

Redefining occasionalism

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Abstract

In secondary scholarship on occasionalism, it is common to distinguish partial occasionalists from full-blown occasionalists, with the former ascribing and the latter denying activity to the mind besides their common denial of activity to material bodies. I show that this distinction arises from a failure to distinguish action from production. Furthermore, if we define occasionalism extensionally to refer to the system of philosophy advocated by Louis de La Forge, Geraud de Cordemoy, and Nicolas Malebranche, full-blown occasionalism simply doesn't exist.

1 Introduction

Occasionalism is best known for its solutions to the problems of individuation and the mind-body relation, according to which both the correspondence of a rational creature's mental volitions with its bodily action and the unity of individual material substances are effected directly by God. In secondary literature on occasionalism today, it is common to distinguish partial, sometimes called local occasionalism, from full-blown or global occasionalism, with the former affirming and the latter denying activity to minds besides bodies. This distinction is first hinted at in Daniel Garber's work on Descartes' account of motion, and first advanced shortly thereafter in Daisie Radner and Steven Nadler's work on occasionalism and on Louis de La Forge in particular [6, 16, 13]. The distinction has since become widespread, with its canonicity witnessed by its acceptance in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on occasionalism.¹

In what follows, I show that the dominant division of occasionalism in secondary scholarship for the past thirty years - essentially since the beginning of scholarship examining differences among occasionalist thinkers - is without foundation: as a matter of the early modern historical record, full-blown occasionalism simply doesn't exist.

For the purposes of this essay, I take 'occasionalism' to describe a historical movement in early modern thought begun among certain followers of Descartes, having as its main defenders Louis de La Forge, Geraud de Cordemoy, and Nicolas Malebranche. Consequently, this article's thesis touches neither on those

¹[5], [4], [2], and [9], [11], [18], [10].

medieval Islamic thinkers whose thought shares real parallels with those of the occasionalists, nor on that one idiosyncratic graduate student in your own department who keeps requesting you do a seminar on *The Search After Truth* even though you're not even an early modern scholar. Neither do I directly address the coherence of occasionalism as such. Consequently, arguments purporting to show that full-blown occasionalism is the only coherent form of the doctrine do not suffice to show that the doctrine was actually held.²

I first show that the distinction between partial and full-blown occasionalism arises from a failure to distinguish action from production, one that the occasionalists themselves would have been familiar with. The main argument then proceeds by induction, showing successively that none of La Forge, Corde-moy, and Malebranche were full-blown occasionalists. Consequently, none of the primary figures associated with occasionalism were actually full-blown occasionalists in the sense the secondary literature describes. Given that full-blown occasionalism is simply occasionalism without qualification, we must conclude that the definition of occasionalism assumed is mistaken.

2 The Defining Marks of the System of Occasional Causes

These problems, difficult and interesting as they may be, do not provide occasionalism with its essential impetus. Rather, one better understands occasionalism as a gradual expansion of the medieval doctrine of continuous creation. According to this doctrine, creatures depend on God not merely in that God must have created them, but also in that God must conserve them at each instant.³ The earliest occasionalist accounts insist that God not only conserves material creatures in being, but also, since it is impossible to preserve a material object in existence without preserving it somewhere, must conserve them in a specific *place* in doing so.⁴ Given that motion is simply change of place on the Cartesian account, it follows that God, being immediately and solely responsible for the successive positioning of material objects, is likewise responsible for their motion. And given the only way material objects could act on each other would be by contact, itself a function of relative position, it follows, the occasionalist maintains, that material objects are causally inert.

Though the above argument establishes nothing about whether *minds* are active or causal, recent scholarship holds occasionalist minds, like occasionalist bodies, are purely passive. Nadler defines full-blown occasionalism as the joint acceptance of the following theses:

1. Natural objects, both minds and bodies, have no causal efficacy

²Cf. [13, 19].

³See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* Ia, q. 104, art. 1, res; cf. Descartes, AT VII. 369.

⁴See La Forge, *Traité de l'esprit de l'homme*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Pierre Clair (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 240-41. Cf. Malebranche, *Entretiens* VII, par. 10 = OC XII. 160; [13].

2. God alone is a true efficient cause.⁵

That the second of these is constitutive of occasionalism is uncontroversial. Whether the first should be so regarded depends on what is meant by ‘causal efficacy’. The occasionalist admits both minds and bodies are causes in a loose sense: both mental volition and bodily contact serve as occasions whereupon God must exercise his causal efficacy. On the other hand, the second thesis entails that minds other than God are not efficient causes. Since efficient causation is traditionally associated with production, a restricted reading of this entailment implies that creatures are not *productive*. A stronger reading, drawn from a similarly traditional association of efficient causation with agency, holds neither minds nor bodies are *active*.⁶ The stronger reading is cemented in a terminological distinction between full and partial occasionalists, the latter being those who ascribe activity to the mind.⁷ But while the assumption that activity presupposes productivity plays an important role in Leibniz’s polemic against occasionalism,⁸ all major occasionalist figures reject the assumption. For the occasionalists generally, minds may be active without being causal; they may even be the producers of their own ideas without producing anything real. We should thus understand occasionalism more restrictedly in terms of the claims that i) God is the only efficient cause, and ii) consequently, neither human minds nor extended bodies are efficient causes.⁹

In *On Nature Itself*, Leibniz describes occasionalism as follows:

But now let us consider a little more closely the opinion of those . . . who judge not things to act, but God at the presence of things and according to the aptness of things; and thus [judge] things to be occasions, not causes, and to receive, not to effect or elicit. When Cordemoy, La Forge, and other Cartesians set forth this doctrine, Malebranche especially adorned [it] with certain rhetorical lights on account of his acumen; but brought forth . . . no solid reasons. Surely, if this doctrine leads to the point of even taking the *immanent actions* of substances away . . . , then it appears foreign to reason like nothing else.¹⁰

Here, Leibniz names Cordemoy, La Forge, and Malebranche as leading occasionalists, and describes occasionalists as being led to the conclusion that not

⁵[12, p. 39]. Similar conceptions have been assumed by [15, pp. 45–46]; [3, p. 174]; [19, p. 288]. A different conception, on which minds need not be wholly passive, is assumed in [16, p. 358].

⁶Cf. Aquinas, in *Metaph.* Bk. 5, lec. 2-3. In connection with Malebranche, see [1, pp. 255–256].

⁷This broader reading is accepted by [12]; cf. [19, p. 288]. Nadler accepts that La Forge views the mind as active, but for this reason regards him as only a partial occasionalist [13, p. 227]. The distinction between partial and full occasionalism is also found in [16], [6], [4], [2], and [9].

⁸See GP IV. 586-87; [17].

⁹Cf. [14, pp. 625–626]; [7, p. 101].

¹⁰GP IV. 509-510.

even minds are active. But if they are so led, it will be against their own explicit commitments. La Forge, for instance, holds

the essence of this faculty [i.e. the will] consists firstly in the fact that it is the active principle of all the mind's actions which chooses from itself and by itself, and determines itself to accept or reject what the understanding perceives or remain suspended when something is not yet perceived clearly enough.¹¹

Like La Forge, Cordemoy describes willing as the mind's activity: '[God] made minds ... capable of action; they will.'¹² We also find this commitment to the active character of mind in Malebranche, who calls the mind's consent to the good an act, albeit 'an immanent act that produces nothing material in our substance.'¹³

Elsewhere, La Forge assumes the mind is the cause of its own ideas:

Although our thoughts follow one another and although it is the external objects or the first thoughts which provide an occasion for the will to determine itself and form the idea of subsequent thoughts, that does not imply that one should not say that it is the will which is the principal and proximate cause of the idea. Otherwise one would have to say that it is the external objects which produce the ideas that we have of them *and not the mind* [...].¹⁴

In spite of this, La Forge is clear the mind produces nothing *material*.

[T]here is no creature, spiritual or corporeal, which can cause change in [matter] or in any of its parts, in the second moment of their creation, if the Creator does not do so himself.¹⁵

In his earlier works, Malebranche, too, does not rule out the mind being the productive cause of its own ideas: the mind's act 'produces nothing *material*

¹¹ *Treatise* ch. XI, 97.

¹² *Traité de métaphysique*, CG 283, trans. from [12, p. 52]. Cf. *Discours physique*, CG 255:

Just as the body is a substance to which extension naturally belongs, so much so that, as for physical effects, it would cease to be a body if it ceased to be extended; in the same way the mind is a substance to which the power of determining itself belongs so naturally, that it would cease to be a mind if it ceased to will. (trans. from [12, p. 47])

Nadler argues Cordemoy is a 'full-blown' occasionalist from his remarks that 'it is just as impossible for souls to have new perceptions without God as it is for bodies to acquire new motions without him.' (*Discours physique*, CG 255. Trans. from [12, p. 50]). But these remarks and others to the same effect establish neither that the mind is inactive nor that it does not cause its ideas. Rather, such passages can be harmonized with those above on the assumptions i) that Cordemoy, like many of his contemporaries, was a compatibilist about divine and human willing, and ii) that because ideas are not real beings, but beings of reason, eidetic production does not provide an instance of real causation.

¹³ *Éclaircissement* 1 to *De la recherche de la vérité* OC III, 25. Trans. from [12, p. 52].

¹⁴ *Treatise* ch. X, 94. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ *Treatise*, 147. Cf. [8].

in our substance’;¹⁶ minds ‘do not ... produce in themselves a reality, or a modification that *physically* changes their substance.’¹⁷ Here, both La Forge and Malebranche assume the production of ideas, though an activity, is not production in the proper sense, since the will’s production of an idea is not the production of ‘a reality’, i.e. a real substance or quality.

But while the *Search after Truth* and its *Elucidations* offer no rejection of the mind’s productive power with respect to its own ideas, this sort of production *is* ruled out in the later *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*.¹⁸ In the person of Theodore, Malebranche states:

If [ideas] are eternal, immutable, necessary, in a word, divine ... surely they will be more considerable than that matter which is inefficacious Be careful. If it is you who give being to your ideas, it is by willing to think of them. Now, pray tell, how can you will to think of a circle, if you do not already have some idea of it, from which to form and complete it? Can something be willed without being known?¹⁹

Here, though, Malebranche’s argument does not proceed from anything about *occasionalism*: the denial of the mind’s productivity with respect to its ideas follows from i) the dependence of willing on knowledge; and ii) the eternity of the ideas themselves – the human mind cannot produce them because *nothing* produces them. Hence, leaving aside whether the passivity of minds might be an untoward consequence of occasionalist tenets, this assumption was not itself among those tenets.

3 La Forge

4 Cordemoy

5 Malebranche

6 The source of the confusion: Leibniz

7 Abbreviations

A = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Ed. Deutsche Akademier der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Berlin: Akademie, 1923.

¹⁶Éclaircissement 1 to *De la recherché de la vérité* OC III, 25. Trans. from [12, p. 52]. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷*Réponse à la Dissertation* = OC 7, 568, Trans. from [12, p. 52]. Emphasis mine. Cf. OC IX, 1129.

¹⁸The *Search* was first published in 1674-5; the *Elucidations*, in 1678 as a supplement to the third edition of the *Search*; the *Dialogues*, in 1688.

¹⁹*Dialogue* I. VII. = JS 12-13.

AG = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. R. Ariew and D. Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.

AT = René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vols. 1-12, ed. Adam and Tannery, revised edition. Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76.

C = *Opusculs et fragments inédits de Leibniz*. Ed. by L. Couturat. Paris: Alcan 1903. Reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms 1961.

CSMK = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1-3, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991. Vols. 1 and 2 cited as CSM.

E = Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethica*. In *Opera quotquot reperta sunt*. Ed. J. Van Vloten and J. P. N. Land. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. Tomus Primus. pp. 35-273.

GP = Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Ed. C. I. Gerhardt. 7 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1875-90. Reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1960.

In Metaph. = Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Trans. John P. Rowan. Html-edited by Joseph Kenny, O. P. with addition of Aquinas's Latin and Aristotle's Greek text. <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/metaphysics5.htm>

JS = *Nicolas Malebranche: Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*. Ed. Nicholas Jolley and David Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

L = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989.

LDV = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence*. Ed. and trans. Paul Lodge. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Reference is to original language page.

GLW = *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolff*. Ed. C. I. Gerhardt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963.

Med. = René Descartes. *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*. Cited by book and paragraph.

Med. chr. = Nicolas Malebranche. *Méditations Chrétiennes*.

NE = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Ed. P. Remnant and J. Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

NG = Nicolas Malebranche. *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Patrick Riley. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

OC = *Oeuvres Complètes de Malebranche*. Directeur A. Robinet. 20 volumes. Paris: J. Vrin, 1958-1967.

Réponse = Abraham Gaultier. *Réponse en forme de dissertation à un théologien, Qui demande ce que veulent dire les sceptiques, qui cherchent la vérité par tout dans la Nature, comme dans les écrits des philosophes; lors qu'ils pensent que la Vie et la Mort sont la même chose*. Ed. Olivier Bloch. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, coll. Encre Marine, 2004.

ST = Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948/1981.

T = Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*. Trans. E. M. Huggard. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985.

Treatise = Louis de La Forge, *Treatise on the Human Mind* (1664). Translation with an introduction and notes by D. M. Clarke. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997.

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