

Steven Nadler, *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians*
New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xi + 215 pp.

Steven Nadler's *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians* gathers together ten of his previously published essays, as well as two postscripts and a helpful preface. The essays are all of very high quality, combine historical detail with philosophical argument, and are written in Nadler's characteristically elegant style. They will be required reading for those concerned specifically with occasionalism and the history of causation, and should serve as a useful resource to anyone interested in philosophical analyses of what Hume famously called the "cement of the universe." Since each main chapter is, in effect, an independent essay, experts may encounter some redundancies that they will want to pass over quickly. For beginners, however, points of overlap may help to highlight many of the most important issues raised by the collection as a whole.

The most general aim of the book is to bring out the often-underappreciated richness and complexity of early modern occasionalism, especially as it was adopted by seventeenth-century Cartesians (4). Occasionalism in its purest form maintains that God alone is causally active. The motion of one billiard ball does not cause another billiard ball to move, but rather serves as the occasion for God's direct causal intervention. Likewise for my willing to wave goodbye and my hand's subsequent movement, and even for my willing to imagine a sunset and the imagining that ensues. Although unrestricted occasionalism was most famously defended by Nicholas Malebranche in the seventeenth century, Nadler nicely shows that occasionalism was also developed by earlier thinkers, and in more restricted forms. Thus, for example, Nadler documents support for occasionalism among tenth century Arabic philosophers and theologians, and credits al-Ghazali with anticipating, in the eleventh century, several lines of thought more commonly associated with the early modern era (84-87, 172-82). Nadler also persuasively argues that, among the Cartesians, Louis de la Forge's occasionalism was limited to body-body relations, while Johannes Clauberg's was restricted to mind-body relations (106, 121).

The first chapter of the collection takes aim at the textbook view that occasionalism arose in the seventeenth century as an ad hoc response to the problem of mind-body interaction. Cartesian dualism claims that mind and body have radically different natures: the former is unextended thinking, the latter nothing but extension. As Princess Elizabeth observed, however, it is not clear how two such radically different kinds of substance might causally interact (10). The textbook story maintains that Cartesians invoked God's direct causal activity precisely in order to overcome the causal gap engendered by their dualism. By systematically examining their arguments, however, Nadler makes a convincing case that Cartesians were not generally led to embrace occasionalism because of concerns rooted specifically in the heterogeneity of mind and body. With the important exception of Antoine Arnauld, discussed in Chapter 5, the figures treated by Nadler are occasionalists *and* dualists, but they are not occasionalists *because* they are dualists.

The second chapter adds further nuance to our understanding of early modern occasionalism by drawing a distinction between occasional causation and occasionalism. Occasional causation occurs, according to Nadler, when one entity or event “induces or incites” some other entity or event to bring about an effect through genuine, transeunt causation. Occasionalism adds the further condition that the only genuine, transeunt cause is God. Drawing on this distinction, Nadler offers a novel interpretation of Descartes’s views on causation. He suggests that, for Descartes, in the crucial case of body-mind interaction, changes in my body may act as occasional causes of changes in my mind insofar as they serve not as transeunt causes but merely as occasional causes for my mind to immanently bring forth its own mental states (38-44). On Nadler’s reading, Descartes thus turns out to be a proponent of occasional causation but not of occasionalism. Somewhat surprisingly, he also turns out to be much closer to Leibniz than to Malebranche in his views on body-mind causation.

The third chapter introduces yet another subtlety by drawing a further distinction between two ways of understanding how God’s volitions relate to his causal efficacy. Malebranche maintains that God acts by general volitions. But how are we to understand this claim? On what might be called “the general content interpretation,” defended, for example, by Nicholas Jolley, God acts through volitions with general contents that, when paired with particular conditions, bring about particular effects (66). On this view, if divine volitions are identified with the laws of nature, the laws themselves may be said to be causally efficacious. On what might be called “the particular content interpretation,” defended by Nadler, God acts only through volitions with particular contents in accordance with general decrees he establishes for himself (59-65). On this view, if the laws of nature are identified with those general decrees, the laws of nature are reduced to mere promises or mnemonics; particular acts of the divine will alone are causally efficacious.

This interesting distinction has already sparked a lively debate among Malebranche’s commentators (66-73). One might wonder, however, how concerned Malebranche should have been with the differences between these two interpretations. On both accounts, God is the sole efficient cause of every particular effect, creatures lack genuine causal powers, and the dependence of creatures upon God is maximized. Furthermore, both accounts appear to be consistent with Malebranche’s theodicy. In brief, Malebranche’s general apologetic strategy is to explain instances of local imperfection by appealing to God’s overriding concern to act in regular, law-like ways. Rain falls uselessly on the sea, monsters are born, and injustices are tolerated on pain of God’s having to depart from “the general laws of nature established at creation” (193). The general-content interpretation can explicate this strategy by proposing that God allows local imperfections in order not to contravene his general-content volitions. The particular-content interpretation, however, can also explicate Malebranche’s strategy by suggesting that God allows local imperfections so that his particular volitions do not contradict the general policies he has set for himself. Given that both accounts seem to give him everything he wants, it remains unclear why it should be important to Malebranche to prefer one of these ways of fleshing out his remarks on general volitions over the other.

The depths of occasionalism are brought out further by Nadler's careful attention to the arguments that have been offered on its behalf. Of the four main lines of thought helpfully canvassed in the first chapter, one in particular plays a perhaps surprisingly prominent role in subsequent chapters. What might be called the "knowledge argument" suggests that for a cause to bring about an effect, it must have detailed knowledge of how exactly that effect is to be brought about. Arnauld, Geulincx, and Malebranche argue that, for example, even if we had the power to raise our hands, we couldn't since we lack sufficient knowledge of the "spirits, nerves, and muscles" requisite for the movement of our limbs (15-16). The argument seems weak – why should we suppose that (say) a bullet has to know anything in order to pierce its target? Nadler valiantly tries to lend support to this line of thought, plausibly suggesting that volitional agency is being taken as *the* paradigm of causality (82). But questions remain. Even if volitional agency is taken as paradigmatic, why shouldn't we suppose, as Aristotelians commonly did, that rocks and fire act in a fashion analogous to rational agents insofar as they act for the sake of ends, but differently insofar as they are not conscious or aware of those ends. Or, for that matter, why shouldn't we take the example of our moving our hands without any intimate knowledge of our spirits, nerves, and muscles as evidence that even volitional agency does not require detailed knowledge of how effects are brought about? One suspects that Nadler is on to something deep and important in his attempt to make the knowledge argument seem more plausible; there is more work to be done here, however, and the knowledge argument seems especially ripe for further investigation.

There is much else in Nadler's rich book worthy of extended discussion. None of it, of course, is likely to make occasionalism seem like an attractive option for contemporary readers. In fleshing out the motivations, distinctions and arguments crucial to understanding the rise of occasionalism among the early modern Cartesians, however, Nadler fully succeeds in his central ambition of showing occasionalism to be a much more complicated and interesting view than is often imagined.

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