

# Causation, Intentionality, and the Case for Occasionalism

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*Abstract:* Despite their influence on later philosophers such as Hume, Malebranche's central arguments for occasionalism remain deeply puzzling. Both the famous 'no necessary connection' argument and what I call the epistemic argument include assumptions – e.g., that a true cause is logically necessarily connected to its effect – that seem unmotivated, even in their context. I argue that a proper understanding of late scholastic views lets us see why Malebranche would make this assumption. Both arguments turn on the claim that a volition is the only candidate for a cause, because only a volition can include an effect as its intentional content.

In *The Search After Truth*, Malebranche produces his most famous argument for occasionalism, which Hume was to make his own.<sup>1</sup>

A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection (*liaison necessaire*) between it and its effect. Now the mind perceives a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects. Therefore, it is only God who is the true cause and who truly has the power to move bodies. (SAT VI.ii.3: 450)<sup>2</sup>

For any two finite objects or events a and b, a causal connection between them could obtain only if those events were necessarily connected. But if there were such a necessary connection, it would be im-

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<sup>1</sup> *Treatise* I.iii.14 in Hume 1978, 161–2: “Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to conceive any connexion betwixt them, or comprehend distinctly that power or efficacy by which they are united. Such a connexion wou'd amount to a demonstration, and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be conceived not to follow upon the other: which kind of connexion has already been rejected in all cases”. For the rejection of the possibility of demonstrative proof in this context, to which Hume alludes, see I.iii.7. For more on Hume and Malebranche, see McCracken 1983.

<sup>2</sup> References to *The Search After Truth* ('SAT') are to Malebranche 1997 and are in the following form: book, chapter, section: page number. References to untranslated works are to the relevant volume in Malebranche 1958–84 ('OC'). For other statements of NNC, see OC V 27 and OC X 64.

possible to conceive of a's occurring without b. God's will and its effects aside, we can always conceive of this happening; thus there is no necessary connection, and hence no genuine *causal* connection, between a and b. Following Steven Nadler's 1996 paper, we can call this the 'no necessary connection' argument, or NNC for short.

The real puzzle about this kind of argument has never been its form or structure but rather who is supposed to be bothered by it. Even if we accept that the connection between two events is not logically necessary, why should anyone believe that it is not a bona fide instance of causation?<sup>3</sup> It is similarly hard to see why anyone would accept that conceivability, even if it is a guide to logical necessity, could tell us anything at all about the natural world and its causal structure.

Writing in 1990, Nicholas Jolley noted that "[t]oday it is natural to object that while genuine causal connections are indeed necessary, the necessity in question is not logical."<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, Steven Nadler argues that Malebranche's identification of logical with causal necessity "does seem strange today, and, I suggest, *should* have seemed strange to a seventeenth century Cartesian." For between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, "there was a clear and dominant philosophical tendency to distinguish causal or natural necessity – grounded in the operations of real efficient causes – from logical necessity."<sup>5</sup> Thus NNC seems directed at a strawman.<sup>6</sup>

But this should lead us to question, not Malebranche's understanding of his philosophical adversaries, but our own. I shall argue that Malebranche in fact gets it right: his philosophical opponents, and a key strand of scholasticism in particular, do indeed hold that causation requires logical, not nomological, necessitation. This is the burden of §1 below.

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<sup>3</sup> This is granting, as causal singularists would not, that any instance of causation falls under a law of nature in a non-trivial sense.

<sup>4</sup> Jolley 1990, 230.

<sup>5</sup> Nadler 2000, 114. Nadler indicates in a footnote that he takes Aquinas to be among the exemplars of this tendency.

<sup>6</sup> Although my concern is mainly with Malebranche's use of the argument, I should note here that the same problems have also been discussed in the context of Hume. In his 2002, Boulter claims that the condemnation's insistence on God's omnipotence threatened the existence of nomological necessity. Roughly, if God can bring about any effect at all without the cooperation of secondary causes, as the condemnation claims, this dissolves any necessary connection between effects. I argue against Boulter's view below (§1).

Solving this problem leads us straight into another. Even if the conflation of logical and causal necessity is intelligible in its context, why is Malebranche so quick to deny that finite relata, and bodies in particular, can be causes? In the passage just quoted, for example, there is no explicit argument for ruling out finite causal relata: it is just supposed to be obvious that nothing but God's will can live up to the necessity criterion. But it would have been anything but obvious to Suárez or Aquinas.<sup>7</sup>

Thus in §2, I argue that Malebranche's dismissal of bodies as causes makes sense only if the requisite tie between cause and effect involves intentionality. Only by means of this kind of intrinsic directedness can an object or event pick out or be directed toward its cause. Having taken over key elements of the scholastic conception of causation, Malebranche finds that in the context of mechanism nothing but God's will can fit this conception. Several of Malebranche's arguments bear the stamp of this line of thought.<sup>8</sup> To see this, we shall have to explore the scholastic notion of power, which underwrites the necessary connection between causes and effects. A power is characterized by its '*esse-ad*' or 'being-toward', its intrinsic directedness toward non-actual states of affairs. Malebranche (following Descartes) rejects the attribution of powers to bodies on the grounds that *esse-ad* amounts to intentionality, a feature only minds possess. The flip side of this, however, is that Malebranche accepts the need for precisely the kind of connection intentionality alone can provide. What makes a divine volition a suitable causal relatum is the intentional nature that ties it to its effects, since the propositional content of a divine volition *just is* that volition's effect.

These insights can help us understand another of Malebranche's puzzling arguments. Finite minds, he claims, cannot cause physical events. Although it is clear that any finite mind, lacking omnipotence, cannot live up to the demands Malebranche places on causes, he does

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<sup>7</sup> This is a bit quick, since, as I explain below, the concurrentist position regards the necessary connection as holding between the powers of objects *plus* God's concurrence on one hand and the effect on the other.

<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the line of thought I develop below, which links at least three of Malebranche's arguments (what we shall call the 'epistemic argument', the 'little souls argument', and NNC), lies behind, or is directly connected with, other argumentative strategies one can discern in the texts. I am of course aware, for example, that Malebranche offers several explicitly theological arguments, including the argument from leeks and onions: attributing causal powers to bodies would require us to worship them, and thus commits us to paganism. I shall not discuss such arguments here.

not rely solely on this consideration to challenge the causal power of minds. Instead, Malebranche offers what I shall call the ‘epistemic argument’: if a mind were to cause the motion of, say, one’s arm, it would have to will the temporal antecedents of that event, which include brain events. But we seem to move our arms all the time in the absence of such knowledge; so whatever the cause is, it cannot be our minds.

The usual story about this argument is that it relies on Malebranche’s doctrine of blind will. For Malebranche, the will is a blind faculty that requires the understanding to direct it. Human minds cannot cause physical events for want of the knowledge of the workings of the animal spirits and nerves. But, as I shall show, the doctrine of blind will goes no distance at all toward justifying Malebranche’s conclusion. If the mind cannot will the motion of the animal spirits as such, it can surely will the motion of one’s limbs. Why should we believe that a mind must will all the antecedents of a physical event in order to will the result? In §3, I show how the epistemic argument comes into focus if we assume, with Malebranche, that a cause must include its effect as its intentional object. This alone lets us see why Malebranche thinks finite minds cannot be causes.

### §1. *Logical and Causal Necessity*

Let us begin with our first problem with NNC. If Nadler *et al.* are correct, Malebranche’s argument is comically wide of the mark, since none, or very few, of his interlocutors holds that causation is logical necessitation. And the rarity of the conflation of logical and nomological necessity, it is implied, is what one should suspect, since it is a very odd view even on its own terms. The natural and most common position on causation, then, involves a distinction between logical and non-logical necessities, and the scholastics, particularly Aquinas, were not so foolish as to run the two together.

For my part, I think the claim that Aristotelianism has at its core a commitment to nomological necessity is deeply wrong-headed. I shall argue that the typical Aristotelian position holds that sub-lunary events are linked by what we would call logical necessity: it is a contradiction, and hence inconceivable, that a cause not produce its effect. I shall also argue that this view is not nearly as odd or indefensible as first appears.

The core position, traceable back to Aristotle, is based on the connection between a form and an object’s powers. A substance does what

it does in virtue of its form. That fire burns is an analytic truth, although one that can only be discovered through experience. Fire that failed to burn would, for that reason, simply not be fire. Ordinary transeunt actions, of course, require two substances, so to be precise, we should say that fire has the power to burn objects endowed with the appropriate passive power. This rough and ready characterization would need to be refined considerably to stand as an interpretation of Aristotle. But let us look instead to the scholastics and the dominant view, found in both Aquinas and Suárez: concurrentism.<sup>9</sup>

Briefly, concurrentism holds that one and the same effect can be ascribed both to God and to natural agents.<sup>10</sup> God, as the primary cause, is responsible for the *esse* of individual beings; creatures, as the secondary cause, are responsible for the properties of those beings. Aquinas writes,

The order of effects is according to the order of causes. Now the first of all effects is being, for all others are determinations of being. Therefore being is the proper effect of the first agent, and all other agents produce it by the power of the first agent. Furthermore secondary agents which, as it were, particularize and determine the action of the first agent, produce, as their proper effects, the other perfections which determine being. (SCG ch.66: 1945 vol.2, 119).

The typical metaphor by which Aquinas explains this curious dual contribution of God and secondary cause is that of craftsman and tool. The tool or instrument by itself does not produce, and is not a sufficient cause, of, say, the wood being carved thus-and-so. Its power depends on the power of the craftsman using it. Nevertheless, that the wood is carved thus-and-so depends partly on the craftsman and partly on the instrument, for which instrument he uses, no less than how he moves his hands, will determine how the wood is shaped. “The whole effect proceeds from [both God and the natural agent], yet in different ways, just as the whole of one and the same effect is ascribed to the instrument, and again the whole is ascribed to the principal agent.”<sup>11</sup> If there were no true secondary causes, there would be no diversity in God’s effects, since God is immutable. Secondary causes are required if God

<sup>9</sup> Scholasticism is, of course, hardly a uniform body of doctrine. But I think concurrentism can claim to be the dominant trend within scholasticism, particularly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The importance of Suárez as an influence on early modern Cartesians has been emphasized by a number of writers, including Dennis Des Chene, Daniel Garber, Jorge Secada, Norman Wells, and others.

<sup>10</sup> See *Summa Contra Gentiles* (henceforth ‘SCG’) ch.70 in Aquinas 1945 vol.2, 129–30, and in the relevant volume of Aquinas 1882–.

<sup>11</sup> SCG ch. 70 in Aquinas 1945 vol.2, 130.

wishes to produce anything other than that which is, like him, immutable and uniform.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike conservationism, which holds that God merely conserves bodies while their powers operate autonomously, concurrentism requires that God also, as it were, work through the powers of the objects he creates and conserves. And unlike occasionalism, which takes God to be the only real cause, concurrentism assigns genuine causal powers to objects, though these powers are exercised only when God works through his creatures to bring about an effect. But how is it possible for a substance to serve as a secondary efficient cause, if God is nevertheless the ultimate source of all power? Isn't this a case of overdetermination?

Suárez deals with this objection in the course of defending concurrentism from occasionalism. Suárez grants that overdetermination is impossible; that is, it is contradictory "for the same action to proceed simultaneously from more than one total cause", where 'total cause' refers to the sufficient condition for a given event. Unlike two total causes, however, the primary and secondary cause "belong to different orders and are essentially ordered to one another."<sup>13</sup> Just as an ordinary object exists in the fullest sense while depending on God for its existence, so an object's power can depend on that of God without being demoted to a power in name only.

It is a matter of dispute in the context of late scholasticism whether (and in what sense) a substantial form acts by itself, or only through its accidents. A further question is whether there are accidents that are not mere instruments to the substantial form. Some of the issues here turn on precisely what one makes of the Eucharist.<sup>14</sup> The crucial claims for our purposes are these: whatever created being acts, acts by virtue of God's concurrence; and created powers are either accidents alone (as in the case of the Eucharistic accidents), *propria* (accidents that follow as a matter of necessity from the substantial form), or substantial forms themselves.

The natural world thus appears, much as it did to Aristotle, as a network of causal powers, the combination of which decides the outcome of any event. The scholastics, of course, accord God primacy of place in the causal structure; but, as we have seen, they deny that God acts alone

<sup>12</sup> SCG ch. 69 in Aquinas 1945 vol.2, 125: "[I]f God works alone in all things, then, since God is not changed through working in various things, no diversity will follow among the effects through the diversity of the things in which God works."

<sup>13</sup> MD 18, 1: 41. References to Suárez are to *Disputationes Metaphysicae* ('MD') in Suárez 1965 and follow this format: disputation number, section: page number in Suárez 1994. Translations are those of Freddoso in Suárez 1994.

<sup>14</sup> See MD 18, 6: 128.

in bringing about natural effects. Once God concurs with a created being's powers, as he does in the majority of cases, it is those powers that 'particularize and determine' the *esse* God provides. It is true that Aristotle often spoke as if the course events had a bit of play in it, as if it were not in what Simon Blackburn has called a 'straitjacket'. For he sometimes writes of that which happens 'always or for the most part'<sup>15</sup>, which suggests some flexibility in the nexus of powers.

This is easily reconciled with a thoroughgoing determinism, however.<sup>16</sup> For when a given action fails to take place, the requisite passive power on the side of the patient might not have been present, as when one animal fails to impregnate another.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the language of 'total cause' seems to have been developed precisely to capture these necessary conditions. In any event, it is clear that, in the realm of non-human phenomena, the Aristotelian view as developed by Suárez and Aquinas entails determinism. For once the requisite active and passive powers are instantiated, and God concurs with these powers, it is a contradiction, and hence a logical impossibility, that the proper event not result. I should emphasize that, on my reading, the first relatum of the logically necessary connection is not the secondary cause alone but that cause plus God's concurrence. Concurrentists and occasionalists agree that without God's activity, no event can happen. Where they differ is on the cooperative causal role of creatures.

I must now defend this reading against two objections, one philosophical, one historical. The philosophical objection is simply that in reading the scholastics as taking causal necessity to be a species of logical necessity, I have done them a disservice. For this then turns their view into a bare tautology. If one packs everything needed to generate a given event into the putative cause, of course that effect will be generated. By appealing to the total cause, cashed out in terms of the instantiation of the relevant active and passive powers plus God's concurrence,

<sup>15</sup> See *Physics* II.v.

<sup>16</sup> I should emphasize that my discussion of Aristotle and the scholastics is limited to the natural world. I do not mean to imply anything about the positions of these figures on the causal roles of human agents or the free will debate.

<sup>17</sup> See Suárez MD 19, 1: 281: "[N]atural causes can, as we have explained, impede one another through resistance or through a contrary action, and in this way they are also capable of removing all the things that are required for acting. But once these things have been posited, natural causes cannot prevent the action of a necessary agent, since they do not have the power to change the nature of things or to remove wholly intrinsic properties." For more on the late scholastic debate, see Leijenhorst 2002, 182f.

I have drained any significance from what seemed like a bold causal hypothesis.<sup>18</sup> And philosophical objections like this one are often transformed into interpretive or historical objections: shouldn't we apply the principle of charity, and look for some other interpretation?

This objection is revealing, since it stems from a conception of analyticity that we owe to modern empiricism. It is only by assuming that all analytic truths are true by virtue of convention, and so can in principle tell us nothing about the way the world is, that the objection threatens the Aristotelian view as I have construed it. And to use this view in evaluating the Aristotelians is to ignore their quite different view of concept acquisition and application.

There are two ways to put the objection. First, one might say that on my reading of the scholastics, a claim like 'fire burns paper' amounts to something like 'if everything necessary for fire to burn paper is present, then it will burn.' This of course is tautological. But it is not the scholastic view. Nowhere in a true causal statement would one find such a blanket conditional whose antecedent ranges over the total cause described as such.

This is not to say that a true causal statement is not logically necessary (because analytic). There is no possible world in which God concurs with a given power, the empowered object is in the presence of others with the requisite passive powers, and that power does not bring about its defining effect. For this is precisely what makes a power the power it is. The negation of a true causal claim is a contradiction.

There is another way to put this objection. Analytic propositions are knowable *a priori* because the (concept of) the predicate is contained in the (concept of) the subject. But it is hard to believe that the truths of natural science can be discovered by reflecting on our concepts. If causal claims were necessary in this way, natural science would be, as Stephen Mumford puts it, "a trivially analytic human folly."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> It is significant that Malebranche's claim that God's will is necessarily connected with its effects was subjected to the same charge of triviality by, e.g., Fontenelle and Hume. See Pyle 2003, 100f. That Malebranche's positive view on causation would be attacked along similar lines is not surprising, since, as I argue below, Malebranche preserves key elements of the scholastic conception of causation.

<sup>19</sup> Mumford's target is the view of Ellis and Lierse, who argue that the laws of nature are logically necessary because they are fixed by the dispositions of physical objects. Mumford claims that, like the Aristotelians, Ellis and Lierse take statements like 'x is an electron  $\leftrightarrow$  has behavior B' to be logically necessary. But, Mumford 1998, 237, argues, this is deeply mistaken: "[t]hat a particular possesses any disposition is logically contingent, even though some particulars, such as



This point seems compelling only if we neglect the Aristotelian account of concept formation. True causal claims are, on this view, *a priori* in the justificatory, not genetic, sense. Although the mind must undergo a complex set of experiences and operations to grasp the relevant concepts, causal claims are ultimately justified by virtue of the connections between essences, as captured in the abstracted concepts.

We get into a position to know causal claims not by stipulating definitions but by recognizing the true natures of the objects involved, a goal that can only be attained through repeated experience, under different conditions, of those objects.<sup>20</sup> Such experience allows the intellect to distinguish the complex of attributes essential to a thing's being what it is – its substantial form or organizing principle – from its accidental or nonessential characteristics.<sup>21,22</sup> The scientific concept of a

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electrons, would not have been classed as such if they had different behavior. To deny this would be to claim that an electron's behavior is dictated by logic and, presumably, that physics is a trivially analytic human folly."

<sup>20</sup> To see this, we can briefly consider the scholastic conception of science, as sketched by Aquinas in his *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* (CPA; subsequent citations of this work will include the book and lecture number, followed by page number in Aquinas 1970). *Scientia* is not knowledge of contingent truths but of "that which cannot be otherwise" (CPA I.9: 31). A demonstration makes a necessary conclusion known from necessary principles or premises, which themselves are better known than the conclusion (CPA I.6: 24). Thus the premises and conclusion of a demonstrative syllogism must contain predications *per se* ("i.e., in virtue of itself") (CPA I.9: 32) and not *per accidens*, since the latter are not necessary (CPA I.13: 43). Further, these predications must be universal, or "said of all" (CPA I.9: 32); if true, they will be true by *de re* definition (CPA I.13: 43). To sum up: scientific knowledge consists in a body of syllogistic demonstration that moves from a set of necessarily true premises to an equally necessary conclusion.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle writes, "[A]ll animals [...] have a connate discriminatory capacity, which is called perception. And if perception is present in them, in some animals retention of the percept comes about, but in others it does not come about. Now for those in which it does not come about, there is no knowledge outside perceiving [...]; but for some perceivers, it is possible to grasp it in their minds. And when many such things come about, then a difference comes about, so that some come to have an account from the retention of such things, and others do not. So from perception there comes memory, as we call it, and from memory [...], experience; for memories that are many in number from a single experience. And from experience, or from the whole universal that has come to rest in the soul [...], there comes a principle of skill and of understanding" (*Posterior Analytics* 99b35–100a9 in Aristotle 1984 vol.1, 164–6). See Aquinas 1970, 237.

<sup>22</sup> This point has been developed at length by Richard Sorabji in an effort to show that Aristotelian essences and the causal laws that flow from them are *de re* rather than analytic. See his 1980, 200f. This is true enough if we take analyticity to amount to truth by stipulation, as I do not.

natural kind is nothing but a more thorough and perspicuous working out of what was already present in the mind when it had initial perceptual contact with instances of that kind. Only the modern empiricist assumption that all analytic truths are true by convention stands in the way of grasping these simple points.

Thus despite being an empiricist, the Aristotelian does not think that concepts can be formed in anything like the *modern* empiricist fashion. When in perceptual contact with a thing, its intentional species is present in the mind. As Aquinas puts it, “the intellect, according to its own mode, receives under conditions of immateriality and immobility the species of material and movable bodies.”<sup>23</sup> The reply to this second form of the objection is clear: although true causal claims are *a priori* in the justificatory sense, this does not mean that one can simply define them into existence, or learn them from one’s armchair.

At this point a historical objection to my account of the scholastics might be raised. Doesn’t the logical necessity of causal claims conflict with God’s omnipotence? Surely most, if not all, scholastics are committed to the literal truth of Biblical miracles, as in the case of Daniel iii, where God prevents the furnace from incinerating three young men, while the soldiers pursuing them burn?

This is an important question, and not only from a textual point of view. For it can be tempting to see NNC’s conflation of distinct forms of necessity as arising from the medievals’ insistence on divine omnipotence rather than from the Aristotelian worldview I have just sketched. Stephen Boulter has recently argued for precisely this position with regard to Hume’s use of NNC, which he calls “theology’s Trojan horse.” On Boulter’s view, as on Nadler’s, the dominant scholastic tradition as expressed particularly in Aquinas held that causality was governed by natural necessity. But, Boulter argues, this nomological necessity was deemed a threat to God’s omnipotence and was rejected in the Condemnation of 1277. Thus “[t]he theologically grounded rationale for what appears to be a conflation of logical and natural necessity was the claim that if some state of affairs is logically possible (or conceivable) it is *ipso facto* physically possible because God’s omnipotence allows Him to bring about *any* state of affairs save those that violate the principle of non-contradiction.”<sup>24</sup>

Now, I have already argued that there simply was no golden age of Aristotelian nomological necessity. And I shall go on to show that,

<sup>23</sup> ST I q.84 art.1, in Aquinas 1945 vol. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Boulter 2002, 77.

however important the Condemnation of 1277 was in the context of medieval philosophy, the dominant view, running from Aquinas in the mid thirteenth century to Suárez in the late sixteenth, maintains the logical necessity of causal claims even given God's omnipotence. But there's an effective *reductio* in the offing as well. Suppose Boulter were right, and some Aristotelians, prior to this emphasis on omnipotence in 1277, went in for nomological necessity. Suppose they were then challenged by those who insisted that anything was possible for God. Why would they be bothered by this? Wouldn't they simply appeal to their distinction between kinds of necessity, and happily grant that God can do anything that is logically possible, even violate their laws of nature? After all, Boulter's mythical Aristotelians do not hold that these laws are logically necessary. Finally, it is quite difficult to imagine that Hume (or Malebranche) should unconsciously deploy a line of thought from a relatively obscure thirteenth-century ecclesiastical debate. Boulter's claim that "Hume [...] is a philosopher who has so internalized the voice of the theologian that he no longer recognizes its [NNC's] theological provenance"<sup>25</sup> is hardly credible, especially since the theologian(s) in question had been swept aside some hundreds of years before.

This still leaves us with the problem of reconciling omnipotence with the necessity generated by the powers of objects. Concurrentism provides a handy way to do just this.

Suárez devotes *Metaphysical Disputation* 19, 1 to a discussion of "causes that operate necessarily."<sup>26</sup> Unsurprisingly, this includes all created beings except humans and perhaps angels. Now, once the requisite active and passive powers are in place, "natural causes cannot prevent the action of a necessary agent, since they do not have the power to change the nature of things or to remove wholly intrinsic properties."<sup>27</sup> Note what it would take for a natural cause to prevent the action of such an agent, i.e., to change the course of events: one would have to alter its intrinsic properties. In other words, one would have to bring it about that fire was not fire.

Nor is there any exception for God here. God is able "only to remove one of the required things." When the requisite elements obtain, even God himself cannot bring it about that a natural (as opposed to free) cause fails to act. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were lifted into Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, God did not remove the fire's

<sup>25</sup> Boulter 2002, 79.

<sup>26</sup> MD 19, 1: 280–282.

<sup>27</sup> MD 19, 1: 281.

power to burn, or flesh's passive power to be burned; all he did was withhold his ordinary concurrence from the fire.<sup>28</sup>

For if God had decided on his own part to grant his concurrence and had left all the other required conditions intact, then he would have been unable to prevent the action. For *it involves a contradiction* to remove that which is natural in the absence of any contrary efficient causality, or at least without withholding the assistance or efficient causality that is required on God's part [...]. And so once the presupposition in question, explained as above, has been made, the action arises with such a strong necessity that it cannot be impeded except by removing some part of what has been presupposed.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Malebranche and Hume suppose, Suárez holds that is logically contradictory, and hence inconceivable, that the presupposition of an action be present and yet that action fail to take place. God can remove his concurrence, but this is no different in kind from a situation in which the intended patient fails to possess the requisite passive power: part of the total cause is not present, and so the action cannot take place. This remains the case, even though God is of course the pre-eminent factor in the total cause.

## §2. 'Little Souls'

We have removed one barrier to understanding NNC: the myth that mainstream scholasticism distinguishes between logical and causal necessity. Malebranche cannot be accused of conflating two types of necessity when there was only one to begin with.

But this raises another problem: why is Malebranche so certain that no physical objects or events, with or without God's concurrence, will

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<sup>28</sup> MD 19, 1: 281: "Therefore, it is not the case that God brought it about that the fire did not act even though all the required things had been posited; instead, he removed one of those things."

<sup>29</sup> MD 19, 1: 281–2; emphasis mine. One might object that the contradiction arises here simply because God cannot will both *p* and not-*p*, and thus that the created powers have no real role to play in explaining the impossibility of God's concurring with a power in the right conditions and yet the characteristic effect not taking place. I think this would be a mistake, however, since, as Suárez makes clear, the contradiction arises precisely in virtue of the nature of the created beings. It remains the case, however, that there is no logical contradiction in such a state of affairs if we subtract God's concurrence: fire that failed to burn cotton without God's activity would still be just the power it is. In addition, note that, for a concurrentist, God does not will states of affairs as such; instead, he achieves his effects *by* working through the powers of beings he has created.

be logically necessarily connected with their effects? This question might seem a bit of unnecessary mystery-making, since Malebranche's statement of NNC suggests that any true cause will have to be omnipotent. If this is Malebranche's point, then it is trivially true that no physical being is a cause (since it lacks a will), and close to trivially true that no finite mind is a cause. I think this suggestion makes Malebranche's argument implausibly weak; at best, it pushes the question back and makes us ask why anyone would agree that only omnipotent beings can be causes. Malebranche is not simply stipulating that omnipotence is a pre-requisite for causal efficacy. More than this, however, it gets the structure of the argument wrong: it is because a true cause is one that is necessarily connected to its effects that only an omnipotent being can count as such. The 'most dangerous error of the ancients', Malebranche thinks, is to assign a logically necessary connection to finite beings on their own; the concurrentists absorb enough of this tradition to include finite beings in the total cause of ordinary events. But again, why is Malebranche so sure that it *is* an error, particularly given that so many other philosophers, spread over nearly two thousand years, found some such view quite reasonable?

We can make a start in answering this question by considering a possible response to NNC on behalf of the scholastics. Recall that Malebranche takes a cause to be "such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect." One might object that even if we grant that causal necessity is logical necessity, sufficiently complicated instances of the latter can escape even the most acute minds. And if Malebranche reads 'the mind' as God's mind, he simply pushes the problem back, inviting the objector to ask how Malebranche has epistemic access to the divine mind and its perceptions (if indeed it has any).

The epistemic element is really innocuous.<sup>30</sup> In order to work, the objection has to appeal to undetected logically necessary connections, with which mathematics and logic, for example, are replete. So, even though a and c are not (perceptibly) necessarily connected, there is some intermediate chain of causes and effects  $b_1$ – $b_n$  that are. Malebranche can now respond that, *whatever* one fills in for  $b_1$ – $b_n$ , the objector must claim that it is logically impossible for the relation to fail to hold between each pair. And now we simply run NNC on these two events. In short, the problem cannot be the merely epistemic one of

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<sup>30</sup> I owe this point to Steven Nadler.

locating logical necessities that might after all be there; finite *relata* are simply not the right sorts of things to serve as truly causal *relata*.

But why? Malebranche does not tell us. It is not just the reply I have constructed for him but his typically curt dismissal of the intelligibility of a necessary connection between bodies that suggests he takes it to involve a category mistake.<sup>31</sup> I think we can reconstruct his reasoning if we consider another of Malebranche's arguments, which itself derives from Descartes.

To make room for their own versions of mechanism, both figures take aim at the scholastic notion of power. And both explicitly argue that power attributions amount to attributions of intentionality; the Aristotelian projects features possessed only by minds on to the inert world of extension. Dennis Des Chene has dubbed this line of thought 'the little souls' argument.<sup>32</sup>

Descartes writes that he does "not suppose there are in nature any *real qualities*, which are attached to substances, like so many little souls to their bodies, and which are separable from them by divine power" (Letter to Mersenne, CSM III 216/AT III 648).<sup>33</sup> In his *Sixth Replies* and elsewhere (e.g., Letter to Arnauld, CSM III 358/AT V 222–223), Descartes accuses the Scholastics of anthropomorphizing nature, insofar as they use concepts derived from the activity of the human mind in explicating natural phenomena such as gravity. In a perhaps disingenuous bit of intellectual autobiography, Descartes confesses that, when he was persuaded of Scholastics notions, he conceived of heaviness as a real quality inhering in bodies, over and above their mechanical qualities. "And although I imagined heaviness to be diffused throughout the heavy body, I did not attribute to it the same extension which constitutes the nature of body." What is more, "while [heaviness] remained coextensive with the heavy body, I saw that it could exercise its force in any part whatsoever" (CSM II 297/AT VII 441–2). A quality like heaviness is thus like a Cartesian soul in that it can become detached from the subject in which it inheres and is diffused throughout the entire body that possesses it. But the final and most important objection is that the Scholastics have projected the intentional capacities

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. *Eluc.* XV: SAT 658, where Malebranche writes that, although "there are many reasons preventing me from attributing to *secondary* or *natural* causes a force, a power, an efficacy to produce anything [...] the principal one is that this opinion does not even seem conceivable to me."

<sup>32</sup> See Des Chene 1996.

<sup>33</sup> References to Descartes are to the 1996 edition of Adam/Tannery ('AT'). Translations follow those in Descartes 1985 ('CSM').

of the mind on to the physical world. Descartes writes, “I thought that heaviness bore bodies toward the center of the Earth as if it contained in itself some knowledge of it.” This is what “most especially shows that I derived my idea of heaviness from the idea of my mind.”<sup>34</sup>

This last feature of the ‘little souls’ argument is picked up and exploited by Malebranche. In arguing that bodies cannot have the power to move themselves, Malebranche writes,

Well, then, let us suppose that this chair can move itself: which way will it go? With what velocity? At what time will it take it into its head to move? You would have to give the chair an intellect and a will capable of determining itself. You would have, in short, to make a man out of your armchair.<sup>35</sup>

And in the fifth of Malebranche’s *Méditations Chrésiennes et Métaphysiques*, The Word asks,

Can this body move itself? In your idea of matter, do you discover any power (*puissance*)? You don’t respond. But suppose this body truly has the power to move itself; in what direction will it go? At what speed? You fall silent again? ‘I mean that body possesses enough freedom and knowledge to determine its own movement and its rate of speed: that it is master of itself.’ But watch out lest you embarrass yourself. For, supposing that this body were surrounded by an infinity of others, what must it do when it encounters a body whose speed and bulk are unknown to it? It will give to it, you say, a portion of its moving force? [...] But what part? How will it communicate this part or propagate its motion? Do you understand all of this?<sup>36</sup>

Like a mind, a body endowed with power would have to be intrinsically directed at states of affairs. Moreover, these states of affairs need never be actual: fire would have the power to burn paper even if it never actually did. Although inhering in a single object, the power is directed toward a range of non-actual states of affairs. This *esse-ad* is the target of Descartes’s claim that a body endowed with heaviness, conceived as a power or quality, would have to know where the center of the earth was if indeed it genuinely tended, of its own volition as it were, toward that location. And Malebranche rejects this feature by saying that power attributions require attributions of both intellect and will. In both fig-

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Aquinas, who writes that “in a heavy body is found an inclination and order to the center of the universe; and hence there exists in the heavy body a certain relation in regard to the center, and the same applies to other things” ST I q.28 art. 1 in Aquinas 1945 vol. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Dialogue VII* in Malebranche 1992, 227.

<sup>36</sup> OC 10, 47–8; translation mine.

ures, it is the property of intentionality that is crucial, and this is a property both agree can be possessed only by minds.

We are now in a position to apply these results to NNC. By making explicit what is to count as a genuine cause, NNC lets us take up the issue of intentionality from the other end: once we see what a true cause requires, we shall see that there is no way in principle for bodies to serve as causes.

There is a connection between God's will and its effects that physical substances or events simply cannot have. For a divine volition includes its effect in the sense that that effect is specified as the *content* of that volition. When God wills that this chair move, and it does, the two events are linked not by the mere sequence God's volition/chair moving, but by God's volition *with this particular content* and the realization of that volitional content. To simplify matters, at least typographically, we can call the propositional content toward which a volition is directed a p-volition, and reserve 'volition' for the mental act considered apart from its content. We can now state the argument: something is of the right kind to serve as a cause just in case it includes its effect in its content; but only volitions are of the right logical type to do so, because they are also p-volitions; and a p-volition (say, that this chair exist in a given location) *just is* the volition's effect.

This is a difficult point, but we can come at it from another angle. The logically necessary connection between cause and effect requires that they be linked in the right way. But how can a physical object or event, described in a non-question begging way, point to or be linked with an effect in any way at all? Events (or objects) described in mechanical terms are not internally connected to their putative effects. For example, 'the ball is dropped from the tower' and 'the ball hits the ground' do not in any sense include or make reference to each other; still less will they do so when analyzed in the appropriate geometrical fashion as mechanism demands. Only intentionality has this feature of directedness.<sup>37</sup> Thus the will is perfectly and uniquely suited to play the

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<sup>37</sup> Although I think it is fairly clear that the spare ontology of mechanism leaves little or no room for powers as conceived by the scholastics, more would need to be done to show that intentionality is the *only* plausible candidate to unite cause and effect. I do not wish to defend this claim *tout court*; my point is only that, within Malebranche's context, intentionality is the only game in town. Now, one might argue that Descartes's notion of *vis* provides precisely such a tie. But Descartes's notion of force is, I think, simply a convenient way of talking about the behavior of bodies. Thus in the *Principles*, Descartes writes that "[t]his power [of bodies to act on one another] consists simply in the fact that everything tends, so far as it



role of cause. Unlike a bare object or event, a volition can be directed at a distinct state of affairs, simply by including that state of affairs as its propositional content. This, I think, is why Malebranche finds the notion that finite relata could be *causal* relata so obviously muddle-headed.

As we have seen, the dominant view held by Malebranche's opponents is not the thoroughly 'pagan' one that takes finite objects to be autonomous agents but the concurrentist view that includes God in the total cause of any effect. NNC applies equally well to secondary efficient causes, of course, since even on the scholastic view, there is no necessary connection between these and any states of affairs. God's concurrence is required. But it also applies to the scholastics' total cause. For the necessary connection here is grounded *both* in God's activity and in the power of the created being. But God's activity is not directed simply at a future state of affairs as such, as it is on Malebranche's view; instead, God works through a created power. The directedness of the total cause, then, must come in part from that created power itself. And this is what Malebranche challenges.<sup>38</sup>

To sum up: Malebranche accepts the scholastic requirement of *esse-ad*; a cause must somehow be intrinsically directed at its effect. But like Descartes, he finds it impossible to conceive how finite objects could have this feature. This, of course, is intimately connected to the abandonment of the Aristotelian ontology. Once a broadly mechanical view is in place, it becomes hard to see how bodies could be causes.<sup>39</sup> Malebranche instead meets the intentionality requirement by ascribing

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can, to persist in the same state, as laid down by our first law" (CSM I 243/AT VIII A 66). This also explains his reluctance to endorse inertial forces as real elements of the world; writing to Mersenne, Descartes says that "I don't recognize any natural inertia or sluggishness in bodies" (CSM III 131/ AT II 466–7). For more on this, see Garber 1992, 298f.

<sup>38</sup> Malebranche does, in fact, distinguish the two views (Aristotle's and the scholastics'). SAT VI.ii.3 is directed at the ancients, while Eluc. XV is directed at the doctrine of secondary causes. But the latter preserves enough of the former (especially the notions of nature and power) to be defeated by the same lines of argument.

<sup>39</sup> This is not to say that there were not philosophers who attempted to preserve the scholastics' secondary causes in the context of mechanism. Pierre-Sylvain Régis stands out as a Cartesian concurrentist who attempts to do just this, and Locke and Boyle, to widely varying degrees, also try to reconcile powers with the mechanist ontology. But they do this by trying to reduce powers to what Boyle calls the 'catholic affections' of matter, and thus eliminate the directedness essential to scholastic powers. See Ott 2008.

causal power only to the one kind of thing he thinks *can* be directed at non-actual states of affairs: the mind.

If I am right about the role of intentionality in NNC, one might well wonder why Malebranche does not bother to make this more explicit. Given the otherwise mysterious nature of the argument, any interpretation of it will have to answer this question, as any interpretation will need to go beyond the materials provided by Malebranche's curt statements of NNC. For my part, I think that, given the prominent role of his own version of the 'little souls' argument, Malebranche might well take it for granted that his readers have absorbed the lesson of that argument: a real cause would have to be directed at its effect. And in the course of stating that argument, he makes it quite clear that no physical object or event can be so directed. One upshot of the analysis of Malebranche's suite of arguments I am in the course of offering is that each argument is less a stand-alone, one-off attempt at undermining the scholastic picture than a node on a web of interrelated lines of thought.<sup>40</sup>

I do not mean to underestimate the differences between Malebranchian and scholastic analyses of causation. The logical necessity of true causal claims for the scholastics is grounded both in created essences and God's concurrence; for Malebranche, its source is solely the divine will. This makes for quite a number of epistemic differences as well: an occasionalist's view of science will not be classificatory in the way Aristotelian science is, nor will it seek to investigate the natures of created beings. For all causal power now resides in God, and to say that an event was caused by God is to say something that applies to *all* events, and hence is uninformative. None of this, however, detracts from the point of agreement I have located.

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<sup>40</sup> One might also wonder why Malebranche does not deploy NNC in answering Bernard de Fontenelle's objection. In *Dialogue 7*, section 12, Theotimus asks what will happen, given matter's impenetrability, if two objects collide before God has established the laws of motion. This suggests that impenetrability is necessarily connected to motion, even if it does not fully determine the direction or speed of that motion. Malebranche's response is disappointing (see Nadler 2000 who takes a similarly dim view); he simply says that when bodies a and b collide, God must then decide which laws of motion to set down. Thus, not only does Malebranche not invoke NNC, or any of his other arguments against secondary causes, he sidesteps the whole issue.

### § 3. *The Epistemic Argument*

This reading helps illuminate Malebranche's otherwise mysterious argument against the claim that finite minds can be causes. We know that minds, according Malebranche, are at least of the right ontological type; still, lacking omnipotence, they also lack a necessary connection with their effects. For any instance of a finite volition and its putative effect, we can always conceive of the former without the latter. This shows that the requirement of logical necessity is not fulfilled (SAT VI.ii.3: 450). Given Malebranche's adoption of the scholastics' analysis of causation as logical necessitation, NNC alone is enough to show that no finite mind, on its own, is a cause. Thus, meeting the intentionality requirement is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for causal power.

But there is a deeper issue here. For Malebranche does not rely solely on NNC to show the inefficacy of finite minds; he also thinks that our ignorance of the neurophysiological facts prevents our will from being a cause. As we shall see, this argument is another manifestation of the requirement that cause and effect be linked by intentionality.

In what we might call 'the epistemic argument', Malebranche asks,

Can one do, can one even will what one does not know how to do? Can one will that the animal spirits expand in certain muscles, without knowing whether one has such spirits and muscles? One can will to move the fingers, because one sees and one knows that one has them. But can one will to impel spirits that one does not see, and of which one has no knowledge? Can one move them into muscles equally unknown, by means of nerve channels equally invisible; and can one choose promptly and without fail that which corresponds to the finger one wants to move?<sup>41</sup>

Here, the chief difficulty with finite minds as causes is their lack, not of omnipotence, but of omniscience. This is equally clear in the *Elucidations*, where Malebranche argues that, in order for a finite mind's will to cause its body to move, that mind would have to "know exactly the size and agitation of an infinite number of particles that collide with each other when the spirits are in the muscles" (Eluc. XV: SAT 671). Thus no such mind could, in principle, be a cause of bodily movements.

Let us first distinguish between volitions whose contents are identical with their immediate effects and those that are not. Call the latter

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<sup>41</sup> *Méditations Chrésiennes* VI.11, OC 10:62, transl. Nadler 2000, 122. See also Eluc. XV: SAT 671, quoted below. Once again, there is a very similar argument in Hume; see *Enquiry* § 7 and McCracken 1983, 258f.

‘chain volitions’, i.e., volitions whose propositional contents the subject can only bring about by setting a chain of further events into motion. Thus willing that my car start is a chain volition, since I can only bring it about by turning the key, which in turns sends an electrical impulse down the steering column, and so on. In a chain volition, one wills the outcome of a chain of events.<sup>42</sup>

Now, Malebranche can admit that there’s no problem in seeing how a non-chain volition achieves its effect. The problem is that all bodily volitions are chain volitions. When I will to move my arm, the content of this volition seems to be identical with its effect, my arm’s moving. But the physiology shows that this is not the case: the immediate effect of my volition cannot be the movement of my arm, since there are necessary intervening events, such as the motion of the animal spirits. So despite appearances, even the simplest physical act we can imagine is a chain volition. And an efficacious volition must be directed at its *immediate* effect.

We can now reconstruct Malebranche’s argument:

- (1) An effective volition is either a chain volition or not.
- (2) Willing to move our bodies is a chain volition.
- (3) In an efficacious chain volition, at least the first member of the chain must be included in the content of the volition.
- (4) We do not know what this member is in the present case. Thus
- (5) None of our bodily volitions is efficacious.

The trick is turned by premise (3). For the most natural story here is that the volition sets in motion a series of events that issues in the motion of the arm; why should we assume that the crucial first element must be included in the content of the volition? Most of us believe that our volitions are in fact efficacious and so are convinced that the epistemic argument must go wrong somewhere. And premise (3) is its only vulnerable spot.

It is common to defend (3) by pointing to Malebranche’s doctrine of blind will.<sup>43</sup> “The will is a blind power, which can proceed only towards things the understanding represents to it” (SAT I.i.2: 5). Radner and Nadler suggest that, since the will can only achieve that which the understanding presents to it, the mind cannot move the body. But this

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<sup>42</sup> One can in an attenuated sense be said to will the chain of events itself. For example, in willing the car to start, I of course will the electrical impulse to travel through the wires to the starter, but I don’t (or don’t necessarily) will those events *as such*.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Nadler 2000, 122f., and Radner 1978, 18.

way of putting matters already brings out the weakness of their reconstruction.

The denial of blind will goes no distance at all toward justifying (3). Malebranche's point about the will is surely sound: one cannot will what one cannot conceive. But of course we can conceive of our arm's moving, even if we have no idea of the intervening causal chain.

In fact, to understand the epistemic argument we need to invoke the point I have been pushing toward concerning NNC: Malebranche requires that causes and effects be linked by the content of a volition. Now, in the case of chain volitions, the requisite link obviously does not obtain. For what the physiology shows us is that the connection is not *volition-arm moving*, but *volition-brain event x-etc.-arm moving*. And without including the brain event in the content of the volition, that volition cannot be efficacious simply because the p-volition and the alleged effect are not identical.

We saw above in the context of the 'little souls' argument that Malebranche takes this requirement of intentional connection to hold across the board. Entertaining the notion that Malebranche might have imposed an epistemic criterion on causes in general, and not merely on minds, Nadler observes that "it seems to be a category mistake to extend the epistemic condition to causation by corporeal agents, such as fire and stones"<sup>44</sup>. But once we see the need for a tie between cause and effect that only intentionality can supply, we also see that this extension is no category mistake; the category mistake, in fact, is committed by those who claim that physical beings can be causes.

#### §4. Conclusion

Occasionalism is a highly counter-intuitive doctrine, and Malebranche surely thinks that he has powerful considerations to advance on its behalf. If these considerations are left opaque, his view cannot but seem a mere historical curiosity. But if I am right, the key element of Malebranche's dialectical strategy falls into place, and the appeal of his arguments, at least in their proper intellectual context, becomes clear.

Why would someone think that causes must logically necessitate their effects? The answer is clear once one has a firm grasp of the Aristotelian tradition, in which powers are defined by their contributions to

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<sup>44</sup> Nadler 2000, 125.

events. Why would someone think that attributing powers to bodies requires treating them as possessed of little minds, with little wills of their own? Well, powers are supposed to be the sorts of things that of their own nature tie an event to its effect. But the only plausible candidate in Malebranche's intellectual context for such a tie is the relation of intentionality, as captured by p-volitions. Finally, why should we think that the first step in a chain volition must be included in the content of that volition? Again, only because a cause must be connected by this relation to its effect.

Where this tie of intentionality is absent, all events are indeed 'entirely loose and separate', as Hume was to write. Malebranche inspired Hume's claim that "[s]olidity, extension, motion; these qualities are all compleat in themselves, and never point out any other event which may result from them."<sup>45</sup> For unlike Aristotelian powers (or Malebranchian volitions), these mechanical qualities are not of the right ontological type to be necessarily connected to their effects.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hume 1999, 136.

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