How not to think of occasionalism

Malebranche’s occasionalism is sometimes represented – often on the basis of a superficial reading of a remark in Leibniz’s *New System* – as if it were merely an *ad hoc* solution to Descartes’ mind–body problem, with God intervening to fill the causal gaps between physical and mental events. This is a gross misrepresentation, based on a failure to understand both the full generality of Malebranche’s doctrine and the grounds on which it rests. It is not that he, like other Cartesian dualists, faces a problem in explaining how body and mind can interact, and is obliged to drag God in to plug the explanatory gaps. Rather, he has a perfectly general account of the nature of the causal relation which entails that only God can be a true cause, and this account yields, as a straightforward corollary, his solution to the mind–body problem.

Occasionalism states that all so-called ‘second’ or ‘natural’ causes are not true causes at all, but serve merely as occasions on which the true cause (God) operates. As we saw in Chapter Two, earlier Cartesians such as Cordemoy and La Forge had articulated semi-occasionalist positions, usually denying causal powers to bodies. It is only in Malebranche, however, that we find a full-blooded occasionalism, denying all causal powers also to finite spirits. Only God, for Malebranche, has the power to bring anything about. But God does not act in random or arbitrary ways: on the contrary, He exerts His power in accordance with general rules, by means of what Malebranche calls *volontés générales*. So the impact of the white billiard ball does not, strictly speaking, cause the red ball to move (the white ball has no such power); the moment of impact merely serves as the occasion for God to redistribute motions according to certain universal laws. Similar stories can be told for all other so-called natural causes. The occurrence of certain events in my nerve organs and brain do not cause a sensation, but whenever my
brain is in state $\phi$ God produces state $\Psi$ in my mind. Likewise, my volition to raise my arm does not cause the motor nerves to fire, but serves as the occasion for God to produce that brain-state. Finally, my mind doesn’t even have any power over its own thoughts: attention is, for Malebranche, a species of prayer. I pray for illumination and, so long as my prayer is sincere, and persistent, and directed towards an appropriate object, God will reveal the required idea.

The general thesis of occasionalism is stated clearly in the *Recherche*, where Malebranche seeks to show that there is only one true cause, and that all so-called ‘second’ or ‘natural’ causes are mere occasions. Because God acts in reliable, predictable ways, in accordance with universal rules, we will come to notice that events of type C regularly precede events of type E, will call the former ‘causes’ and the latter ‘effects’, and will come to expect an E-type event when we observe a C-type event. This is, of course, essential for everyday life and for the natural sciences, but has fatal consequences for metaphysics. (See *OCM* I 171–5, LO 76–8; *OCM* II 76–84, LO 307–11.) The belief in natural causes is ‘the most dangerous error of the philosophy of the ancients’ (*OCM* II 309–20, LO 446–52), and the deep reason why the philosophy of Aristotle is not just un-Christian but anti-Christian. The Aristotelian acceptance of natural powers is, Malebranche argues, inseparable from pagan attitudes to nature. If one believes that the apple is the real cause of one’s pleasure, and that the sun is the sustaining cause of all vegetation, it is only reasonable to love the apple and to worship the sun. To refute this ‘miserable’ philosophy, the contrary truths must be established, namely that ‘there is only one true cause, because there is only one true God; that the nature or power of each thing is nothing but the will of God; that all natural causes are not true causes, but only occasional causes’ (*OCM* II 312, LO 448).

The purpose of teaching occasionalism, in Malebranche’s eyes, is therefore moral and spiritual. Since humans naturally come to love whatever they regard as causes of their pleasures, Christians should be forever repeating the lessons of occasionalism, and seeking to learn them by heart. The Christian must love and fear only God, we are told in Éclaircissement XV of the *Recherche* (*OCM* III 211–52, LO 657–85), but this is impossible for a believer in second causes. The point is reiterated in the *Conversations Chrétiennes* (*OCM* IV 20). Whatever can cause us pleasure and pain, explains Malebranche’s spokesman Theodore, is a proper object of love and fear, so belief in natural causes leads inevitably to paganism and idolatry.

Malebranche has two very different lines of argument in support of his occasionalism. There is what might be called the ‘thin’ argument,
starting with the notion of cause as necessary connection, and arguing that only God’s will meets this condition. Then there is the ‘deep’ argument, taking its origin from the theological doctrine of continuous creation, which we touched on briefly in our discussion of Descartes in Chapter Two. The second and third sections of this chapter focus on the thin argument; the fourth and fifth sections set out the deep argument and its implications; the final section discusses objections and replies.

**The idea of necessary connection**

Malebranche takes it for granted that a true cause is necessarily connected with its effect (OCM II 316, LO 448). What sort of necessary connection does he have in mind? Although he never spends much time on the topic, it is clear that he draws no sharp distinction between logical and metaphysical senses of necessity. The test for what is metaphysically possible is what can be conceived or described without self-contradiction. So for there to be a genuine causal relation between events C and E, one must be able to ‘see’ (i.e. rationally intuit) that C could not occur without E, i.e. that this would involve a contradiction. But this is never the case, Malebranche argues, for so-called ‘second’ or ‘natural’ causes. It is evident, he argues in Book Six of the *Recherche*, that no body has the force required to move itself, far less to set another body in motion (OCM II 312–13, LO 448). Our idea of body actually excludes such powers. So only a spirit can be a cause. But there is no necessary connection between the will of a finite spirit and its effects. We cannot discern any necessary connection between my willing to raise my arm and my arm going up. Indeed, we can see clearly that there is no such necessary connection: it is perfectly conceivable that the volition can occur without the action. So it seems that no finite spirit can move a body, any more than another body can.

The search for necessary connections leads naturally into an analysis of our idea of power. (For Malebranche, as later for Hume, the ideas of power and of necessary connection are two sides of the same coin.) Previous generations of philosophers, says Malebranche, have spent enormous amounts of time and effort arguing about the powers of natural things, trying to define such terms as ‘force’, ‘power’, ‘efficacy’ and the like. But all such talk is, in the final analysis, unintelligible (OCM I 458–9, LO 242). The very notion of such a ‘force’, ‘power’, or ‘efficacy’, says Malebranche in *Éclaircissement* XV of the *Recherche*, is completely inconceivable. ‘Whatever effort I make in order to understand it, I cannot find in me any idea representing to me what might be the force or the power they attribute to creatures’ (OCM III 294, LO 658). The philosophers who believe in second
causes are arguing without a clear idea of what they are talking about, which explains their endless controversies and confusions.\footnote{7}

Naturalistic philosophers, Malebranche explains, have been misled and seduced by their senses (\textit{OCM} III 207–8, LO 659–60, and \textit{OCM} III 232–3, LO 673–4). When they see plants growing after the rains, they assume that the rains have caused the vegetation, although they have no comprehension of how this could be. Averroes, for example, accuses the occasionalists of his day of having cracked brains for denying that fire burns and the sun illuminates, but his pretended ‘demonstration’ of these supposed causal powers amounts to nothing more than a blatant \textit{petitio principi}. In fact, of course, occasionalists do not deny the manifest evidence of their senses. We need, Malebranche explains, to distinguish carefully between what is actually presented to the senses, and what is added by the mind of the observer, and may be the result of mere habit or prejudice, albeit a prejudice that seems to come naturally to us:

When I see one ball strike another, my eyes tell me, or seem to tell me, that the one is truly the cause of the motion it impresses on the other, for the true cause that moves bodies does not appear to my eyes. But when I consult my reason I clearly see that since bodies cannot move themselves, and since their motor force is but the will of God that conserves them successively in different places, they cannot communicate a power they do not have and could not communicate even if it were in their possession. For the mind will never conceive that one body, a purely passive substance, can in any way whatsoever transmit to another body the power transporting it.

(\textit{OCM} III 208, LO 660)

Strictly speaking, my eyes only seem to teach me that the first ball moves the second, or that sun and rain are the causes of vegetation. We need to consult reason, not to correct sense itself, but to correct an all-too-human prejudice, a naïve tendency to confuse constant conjunction with genuine causation. In the \textit{Méditations Chrétiennes}, this Malebranchian doctrine is voiced by no less an authority than the Word of God:

Renounce your prejudices, my son, and never judge, with regard to natural effects, that one thing is the effect of another, because experience teaches you that it never fails to follow it. For of all false principles this is the most dangerous and the most fertile source of errors. As the action of God is always uniform and
constant, because His volitions are immutable and His laws inviolable, if you follow this false principle, although God does all, you will conclude from it that He does nothing.

\[(OCM\ X\ 59)\]

As Pierre Bayle puts it, human beings are ‘drawn by their nature, and in some way instructed by a natural lesson, to judge that anything which is regularly connected with a certain effect, and without which that effect is not produced, is the true cause of it’ \((OCM\ XVII–I\ 591)\). This natural tendency, harmless and even benign both in practical everyday contexts and in the natural sciences, is the source of dangerous errors in metaphysics. The natural judgements in question must be automatic, powerful, but \textit{resistible} – if not, our Creator would be to blame for our errors. To correct the error, one must carefully distinguish what is actually ‘given’ to the senses from what is automatically added in judgement, and then subject this extra element of judgement to rational scrutiny. Reason, once consulted, corrects the error, but does not eliminate its source – we remain liable to go on making the same errors again and again. Occasionalism is a lesson we will forever have to learn anew and repeat to ourselves, day after day, without any hope of it becoming second nature.

If a true cause must be necessarily connected with its effect, it is easy to show that only the will of God can be such a cause. There is a necessary connection between ‘God wills that X’ and ‘X occurs’, so long as God is conceived as omnipotent and X as logically possible (not self-contradictory). This argument appears in Book Six of the \textit{Recherche} \((OCM\ II\ 313,\ LO\ 448)\) and is repeated in Part 1 of the \textit{Traité} \((OCM\ V\ 27)\). Here Malebranche draws the further inference that, since God’s will is sufficient for the willed effect to occur, He has no need of any instruments to bring about His designs – His volitions are, in and of themselves, efficacious. There would be a contradiction, explains the Word in the \textit{Méditations Chrétiennes}, in God’s willing a man’s arm to move, and the arm not moving \((OCM\ X\ 64)\). There is a necessary connection between the will of an omnipotent being and its effects. To deny this, explains the Christian philosopher in the \textit{Entretien d’un Philosophe Chrétien et d’un Philosophe Chinois}, is simply to deny the existence of an omnipotent being \((OCM\ XV\ 33)\).

Critics of Malebranche, from Fontenelle\textsuperscript{8} and Hume\textsuperscript{9} down to Church\textsuperscript{10} and Watson,\textsuperscript{11} have objected to the tautological and seemingly merely verbal character of this argument. I understand, writes Fontenelle in his \textit{Doutes}, that
... since He [God] is all-powerful by His essence, it is impossible that He should will that a thing exist, and that that thing not exist. But do I conceive how that thing is, as soon as God wills that it exist? Not at all; on the contrary ...¹²

I must grant that the will of God is a real cause because I can see that there is a necessary connection between it and its effects, although I don’t understand how it produces those effects. But can I not say exactly the same, asks Fontenelle, regarding the collision of bodies? I see that the red ball must move when struck by the white ball (because both are impenetrable) even though I cannot conceive how ‘force’ (whatever that may be) can be transferred from one body to another.

Hume expresses this objection with characteristic clarity and vigour. If, he writes, we say that:

... the idea of an infinitely perfect being is connected with that of every effect, which he wills, we really do no more than assert, that a being, whose volition is connected with every effect, is connected with every effect; which is an identical proposition, and gives us no insight into the nature of this power or connexion.¹³

We seek rational insight into the relation between cause and effect, and are fobbed off with what looks like a merely verbal proof. If I can’t understand how my volitions can bring about the voluntary motions of my body, does it help to be told that the volitions of an omnipotent being are, necessarily, efficacious? If I understand ‘omnipotent’, I will grant the validity of the inference from ‘An omnipotent being willed X to occur’ to ‘X occurred’, but it seems to shed no light whatsoever on the nature of the causal relation.

Malebranche has a twin-track response to this fundamental objection.¹⁴ His main line of response is his theory of continuous creation, which we shall discuss later. He also seeks, however, to meet the objection more directly. In the ninth of the Méditations Chrétiennes he admits frankly that we have no clear idea of power, and thus cannot conceive how God creates the world, but he denies that this invalidates his argument (OCM, X, 97). The point is repeated in his reply to Fontenelle. To judge that A is the cause of B, he insists, we need only to see that A could not occur without B. One need not also see why this necessary connection holds, i.e. how A brings B about (OCM XVII–1 580).
Particular causal relations

We must now examine how Malebranche applies the general doctrine of occasionalism to particular types of causal relation: body to body (impulse), body to mind (sensation), mind to body (voluntary motion), and mind to mind (thought). Let us deal with each in turn, starting with the apparent power of a moving body to set another body in motion.

We have already seen Malebranche’s denial, in Éclaircissement XV of the Recherche, that the mind can conceive of any genuine moving force or power, transferred from one body to another in collisions. In the fifth of the Méditations Chrétiennes, the author admits his embarrassment regarding his incapacity to form any clear idea of this supposed power. The Word promptly replies that, if a man will but still his senses and set aside his prejudices, the truth will become apparent to him. Suppose the physical universe consisted of only one cubic foot of solid matter:

Could this body move itself? In your idea of matter, do you discover any power? You do not reply. But supposing that this body truly had the power of moving, in which direction will it go? How fast will it move? You are still silent?  

(OCM X 47)

These rhetorical questions run together two clearly distinct arguments. First of all, there is an appeal to our clear idea of body or material substance. This idea, as Descartes taught us, contains only size and shape and the capacity for local motion – geometric and kinematic properties but no dynamic ones. But a clear idea, for Malebranche, excludes whatever it does not include. If I have a clear idea of X, I can tell a priori, for any property F, whether X is F or non-F. If the idea of X contains F, X is F; if it does not contain F, X is non-F. That is what it is, for Malebranche, to have a clear idea. This principle licences the inference from ‘My clear idea of body doesn’t represent it as possessing any dynamical properties’ to ‘My clear idea of body represents it as devoid of dynamical properties’.

The second strand of argument involves an application of the principle of sufficient reason. If our hypothetical body had a motive power, and was thus capable of self-motion, the power would have to produce some determinate motion, in terms of speed and direction. But no sufficient reason could be provided in such a case.

What happens, the Word continues, when a moving body strikes another body?
... what will become of it, when it encounters another of which it knows neither the solidity nor the size? It will give to it, you will say, a part of its motive force? But who has taught you this? Who has told you that the other will receive it? What portion of this force will it give to it? And how will it be able to communicate or spread this force? Do you conceive all this clearly?

*(OCM X 48)*

Your senses, the Word continues, tell you only that the resting body begins to move after being struck by the moving body; to infer from this that the moving body possessed a motive force or power, some part of which it imparted to the other, is a mere prejudice.

This argument finds its definitive statement in the seventh of the *Entretiens sur la Métaphysique*, where Malebranche’s spokesman Theodore seeks to show his young pupil Ariste that it is self-contradictory to suppose that one body can act upon another (OCM XII 154–5, JS 110). Consult your clear idea of body, says Theodore. ‘Do you not clearly see that bodies can be moved, but that they cannot move themselves?’ Once again, there is an appeal to sufficient reason to reinforce the point. If this chair could begin to move, asks Theodore, how fast would it move, and in which direction? The final and conclusive proof depends on the theory of continuous creation, but the lack of any motive force or power in bodies can be established independently.

As for the supposed power of bodies to act on minds or spirits, this is even more incomprehensible. Experience can of course establish that whenever a human brain comes to be in state $\phi_1$, the mind of that human will come to be in state $\psi_1$. Precisely which part of the brain serves as the seat of the soul is of no great significance for Malebranche. He alludes vaguely to the ‘principal part’ of the brain, and mentions Descartes’ notorious pineal gland hypothesis without endorsing it (OCM I 193–4, LO 89), merely as one physiological theory among others. Given a physical effect on the organs of sense and thence on the brain, the mind will come to experience a certain sensation. We must not infer, however, that the mind considers the brain-traces (it certainly has no awareness or knowledge of them), nor that the brain-traces are the real causes of our sensations. The mind can receive nothing from bodies.

In place of the supposed action of body on mind Malebranche postulates a ‘mutual correspondence’ between brain-states and sensations, which correspondence is sustained by the ‘general laws of the union of soul and body’ (OCM I 216, LO 102). A similar story can be told for the
passions, which have as their (occasional) causes agitations of the blood and animal spirits. It is impossible, Malebranche insists, that there could be any sort of necessary connection between an agitation of the blood and/or animal spirits on the one hand, and an emotion on the other:

For I cannot understand how certain people imagine that there is an absolutely necessary relation between the movements of the spirits and blood and the emotions of the soul. A few tiny particles of bile are rather violently stirred up in the brain – therefore, the soul must be excited by some passion, and the passion must be anger rather than love. What relation can be conceived between the idea of an enemy’s faults, or a passion of contempt or hatred, on the one hand, and the corporeal movement of the blood’s parts striking against certain parts of the brain on the other? How can they convince themselves that the one depends on the other, and that the union or connection of two things so remote and incompatible as mind and matter could be caused and maintained in any way other than by the continuous and all-powerful will of the Author of nature?

(OCM II 129, LO 338–9)

When considering supposed body–body interactions, we are asked to concentrate our attention simply on the clear idea of matter to see that it doesn’t contain any causal power. For the supposed effects of bodies on minds, Malebranche prefers to deploy his dualist metaphysics. Once we see that the presence of bile particles in the blood can be conceived as quite distinct from the feeling of anger, we will grant that each is capable of existence independently of the other. If so, there can be no metaphysically necessary connection between them, and the question of why they tend to co-occur must be referred to the will of God in establishing one the (occasional) cause of the other.

In the Conversations Chrétienes we find a somewhat different version of the argument, turning on an explicit principle of causal containment. Fire, Theodore reminds his pupil Ariste, is just a rapid state of agitation of the minute constituent particles of a body, not itself possessed of pleasure or pain. Can fire, then, be the cause of pleasure or pain in the mind of a spirit? Ariste replies simply that he does not think so (OCM IV 15–16). The third participant in the conversation, the naturalistically-minded Aristarche, replies that the fire causes only the sensation of heat, and that the pleasure or pain result from the mind’s perception of the beneficial or harmful effects of the fire upon the body of the subject.
This, responds Theodore, makes no sense at all. The soul is completely ignorant of the physiological changes in the body, so can’t be responding to them. Nor is the soul active in sensation – if experience teaches us anything in this regard, it is that such sensations are passive. In any case, Aristarche has failed to answer the original objection: the heat (as sensed) is no more in the fire than is the pleasure or pain. The moving parts of the fire can – or at least, so it seems – impart motion to the fibres of the hand, but they cannot communicate a sensation they do not themselves possess (OCM IV 19).

In the seventh of the Entretiens sur la Métaphysique, Theodore is seeking to persuade Ariste that he is more closely united with God than with his own body. Ariste thinks that it is certain that bodies act on minds – if the thorn pricks my body, I will feel pain. Experience, he insists, leaves no room for doubt on this score. Theodore’s reply is as follows:

Nevertheless I strongly doubt it, or rather I do not believe it at all. Experience teaches me that I feel pain when a thorn pricks me. That much is certain. But let us leave it at that. For in no way does experience teach us that the thorn acts on our mind, or that it has any power. Let us believe nothing of the sort – that is my advice to you.

(OCM XII 151, JS 107)

Theodore dismisses the idea of a ‘union’ between soul and body as hopelessly obscure. ‘This word “union”, then, explains nothing. It requires explanation itself’ (OCM XII 153, JS 109). Experience teaches us that there are reliable correlations between mental and bodily states, but it sheds no further light. Reason tells us that mental and physical states are quite distinct, and therefore cannot be true causes of each other. Malebranche here reveals himself as a more strict and rigorous dualist than Descartes, who was prepared to take the notion of a mind–body union seriously, at least in his replies to the objections of Princess Elizabeth. One of Malebranche’s earliest critics, Desgabets, objects that his dualism is so strict that it leaves, effectively, no distinction between a human soul and an angel (see OCM XVIII 81–93). If the soul can exist and have its full range of modes (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) quite independently of the body, then, says Desgabets, the disembodied state is ‘natural’ to it, and embodiment would be merely accidental. This is in stark contrast to the more orthodox Thomist view, espoused by Desgabets, that the human soul is ‘naturally’ embodied, and can only
exercise its full range of powers in the embodied state, whereas disembodiment is a ‘violent’ state possible only by supernatural power.

The question of the cause of our sensations is addressed once again in a late work, the *Entretien d’un Philosophe Chrétien et d’un Philosophe Chinois*. When I open my eyes in the countryside, says the Christian, the objects reflect light rays, which produce images when focused onto the retinas of my eyes, which images in turn give rise to agitations in my optic nerves and brain. But none of these things is a perception. That, replies the Chinese sage, is just what our philosophers deny:

> For what we call spirit or soul is, according to them, nothing but subtle organic matter. The vibrations of the fibres of the brain, joined with the movements of those little bodies or animal spirits are the same things as our perceptions, our judgements, our reasonings. In a word, they are the same thing as our various thoughts.

*(OCM XV 12)*

Malebranche thus ascribes to the Chinese philosophers an identity theory of mind and body that has a striking resemblance to Spinozism. The Chinese (and Spinozist) identity theory is dismissed, however, as inconsistent with our clear ideas:

> I clearly conceive, by means of the idea of extension or of matter, that it is capable of shapes and of movements, of permanent or successive relations of distance, and nothing more; and I speak only of what I clearly conceive. I find that there is even less of a relation between the movement of little bodies, the vibration of the fibres of the brain, and our thoughts, than there is between the square and the circle, which no one ever mistakes for one another.

*(OCM XV 12)*

How can a particular arrangement or motion of the fibres of the brain be a certain thought or feeling? In this argument Malebranche grants, for the sake of argument, that $\phi \rightarrow \phi$ causal relations are intelligible, but insists that, even if this were so, $\phi \rightarrow \Psi$ causal connections would still be ruled out by dualist metaphysics, which in turn rest on the principle of clear ideas. There could only, it seems, be an intelligible connection between physical cause (stimulation of the sense organs) and mental effect (sensation) if some sort of identity theory were true, but that is inconceivable.
Turning now to the supposed power of the human mind to move its own body by an act of will, Malebranche needs, once again, to reject the seeming verdict of common sense as mere unreflective prejudice. To deny that I can raise my own arm, or flex my own leg, might seem crazy, he admits. But the arguments against the assumption of any such causal power are simply unanswerable. There is no necessary connection, we are reminded in Book Six of the *Recherche*, between my will to raise my arm and my arm going up (*OCM* II 315, LO 450). The volition is a mode of a finite mind or spirit; the motion is a mode of a quite distinct material substance; so each can be conceived independently and there can be no necessary connection between them. Such a *liaison nécessaire* exists only between the Divine will and its effects. Nor can God communicate such a power to creatures, any more than He can communicate His divinity. Omnipotence is incommunicable, and only an omnipotent agent can be a true cause. The reason why this seems so obvious to Malebranche will become clearer when we discuss the metaphysics of continuous creation.

In addition to the standard argument from the lack of a necessary connection, Malebranche adds a new and quite distinct argument to refute the common-sense opinion that our volitions are the causes of our voluntary bodily motions. When I will to raise my arm, animal spirits course along the motor nerves leading from my brain to the muscles of my arm. So, says Malebranche, to move my arm, I first have to dispatch the animal spirits down the requisite channels. But even men who know nothing of anatomy can move their arms at will (*OCM* II 315, LO 449–50). Often, indeed, the mere yokel will move more dextrously than the learned physician or anatomist. A man may will to raise his arm, but only God knows how to do it. Lacking this knowledge, how can my mind be the true cause?17

This typically Malebranchian argument can also be found in *Éclaircissement* XV of the *Recherche*, where Malebranche replies to a series of standard arguments for the reality of second causes. When I will to move my arm, the arm will (normally) move as willed. This, says Malebranche, cannot be denied:

But I deny that my will is the true cause of my arm’s movement … for I see no relation whatever between such different things. I even see clearly that there can be no relation between the volition I have to move my arm and the agitation of the animal spirits, i.e. of certain tiny bodies whose motion and figure I do not know and which choose certain nerve canals from a million
others I do not know to cause in me the motion I desire through an infinity of movements I do not desire.

\( OCM \text{ III 226, LO 669} \)

It follows, Malebranche concludes, that the ‘union’ of mind and body is completely unintelligible, except as a somewhat misleading way of referring to God’s constant sustaining action. By establishing my volitions as (normally) occasional causes of the motions of my limbs, God has laid down certain rules for His own operations. To say that He has given me the ‘force’ or ‘power’ needed to move my limbs is to say nothing at all. An opponent might retort that this ‘force’ is known by introspection, through our familiarity with the sensation of \textit{effort}. Granting that the sensation of effort often accompanies voluntary motions, Malebranche replies that (a) this sensation often merely makes us aware of our own weakness; and (b) there is still no ‘\textit{rapport}’ or intelligible relation between the sensation and the bodily motion. No sensation (a mode of the soul) could have the right sort of necessary connection to a bodily motion.

In the sixth of the \textit{Méditations Chrétiennes} we can find essentially the same argument, now put in the mouth of the Word of God. To judge the powers of creatures, says the Word,

\[ \ldots \text{it is necessary to retire into yourself and consult their ideas, and if one can find in their ideas any force or virtue, it must be attributed to them: for one must attribute to beings what one clearly conceives to be contained in the ideas which represent them, since these are the eternal models on which they have been formed} \]

\( OCM \text{ X 60} \)

So if you wish to know whether the soul can move the body, you must seek to discover a necessary connection between a volition and a bodily movement, or rather between their respective ideas. (This raises a serious problem for Malebranche: by his own explicit admission, we have no clear idea of the soul and its modes.\textsuperscript{18} Small wonder that we soon switch back to the argument from ignorance). To move its body itself, the soul would need detailed anatomical knowledge, yet an ignorant peasant can dance more nimbly than the most learned physician. ‘Can one do, can one even will what one doesn’t know how to do?’ \( OCM \text{ X 62} \). As for the suggestion that the sensation of effort provides some insight into a real causal power located in the will, it is again dismissed as merely a mistake: ‘do you clearly see that there is some relation
between what you call effort, and the direction of the animal spirits in
the tubes of the nerves which serve the movements that you want to
produce? (OCM X 64).

Since the answer to this rhetorical question has to be a clear and
decided ‘no’, it follows that the sensation of effort is only contingently
associated with the motion of the animal spirits. So there is no necessary
connection between the act of will (with or without the sensation of
effort) and the resulting bodily motion. The fact that such volitions are
(normally) followed by appropriate bodily motions can only be put down
to God’s constancy and benevolence in establishing the laws governing
the operations of mind and body.

Let us turn finally to the mind’s supposed control over its own states,
i.e. to Ψ→Ψ causal connections. That the human soul has considerable
power over its own states was common ground to almost all
metaphysicians before Malebranche. Yet this too is denied, as attributing
to the creature too high a degree of independence of its Creator. To
understand Malebranche’s position, we need to distinguish the intellectual
from the purely sensory domains, and to show that God is the only true
cause operative in both these realms of our experience.

In the intellectual domain, as we have seen, Malebranche asserts that
ideas are archetypes in the mind of God, not modes of the human soul.
The act of attention, e.g. to a mathematical problem, is a sort of analogue
of prayer. But there is no necessary connection between a prayer and its
realisation, any more than there is for any other human act of will. As for
questions of value and motivation, God causes in me both my general
inclination towards the good, and my first-order love of particular offered
goods. The only thing that remains up to me is my second-order act of
consenting to proffered first-order goods. Whether this suffices to give
Malebranche a defensible account of human freedom will be our topic
in Chapter Nine.

In Éclaircissement XV of the Recherche, the passivity of the mind in the
reception of ideas is supported by a familiar argument. Introspection teaches
me that, when I will to think of a certain subject, the required idea comes
(usually) to mind. This may need a little spelling out, to avoid obvious
paradoxes. I can’t will to think of Vienna, it might seem, without already
thinking of Vienna. What I will, presumably, is to visualise the front of the
Karlskirche, to remember the dates of Emperor Franz Joseph, or to call to
mind the opening bars of Mozart’s Fortieth Symphony. Once described in
such terms, it is clear that the act of will is only contingently connected
with its fulfilment. But since such volitions regularly precede the reception
of ideas, prejudice leads us to conclude – quite mistakenly – that our
minds have the active power to create ideas, rather than the merely passive power of receiving them. This is, of course, the same old error of confounding regular succession with real causal power.

In the first of the Méditations Chrétiennes, the same metaphysical point is expressed in theological language, in terms of Augustine’s notion of illumination. The human mind, says the Word, is not the source of its own light: it is an ‘illuminated light’, not an ‘illuminating light’ (OCM X 12). When one makes an effort to understand a topic then, so long as it is within our limited capacities, illumination will normally be forthcoming. But there is no necessary connection between the will and the illumination. The sense of intellectual effort, of striving to understand, is no more an indication of real causal power than in the parallel case of bodily motion.

As for sensations, experience teaches us unequivocally that our minds are passive: they occur in us, but ‘sans nous et même malgré nous’ (OCM XV 14). As Theodore puts it in the Entretiens sur la Métaphysique,

... each of us certainly senses that we are not the cause of our pain when we bleed, for example, or when we burn ourselves. We feel it despite ourselves and we cannot doubt that it comes from an external cause.

(OCM XII 93, JS 57)

If the pain of bleeding or burning is not caused by the soul itself (which introspection shows to be passive), nor by bodily damage (a point already established by previous arguments), there remains only God who possesses the necessary knowledge and power. In addition, many sensations (e.g. visual ones) involve natural judgements. Since such judgements seem to require detailed knowledge of geometry and optics, yet to come to us in an instant without any calculation on our parts, it is easy for Malebranche to show that only God could be the cause of such sensations (OCM XV 14). My soul isn’t aware of the images on the retinas of my eyes, nor do I know enough geometry and optics to derive, from the properties of the images, inferences about the sizes, shapes and distances of the bodies around me. Nor again could I calculate with sufficient rapidity to arrive at dozens of such natural judgements in an instant. Yet all these operations must take place somehow to generate judgements that are ‘en nous’ but ‘sans nous’ and even ‘malgré nous’. I need only open my eyes to find myself not just bombarded with mere sensations, but also spontaneously forming the integral natural judgements. Only God, Malebranche concludes, could be the cause of such sensations and judgements.
Continuous creation

The doctrine of continuous creation is not an innovation by Malebranche. Indeed, in the first Éclaircissement of the Recherche he describes it as ‘the general view among theologians’ (*OCM* III 26, LO 551). What is new in Malebranche is his clear perception of the radical implications of this orthodox thesis of scholastic theology. Where the majority of the schoolmen had sought to explain how continuous creation could be reconciled with the ordinary belief in natural powers, Malebranche thinks that all such reconciling projects are unintelligible, and that continuous creation, properly understood, entails the complete non-existence of any natural powers.

The doctrine of continuous creation provides Malebranche with his final and definitive argument for occasionalism. The arguments against particular types of causal power, wrongly supposed to exist in created minds and bodies, can now be relegated to a secondary and subordinate status. Since the argument from continuous creation is perfectly general, it applies indifferently to all supposed causal relations.

Suppose, explains Malebranche in the first Éclaircissement to the Recherche, that God has created a body at point X. A creature, we are then told, moves the body from X to another point Y. But, asks Malebranche, what are we to conceive in such a case?

A body … exists because God wills that it exist, and He wills it to exist either here or there, for He cannot create it nowhere. And if He creates it here, is it conceivable that a creature should displace it and move it elsewhere unless God at the same time wills to create it elsewhere in order to share His power with His creature as far as it is capable of it?

(*OCM* III 26, LO 551–2)

If the continued existence of any given body is nothing but its continuous re-creation by God then, given that a body cannot exist without a determinate set of modes (size, shape and relations to other bodies) it follows that for a body to move from X to Y is simply for God to create it at X, then to re-create it at Y. But if this is the correct metaphysical account of the continued existence of a body, the only possible role for a secondary agent is that of occasional cause. An exactly parallel account can be told, of course, for souls and their modes (perceptions, thoughts and feelings). The crucial premise here is that of complete modal determinacy, i.e. that, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, the creation of a body (or a soul) requires its creation with a
fully determinate set of modes. This thesis granted, continuous creation does indeed seem to entail a thoroughgoing occasionalism.\(^{23}\)

It is impossible, Malebranche insists, for God to communicate His power to creatures. His confidence rests, once again, on the doctrine of continuous creation. The reason is provided in Book Six of the Recherche. Only omnipotence can create bodies (or souls), and omnipotence is incommunicable: ‘God cannot even communicate His power to creatures, He cannot make them gods’ (\textit{OCM} II 318, LO 451). Not even the most enlightened of the angels can be a true cause. God sometimes establishes the will of an angel as an occasional cause (i.e. He decides that He will execute the angel’s volitions), which may explain the frequent miracles of the Old Testament,\(^{24}\) but this is not a genuine transfer of causal power. Since God cannot create more gods, and only a god can possess the power of creation, the thesis of continuous creation rules out any communication or transfer of power from God to His creatures.

In the \textit{Méditations Chrétiennes}, the Word spells out this doctrine in its purest form. No finite spirit, the meditator is informed, can so much as move an atom by as little as a hair’s breadth (\textit{OCM} X 49). For a body to continue to exist, God must continue to will its existence: creation and conservation are one and the same for God. The only way in which a finite spirit could move a body, it follows, is if it could oblige God to recreate the body at Y rather than at X. So to be a true cause, a finite spirit would have to prevail over God, which is self-contradictory. God may, of course, establish for Himself a general rule making the volitions of certain finite spirits occasional causes, but that is a different matter altogether.

The most formal and explicit statement of Malebranche’s argument can be found in the seventh of the \textit{Entretiens}. It is the will of God, Theodore explains to Ariste, that gives existence to all bodies.

Thus it is this same volition that puts bodies at rest or in motion, because it is that volition which gives them being, and because they cannot exist without being at rest or in motion. For, take note, God cannot do the impossible, or that which contains a manifest contradiction. He cannot will what cannot be conceived. Thus He cannot will that this chair exist, without at the same time willing that it exist either here or there and without His will placing it somewhere, since you cannot conceive of a chair existing unless it exists somewhere, either here or elsewhere.

(\textit{OCM} XII 156, JS 111–12)
This argument is perfectly general, applying to minds as well as bodies. Just as God cannot create a body without determinate values for its size, shape, and position, so He cannot create a mind without a corresponding set of psychological modes, i.e. perceptions and inclinations. Theodore’s pupil Ariste admits that, in the original creation of bodies, God must determine not just their existence but also their location and state of motion or rest. But, he continues, this is no longer the case. Now that the moment of creation has passed, he thinks, bodies dispose themselves ‘haphazardly, or according to the law of the strongest’. But, retorts Theodore, the moment of creation does not pass!

For the world assuredly depends on the will of the Creator. If the world subsists, it is because God continues to will its existence. Thus, the conservation of creatures is, on the part of God, nothing but their continued creation.

*(OCM XII 156–7, JS 112)*

Ariste suggests that God would require a positive volition to annihilate His creation, but Theodore corrects him. To suppose that the physical universe will continue to exist unless God explicitly wills its annihilation is to represent the creature as independent of its creator. For some creator–creature relations (parent and child, builder and house) the creature can survive the absence or non-existence of its creator, but the relation between God and His creatures is not of this kind. The builder can emigrate, or die, and the house remain, but if the sun were to cease-to-be, its light would be extinguished and all would be dark. The relation between God and the world is of the latter kind: if He were for a moment to withdraw His sustaining hand, the whole of His creation would instantaneously cease-to-be.25

The lesson, Theodore concludes, is perfectly clear. Once we understand continuous creation, we see that it is simply self-contradictory to assume any causal powers either in bodies or in finite (created) spirits:

Creation does not pass, because the conservation of creatures is – on God’s part – simply a continuous creation, a single volition subsisting and operating continuously. Now, God can neither conceive nor consequently will that a body exist nowhere, nor that it does not stand in certain relations of distance to other bodies. Thus, God cannot will that this armchair exist, and by this volition create or conserve it, without situating it here, there, or elsewhere. It is a contradiction, therefore, for one body to be
able to move another. Further, I claim, it is a contradiction for
you to be able to move your armchair. Nor is this enough; it is a
contradiction for all the angels and demons together to be able
to move a wisp of straw. The proof of this is clear. For no power,
however great it be imagined, can surpass or even equal the
power of God. Now it is a contradiction that God wills this
armchair to exist, unless He wills it to exist somewhere and
unless, by the efficacy of His will, He puts it there, conserves it
there, creates it there. Hence, no power can convey it to where
God does not convey it, nor fix nor stop it where God does not
stop it, unless God accommodates the efficacy of His action to
the inefficacious action of His creatures.

(OCM XII 160, JS 115–16)

An exactly similar proof could of course be provided for every mode
of every finite and created mind.

Continuous creation and volontés générales

According to the doctrine of continuous creation, for every substance S
and every mode M of S, the questions ‘Why does S exist?’ and ‘Why does
S have M?’ must be answered ‘Because God wills it so’. But this suggests
– quite misleadingly – that God’s volitions extend to all the particular
details of His material and spiritual creation. This Malebranche
emphatically denies, notably in the Traité de la Nature et de la Grâce,
and in the ensuing controversy with Arnauld. To say that God does
everything, Malebranche argues, does not entail that anything is arbitrary
or idiosyncratic. In establishing occasional causes, God binds Himself
to acting in accordance with volontés générales. He wills that, for example,
the collision of one body with another serves as an occasion for Him to
redistribute motions in accordance with a set of universal rules, and that
the modes of a human mind stand in a regular one-to-one correspondence
with the modes of the human brain.

When Malebranche writes of God’s volontés générales, does he mean
that the content of such divine volitions is itself universal in form? Or
does God will particular events, but do so in accordance with universal
rules? Does God will, for example, ‘Let it be the case that whenever X
occurs Y occurs’? Or does God will, whenever X occurs ‘let Y occur’?
Most of the critics and commentators, from Arnauld to Desmond Clarke,
have assumed that Malebranche takes the former view. Recently,
however, this established reading has been challenged by Steven Nadler.
who argues that God exercises particular acts of will in accordance with general rules. On the traditional interpretation God doesn’t need, strictly speaking, to intervene in the course of nature: a few timeless acts of will express His power once and for all. If this is right Leibniz’s account of occasionalism, with its picture of God forever intervening in the course of nature, is a gross caricature, and Malebranche’s actual position is closer to Leibniz’s own pre-established harmony. On Nadler’s interpretation God, by contrast, is forever active in the physical and psychological realms alike, albeit exercising particular volitions in accordance with general rules. Nadler suggests that the reason God must execute His own designs is that He does not give His creatures ‘natures’, in the Aristotelian sense of ‘nature’ as internal principle of motion and rest. If creatures have no natures, Nadler argues, the laws of nature need to be actively executed by God, not merely laid down by Him in the act of creation. On this sensitive issue the texts are inconclusive. Nadler’s reading seems better to capture Malebranche’s keen sense of the immediacy of the dependence of all things on God. On the other hand, Malebranche does sometimes write as if the laws themselves are efficacious, which suggests that our talk of a ‘law’ is not mere shorthand for a regular and reliable pattern of particular volitions.

A recent paper by Andrew Pessin returns to this vexed question. Pessin admits that the textual evidence is inconclusive, with some passages that lend themselves to each of the opposed readings. He finally comes down on the side of Nadler, arguing that the theory of particular volitions in accordance with general laws makes better sense of Malebranche’s position than the standard view. He shows how – with a little ingenuity – this interpretation can meet the standard objections: that God is now said to be ‘at rest’, and that God seeks to minimise the number of His volitions. But he admits, in conclusion, that the issue is one that Malebranche himself seems never to have explicitly addressed, and may not even have been aware of. What concerned Malebranche was the lawlikeness of God’s operations, not how, precisely, that lawlikeness is brought about.

If God does everything, how are we going to defend the notion of Divine Providence against obvious objections? How, as Milton would have put the question, are we to justify the ways of God to man? The problem is addressed in Éclaircissement VIII of the Recherche, in the context of Malebranche’s explanation of original sin and its transmission. If God acted by particular volitions, says Malebranche, we would have to say that He willed every physical and moral evil that defaces and devalues our world. But this overturns all religion and morality (OCM
III 84, LO 586). If we are to continue to describe God as ‘just’, ‘wise’, and ‘benevolent’, and mean anything at all by what we say, we cannot assume that He wills every detail of the world we experience. Rather, we must say that His will is in accordance with some principle of order. Order requires that God act by means of general laws, and this mode of operation permits the occasional lapse. In the realm of organic nature, for example, we come across monsters, i.e. animals with too many or too few limbs, or with members ill-adapted to their lifestyles. Why are there monsters?

Order demands that the laws of nature by which God produces this infinite variety found in the world be very simple and small in number, as they in fact are, for this conduct bears the mark of an infinite wisdom. Now, the simplicity of these general laws produces in certain particular cases, due to the disposition of the subject, irregular kinds of motion, or rather, monstrous arrangements of them, and consequently, it is because God wills order that there are monsters. Thus, God does not will positively or directly that there should be monsters, but He wills positively certain laws of the communication of motion, of which monsters are necessary consequences.

*(OCM III 88–9, LO 589)*

Continuous creation in accordance with *volontés générales* was not a dangerous or controversial doctrine when confined to the realm of nature. What proved much more provocative, and sparked the vitriolic exchanges with Arnauld, was Malebranche’s explicit extension of the same doctrine to the theological realm of grace. The Catholic Church requires us to believe that God sincerely wills that all men be saved, but orthodoxy also accepts that many are damned. This seems – at least at first sight – inconsistent with God’s omnipotence. Jansenists such as Arnauld claim that God’s grace is always efficacious, so the reason many are damned is that God has not given them sufficient grace, which seems to imply that God does not sincerely will to save all sinners. Malebranche’s doctrine of *volontés générales* helps him to see an exit from this seeming theological impasse.

Experience suggests, says Malebranche in *Éclaircissement* XV, that grace is given to many, but that it is often inefficacious, like rain falling on stony ground (*OCM* III 220, LO 666). The analogy suggests that the distribution of grace, like that of rain, takes place in accordance with general laws rather than being given with an eye on the details of each particular case.
God’s actions are always in accordance with order, but order requires Him to act in a manner that is worthy of His attributes of wisdom and immutability. This argument, only sketched in *Éclaircissement* XV (1678), becomes the central pillar of the *Traité de la Nature et de la Grâce* (1680), and the heart of the bitter polemical exchanges with Arnauld. When we speak of God, says Malebranche in the *Traité*, we must not do so according to the ideas of the vulgar, but in accordance with our idea of an infinitely perfect Being (*OCM* V 26). Such a Being must be wise and immutable, and must act in such a way as to express these attributes. In sustaining the physical universe, He must act by a few simple and universal laws, as experience confirms. But the argument from the idea of God to His manner of action is *a priori*, not empirical, and must be equally valid in matters moral and spiritual as in matters physical (*OCM* V 32–3). This is the central argument of the entire *Traité*. God, according to Malebranche, has established the (human) soul of Jesus Christ as the occasional cause of the distribution of grace to humans, and acts Himself in accordance with the general principle ‘If Jesus wills that X receive grace, X will receive grace’. But the soul of Jesus, although united with the divine wisdom of the Word, does not have *actual* knowledge of all that God knows, with the result that the distribution of grace is not, in general, proportioned to the specific needs of particular sinners.

That grace is distributed in accordance with general laws can be demonstrated, claims Malebranche in the first *Éclaircissement* to the *Traité*, both *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Arguing *a priori*, one starts with a divine attribute such as wisdom or immutability, which is necessarily contained in the notion of a perfect Being. One then demonstrates that acting by general laws betokens greater wisdom than acting by lots of particular volitions. (A watchmaker who can design a timepiece that will run without intervention shows greater skill than one who is continually obliged to tinker with his creation.) Only a being with limited intelligence and foresight needs to act by particular volitions (*OCM* V 165–6). Arguing *a posteriori*, we notice that grace sometimes falls on hardened hearts, as rain on stony ground. But the wilful rejection of grace by the sinner increases his guilt. It follows that, if God acted by particular volitions, either His will is frustrated, or He is malicious, i.e. He deliberately and cruelly wills to make a particular sinner more culpable. But His will cannot be frustrated. So the opponent, it seems, is committed to a representation of God as cruel and partial in His operations.

This line of argument is incessantly repeated in the correspondence with Arnauld. My *Traité*, Malebranche explains, is directed against two
sets of opponents. On the one hand, there are the libertines and atheists; on the other, there are those Christian theologians who deny that God has a sincere will to save all men (OCM VI 35). The Catholic Church requires us to believe both that God wills the salvation of all men, and that many men are damned. How is this possible? Only God can resist God, so the reason why many men are damned must be found in the divine attributes. A perfect being must act by volontés générales rather than by volontés particulières. That God does so can be proved a priori (from the idea of a perfect Being), a posteriori (from experience), and by reductio (refutation of the rival theory). If God governed the world by particular acts of will, it would be a sin to run for cover when it rained, and we could re-instate trial by combat in place of the law courts, confident that God would intervene to vindicate the righteous (OCM VI 42–3). And we would be forced to conclude that God wills the salvation only of those who are in fact saved. Arnauld, according to Malebranche, may pretend to be a good Catholic, but his Jansenist principles are in fact just Calvinism in disguise (OCM VII 525ff).

**Is this the best of all possible worlds?**

Is the physical and moral universe that God has created the best world that He could have created? There are powerful reasons pressing Malebranche to answer both ‘no’ and ‘yes’. Let us examine the negative answer first. God could have created a world in which rain always falls on cultivated ground, and is never wasted by falling on stony ground or into the sea. Likewise, God could have given to each man precisely the amount of grace needed for his salvation. But to achieve such ends God would have had to employ more complex means, either in terms of more, and more complex, general laws, or in terms of a greater number of particular interventions. If we just consider the physical universe, it is ‘founded on laws of motion that are so simple and natural that it is perfectly worthy of the infinite wisdom of its author’ (OCM V 29). From the infinity of possible universes, God has chosen, we are told, the one that ‘could have produced and conserved itself by the simplest laws, or that had to be the most perfect in relation to the simplicity of the means necessary for its production or conservation’ (OCM V 28).

If we consider the universe in abstraction from the laws by which God creates and sustains it, it will be judged manifestly imperfect. Just as monsters are blemishes in the Order of nature, so are hardened sinners in the Order of grace. Arnauld objects that it is rash – not so say presumptuous – to take it upon ourselves to find fault with the work of God
What we call ‘faults’ and ‘blemishes’ must, he insists, merely reflect our ignorance of God’s intentions. Monsters, as well as perfectly formed organisms, equally manifest God’s will. If every detail of the world is the result of a particular volition on God’s part, the inference is inescapable.

Arnauld’s opinion, says Malebranche, threatens to overturn the very foundations of morality and religion ("OCM IX 766"). If we can’t trust the objectivity of our judgements of perfection (physical and moral), a terrifying prospect looms before us. Maybe our value judgements reflect only our human desires and feelings, not to say our prejudices. If every monstrous birth and every unrepentant sinner is exactly as God willed – in every particular and detail – then God’s ways are not our ways, and His ends may be utterly distinct from ours. But this is incredible. That a monster is imperfect, a failed copy of a divine plan or archetype, is simply apparent to us. To deny it is to reject the argument to design for the existence of a wise and benevolent Creator.33 If we can’t find faults in the works of God, we can’t admire His handiwork or praise His wisdom either ("OCM IX 769").34 If a creature is perfect simply because it is as God willed it, and all creatures – perfectly formed and monstrous alike – are the product of particular divine volitions, it becomes completely meaningless to praise God’s wisdom in achieving His ends.

I do not fear to say it again: the universe is not the most perfect that could exist in an absolute sense, but only the most perfect that can exist, in relation to the means most worthy of the divine attributes. There are visible defects in the works of God – in His works I say again, but not in His conduct. It is a visible defect, that a child should come into the world with superfluous members which prevent it from living.

("OCM IX 768")

To suppose that God had a particular volition to create this particular malformed infant would be, for Malebranche, a blasphemy. Rather, God owes it to Himself to act in accordance with His attributes of wisdom and immutability. His actions are always in accordance with Order, and Order requires that He care more about His own perfections than about His creatures. It is, after all, a mark of Order to love things in strict proportion to their objective degrees of perfection.

An all-perfect being must, Malebranche argues, act by the simplest of means to bring about its designs. Reliance on unnecessarily complex or cumbersome means to bring about a desired end is a mark of imperfection.
This serves to introduce the famous principle of the *simplicité des voies*. The picture here is of *simplicité des voies* as a side-constraint, limiting God’s freedom to choose among the possible universes He could create. On such a picture, the degree of perfection of each universe is independent of the means used to create it, and the *simplicité des voies* principle serves merely to exclude many possible universes (including some of the best), leaving only a small subset for God to choose from. This, however, is not Malebranche’s final view of the matter. In the ‘Letter against Prejudice’ of 1704, Malebranche provides a synopsis of his *Traité*, and an enlightening picture of the nature of God’s choice. It follows from my principles, Malebranche explains, that:

> God has not made, and did not have to make this world the most perfect that was possible, but only the most perfect that was possible with regard to the simplicity and fruitfulness of the means which He employed to produce it. Let me explain. A work with a degree of perfection of eight, or which expresses the character of the divine attributes to degree eight, produced by means which only express them to degree two, only expresses those attributes in total to degree ten. But a work with a degree of perfection of six, or which expresses the divine attributes to degree six, produced by means which also express them to degree six, expresses the divine attributes to degree twelve. Therefore, if God were choosing one of these two works, He would choose the less perfect, since the less perfect one, when combined with the means, would better display the character of His attributes, and His inviolable law is only, and can only be, the immutable order of His attributes. In a word, God honours Himself as much by the wisdom of the means as by the excellence of the works. (*OCM* IX 1085)

This explains why many aspects of creation, physical and moral alike, appear imperfect to us – we tend to notice the intrinsic perfections and imperfections of the work and to overlook the simplicity of the means employed. A little reflection, however, should serve to enlighten us. It would be contrary to Order for God not to care about His own wisdom, and not to intend to express it in His work. We can’t, perhaps, see how to do the calculation, nor how to render the various divine attributes mutually commensurable, but this merely reveals our limitations.

If the *simplicité des voies* is thus reconstrued as part of the goal rather than as a side-constraint, Malebranche can reply to the objection of
Fontenelle that he represents God as a poor workman, unable to achieve His ends. God’s true aim, for Malebranche, is the best weighted expression of His own attributes, not any particular arrangement of the created universe. This also helps Malebranche with the thorny subject of miracles. God owes it to Himself, says Malebranche, to express His wisdom and immutability in His creation. This in turn requires that He minimise the number of miracles. But the minimum number of miracles (creation aside) is zero. So if the simplicité des voies were a side-constraint, we seem to have all the premises in place for an argument terminating in pure deism. Malebranche’s opponents, starting with Bossuet and Arnauld, levelled just this accusation against him, i.e. that he was denying – at least implicitly – the miracles of scripture. But on Malebranche’s final account of the subject, this conclusion does not follow. If simplicité des voies is a part of God’s goal in creation, to be balanced against other competing desiderata, it remains at least conceivable that Order (the most balanced total expression of all the divine attributes) could permit, or even require, the occasional miracle.

Objections and replies

The non-existence of bodies

The most obvious objection to occasionalism is that, by making the material universe causally redundant, it leads directly to idealism. In his Examination of Père Malebranche’s Opinion of Seeing all Things in God, Locke raises just this charge. How, on Malebranche’s principles, Locke asks, can he know that the sun exists at all?

Did he ever see the sun? No, but on occasion of the presence of the sun to his eyes, he has seen the idea of the sun in God, which God has exhibited to him; but the sun, because it cannot be united to his soul, he cannot see. How then does he know that there is a sun which he never saw? And since God does all things by the most compendious ways, what need is there that God should make a sun that we might see its idea in him when he pleased to exhibit it, when this might as well be done without any real sun at all.

Locke’s Examination is of course a critique of the Vision in God, so it might be thought inappropriate to introduce it here. But Locke’s objection – that the Vision in God leaves Malebranche trapped in the ‘palace of ideas’ – turns precisely on the lack of any causal role for bodies in the
production of our perceptions. For Malebranche, ideas are ‘in’ God and it is ideas that cause our perceptions, leaving no causal role for tables and chairs, trees and houses. It is because Locke allows such a causal role that he thinks his theory of ideas doesn’t fall into the veil-of-ideas scepticism that threatens Malebranche.

If God produces all my sensations Himself, why should He need the prompt or reminder of an occasional cause (usually the presence of a body to my sense organs)? Since He does nothing in vain, surely it would be more economical and elegant to do without bodies altogether? The Jesuits of the Mémoires de Trévoux, no friends of Malebranche, described Berkeley as a ‘Malebranchiste de bonne foi’ (OCM XIX 834) for explicitly accepting the idealism that they saw as implicit in Malebranche’s principles.

The objection is first voiced in Éclaircissement VI of the Recherche, and receives its fullest treatment in the sixth of the Entretiens. In the former work, Malebranche admits frankly that it is very difficult to prove that bodies exist (OCM III 53, LO 568). In philosophy, Malebranche has instructed us, we should only believe what has been demonstrated with geometrical rigour, propositions we cannot doubt without suffering ‘the secret reproaches of Reason’, as he puts it. But the existence of a material world is not demonstrable. The direct or immediate object of my acquaintance when I open my eyes is not the material universe but an ‘intelligible’ world, with its own ‘intelligible’ space, filled with ‘intelligible’ bodies (OCM III 61, LO 572–3). I find myself, of course, as Descartes reminded us in the Sixth Meditation, spontaneously believing in an external world of material things, but this penchant extrême à croire is a matter of conviction rather than of evidence. And we know that our natural judgements lead us astray in other matters, such as our tendency to ‘project’ sensible qualities such as red and hot and sweet, to suppose that these mere sensations are objective qualities of bodies.

Our erroneous judgements about secondary qualities, Malebranche replies, can readily be corrected by reason, whereas it is impossible to demonstrate by reasoning that bodies do not exist. The balance of probabilities must therefore favour belief: God has given us a strong propensity to believe in bodies, and it would be hard to absolve Him of the charge of deceit if such natural judgements were all erroneous. But this reasoning, which is a variant on Descartes’ proof of the external world in Meditation Six (albeit deprived of its causal element) is still a matter of plausibility rather than a strict proof. Given that God was not obliged to create the material universe, its existence can only be contingent, and therefore not demonstrable a priori. So if the existence
of bodies can be proved neither *a priori* (from the idea of God) nor *a posteriori* (from experience) it remains, as far as unaided reason is concerned, merely plausible. It is to faith, i.e. to scripture, that we must turn at last for full assurance that God created the heavens and the earth, and that the Word was made flesh (*OCM* III 64, LO 574).

In the sixth of the *Entretiens*, Theodore explains to Ariste that God, and not material things, is the true cause of all our sensations. The quick-witted young pupil promptly replies that he has just had a very strange thought:

> I almost dare not suggest it to you, for I fear that you will consider me a visionary. It is that I am beginning to doubt that bodies exist. 

(*OCM* XII 136, JS 94)

When Ariste demands a strict demonstration of the existence of bodies, Theodore responds that this is asking too much:

> ‘An exact demonstration’! That is a little too much, Aristes. I confess I do not have one. On the contrary, it seems to me that I have an ‘exact demonstration’ of the impossibility of such a demonstration.

(*OCM* XII 136, JS 95)

The notion of an absolutely or infinitely perfect being, Theodore explains, does not include the notion of creation. Since God is sufficient to Himself, creation is a free act of His will rather than a necessary emanation from His essence. So the existence of the material universe is a contingent fact that cannot be demonstrated *a priori*. Our confidence in the real existence of bodies must rest ultimately on revelation.

Revelation, Theodore continues, comes in two varieties, ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’. The natural revelation of the material world is provided by my senses. The senses do, admittedly, give rise to errors and confusions – we do sometimes confuse mere phantasms with real things – but this gives us no reason for a *general* doubt of the existence of bodies. On the contrary, says Theodore, my sensations of the external world pass a coherence test: they are ‘so consistent, so linked together, so well ordered, that it seems to me certain that God would be deceiving us if there were nothing in everything we see’ (*OCM* XII 142, JS 99).

Our sensations come with built-in natural judgements concerning the real existence and properties of external objects. These natural judgements are only plausible, never evident. But in the case of our judgements of
sizes, shapes and distances we have no general reason to doubt them, and we find that (with a few exceptions, dismissed as ‘dreams’ and ‘hallucinations’) they pass a coherence test. Given these natural facts, says Theodore, no actual person entertains a genuine and sincere doubt of the existence of bodies (OCM XII 143, JS 100). But for complete certainty we still need to turn to faith. Our confident certainty of the existence of bodies thus rests, for Malebranche, on two different forms of revelation (sensation and scripture) and on two different coherence tests (of sensory beliefs with one another, and of sensory beliefs with the revealed Word of God).

Locke, we have seen, had a point. By denying the supposed causal connection between bodies and minds, Malebranche takes away the naïve, common-sense route to belief in an external world. In place of a simple inference from effect (sensation) to cause (external object), Malebranche leaves us with a web of natural judgements, coherent with one another for the most part but drawing external support only from the supernatural revelation of scripture. Small wonder that Malebranche was one of the ancestors of various idealist strands in modern philosophy.

**Is occasionalism incompatible with mechanism?**

In Cartesian physics, there is a powerful element of philosophical rationalism, a pressing *a priori* demand that all explanations in physics be couched in terms of our clear and distinct ideas. This appeal to clear and distinct ideas was taken to rule out action at a distance as unintelligible. Bodies, the Cartesians tell us, are moved only by impulse and pressure. This Cartesian physics is explicitly endorsed by Malebranche in Chapter Eight of Book Six of the *Recherche* (OCM II 400ff, LO 498ff). He goes on to apply it to the phenomena of magnetism and of muscular contraction, both of which are explained in terms of the mechanical action of currents of subtle matter.

But this Cartesian physics seems to depend on our possession of some kind of rational insight into real causal powers. The Cartesian mechanist thinks that only the impact of another, moving body *can* set a previously resting body in motion. It is far from obvious that Malebranche, given his commitment to occasionalism, can endorse this argument. If the true cause of all bodily motions is the will of God, why should He be under any obligation to establish laws of motion in which contact invariably plays the role of the occasional cause? Why not some form of action at a distance? This objection is voiced by Fontenelle in his response (1686) to Bayle’s reply to his *Doutes sur le sistème physique des
If, asks Fontenelle, there is nothing in the moving body that qualifies it to be the real cause of the ensuing motion of the struck body, why should contact be required at all?

I shall suppose therefore that God, instead of establishing collision as the occasional cause of the communication of motions, has established as the occasional cause the passage of two bodies to a certain distance from one another, for example to a line which is the mean proportional between their diameters. The entire order of the material universe would then depend on this new principle.43

Let body A, of 1 inch diameter, approach body B, of 2 inches in diameter. Then, on this proposed principle, they will rebound as soon as the distance between them reaches $\sqrt{2}$ inches. But, says Fontenelle, we see no ‘liaison naturelle et nécessaire’ in such a case, in sharp contrast to the case of collision, in which the impenetrability of the colliding bodies necessitates some redistribution of their motions. When A strikes B, says Fontenelle,

... I see that it is absolutely necessary that some change or other must take place; and the necessity of this change is not derived from the will of God, for according to the hypothesis He would still move A and B in the same way if nothing external to Him opposed this, but it is derived from the nature of bodies and from their impenetrability, which is absolutely opposed to the continuation of the movement of A and of B as it was previously.44

There is then, in Fontenelle’s eyes at least, a necessary connection between the natures of bodies A and B (their impenetrability), and contact–action, which connection is lacking for action at a distance. The nature of bodies, he infers, plays a real causal role which the occasionalist cannot account for.

This is a powerful argument against occasionalism. The occasionalist, it seems, will be forced to say that the two types of action are essentially the same, and that impenetrability itself is only an ‘institution’, i.e. the consequence of a divine decree rather than a real causal power. Ariste comes close to this in the seventh of the Entretiens:

Thus one body cannot move another by an efficacy belonging to its nature. If bodies had in themselves the force to move
themselves, the stronger would – as efficient causes – overcome those bodies they encountered. But, as a body is moved only by another body, their encounter is only an occasional cause which, in virtue of their impenetrability, obliges the mover or creator to distribute His action. And because God must act in a simple and uniform manner, He had to formulate laws which were general and as simple as possible, in order that when change was necessary He changed as little as possible and, at the same time, produced an infinity of different effects …

\textit{(O\textsc{cm} XII 164, JS 119)}

The suggestion here is that the impenetrability of bodies obliges God to make some change or other to the motions of colliding bodies, but that nothing in the intrinsic features of the bodies determines God’s precise choices.\textsuperscript{45} But this can only be part of the story. Even impenetrability cannot, for a strict occasionalist, be a real power residing in bodies and compelling God to act in certain ways. On the contrary, occasionalism requires that impenetrability itself be only an ‘institution’, a consequence of a divine decree and nothing more. But then, Fontenelle can ask, what exactly is a body, over and above a mere geometrical figure? Does it have any intrinsic nature of its own? This line of enquiry would lead Leibniz – another perceptive critic of Malebranche – towards a genuine dynamics of moving bodies.\textsuperscript{46}

The most acute and incisive reply to Fontenelle was provided by Pierre Bayle. If God had established Fontenelle’s imagined law then, says Bayle, men would simply have come to believe that the approach of A was the true cause of the motion of B. We are led by our nature, as if ‘instructed by a natural lesson’, to judge that regular succession indicates real causation \textit{(O\textsc{cm}, XVII–1 591)}. So whichever system of laws God chooses to establish, the occasionalist can continue to insist that God is the only true cause, while acknowledging that we will spontaneously find ourselves attributing natural powers to creatures – contact action in one case, action at a distance in the other.

In contact action, it seems, the change of state of the colliding bodies follows necessarily from their nature (impenetrability). This, says Bayle, the occasionalist can grant. But Fontenelle wants us to conclude that the collision is the real cause of the redistribution of motions, not just the occasion for that change. This, replies Bayle, does not follow. In creating impenetrable bodies, God establishes certain rules for Himself:
It is therefore quite possible that the collision, or the nature of bodies, is at the same time the occasional cause, and nothing more, of the communication of motions, and that God is obliged by such an occasion to move bodies in a certain manner. 

("OCM XVII–1 592")

As regards the ontological issue of the real existence or otherwise of natural powers, Bayle’s defence of occasionalism against Fontenelle seems conclusive. What it is for bodies to be impenetrable is simply for God to have established certain rules for His continuous re-creation of bodies and the re-distribution of the modes of local motion. The epistemological issue, however, remains unresolved. Given that occasionalism seems to place no a priori constraints on the rules God could choose to employ, how can we be so confident that He has in fact chosen contact–action rules alone? Malebranche exudes confidence on this point, and his disciples were prominent in the French resistance to Newtonian physics, but the principles of occasionalism seem to rule out any attempt to exclude action at a distance from physics on a priori grounds. It is true, of course, that we find contact–action easier to comprehend than action at a distance, but this may be only a matter of human psychology.

A theological parallel may help to reinforce this point, that occasionalism places no a priori constraints on (occasional) causes. Our intuitions tell us that an effect cannot precede its cause. But, as Malebranche sees, the occasionalist is at liberty to deny this. On Malebranche’s account of grace, the prayers of Jesus Christ are the occasional cause of God’s distribution of the gift of grace. But what of the grace received by the Old Testament patriarchs? On occasionalist principles, Malebranche replies, this objection is deprived of all force ("OCM V 158"). Since the cause (occasion) has no power or efficacy of its own, and no necessary connection with the effect, why should it not be the case that Abraham receives grace in 1000 BC because Christ prays for him in 30 AD? Since God is omniscient, He knows, at the former time, that Christ will pray for Abraham at the latter time, and God wills timelessly to distribute grace in accordance with Christ’s prayers. Malebranche admits that such backwards causation seems ‘contrary to order’, and doesn’t insist on the truth of this bizarre hypothesis, but on his principles it remains perfectly possible. The example serves to illustrate the tension between occasionalism and causal rationalism, as applied to occasional causes. The doctrine of occasionalism as we have seen, results from the application of causal rationalism to real (metaphysical) causation. But if occasionalism is correct, everyday ‘causal’ laws are just divine institutions,
which need not fall under any *a priori* constraints. Unless we can lay down rules for God, we may have to make greater and greater concessions to Humean empiricism.49

**God is the author of sin**

In *Éclaircissement* XV of the *Recherche*, Malebranche lists a battery of arguments for the reality of second causes and against occasionalism. The sixth of these ‘proofs’ of second causes is based on morality. Human moral responsibility, we are told, requires the existence of a real causal power in the will; the occasionalist, by denying any such power, makes God the author of sin (OCM III 224, LO 668). Malebranche’s reply to this charge will be discussed in detail in Chapter Nine; here, we shall just sketch the outline of his defence. Let us take an undoubtedly criminal action such as a wilful murder, and consider the implications of the doctrine of continuous creation. God re-creates the murderer’s body from moment to moment, including the hand that holds the knife. But the mere positions and motions of bodies are morally neutral; in them alone there can be no sin. God also re-creates the killer’s soul from moment to moment, including the modes that are his rage and his desire to kill. But, Malebranche insists, the sin lies not in the inclination *per se*, but in the sinner’s acceptance and endorsement of it, in his failure to resist the temptation. It is only this second-order state that is the criminal’s responsibility, and this state is not itself a mode of the soul and contains, as Malebranche puts it, ‘rien de physique’. So God re-creates the murderer’s soul with all its modes, but He does not create, and is therefore not responsible for, the murderer’s giving way to an evil temptation.

**Everything is miraculous**

The fifth of the ‘proofs’ of second causes listed and rebutted in *Éclaircissement* XV is that, on Malebranche’s principles, all events would be miracles:

If bodies did not have a certain *nature* or *force* to act, and if God did all things, there would be only the supernatural in even the most ordinary effects. The distinction between the natural and the supernatural, which is so widely accepted and which is established by the universal assent of the learned, would be extravagant and chimerical.

(OCM III 222–3, LO 667)
If the distinction between natural and supernatural events rested properly on the assumption of natural powers, Malebranche admits, this objection would be well-founded. Define a supernatural event as one that transcends the powers of creatures and it will evidently follow from occasionalism that, since there are no such powers, everything that happens is supernatural.\(^{50}\) But the correct conclusion to draw from this is that the distinction had not been well drawn in the first place. The events we call ‘natural’ are those brought about by God in accordance with general laws, while those we call ‘supernatural’ require particular volitions.\(^{51}\) The ‘nature’ of the pagans, so prominent in the philosophy of Aristotle, is indeed a chimera. But the distinction between natural and supernatural, properly drawn, remains in force.\(^{52}\) We shall return to this issue in Chapter Ten.

**Scripture acknowledges natural powers**

The seventh supposed ‘proof’ of natural causes starts from scripture (\(OCM\) III 229–30, LO 672). It is easy enough, of course, for opponents of occasionalism to cite passages from scripture that speak of second causes as if they possessed genuine powers. When the Bible speaks of the earth bringing forth fruit, or of animals being commanded to increase and multiply, the most natural reading of such passages is in terms of delegated powers. But, Malebranche retorts, there are also many passages in scripture that attribute natural events directly to the will of God. How are we to resolve this apparent inconsistency?

Where scripture speaks with the vulgar, i.e. in accordance with the prejudices of the ordinary unreflective man, we should, Malebranche recommends, employ the doctrine of accommodation. In such passages the Word is accommodating itself to vulgar opinions. On the other hand, where scripture flatly contradicts vulgar opinions and prejudices (e.g. by ascribing natural events directly to God) it must be read literally.

This argument is repeated in the correspondence with Arnauld, where Malebranche sets out his view about the relation between the first cause and second causes (\(OCM\) VII 543–4). There are, Malebranche explains, three possible accounts. One could believe (1) that creatures act by their own delegated powers, independently of God; (2) that God’s ‘concourse’ is necessary for the operation of all second causes; or (3) that God is the only true cause (occasionalism). Account (1) is rejected by theologians as un-Christian, and can be shown by philosophical argument to be impossible. Account (2), the ‘concourse’ theory, is commonly endorsed by Christian theologians, but is dismissed by Malebranche as both
unintelligible and contrary to scripture. It is unintelligible because a creature cannot be said to have a causal power if it can’t act independently. But if God’s willing X is both necessary and sufficient for X, what does the supposed power of the creature amount to? The ‘concourse’ theory, in Malebranche’s view, is unstable, and must collapse either into deism or into occasionalism. It is un-scriptural for two reasons. In the first place, it is nowhere found in the pages of scripture. More importantly, however, it is inconsistent with those passages of scripture in which natural events are attributed directly to God’s will. (OCM VIII 700–3). The only account of the relation between the first cause and (so-called) second causes which is both intelligible in its own right, and compatible with the most plausible reading of scripture, is occasionalism.