

DIVINE ACTION AND GOD'S IMMUTABILITY: A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY ON HOW TO RESIST OCCASIONALISM

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Abstract. Today's debates present 'occasionalism' as the position that any satisfying account of divine action must avoid. In this paper I discuss how a leading Cartesian author of the end of the seventeenth century, Pierre-Sylvain Régis, attempted to avoid occasionalism. Régis's case is illuminating because it stresses both the difficulties connected with the traditional alternatives to occasionalism (so-called 'concurrentism' and 'mere-conservationism') and also those aspects embedded in the occasionalist position that should be taken into due account. The paper focuses on Régis's own account of secondary causation in order to show how the challenge of avoiding occasionalism can lead to the development of new accounts of divine action.

In solving problems it is not sufficient to make use of the general cause and to invoke what is called a *Deus ex machina*.

G. W. Leibniz, *A New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances* (1695)

I. DIVINE ACTION AND OCCASIONALISM: CONTEMPORARY WORRIES AND HISTORICAL CASES

Contemporary theologians, philosophers of religion and philosophers of science widely debate (and largely disagree) about what could be the best account of divine action. Nevertheless, they seem to have reached

a consensus about what such an account should *not* be. The majority of the authors engaged in this debate refer to ‘occasionalism’ as the position that any satisfying account of divine action must avoid.¹ ‘Occasionalism’ is generally understood as the claim according to which God is not only constantly operating in the created world, but he is also the *only* cause causally efficacious, while finite creatures (‘secondary causes’ in the scholastic jargon) do not exercise any causal role.²

Occasionalism has a long history. During the medieval period, it was defended mainly among Islamic theologians. Authors such as Al-Ghazali were interested in demonstrating the inconsistency of the Aristotelian ‘pagan’ philosophy defended by Avicenna and Averroes. Among the arguments delivered against Aristotelianism, Islamic theologians argued extensively that finite creatures cannot have any causal efficacy on their own, by contending that God is the *only* cause constantly operating in nature. Yet, occasionalism never gained consensus among medieval Christian scholastics. The occasionalist position was discussed and rejected by all the main scholastic authors, from Aquinas to Suárez, and only a few medieval thinkers explicitly embraced it.³ Things suddenly changed in the second half of the seventeenth century. Not only did several of Descartes’s disciples (Geulincx, La Forge, Cordemoy, Malebranche) explicitly brand occasionalism as the true output of Cartesianism, but all the most influential authors of the period (Locke, Boyle, Leibniz, Clarke, Bayle, Hume) considered occasionalism an option deserving serious consideration. Recognizing that ‘occasionalism’ has a history is important to avoid the risk of oversimplifications and misrepresentations in today’s discussions.

In this paper I would like to focus on the case study offered by one of the most prominent Cartesian authorities of the end of the seventeenth century, Pierre-Sylvain Régis (1632-1707), in order to analyze how he attempted to resist the occasionalist position despite his endorsement of Descartes’s philosophy. Régis’s case is particularly interesting because it illuminates the insufficiency of other major scholastic attempts to resist occasionalism and presents an original new account of secondary

¹ See Murphy 1995 and 2009, Saunders 2002, Clyton 2004, Tracy 2009, Russell 2009, Silva 2011.

² For an overview of the occasionalist position see Freedoso 1994.

³ Perler and Rudolph 2000 provides the best discussion of medieval occasionalism. Yet, besides Islamic occasionalist only Pierre d’Ailly (1350-1420) and Gabriel Biel (1415-1495) are the main representatives of medieval occasionalism.

causation. The contemporary reader might wonder why Régis's case is relevant to *today's* discussions since our contemporary conceptual landscape and account of the physical world seems incommensurate with that of a seventeenth-century Cartesian author. I have two responses to this concern.

My first answer is conceptual. In this paper I will concentrate my attention on the *metaphysical* argument defended by Régis, which is based on a reflection on the nature of God's immutability. At this level of metaphysical abstraction Régis's position should not be seen as incommensurate with today's discussions in theology and philosophy of religion since the concern for granting God's immutability is a metaphysical issue worth considering in itself.

My second answer is historical. Today's discussions on divine action often rely on a precise historical understanding of the seventeenth century 'scientific revolution',⁴ which is usually depicted as the beginning of the ongoing process of the secularization of science.⁵ However, one of the main issues that remains unexplored is precisely how the concept of divine action evolved and in what ways did debates on divine action contribute to the later development of the scientific revolution. From this point of view, by examining Régis's position it will be possible to foster a more refined and less simplistic account of the interplay between metaphysical, theological and scientific concerns that shaped the debate on divine action across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In section 2, I outline Régis's argument against occasionalism and explain in which sense his account of secondary causation offers a new way to understand the relationship between divine action in nature and the causal efficacy of creatures. In section 3, I explain that the novelty of Régis's account is reflected in the early reception of his view and the criticism that it offers nothing but a form of occasionalism in disguise. Nonetheless, I also show that Régis's position is less idiosyncratic of what it might appear at first sight. To support this claim I offer evidence that his account of secondary causes is consistent, for instance, with some crucial points already defended by Spinoza for reasons analogous to that presented by Régis. In section 4, I offer a few conclusive remarks on the way in which this discussion can be useful for today's debates on divine action.

⁴ E.g. Dodds 2012.

⁵ E.g. Israel 2011.

II. RÉGIS'S ACCOUNT OF SECONDARY CAUSES AND HIS REJECTION OF OCCASIONALISM

Occasionalism is the result of two independent theses held together: (1) God acts *immediately* in nature, that is, he is immediately involved in the production of natural effects; and (2) secondary causes or finite beings do not have any causal power whatsoever. There are different ways to establish occasionalism. An *a priori* or theological way – defended mostly by Islamic theologians and seventeenth-century authors such as Malebranche – consists in showing that the first thesis entails the second. For instance, God's omnipotence entails that secondary causation is redundant. An *a posteriori* way – defended by Cartesian authors such as Geulincx and La Forge⁶ – consists in showing that the second thesis entails the first. For instance, since finite creatures *cannot* be causally efficacious (because, for different reasons that might be advanced, they fail to fully account for the production of phenomena that we observe), God must be constantly acting in nature in order to produce the events we experience.

From Aquinas to Suárez, a majoritarian alternative to occasionalism has been the so-called 'concurrentism'. Concurrentism holds the first thesis but rejects the second. Aquinas, for instance, agrees that God must be *immediately* involved in the operation of natural beings, although he aims to establish that this does not rule out secondary causation but leaves room for creatures to contribute to causal processes.⁷ The burden of concurrentism is to show *how* the cooperation between God and creatures can be presented in a consistent and convincing way. Concerning this problem, scholastics and later scholastics largely disagreed and offered a variety of different accounts that shall not concern us for our present purposes.⁸ However, it is important to note that a way

⁶ Aquinas refers to these kinds of arguments indirectly in *De Potentia*, III.7: 'according to Rabbi Moses some of the sages in the Moorish books of law asserted that all these natural forms are accidents, and since an accident cannot pass from one subject to another, they deemed it impossible for a natural agent by its form to produce in any way a similar form in another subject, and consequently they said that fire does not heat but God creates heat in that which is made hot.' Concerning La Forge see Sangiacomo 2014.

⁷ The main texts in which Aquinas defends this view are: *De Potentia*, III.7; *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 105 a. 5; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III chs. 66-67; *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, II, dist. I, q. 1 a. 4. For an account of Aquinas's view on secondary causation, see Silva 2014. I will not discuss the consequences of Aquinas's position for human will and its freedom, on which see Dvořák 2013.

to avoid the difficulties raised by concurrentism is to reject *both* the thesis at the basis of the occasionalist position by holding that God does *not* act immediately in nature, but only mediately through secondary causes. Medieval opponents of Aquinas, such as John of Peter Olivi (ca. 1248–1298) and Durandus of Saint-Pourçain (ca. 1275–1332/4), were among the first defenders of this position, which is usually labelled ‘mere conservationism’, although I prefer to call it ‘mediationism.’⁹ The majority of later scholastic authors, who were afraid of weakening the ontological dependence of creatures on God’s power, regarded mediationism with great suspicion.¹⁰

Régis’s position does not match with any of the above-mentioned views.¹¹ Régis rejects the first thesis of occasionalism by arguing that God *cannot* act immediately in nature. From this point of view, he agrees with mediationists and disagrees with both concurrentists and occasionalists. However, Régis also endorsed a qualified version of the second thesis held by occasionalists by arguing that secondary causes are not *per se* causes. This means that secondary causes do not have an intrinsic causal power, but they operate as instruments of God, able to bring about their effects only because the power they use is numerically the same as that of God himself. From this point of view, Régis’s position is irreconcilable with that of both concurrentists and mediationists. Given this eccentricity of Régis’s view, I will label it ‘instrumental mediationism’. In the rest of this section I present Régis’s reasons for defending such a position.

Régis’s ontology admits three kinds of entities. The first is God, who is an absolutely perfect substance (i.e. a thing existing in itself or ‘en elle-même’),¹² first cause and the creator of everything. The second includes two imperfect and dependent substances, namely, body and mind (*esprit*).¹³ The bodily substance is really distinct from the thinking

⁸ For a historical outline of the different positions and their evolution see Schmutz 2001.

⁹ Concerning Olivi see Frost 2014; concerning Durandus see Schmaltz 2008: 19–24.

¹⁰ See e.g., Suárez DM 22.1.1–23.

¹¹ In discussing Régis’s position, I will refer to his two main works: *Cours entier de philosophie, ou Systeme general selon les principes de M. Descartes*, published in 1691 (hereafter *Cours*), and *L’Usage de la rasion et de la foy* published in 1704 (hereafter *Usage*). All translations are mine. For present purposes, the differences that sometimes occur between these two works do not concern us. For an overview of Régis’s position and its relevance in the early modern discussion, see Schmaltz 2002.

¹² See *Cours*, pp. 72–73.

¹³ See *Cours*, pp. 80–81.

substance and they are both completely general when conceived as substances; however, they can be modified in various ways. When the body and mind are modified in a certain way, they are expressed as 'modal entities' ('estres modaux'), which defines the third kind of entity admitted by Régis's ontology. Properly speaking, finite bodies and human souls (*âmes*) are not substances but 'modal entities', that is, ways in which the bodily or thinking substances are modified.

With this general picture in mind we can better appreciate how Régis explains the relation between God's activity and finite things:

When I reflect on the specific way in which modal entities act, I see that they have no efficacy on their own. Thus, to stress this difference between the effects that God and modal entities bring about, I will call God 'primary efficient cause', and the modal entities 'secondary efficient causes'. By 'primary efficient cause' I understand that cause that acts by itself and through itself, while by 'secondary efficient cause' I understand that cause that acts in virtue of another. Since secondary causes act more immediately than the primary cause, to stress this difference I will attribute the production of all the modal entities to the secondary causes rather than to the first cause. (*Cours*, pp. 109-110)¹⁴

Two major aspects of Régis's account must be stressed since both represent crucial departures from concurrentism. First, God *does not* act directly on modal entities. Régis eagerly repeats that 'when I reflect on the fact that since God is immutable he can act only through a very simple act of will; I see that the succession that is observed among modal entities cannot derive immediately from God; thus, it must derive from secondary efficient causes' (*Cours*, p. 110).¹⁵ In other words, because the effects produced by modal entities imply change and succession, these

¹⁴ 'Quand je fais reflexion sur la maniere particuliere dont les estres modaux agissent, je conçois qu'ils n'ont rien d'eux-mêmes qui soit efficace ; c'est pourquoy, pour marquer cette difference par rapport aux effets que Dieu et les estres modaux produisent ensemble, je veux appeler Dieu, *Cause efficiente premiere*, et nommer les Estres modaux, *Causes efficientes secondes*, entendant par cause efficient premiere, celle qui agit d'elle-même et par elle-même, et par cause efficient seconde, celle qui agit par la vertu d'une autre. Et parce que les causes efficientes secondes agissent plus immediatement que la premiere, pour marquer encore cette difference, j'attribueray la production de tous les estres modaux, non à la cause premiere, mais aux causes secondes.'

¹⁵ 'Lors que je fais reflexion que Dieu estant immutable ne peut agir que par une volonté tres-simple; je vois bien que la succession qui se rencontre dans les choses modales ne peut venir immediatement de luy, et que par consequent elle doit proceder des causes efficientes secondes.'

effects cannot follow from God immediately (since he is immutable and simple) but must be determined by other modal entities.

The emphasis on the fact that God does not act immediately in the operations of modal entities is crucial to Régis's attack on occasionalism:

I say 'secondary efficient causes' rather than 'occasional causes' because occasional causes are incompatible with the idea of God. In fact, if by 'occasional causes' I understand those causes that determine God to produce some effect that he would not produce otherwise (unless these causes would offer him the occasion by themselves and without that he predetermined them), this would suppose in God a kind of indeterminacy that is incompatible with his immutability. Yet, if by 'occasional causes' I understand those causes that determine God's will, which is by itself general, this would entail the same problem. Thus, I shall not say that secondary causes are occasional causes. (*Cours*, p. 110)¹⁶

According to Régis, occasionalism presupposes that God is not determined by himself to produce certain particular effects. From this point of view, occasional causes are incompatible with God's immutability since they determine God to produce something that he would not have produced without the occasional cause acting upon him. Moreover, the occasional cause is defined as acting upon God directly in order to determine him to bring about *immediately* the effect that the occasional cause by itself has no power to produce.¹⁷ This entails that occasional causes make God immediately responsible for the production of finite and specific effects, which are once again incompatible with divine immutability and simplicity. Régis rules out occasionalism as such by precluding any possible immediate involvement of God in the causal process.

Nonetheless, Régis is adamant in admitting that secondary causes do *not* have any intrinsic causal power and can act only because God's primary causation enables them to act in a certain way. To explain

¹⁶ 'Je dis des causes efficientes secondes, et non pas des causes efficientes occasionelles, parce que les causes occasionelles paroissent répugnantes à l'idée de Dieu ; car si par causes occasionelles, j'entends des causes qui déterminent Dieu à produire quelque effet qu'il ne produiroit pas, si ces causes ne luy en donnoient occasion d'elle-memes, et sans qu'il les ait prevenues, cela suppose en Dieu une indetermination qui est incompatible avec son immutabilité ; et si j'entends des causes qui déterminent la volonté de Dieu qui est d'elle-meme generale, cela suppose encore le meme défaut. Je ne diray donc point que les causes secondes sont des causes occasionelles.'

¹⁷ The insistence upon the fact that occasional causes determine God to bring about effect was stressed by occasionalists such as La Forge 1997: 148.

this point, Régis introduces a further comparison between occasional causes and instrumental causes in order to claim that only the secondary efficient causes work as *instrumental* causes:

To reject this opinion [i.e. occasionalism], it is enough to show the difference between an occasional cause and an instrumental cause. The difference is this: we call *occasional* cause that which determines a free agent to act, but which does not contribute in anything to the agent's action. On the contrary, we call *instrumental cause* that which is determined to act by a principal cause, but in such a way that it modifies the action of the principal cause. [...] This being said, it will be easy to show that all secondary causes are instrumental causes in relationship to the first cause. (*Usage*, ch. 36, p. 205)¹⁸

While Aquinas and his followers maintain that secondary causes are *per se* causes, Régis argues instead that secondary causes have no active power 'deux-mêmes'. Because God cannot act directly by producing changes in modal entities, he has to use secondary causes as his own instruments. However, Régis does not accommodate instrumental causality with intrinsic powers of finite things, as it happened in the concurrentist tradition.¹⁹ Rather, he equates secondary causes with 'instrumental' causes in the sense that they do not have any causal power at all beyond the way in which God makes use of them.

To better explain this point, let us assume that a cause A produces the effect E. We can express this relation in the simplest way by saying that

$$A \Rightarrow E$$

On the one hand, a concurrentist (e.g. Aquinas) would modify this expression in order to integrate God's immediate and direct concursus, by stating:

¹⁸ 'Pour refuter cette opinion, il suffit de faire voir quelle est la difference qui se trouve entre la cause occasionnelle et la cause instrumentale. Or elle consiste cette difference, en ce qu'on appelle cause *occasionnelle* celle qui détermine un agent libre à agir, mais qui ne contribue rien à son action ; et on appelle au contraire *cause instrumentale*, celle qui est déterminée à agir par une cause principale, mais de telle sorte qu'elle modifie elle-même l'action de cette cause principale. [...] Or cela posé, il sera aisé de faire voir que toutes les causes secondes sont des causes instrumentales à l'égard de la cause première.'

¹⁹ Aquinas's account of instrumental causes is analogous to that of secondary causes: instrumental causes remain *per se* causes, although their causal power is exploited by a superior agent to produce effects that the instrumental cause would not be able to produce by itself. On this point see Albertson 1954. Suárez will defend Aquinas's view in DM 17.2.12.

$A (+\text{God}) \Rightarrow E$

An occasionalist, on the other hand, would stress the fact that A can be only an *explanatory* cause, or rather it provides the *occasion* for God to produce E. In this sense, she would say that

$A \Rightarrow (\text{God produces}) E$

However, Régis's solution differs from both these formulations. It could be expressed by saying that

$\text{God} (A) \Rightarrow E$

First, Régis differs from both concurrentists and occasionalists insofar as he rules out God's immediate intervention. God does not act immediately to produce any effect whatsoever but he acts only *through* secondary causes. For instance, God does not immediately move a body, say B, but the motive force (i.e. God's will) applied to another body, say A, determines B to move in a certain way (according to the law of motion) when A collides with B. Régis's point is that, although without God's power neither A nor B could produce any effect, once God has bestowed his power (i.e. the motive force), A is the more proximate cause that determines B's motion on the basis of the physical properties of both A and B.²⁰

Second, Régis denies (*pace* occasionalists) that bodies have *only* an explanatory role. In fact, bodies can play an explanatory role because they are immediately involved in the causal process.²¹ Finite bodies channel God's general power by specifying its efficacy in order to bring about finite effects that could not be directly derived from God's infinite and immutable power. Third, Régis also denies (*pace* concurrentists) that bodies are endowed with intrinsic causal powers. Rather, they can operate only because God applies his will to them. Modal entities are 'instrumental' or 'secondary' causes in the sense that they can operate *only* because God allows them to operate.²²

Régis's fundamental reason for denying the immediacy of God's action in nature is an appeal to God's immutability. Since God is eternal,

²⁰ See *Cours*, pp. 303-306.

²¹ See *Usage*, ch. 36, p. 205.

²² From this point of view, I disagree with Ott 2008, and 2009: 112-130, who argued that Régis would have simply melded Aquinas's concurrentisms with seventeenth century mechanist physics.

it is inconceivable that mutable and changeable effects follow *immediately* from his own nature. Régis's reason to deny that secondary causes are *per se* causes is that since they fully depend on God in order to exist and to be conserved in existence, it would be absurd to claim that they can have causal powers on their own. This does not mean that secondary causes are causally inefficacious – as occasionalists contend – but rather that they 'channel' God's own power by modifying it in order to produce specific effects.

III. RÉGIS'S RECEPTION AND HIS DEBT TO SPINOZA

Not only did Régis never present himself as a concurrentist in Aquinas's sense, but his contemporaries never perceived him in this way either. The first reaction to Régis's position came from Jean Du Hamel (ca. 1633-1714), a scholastic professor of the Collège du Plessis, who published his *Reflexions Critiques sur le systeme cartésien de la philosophie de M. Regis* in 1692. Du Hamel attacks the claim that secondary causes cannot produce any true action. According to Du Hamel, God's immediate involvement in the causal process is completely compatible with the fact that secondary causes are *per se* causes.²³ From this point of view, Du Hamel objects to Régis's perspective that the standard concurrentist view is better placed to reject occasionalism. Régis's answer is apparently puzzling for a concurrentist such as Du Hamel since Régis wants to maintain that secondary causes do have a power of acting (*pace* occasionalist), but this power is not essentially embedded in their own nature, being rather God's own power infused in the secondary causes themselves.²⁴ From this point of view, Régis refrains from joining the standard concurrentist position.

This is the reason why Régis's solution was often received, rather ironically, as a form of occasionalism in disguise. In 1694, Henri de Lelevel published his polemical pamphlet *La vray et la fausse metaphysique ou l'on refute les sentiments de M. Regis*. Concerning the issue of secondary causation, Lelevel claims that Régis's secondary causes are nothing but *occasional* causes.²⁵ He points out that Régis's account of secondary causation faces a dilemma: either we can perceive that secondary causes

²³ See Du Hamel 1692: 149-150.

²⁴ In the case of human will, see the reply in Régis 1692: 85.

²⁵ See Lelevel 1694: 121-122.

are endowed with a real power of acting or we cannot.²⁶ The first case would lead to concurrentism, and it would be the only way to preserve a real causal efficacy for secondary causes. Yet, we know that Régis rejects it. If God's power is not really distinguished from the power of secondary causes, how can we claim that secondary causes have any power at all? If God participates in the production of a certain effect, why is God's omnipotence insufficient to bring about that effect? Lelevel recognizes that Régis comes to agree more with his occasionalist opponents than with his plausible Thomist allies. As a result, Lelevel concludes that Régis's account of secondary causes is doomed to collapse in occasionalism.

Jacob Gousset stressed this point even more forcefully. In his *Causarum Primae et Secundarum realis operatio rationibus confirmatur* (published in 1716), Gousset reproduces Lelevel's charge by arguing that Régis was actually an occasionalist and that his system was at odds with concurrentism as properly understood. Gousset believes that scholastic concurrentism is the only true remedy against occasionalism (Gousset 1716: 112). He acknowledges that Régis expressly attempted to argue against La Forge and Malebranche – the two major occasionalists whom Gousset discusses in his book. However, according to Gousset, Régis's argument against occasionalism is purely rhetorical.²⁷ According to Gousset, Régis's 'secondary causes' are nothing but *causae sine quibus non* – typically invoked by occasionalists.²⁸ While an efficient cause is directly responsible for the production of a certain effect, a *causa sine qua non* is merely a condition (an *occasion*) for such a production. Therefore, a *causa sine qua non* cannot have any causal power on its own and must not be confused with an efficient cause.²⁹ Régis's secondary causes are *causae sine quibus non* (i.e. occasional causes) in disguise.

Gousset also expresses his scepticism about Régis's analogy between secondary and instrumental causes.³⁰ In fact, Gousset stresses that instrumental causes discussed by concurrentists are really endowed with active powers that will be then exploited and applied by the principal cause in order to bring about effects that the instrument alone could not

²⁶ See Lelevel 1694: 125-126.

²⁷ See Gousset 1716: 64.

²⁸ See Gousset 1716: 22.

²⁹ Gabriel Biel and Pierre d'Ailly were the main scholastic supporters of occasional causes intended as *causae sine quibus non*, both mentioned by Gousset 1716: 124-128. Concerning Biel, see Perler and Rudolph 2000: 189-201.

³⁰ See Gousset 1716: 65.

produce. On the contrary, Régis's understanding of instrumental causality denies any causal efficacy *per se* to instrumental causes by admitting that they can operate only because God bestows his own power on them.

This quick overview of the reception of Régis's account of 'instrumental mediationism' among his contemporaries provides evidence that Régis's effort to find a new alternative to both occasionalism and concurrentism appeared disorienting and problematic since its very reception. Yet, was Régis's position really so idiosyncratic in the early modern period? We can better understand the status and degree of novelty of Régis's account of secondary causation by verifying what could have been a plausible early modern source for it.

Descartes is not a promising candidate. Descartes's followers interpreted him alternatively as the father of occasionalism (e.g. La Forge, Cordemoy, Malebranche) and as a classic concurrentist (e.g. Goussset). Today scholars also disagree on whether Descartes was an occasionalist (e.g. Garber 1992: 299-305), a concurrentist (e.g. Platt 2011), or a mere conservationist (e.g. Schmaltz 2008: 125-128). Be that as it may, Régis argues expressly against occasionalism. Moreover, he differs significantly from concurrentism because he denies that finite things are endowed with active powers. *A fortiori*, then, he could have neither been a mere conservationist. Hence, irrespective of how we decide to collocate Descartes's position, it seems safe to assume that Régis's own account of secondary causation is not deduced 'according to the principles of M. Descartes'.

Nor does Dom Robert Desgabets, who inspired several of Régis's claims, seem to be a feasible source of his account of secondary causation. Desgabets claimed that 'it is the contact among bodies that determines God to move those that were at rest'.³¹ The fact that a body determines God is exactly the kind of occasionalist claim that Régis wants to contrast. Moreover, Desgabets expressly argues that bodies do not have any force on their own and thus that all secondary causes should be dismissed.³² Desgabets's dismissal of secondary causes seems to support occasionalism rather than contrast it.³³

³¹ Desgabets 1983-1985, III, p. 88.

³² Desgabets 1983-1985, III, pp. 88-89.

³³ Schmaltz (2002: 256) agrees that 'Régis was more consistent than Desgabets in his rejection of an occasionalism in Lelevel and Malebranche that relates creatures directly to God'.

A more likely candidate to explain Régis's position is Descartes's most heterodox disciple, namely, Baruch Spinoza. In the *Usage*, Régis takes care to refute Spinoza's metaphysics.³⁴ Nonetheless, the refutation demonstrates two important aspects of Régis's attitude toward Spinoza. First, Régis knew very well Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma* and was well acquainted with the *Ethics*. Second, Régis's confutation of Spinoza concerns the claim that God is the *only* substance and each finite thing is just God's modification.³⁵ Actually, no one in the seventeenth century would have openly endorsed this claim. However, Régis admits that Spinoza's principles might be helpful to some extent.³⁶ In fact, Spinoza's metaphysics provides remarkable support for Régis's account of secondary causation.

First, Spinoza is deeply committed to the fact that God does not produce *immediately* any finite effect. Spinoza demonstrates that from God's infinite nature only infinite effects can follow (E1p21)³⁷. However, every finite thing must have been determined to act by God (E1p26).³⁸ Therefore, God must have determined every finite thing to act and operate only through other finite things (E1p28).³⁹ The resemblance of

³⁴ *Usage*, pp. 481-500. Concerning the historical background of Régis's refutation, see Vernière 1954, vol. 1, pp. 250-257.

³⁵ Henri de Boulanviller effectively summarized the general strategy of Régis's refutation by pointing out that 'la plus grande partie de ces difficultés ne consiste que dans une distinction de substance en général et de substance en particulier, ce qui le met hors de la question dont il s'agit, puisque Spinoza n'admet point de substance particulière' (Boulanviller 1973: 233. Boulanviller never published his manuscript of *Examen de la Réfutation faite par M. Régis de l'Opinion de Spinoza sur l'Existence et la Nature de Dieu*, which is actually not dated).

³⁶ E.g. *Usage*, p. 499: '[ils] servent au moins, quand ils sont pris dans un bon sens, à confirmer ce que nous avons dit de la nature et de l'existence de Dieu.' Régis is here referring to his account of God conceived as 'une Pensée parfaite' (ibid.).

³⁷ 'All the things which follow from the absolute nature of any of God's attributes have always had to exist and be infinite, or are, through the same attribute, eternal and infinite.' All quotes from the *Ethics* are from Spinoza 1994, quotes from other works are from Spinoza 2002.

³⁸ 'A thing which has been determined to produce an effect has necessarily been determined in this way by God; and one which has not been determined by God cannot determine itself to produce an effect.'

³⁹ Cf. E1p28dem: 'Whatever has been determined to exist and produce an effect has been so determined by God (by P26 and P24C). But what is finite and has a determinate existence could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God [...]. It had, therefore, to follow from, or be determined to exist and produce an effect by God

Spinoza's argument to Régis's denial of God's *immediate* action is crystal clear.⁴⁰

Second, because finite things are nothing but modifications, they have no power to act for themselves. Finite modes completely depend on God's activity to bring about their effects. In the *Ethics*, however, Spinoza does not deny finite activity. Rather, he derives finite activity from the fact that things are a modification of God and God's essence is nothing but his power to act (E1p34). Hence, 'singular things are modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by 1p25c), that is (by 1p34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts' (E3p6dem). Again, Spinoza claims that 'modal entities' do have causal powers. However, the causal efficacy of finite modes does not imply that they are causes 'd'eux-mêmes', but rather that God himself acts through them.⁴¹

Of course, Spinoza takes God as the substance to which finite modes inhere. Substance monism is crucial to fully understanding the meaning that these two claims have in the *Ethics*. Nonetheless, both claims do not conceptually depend on substance monism. God does not produce immediately any finite effect because finite effects cannot follow from an infinite cause. This claim does not depend on the thesis that God is the only substance, but rather on the ontological heterogeneity between infinite and finite effects. Furthermore, Spinoza denies that modes could be *per se* causes because modes do not exist *per se* but they inhere in a substance. Again, this claim does not depend on assuming that God is the only substance, but rather on the ontological difference between substance (existing *in se*) and modes (existing *in alio*). Spinoza's *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM), published in 1663 as an appendix to the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, provide evidence to the fact that

or an attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence.'

⁴⁰ Cf. E1p28s: 'since certain things had to be produced by God immediately, namely, those which follow necessarily from his absolute nature, and others [...] had to be produced by the mediation of these first things, it follows: I. That God is absolutely the proximate cause of the things produced immediately by him [...]. II. That God cannot properly be called the remote cause of singular things, except perhaps so that we may distinguish them from those things that he has produced immediately, or rather, that follow from his absolute nature.'

⁴¹ Spinoza often presents finite things as the passive material in God's active hands, as clay in the potter's hands (*chomer beyad hayotzer*) – a biblical metaphor Spinoza employs on several occasions (e.g., TTP, note 34).

these two points can be conceptually separated from substance monism. *Metaphysical Thoughts* is presented as a 'Cartesian' discussion and does not include any claim for substance monism.

In the CM, Spinoza suggests that God does not create *immediately* modifications of substances.⁴² Spinoza defines creation as 'an operation in which no causes concur beyond the efficient cause; or that a created thing is that which presupposes nothing except God for its existence' (CM2, 10, p. 203). However, he expressly remarks that 'from this definition it clearly follows that there is no creation of accidents and modes. For these presuppose a created substance besides God' (CM2, 10, p. 204). Indeed, 'created is every thing whose essence is clearly conceived without any existence, and which is nevertheless conceived through itself: for example matter' (CM2, 10, p. 204). God *directly* creates and constantly conserves only *substances* and not their *modifications*. Only a substance is 'conceived through itself' while a mode is conceived through something else. This does not deny that modes, such as particular bodies, depend on God's power to produce whatever effect they produce. Should God stop to conserve their substances, modes would completely cease to exist. Nonetheless, God's creation and conservation implies only an 'indirect' concursus with finite modes. Spinoza himself recognizes that this view is quite far from that of Aquinas and other scholastics, 'who, accepting God's concurrence, interpret it in a sense quite at variance with what we have expounded' (CM2, 11, p. 207).

In the *Metaphysical Thoughts* Spinoza also argues that finite things have no other power than that provided by God's continuous concursus. According to Spinoza, finite things do have a 'striving' or 'conatus' to self-preservation, which suggests a power to produce certain effects. On the one hand, Spinoza argues against the 'distinction between the *conatus* of a thing and the thing itself' (CM1, 6, p. 188), that is, he suggests that the *conatus* ought not to be distinguished from the thing itself.⁴³ If finite things have such a conatus, they must be endowed with some causal efficacy. On the other hand, however, he claims that the 'force [through

⁴² Spinoza's correspondent, Willem van Blijenbergh, attributes this claim to him (cf. Letter 18, in Spinoza 2002: 806). However, in his replies, Spinoza only maintains that God (necessarily) creates and conserves the *essence* of each thing (see, e.g., Letter 23, in Spinoza 2002: 832), from which (necessarily) follows every effect that the thing can produce.

⁴³ Spinoza's argument seems here very similar to what Descartes puts forward in *Principles*, II, art. 43.

which things persevere in their own being] is different from the things themselves' (CM2, 6, p. 197). Finite self-preservation is only made possible and constantly supported by God's continuous creation. Finite things receive their power to act from God only, and this power does not exist in them beyond God's activity. As Spinoza writes, 'no created thing affects anything by its own force, just as no created thing began to exist by its own force' (CM1, 3, p. 184). More explicitly, he claims: 'we have demonstrated that things never have any power from themselves to affect anything or to determine themselves to any action' (CM2, 11, p. 207).⁴⁴ Finite things do have causal powers, but these powers consist of nothing beyond God's own power.

I am not committed here to discussing whether these claims are coherent or fully consistent. The only point that I would like to stress is that the comparison between the *Ethics* and the *Metaphysical Thoughts* reveals that Spinoza constantly holds the two claims at stake: 1) God does not act directly in producing finite modes; and 2) finite things have no causal power of their own. Spinoza holds these two claims irrespective of his endorsement of substance monism. Both these claims are much in the vein of what Régis wanted to argue. The interesting point, of course, is not whether Régis was a full-blown Spinozist. Rather, the reference to Spinoza is worth noting because it confirms that in order to contrast the assaults of occasionalism, Régis did not simply resuscitate medieval concurrentism but preferred to defend a position already espoused by Spinoza. Arguably, Régis's account of secondary causation seemed so controversial to his contemporaries because it was difficult to encapsulate it in the three major scholastic accounts of God's concurrence.

⁴⁴ In the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza follows Descartes (and the scholastic tradition) in equating creation and conservation. In his *Cours*, Régis distinguishes the immediate creation of substances from the *generation* of modal entities. Nonetheless, he states that 'la conservation des substances n'est que leur creation continuée' (*Cours*, p. 101). In his *Usage* Régis argues instead that creation refers to substances only while conservation refers to modal beings, and he rejects the scholastic equation between conservation and creation (*Usage*, pp. 158-166). Régis is led to this position by his need to defend the doctrine of the 'indefectibility of substances' that he inherited from Desgabets (see Schmaltz 2002: 94-113), which plays a much more prominent role in the *Usage* rather than in the *Cours*. For present purposes, however, this change only indicates that Régis is willing to weaken even that kind of *immediate* involvement of God's activity in finite beings that was represented by his continuous creation.

IV. REJECTING OCCASIONALISM: NOT SO EASY

The discussion of Régis's position offers evidence of the fact that rejecting occasionalism is by no means a simple enterprise. The exact meaning of the occasionalist claim that God is the only cause in nature depends on the specific arguments used to support it. Resorting to occasionalism as an *ultima ratio* solution for the problem of causal interactions among bodies is very different from defending occasionalism on the basis of strong *a priori* theological concerns regarding God's omnipotence. Even assuming that we should *not* embrace the occasionalist position, a mere denial of it does not entail any positive account of secondary causation in particular.

Régis's case illustrates some of the main problems that affect the two traditional alternatives to occasionalism developed in scholastic and later scholastic thought. Although concurrentism can be developed in a variety of ways, the very reason for embracing it is the possibility of maintaining the thesis that God acts *immediately* in nature, although without undermining the causal efficacy of secondary causes. However, this claim seems to conflict with God's immutability and infinity. Concurrentists try to avoid this problem by maintaining that God always operates uniformly in nature and that secondary causes actually modify and determine through their own causal powers God's general power. However, as Duns Scotus already noted (*Ordinatio*, IV, dist. 1, q. 4) against Aquinas, it is far from obvious that it would be possible to distinguish in a given effect a part of it *immediately* arising from God and another part immediately arising from the secondary cause. For instance, although Thomists could claim that God bestows a general *esse* on his creatures and then they modify it in specific ways, Scotus objected that in finite effects it is impossible to distinguish between this general *esse* and the determination arising from secondary causes. In fact, we do not experience general *esse* but always a specifically modified and determined being. But if it is not possible to clearly separate between what depends immediately on God and what depends immediately on the secondary cause, it seems unclear why and how the claim that God concurs immediately with secondary causes can be maintained. Furthermore, following Spinoza's argument, it seems impossible that finite effects could follow *immediately* from an infinite Being. From this point of view, Régis's instrumental mediationism has the advantage of avoiding these metaphysical worries.

However, Régis also acknowledges that there is a theological concern at the basis of occasionalism that should be taken seriously, which is about the ontological autonomy of secondary causes. Both concurrentists and traditional mediationists consider secondary causes as *per se* causes, that is, as intrinsically endowed with causal powers. Yet, since secondary causes completely depend on God for their existence and conservation in being, it seems difficult to conceive of how they could be endowed with causal powers *per se*, that is, with causal powers numerically different from God's own power. Should God withdraw his constant act of creation and conservation, secondary causes would simply cease to exist and act. This is the reason why Régis (and in a more extreme way Spinoza) defended a non-substantivist account of finite things, by conceiving them not as *substances* but rather as *modes* (i.e. as entities that cannot be conceived of *per se* but must be referred to something else in order to exist and be conceived).

To conclude, the case of Régis illustrates that when today's theologians and philosophers join their voices in the common admonition that a workable account of divine action should reject occasionalism, it must be carefully considered that such a rejection is neither easy nor univocal. Régis's position exemplifies that the more common and established alternatives to occasionalism are not without their own difficulties, to which Régis's 'instrumental mediationism' attempts to remedy. The take home message of this historical analysis is not that Régis's account must be universally adopted or taken as the ultimate solution to the problem of finding an alternative to occasionalism. Rather, Régis's case – with all the difficulties that it entails and that were perceived by his contemporaries – illustrates how the challenge of occasionalism forces us to critically evaluate past accounts of divine action and seek new solutions. This was true for Aquinas's earlier effort to outline the concurrentist model and for several later authors who were engaged in developing different varieties of it. This was true for Durandus's mediationism and for Régis's view as well. From this point of view, occasionalism can be appreciated in today's discussions if not as a viable position at least as a proper *occasion* to deepen the nature of divine action and its relationship with the causal power of finite creatures.

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