

# Ockham on Divine Concurrence

ZITA V. TOTH

*University of Virginia*

*The focus of this paper is Ockham's stance on the question of divine concurrence—the question whether God is causally active in the causal happenings of the created world, and if so, what God's causal activity amounts to and what place that leaves for created causes. After discussing some preliminaries, I turn to presenting what I take to be Ockham's account. As I show, Ockham, at least in this issue, is rather conservative: he agrees with the majority of medieval thinkers (including Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and others) that both God and created agents are causally active in the causal happenings of the world. Then I turn to some texts that may suggest otherwise; I argue that reading Ockham as either an occasionalist or a mere conservationist based on these texts originates from a misunderstanding of his main concern. I conclude with raising and briefly addressing some systematic worries regarding Ockham's account of concurrence.*

The interpretation of Ockham's thoughts on causation underwent the kind of change during the twentieth century that has become almost customary for fourteenth-century thinkers. The historiography, at least in outline, has been something like this: people had, for a long time, read Ockham as a Humean, some defending its cogency; then it was shown that Ockham had held neither the metaphysical thesis that causation is mere correlation, nor even the weaker epistemological one that we cannot have knowledge or certainty of the principle of causality.<sup>1</sup> With this, the issue was mostly settled. One might wonder, nevertheless, whether the question of Humeanism was wrongly posed to start with. Ockham was a medieval theologian, and with all of his contemporaries, held that at least God is efficiently causally active by cre-

---

1. Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), chapter 18; and eadem, "Was Ockham a Humean about Efficient Causality?," *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979): 5–48. She also provides numerous examples for Ockham's Humean interpretation.

ating (and sustaining) the universe. Thus, the crucial question to be posed for Ockham seems to be not so much a question of Humeanism but rather a question about the role of divine causation in the created realm—the question of divine concurrence.

To put it simply, the question of divine concurrence concerns whether God is causally active in the causal happenings of the world, and if so, what his causal activity amounts to.<sup>2</sup> There is a whole spectrum of different views that medieval thinkers endorsed regarding this subject, clustering around three main positions.<sup>3</sup> First, occasionalists held that it is *only* God who is causally active in what *we* see as the causal happenings of the world. Second, mere conservationists held that God only keeps the world in existence but otherwise is not in any way involved in its causal happenings. Third, concurrentists (proponents of the majority view) thought that both God and created causes are causally active in producing effects.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of this paper is Ockham's stance on this question. After discussing some preliminaries, I will turn to presenting what I take to be Ockham's account. As I show, Ockham, at least in this issue, is rather conservative: he agrees with the majority of medieval thinkers (including Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and others) that both God and created agents are causally active in the causal happenings of the world. Then I turn to some texts that may suggest otherwise; I will argue that reading Ockham as either an occasionalist or a mere conservationist based on these texts originates from a misunderstanding of his main concern. I will conclude with raising and briefly addressing some systematic worries regarding Ockham's account of concurrence.

---

2. All this should be understood in a, broadly speaking, Aristotelian framework; more about that below. By "cause," unless otherwise noted, I always mean an efficient cause in the Aristotelian sense. Although there were other senses of "cause" in which medieval thinkers thought God was a cause of the created world, they fall outside the scope of the present issue.

3. These positions were not equally represented; most medieval thinkers, in fact, were somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

4. For a general overview of these positions, see, e.g., Alfred J. Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is not Enough," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 553–585. I will follow the usual way of talking about "secondary causes" in the sense of created causes, and at times I will also use the expression "secondary effect" to denote the effect of a secondary cause.

## OCKHAM ON CONCURRENCE: THE SHORT STORY

Since the question of divine concurrence concerns whether God and created things are *causes*, it will be useful to look first at Ockham's understanding of efficient causes in general. Ockham, like most of his Aristotelian contemporaries, understood causation to be a relation, involving substances acting on other substances. For his theory of divine concurrence we need not go into the metaphysical details of this generally Aristotelian framework, but it should be kept in mind that when we talk about an "effect," we usually mean an accident produced in a subject (such as the accident of health produced in a patient), and that Ockham, being a reductivist about most of Aristotle's categories, thinks that the relation of causality itself can be reduced to the agent, the patient, and the effect.<sup>5</sup>

Ockham gives slightly different formulations of what he means by the term *causa* in different places, and the number of these definitions and the significance of the differences between them remain unclear. Nevertheless, this one from the *Ordinatio* seems to capture, at least generally, the gist of most of his similar definitions: a cause is "that which, when it is posited while others are destroyed, the effect follows; or that which, when it is not posited while whatever else is posited, the effect does not follow."<sup>6</sup> Based on this and similar passages, it seems that for Ockham, the following gives at least an approximation of what we regard as efficient causes:

*EC*: *c* is an efficient cause of *e* just in case: if *c* is posited then *e* is (or can be) posited without any further entities, while if *c* is not posited then *e* is not (or cannot be) posited either.

---

5. For some details of his view, see Susan Brower-Toland, "Causation and Mental Content: Against the Externalist Reading of Ockham," in *The Language of Thought in Late Medieval Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Claude Panaccio*, ed. Magali Roques and Jenny Pelletier (Springer, 2017), 55–80; and Robert Aurelien, "L'explication causale selon Guillaume d'Ockham," *Quaestio 2* (2002): 241–265. See also Adams, *William Ockham*, chapter 19.

6. Guillelmi de Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d. 1, q. 3 (hereafter *Ord.*): quod ipso posito, alio destructo, sequitur ille effectus, vel quod ipso non posito, quocumque alio posito, non sequitur effectus. Guillelmi de Ockham, *Opera Theologica* (hereafter *OTh*), ed. Gedeon Gál (St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1967), I, 416. See also the almost verbatim identical definition in the *Expositio Physicorum* (hereafter *Exp. Phys.*) VII, c. 3, 4: illud est causa alicuius rei, quo non posito omni alio posito, res illa non est, et quo posito, res est. Guillelmi de Ockham, *Opera Philosophica* (hereafter *OPh*), ed. Gedeon Gál (St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1985), V, 629–630. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Latin are mine.

Thus, for instance, if we say that fire is the efficient cause of heat, then according to Ockham, what we mean is that if fire is present, then we need nothing else to explain the presence of heat; or, if fire is not present, we will not find heat either.<sup>7</sup>

Ockham's definition might seem rather minimalistic or even trivial, but in some sense it will turn out to be both too broad and too narrow. It is too broad since there are things that are not properly speaking causally related, but nevertheless fulfill *EC*; and it is too narrow for a general notion of efficient causality because it only picks out efficient causes that are total, immediate causes of their effects. To see this, and to better understand Ockham's discussion of divine concurrence, the following distinctions might be helpful.

First, consider the distinction between mediate and immediate causes. This was a standard distinction in medieval discussions of concurrence, even though different thinkers often understood it slightly differently. As Ockham notes in the *Physics* commentary, on his understanding, only immediate causes are causes properly speaking, while mere mediate causes are causes only somewhat improperly so.<sup>8</sup> This is because a mediate cause does not fulfill *EC*: it could happen that an effect exists while its mediate cause does not. In fact, this is the case in every *per accidens* ordered causal series. For instance, although Adam—according to the story of *Genesis*—is the first member of the causal series that generated me, I can continue on living even if Adam is not around any longer.<sup>9</sup> Thus, as Ockham notes, “every cause, properly speaking, is an immediate cause.”<sup>10</sup>

It was also customary to distinguish between various senses of “immediacy”; between what we may call “immediacy of supposit” and

---

7. The parenthetical parts of *EC* mark the usual distinction between cause in potency and cause in act; this, however, will not play an important role in the present issue.

8. *Exp. Phys.* VII, c. 3, 3: Causa autem uno modo accipitur pro causa immediata . . . aliter accipitur . . . magis improprie pro illo quod est tantum causa causae (*OPh* V, 628).

9. Ockham notoriously criticizes the notion of essential order between causes, at least as Scotus had understood it; perhaps this is the reason why he does not make the distinction in those terms. According to some commentators, he simply misunderstands Scotus's notion of essential order (see, e.g., Adams, *William Ockham*, 772–780; and Rega Wood, “Ockham on Essentially-Ordered Causes: Logic Misapplied,” in *Die Gegenwart Ockhams*, ed. Wilhelm Vossenkuhl and Rolf Schönberger (Weinheim: VCH, Acta humaniora, 1990), 25–50).

10. *Ord.* I, d. 45, q. un: Omnis causa proprie dicta est causa immediata (*OTb* IV, 665).

“immediacy of power.” To illustrate it with a common example, when a bailiff acts on behalf of the king, the king is an immediate cause of the bailiff’s deeds with the immediacy of power (the bailiff cannot do anything but by the king). On the other hand, the bailiff is an immediate cause with the immediacy of supposit, since he is the one who is the most proximate to his action.<sup>11</sup> While Ockham does not make the distinction explicitly, it will prove to be helpful in understanding his take on divine concurrence.

Second, consider the distinction between total and partial causes. It should be noted that the only kind of causes that fulfill definition *EC* above are total causes, and indeed, the definition of “total cause” that Ockham gives is almost verbatim the same as definition *EC*.<sup>12</sup> We know that it is the fire that is producing heat in a room by removing everything else from the room but the fire, and observing that the heat still remains. And of course, with partial causes this is not so: if  $c_1$  and  $c_2$  are partial causes of  $e$ , then if  $c_1$  is posited without  $c_2$  then  $e$  will not come about.

There is more to be said about Ockham’s precise understanding of efficient causes; I will return to some further intricacies of the definition below. These distinctions are enough now to formulate the question of divine concurrence more precisely: is God an immediate cause of every effect in the created world? If so, are God and the secondary cause both total causes, or are they partial causes of one and the same effect? Are created causes causes of their effects at all?

Ockham’s answer, in short, is that both God and created agents are immediate causes of secondary effects, and that we can imagine how this works by the help of an analogy:

Imagine that a very strong man can carry ten pounds of weight on his own, and no one can carry that much without him. Then if one of the weak men were to carry that ten pounds with that strong one, nevertheless the strong would still be said to carry it immediately just as the weak one. And this does not make the weak one superfluous, if the strong one does not want to carry the ten pounds on his own.<sup>13</sup>

---

11. For the example, see Giles of Rome, *Questiones de ente et essentia*, q. 4. For a contemporary analysis, see Gloria Frost, “Peter Olivi’s Rejection of God’s Concurrence with Created Causes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22(4) (2014 October): 655–679, especially 662–663.

12. E.g., *Reportatio* (hereafter *Rep.*) II, q. 3–4 (*OTb* V, 63).

13. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: Exemplum rude ad hoc: ponatur quod unus homo fortissimus possit portare decem per se, et nullus alius posset portare sine eo. Tunc si

It is not entirely clear how much one should read into this *exemplum crude* (as Ockham himself calls it), and I will return to some of its problems below. But the analogy at least suggests—since we might imagine divine concurrence as the help a strong man gives to a weak one when carrying a heavy weight—that created causes alone are too weak to bring about their effects, and therefore require divine help.

This is in fact the claim that Ockham argues for, in opposition to some of his contemporaries (most notably Peter John Olivi and Peter Auriol<sup>14</sup>). More precisely, he thinks that we can demonstrate that created natural agents cannot be total causes of their effects:

A total natural principle, equally directed towards many things of the same kind, either produces all or nothing; but if a creature can create some individual, then by the same reason by which that one <was created, it can create> infinitely many. Because it is a natural agent, it is directed towards everything, therefore it can actually create infinitely many individuals. This is false, therefore, etc.<sup>15</sup>

As Ockham argues here, natural agents—contrary to voluntary ones—are equally directed towards all their effects, possibly infinitely many. Thus, if they create a specific thing, that means that a primary cause is directing them to it—in which case the natural agent is not in fact a total but only a partial cause of that effect. Since natural agents do not (and cannot) bring about infinitely many things, it means that they are not total causes of their effects.

The argument in itself is perhaps less than fully convincing, but Ockham continues to elaborate on the theory. He thinks that we can also show that God is a primary cause with the primacy of perfection and unconstrainedness, but not with the primacy of duration.

---

aliquis debilis portet illa decem cum illo forti, nihilominus ille fortis dicetur immediate portare sicut debilis. Nec propter hoc superfluit ille debilis si fortis non vult per se portare decem (*OTb* V, 72).

14. For Olivi, see *In Sent.* II, q. 116. Petrus Iohannis Olivi, *Quaestiones in Secundum Librum Sententiarum*, ed. Bernardus Jansen (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 1926), 333–347. For Auriol, see *In Sent.* II, d. 38, q. 1. Peter Auriol, *Commentariorum [sic] in secundum librum Sententiarum* (Rome: Zannetti, 1605), which text, however, is notoriously unreliable. Cf. also Florence, Conv. Soppr. A.3.120.

15. *Rep.* II, q. 6: Principium totale naturale aequaliter se habens ad plura eiusdem rationis vel producit omnia vel nihil; sed si creatura potest creare aliquod individuum eiusdem rationis, qua ratione unum et infinita. Quia ex quo est agens naturale, aequaliter respicit omnia, potest igitur creare de facto infinita individua. Hoc est falsum, igitur etc (*OTb* V, 91).

For these different senses of “primacy,” consider, first, that when both the sun and a fire produce heat, the sun is primary to the fire with the primacy of perfection, since it has more of a power to bring about the heat than the fire does. Second, we say that a cause  $c_1$  is prior to  $c_2$  with the primacy of unconstrainedness if  $c_1$  can produce more diverse effects than  $c_2$ ; the sun again is primary to an angel in this sense since it can concur with many diverse effects while an angel cannot. Finally, primacy of duration can also be taken in two ways:  $c_1$  is primary in the first sense to  $c_2$  just in case it is prior to it according to nature;  $c_1$  is primary to  $c_2$  in the second sense just in case  $c_1$ 's causation precedes that of  $c_2$  in time.<sup>16</sup>

According to Ockham, it follows from God's omnipotence that whenever he concurs he is the primary cause both in perfection and in unconstrainedness,<sup>17</sup> since he has infinite power and can create whatever does not involve a logical contradiction—which is not true of any other cause. Moreover, as Ockham argues, God is primary to secondary causes with the primacy of duration in the first sense but not in the second sense; he precedes everything in the sense of natural priority, but at the same time when God acts to bring about the secondary effect, the secondary cause also acts and thus there is no temporal priority.<sup>18</sup>

So far we have established that secondary causes need a primary, directing cause, and that God is a primary cause in two senses of primacy (primacy of perfection and primacy of unconstrainedness). But one may say that a crucial aspect of any theory of divine concurrence is the way it spells out the immediacy of God's action. Does God act merely mediately through the secondary causes, or also immediately? And if so, in what sense?

Ockham's answer is “yes,” and for the claim that God is an immediate cause with the immediacy of power, he proposes several arguments. First, it follows already from definition *EC*. If God exists, and by his power keeps agents and created powers in existence, they bring about their effect; if, *per impossibile*, God did not exist, the secondary effect would not exist either (of course, nor would the secondary cause, for that matter). This means that God's power of maintaining things in existence is immediately joined to every secondary effect (as

---

16. *Rep.* I, d. 45, q. un.

17. Although in the divine case these two kinds of primacy are grounded on the same (the divine omnipotence), they do not necessarily overlap in other cases, as the angel example shows.

18. *Rep.* I, d. 45, q. un.

well as to every secondary cause), and thus God is their immediate cause by the immediacy of power.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, if God were not an immediate cause, he must be a mediate cause; more precisely, a mediate partial cause of effect *e*. But if  $c_1$  and  $c_2$  are partial causes of *e*, nevertheless *e* does not need  $c_2$ 's power to come about, then it seems that  $c_2$  is not in fact a partial cause of *e*, after all. Which means that if God is not an immediate cause of effects, then he is not their cause at all.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, every effect depends more on an unconstrained universal cause than on a constrained one. We experience, however, that there is no effect without at least a constrained universal cause being present and causing it—we experience, for instance, that no matter how proximate a cause is to its recipient, it does not act unless amended by the power of the sun (this is most obvious in the case of living things).<sup>21</sup> Since God is the most unconstrained and most universal cause, everything must depend on him the most.

Finally, Ockham utilizes one of the usual arguments for God's immediate concurrence that thinkers before him also often employed, based on the example of Nebuchadnezzar's fire and *contra naturam* miracles in general. According to this argument, if God does not concur with secondary causes, we cannot satisfactorily explain cases where an agent is exercising its power, there is no impediment, and nevertheless the effect fails to be produced. (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not burned by the fire even though the fire was exercising its causal powers in otherwise favorable circumstances.<sup>22</sup>) Since it seems that miracles like the above are at least logically possible, while they would be ruled out by mere conservationism, it follows that mere conservationism is false.<sup>23</sup>

From these arguments, Ockham concludes that God immediately produces every secondary effect by the immediacy of power—that is, in the way in which the king immediately acts when his bailiff acts on

19. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4 (*OTb* V, 63).

20. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4.

21. Cf. *Auct. Arist.* 2, 65: homo generat hominem et sol. Jacqueline Hamesse, ed., *Les auctoritates Aristotelis: Un florilège médiéval* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1974), 145.

22. See *Daniel* 3:19–27.

23. The same argument is used by Peter of Palude, arguing against Durand of St.-Pourçain's mere conservationism (*In Sent.* II, d. 1, q. 4. Zita V. Toth, "Peter of Palude on Divine Concurrence: An Edition of his *In II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 4," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 83 (2016): 49–92, 83). And the example is similarly used by Hervacus Natalis and others as well.



his behalf, or in the way a fire heats up some water in a kettle. To be sure, Ockham is quick to point out that God is very much unlike the fire in some respects. For instance, while we experience in the physical world that whatever produces an effect, itself changes, this is not true of God. God's activity, in this respect, is more similar to how the human will causes (forms) a volition. It might happen, for instance, that one forms a volition today to write tomorrow, and one preserves that volition until tomorrow comes. If one does indeed write tomorrow, then a partial cause of that writing is one's volition that will not have changed since today. Similarly, Ockham thinks, God can will something with unchanging will from eternity, which nevertheless comes about only at a certain time.<sup>24</sup>

Although as was said above, Ockham does not explicitly make the distinction between the two kinds of immediacy, at other places he points out that God *may* bring about effects immediately with the immediacy of supposit as well:

An accident does not depend more on an accident than an accident depends on a substance. But God can bring about an accident as an effect without the mediation of a substance. Therefore, God can produce any accident as an effect without any other accident, and so with regard to all other things.<sup>25</sup>

The structure of this argument is clear: since an accident depends more on a substance for its being than on another accident, and since God can bring about an accident without the mediation of a substance (as for instance in the Eucharist), therefore, God can bring about both accidents and substances without the mediation of anything. We should note, however, that the argument only demonstrates that God *can* be an immediate cause with the immediacy of supposit, and not that God *is* indeed such an immediate cause for every secondary effect.

Having established that God acts immediately in the production of secondary effects, as a further characterization of divine concur-

---

24. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: Potest enim aliquis nunc velle cras ista hora producere aliquem effectum et semper in tali voluntate perseverare, et cras talem effectum producere per velle istud continuatum per unum diem. Istud autem velle est causa partialis illius effectus extra producti. Et patet quod quando ille effectus producitur, voluntas de novo non mutatur (*OTh* V, 59–60).

25. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: Non magis dependet accidens ab accidente, quam accidens a substantia. Sed Deus potest facere accidens sine substantia media in ratione effectus. Igitur potest facere quodcumque accidens sine alio in ratione effectus, et sic est de omnibus aliis (*OTh* V, 66).

rence, Ockham also notes that God is a cause of secondary effects by both his will and his essence. His position here is directed against Scotus, who argued that it is only God's will that is causally related to creatures; otherwise there would be no way to preserve contingency in the created world (since God's essence would be a natural, non-contingent cause).<sup>26</sup> As Ockham notes, however, this cannot be maintained since there is no real distinction between God's essence and his will due to divine simplicity, and hence if an effect is causally related to one it must also be similarly related to the other. According to Ockham, just as a will can produce something necessarily (for instance, God's will necessarily produces the Holy Spirit, or an angelic will necessarily produces an intuitive cognition of that will in another angel), an essence can also produce something contingently—and this is the way, according to Ockham, in which God's essence produces the secondary effects.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, so far, Ockham has argued for the following claims: there must be some primary cause helping out the secondary causes in the production of their effects; and God brings about things both by his essence and his will, in an immediate action at least in the sense of immediacy of power, but possibly with the immediacy of supposit as well. At this point, however, the mere conservationist may object. For let's consider God's action and the action of the secondary cause in producing an effect. Are these actions, the mere conservationist would ask, numerically the same, or numerically different? They cannot be the same, since they come from different agents. But if they are different, then it seems that the (metaphysically) posterior one is not needed for the production of the effect, after all.<sup>28</sup>

Ockham seems to be targeting this or a similar argument when he shows that God acts with an action that is both numerically distinct from and identical with that of the secondary agent, in different respects, and thus the original dilemma is based on a false dichotomy. To understand this response we need to keep in mind that, as was mentioned earlier, action, for Ockham, is not a distinct Aristotelian category but can be fully captured by its *relata*. Thus, an action,

---

26. For Scotus's position, see *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, p. 1, q. 1–2, n. 79–88. Johannes Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio: Liber primus, distinctio prima et secunda*, ed. Commissio Scotistica, Vol. 2. (Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950).

27. *Rep.* I, d. 45, q. un.

28. Durand of St.-Pourçain makes this argument in *In Sent.* II, d. 1, q. 4. Durand of St.-Pourçain, *Scriptum super IV libros Sententiarum: distinctiones 1-5 libri secundi*, ed. Fiorella Retucci (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 53–55.

Ockham notes, can be taken in three ways. First, it can be taken *pro respectu*, which means that one considers the basis of the relation, which in this case is the agent. Since God's action and the action of the secondary agent have different bases, they are different actions in this sense. Second, we can also consider actions *pro conceptu connotante*, meaning that the action stands for the agent while connoting the effect. Again, in this case actions must be different if their agents are different, and thus God's and the secondary agent's actions will be different in this sense as well. Finally, we might consider actions to be taken *pro effectu*, that is, for their effect; in this respect, since the terminus of God's and the secondary agent's actions is the same, they can be considered the same action.<sup>29</sup>

All in all, from these texts it seems clear that Ockham adheres to (some version of) the common medieval theory of divine concurrence. He thinks that in an instance of causal happening, for instance when fire heats up some water, both God and the fire are causally active. They are both immediate causes of the heat, and act with actions that are in some way numerically identical and in some way numerically distinct from one another.

#### TEXTUAL OBJECTIONS

If this were all that Ockham had said about causation and divine concurrence, it would be difficult to explain how Gilson could remark that "Hume's philosophy could have dwelt with Ockham's theology without doing it much harm,"<sup>30</sup> a point that was repeatedly insisted on by several others.<sup>31</sup> While, as I intend to show, Ockham was not an occasionalist, there seem to be some texts that point in the opposite direction. Thus, although it seems clear from the above that Ockham thinks that both God and secondary agents are causally active in the happenings of the world, consider, for instance, this passage from the *Reportatio*:

From this it follows that it cannot be demonstrated that any effect is produced by a secondary cause: because although when the fire approaches the flammable thing, combustion always follows, nev-

---

29. See *Rep.* II, q. 3–4 (ed. Gedeon Gál, *OTb V* (St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1981), 50–79), esp. 74–75.

30. Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 68.

31. A florilegium of these Humean and sometimes purely occasionalist interpretations is given in Adams, "Was Ockham a Humean about Efficient Causality?," 5–8.

ertheless it could still be the case that the fire is not its cause. For God could have ordained that whenever fire is present to a patient close by, the sun would cause combustion <in that patient> just as He ordained with the church that when certain words are spoken, grace is produced in the soul.<sup>32</sup>

According to this argument, since it could be the case that fire be always followed by heat and nevertheless the former not be a proper efficient cause of the latter, it cannot be demonstrated that fire *is* a proper efficient cause of heat. Ockham's analogy is illuminating: if one were to demonstrate, based on constant correlation of *c* and *e* that *c* is a proper efficient cause of *e*, then by the same means one could demonstrate that sacraments are proper efficient causes of divine grace. Ockham thinks, however, that this would be absurd since sacraments are *not* proper efficient causes of grace but mere visible signs of it (more about this below).<sup>33</sup>

In this and several other similar arguments, Ockham curiously assumes that the *only* way we could recognize the causal relation is by correlation. Although he does not argue separately for this claim, he refers to it as at least plausible:

That this <i.e., definition EC above> suffices for something to be the cause of another, is manifest. For if not, then every way of knowing something to be an immediate cause of another would perish. For if from the fact that if this is posited the effect follows and not posited the effect does not follow, it does not follow that this is a cause of that effect, there is no way to know that fire is the cause of heat in the wood.<sup>34</sup>

That is, according to Ockham, correlation seems to be our only cognitive access to causal relations, and thus if correlation is not sufficient for

---

32. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: Et ex hoc sequitur quod non potest demonstrari quod aliquis effectus producitur a causa secunda: quia licet semper ad approximationem ignis combustibili sequatur combustio, cum hoc tamen potest stare quod ignis non sit eius causa. Quia Deus potuit ordinasse quod semper ad praesentiam ignis passo approximato ipse solus causaret combustionem, sicut ordinavit cum Ecclesia quod ad prolationem certorum verborum causaretur gratia in anima (*OTb* V, 72–73).

33. For Ockham's treatment of sacramental causation, see *Rep.* IV, q. 1.

34. *Rep.* I, d. 45, q. un.: Quod autem illud sufficiat ad hoc quod aliquid sit causa alterius, videtur esse manifestum. Quia si non, perit omnis via ad cognoscendum aliquid esse causam alterius immediatam. Nam si ex hoc quod hoc posito sequitur effectus, et hoc non posito non ponitur effectus, non sequitur illud esse causam illius effectus, nullo modo potest cognosci quod ignis sit causa caloris in ligno (*OTb* IV, 665).

causation, then we can never have knowledge about such claims as “fire causes burning” or “the doctor heals the patient.” It very well might be the case that it is not the fire or the doctor but God who is acting so.

It is worth noting also that Ockham’s contemporary, Walter Chatton, recognized already that Ockham cannot consistently claim that we could be certain that things act. Consider, for instance, this objection, directed against Ockham’s reductivism about relations in general:

The first example is this proposition: “Socrates generated Plato.” It is either required for the truth of this proposition that there existed a relation <between them>, or not. But against this <latter>: it could be both true that every absolute thing existed and nevertheless Socrates did not generate Plato.<sup>35</sup>

Although Chatton’s target is more general, the objection applies to causation as well. As he points out, if one holds—as Ockham does—that there are no relations apart from absolute things (their foundations), then we could never know that Socrates generated Plato, for the simple reason that both it and its denial are compossible with the existence of Socrates and Plato as absolute things.<sup>36</sup>

Beside these remarks, it may seem that an occasionalist interpretation would seem to fit well with Ockham’s insistence on the claim that God’s omnipotence implies that God can produce immediately whatever a secondary cause can produce; that is, for any *particular* secondary effect, God could bring about that it was produced not by its secondary cause but by God himself.<sup>37</sup> And since we might not know whether God *does* produce an effect at a given time or perhaps even constantly, we might just as well be living in a world where secondary causes do not genuinely act. These considerations seem to suggest that Ockham, contrary to the above presentation, is actually an occasional-

---

35. *Lect.* I, d. 30, q. 1, a. 4: Primum exemplum est haec propositio “Sortes generavit Platonem.” Aut requiritur ad hoc quod haec propositio sit vera quod aliquando praefuit res respectiva, et tunc propositum; aut non, et tunc non habetur propositum. Contra: simul stant quod omnia absoluta quae unquam fuerunt praefuerunt et tamen quod Sortes non generaverit Platonem. Walter Chatton, *Lectura super Sententias*, ed. J. C. Wey and Girard Etzkorn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 234.

36. For a comparison of Chatton’s and Ockham’s view of the matter, see Rondo Keele, “Can God Make a Picasso? William Ockham and Walter Chatton on Divine Power and Real Relations,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45 (2007): 395–411.

37. *Ord.* I, prol., q. 1: Quidquid potest Deus per causam efficientem mediam, potest per se immediate (*OTb* I, 35).

ist, or at least that—whether or not he is aware of it—is committed to occasionalism.

One might also wonder, on the other hand, whether Ockham really thinks that divine concurrence is necessary. Recall the “strong man” analogy quoted above. As the analogy describes, we might imagine divine concurrence as the help a strong man gives to a weak one when carrying a heavy weight. This seems to imply that although the power of the created agent is incapable of bringing about its intended effect without God augmenting that power, Ockham thinks that the secondary cause is at least sufficient to bring its power into action. While this action may not be strong enough to produce the intended effect, it brings about its own part entirely on its own. With this, Ockham seems to disagree with some earlier thinkers who thought that divine concurrence was needed for the secondary agent to act at all,<sup>38</sup> which may suggest that contrary to being an occasionalist, Ockham is actually a mere conservationist.

Second, Ockham also thinks that we cannot demonstrate that God is a free creator, because we cannot demonstrate that God creates more than one thing at all.<sup>39</sup> But if this is so, then it seems that we also cannot know that God *concurrs* with more than one thing, and consequently, that he concurs with every secondary cause. Thus, we may have no good reason to suppose that he does so.

#### TRUTH AND DEMONSTRABILITY

I will proceed with the textual objections backwards, although the strategy of answering them will be similar. In short, while Ockham thinks that both mere conservationism and occasionalism are false, he does not think that they are demonstrably so.

Ockham does not think that the falsity of mere conservationism can be demonstrated, since—as the textual objection points out—he does not think that we can demonstrate that God produces multiple things. The latter demonstration would imply that we can demonstrate that God is a free agent, and according to Ockham, no such demonstration can be given. Although the topic of divine freedom might seem somewhat tangential to the issue of divine concurrence, it is the hook on which many of Ockham’s claims about divine concurrence hang, and so worth looking at it more closely.

---

38. See, e.g., Aquinas, *Quaestiones de potential Dei*, q. 3, a. 7.

39. See below; *Rep.* II, q. 5.

Ockham's—rather unsurprising—main thesis in this part of the *Reportatio*<sup>40</sup> is that God brings about everything freely. Nevertheless, he develops this thesis together with a rejection of Aquinas's and Scotus's arguments for the same, and together with the rejection of another argument proposal that he deems as the best one. Consequently, he concludes that we actually cannot demonstrate that God creates freely.<sup>41</sup>

Aquinas's main tenet when considering God's freedom was to refute the position according to which creation happened by necessity, as some Neoplatonists (and arguably Avicenna) maintained. Aquinas does this by distinguishing acts by will and acts by necessity and considering the question whether God acts by the former or by the latter. Thus, for instance, in the *Summa theologiae* he claims that "it must be said that God's will is the cause of things, and that God acts by will and not by the necessity of nature, as some supposed."<sup>42</sup> Ockham claims, however, that Aquinas's argument cannot establish the conclusion (namely, that God acts freely), since acting by will does not necessarily imply acting freely. As he notes, citing Aquinas, "the divine will and ours will God naturally, and thus when something is judged by the intellect, the will necessarily wills it."<sup>43</sup> Which means, as Ockham points out, that Aquinas is committed to the thesis that the will can be necessitated by the intellect, and thus the argument according to which God acts by will therefore freely, is not sound.

Neither does Scotus's solution work, according to Ockham. Scotus thinks that the divine will is contingently related to its effects, grounding thereby all contingency in the created world; if there were no contingency in the divine will, there could be no contingency in creatures either (since they do not act except by virtue of the first cause), which we know to be false.<sup>44</sup> As Ockham notes, however, "from the contingency of the secondary cause one cannot argue for

---

40. *Rep.* II, q. 4.

41. For a thorough discussion of Ockham on divine freedom, see Adams, *William Ockham*, chapter 30.

42. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, q. 19, a. 4: *necesse est dicere voluntatem Dei esse causam rerum, et Deum agere per voluntatem, non per necessitatem naturae, ut quidam existimaverunt* (Leonine ed., 4:237). Similar treatments can be found in *Quaestiones de potential Dei*, q. 1, a. 5 and q. 3, a. 15, and in the *Summa contra gentiles*.

43. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: *Voluntas divina et nostra vult Deum naturaliter, et sic quando aliquid iudicatur ab intellectu, voluntas necessario vult illud* (*OTb* V, 53). For Aquinas, see *ST* I, q. 60, a. 2–3, co.

44. Cf. *Ord.* I, d. 2, p. 1, q. 1–2, n. 79–88.

the contingency in the first cause.”<sup>45</sup> For we might have concurring causes of a contingent effect, in such a way that one of these concurring causes is not free: for instance, when the will and an object concur as partial causes to form an act of volition, the former is a contingent cause of that volition while the latter is a natural, non-contingent cause of it. Thus, it is at least possible that in a contingent secondary effect, whose partial causes are the secondary cause and God, the former is a contingent cause while the latter is not.

Ockham thinks that these earlier arguments are mistaken because it cannot be demonstrated, strictly speaking, that God is a free cause of everything even though it should be believed. Take, for instance, an argument that Ockham deems more persuasive than any of the previously presented ones:

Every non-impedible cause, equally directed towards many or infinitely many things, if at a certain time it brings about one of these things but not another, is a contingent and free cause. Because from the fact that it is not impedible and is and is equally and equally primarily directed towards all those things, there seems to be no reason why it produces one rather than another unless because of its freedom. But God is such a cause with respect to everything that is producible by him from eternity, therefore etc.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, according to this proposed argument, since God is omnipotent and thus equally directed towards all producible things (i.e., all things that are logically compossible), the fact that he only created some of them could not be explained except by his free will.

While Ockham thinks that this argument fares better than the previous ones, he does not think that it is, strictly speaking, demonstrative. As he notes later,

This argument is not a demonstration to an infidel, because he would say that God is not immediately and equally directed towards all producible things, but produces the first intelligence

---

45. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: Ex contingentia causae secundae non potest argui contingentia in prima (*OTb* V, 55).

46. *Rep.* II, q. 3–4: Omnis causa non impedibilis aequaliter respiciens multa sive infinita si agat unum illorum in aliquo instanti et non aliud, est causa contingens et libera. Quia ex quo non est impedibilis et aequaliter respicit omnia et aequae primo, non videtur ratio quare plus producit unum quam aliud nisi propter libertatem suam. Sed Deus est huiusmodi causa respectu omnium producibilium ab eo ab aeterno, igitur etc. (*OTb* V, 55–56).



by necessity, and by the mediation of the first produces the other or that first intelligence produces the other, and so forth. Therefore, if it could be shown by natural reason that God produces *de novo* when he produces one and not another, it would follow that we could show contingency in God.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the reason why Ockham thinks divine freedom is indemonstrable, is because we cannot philosophically demonstrate that multiple diverse things in the world were created by God. One might maintain, with Avicenna, that the only thing that God produces is the first intelligence, and either God produces the second intelligence by the mediation of the first intelligence, or the first intelligence itself produces the second intelligence, and so on. In this case, however, God would, by himself, produce only one effect—and he would not be free in the relevant sense.

Returning to the question of concurrence, it might be the case that similarly to creation, God only concurs with the first intelligence, while that concurs with the second and so on. Recall that when earlier Ockham demonstrated that secondary causes cannot be *total* causes of their effects, he did not specify what the concurring cause was—just that there was one. Thus, it is not demonstrably false that God does not concur with secondary causes at all to produce their effects.

We should note, however, that in all of these texts, Ockham's main concern is *demonstrability*. It is not demonstrably true that God is a free agent; nevertheless, Ockham thinks we have good reasons to believe so. And, as was seen above, with *that* much, we can know—and even demonstrate—that secondary causes require God's concurrence, that that concurrence is immediate, and in different respects is both numerically identical to and different from the action of the secondary agent. All these claims followed from the assumption that God is a free agent who brings about multiple things in the universe, which is an assumption, Ockham thinks, that all his opponents would accept.

Let us return to Ockham's analogy. The "strong man" objection is an objection only insofar as a theory of concurrence would require

---

47. *Rep.* II, q. 5: Sed ista ratio non est demonstratio uni infideli, quia diceret quod Deus non immediate et aequaliter respicit omnia producibilia, sed producit primam intelligentiam necessario et mediante prima producit aliam vel ipsa prima intelligentia producit aliam, et sic etc. Si igitur posset probari per rationem naturalem quod Deus producit de novo cum producit unum et non aliud, sequeretur quod posset probari contingentia in Deo (*OTb* V, 84). See also Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, IX, c. 4. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

more than what the analogy suggests. That, however, seems to be an unreasonable assumption. It is true that some concurrentists—most notably Aquinas—maintain that secondary agents cannot even exercise their powers without divine help. As I pointed out in the introduction, however, theories of concurrence occupy a whole spectrum, and this is also true of concurrentists' theories in particular: they need not agree on every detail. Ockham's theory, which maintains that God's help is only needed to strengthen the secondary agent's power, is more similar to Scotus's view, who had argued against Aquinas's instrumental causal model of concurrence.<sup>48</sup>

It seems that Ockham's strategy in answering the charge of occasionalism would be similar. In short, he thinks that the above given definition *EC* is not a good definition of real efficient causality. It is not a good definition, since both genuine efficient causes and mere *sine qua non* causes fulfill it, while we can draw a (non-trivial) distinction between these two even if we may not be able to demonstrate which of them we see in a particular instance of causation. Since *EC* would be a sufficient characterization if causation were understood in occasionalist terms, this shows that Ockham's understanding is more than that.

Ockham's stance on the distinction between proper and *sine qua non* causes can be best seen in his discussion of sacramental causation. The main question—involving various theological and metaphysical difficulties that we will need to disregard here—was whether and how sacraments cause their effects in the recipient (that is, how they cause grace in the soul), and whether there is any difference between this causation and regular causation in nature. Most thinkers wanted to maintain that sacraments *are* somehow causally related to the grace that follows them; sacraments “effect what they figure.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, most thinkers also wanted to maintain that sacraments cannot be proper causes of grace, since that would give rise to serious metaphysical as well as theological worries if not straight-out absurdities (e.g., a corporeal thing bringing about an incorporeal effect that surpasses its actuality).<sup>50</sup>

---

48. Scotus's main worry about Aquinas's model seems to be that it cannot preserve contingency in the created world. See, e.g., *Lectura* II, d. 34–37, q. 4.

49. E.g., Aquinas, *In Sent.* IV, d. 1, q. 1, a. 4, qc. 1. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis*, ed. Pierre Mandonnet (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929).

50. For a detailed overview and analysis of these difficulties and the medieval theories, see Marilyn McCord Adams, “Powerless Causes: The Case of Sacramental Causality,” in *Thinking about Causes*, ed. Peter Machamer and Gereon Wolters (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 47–76; and *eadem*, *Some*

Ockham, in particular, and in contrast to Aquinas,<sup>51</sup> thought that sacraments cannot be proper causes but are mere *sine qua non* causes of grace.

After presenting his view that sacraments are not proper causes, even though to their presence the presence of grace follows, Ockham raises and answers an objection. The objection, as formulated in the *Reportatio*, runs thus:

It seems that everything such that when it is posited another is posited, is a cause properly speaking; for it does not pertain to the notion of cause that the effect follows necessarily, but that the effect cannot exist without it. Therefore, it is enough that, when it is posited, the effect is posited and that the effect is not posited without it. Therefore, the sacraments are causes properly speaking.<sup>52</sup>

The objection is a common one, and will be similarly dealt with by later thinkers as well, including Peter of Ailly and Gabriel Biel<sup>53</sup>: since, according to definition *EC*, correlation is sufficient for causation, *and* since correlation can be found in the sacraments-grace pair (where the sacraments are always followed by grace), therefore—contrary to Ockham’s proposed and defended view—the sacraments *are* proper efficient causes of grace.

Ockham, denying that sacraments are proper efficient causes of grace, responds to the objection by denying that the above formulated criterion—the criterion of correlation—indeed gives a sufficient condition of *c* being an efficient cause of *e*. Thus, against the objection he notes: “To the first principal objection I say that it is true if it is so by the nature of the thing. But when it is so by the will of another, it is not true.”<sup>54</sup> As this shows, Ockham did not think that the notion of

---

*Later Medieval Theories of the Eucharist: Thomas Aquinas, Gilles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and William Ockham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

51. To be more precise, Aquinas thinks that sacraments are proper but only dispositive causes of grace.

52. *Rep.* IV, q. 1: Videtur quod omne illud quo posito ponitur aliud sit causa proprie dicta, quia non est de ratione causae quod ad ipsam necessario sequatur effectus, sed quod non possit sine ea. Igitur sufficit quod ipsa posita ponatur effectus, et quod non ponatur effectus sine ea, igitur sacramenta sunt proprie causa (*OTb* VII, 15).

53. For Peter of Ailly, see *In Sent.* IV, q. 1, a. 1. Petrus de Alliaco, *Questiones super Sententiarum* (Strasbourg: 1490; repr.: Minerva, 1968), especially fol. 32ra. For Biel, see his *Collectorium* IV, d. 1, p. 1, q. 1, a. 1. Gabriel Biel, *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum: Libri quarti pars prima*, ed. Wilfridus Werbeck and Udo Hofmann (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1975).

54. *Rep.* IV, q. 1: Ad primum principale dico quod verum est si sic sit ex natura rei. Quando tamen est ex voluntate alterius, non est verum (*OTb* VII, 18).

causality is exhausted by the notion of constant correlation, or that it is compatible with  $c$  being an efficient cause of  $e$  that God (and not  $c$ ) produces  $e$ . On the contrary, he distinguishes proper efficient causes from *sine qua non* causes, even though both fulfill definition *EC*.

In another place Ockham makes the distinction between proper and *sine qua non* causes even more clearly:

Therefore, to the question I first propose a distinction. . . . Because “cause,” if it is that the being of which is followed by another, can be taken in two ways. One way, when from the nature of the thing the presence and being of one is naturally followed by the being of the other. The other way, when the being of one is followed by the being of another merely by the will of another. And in this way we say that the meritorious act is a cause with respect to the reward merely by the divine will. And a *sine qua non* cause is a cause in the second way.<sup>55</sup>

According to Ockham’s distinction,

*EC1*:  $c$  is a proper efficient cause of  $e$  just in case if  $c$  is posited then  $e$  is (or can be) posited without any further entities, by the nature of  $c$ , while if  $c$  is not posited then  $e$  cannot be posited by the nature of  $c$ .

On the other hand,

*SN*:  $c$  is a *sine qua non* efficient cause of  $e$  just in case if  $c$  is posited then  $e$  is posited without any further entities, not by its nature but by someone’s will, while if  $c$  is not posited then  $e$  is not posited either by someone’s will.

That is, we talk about a proper efficient cause when  $c$  is followed by  $e$  *by the nature of  $c$* , in other words, by its own causal powers;<sup>56</sup> while we

---

55. *Rep.* IV, q. 1: Ideo ad quaestionem primo praemittam unam distinctionem propter dicta Sanctorum et auctorum. Quia causa, cum sit illud ad cuius esse sequitur aliud, dupliciter potest accipi. Uno modo quando ex natura rei ad praesentiam et esse unius sequitur naturaliter esse alterius. Alio modo quando ad esse unius sequitur esse alterius ex sola voluntate alterius. Et isto modo dicimus quod actus meritorius dicitur causa respectu praemii ex sola voluntate divina. Et causa sine qua non dicitur secundo modo causa (*OTb* VII, 12).

56. As Ockham repeats again in another *Reportatio* passage (*Rep.* II, q. 12–13): “That, which if posited another can be posited while removing everything else, and if not posited the other cannot be posited *naturally*, is its cause” (*OTb* V, 276, emphasis added).

talk about a *sine qua non* cause when *c* is followed by *e* not by the nature of *c* but by the will and power of another. Fire, for instance, is a proper efficient cause of heat in this sense, but a stop light is a mere *sine qua non* cause of the stopping of my car. Sacraments are also mere *sine qua non* causes of grace: they are followed by grace even though they do not possess sufficient power to effect it in any way. Instead of the material sacraments bringing about grace, it is God's will and power that does so every time when the sacraments are present.<sup>57</sup>

As it is clear from this, Ockham does *not* think that in regular efficient causation it is God who produces the effect, as the occasionalist would have it. On the contrary, he thinks that when we see that the burning fire is followed by the heat in the wood, it is indeed the fire that produces the heat.

We should return, however, to the passages quoted above that seem to indicate that this is not so, since they point to an important feature of Ockham's account, namely: while Ockham thinks that occasionalism is false, and we have good reasons to suppose so, he does not think that its falsity is demonstrable. (The *Reportatio* passage quoted above started with exactly this claim: "It cannot be demonstrated.") Ockham repeatedly insists that we cannot demonstrate that fire produces heat in the water because we cannot demonstrate that it is not something else that is doing so. And we cannot demonstrate the latter, since the negation of it does not entail a contradiction. Thus, Ockham points out in the same passage, it is at least logically possible that God so ordained the world that whenever a flammable thing is near fire, the sun produces combustion in it. While Ockham does not consider here the more radical scenario according to which it would not be the sun but God himself producing combustion, by similar reasoning, it seems that Ockham would have to say that there would be no logical contradiction in that scenario either. Consequently, occasionalism is not *demonstrably* false.

Some of Ockham's medieval contemporaries would insist that we experience causation, and thus we have at least experiential knowledge that occasionalism is false. Ockham, however, famously denies this. One of his rather interesting examples occur in the *Quodlibeta*, where he considers whether a creature can create, if we take 'creation' to be

---

57. For some interesting historical details of the example used for the proper vs. *sine qua non* cause distinction, see William J Courtenay, "The King and the Lead Coin: The Economic Background of 'Sine qua non' Causality," *Traditio* 28 (1972): 185–209. See also his "Covenant and Causality in Pierre d'Ailly," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 94–119.

the induction of a new form without a preexisting subject. Ockham's answer is the usual negative one, but in the discussion he raises an objection according to which a creature *does* create, namely when, for instance, in the Eucharistic wine it produces an accidental change. According to the metaphysics of sacraments presupposed here, in the Eucharistic wine there is no subject that would receive change—in fact, all the accidents in it are accidents without a substance, because the substance of the wine is not present (and the substance that *is* present, namely Christ's body, is not apt to receive these same accidental forms). Thus, when the Eucharistic wine approaches a fire, and the fire induces some heat in it, the fire seems to *create* the heat in the sense specified above. And this would be a problem since creation in this sense was held to be unique to God alone.

Ockham responds to the objection this way:

I reply that I understand the principle in question as follows: When the effect is by its nature apt to be caused and apt to exist naturally in the presence of the agent, then bringing about something is nothing else than the effect's existing in this way. In the case under discussion, however, this is not the way it is, since the heat in question is not naturally apt to be produced by the fire. For the heat exists without a subject, and a natural agent is not able to produce anything without a patient. *Hence, if God did not produce this heat, then nothing would be produced here in the presence of the fire.* For there is no recipient subject here.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, despite what we expect based on our experience, what happens when the Eucharistic wine approaches the fire is *not* that the fire induces some heat in it; indeed, fire can do nothing in this case, since there is no subject on which to act, and all natural agents presuppose a subject to act on. Instead, as Ockham claims, the new accident in the wine is created by God directly.

Thus, it seems that Ockham, even if not considering such scenarios explicitly, is committed to the claim that we do not have indubitable experiential knowledge that occasionalism is false. For since we

---

58. *Quodl.* II, q. 9: Illud principium intelligo sic: quando effectus natus est naturaliter causari et esse ad praesentiam agentis, tunc efficere non est nisi effectum sic esse. In proposito autem non est sic, quia ille calor non est natus produci ab igne, quia est sine subiecto; et agens naturale non potest aliquid producere sine passo. Unde si Deus non produceret illum calorem, nihil produceretur ibi ad praesentiam ignis, ex quo non est ibi subiectum patiens (*OTb* IX, 156. William Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, ed. and trans. Alfred Freddoso (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 131–132.

know that instances like qualitative changes in the Eucharistic wine actually happen, we cannot exclude the possibility of it *always* happening. Imagine someone, with no knowledge of sacramental theology and metaphysics, whose only experience of causation is one involving the Eucharist. Although she might be justified in concluding from her experiences that fire causes heat in the wine, her judgment in this case would be wrong. Moreover, since only those propositions are demonstrable whose negation entail a contradiction, and since—as we have just seen—it is not the case with propositions such as “the heat in the presence of fire is produced by the fire,” Ockham is committed to the claim that we cannot demonstrate that occasionalism is false.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, just as it was the case with respect to mere conservationism, we should notice that here, again, Ockham’s concern is demonstrability. While we cannot demonstrate that secondary causes act and that occasionalism is false, based on many experiences and subsequent abstract reasoning, we have very good reasons to believe so.

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, like many of his contemporaries, Ockham thinks that God freely and immediately concurs with every created agent, and is thus a partial cause of every effect. But he also thinks that neither the falsity of mere conservationism nor the falsity of occasionalism is philosophically demonstrable. We cannot demonstrate that mere conservationism is false, since it could be the case that it is only the first effect that God produces immediately, and not the generable effects of the sublunar world. The demonstrability of the falsity of mere conservationism would depend on the demonstrability of God being a free cause; and since the latter—*pace* Scotus—is not demonstrable, according to Ockham, God’s immediate concurrence with secondary causes is not demonstrable either.

On the other hand, the falsity of occasionalism is not demonstrable since God *in principle* could have made the world such that its efficient causes are not those which we think they are; in fact, this happens in cases involving qualitative changes in the Eucharist. Can we arrive at a logical contradiction by assuming that we live in a sacramental universe? According to Ockham, we cannot. But do we have good reasons to suppose that we do not in fact do so? According to Ockham, we do.

---

59. It is important to emphasize, however, that—unlike for instance Gabriel Biel later—he does not explicitly consider occasionalism in the context of the qualitative change in the Eucharistic wine.

Should these indemonstrability claims worry us, or at least, should they worry Ockham? Is it not unsatisfactory, metaphysically speaking, that it is logically possible that we live in an occasionalist universe where causation is just like sacramental causation? Should it worry especially the theologically minded audience, that God may not be causally acting in the universe at all (a view that could lead to problems concerning divine foreknowledge and providence)?

It seems that whether one should really regard the logical possibility of a sacramental universe as endangering our everyday notion of causation, depends on what standards of certainty one adopts. And as far as Ockham is concerned, the answer to the above questions is “no.” The indemonstrability of the falsity of occasionalism is only worrisome (if one is worried about occasionalism at all) if one thinks, with Descartes or Nicholas of Autrecourt, that we can be certain only of demonstrable things, that is, if one thinks that we can be certain of something only if its negation entails a contradiction. As was just seen, according to Ockham, occasionalism is not like that, and thus it follows that if this is Ockham’s standard of certainty, then he would be committed to the claim that we cannot be certain and cannot know that occasionalism is false.

Ockham, however, together with most of his contemporaries, does not think that we need such unqualified certainty in order to have knowledge. For instance, according to him, we can have certainty regarding judgments about sense experience (from intuitive cognition) as well as about such abstract concepts as “substance,” even though neither of these is demonstrable strictly speaking: even though, for instance, God could even bring it about that we have an intuitive cognition of non-existents,<sup>60</sup> and even though we sometimes see a man when he is actually not one.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, according to Ockham, we do have sufficient certainty of claims like ‘this is a man,’ even if this certainty is not infallible.

Consequently, Ockham has no skeptical worries arising from the indemonstrability of the concurrentist claim either. As we have seen,

---

60. We need not get into the debate whether or to what extent this is possible, and what skeptical consequences it may entail. For a summary of this long-standing debate, see Marilyn McCord Adams, “Intuitive Cognition, Certainty, and Scepticism in William Ockham,” *Traditio* 26 (1970): 389–398. Ockham seems to think that if God causes an intuitive knowledge of non-existent, then the intellect would judge that it did not exist and thus would not be deceived.

61. The standard medieval example for this latter kind of mistake is Tobit and the angel in the *Book of Tobit*, 5.



he spends great effort demonstrating various details of his concurrentist view, as opposed to what the mere conservationist would say, and distinguishing regular causation from *sine qua non* causation, as opposed to what an occasionalist would say. The distinction between proper and *sine qua non* causes, so crucial for Ockham, will start to diminish in some later thinkers, as a consummation of which Gabriel Biel, in a self-proclaimed Ockhamist fashion, can insist that “if God determined himself that from this day, to the utterance of some words that are uttered by anyone, he would will to give rain, then those words just uttered would be the proper causes of rain.”<sup>62</sup> But as was shown above, Ockham would find this thought very alien.

---

62. *Collectorium* IV, d. 1, p. 1, q. 1, a. 1, notabile 3: [S]i Deus determinaret se, quod ab hac die ad prolationem alicuius verbi a quocumque prolati velit dare pluviam, verbum illud iam prolatum proprie esset causa pluviae (Werbeck ed., 14).