility*. In this it may be contrasted with the kind of power that belongs to Malebranchean genuine and occasional causes, which are grounds of *necessity*, or of something *having to* be one way rather than another. A genuine cause is such a ground by its own efficacy; an occasional cause, derivatively.

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. It includes both the enabling power of acting in ways that are not necessitated or causally determined, and the compelling power of being necessarily efficacious. Such a conception of divine will serves to integrate a view of the universe as governed in most respects by laws that in some way necessitate, but that seem to be contingent in that we can imagine a world being governed by other laws instead.

⁴³I do not mean to deny that *pouvoir*, as a noun, can bear in ordinary French most of the meanings of the English word 'power', though in revising the first Elucidation in 1712 Malebranche may have seen less connotation of a

So far as I can see, what Malebranche says about this 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, the *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 in the Malebranchean sense 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 typically are occasional causes of what results from them. The power of free choice is a power that cannot be explained by a theory of necessary efficacy; and Malebranche's theories of genuine and occasional causation are theories of the workings of necessary efficacy. We should note, moreover, that Malebranche's views imply something similar about *God's* power to choose freely whether to create a world or not. God's free choice cannot be necessitated. Therefore it can no more have a Malebranchean genuine cause than our free choices can. The concept of a power to act by volitions that are not necessitated by anything has thus a central role in Malebranche's cosmology.

I take the concept of a power of free action to be for Malebranche a primitive concept, for which he does not expect a definition or explanation in terms of anything clearer or more fundamental. Indeed, his views about the epistemological status of psychological concepts preclude any illumination explanation of a psychological power such as that of free action in terms of anything deeper. It is perhaps Malebranche's most dramatic departure from Cartesianism that he denies that we perceive any clear idea of the mind, or of thought. He maintains that we do perceive clear ideas of extension and its modes, and thus of body, which he holds are God's own ideas of those things, which God allows us to perceive. But he says, “It is not the same with the soul; we do not know it by its idea, we do not see it in God. We know it only by *consciousness*,” that is, “by the inner feeling [*sentiment*] that we have of ourselves.” In this way “we know of our soul only what we feel happening in us,” which is “not as perfect a knowledge of the nature of the soul as [we have] of the nature of bodies.” On the other hand, we have a surer knowledge of the *existence* of our thoughts and feelings, and hence of our own mind than we have of the existence of any body—presumably because we are immediately conscious of our thoughts and feelings by having those very thoughts and feelings, whereas our knowledge of bodies is mediated by our perception of ideas in God that could exist without bodies actually existing (RV III.ii.7: OCM I.451-52/LO 237-38).⁴⁴

necessity-bearing efficacy in *pouvoir* than in *puissance*.

⁴⁴Malebranche is by no means alone among early modern philosophers in supposing that we have empirical knowledge, in self-consciousness, of broadly causal psychological properties. In an editorial note to OCM III.27, Geneviève Rodis-Lewis cites Descartes's statement, in his *Principles of Philosophy*, I.41, that “we are so conscious of the freedom ... that is in us that there is nothing that we comprehend more evidently and perfectly” (AT VIII-1.20). Berkeley's claim that he knows himself as an active being by “a reflex act” is another instance. Berkeley,

Malebranche assigns the same epistemological status is assigned to free will as to the nature and existence of the soul. He says that when a particular good is presented to us, we have internal feeling of our freedom in regard to it, as we have of our pleasure and our pain when we feel them. Indeed, we are convinced of our freedom by the same reason that convinces us of our existence; for it is the internal feeling that we have of our thoughts that teaches us that we exist.

So we have no more reason to doubt that we are free when we feel our freedom, than we have to doubt our existence when we are feeling pleasure or pain, “since we have no clear idea of our soul or of our pain, but only internal feeling of them” (RV E1: OCM III.27/LO 552). Strictly speaking it is presumably the concept of acting freely, rather than that of the power to do so, that Malebranche regards as empirically given, inasmuch as he holds that “we do not feel our faculties when they are not presently acting” (RV E1: OCM III.22-23/LO 550). But the concept of the act leads easily to that of the power, if one allows oneself the inference from ‘does’ to ‘can do’.

Certain as the knowledge of the reality of free will is that we have by inner feeling, however, it does not carry with it knowledge of the nature of free will. He says, “I sense that I will, but ... I do not know clearly what it is to will” (MCM IX.15: OCM X.102). And “[a]s we do not know our soul by a clear idea, ... it is in vain that we try to discover ... what it is in us” that lies at the root of such phenomena of volition as that of being “overcome by a motion that is not invincible and that one can change by one’s will ... For finally, we have no clear idea of any modification of our soul” (RV E1: OCM III.30/LO 554). For this reason Malebranche can hardly hold out hope of an explication of his concept of a power of free will that would leave it anything other than an unanalyzable concept grounded in inner feeling.

What Malebranche says about God’s will is intertwined with what he says about our wills. He ascribes to God too a power to act by volitions that are not necessitated by anything. God’s free choice to create a world cannot be necessitated. Therefore it can no more have a Malebranchean genuine cause than our free choices can. And God’s will escapes our cognitive grasp as our own will does. Admitting that we do not comprehend God’s omnipotence, Malebranche says that God has not given us any “distinct idea that corresponds to the word ‘power’ or ‘efficacy’.” That is something he says without any restriction as to whether the power in question belongs to God or creatures. And he adds that we “do not even know what the will of God is” (MCM IX.2: OCM X.96). We might wonder how we are to know that God’s practical volitions are, necessarily, universally efficacious, if we “do not even know what the will of God is.” So far as I can see, Malebranche must suppose that our consciousness, by inner feeling, of our own free will gives us a working concept of free will in general which is enough, in combination with our perception of the infinite perfection of the divine nature, to yield knowledge that perfectly efficacious will is a perfection that God must possess.

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). Their operation can be explained in some cases as *occasional* causation in which the effect is necessitated. 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. Further it necessitates us, if we are actually consenting at a given time to rest in one of two or more goods, not to choose any but the one that at that time seems best to us (cf. RV III.i.4: OCM I.405/LO 211-12). But as between consenting to rest in the particular good that seems best to us at the time, and suspending consent for further reflection before consenting to rest in *any* particular good, Malebranche holds that neither alternative is necessitated or excluded by our inclination toward the good in general. Whether we consent or suspend consent, we will be motivated by that invincible inclination; but because of the absence of necessitation, 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). In particular, a habit [*habitude*] can make an inclination stronger or weaker. 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). Malebranche distinguishes “natural love,” which is necessitated by natural inclinations, and free love, or love by choice [*amour de choix*], which depends on freedom and “the consent of the will.” He says that “love by choice leaves a habit of love by choice. For when one has often consented to love for a good, one has an inclination or easiness to consent to it again” (TM I.iii.18: OCM XI.49/W 66). In such a case, 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. Perhaps it will be objected that the effect of the habit is not the consent to the good in question, but rather the *easiness* of consenting to it. But saying that would still leave Malebranche with another broadly causal concept—a concept of an easiness of consenting whose operation seems not to be explicable in terms of either genuine or occasional causation because it cannot be explained in terms of necessitation of consenting. In any event, whether Malebranchean inclinations and habits of creatures operate as occasional cause, 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.

Like the concept of a power of free action, concepts of inclinations such as that of a habitual easiness of freely consenting or freely suspending consent must, I think, be primitive for Malebranche, inasmuch as he does not allow us enough understanding of our own minds to provide an illuminating definition of them. It is not an invitation to deeper analysis, but a confession of limits of understanding, when he himself says of the desire which he regards as our most fundamental inclination ,

I grant that we have no clear idea ... of that constancy of pressure or natural motion toward the good. But that's because we do not know ourselves by *idea*, as I have proved elsewhere (RV E1: OCM III.22/LO 550).

More generally, he speaks of “dispositions” that may “remain in the soul after its acts,” comments that “we know [them] only by consciousness or internal feeling,” and adds, “It is

impossible to explain in what consist the dispositions or the modifications of beings of which one does not have the ideas in accordance with which God has formed those beings” (RPP §14: OCM XVI.60).

4.3 Free Will, Causation, and Being

In section 4.2 I 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. Can God really be “the one who does [*fait*] everything in all things” (RV E15: OCM III.203/LO 657) if there is anything in the world that has no genuine cause? Specifically, can God really be “the one who does [*fait*] everything in all things” if there are human acts of consenting or suspending consent that are not necessitated or causally determined by God?

This question can be related to the argument from continuous creation that 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.

[CC2] is explicitly intended to apply to “the modes [*manières*] of being of minds”⁴⁵ as well as of bodies; but Malebranche's expositions of the argument are usually focused mainly or entirely on causation of modes of bodies.

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

[CC4] It is a contradiction that a body be neither at rest nor in motion,
to the conclusion,

[CC5] Therefore it is a contradiction for God to make [*faire*] a body which he makes neither at rest nor in motion (EMR VII.6: OCM XII.155-56/JS 111-12).

⁴⁵OCM 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. Lee rightly emphasize the formulation in [CC2].

For similar reasons, according to Malebranche, in continually recreating the world, God must give each portion of matter at each instant a particular place and “certain relations of distance with the other bodies” (EMR VII.10: OCM XII.160/JS 115). This will determine all the modes of the universe of bodies, conceived in broadly Cartesian terms

The validity of the inference from [CC4] to [CC5] deserves to be questioned, and the question goes to the heart of the matter. If I know nothing about your car at time t , except that it is in good running order, I am entitled to believe that it is either in motion or at rest at t ; but I have no reason to believe that it is in motion or to believe that it is at rest. Similarly, we may grant that in causing a body to exist at time t , God must cause it to exist as a body that is either at rest or in motion at t . But does it follow that God must either cause it to be at rest at t or cause it to be in motion at t ? Or could God merely cause it to exist as a body that has and exercises at t a *power to determine itself* either to be at rest at t or to be in motion at t ?

At this point we must beware of a tempting but fallacious argument. The temptation is to think that if the world is, 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 .⁴⁶ But there an infinite regress lurks. If causally undetermined 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. This seems to me to apply, whether we are thinking of the agent as a free will or as a physical particle that can be in either of two places at time t regardless of what happened before t . For this reason I doubt very much that the thesis of continuous creation should be seen as ruling out the possibility of created powers of self-determination whose exercise would be simultaneous with what gets determined. And the limited power of self-determination that Malebranche ascribes to human wills must be of precisely that sort.

⁴⁶Such 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 proposing for Malebranche (T 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 Carriero, “Spinoza on Final Causality,” pp. 108-9, and the debate has roots in medieval as well as ancient philosophy. (See Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, 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.

What is Malebranche's view about this? He agrees, emphatically, that minds can be continuously created with a power of free self-determination of their wills. But he denies that bodies can be created with a comparable power of self-determination. This denial is defended in another of his arguments on this subject, 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 at all—from which he must certainly infer that they cannot have any power to determine themselves as God has not determined them. For present purposes I need not evaluate this argument. I need only observe that it provides no basis for an argument that created *minds* cannot have a power of self-determination.

Malebranche, of course, offers no corresponding argument against the possibility of created minds possessing a power of self-determination. On the contrary, in controversy with Arnauld, he argues that minds and bodies differ in this respect. He says,

It is a contradiction in terms for God to move a body in an indeterminate way, or toward a body in general. But the natural motion of the soul is an indeterminate motion; it is love for the good in general. ... [A]t every moment [a human being] can change the determinations of his love. For that it is not necessary for him to overcome the power of God, since the particular motions of the soul are not invincible, as the particular motions of bodies are. For they are not, as those of bodies are, a necessary consequence of their conservation, or of their continued creation" (OCM VII.569).⁴⁷

That "the natural motion of the soul is an indeterminate motion," which the created agent can determine further in ways not determined by God, is a central and recurrent feature of Malebranche's account of the human will.

Malebranche is so intentional about this point that I think it is less plausible to regard it as inconsistent with his argument from continuous creation than as limiting the intended scope of that argument. And in fact, from the very beginning, there are lines of thought in his treatment of human free will that do serve in the end to limit the scope of the argument from continuous creation. They have nothing to do with necessary connection, but rather serve to minimize the *ontological status* of the operations of the will. In the end Malebranche will argue that free acts do not have enough ontological status to need to be determined by God in creation.

One such line of thought is found in the very first chapter of *The Search after Truth*, in all editions (OCM I.42-43/ LO 2-3). There Malebranche distinguishes a wider and a stricter sense of 'modification', though in his intentional casualness about terminology he does not always help

⁴⁷This passage is quoted in an interesting discussion in Schmaltz, *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul*, pp. 226-27.

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 being of the soul, one could call it a modification of the soul.”

Malebranche says that motion could be called “a *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, which is plainly not Cartesian, Malebranche will not “call the inclinations of the will, nor the motion 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.” The passage just quoted deals with the inclinations of the will rather its free acts; but later 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.

Another ontological-status-minimizing line of thought emerges in Elucidation 1, added to the *Search* in 1678, where Malebranche says, “So here is what the sinner does. He stops, he rests, he does not follow⁴⁸God. 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.” This can be read as grounding an argument that our free consenting or withholding of consent is not inconsistent with Malebranche’s assertion that “God makes [*fait*] everything that is.” “Is” in this assertion certainly has a metaphysically heavy sense. It was changed to “is real” in Malebranche’s last two editions of the Elucidation; 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.” 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 realities (OCM III.19-20, 36, 203/LO 548, 557, 657).

Such an argument is made explicit in a passage added in 1712 to the first Elucidation of *The Search after Truth* (OCM III.31/LO 554). Malebranche considers an objection that would draw from his continuous creation argument for occasionalism the consequence,

If a man rests in [a particular] object, God creates him resting and stopping at that object. ... He creates in him his consent, in which he has no more part than bodies have in the motion that transports them.”

Malebranche responds:

I reply that God creates us speaking, walking, thinking, willing, that he causes in us our perceptions, our sensations, our movements, in a word that he makes [*fait*] everything that is real and physical in us. ... But I deny that God makes us consenting, precisely as consenting, or resting in a particular real or apparent good. God only creates us ceaselessly being able to stop at such a good. ... So God creates us, not precisely as consenting or suspending our consent, but being able to give it or suspend it.”

⁴⁸Later editions, beginning in 1683, add: “the pressure (*l'impression*) of”.

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 a monopoly for God, 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*].”⁴⁹

A conception of God's causal action in the world as creating being obviously goes well with Malebranche's continuous creation argument for occasionalism. But 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). And in 1688 he argues,

An infinitely wise God cannot will what is not worthy, so to speak, of being willed; he cannot love anything that is not lovable. Now there is nothing lovable about non-being. So it cannot be the object [*terme*]of divine volitions (EMR VII.9: OCM XII.158/JS 114).

Malebranche's discussions of the ontological status of free acts tend to focus on cases in which someone sins. He claims that the sinner does nothing in the free act of sinning. But that leaves a question about the case in which one refrains from sin. For Malebranche clearly holds that when created minds freely sin, it was also in their power of free choice not so sin. And that implies that if what they do in not sinning is something rather than nothing, then created minds do have power to perform a free act that is something rather than nothing. So suppose a created mind, in freely choosing, does follow God's leading instead of resting in a particular good, and thus refrains from sin: is that nothing too? Or is it something rather than nothing?

Malebranche's answer is clear in Elucidation 1 of *The Search after Truth* as it stands in his last edition of it in 1712. He says there, “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.” This is part of an account of human voluntary consent in which he says of “our different consents” that he regards them “as rests, or free cessations from investigation and examination.” In this context, he grants that

⁴⁹Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations*, XII.ii.4.

if it is claimed that willing different things is giving oneself different modifications, or that our different consents ... are physical realities, ... I grant that in that sense the mind can modify itself in different ways by the action, or desire to be happy, which God puts in it, and that in that sense it has a true power.”

But that is a misleadingly conciliatory statement, reflecting Malebranche's desire to avoid merely verbal disputes. It is clear that he does not really mean to grant the claim, except in a sense of 'modification' in which he prefers not to use the word. For this whole discussion is preceded by his statement, “So when we sin, we do not produce any new modification in ourselves”; and it concludes with the statement, “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).⁵⁰

Malebranche's views about the relation between free will and being or reality get their fullest and clearest statement in his last book, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique* (1715). This book was a response to a book, *De l'action de Dieu sur les créatures* (1713), in which the author, Laurent Boursier (1679-1749), defended a theory of “physical premotion.” Physical premotion is *physical* in a sense that does not imply materiality or corporeality. As understood by Boursier, it is an action of God that produces in a created mind an effect that is “physical,” as Boursier and Malebranche put it, or metaphysically real, as we might put it.⁵¹ Specifically, Boursier says, “Physical premotion truly gives action; it brings it about [*fait*] that the human being actually consents, but it does not remove the real and internal power [*pouvoir*] that the human being bears in the depth of his being to consent or not consent.” It does not remove the power, inasmuch as it does not “destroy any one of the qualities and realities of our soul in which its power consists.” However, it does determine that the power is exercised in one way rather than in any other. “What the premotion effects in the soul is the action itself, the willing, the determination.”⁵²

Malebranche reads this, plausibly enough, as implying that it would be *contradictory* for a soul not to give a consent that it is physically premoved by God to give. And his verdict is that Boursier's view “destroys freedom,” or “leaves the name of freedom, and explains it in a way that annihilates the reality of it” (OCM XVI.7-8). In this disagreement, Boursier and Malebranche were essentially taking sides in a controversy about the efficacy of God's grace that was already more than a hundred years old—Boursier on the side of Dominican Thomists such as Domingo Bañez (1528-1604) and Diego Alvarez (ca. 1550-1635), who sponsored the term ‘physical premotion’, and Malebranche on the side of Jesuits such as Molina and Suárez, who pioneered a less deterministic view.⁵³

Boursier explicitly claims an ontological basis for his theory of physical premotion, declaring that “The great principle on which we have demonstrated physical premotion is that the

⁵⁰In 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.

⁵¹In passages quoted in the previous paragraph 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.

⁵²These passages from Boursier's book are quoted from the André Robinet's editorial endnotes in OCM XVI.199-200 (note 3).

⁵³For background on this debate see Freddoso's introduction to Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*; p. 18 of it is most relevant to physical premotion.

modalities of the soul are beings, so that to have more of these modalities is to have more degrees of being.” He also holds that “all there is of being in the world, all there is that’s good, that’s true, that’s existent, all has its cause in the will of God, doesn’t exist except because God wills it.” And he applies these views to the case of determinations of the will: “the power to act plus the action is a *plus being*; that is, *being plus being*. The power to determine oneself, plus the determination, is *being, plus being*. ... Therefore God produces not only the being of the soul, but also its actions and its determinations.”⁵⁴ This argument is aptly summarized as follows by Yves Marie André, Malebranche’s contemporary and biographer:

our soul ... cannot receive any change without acquiring or losing some reality, some degree of being. Now if that is true, physical premotion is demonstrated, for certainly there is none but God that can create in nature new degrees of being, which increase and amplify the reality of substances (quoted in OCM XVI.xii).

I believe that Malebranche’s negative claims about the ontological status of human free voluntary acts were always meant to protect against this type of deterministic argument. But it is not surprising that in his debate with Boursier, Malebranche’s views about the ontology of consent and suspension of consent come to the fore. Replying to Boursier, 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).

It is interesting also that Malebranche says that in regarding “consents ... as beings added to the soul, or at least as physical modalities that change the substance, really and by themselves,” Boursier’s mistake is “that he confuses the physical with the moral” (OCM XVI.37). The point of this diagnosis is revealed, I believe, when Malebranche, explaining his claim that “the moral is not the physical,” remarks that “the morality of acts ... depends exclusively on the variety of objects in which the will rests” (OCM XVI.42). This reverberates with Malebranche’s statement, in the first chapter of *The Search after Truth*, that 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 (OCM I.42-43/ LO 2-3). Malebranche could also have been aware of an analogy at this point with the Scholastic view that cognitive perfection is real in God, but that whether there exist, for instance chickens, and hence whether God knows that there exist chickens, makes a difference to what external intentional objects God’s knowledge has, but no difference whatever to what is real in God. Indeed, Malebranche himself must regard divine volitions regarding the world as individuated by their external intentional objects, if my argument on that subject in section 2 is correct.

⁵⁴These passages from Boursier’s book are quoted in OCM XVI.203, 209, and 207 (notes 31, 67, and 54).

5. Conclusion

I have tried to show that Malebranche's views about causation and about free will form a system that is both more complex and more consistent than is commonly recognized. I have focused particularly on the array of broadly causal concepts that Malebranche employs. Most famously, there are the sharply contrasted but closely related concepts of genuine [*véritable*] cause and occasional cause, both of which involve the necessitation, in one way or another, of an effect. But there is also the concept of a power of free will, which Malebranche ascribes both to God and to created minds, and is willing in the end to call a true [*vraie*] cause although it does not necessitate an effect. While Malebranche does not exactly call attention to it as an additional causal concept, he is very committed to affirming the non-necessitating power of free will; and God's power of free will obviously has a particularly central role in the Malebranchean universe. Similarly, and again without much fanfare, he is committed to broadly causal concepts of inclinations and habits, in some cases as influencing, but not necessitating effects. We have also seen that Malebranche ascribes to God's will, and only to God's will, two properties that are certainly distinguishable, and might be thought logically separable: that of being a "genuine" cause that necessitates its effects by its own efficacy, and that of giving *being*.

In arguing for their consistency, I have not defended Malebranche's views about causality on every point. I think indeed that his claim that the free and not necessitated consent of the will has less being or reality than other properties of a mind is particularly hard to make plausible, even if it is formally consistent with his other views. Many philosophers may be disappointed with Malebranche's openly acknowledged willingness to reason with broadly causal terms for which he does not claim to perceive corresponding clear ideas. For better or worse, Malebranche was not Hume, important as some of his arguments were to Hume. On the whole, his treatment of causality was not driven, as Hume's was, by an insistence on reasoning only with clear ideas, but rather by a theological vision. In this respect his philosophical method is also less Cartesian than it is purported to be some chapters of his *Search after Truth*.⁵⁵ The resulting structure of thought, however, with, among other things, its conception of laws of nature as general volitions of God, remains an object of great philosophical as well as theological interest.

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⁵⁵As is rightly emphasized in Gueroult, *Malebranche*.

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