

Steven Nadler

Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians.

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If any American philosopher could take credit for returning occasionalism to the Anglo-American philosophical canon, it would be Steven Nadler. Beginning with his 1989 work *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas*, continuing with his 1992 work *Malebranche and Ideas*, and a series of seminal articles, Nadler slowly chipped away at the careless textbook mythology that saw occasional causation as an ad-hoc solution to the mind-body problem. *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians* brings together a selection of Nadler's 1993-2004 articles on various Cartesian philosophers in one place, so the reader can observe for herself the carefully textually grounded and philosophically perceptive case he built for a more nuanced understanding of occasional causation in Arnauld, Cordemoy, de la Forge, Descartes, Geulincx, Malebranche (and the influence of occasionalism on Leibniz and Hume).

The articles in the collection were published in various journals across several years, as Nadler re-oriented the scholarly discussion of occasionalism, so some repetition inevitably occurs. In addition, a second edition would be improved structurally if Nadler began with the current second chapter, 'Descartes & Occasional Causation'. As all of the philosophers discussed followed Descartes philosophically and/or chronologically, laying out Nadler's interpretation of Descartes on causation would have served as a better frame for the collection that follows. Moreover, in this chapter Nadler most clearly draws the distinction between 'occasionalism' as a full-blown theory of causation, and 'occasional causation' as one among various forms of causation, that is implicit or explicit in almost all of the book's chapters (save 9 and 10).

Chapter 1, 'Occasionalism and the Mind-Body Problem' (1997), draws a clear and textually grounded case about the development of occasionalism from a deep concern about causation in general, not in response to a particular worry about mind-body causation. Nadler argues that, in fact, the mind-body worries that consume our contemporaries 'played no role at all in motivating the occasionalisms of Malebranche, Cordemoy and Guelincx' (9). A general problem about necessary connection as being required for causation—a connection seemingly beyond the grasp of finite creatures—consumed 17th century Cartesians, as did the metaphysics of God's continued creation of the universe.

As mentioned above, Chapter 2, 'Descartes and Occasional Causation' (1994), argues for a distinction between *occasionalism* as a full-blown theory of causation and *occasional causation* as one of various types of creaturely causation, including efficient/transcendent and immanent causation. In the case of the occasionalism, but not of occasional causation, the analysis of a cause as demanding a necessary connection rules out all but God as a true cause. Nadler argues that Descartes introduced occasional causes

only where ‘efficient causation cannot intelligibly operate’—say, because of the mind-body dissimilarity—but argues that Descartes does not deny finite creatures any efficient casual power, as do the ‘occasionalists’ such as Malebranche (36). Indeed, Nadler argues that interpreters like Garber over-read Descartes’ use of the term ‘occasion’ as they assume it instantly transfers all true causal agency to God. As Nadler reads such texts, God ordains that the body occasion the *mind*’s causal efficacy, not His own. As such, Descartes uses the structure of occasional causation without accepting the full doctrine of occasionalism.

Chapter 3, ‘Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche’ (1993), analyzes the debate in Malebranche’s day and our own on how to interpret God’s causal activity within occasionalism. Is God constantly active in the universe or do the laws of nature, so to speak, do the work for Him after creation has passed (so to speak)? Nadler defends the traditional reading of Malebranche’s God as ‘personally, directly, and immediately responsible for bringing about effects and causal changes in nature’ (49). He argues that philosophers including Antoine Arnauld, Desmond Clarke, and Nicholas Jolley misinterpret Malebranche because they interpret his term ‘general volitions’ to mean that God institutes general laws of motion, mind-body union, and of the union of human and divine reason, at which point laws operate to bring about effects when the requisite ‘occasion’ obtains. For Nadler, such an account gets things backwards: in acting by ‘general volitions’ God acts in accordance with the general laws that He created: God’s causal activity is thereby constant and worthy of a wise creator (who doesn’t act via a hodgepodge of ad hoc particular volitions outside the framework of occasional causation). Acting in accordance with general laws, of course, is nevertheless compatible with individual acts of God’s will. ‘God as universal cause acting only by general volitions is consistent with God as the sole and constant efficient agent of natural change’ (65). Nadler’s defense of the traditional view makes better philosophical sense of Malebranche’s metaphysics than the competing ones he rejects.

Chapter 4, ‘Knowledge, Volitional Agency and Causation in Malebranche and Geulincx’ (1999), contrasts the traditionally discussed metaphysical and theological arguments for occasionalism with a little discussed epistemological argument. Malebranche and Geulincx press hard on the apparently clearly and distinctly perceived premise that you cannot cause what you do not know how to bring about. Given, for example, that human beings are neither aware of nor know the requisite physiological and neurological events needed to carry out the will’s command to move their arms, human beings cannot be the true cause of such motion. Thus from the commonly accepted adage that their can be no blind willing, Malebranche and Geulincx use the finite nature of the human mind to show it lacks the knowledge required for causality—‘you are not the cause of that which you do not know how to do’ (80). Nadler links this epistemic condition on causality as far back as medieval Islamic theologians (of some of whom 17th century Cartesians were aware). Further, if one takes ‘volitional agency’ as the model of causality, as Nadler argues many Cartesians did, such an epistemic restriction is not as ridiculous as it might otherwise appear to the contemporary reader.

Chapter 5, ‘Dualism and Occasionalism: Arnauld and the Development of Cartesian Metaphysics’ (1994), asserts that Arnauld was the only Cartesian to explicitly introduce occasional causation to solve problems of mind-body interaction in Descartes’ metaphysics. The chapter traces Arnauld’s chronological and philosophical development of limited occasional causation in his own Cartesian system. In the end, Nadler believes that Arnauld pushes even further than Descartes the claim that only God has the knowledge required to produce and coordinate bodily motions and mental sensations. One small complaint the reader might have about this chapter is Nadler’s failure to translate, at least in footnotes, some of the longer passages from Arnauld which he cites as evidence.

Chapter 6, ‘The Occasionalism of Louis de la Forge’ (1993), argues that although de la Forge is usually credited with being one of occasionalism’s founders, his use of occasional causation is restricted only to body-body relations. Nadler argues that de la Forge may have flirted with a fuller occasionalism (whereby God is the unique true cause) in earlier, unpublished works, but that his ‘mature’ thought in his 1665 *Traité de l’esprit de l’homme* pulls back from this. Instead, ‘God has established that certain bodily motions should occasion the soul to produce certain ideas and that the mind, through its volitions, should move the body’ (109). According to Nadler, La Forge took this approach from Descartes: ‘[i]t is not occasionalism—it is occasional causation, which, for La Forge, is a secondary but real causal relation’ (114-15). There is not enough space to reproduce Nadler’s subtle analysis here; this chapter does one of the most thorough jobs of contrasting the various flavors of occasionalism among the Cartesians.

Chapter 7, ‘Louis de la Forge and the Development of Occasionalism: Continuous Creation and the Activity of the Soul’ (1998), feels like the natural continuation of Chapter 6. The chapter opens provocatively, declaring that ‘[t]he doctrine of divine conservation is a dangerous one’, with Nadler clarifying the danger to be a philosophical one: the doctrine ‘establishes too much’ (123-4). If the doctrine’s interpretation destroys all natural causality, good Cartesians should reject it (and deviant ones, such as Malebranche and Cordemoy, should have done so). Nadler highlights the medieval distinction between a cause operating *secundum esse* (whose continuous operation is needed to sustain its effects) and a cause operating *secundum fieri* (whose causal input is needed merely to bring about effects that endure after the cause ceases) as the key to a proper Cartesian understanding of divine conservation. There need be no necessary connection continuous creation/conservation and occasionalism for Cartesians, a claim Nadler defends with his close reading of Descartes and de la Forge’s metaphysics.

Chapter 8, ‘Cordemoy and Occasionalism’ (2005), offers another example of Nadler at his best, carefully analyzing texts to show problems and connections that other commentators have missed. Whereas commentators are practically unanimous in granting Cordemoy’s full occasionalist pedigree, Nadler asserts that they miss an important lack of argumentation against the soul’s activity within Cordemoy’s account. Further, because commentators ignore a posthumous text of Cordemoy’s from 1691, they are correct but unjustified in their assertions of Cordemoy’s robust commitment to occasionalism as a complete doctrine of causation.

Chapter 9, “‘No Necessary Connection’: The Medieval Roots of the Occasionalist Roots of Hume’ (1996), should be required reading in graduate philosophy courses in the history of philosophy. The chapter does an excellent job of both 1) undermining caricatures of occasionalist philosophy and philosophers; and 2) tracing the lines of influence from medieval philosophy through Malebranche and to Hume. In particular, Nadler shows how thinkers whose philosophical projects were as varied as al-Ghazali, Nicolas of Autrecourt, Malebranche, and Hume all used ‘the negative argument that we can never perceive a sufficiently necessary connection between any two natural objects or events’ to undermine claims that reason discerns real causal powers and connections in nature (166). Thus even though Hume and Autrecourt conclude from this that we lack any demonstrative knowledge of causality, whereas Malebranche and Al-Ghazali conclude there is only divine causality, all of the philosophers carefully approach the issue of causation in a systematic way.

Chapter 10, ‘Choosing a Theodicy: The Leibniz-Malebranche-Arnauld Connection’ (1994), ends the book on a theological note. Nadler brings out similarities in Leibniz and Malebranche’s respective analyses of divine causation in the realms of nature and grace by examining similar ways in which their theodicies offended the irascible Arnauld. Recall from Chapter 8 that Arnauld was one of those disposed to viewing Malebranche’s occasionalism as a kind of pre-established harmony in disguise (thus God rests while laws/monads govern creaturely ‘action’). Here Arnauld worries about another apparent similarity in Malebranche and Leibniz’s ‘mechanics of the divine *modus operandi* in the realms of nature and grace’ (101). Specifically, although Leibniz’s God balances simplicity of laws and richness of phenomena in the ‘best of all possible worlds’ and Malebranche’s God balances simplicity of means with resulting work to achieve the overall product most worthy of God, they *both* have God limit his omnipotence in relation to his wisdom/reason. Neither Leibniz nor Malebranche’s God *could* act in imperfect ways unworthy of God’s nature. In contrast, Arnauld demanded that ‘God’s will has no rule other than itself: this is the very meaning of omnipotence and divine freedom’ (202-03).

University libraries should purchase the book for ease of reference and research for modern scholars and graduate students. However, spending \$65.00 for a collection of articles already available in journals—and without any new material—makes the book a bit of a luxury for the early modern specialist already familiar with Nadler’s work. The buyer expecting new ground to be broken, as in Tad Schmaltz’s *Radical Cartesians*, will be disappointed. The collection would have been greatly enhanced by a final, original essay where Nadler brought all of the Cartesians’ positions together to explore their ties and divergences. Perhaps such a philosophical commentary could also have updated and deepened Nadler’s own considered view of the causal scene amongst these demi- and full occasionalists. That being said, this remains overall a fine work of scholarship.

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