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Occasionalism

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Philosophical Concept

Occasionalism was a theory of causation that played an important role in early modern metaphysics. In its most radical form, this theory holds that God is the only genuine cause, with natural events serving merely as 'occasions' for divine activity. According to an old textbook view, which has its source in the seventeenth century, occasionalism was introduced as an *ad hoc* solution to the problem, deriving from Descartes's dualism, of how mind and body can causally interact. In fact, however, occasionalism has a history that dates from long before Descartes, and it was initially offered as a solution to theological rather than purely metaphysical difficulties. After Descartes, moreover, occasionalism remained significant for reasons that go far beyond the issue of mind-body interaction.

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1. Medieval occasionalism and its critics

In his *Dalâlat al-Ha'irîn (Guide of the Perplexed)*, Maimonides mentions a view of causation popular among Islamic theologians, according to which God conserves the world over time by re-creating different durationless accidents at different temporally indivisible moments (1190, vol. 1: 203). According to this view, any change in the world derives directly from God's causality. There was a competing account of causality, however, in the work of Islamic philosophers such as al-Farabi, in the tenth century, and Ibn Sina, in the eleventh century. According to this account, the natural course of events derives necessarily from certain 'forms' that, though emanating ultimately from God through pure intelligences, nonetheless exist in created objects (see Creation and conservation, religious doctrine of §3; Aristotelianism in Islamic philosophy §2; Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy §§2–3). There is a direct response to this account in the *Tahâfut al-Falâsifah (Incoherence of the Philosophers)* of al-Ghazali. In this text, al-Ghazali is concerned to preserve the Islamic belief in miracles by offering a refutation of the claim of 'the philosophers' that any departure from the natural course of events is impossible. He argues that the relations between natural causes and their effects cannot be absolutely necessary given that the affirmation of the existence of the one does not logically require the affirmation of the existence of the other. The way is then cleared for the position that the causes and effects of concern in the natural sciences 'are connected as the result of the decree of God (holy be his name), which preceded their existence' (1095: 185). Miracles are simply events that God produces in a manner that deviates from his customary action.

In *De Potentia Dei (On the Power of God)*, Thomas Aquinas is concerned to distinguish his own view that ‘God operates in operations of nature’ from the position, of ‘some of the sages in the Moorish books of law’ reported by ‘Rabbi Moses’ [Maimonides], that ‘fire does not heat but God creates heat in that which is made hot’ (1265-6, vol. 1: 127-8). Aquinas’s initial response is that this position is ‘manifestly opposed to the nature of sensation’, since the senses merely passively receive the effects of the activity of sensible objects (1265-6, vol. 1: 128). Al-Ghazali anticipated this response when he noted in the *Incoherence* that sensory effects ‘are observed to exist *with* some other conditions’, but we do not see that such effects ‘exist *by* them’ (1095: 186). Yet Aquinas adds that it is ‘opposed to God’s goodness’ that God does not communicate to creatures the power to produce effects (1265-6, vol. 1: 128). He insists that ‘the operations of nature’ follow rather from various created forms. Given Aquinas’s position that natural operations derive from such forms, there may seem to be no room for his own thesis that God operates in these operations. However, he responds to this line of objection by arguing that God acts with the creature in producing an effect by ‘moving and applying its power to action’ (1265-6, vol. 1: 131). This later became known as the view that God, as ‘primary cause’, ‘concurs’ with the action of ‘secondary causes’.

In a fourteenth-century text first published in the sixteenth century,Durandus of Saint-Pourçain agrees with Aquinas in rejecting occasionalism on the grounds that ‘it denies of things their proper operation and also denies the sensory judgment by which we experience that created things act on one another’ (1571: §4). However, Durandus also claims that Aquinas’s own view that God acts immediately with creatures in producing their effects precludes genuine causal efficacy on the part of creatures. Durandus concludes that the only acceptable alternative to occasionalism is the position that the divine contribution to the production of an effect by a secondary cause is restricted to God’s creation and continuing conservation of that cause with its causal power (1571: §§6-17). Pre-modern views of causality thus included Durandus’s ‘mere conservationism’ in addition to Islamic occasionalism and Aquinas’s ‘concurrentism’. However, concurrentism became the dominant alternative to occasionalism within later scholasticism. And although the fifteenth-century scholastics Pierred’Ailly and Gabriel Biel were sometimes cited as being sympathetic to occasionalism, by the beginning of the seventeenth century this account of causation had no prominent proponents. This helps to explain how some early modern thinkers could have taken Cartesianism to be the primary source of occasionalism.

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2. Descartes and Cartesian occasionalism

There is the claim in the modern period, in the work of Bernard deFontenelle , that Descartes ‘invented’ the theory of occasional causes, according to which ‘God on the occasion of bodily motion, could imprint a thought in the soul, or on the occasion of a thought of the soul, imprint a motion in body’ (1696: 529-30). In fact, there is some question whether Descartes accepted any form of occasionalism (see Descartes, R. §§8, 11, 13). He seems to have had no patience with the suggestion that the causal interaction of mind and body is ruled out by the fact that they have

heterogeneous natures. Thus he notes at one point that ‘the whole difficulty that [questions concerning mind–body interaction] contain proceeds solely from a supposition that is false and cannot be proved, namely that, if the soul and the body are two different substances with diverse natures, this prevents them from being able to act on each other’ (Descartes 1647: 275). Moreover, in famous correspondence with Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes appeals to the fact that we have a ‘primitive notion’ of soul–body union that reveals ‘our notion of the soul’s power to move the body, and the body’s power to act on the soul and cause its sensations and passions’ (1643, 217-20).

However, it has been thought that there are special reasons to attribute to Descartes an occasionalist account of body–body interaction in physics. These reasons are connected to Descartes’s claim that God’s conservation of the material world differs only ‘in reason’ from his initial creation of it. On a prominent reading of this claim, Descartes is assuming that the conservation of a body at a certain moment is just the re-creation of that body at that moment. In continually re-creating bodies over time, God fully determines their states at each moment they exist.

Though this account of divine conservation is reminiscent of the view that Maimonides found in the Islamic occasionalists, there are reasons to refrain from attributing it to Descartes. For one thing, his own account of divine conservation draws on the scholastic commonplace that God’s act of conserving the world is numerically the same as his initial act of creating it. Thus divine conservation consists not in a series of acts of re-creation, but rather in the continuation of a single act of creation. Moreover, when explaining the re-distribution of motion due to bodily collision, Descartes appeals explicitly to the activity of ‘forces’ in the colliding bodies.

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Cartesian occasionalism would therefore appear to be a post-Descartes phenomenon. A noteworthy event here was the publication in 1666 of defences of different forms of occasionalism in the work of two French Cartesians, Louis de la Forge and Géraud de Cordemoy. In his *Traité de l’esprit de l’homme (Treatise on Man)*, La Forge is most clearly committed to occasionalism in the case of body–body interaction. For he argues that the ‘force’ that produces motion cannot be found in body, considered, in Cartesian terms, as merely an extended thing. Moreover, he suggests at one point that God alone can move a body since he must not only ‘continue to produce [a body], if he wants to conserve it in existence; but, in addition, because he cannot create it everywhere or outside of any particular place, he must put it in a place’ (1666: 241). As we will see, this sort of appeal to divine conservation can be found as well in one of Malebranche’s main arguments for his complete form of occasionalism (see §3). However, La Forge’s occasionalism is more attenuated. For La Forge wants to maintain that our mind has a genuine power to ‘determine’ the motion of the body to which it is united by directing it in a particular manner. He also claims that our mind produces sensory states in itself

when certain bodily motions – serving as 'remote and occasional causes' of these states – are present.

Cordemoy introduced his argument for occasionalism in his *Six discours sur la distinction et l'union du corps et l'âme (Six Discourses on the Distinction between and the Union of Body and Soul)*. In contrast to La Forge, Cordemoy makes clear that God alone can determine the direction of bodily motion. His distinctive argument for this conclusion appeals to the fact that only the agent who first initiated bodily motion can continue that motion. Since God alone initiates motion in creating the world, he alone can continue that motion by fully determining it at each subsequent moment. Created minds and bodies can provide only the occasion for God to determine bodily motions in a particular way (Cordemoy 1666: 135-6). In his *Six Discourses*, Cordemoy does not explicitly address the question of whether the mind has the power to determine its own states. However, in later work he appeals to the claim in Malebranche that God alone can produce all that is real even in our free actions, though he does not address the question of how God's activity could be consistent with our freedom.

3. Malebranche, Berkeley, Hume

Nicolas Malebranche was the most famous and influential of the Cartesian occasionalists. In contrast to La Forge and Cordemoy (see §2), he argues explicitly for a complete occasionalism that deprives creatures of any intrinsic causal power. Al-Ghazali had earlier appealed to the lack of a necessary connection between perceived causes and effects in arguing for the occasionalist conclusion that God produces all effects in nature (see §1). So also in his *De la Recherche de la vérité (Search after Truth)*, Malebranche argues for his occasionalism by appealing to the fact that a true cause must bear a necessary connection to its effects. He then claims that since there is such a necessary connection only between the volitions of an omnipotent being and their outcomes, God alone can be a cause (1674-5: 450). One complication for this argument, which Hume will later exploit, derives from Malebranche's later admission that though we know *that* there is a necessary connection between God's volitions and their effects, we cannot see *how* God brings about those effects.

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Though Malebranche seems to have remained committed to his 'necessary connection argument' for occasionalism, in his later writings another argument is more prominent. The latter argument appeals to the fact that God's conservation of the world consists in his continuing creation of it. In his *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion (Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion)*, Malebranche applies this argument most explicitly to the case of God's determination of bodily states. He claims there that 'because the conservation of creatures is – on the part of God – simply a continuous creation', in conserving a particular body, such as a chair, at a particular moment, 'God cannot will that this chair is, and not will at the same time that it is here or there, and by his will not place it there' (Malebranche 1688: 115-16). As in the case of Descartes, Malebranche has been read as identifying God's conservation of the world with his

continual re-creation of it. But as in the case of Descartes, this reading of Malebranche cannot be sustained. For in the passage just cited, Malebranche also notes that divine conservation consists in ‘a single volition subsisting and operating continuously’ (ibid.). In contrast to the case of Descartes, however, Malebranche makes clear in his *Dialogues* that the continuously active divine volitions fully determine all states of the material world. Moreover, he had noted in his *Traité de la morale (Treatise on Ethics)* that the same conclusion applies to created minds, since ‘if God keeps or creates the soul in the way of being that afflicts it, such as with pain, no mind can deliver itself therefrom, nor make itself feel pleasure thereby, unless God concurs with it to carry out its desires’ (Malebranche 1684: 147).

Cordemoy broached, without fully confronting, the problem of the compatibility of God’s determination of our mental modalities with our freedom of action. However, Malebranche was explicit that though God does indeed determine our modalities, we have the power to suspend or give our consent to motives to action that God creates in us. Malebranche’s subtle but difficult position is that his attribution of this power to free agents does not compromise his complete occasionalism since the consent and suspense that derive from this power are themselves not real beings, but merely privations that serve as occasions for God to produce new modalities in us. In his *Search*, Malebranche offers his occasionalism as a Christian response to the ‘dangerous error’ of an ancient pagan philosophy that attributes causal efficacy to created ‘natures’ (1674-5: 446). The influence of Malebranche on George Berkeley is clear from the latter’s claim, in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, that ‘it is more unaccountable’ that the view that sensible objects contribute causally to the production of natural effects ‘should be received among*Christians* professing belief in the Holy Scriptures, which constantly ascribe those effects to the immediate hand of God, that heathen philosophers are wont to impute to *nature*' (1710: 89). This theological argument informs Berkeley’s position that Newtonian gravity is not a real power in nature, but rather a mere ‘mathematical hypothesis’ that allows us to predict sensory phenomena. This acceptance of an occasionalist version of Newtonian theory distinguishes Berkeley from Malebranche, who was committed to an occasionalist explanation of gravity in terms of Cartesian vortices. Berkeley is further distinguished from Malebranche by the fact that his case for occasionalism rests primarily on his identification of sensible objects with collections of passive sensory ideas. Thus Berkeley does not extend his occasionalism to the case of finite minds, and indeed claims that such ‘spirits’ differ from their ideas in virtue of the fact that they are the locus of causal activity.

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The influence of Malebranche on the views of David Hume is reflected in the claim of the latter, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, that ‘the*Cartesians*' have shown that ‘the ultimate force and efficacy of nature is perfectly unknown to us, and ’tis vain we search for it in all the known qualities of matter’ (1739-40: 159). However, Hume continues by rejecting the ‘certainly very curious’ opinion of the Cartesian occasionalists that the power that produces effects in nature ‘must lie in the Deity, or that divine being, who contains in his nature all excellency and

perfection', on the grounds that 'we have no adequate idea of power or efficacy in any object', including God (1739-40: 159-60). For Hume, the occasionalist argument against our experience of power in nature leads one rather to the conclusion that causal necessity 'is something that exists in our mind, not in objects', and in fact is 'nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc'd union' (1739-40: 165-6). In effect, then, Hume is replacing Malebranche's theological explanation of causal connections in nature with a psychological explanation of our causal inferences.

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