

A Special Occasion: Exploring Malebranche's Argument for Occasionalism

Descartes, the father of rationalism, proposed that the world consists of two separate and distinct substances: mind and body. For Descartes, any bodily substance is simply something that is extended in space. The mind, however, is independent from bodies, not extended, and categorized by the ability to think. This idea of dualism ushered in a conceptual difficulty; if mind and body are two separate and distinct substances, how can/do they interact?

Nicolas Malebranche also resided in the dualist camp, as evidenced by one of his works where he says, "We have only two sorts of ideas, ideas of minds and ideas of bodies" (p.94). Despite sharing some views with Descartes, the two philosophers certainly didn't see eye to eye on certain metaphysical issues. In response to the hole Descartes dug himself by introducing the conceptual difficulties of interactionism to dualism, Malebranche argued that God is the only true cause of everything through what he called occasionalism. The goal of this paper is threefold; first, I will present Malebranche's various arguments for occasionalism, second, I will raise challenges to this position, and lastly, I will present rebuttals to the aforementioned challenges.

Malebranche pursues four different avenues for proving his argument for occasionalism, or that God is the only true cause of everything. The first and arguably most powerful argument for occasionalism entails a systematic proof that leaves God as the only possible agent for causing any change in the world. Before fully elaborating on this syllogism, it is first necessary to observe how Malebranche argues against interactionism.

Malebranche does this through his fabricated dialogue between two characters named Aristes and Theodore (p.222-242). When discussing mind body interaction, Aristes states, “I do not believe that a thorn can act on my mind, Theodore. But it might be said that it can act on my body and, by way of my body, on my mind in consequence of their union” (Aristes, p.224). Since Malebranche himself is a dualist, he does believe in a connection between mind and body, but he still puts Cartesian interactionism to bed in one full swoop when he writes, “Thus, though your finger was stuck by a thorn, though your brain was moved by its action, neither finger nor brain could act on your soul and make it feel pain. Your brain and your finger are nothing but matter, and so neither can act immediately on your mind” (Theodore, p.225). With this dialogue, Malebranche effectively problematizes Descartes’ view of how the mind and body could interact.

Now that interactionism has been addressed, Malebranche’s next move is to reduce the movement of bodies to God’s doing. Malebranche’s proof is as follows:

Premise 1: Bodies can’t move bodies.
Premise 2: Minds can’t move bodies.
Conclusion: God moves bodies.

Malebranche begins by saying, “It is clear that no body, large or small, has the power to move itself” (p.94). This claim is simple and self evident, since it is understood that bodies cause other bodies to move, and bodies don’t move on their own accord. Malebranche next argues against minds moving bodies when he says, “Thus, since the idea we have of all bodies makes us aware that they cannot move themselves, it must be concluded that it is minds which move them. But when we examine our idea of all finite minds, we do not see any necessary connection between their will and the motion of any body whatsoever” (p.94). Even if one were to argue that minds could be responsible for the bodies they are connected to to move, it is still clear that minds

could never move bodies they are not connected to. For example, one cannot exercise their mind to cause a ball to roll. A mind may will for it to happen, but this by no means guarantees any effect whatsoever. In light of his two premises, Malebranche posits that, “The motor forces of bodies is therefore not in the bodies that are moved, for this motor force is nothing other than the will of God” (p.94). Essentially, Malebranche patches up the mind body problem by denying interactionism altogether and suggesting that God is the true cause of all movements of bodies.

Malebranche’s second argument for occasionalism begins with the idea that the true cause of something necessitates an effect. When Malebranche says “necessitates an effect”, he means that if the effect brought about by the cause does not occur then there is a contradiction. Again, Malebranche systematically eliminates all possibilities of other entities besides God being true causes by proving that other entities do not necessitate effects as a result of their will or movement. For example, if one wills to move their arm with their mind or to move a table with their mind, it is not a contradiction if neither event happens. In the case of bodies, if a ball rolls and collides with another one, it is not a contradiction if the latter ball does not move, but merely an oddity. It is important to note that while an unprecedented event might occur, this does not qualify as a contradiction. For example, if a ball were to collide with another and the latter turned into a butterfly, while strange, it still does not meet the criteria for a contradiction. In the case of God, however, his omnipotence necessitates that what He wills should happen. (This is with the exception of willing impossibilities, such as creating square circles, which are mutually exclusive in definition and form).

Malebranche presents a third, weaker argument, which claims that if one can truly cause something to happen, then one must understand exactly how it happened. It ought to be noted

that the evidence Malebranche uses is fairly dated in light of current scientific discoveries, but the principle of his argument remains relevant. Returning to the dialogue between Aristes and Theodore, Theodore asks, “For on a little reflection, do you really know just what you need to pronounce the name of your best friend, to bend or straighten the finger you use most?”

(Theodore, p.233). Malebranche assumes that even if one did have exact knowledge of how events happened, it still would not qualify them to be true causes of events. However, Malebranche appears to backtrack when presenting this argument since he later says, “But remember in any event the principle that it is only the Creator of bodies who can be their mover” (p.234). Despite this, it is made clear that there is a gap in the knowledge of how events happen and the fact that they occur.

The fourth argument Malebranche presents is the shortest. He first argues that all things that exist are contingent on God willing them into existence at every moment. He then argues that God wills everything’s location at every moment as well. As a result, it can be deduced that God alone determines the movement of bodies since He alone wills their existence and location.

Many challenges have been brought to Malebranche’s occasionalist argument. (For the sake of keeping the argument metaphysical, I will operate under the premise that an omnipotent/omniscient God does exist). A few immediate questions arise, such as, “does God micromanage everything or set general laws into motion,” and “do we really have free will if God is the cause of every event?” The question of whether or not people have free will relates to whether or not people have agency as well. Malebranche also seems to put his foot in his mouth when he says, “A natural cause is therefore not a real and true, but only an occasional cause, which determines the Author of nature to act in such a manner in such and such a situation”

(p.94). The underlined portion uses language that suggest God is compelled to act based on occasional causes. This is in direct contradiction with the argument that Malebranche originally set in place.

To respond to these questions, it is first necessary to further elaborate on the vocabulary Malebranche exercises when discussing matters of causes. Malebranche makes a critical distinction between true causes and natural causes. He posits the idea that while a rolling ball hitting another ball is a natural cause of the latter ball's movement, the true cause is that God willed the latter ball to move, regardless of prior events. This distinction augments Malebranche's argument because it does not neglect the fact that repeated observational causes exist, but that without God willing them they wouldn't happen. These repeated observations have been characterized and quantified by what are commonly known as "laws of nature".

To clarify, Malebranche does assert that natural causes occur. Natural causes, which are also called occasional causes, are the causes that people often attribute to events due to repeated observations (for example, a ball rolling and hitting another, causing the latter to move), but Malebranche wants to clarify that God wills each event to happen necessarily, and without His will these events could not happen at all.

The question of whether God micromanages is also problematic because it subjects God to temporality. Furthermore, it implies that there is a lack of uniformity in how God works that is contrary to the laws of nature. Malebranche himself makes it clear that God created laws that would apply to the world. To elaborate, he says, "[God] moves all things, and thus produces all the effects that we see happening, because He also willed certain laws according to which motion is communicated upon the collision of bodies; and because these laws are efficacious, they act,

whereas bodies cannot act” (p.95). The laws themselves, while efficacious, are only so because God willed them to be. Malebranche also emphasizes that body-body interactions aren’t truly caused by other bodies. While laws God created dictate how the objects move, he further clarifies by saying, “As [objects/bodies] are all equally powerless, they do not mutually depend on one another” (p.234). It becomes clear that Malebranche’s argument for occasionalism is not as suffocating as it might have first appeared to be.

However, one looming question is that of free will/agency. Can a person have free will under occasionalism? Even if one can exercise will, do they have agency if their will is not efficacious? This question can be addressed with ease when one considers the finity of their minds, bodies, and capabilities. Malebranche specifically addresses concurring wills (when God and another entity will something) by proposing this hypothetical: “I see two wills concurring when an angel moves a body; that of God and that of the angel; and in order to know which of the two is the true cause of the movement of this body, it is necessary to know which one is efficacious” (p.96). According to what Malebranche previously stated, it is clear that God is the true cause because His will is efficacious, and necessarily so. It has also been established that due to finity of minds as well as the cancellation of interactionism that one can will something and it not occur without it being a contradiction.

The language of an occasional cause determining God to act is another matter. Upon further observation, it becomes clear that once the clause, “but only an occasional cause,” we are left with the statement “A natural cause is therefore not a real and true...which determines the Author of nature to act in such a manner in such and such a situation” (p.94). Syntactically, this sentence suggests that real and true causes, and not the occasional causes, are the ones that

determine God to act in a particular manner. However, this language still implies that causes compel God to act in a particular manner as opposed to God exercising true causes. This conception is difficult to tease out, since Malebranche doesn't entertain this statement any further. Regardless, the syntactical clarification presented alleviates any blatant contradictions found in Malebranche's argument.

In summation, Nicolas Malebranche attempts to solve the mind-body problem by denying interactionism and positing that any interactions between bodies are truly caused by God and God alone. Malebranche believed that other philosophers misattributed causes of body-body interactions to the bodies themselves, and as a result introduced his occasionalist argument that represents a more intimate metaphysical understanding of God. His occasionalist argument problematizes mind-body interactions proposed by Descartes and emphasizes the limitations of minds and bodies. Malebranche then brings attention to the omnipotence of God as reason for bodies moving necessarily through His will. Despite issues raised of free will, agency, and the method in which God enacts His will for true causes to occur, each was addressed by further investigating the relationship between God and other minds, other wills, and laws of nature. Given his theological premises, Malebranche's occasionalist argument presents a strong case for non-interactionist dualism.