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Malebranche's Arguments for Occasionalism in Their Historical Context

Andrea Sangiacomo

1. *Malebranche's arguments*

According to Malebranche, finite creatures are not genuine causes and God is the only true cause operating in nature. Since God brings about effects in nature at the 'occasion' of certain creatures' states, this view is usually labelled 'occasionalism'.¹ Scholars agree on the fact that Malebranche makes use of two main arguments to support occasionalism: the 'no necessary connection' argument (NNC) and the 'conservation is but continuous creation' argument (CCC). Scholars disagree about how each of these arguments works and which of these is the most conclusive.² Since NNC figures mainly in the *Search after Truth* (1674-1675), while CCC appears most explicitly in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* (1683) and in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* (1688), scholars also disagree about whether there was any evolution in Malebranche's thought, and if he dismissed NNC in favour of CCC in his later writings. Finally, a growing trend in recent literature emphasises that Malebranche's occasionalism is at odds with the late scholastic philosophy, which defends the causal efficacy of creatures. However, understanding

¹ Acknowledgement note: this paper is part of my NWO Veni research grant "Occasionalism and the secularization of early modern science: Understanding the dismissal of divine action during the scientific revolution", which I run at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Groningen. I would like to thank Han Thomas Adriaenssen, Emanuela Scribano and Sean Greenberg for helpful discussions and insightful comments on various versions of this paper.

² Loeb (1981) and Fisher (2011) defended that NNC is the most conclusive argument, while Carraud (2002, 361-365), Pyle (2003) and Lee (2008) privilege CCC.

the exact way in which Malebranche's arguments are supposed to succeed against the scholastics is no less problematic (cf. Ott [2009]; Lee [2008] and Fisher [2011]).

In this paper, I argue that Malebranche's arguments are better understood as part of his broader attack on the scholastic notion of substantial form and Suárez's account in particular. What distinguishes Suárez's view is that he takes human minds as the paradigm to understand substantial forms in general. This has relevance for why NNC targets mind-body causation and how the argument properly works. Moreover, substantial forms bear causal powers. According to Suárez, finite creatures operate as genuine secondary causes insofar as their substantial forms allow them to produce certain effects, and God concurs with them by constantly bestowing their being and supporting their operations (a position usually referred to as 'concurrentism'). Suárez's concurrentism provides important background to assess how CCC could succeed in establishing occasionalism.

Recent scholars increasingly consider Suárez as a major scholastic reference for early modern authors.³ Moreover, there is evidence that Malebranche was directly familiar with Suárez's thought. In the Fifteenth *Elucidation* to the *Search* (OC.iii.205-210/LO 658-661)⁴ Malebranche mentions Suárez's account of substantial forms as the root of causal powers in creatures (DM 18.2.3)⁵ as a main target. In his last work, the *Réflexions sur la Prémotion Physique* (1715), Malebranche provides a lengthy quote from Suárez's *De Incarnatione Verbi* as support of his own

³ See, e.g. for Descartes: Schmaltz (2008) and Hattab (2009); Leibniz: Di Bella (2010); Hobbes: Pink (2003); Spinoza: Viljanen (2011, 37-53). See also Carraud (2002).

⁴ Main abbreviations for Malebranche's works are: 'OC' for Malebranche's *Oeuvres Complètes*; 'LO' for the Lennon/Olscamp translation of the *Search*; 'JS' for the Jolley/Scott translation of the *Dialogues*; 'R' for the Riley translation of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*.

⁵ Main abbreviations for Suárez's works are: 'DM' for *Metaphysical Disputations*; 'KR' for the Kronen/Reedy translation of DM 15; 'F' for the Freddoso translation of DM 17-21.

views (OC.xvi.165-171). Although it has been argued that Malebranche had Suárez's views in mind while developing some aspects of his epistemology (Connell [1967] and critically Scribano [2006, 220-221]) and as context for the arguments for occasionalism (Fisher [2011]), the intimate connection between Suárez's account of causation and his account of substantial forms has been neglected. By placing Malebranche's arguments for occasionalism in the context of his attack on the notion of substantial form, we can both better understand how Malebranche's arguments work, and avoid difficulties that affect the other current available readings. My conclusion is that the differences between CCC and NNC explain the different roles that they play in Malebranche's overall strategy to convince his readers that occasionalism is the best alternative to the scholastic understanding of secondary causation.

2. *Why is there no necessary connection between causes and effects?*

In *Search* 6.2.3 Malebranche presents NNC:

It is clear that no body, large or small, has the power to move itself. [...] 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.* On the contrary. We see that there is none and that there can be none. We must therefore also conclude, if we wish to reason according to our lights, that there is absolutely no mind created that can move a body as a true or principal cause, just as it has been said that no body could move itself. But when one thinks about the idea of God, i.e., of an infinitely perfect and consequently all-powerful being, one knows there is such a connection between His will and the motion of all bodies, that it is impossible to conceive that He wills a body to

be moved and that this body not be moved. (OC.ii.312-313/LO 448, emphasis added)

A few paragraphs after this passage, Malebranche reiterates:

[I]t appears to me quite certain that the will of minds is incapable of moving the smallest body in the world; for it is clear that there is no necessary connection between our will to move our arms, for example, and the movement of our arms. (OC.ii.315/LO 449)

After this further discussion, Malebranche reiterates NNC for the third time:

[N]ot only are men not the true causes of the movements they produce in their bodies, there even seems to be some contradiction (in saying) that they could be. A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect. Now the mind perceives a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects. Therefore, it is only God who is the true cause and who truly has the power to move bodies. (OC.ii.316/LO 450)

This third occurrence of NNC makes an assumption implicit in the other two occurrences explicit: that “a true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect”. Moreover, in all the three occurrences of NNC, the argument focuses on mind-body interactions, rather than on causal relationships in general. The problem is to understand what entitles Malebranche to claim that there is no necessary connection between the mind’s volitions and bodily movements. Here scholars disagree.

Nadler maintains that NNC is grounded in the tautological observation that creatures, *qua* finite beings, are not omnipotent:

The reason why there is no logically necessary connection between a human volition and its intended object is itself purely logical or conceptual in nature. The human will, by definition, is finite and thus not omnipotent. And, again by definition, to be non-omnipotent just means that if one wills x , it does not (logically) necessarily follow that x obtains. (2010, 171)

Nadler's assumes that the necessary connection invoked by Malebranche is a logical necessity, according to which it is logically impossible for a true cause to fail to produce its effects. Only an omnipotent cause can thus count as a true cause, namely, as a cause from which effects follow with logical necessity. Since finite creatures are not omnipotent, they cannot qualify as true causes.

Nadler's reconstruction is problematic though (see also Cuning [2008]; Ott [2009, 93]; Fisher [2011]). NNC is supposed to establish that finite creatures are not genuine causes. On Nadler's reading NNC already entails that no finite creature (just because it is a *creature*, and thus a finite being) can count as a genuine cause. An omnipotent cause is by definition a genuine cause since it can produce whatever it wants. But NNC should convince a reluctant reader that finite creatures (such as finite minds and bodies) are not genuine causes since Malebranche introduces NNC against "the general opinion of ordinary philosophers" (OC.ii.309/LO 446) that he seeks to reject. Malebranche begs the question if NNC assumes a definition of genuine cause that no finite creature could ever satisfy.

Passages in which Malebranche seems to suggest that having causal powers entails some form of omnipotence could support Nadler's reconstruction (OC.ii.309, 316, 317-318/LO 446, 450, 451).⁶ These passages might be taken as evidence of the fact that Malebranche considers

⁶ Malebranche refers to omnipotence also in the first and third occurrences of NNC (OC.ii.313 and OC.ii.316). However, these passages are not explicit about the fact that omnipotence should be taken as a condition for true causation.

omnipotence as condition for genuine causal efficacy. However, Malebranche's references to omnipotence do not lead to the conclusion that finite (non-omnipotent) beings *cannot* be genuine causes (from a theoretical point of view), but rather stress that attributing them any degree of causal power is at odds with Christian faith. Moreover, Malebranche grants that having finite causal powers does *not* necessarily amount to being truly omnipotent (in the way in which God is). Hence, it is not the case that, for Malebranche, 'sharing' God's power necessarily entails having the same degree of God's power, namely, being omnipotent. Rather, Malebranche's point is that even granting the *least* degree of causal power to finite beings jeopardizes the divide between God and creatures that faith requires. For these reasons, Malebranche's references to omnipotence do not amount to considering omnipotence as condition for genuine causality.

The discussion developed so far sheds light on an important point. If omnipotence does not constitute a prerequisite for causation, then it is also not necessary to assume that the kind of 'necessary connection' at stake in NNC is a 'logical necessity'. Malebranche does not make this assumption explicit in the text. The best textual evidence that Malebranche is dealing with logical necessity is his assertion: "the mind perceives a necessary connection *only* between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects" (OC.ii.316/LO 450, emphasis added). But what entitles Malebranche to add the 'only' in this sentence? Of course, *if* Malebranche assumed that necessary connections have to be *logically* necessary, then the 'only' would be appropriate. However, the mind could simply fail to perceive a necessary connection in the case of finite beings for other reasons and thus the mind would perceive a necessary connection "only" in the case of God, in the sense that God would be the only true agent *left*. Consequently, assuming that NNC deals with logical necessity is unwarranted by the text and does not ultimately succeed in better construing the argument (since it makes NNC beg the question). I will discuss more in detail the kind of necessity at stake in NNC in the next section. For the moment, let me review another current reading of NNC.

Lee (2008) argues that NNC is better understood as addressed to a scholastic opponent. Nonetheless, Lee argues that NNC is doomed to fail against such an opponent. Lee's reconstruction

endorses an important point of Nadler's reading insofar he agrees that NNC entails logical necessity. However, Lee contends that such a "is unacceptably narrow, from the concurrentist's perspective, in that it rules out creaturely causation in principle" (2008, 549). Lee remarks that (1) NNC should be able to succeed against a scholastic opponent; (2) NNC is build on the idea that causal relationships are logically necessary; and (3) a scholastic opponent would not share this understanding of causality in terms of logical necessity.⁷ For this reason, Lee concludes that NNC would fail to convince a scholastic opponent, who would simply disagree with Malebranche's definition of causation. Although I agree on points 1 and 3, I disagree with point 2 and thus with Lee's conclusion. As I argued regarding Nadler's interpretation, assuming that NNC considers causal relationships as logically necessary makes NNC beg the question.⁸ If NNC is not construed in this way, it remains possible that NNC does share common ground with the scholastic opponent. Accordingly, it is not obvious, contrary to Lee's conclusion, that NNC is doomed to fail against such an opponent. I shall explain in the next section (§3.2 in particular) in which sense NNC shares some common ground with Suárez's account of causation.

3. *Understanding NNC*

In this section I argue that NNC is better understood as the culmination of Malebranche's rejection of substantial forms that is developed throughout the *Search*.

⁷ Against Lee, Fisher (2011) maintains that Suárez's account of secondary causation entails a form of logical necessity. I disagree with Fisher, see discussion below in §3.2.

⁸ Schmaltz (2008b) and Adams (2013) agree in denying that NNC entails logical necessity.

3.1. *Malebranche against substantial forms*

According to Suárez a substantial form is “a simple and incomplete substance which, as the act of matter, constitutes with it the essence of a composite substance” (DM 15.5.1/KR 77). The substantial form and primary matter compose together a single unified individual. The substantial form is responsible for the specific qualities of the individual and is the sole bearer of its causal powers.

Suárez’s view of substantial forms is relevant for two distinctive features. First, on Suárez’s account (unlike that of other scholastic authors such as Aquinas) human minds are not an exceptional kind of substantial form but the standard model of it (DM 15.1.6/ KR 20). This entails that attacking Suárez’s account of substantial forms threatens not only his natural philosophy but also his account of the nature of the human mind. Second, Suárez emphasises that substantial forms, though not directly observable in nature, must be admitted as the best way to account for phenomena (DM 15.1.8-15/KR 22-28). This strategy makes Suárez’s account less dependent on metaphysical reasons but vulnerable to better explanations for natural phenomena (Hattab 2009, 40-64).

In the *Search*, Malebranche contends that the notion of substantial form is biased by the prejudice that “our sensations are in objects” (OC.i.166/LO 73). On the basis of this prejudice it follows that “since honey, salt, and other natural bodies differ essentially from each other, it follows that [...] there must of necessity be some substance that, being joined to the primary matter common to each different body, makes them differ essentially from one another” (OC.i.167/LO 75). However, to fully dismiss this notion, Malebranche has to show that Suárez’s doctrine of substantial forms does not really account for natural phenomena.⁹ Malebranche explicitly engages in this task in Chapters 6.2.2 and 6.2.3.

⁹ In the *Search* Malebranche often lists together substantial forms, real accidents and other similar

In Chapter 6.2.2, Malebranche denies that substantial forms provide a good causal account of the phenomena we observe in nature. Reiterating a claim already discussed (OC.i.457-458/LO 242), Malebranche contends that substantial forms are merely abstract notions that do not really explain what happens in nature. He writes:

For even if you know that there is a substantial form in fire, accompanied by a million faculties similar to those for heating, dilating, and melting gold, silver, and all metals; for lighting, boiling, and cooking; nevertheless if you ask me to solve this difficulty – namely, can fire harden mud and soften wax? – the ideas of substantial forms and faculties for producing heat, rarefaction, fluidity, and so on, would be useless to me in discovering whether fire would be capable of hardening mud and softening wax, there being no connection whatsoever between the ideas of the hardness of mud and the softness of wax and the ideas of the substantial form of fire, and of the qualities of producing rarefaction, fluidity and so on. It is the same with all general ideas. Thus, they are completely useless for resolving a single question. (OC.ii.306/LO 444)

Malebranche argues that substantial forms fail to account for the effects attributed to them because their notion is too abstract and vague to bear any connection with our ideas of the properties and specific natures of the effects that they are supposed to explain.

In Chapter 6.2.3 Malebranche continues his attack on the notion of substantial form. The chapter opens explicitly with a criticism of scholastic views:

scholastic concepts (see, e.g. OC.i.457-458/LO 242; OC.ii.309/LO 446). Malebranche reduces the origin of all these scholastic notions to the same epistemological mistake, which consists in attributing the contents of our sensation to objects themselves (OC.i.165-170/LO 73-75).

If we assume in accordance with their [i.e. philosophers'] opinion, that bodies have certain entities distinct from matter in them, then, having no distinct idea of these entities, we can easily imagine that they are the true or major causes of the effects we see. That is even the general opinion of ordinary philosophers; for it is mainly to explain these effects that they think there are substantial forms, real qualities, and other similar entities. (OC.ii.309/LO 446)

After the first occurrence of NNC, Malebranche concludes:

There are therefore no forces, powers, or true causes in the material, sensible world; and it is not necessary to admit the existence of forms, faculties, and real qualities for producing effects that bodies do not produce and for sharing with God the force and power essential to Him. (OC.ii.314/LO 449)

All the three main occurrences of NNC focus explicitly on the case of mind-body interactions. I mentioned that Suárez modelled his account of substantial forms in natural beings on the case provided by human substantial forms (i.e. human minds). Malebranche's critique until Chapter 6.2.2 aims to show that substantial forms cannot account for natural phenomena and should not be attributed to brute things. However, even Descartes (who argued against the use of substantial forms in natural philosophy) granted that the human mind was the only instance of a substantial form in an otherwise fully mechanist universe.¹⁰ Like a substantial form, the human mind is supposed to be an immaterial principle responsible for voluntary bodily motions. This suggests that rejecting substantial forms in brute things does not entail that the human mind cannot be conceived

¹⁰ See Descartes to Regius, January 1642 in Descartes (1991, 207-208); Descartes to Elisabeth, 21st May 1643, in Descartes (1991, 219).

as a substantial form. In Chapter 6.2.3 Malebranche takes issue with this last domain of reality in which substantial forms seem to still have some room, namely, human beings and their minds.

If Malebranche can show that the human mind *cannot* be considered as a substantial form, then he will: (i) reject what for Suárez represents the fundamental model to think about substantial forms in general; and (ii) will dismiss the last domain in which substantial forms still survived even in the Cartesian universe. I contend that NNC aims to accomplish this task by showing that the human mind cannot work as a substantial form responsible for voluntary bodily motions. Before explaining this point, let me first introduce one further element that will prove to be important to understand how NNC works.

3.2. Malebranche and Suárez on causal containment

Despite his hostility to substantial forms, Malebranche shares with Suárez at least one specific principle about the nature of causal relationships. Appreciating this principle is crucial to showing how NNC can succeed against Suárez's account of substantial forms. Following Schmaltz (2008, 52) I call this the "causal containment axiom".

As Suárez formulates it:

It is certain that an effect cannot exceed in perfection all its causes taken together. It has been proved that the effect has no perfection that it does not derive from its cause; thus an effect cannot have any perfection that did not pre-exist in any of its causes, either formally or eminently, because causes cannot give away what they do not contain at all. (DM 26.1.2, my translation)

According to Suárez, a cause is a principle on which the effect depends for its proper and specific

kind of *being* (DM 17.2.2/F 11). Causes explain their effects because they show the origin of the specific kind of being that characterizes a specific effect. Violations of the causal containment axiom would entail some sort of creation *ex nihilo*, which cannot have place among creatures (DM 20.2.1/F 25).

The causal containment axiom constrains the *kind* of effects that can follow from a certain cause. For instance, the nature of fire will always produce heat when all conditions that allow fire to operate are granted. The causal containment axiom does not determine whether a particular fire will produce a particular heat but the *kind* of being that fire can produce. In this sense, the causal containment axiom entails a form of necessity that characterizes causal relationships. This form of necessity concerns the way in which the nature of the cause (i.e. its proper kind of being) is always connected with the nature of its effect. I shall refer to this kind of necessity as a ‘conceptual’ necessity. This conceptual necessity does not concern whether the effect always and inevitably obtains (as a ‘logical’ necessity would entail), but rather the fact that *if* an effect follows from the cause, then the nature of the effect must necessarily be traced back to the nature of its cause. If the effect cannot be traced back to the nature of the cause, then the effect is not the effect of that cause.

Descartes makes use of the causal containment axiom in the *Meditations* in order to prove both God’s existence (in the third *Meditation*) and the existence of the material world (in the sixth *Meditation*).¹¹ Malebranche uses the axiom during his demonstration of the doctrine of the vision in God (OC.i.424/LO 223). Malebranche’s discussion of intelligible extension in the Tenth *Elucidation* presupposes again the causal containment axiom. God must somehow contain in himself the nature of the things he creates, including extension (OC.iii.151-152/LO 626). Since God is supremely perfect, he contains the nature of creatures eminently or, as Malebranche puts it, in “an intelligible fashion”. The main reason for the fact that God must contain eminently or intelligibly what he produces as a cause is that (as the causal containment axiom holds) no cause can produce

¹¹ See discussion in Schmaltz (2008, 51-71).

something that it does not (formally or eminently) contain.

Finally, Malebranche uses the causal containment axiom earlier in Chapter 6.2.3 when he proves that bodies by themselves cannot be true causes. Malebranche argues that “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” (OC.ii.313/ LO 448). Here, the main reason why bodies cannot be true causes of physical effects is that our clear and distinct idea of extension does not entail any ideas of force of motion or motive powers. The causal containment axiom grants that bodies cannot count as causes of bodily effects because they do not contain the force of movement that is necessary to account for bodily effects (see also OC.iii.204/LO 658).

In the next sub-section, I shall argue that NNC provides another instance of Malebranche’s use of the causal containment axiom. This time, the axiom is used to show the lack of necessary connection between the mind’s volitions and bodily movements.

3.3. *NNC at work*

In the context of Malebranche’s attack on the notion of substantial form, NNC shows that when the mind is supposed to operate as a substantial form it does not satisfy (*pace* Suárez) the causal containment axiom and cannot count as a true cause of bodily voluntary motions. When the mind is conceived of as a substantial form, according to Malebranche, something material is attributed to it and something thinking is attributed to the body. This entails that mind and body are no longer two radically distinct substances (as a Cartesian would hold) but rather intermingled entities (OC.i.476/LO 253). This is in fact how Suárez tries to explain (though with a bit of caution) mind-body interaction:

You will say: how can form which is so distant in its nature from matter be immediately united to matter through itself? This seems especially difficult in the case of the rational soul which is spiritual. I respond, in the first place, that there is not so great a distance that form and matter do not agree in a genus. I respond, secondly, that distance is not a hindrance if there is a due proportion. [...] This proportion consists in the nature of act and potency and in the natural and essential aptitude and mutual relation which they have between themselves. (DM 15.6.2/KR 80-81)

Malebranche opposes the idea that intermingling mind and body would explain their (alleged) interaction. Just before the first occurrence of NNC, Malebranche argues that bodies cannot count as true causes of physical effects because they do not satisfy the causal containment axiom. This entails that the mind cannot be the proper cause of the bodily movement *insofar as* the mind is extended, because *qua* extended thing the mind does not have any true causal power (since no extended thing *qua* extended has true causal powers). To some extent, even Suárez himself (e.g. in DM 18.2.1) grants that material things considered only *qua* material cannot have active causal powers (since these powers belong to substantial forms). This is why Malebranche establishes that causal powers must be located in minds *qua* minds since the first occurrence of NNC. However (*pace* Suárez), even (finite) minds *qua* minds cannot satisfy the causal containment axiom in the case of bodily voluntary motions.

After the second occurrence of NNC, Malebranche introduces his argument from lack of knowledge.¹² Malebranche argues:

¹² The argument from lack of knowledge features also in the *Méditations* (OC.x.61-62) and in the *Dialogues* (OC.xii-xiii.163-166/JS 119-120). For the historical background of this argument see Scribano (2011).

For how could we move our arms? To move them, it is necessary to have animal spirits, to send them through certain nerves toward certain muscles in order to inflate and contract them, for it is thus that the arm attached to them is moved; or according to the opinion of some others, it is still not known how that happens. And we see that men who do not know that they have spirits, nerves, and muscles move their arms, and even move them with more skill and ease than those who know anatomy best. Therefore, men will to move their arms, and only God is able and knows how to move them. (OC.ii.315/LO 449-450)

The argument from lack of knowledge builds upon the fact that a volition can be the actual efficacious cause of a bodily movement only if that volition somehow includes or is guided by knowledge of *how* the bodily parts have to be moved. Malebranche advances two connected remarks: (i) bodily motions occur even when volitions are *not* associated with the sufficient relevant knowledge required to account for how they take place and (ii) improving the knowledge of bodily parts (e.g. through knowledge of anatomy) does not seem to affect the efficiency and successfulness with which voluntary motions are produced.

These two remarks suggest that considering the mind's volitions as the true cause of bodily movements violates the causal containment axiom. If volitions are the true cause of bodily motions, then they must fully account for the nature of these motions. However, the argument from lack of knowledge shows that bodily motions occur in *absence* of the relevant knowledge that would explain how volitions can cause those movements, and that the way in which bodily motions are produced is not affected by an increase in this relevant knowledge. It follows that bodily motions occur independently of the mind's knowledge about how to bring them about. When a bodily motion occurs, the mind's volition and knowledge are insufficient to account for how that motion occurred. This entails that there is something more in the bodily motion (the effect) that is not accounted for by the mind's volitions and knowledge (i.e. by the motion's alleged cause). As a

consequence, assuming that the mind's volitions and knowledge are the cause of bodily motions contradicts the causal containment axiom.

NNC does not bear directly on volitions failing to obtain their effects but rather on the more general fact that even when bodily motions obtain, they cannot be accounted for by what is causally efficacious in the mind (i.e. by volitions). By showing that there is no 'conceptual' necessary connection between volitions and bodily motions, NNC rules out that the mind is the cause of these motions on conceptual grounds (i.e. on the basis of an analysis of the nature of the cause and its alleged effect), without the need to assume that only an infallible (and thus omnipotent) cause can count as a genuine cause. *Pace* Suárez, the "proportion" between the operations of the mind (knowledge) and those of the body (movement) is merely a constant conjunction, which does not entail any genuine mind-body causation.

This reconstruction entails that NNC and the argument from lack of knowledge do not work independently. As mentioned in §2, the minor premise of NNC is that the mind does not perceive any necessary connection between volitions and bodily movements. However, NNC does not offer any reason why this minor premise should be accepted. In §2, I argued that Nadler's attempt to make this premise self-evident (by assuming that Malebranche considers omnipotence as a condition for true causal efficacy) makes NNC beg the question. Instead, the argument from lack of knowledge offers *a posteriori* support of the minor premise of NNC. The argument from lack of knowledge provides some empirical evidence for the fact that bodily movements and volitions are not necessarily correlated to one another. This entails that volitions cannot causally account for bodily motions. Consequently, the only necessary connection *left* in nature is that between God's own will and natural phenomena, the alleged mind-body interaction included.

3.4. *NNC and argument from lack of knowledge*

My reconstruction of NNC might suggest that the argument from lack of knowledge, not NNC, does most of the argumentative work in Chapter 6.2.3. Pierre Bayle read Malebranche this way and considered the argument from lack of knowledge to be stronger.¹³ More recently, Ott contended that NNC in fact depends on the argument from lack of knowledge. According to Ott, “Malebranche’s dismissal of bodies as causes makes sense only if the requisite tie between cause and effect involves intentionality. [...] Having taken over key elements of the scholastic conception of causation, Malebranche finds that in the context of mechanism nothing but God’s will can fit this conception” (2009, 81). I disagree with Ott because what he presents as a “key element” of scholastic accounts is in fact an undue conflation of efficient causation (which does not entail intentionality) and final causation (usually associated with intentionality). Scholastic authors such as Suárez carefully distinguished these two kinds of causation and denied that numerically the same cause must play both roles (see e.g. DM 23.10.6).

Malebranche’s argument from lack of knowledge does not rule out *in principle* that finite minds could be genuine causes. It only shows that a finite mind is not the cause of these movements *if* it lacks the relevant knowledge necessary to account for bodily movements. I maintain that NNC allows Malebranche to move from a *factual* remark about the impossibility for human minds to account for voluntary motions, to the more general conclusion that it is *contradictory* to think of finite minds as genuine causes.

Malebranche’s own way of phrasing the transition from the argument from lack of knowledge to the third occurrence of NNC suggests this: “but not only are men not the true causes of the movements they produce in their bodies, *there even seems to be some contradiction* (in saying) that they could be” (OC.iii.316/LO 450, emphasis added). The first part of the sentence presents the conclusion of the argument from lack of knowledge as a factual remark. The second part of the sentence, instead, contends that there is a “contradiction” in saying that human beings

¹³ On Bayle’s reading of NNC see Mori (1999, 128-133).

could be capable of being causes of their voluntary motions. The argument from lack of knowledge does not account for this “contradiction” since it leaves open the possibility that if a fully adequate and complete knowledge of how to produce bodily motions would be granted to a finite mind, then that mind would be able to produce the intended bodily motions.

NNC reveals that if bodily motions already occur *without* this fully perfect knowledge of the mind, then the mind’s knowledge and volitions *cannot* be the cause of these motions, since (for the causal containment axiom) these bodily motions are not accounted for by the mind’s relevant cognitive modifications. It follows that there is no conceptual necessary connection between volitions and motions, and thus the human mind cannot be the true cause of these motions. Taking volitions as true causes of motions thus contradicts the causal containment axiom.

To summarize, NNC shares with Suárez the idea that the nature of the effect should be somehow contained in the nature of its (total) cause. Malebranche’s argument from lack of knowledge provides empirical evidence for the claim that the nature of the effects produced by the mind (i.e. knowledge and volitions) are not necessarily connected even in a ‘conceptual’ way with bodily movements (since they can occur independently from each other). This entails the human mind does not satisfy the causal containment axiom as the cause of those movements. If Suárez’s account of substantial forms tried to account for the common experience of natural phenomena, Malebranche’s use of NNC (combined with the argument from lack of knowledge) shows that the human mind cannot work as a substantial form. Nonetheless, Malebranche’s battle against substantial forms does not end in the *Search*.

4. *Continuous creation and the laws of nature*

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, CCC appears both in Malebranche’s *Meditations* and the *Dialogues*. In the *Meditations*, Malebranche argues:

Because bodies exist in virtue of God's will that they exist (since the reason why they do not cease to exist is that God's will that they exist does not cease), it is evident that in God creation and conservation are nothing but the same action. This being supposed, God must create bodies either in movement or at rest. A body is at rest because God creates or conserves it always in the same place; it is in movement because God creates or conserves it always in succession in different places. It follows that in order to move a body or to stop it, a spirit would have to oblige God to change his conduct of action. [...] The moving force of bodies is God's omnipotent action, which conserves bodies successively in different places: there is no spirit that can be the master of God's action, there is no power that could change it; thus only God can move the bodies. [...] Yet, my son, if God alone moves matter, it is He alone who produces as true cause all the natural effects that certain Philosophers attribute to a blind nature, to forms, faculties and virtues of which they do not have any idea. (OC.x.50, my translation)¹⁴

According to the standard interpretation, CCC entails that God is the only true cause in nature because his creation and conservation of creatures is not limited to their substances only, but extends to their modes as well.¹⁵

I grant that Malebranche's CCC entails that God's creation and conservation encompasses not only the existence of substances but also that of modes. I also acknowledge that Malebranche explicitly states in the quote above from the *Meditations* that finite creatures could not act *against*

¹⁴ See parallel passage in *Dialogues*: OC.xii-xiii.160-161/JS 115-116.

¹⁵ See Lee (2008, 555). Pyle (2003, 111) and Nadler (2000, 127-129) agree on this reading. Pessin (2000) argues that CCC extends to modes only in the case of bodies. Instead, Cunning (2008) claims that God recreates only modes.

God's will. It follows that if God decided to create a body at rest in a place or rather to make it move from one place to another, no finite creature could have the power to resist God's will. This reconstruction does not, though, explain *why* God is the *only* cause of the effects we attribute to bodies. In particular, the standard interpretation of CCC does not rule out the possibility that God constantly recreates substances (and their modes) in such a way that they would be endowed with finite and limited, but still real, causal powers that contribute to the causal process.

This point is particularly important for understanding in which sense CCC could be used to establish occasionalism. As it is widely acknowledged, the claim that "in God creation and conservation are nothing but the same action" (OC.x.50) is not original of Malebranche but was already at the core of Suárez's account of how God concurs with creatures (e.g. DM 21.2.3). It is also important to appreciate that, according to Suárez, God's concurrence is not limited to the creation and conservation of the *substance* of creatures, but also extends to their modes and actions. As Suárez explains:

[C]reated beings depend on God no less as agents than as beings since [...] just as they are beings-through-participation, so too they are agents-through-participation [...]; therefore, while they are acting, they are dependent not only because they are being conserved in *esse* by God, but also because in their very acting they require God's influence *per se* and immediately. (DM 22.1.10/F 156)¹⁶

According to Suárez, since creatures essentially depend on God's creation and conservation, their dependency encompasses both their existence and their actions. In other words, creatures depend on God not only for their being but also for whatever they do as *agents*.

An advocate of the standard interpretation of CCC might object that Malebranche's

¹⁶ See also DM 22.1.6/F 152; DM 22.1.7/F 154; DM 22.1.25/F 164.

argument entails that God not only constantly recreates substances and modes but that he also fully determines these substances and modes. As Lee puts it, God “fully determines their [i.e. creatures’] modes or modifications” (Lee 2008, 555). However, this point can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, God might fully determine the nature of the creature in the sense that the creature (considered in itself) could have the power to produce one effect or another (e.g. move in one direction or another) but could not be fully responsible for producing either one or the other without God’s intervention. Suárez would agree on this point:

A fire is indifferent with respect to producing this heat or that heat – not, though, *negatively* or *privatively* indifferent, that is, indifferent by virtue of not having the full power for either of them within its own order, but rather *positively* indifferent, by virtue of being sufficient for either of them as a proximate cause but not being determined to either. (DM 22.2.32/F 191-192)¹⁷

A supporter of the standard interpretation arguably wants to maintain that CCC entails something stronger than what is argued for here by Suárez, namely, that finite creatures have no *power* to produce any effect (in Suárez’s terminology creatures are “negatively or privatively indifferent”). Although CCC can establish occasionalism only if it secures this latter point, it is utterly unclear how this could be done on the standard interpretation. The fact that God creates and conserves the beings of substances and their modes does *not* entail that God cannot also bestow powers with which he will then concur (as Suárez holds). And even the fact that God ‘determines’ the modes and actions of his creatures can be read in a way (as Suárez does) that is compatible with the fact that creatures have genuine (albeit limited) causal powers.

I contend that CCC succeeds in establishing Malebranche’s occasionalist conclusion only if

¹⁷ See also DM 19.1.5-11/F 273-279.

the way in which God's creation works is further qualified. According to Malebranche, God's creation does not consist in directly creating a variety of finite substances, each of them endowed with its own peculiar nature, but rather in establishing the most general laws of nature, from which the variety of things follow. This understanding of God's creation is entailed by Malebranche's account of the laws of nature. Let me elaborate on this point.

In his *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1680), Malebranche argues that God operates in the realm of nature through general wills (OC.v.28/R 116). God's wisdom necessarily entails that God's will always acts uniformly and generally through the simplest ways. God does not create different specific creatures each endowed with unique substantial forms, but he rather establishes the most simple and general laws from which the greatest variety of creatures can be produced.¹⁸ God's act of creating and conserving creatures cannot be separated from the *way* in which he creates and conserves them. Since creation and conservation are an act of God's will, the way in which God creates and conserves creatures depends on how God's will works. When God constantly recreates a creature and its modes, he not only upholds the creature's being but he also recreates it according to his general volitions (i.e. laws of nature) that define the intrinsic features of the creature itself.

According to Suárez, it is possible to think that God *concurrs* with the operations of creatures because God creates a variety of different substances characterized by different natures (i.e. substantial forms), and God adapts his concurrence to each creature in proportion to its needs and on the basis of its specific kind of being. As Suárez puts it, God's "will decides all things distinctly and in particular, and it extends to each individual thing according to its capacity and need" (DM

¹⁸ Scholars disagree about how Malebranche's account of God's general will works: see Nadler (1993); Schmaltz (2008b) and Jolley (2013, 92-104).

22.4.4/F 218).¹⁹

Malebranche's account of God's creation through general will rules out that creatures are endowed with specific natures. What scholastics call 'natures' are nothing but the result of God's general will. Since God's general will and God's act of creation come together, God's creation (and constant conservation) happens according to God's general wills, which in turn defines without any residue all that a creature is and can do.

The connection between CCC and Malebranche's account of the laws of nature is entailed in both the *Meditations* and in the *Dialogues*. In the *Meditations*, just before introducing CCC, Malebranche argues: "does a wise Being make something by means of complex ways [*par des voies composées*] when he can make it by means of simpler ways [*par de plus simples*]? If your wills were efficacious, would you make instruments in order to execute your plans?" (OC.x.48, my translation). Malebranche's point is that God does everything (creation included) through his will. Malebranche also maintains that God operates in nature through general wills, that is, through the simplest ways. This means that God does not first create a variety of different natures and then impose a certain set of laws upon them. Rather, God's act of creation is ruled already by the set of simplest laws (consistent with God's simplicity), which determine the whole variety of creatures that will be produced. This point is captured by the way in which Malebranche summarizes the results of his discussion of CCC:

God does not communicate his power to creatures, unless by making them occasional causes for the production of certain effects, which follows from the laws that he established in order

¹⁹ Suárez repeats this point several times: see, DM 17.2.18/F 30; 22.2.30/F 190; 22.4.3/F 217; 22.4.4/F 218; 22.4.8/F 220.

to execute his plans in a uniform and constant manner, by means of the simplest ways, those that are more convenient to his wisdom and his other attributes. (OC.x.55)²⁰

The claim that creatures are occasional causes is here linked directly with the fact that they operate according to God's laws, namely, according to the simplest ways that God established to create the world.

In the *Dialogues* Malebranche further clarifies this point by arguing that if, by hypothesis, God would not have established yet any law at the moment of creation, then bodies would simply not produce any effect. As he writes:

You do not prove at all that a moving body can, by means of something belonging to it, move another body which it encounters. If God had not yet established the laws of the communication of motion, the nature of bodies — their impenetrability — would oblige Him to make such laws as He judged appropriate; and He would choose those which are the simplest, provided they are sufficient to make the things He willed to form from matter. But it is clear that impenetrability has no efficacy of its own. (OC.xii-xiii.164/JS 118)

It is important to observe that the hypothesis under discussion here is not supposed to show that laws are established *after* God created bodies, but rather that the nature of bodies alone could not contribute in any sense to the production of their (alleged) effects.²¹ In fact, *no* effect would follow from a collision if God had not yet established a law ruling the output of collisions. This entails that bodies can be connected with certain effects not in virtue of any intrinsic feature that belong to them (even the sheer fact of being extended), but only because God established certain laws that

²⁰ See parallel passage in *Dialogues*: OC.xii-xiii.160-161/JS 116.

²¹ For further discussion, see Schamltz (2008b).

determine how bodies behave. Since God's establishment of certain laws comes together with his act of creating the world, God's constant creation and conservation is not limited to the being of things, but also completely defines their nature and the effects that can be connected with it.

CCC is closely connected with Malebranche's critique of substantial forms. Launched in the *Search*, the same critique remains crucial in both the *Meditations* and the *Dialogues*.²² Malebranche's dismissal of substantial forms and finite causal powers requires offering an alternative account of the way in which God constantly operates in nature and produces the variety of natural phenomena we observe. The solution is provided by Malebranche's account of the laws of nature, which gains momentum in Malebranche's works since the Fifteenth *Elucidation* (OC.iii.213/LO 662), and notably in the *Treatise*. As already mentioned, CCC relies on a premise (about conservation as continuous creation) widely accepted by scholastics (and even by Descartes). As I argued, this premise does not entail occasionalism *per se*. However, when combined with Malebranche's dismissal of substantial forms and with his positive account of the laws of nature (i.e. of *how* God creates), the occasionalist conclusion follows. CCC is thus part of Malebranche's attack on substantial forms, and its validity relies on Malebranche's alternative doctrine to substantial forms to explain natural phenomena, namely, on his account of the laws of nature.

5. Conclusions

There are two important consequences of my reading of Malebranche's arguments for occasionalism. First, there is no reason to consider CCC as a replacement of NNC. The fact that CCC presupposes Malebranche's account of the laws of nature explains why it features in works published after the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Nonetheless, NNC figures both in the

²² See *Meditations*: OC.x.50-55; *Dialogues*: OC.xii-xiii.63/JS 31 and OC.xii-xiii.166/JS 121.

Meditations (OC.x.61) and the *Dialogues* (OC.xii-xiii.96/JS 59). In both contexts, Malebranche uses NNC against mind-body interaction by arguing that mind and body cannot produce any effect upon one another. NNC attacks the obscurity of the notion of substantial forms and shows how it fails to satisfy the causal containment axiom held by scholastic authors such as Suárez. CCC, instead, breaks with the way in which scholastic authors conceive of God's act of creation and conservation.

Second, the differences between NNC and CCC can be accounted for by the unique roles that the two arguments play in Malebranche's overall strategy to establish occasionalism as the best alternative to the scholastic account of secondary causation. NNC engages with a reader that is still convinced of the existence of substantial forms at least in the case of human minds. Arguably, this kind of reader is someone educated in the principles of scholastic philosophy, or even someone inclined to accept Descartes's own philosophy but still attached to consider at least the human mind as a substantial form (as Descartes himself granted). To this reader, NNC demonstrates that even the human mind cannot count as a genuine cause of bodily motions, and thus only God can be responsible for the constant conjunction we observe between volitions and bodily motions.

Instead, CCC presupposes that the reader has already accepted that there are no substantial forms in nature, but that she is not yet convinced of the occasionalist conclusion that Malebranche wants to establish. This reader would be sympathetic to Malebranche's account of the laws of nature, since similar accounts gain popularity in seventeenth-century natural philosophy.²³ To this reader, CCC shows that, once natural phenomena have been conceptualized in terms of laws of nature (instead of substantial forms), there is no way to resist the occasionalist conclusion that God is the only cause operating in nature.

Using different arguments allows Malebranche to first engage with the very existence of substantial forms (especially by using NNC), before reinforcing the inference (especially by using

²³ For an overview of the debate see Roux (2008) and Schmaltz (2008b).

CCC) from the dismissal of substantial forms to the establishment of occasionalism as the best alternative to the scholastic account of secondary causation. Because Malebranche's arguments support occasionalism in different ways, there seems to be no reason why Malebranche should have preferred to use only one of them when he could have used both, as in fact he did.

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