

# God, Nature and Connections: Malebranche's Conception of Causality and Locke's Critiques

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*Abstract:* This article considers the arguments and essential passages of the Malebranchian theory of causality in order to focus on and analytically examine the conception of the relationships between God, creatures and the entire universe that it implies. The aim is to show, first of all, how the Malebranchian position is defined starting from a sharp critique of the “pagan” notion of nature, asserting the need to eliminate any God-nature dualism, reducing the latter to the legality established by the former. It then examines Malebranche's occasionalist paradigm as a theory of the links between God and creatures and of the connections within the cosmos. Finally, Locke's objections to Malebranche and Locke's conception of power and relations between things are analysed, highlighting the fundamental differences between the two positions.

*Keywords:* Causality, Connections, Locke, Malebranche, Nature

## 1. *Criticism of the “pagan” notion of nature and arguments in support of the occasionalist thesis*

In this article, we do not intend to review analytically the arguments in support of the occasionalist Malebranchian theory in contrast to other theories that attribute actual causal power to bodies and minds. While recalling the essential arguments and passages of the doctrine, we intend to focus rather on the conception of the relationship between God, creatures and the entire universe that Malebranchian conception implies.

Malebranche's occasionalist position is defined within a complex debate that sees the emergence of a new explanatory paradigm of natural phenomena that aspires to harmonize with the Christian worldview. In the third book of *The Search after Truth* Malebranche incidentally notes that the habit of seeing two things together leads the mind to believe that there is a causal relationship

between the two things<sup>1</sup>. But the constant succession of two phenomena is not sufficient to claim that they are linked by such a relationship<sup>2</sup>; in reality it is only a “relationship of presence”<sup>3</sup>. This is an argument used, in the Cartesian area, by Cordemoy, whose arguments are similar to those of Malebranche: perceiving that a body moves as soon as another body touches it, one is led to believe that the latter is the cause of its movement, while one does not question the actual capacity to produce the motion that a body should be endowed with<sup>4</sup>. From the considerations on the true cause of the movements of our body and the external bodies, the Oratorian concludes that these encounters of the bodies are the occasion that allows God, the author of the movement of matter, to execute the decree of His will, “the universal cause of all things [la cause universelle de toutes choses]”<sup>5</sup>.

In the sixth book, on the other hand, in order to oppose the philosophy of the pagans, the pagan mind that deifies bodies by attributing to them the power to produce certain effects by virtue of some faculty or quality of their nature<sup>6</sup>, Malebranche sets out to demonstrate that “there is only one true cause because there is only one true God” and that the natural causes of bodies are not true causes (“*véritables causes*”) but only occasional causes (“*causes occasionnelles*”) of the effects that follow them<sup>7</sup>. The essential passages of Malebranche’s argument are as follows: the movement of bodies cannot be produced by a body because the idea of bodies excludes that they have the

<sup>1</sup> “This is why everyone concludes that a moving ball which strikes another is the true and principal cause of the motion it communicates to the other, and that the soul’s will is the true and principal cause of movement in the arms, and other such prejudices – because it always happens that a ball moves when struck by another, that our arms move almost every time we want them to, and that we do not sensibly perceive what else could be the cause of these movements” (N. Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité*, III, II, III, *Œuvres complètes*, 20 vols., ed. by A. Robinet, Vrin/CNRS, Paris 1958-90, vol. I, p. 426; *The Search after Truth*, henceforth *SaT*, trans. and ed. by Th.M. Lennon and P.J. Olscamp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 224).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428 (*SaT*, p. 225).

<sup>3</sup> The expression is used by A. Robinet, *Système et existence dans l’œuvre de Malebranche*, Vrin, Paris 1965, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> “[...] ces personnes, ne voyant que deux corps, se persuadent, à cause que le transport du second est toujours arrivé aussitôt que le premier mû en a été approché, que c’est en effet l’un qui a fait mouvoir l’autre, sans considérer qu’un corps ne saurait produire l’effet qu’ils lui attribuent [...]” (G. de Cordemoy, *Le discernement du corps et de l’âme* en six discours: pour servir à l’éclaircissement de la physique, Lambert, Paris 1666, IV<sup>ème</sup> Discours, p. 105). Cordemoy then extends the same consideration to minds (*ibid.*, pp. 105-06).

<sup>5</sup> Malebranche, *RV*, III, II, III, *OCI*, p. 428 (*SaT*, p. 225).

<sup>6</sup> Malebranche, *RV*, VI, II, III, *OCII*, pp. 309-10 (*SaT*, p. 446).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312 (*SaT*, p. 448).

power to move; it cannot be produced by minds either because we cannot conceive of any necessary relation between their will and the movement of any body; we can instead conceive of such a relation between the will of God, the infinitely perfect being, and the movement of all bodies<sup>8</sup>. Bodies and minds are certainly natural causes, but a natural cause is not real and true (“une cause réelle et véritable”): it is only an occasional cause, which determines God to act in this or that way in this or that situation<sup>9</sup>. More concisely, “the motor force of bodies [...] is nothing other than the will of God”<sup>10</sup>. A few pages later Malebranche explains the concept of “cause véritable”: “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”<sup>11</sup>. One of the fundamental arguments for the refutation of theories of the causal relationship between two phenomena is developed here: the ‘no necessary connection’ argument<sup>12</sup>. It is based on the idea that, since a true cause is only that which is necessarily connected

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 312-13 (*SaT*, p. 448).

<sup>9</sup> “Une cause naturelle n’est donc point une cause réelle et véritable, mais seulement une cause occasionnelle, et qui détermine l’Auteur de la nature à agir de telle et telle manière, en telle et telle rencontre [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 and such a manner in such and such a situation]” (ibid., p. 313; *SaT*, p. 448). This passage is one of these upon which Steven Nadler leans to show that Malebranche involves God “in constant causal activity in the world” (S. Nadler, “Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche”, in Id., *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 61). Nicholas Jolley argues against Nadler’s interpretation. According to Jolley the doctrine of continuous creation demonstrates that God is a causally sufficient condition of all their states: it deals with God’s general volitions, that is the laws of physics, so this doctrine does not require any particular volitions in relation to each state of a finite being (N. Jolley, “Occasionalism and Efficacious Laws in Malebranche”, in *Causality and Mind. Essays on Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 98). According to Adams, “two models of occasional causation” can be found in Malebranche: one “assigns more causal work to laws of nature and occasional causes”, the second assigns a particular causal work to God, in the sense that He “is active in causing” a particular modification [Adams refers particularly to Malebranche, *OC VIII-IX*, p. 685]. See R.M. Adams, “Malebranche’s Causal Concepts”, in E. Watkins (ed.), *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature: Historical Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Malebranche, *RV*, VI, II, III, *OC II*, p. 313 (*SaT*, p. 448).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 316 (*SaT*, p. 450).

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this topic, and the question of whether Malebranche understands causal necessity as logical necessity, see A.R.J. Fisher, “Causal and Logical Necessity in Malebranche’s Occasionalism”, in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 41 (2011), 1, pp. 523-48.

with its effect, only an omnipotent being can have such a causal power<sup>13</sup>. The epistemic argument – which is developed, for example, in *Elucidation 15*<sup>14</sup> – must be added to this, as another architrave in support of the Malebranchian thesis, particularly when it comes to insisting on the ineffectiveness of finite minds: ignorance of the neurophysiological processes involved in our movements, even voluntary ones, contributes to demonstrating that our desires to perform this or that movement are only occasional causes, not real causes, of the movement we actually perform<sup>15</sup>. Briefly, according to this argument, knowledge is a condition for something to be a true cause. In this regard, Stephan Schmid notes that, in Malebranche, the relation of natural causation involves two relations: “[...] (i) the relation of God taking something as an occasion (for bringing something about) and (ii) the relation of God bringing something about (on the occasion of something). [...] both relations are crucially dependent on (divine) cognition”<sup>16</sup>.

Let us now return to Malebranche’s apologetic intent. In the last pages of the chapter of *The Search after Truth* examined here, this purpose strongly re-emerges: on the one hand, Malebranche reiterates that the small divinities of the pagan mind and the particular causes of phenomena are “merely chimeras” that distance men from the worship of the true God; on the other, he clearly expresses his stance in favour of Cartesianism against all the philosophies of the past: “the philosophy that is called new” accords perfectly with the first principle of Christianity (one must love and fear only one God, the only One who can make men happy)<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Ott highlighted the difficult points of the ‘no necessary connection’ argument (W. Ott, *Causation & Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012 [2009], pp. 92-97). In particular, he notes that there is a connection between God’s will and its effects that physical events simply do not have, and this is because “a divine volition includes its effect in the sense that effect is specified as the *content* of volition. [...] the claim that ‘if God wills that *p*, then *p*’ is necessary because it is analytic; it is analytic not just because God is omnipotent but because the contents of his volitions are identical with their effects” (ibid., p. 94). According to Ott, intentionality plays a key role in the ‘NNC argument’: only intentionality – the will to produce a certain effect – makes it possible to link cause and effect properly (ibid., p. 95).

<sup>14</sup> Malebranche, *OC III*, pp. 225-26 (*Elucidations of the Search after Truth*, in *The Search after Truth*, cit., p. 669).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Malebranche, *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, VI, § 11, *OC V*, p. 62. According to Ott, this argument contributes to proving “the requirement that cause and effect be linked by intentionality” (Ott, *Causation*, cit., p. 97).

<sup>16</sup> S. Schmid, “Causation and Cognition in Malebranche”, in D. Perler and S. Bender (eds.), *Causation and Condition in Early Modern Philosophy*, Routledge, New York and London 2020, p. 98. For a careful analysis of the epistemic argument, highlighting its virtues and limitations, see ibid., pp. 84-87.

<sup>17</sup> Malebranche, *OC II*, pp. 318-20 (*SaT*, pp. 451-52).

In *Elucidation 15* Malebranche further develops the arguments in support of the occasionalist theory by refuting other conceptions of causality, namely those doctrines that attribute to nature or bodies multiple faculties, powers and a real capacity to produce effects. It is not only a matter of rejecting the hypotheses of the pagan philosophers (Aristotle), but also of other authors (the Scholastics) who, following a different path from the former, and even though they are part of the Christian tradition, nevertheless attribute some efficacy to nature and natural causes<sup>18</sup>. Malebranche provides a biblically based explanation<sup>19</sup> for the fact that human beings attribute the power to produce certain effects to creatures rather than ascribing causal power to God alone: one of the most regrettable consequences of original sin is the loss of a feeling of veneration and admiration for God and His work in favour of a psychological attitude marked by horror and fear of His presence. Man perceives that he is a sinner, so he tries to hide from the Creator: he “prefers to imagine in the bodies surrounding him a blind nature or power that he can master and without remorse use toward his bizarre and disordered intentions, than to find in them the terrible power of a just and holy God who knows all and who does all”<sup>20</sup>.

In the last section of *Elucidation 15* Malebranche refutes the strategy of those who bring certain passages of Holy Scripture in support of the efficacy of second causes. He is wary of taking such passages of Scripture literally, especially those expressions that apparently testify in favour of the efficacy of natural causes and that are based on ordinary judgements: in fact, the biblical text, proposing to instruct both enlightened and simple people, often adapts itself to the weakness of men, most of whom judge things according to the impressions of the senses and the prejudices rooted in childhood<sup>21</sup>. It is also necessary to consider all those places where the Bible states that God alone acts<sup>22</sup>: and so “[...] all force, power [la puissance], efficacy [l’efficacité] must be placed on the side of God”<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Malebranche, *OC III*, p. 204 (*Elucidations*, pp. 657-58).

<sup>19</sup> Ferdinand Alquié (*Le cartésianisme de Malebranche*, Vrin, Paris 1974, p. 248 ff.) has highlighted those passages in Malebranche’s works, including this one in *Elucidation 15*, where it is possible to detect the religious inspiration of certain points of occasionalist theory. See also Malebranche, *RV*, VI, II, III, *OC II*, p. 318 (*SaT*, p. 451): “for since Original Sin, the mind of man is quite pagan [depuis le péché l’esprit de l’homme est tout païen]”, but consider the entire argumentation developed in this paragraph (ibid., pp. 318-19; *SaT*, p. 451).

<sup>20</sup> Malebranche, *OC III*, p. 204 (*Elucidations*, p. 657).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 233 (*Elucidations*, p. 675).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 238-39 (*Elucidations*, pp. 677-78).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 239 (*Elucidations*, p. 678).

Here Malebranche argues that the force that moves bodies (“their *motor force*”) is the will of God, always necessarily efficacious and capable of preserving them successively in different places<sup>24</sup>; the force that enables minds to operate is also the will of God who loves men and leads them towards the good<sup>25</sup>: everything that creatures do does not happen by virtue of their own efficacy, but by the power [“puissance”] of God that “is, as it were, communicated to them by the natural laws God has established in their favor [leur est en quelque sorte communiquée par les lois naturelles que Dieu a établies en leur faveur]”<sup>26</sup>. Now these theses have a precise and fundamental repercussion on the level of the correct relationship to be established between man, God and things. If man tends to love those things that are capable of doing him good, then occasionalist philosophy loosens every knot that concerns the human attitude towards everything that surrounds him: “this philosophy [...] authorizes only the love of God, and absolutely condemns the love of everything else. [...] this philosophy [...] sanctions only the fear of God and absolutely condemns all others [cette philosophie n’autorise [...] que l’amour de Dieu, et condamne absolument l’amour de toute autre chose; [...] cette philosophie n’approuve [...] que la crainte de Dieu et condamne absolument toutes les autres]”<sup>27</sup>. Occasionalism legitimises all movements of the soul that are just and reasonable and condemns all those that are opposed to reason and religion: the desire for riches, the pursuit of magnificence or abandonment to debauchery cannot be justified on the basis of this doctrine, since the love of bodies appears “absurd and ridiculous [extravagant et ridicule]” in the light of the principles it establishes<sup>28</sup>. According to this philosophy, man must love only God, since God alone is the cause of his happiness: in other words, it is God – and not nature – who provides man with goods, and God alone – not God and nature<sup>29</sup>. In a passage from the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, Malebranche states that only the constant and efficacious will of God constitutes the union between soul and body and explains his thesis in this way: “[f]or there is no other nature, that is,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 240 (*Elucidations*, p. 678).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 241 (*Elucidations*, p. 679).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 243 (*Elucidations*, p. 680).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 244-45 (*Elucidations*, p. 681).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 245 (*Elucidations*, p. 681).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-46 (*Elucidations*, p. 681). See particularly this passage: “[...] we must not say that it is God and nature. We must say that it is God alone and speak in this way without equivocation in order not to deceive the simple [il ne faut point dire que c’est Dieu et la nature. Il faut dire que c’est Dieu seul, et parler ainsi sans équivoque, pour ne pas tromper les simples]” (ibid., p. 246; *Elucidations*, pp. 681-82).

there are no other natural laws, except the efficacious volitions of the Almighty [car il n'y a point de nature, je veux dire d'autres lois naturelles que les volontés efficaces du Tout-puissant]<sup>30</sup>. Certainly, in the *Dialogues*, Theodore expresses a strong feeling of admiration for the universe<sup>31</sup>, but he does not intend to fall into the error of deifying nature. Theodore clearly indicates to Aristes that one must distinguish the beauty and magnificence of the universe from God's use of the natural laws by which the profusion of living beings is produced; it is only this art that is properly divine: "Nothing is more beautiful, more magnificent in the universe that this profusion of animals and plants upon which we have just remarked. But, believe me, nothing is more divine that the way in which God fills the world, than the use God is able to make of a law so simple that it seems good for nothing"<sup>32</sup>.

Malebranche's occasionalist theory thus rethinks – perhaps even more radically than Descartes<sup>33</sup> and against the pagan philosophers (and not only them), including Seneca, explicitly quoted by the Oratorian<sup>34</sup> – the concept of nature, which seems to be eclipsed in favour of that of natural or general laws<sup>35</sup>,

<sup>30</sup> Malebranche, *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et la religion*, IV, § 11, OC XII, p. 96 (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, ed. by N. Jolley and D. Scott, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 60). This passage could support Jean Erhard's remarks on one of the implications of the theory of divine unicity: "[...] il [Dieu] se rapproche de la Nature au point, non de se confondre avec elle, mais de la diluer dans sa propre infinité" (J. Erhard, *L'idée de nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Albin Michel, Paris 1994 [1963], p. 78). By the term 'nature' – Erhard also points out –, Malebranche means all creatures, both the world of minds and the world of bodies (*ibid.*, p. 77).

<sup>31</sup> It is what Alquié emphasises in *Le Cartésianisme*, cit., p. 291: "Nous sommes également éloignés de l'idée selon laquelle le monde créé, indigne de Dieu, ne vaut que par l'Incarnation. À la place de tout cela, nous trouvons la chaleur d'une admiration proprement naturaliste". See for example Malebranche, *EMR*, X, §§ 2 and 7, OC XII, pp. 226-28, 233-34 (*Dialogues*, pp. 173-75, 179-80).

<sup>32</sup> Malebranche, *EMR*, X, § 7, OC XII, p. 234 (*Dialogues*, p. 179).

<sup>33</sup> Descartes explicitly states that he does not mean by nature a divinity or an imaginary power, but matter itself, whose modifications occur according to certain laws. See R. Descartes, *Le Monde*, in *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, Vrin, Paris 1996, vol. XI, pp. 36-37. Consider also the *Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditation Six*: "for by 'nature', taken generally, I understand nothing other than God himself or the ordered network of created things which was instituted by God. By my own particular nature I understand nothing other than the combination of all the things bestowed upon me by God" (AT, VII, p. 80, IX-I, p. 64; *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. and transl. by R. Ariew and D. Cress, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., Indianapolis-Cambridge 2006, p. 45).

<sup>34</sup> In a footnote of *Elucidation 15* Malebranche quotes Seneca's *De beneficiis* (IV, 8), in which he detects the doctrine that divinizes nature, elevates nature to a supreme principle alongside God (OC III, p. 246; *Elucidations*, p. 681).

<sup>35</sup> "[...] I suppose on the contrary that it is God who does all in all things; that the nature of the pagan philosophers is a chimera [la nature des philosophes païens est une chimère]; and that, properly speaking, what is called *nature* is nothing other than the general laws [ce qu'on appelle *Nature*, n'est rien autre chose que les lois générales] which God has established to construct or to preserve his work

where the laws of nature are none other than the practical and always efficacious wills of God<sup>36</sup>: far from being an entity independent of its Author, nature is reduced to a set of phenomena governed by laws (and this is what makes it a cosmos and not a chaos), and, since these laws are none other than the will of God, it depends entirely and constantly on its Author<sup>37</sup>, even in the sense that God is directly active in every event occurring in the different orders of the cosmos through his general wills (apart from a few rare exceptions where He is so through his particular wills)<sup>38</sup>. In other words, nature – correctly understood, according to Malebranche – is reduced to a set of general laws regulating the relations between things (laws of movements) and, in the case of man, the union of soul and body; nevertheless, a general law of nature is the will of God Himself<sup>39</sup>. This argument almost seems to build a bridge between the two models of occasionalism identified in Malebranche – illustrated in n. 9 of this article – by highlighting that God’s active power, God’s efficacy expressed in His will, is at one with the general laws of nature, even if this argument stresses that God’s activity consists in willing general laws and leaves God’s particular

by very simple means, by an action which is uniform, constant, perfectly worthy of an infinite wisdom and of a universal cause” (Malebranche, *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, I<sup>er</sup> Éclaircissement, § 3, *OC V*, p. 148; *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, translated by P. Riley, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, p. 196). See also *Réponse au Livre I des Réflexions philosophiques et théologiques de M. Arnauld sur le Traité de la nature et de la grâce* (1686), II<sup>ème</sup> Lettre, Chapitre 1, *OC VIII-IX*, p. 704, where Malebranche reaffirms that the nature of philosophers is a pure chimera and that “the laws of Nature are nothing but the general laws, or the general practical volitions of the Creator [Les lois naturelles n’étant que les lois générales ou les volontés pratiques générales du Créateur]”.

<sup>36</sup> “Puisque les lois de la Nature ne sont que les volontés de son Auteur, si ces lois sont générales, ses volontés le sont aussi [...] les lois naturelles sont ce par quoi les choses sont: parce que les lois de la Nature ne sont que les volontés pratiques et toujours efficaces de son Auteur” (Malebranche, *Réponse au Livre I des Réflexions philosophiques et théologiques de M. Arnauld sur le Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, I<sup>ère</sup> Lettre, Chapitre 1, § 4, *OC VIII-IX*, p. 654).

<sup>37</sup> For example, it is a natural law that one body meeting another is set in motion, but this only happens “because God willed it and still wills it [parce que Dieu l’a voulu, et le veut encore]” (ibid.).

<sup>38</sup> “Malebranche’s occasionalism [...] is rather a theory according to which God acts immanently and directly in every event (with very limited exceptions) by general rather than particular volitions which do not require readjustment” (Adams, “Malebranche’s Causal Concepts”, cit., p. 77).

<sup>39</sup> “Thus the general law of Nature and the general will of God are one and the same thing [Ainsi loi générale de la Nature ou volonté générale de Dieu ne signifient qu’une même chose]” (Malebranche, *Réponse au Livre I des Réflexions philosophiques et théologiques de M. Arnauld sur le Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, I<sup>ère</sup> Lettre, Chapitre 1, § 4, *OC VIII-IX*, p. 654. See also *Entretiens sur la mort*, III, *OC XII-XIII*, p. 429: “The laws of motion, those of the union of soul and body, in a word all natural laws, are but the effective and constant wills of the Creator, and all divine wills necessarily conform to the immutable order of justice [Les lois des mouvements, celles de l’union de l’âme et du corps, en un mot toutes les lois naturelles ne sont que les volontés efficaces et constantes du Créateur, et toutes les volontés divines sont nécessairement conformes à l’ordre immuable de la justice]”.



causal work in the background. In any case, in this way, the Malebranchian conception relativises, for better or for worse, the importance of things for us. “We should fear neither plague, nor war, nor famine, nor our enemies, nor even devils; we should fear God alone. We should flee a sword with which someone would stab us, we should avoid fire, we should leave a house about to crush us; but we should not fear these things”<sup>40</sup>.

Malebranche recognises that it is natural to feel gratitude towards something in relation to the good or profit one receives from it, so he does not think it is so surprising that almost all peoples have worshipped the sun, considered by all as the cause of their goods, and that the Egyptians even worshipped the moon, the Nile and certain vile animals. That is why it is dangerous to argue for the efficacy of secondary causes, even if one adds to it the (confused and ambiguous) idea of the immediate contribution that God would provide to them<sup>41</sup>. The explanation of simultaneous concurrence, in fact, was introduced into theology “to make more bearable this prejudice of the senses, or this principle of the Philosophy of the Pagans, that Nature and the natural laws are different from the efficacy and the general wills of the Creator: I claim that this opinion is not in conformity with the Scripture [pour rendre plus supportable ce préjugé des sens, où ce principe de la Philosophie des Païens, que la Nature et les lois naturelles sont différentes de l’efficace et des volontés générales du Créateur: je prétends que cette opinion n’est point conforme à l’Écriture]”<sup>42</sup>. In order to escape the trap of idolatry – an objective clearly circumscribed as early as *The Search after Truth*<sup>43</sup> –, one must identify the true cause of one’s happiness and free oneself from the sensory prejudice that the pleasures enjoyed by men come from the body. From this point of view, it is necessary to appeal to reason, which alone, even if it speaks in a humble manner and is contradicted by the senses, can tell them that God alone acts in them<sup>44</sup>. *Elucidation 15* shows

<sup>40</sup> Malebranche, *OC III*, p. 246 (*Elucidations*, p. 682).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50 (*Elucidations*, pp. 683-84). On Malebranche’s critique of divine concurrence but also on the links between this doctrine and occasionalism, see S. Manzo, “Malebranche y su crítica de la eficacia de las causas segundas. Las refutaciones del concurrentismo y del conservatismo”, in *Ingenium. Revista de historia del pensamiento moderno*, (4) 2010, pp. 29-52.

<sup>42</sup> Malebranche, *Réponse au Livre I*, 1<sup>ère</sup> Lettre, Chapitre 1, *OC VIII-IX*, p. 701.

<sup>43</sup> See in particular Malebranche, *RV*, VI, II, III, *OC II*, pp. 309-12 (*SaT*, pp. 446-48).

<sup>44</sup> Malebranche, *OC III*, pp. 250-51 (*Elucidations*, p. 684). On the opposition between reason and the senses on this point, see also *Elucidation 10* (*ibid.*, p. 127; *Elucidations*, p. 612) and the *Réponse au Livre I des Réflexions philosophiques et théologiques de M. Arnauld sur le Traité de la nature et de la grâce*. In this last text, Malebranche insists on the fact that the Holy Scriptures, like reason, free us – when correctly understood – from the prejudices of the senses (*OC VIII-IX*, pp. 702-3). The contrast between the senses and the reason often reappears in Malebranche’s works, but with various

clearly, in our view, that the Malebranchian doctrine of causality – articulated around the three plexuses: God alone as efficacious cause, second causes as occasional causes, lacking real efficacy, communication of power from God to creatures<sup>45</sup> – aims to reconfigure the relations between God and creatures and those established among creatures themselves with a view to rejecting paganism and idolatry – attitudes proper to another age – and to determining the only religiously and philosophically acceptable attitude that harmonizes with the mechanistic view of nature proper to modern philosophers. The concept of “efficacy”, further developed in later works, such as the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* and the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, contributes to further marking the difference between the true cause and the occasional cause (and thus to reinforce the different attitude to be taken towards one and the other): the first acts in virtue of its own efficacy<sup>46</sup> – and thus immediately translates into action the will to do something<sup>47</sup> – while the second acts in virtue of an efficacy that does not belong to it.

## 2. Occasionalism as a theory of the link between God and creatures and of connections within the cosmos

Malebranche establishes an essential link between the divine will and occasional causes, since, according to him, it is God who is their foundation, who wills the existence of the world<sup>48</sup>. Nevertheless, as Bardout noted, the speci-

nuances. For example, in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* (V, § 5, OC X, p. 48), the Word advises the disciple to limit himself to what his senses tell him, for example, that one body moves when it encounters another, but not to attribute a motor force to the bodies. Nevertheless, to increase his knowledge of the movement of bodies, the disciple has to consult Reason.

<sup>45</sup> The idea that God communicates his power to creatures already emerges in *The Search after Truth*: see Malebranche, OC II, p. 318 (*SaT*, p. 451).

<sup>46</sup> See the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*: “I think that I have demonstrated in *Recherche de la vérité* that it is only God who is a true cause, or who acts by his own efficacy [...]” (*TNG*, I<sup>er</sup> *Éclaircissement* I, § 11, OC V, p. 155; *Treatise*, p. 202). In the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, Malebranche affirms that as God is an infinitely perfect being, his volitions are efficacious by themselves (“par elles-mêmes”): in fact, it is a great perfection that everything one wills is fulfilled by the very efficacy of one’s will (“par l’efficace même de sa volonté”) (*MCM V*, § 6, OC X, p. 48).

<sup>47</sup> “Si Dieu a donc la volonté qu’un corps soit mù, cela seul le mettra en mouvement, et l’action de la volonté de Dieu sera la force mouvante de ce corps” (*MCM V*, § 6, OC X, p. 48).

<sup>48</sup> See *Elucidation 15*, in which Malebranche affirms that it is God who does everything, since it is His will that causes, and His wisdom that regulates all communications of movements (OC III, p. 209; *Elucidations*, p. 660).

ficity of occasionalism does not lie solely – and perhaps not primarily – in the concentration of causality in God. This thesis has to be coupled with another one: the Occasionalism requires a disjunction between the efficient cause, which actually produces the being or its determinations, and the so-called occasional cause, which gives reason for the deployment or commitment of the efficacy of the cause<sup>49</sup>. Bardout makes use of this following passage from the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*:

Ce n'est pas rendre raison d'un effet particulier que d'en marquer la cause générale, et de répondre simplement, que Dieu le veut. Car c'est ce que tout le monde sait. Exemple: si l'on demande pourquoi le feu fait plaisir, ce n'est pas répondre que de dire que Dieu le veut, car c'est de quoi on ne doute pas. Il faut dire pourquoi Dieu le veut, ou marquer la cause naturelle qui en conséquence des lois générales, fait que Dieu donne à l'âme le sentiment de chaleur: c'est-à-dire, qu'il faut, si on le peut, rendre raison de l'effet par la cause occasionnelle<sup>50</sup>.

Efficacy is unrepresentable, both in itself (we do not see the power that brings a thing into existence) and in the modalities of its deployment, without the intervention of “an operator of rationality” distinct therefrom. This rationalisation function would be played by the occasional cause, whose presence is always required to trigger the action of the efficient cause. The occasional cause could be considered as the determining reason or as what makes efficacy intelligible<sup>51</sup>. Malebranche's conception of causality thus distinguishes reason from cause and then thinks of their connection by means of the concept of the law of nature<sup>52</sup>, since it is by virtue of a general law that a given occasional cause enables God to produce a given effect. Efficacy (true causality) reveals a residue of mystery, of unintelligibility in a theory that nonetheless grants the human mind, by virtue of its union with universal reason, the possibility of knowing certain general laws and reconstructing the explanation of individual phenomena through occasional causes: the latter are effectively an operator of rationality through which various orders of reality are freed from possible auras of mystery and from the rule of presumed hidden powers or virtues and

<sup>49</sup> J.-Ch. Bardout, “Le modèle occasionnaliste. Emergence et développement, au tournant des XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles”, in *Quaestio* 2 (2002), p. 468.

<sup>50</sup> Malebranche, *TNG*, II, § 2 (additions), *OC V*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>51</sup> Bardout, “Le modèle occasionnaliste”, p. 471.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 471-72.

reveal themselves to be potentially – but not entirely<sup>53</sup> – ascribable to a plane of intelligibility.

At the same time, however, the genuine cause-occasional cause binomial reveals itself to be a unifying conceptual structure on a twofold level: on the one hand, it makes the links between God and creatures (at least according to a general principle<sup>54</sup>) and creatures among themselves (certain connections between occasional causes and effects) intelligible in an appropriate way through divine laws<sup>55</sup>; on the other hand, as the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* shows in particular, this conceptual structure embraces the natural and supernatural worlds. In the passage just quoted, Malebranche states that the procedure that gives the reason for the effect through the occasional cause also applies to the realm of grace, so that, as far as the distribution of grace is concerned, the reason is to be sought in Jesus Christ as man and as mediator and head of the Church in the light of what the Scriptures teach, namely that God wishes to give grace to men through the mediation of his pontiff<sup>56</sup>. In these pages of the *Treatise*, the Oratorian insists on the fact that it is necessary to identify the specific occasional cause that determines the efficacy of the general cause according to the laws that govern a certain order of reality and in relation to the divine plans. In the case of the union of soul and body, reason and experience show that God has not established the movement of the planets as an occasional cause of this union. Since God's intention is to unite soul and body, He can only produce sensations of pain in the soul when some change is produced in the body that breaks its equilibrium: the occasional causes of their union are not to be sought elsewhere, but in our soul or our body<sup>57</sup>. This argumentative procedure continues, on a broader scale, the project of de-divinising nature, or rather re-semanticising the divine character

<sup>53</sup> There are general laws unknown to us. Malebranche speaks of them in relation to miracles. By this term – he writes in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* –, we must understand not only what God does by means of particular wills “but also everything that is not a necessary consequence of the natural laws which are naturally known to you and whose effects are common [mais encore toute ce qui n'est point une suite nécessaire des lois naturelles qui te sont naturellement connues et dont les effets sont communs]” (*MCM*, VIII, § 10, *OC X*, p. 86). See also *ibid.*, VIII, § 26, *OC X*, p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> See for example the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*, VI, § 12, *OC X*, p. 64: “Tu es sûr qu'il y a une liaison nécessaire entre les volontés d'un Être tout-puissant et leurs effets”.

<sup>55</sup> See for example the explanation of the process by which, as a consequence of the natural laws of communication of movements, the fire, whose parts are constantly moving, shakes those of the body next to it and thus heats it up (*ibid.*, V, § 16, *OC V*, p. 54).

<sup>56</sup> Malebranche, *TNG*, II, § 2 (addition), *OC V*, p. 67.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, II, §§ 3-4, *OC V*, pp. 67-68 (*Treatise*, pp. 139-40).

of nature<sup>58</sup>: in nature, not everything is connected to everything else by the action of particular virtues and hidden forces, but there are precise connections between entities and their modes within certain orders. These are the five hierarchical worlds: material, psycho-physical, psycho-intellectual, which together form the wider sphere of nature, angelic and evangelical, the latter constituting the world of grace<sup>59</sup>. However, the two great spheres of nature and grace remain in relation: “[s]ince grace is conjoined with nature, all the movements of our soul and of our body have some relation to salvation”<sup>60</sup>.

But it is perhaps in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* that Malebranche best highlights this particular junction of his doctrine, deepening the theory of *liens* already outlined in *The Search after Truth*<sup>61</sup>: the theory of occasional causes is part of a broader vision of the connections and construction of the universe, God’s great work<sup>62</sup>. After all, the book published in 1683 (first edition) marks in some ways a turning point in Malebranche’s theory: the argument of the “Not Necessary Connexion” as the fundamental pivot of the occasionalist thesis seems to weaken – without however disappearing in the

<sup>58</sup> See the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (II, § 58) and the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (XIV, § 10): “[...] everything is full of Jesus Christ, everything expresses and represents him, so far as the simplicity of the laws of nature may permit [tout est plein de Jésus-Christ; tout l’exprime et le figure, autant que la simplicité des lois de la nature le peut permettre]” (ibid., *OC V*, p. 113; *Treatise*, p. 165); “[e]verything expresses and represents Jesus Christ. Everything is related to Him after its manner, from the most noble of intellects down to the most contemptible insects” (*OC XII*, p. 346; *Dialogues*, p. 276).

<sup>59</sup> For a systematic discussion of these worlds, see M. Gueroult, *Malebranche, Tome II: Les cinq abîmes de la Providence, 1: L’ordre et l’occasionalisme. Tome III: Les cinq abîmes de la Providence, 2. La Nature et la Grâce*, Aubier, Paris 1955.

<sup>60</sup> Malebranche, *TNG*, II, § 42, *OC V*, p. 104 (*Treatise*, p. 157).

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the reflection on the bonds that unite humans to their fellow human beings and to the entire universe in the fifth book: Malebranche, *V, II, OC, II*, p. 133 (*SaT*, pp. 341-42).

<sup>62</sup> The Word, in fact, explains to his disciple: “Tes désirs ou tes efforts ne sont donc point les causes véritables qui produisent par leur efficace le mouvement de tes membres; puisque tes membres ne se remuent que par le moyen de ces esprits. Ce ne sont donc que des causes occasionnelles que Dieu a établies pour déterminer l’efficace des lois de l’union de l’Âme et du Corps, par lesquelles tu as la puissance de remuer les membres de ton corps. Et Dieu a établi ces lois pour plusieurs raisons considérables qui toutes néanmoins ont rapport à son grand ouvrage. Il les a établies pour unir les esprits à des corps, et par leurs corps à ceux qui les environnent: et par là les unir tous entre eux et former des États et des Sociétés particulières: et par là les rendre capables des sciences, de discipline, de religion: et par là fournir à Jésus-Christ et à ses membres mille moyens d’étendre la foi, d’instruire et de sanctifier les hommes, et de construire ainsi son grand ouvrage l’Église future; laquelle supposant la diversité des mérites et des sacrifices, il fallait que les hommes eussent une Victime à sacrifier à Dieu, et qu’ils pussent par elle s’immoler eux-mêmes en mille manières différentes” (Malebranche, *MCM*, VI § 11, *OC X*, p. 63).

subsequent production of the Oratorian<sup>63</sup> – insofar as in the *Ninth Meditation* the Word declares to his disciple that mankind has not been given a distinct idea of power or efficacy because God has not endowed creatures with genuine power; and that mankind is not given to grasp clearly a necessary link between God's will and its effects – even though it remains clear that God would not be omnipotent if his wills were inefficacious<sup>64</sup>. In other words, men do not have any distinct idea of power or efficacy at all, in God or in creatures, and the necessary connection that they can perceive is not between God's volitions and their effects, but only between the principle of divine omnipotence and the prerogative that God's volitions are efficacious<sup>65</sup>. Indeed, in the *Christian and Metaphysical Meditations* – and generally also in works published later –, Malebranche's main occasionalist argument is constructed on the basis of a different thesis: that in conserving the created world in being, God is continuously creating it at every instant<sup>66</sup>. The thesis of continuous creation seems well articulated with the argument that God established the laws of the union of soul and body to bind men to each other and to the bodies around them, enabling them to build knowledge and political communities, which then become the ground for the building of the future Church and, ultimately, to reconnect the world to the one efficacious cause that continually creates it and ensures its subsistence.

Nevertheless, in what is the great summa of Malebranche's thought, the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, the argument that links the occasionalist thesis and the theory of the bonds that connect spiritual and corporeal beings to each other in various ways probably finds its clearest formulation<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion on this question, see Adams, "Malebranche's Causal Concepts", cit., pp. 85-89. See also S. Lee, "Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation: Malebranche's Two Arguments for Occasionalism", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008), 4, pp. 539-65.

<sup>64</sup> Malebranche, *MCM*, IX, § 2, *OC X*, p. 96.

<sup>65</sup> See Adams, "Malebranche's Causal Concepts", cit., pp. 85-86.

<sup>66</sup> See Malebranche, *MCM*, V, § 7-9, VI, § 11, *OC X*, pp. 49-51, 62-63. Concerning the demonstration of occasionalism throughout the argument of continuous creation, which becomes the major argument in the period of maturity, see A. Robinet, *Système et existence*, cit., pp. 95-100.

<sup>67</sup> However, consider also the pages of the *Traité de morale*, where the Oratorian affirms that creatures cannot establish causal relationships with each other and that God alone – whose will is "the link of all unions [le lien de toutes les unions]" – can unite them with each other by communicating His power when He determines them to be occasional causes to produce certain effects (Malebranche, *TM*, I<sup>ère</sup> partie, X, § 3-4, *OC XI*, pp. 117-18; *Treatise on Ethics* (1684), translation and introduction by C. Walton, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1993, p. 115).

In paragraph 10 of *Dialogue 7* Theodore formulates the thesis of continuous creation as the basis of the argument in favour of the theory of the one efficient cause<sup>68</sup>, an argument which, in his view, is fundamental to harmonising reason with experience and understanding “the greatest, the most fruitful and the most necessary of all principles”, i.e.:

God communicates His power to creatures and unites them with one another, only because He establishes their modalities, occasional causes of the effects which He produces Himself – occasional causes, I say, which determine the efficacy of his volitions as a consequence of the general laws He has prescribed for Himself, in order to make His conduct bear the character of His attributes and to spread throughout His work the uniformity of action necessary both to unite together all the parts that comprise it [pour en lier ensemble toutes les parties qui le composent], and to rescue it from the confusion and irregularity of a kind of chaos [et pour le tirer de la confusion et de l'irrégularité d'une espèce de chaos] in which minds could never understand anything<sup>69</sup>.

A little further on, Theodore explains that creatures are united to God by virtue of an immediate union and are essentially dependent on Him; being powerless, they cannot depend on each other at all. It may also be conceded – without, however, indulging the common ideas – that they are united to each other and depend in some way on each other, provided that we add that this happens as a consequence of the immutable and efficacious wills of God, that is, of the general laws which He has established. We derive our power and our faculty from His efficacious will: it is this will that makes possible the reciprocity of the modes of our soul and our body, and thus establishes

<sup>68</sup> The conservation of finite beings is a continuous creation, the persistence and uninterrupted operation of God's will. Malebranche argues that God cannot conceive, and therefore cannot will, that a body should not exist in any place and should not have certain relations of distance with others. Therefore, if God wills that a certain body should exist, He wills that it should exist in this or that place; consequently, no power can lead it where God does not transport it, nor stop it if God does not stop it. And if experience shows us that this – moving a body – is possible, reason allows us to explain it by the notion of the communication of God's power to creatures (Malebranche, *EMR*, VII, § 10, *OC XII*, p. 160; *Dialogues*, pp. 115-16). The argument in support of the occasionalist thesis based on God's conservation of creatures through their continuous creation, reveals two significant implications on the metaphysical level, on which Steven Nadler has emphasised that: 1) “the power to cause, to give new modalities to finite things, belongs only to the being that creates and sustains them”; 2) “all causality in nature is ultimately and essentially creation, in the strongest sense of the word” (S. Nadler, “Malebranche on Causation”, in S. Nadler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 128-29).

<sup>69</sup> Malebranche, *EMR*, VII, § 10, *OC XII*, pp. 160-61 (*Dialogues*, p. 116).

the link between our soul and our body, and, through this, gives rise to many other bonds (friendship, property, and so on)<sup>70</sup>. “I derive nothing – as Malebranche further explains – from my nature, nothing from the imaginary nature of the philosophers. Everything comes from God and His decrees. God has integrated together all His works [Dieu a lié ensemble tous ses ouvrages], without producing any connecting entities [non qu’il ait produit en eux des entités liantes]. He has subordinated them to one another, without conferring upon them any efficacious qualities. [...] the divine decrees are the indissoluble connections [les liens indissolubles] between all the parts of the universe, and the wondrous chain [l’enchaînement merveilleux] of subordination of all causes”<sup>71</sup>.

The occasionalist paradigm as outlined by Malebranche in these passages emphasises the communication of power through occasional causes, which thus play, one might say, a mediating role between God’s power and its effects and constitute a concrete, factual element of union between creatures, without, however, on a metaphysical level, having an effective connecting power. Occasional causes determine the efficacy of God’s will, hence His general laws, the uniformity of which reverberates throughout the cosmos in such a way that, observed from the proper perspective of these laws, it reveals itself not as a chaotic and irregular magma, but as an ordered and regular structure. The general laws of the cosmos – the laws of the union of soul and body and of the communication of movements – guarantee that uniformity which alone makes possible the connection between all parts of the universe<sup>72</sup> and establishes order in nature<sup>73</sup>. It is in this way that occasional causes constitute an operator of rationality that allows our finite minds to actually understand how events are linked to one another in the cosmos. Malebranche points out that there are no “connecting entities”, which would somehow have the power to make creatures independent of the Creator, thus restoring the ancient conception of Nature that the Oratorian has been fighting against since *The Search after Truth*. The intricate system of true cause/general laws/occasional causes

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., § 13, OC XII, pp. 165-66 (*Dialogues*, pp. 120-21).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., OC XII, p. 166 (*Dialogues*, p. 121).

<sup>72</sup> Malebranche reiterates this concept in his last work, the *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique* (OC XVI, p. 40).

<sup>73</sup> On this point in particular, see what Malebranche writes in the last *Elucidation* of *The Search after Truth*: “And it is necessary for God to act through general laws in the ordinary course of His Providence not only because this way of acting bears the mark of wisdom and immutable divinity but also because without it there would be no order in nature, no principles of physics, no sure rules of conduct” (Malebranche, *RV*, *Éclaircissement* XVII, § 43, OC III p. 346; *Elucidations*, p. 746).



– by relating the multiplicity of possible links among things to the single causal power, the genuine cause of all natural unions<sup>74</sup> – is nevertheless intended to account for a varied and structured cosmos in which things are linked to one another and causes are wonderfully subordinate to one another.

### 3. *Locke's critique of Malebranche and the Lockian conception of power and relations between things*

Locke became interested in Malebranche's work during his stay in France: in 1676 he bought the two volumes of *The Search after Truth*, published in 1674 and 1675 respectively in Paris by the publisher André Palard<sup>75</sup>. However, it seems that the English philosopher did not actually read the two volumes in detail until early 1685, during his stay in Holland<sup>76</sup>.

In 1693 Locke wrote a memoir – almost in the form of notes – in which, in the light of the second part of the third book of *The Search after Truth* and of *Elucidation 10*, he critically examined some aspects of the Malebranchian theory of the vision in God and of the nature of ideas. This text, as is well known, was published posthumously, since only in his last letter to King, did Locke lift the ban on its publication. Anthony Collins and Peter King, editors of the *Posthumous Works*, a collection that appeared in London in 1706, published it under the title, which has remained unchanged since then, *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*<sup>77</sup>. Later, in 1732, a French edition of this paper also appeared, published in the second edition of the collection of some of Locke's works<sup>78</sup>. In both of these editions, as well as in later ones, this text has not been edited in its entirety. In particular, certain opening paragraphs and a subsequent short passage have been published

<sup>74</sup> See Malebranche, *Conversations chrétiennes*, VII, OC IV, p. 157: “[...] Dieu unit entre eux tous ses Ouvrages, et il n’y a que lui, que ses volontés immuables et toujours efficaces qui soient la cause véritable de toutes les unions naturelles”.

<sup>75</sup> See G. Bonno, *Les relations intellectuelles de Locke avec la France*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1955, pp. 58 e 243-45.

<sup>76</sup> See J. Lough, “Locke's Reading during his Stay in France (1675-1679)”, in *The Library* 8 (1953), pp. 229-58.

<sup>77</sup> *Posthumous Works of John Locke*, Printed by W.B. for A. and J. Churchill at the Black Swan in Pater-Noster-Row, London 1706, pp. 139-213.

<sup>78</sup> *Ceuvres diverses de Monsieur Locke. Nouvelle édition considérablement augmentée*, 2 vols., Jean Frédéric Bernard, Amsterdam 1732.

only recently<sup>79</sup>: in any case, these passages are preserved in the copy made by Locke's copyist and faithful helper, Sylvester Brounower<sup>80</sup>. These paragraphs are important from a philosophical-historical point of view as they explicitly refer to Norris' work, *Reason and Religion*<sup>81</sup>. Norris, as is well known, is a staunch defender of Malebranchian philosophy and in particular of the theory of the vision of ideas in God<sup>82</sup>. In the *Remarks upon some of Mr. Norris's Books, wherein he asserts P. Malebranche's Opinion of seeing all Things in God*, after examining the Malebranchian theory, Locke also makes some observations on the Norrisian interpretation of Malebranche's theory of vision in God<sup>83</sup>. Here we will merely make a passing reference to the parts of Locke's texts in which he evokes the occasionalist theory: we will therefore not dwell on the similarities between the epistemology of the two thinkers – for example, on the fact that both thinkers state that humans do not know the metaphysical essence of their soul and abandon the Cartesian project of providing an accurate explanation of the mechanics of mind-body interaction<sup>84</sup>– and, while finding some similarities between the two thinkers, we will essentially focus on the Lockian critique of the theory of occasional causes and the alternative model of causality that Locke contrasts with it.

In *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*, Locke deals with the perception of ideas according to the theory of vision in

<sup>79</sup> The complete edition of Locke's text with the paragraphs concerning Norris is published in [www.digitallockeproject.nl](http://www.digitallockeproject.nl) and in the Italian translation by L. Simonutti (J. Locke, *Malebranche e la visione in Dio. Con un commento di Leibniz*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 1994).

<sup>80</sup> See MS. Locke d 3; P. Long, *A Summary Catalogue of the Lovelace Collection of the Papers of John Locke in the Bodleian Library*, University Press for the Society, Oxford 1959, p. 32; L. Simonutti, *Introduzione*, in Locke, *Malebranche e la visione in Dio*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> J. Norris, *Reason and Religion, or, The Grounds and Measures of Devotion, consider'd from the Nature of God, and the Nature of Man in several Contemplations: with Exercises of Devotion applied to every Contemplation*, 2 vols., printed for Samuel Manship, at the Bull in Cornhil, London 1689.

<sup>82</sup> On the Norrisian reading of Malebranche see E. Scribano, *Norris interprete di Malebranche*, in A. Santucci (ed.), *Filosofia e cultura nel Settecento britannico*, il Mulino, Bologna 2001, pp. 43-52. On Locke, Norris and Malebranche, see Ch. Johnston, "Locke's *Examination of Malebranche* and John Norris", in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958), 4, pp. 551-58.

<sup>83</sup> The *Remarks* were first published by Pierre Desmaizeaux, in the volume *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke, never before Printed, or not Extant in his Works*, Printed by J. Bettenham for R. Francklin, at the Sun in Fleetstreet, London 1720, pp. 153-76.

<sup>84</sup> On this point, see Ch. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983, pp. 145-46. On the question of the soul, according to Locke, the mere philosophical speculations should be replaced by an examination of that which is accessible to us in our experience of ourselves. On this point, see A. Waldow, "Locke on the Irrelevance of the Soul", in *Philosophy* 87 (2012), 341, p. 373. On the complexity of the Lockean conception of the soul, criss-crossed by multiple orientations that are not always reconciled, see Ph. Hamou, *Dans la chambre obscure de l'esprit*, Ithaque, Paris 2018.

God. He evokes the Malebranchian conception according to which our desire to know a figure is the occasional cause that allows God to show it to us<sup>85</sup>. But Locke is not convinced by this explanation, since it denies the production of one idea by another: “Let it be so, this does not make any Idea *feconde*, for here is no production of one out of another: but as to the occasional cause, can anyone say that is so?”<sup>86</sup>. Locke believes that it cannot be denied that God possesses the ideas of geometrical entities, but he is not convinced that He would show such an idea to a man however much man might wish it. Locke then asks how it is possible to claim that we have perfect knowledge of bodies and their properties if, in fact, men in the world do not have the same idea of a body. Here Locke emphasises a fundamental difference between his conception of the body and Malebranche’s: for the Oratorian, the nature of the body is reduced to extension; for Locke, extension alone is not enough to make a body, solidity must be added. “For – Locke writes – if Bodies be Extension alone and nothing else, I cannot conceive how they can move and hit one against another, or what can make distinct Surfaces in a uniform simple Extension”<sup>87</sup>.

In the *Remarks upon some of Mr. Norris’s Books*, in which he replies to *Cursory Reflections upon a Book call’d An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, albeit in a concise way, Locke develops a stronger argument against occasionalism than in the *Examination*: it is a critique that attacks the occasionalist thesis at its roots. Locke is interested in the question of the origin and production of ideas in our minds, in particular of ideas of sensory objects, where light and colours come into play. In this respect he argues that the hypothesis of occasional causes is not sufficient to account for perceptual phenomena. If visible objects – Locke asks – are seen only because God manifests their ideas to our minds, on the occasion of the presence of those objects, why, given the same occasional cause, does one individual have the idea of that object (thus actually he sees it) and another (e.g. a blind person) does not perceive it?<sup>88</sup> According to Locke, therefore, external

<sup>85</sup> J. Locke, *An Examination of P. Malebranche’s Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*, in *Posthumous Works of John Locke*, cit., § 46, pp. 194-95 (*The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*, 12th edition, C. and J. Rivington, London 1824, vol. 8, pp. 243-44).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195 (*WJL* 8, p. 244) [Hereafter, the spelling has been modernized].

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* (*WJL* 8, p. 244).

<sup>88</sup> “If visible objects are seen only by God’s exhibiting their ideas to our minds, *on occasion* of the presence of those objects, what hinders the Almighty from exhibiting their ideas to a blind man, to whom, being set before his face, and as near his eyes, and in as good a light as to one not blind, they are, according to this supposition, as much the occasional cause to one as to the other? But yet under this equality of occasional causes, one has the idea, and the other not; and this constantly: which would give one reason to suspect something more than a presential *occasional cause* in the object”

objects could not, when present, always be considered as occasional causes. He who stands and remains for a long time in a room perfumed with sweet fragrances at a certain point ceases to perceive those fragrances, although the flowers are ever present; often, then, when he returns there after an absence of some time, he perceives them again. In the same way he who, coming from outside, in the full light of the sun, enters a room with the curtains closed, sees nothing at first, although those who have been in the room for some time see him and everything clearly. Locke therefore concludes: "It is hard to account for either of these phenomena, by God's producing these ideas upon the account of *occasional causes*. But by the production of ideas in the mind, by the operation of the object on the organs of sense, this difference is easy to be explained"<sup>89</sup>.

After questioning the weakness of the occasional cause as an 'operator of rationality' capable of explaining single perceptual phenomena, in the next two paragraphs Locke questions the core of the theory. In § 15 he summarises the Malebranchian conception by emphasising the impotence of creatures and the role of God who intervenes to produce this or that effect "*on occasion*" of some movement. If we assert that God alone is the efficient cause, and that all power is in Him and is not communicated to creatures, do we not, Locke wonders, end up limiting divine power itself?<sup>90</sup> Locke therefore asks himself which is the more perfect power: to build a watch that, once set in motion by the watchmaker, indicates the hours and produces sounds at precise times, to the extent that the device and its parts work in harmony; or a machine that reminds him that he "should strike twelve upon the bell", every time the hour hand reaches the hour?<sup>91</sup>

In § 16 Locke challenges the validity of the entire theory, introducing a new argument: the theory that attributes the power to produce effects to God alone, leads to the necessitarianism of Hobbes and Spinoza.

(J. Locke, *Remarks upon some of Mr. Norris's Books, wherein he asserts P. Malebranche's Opinion of seeing all Things in God*, in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke...*, cit., § 12, p. 166; *WJL*, vol. 9, pp. 253-54). We have used the punctuation and the spelling of *The Works of John Locke*, but maintained the capital letters and italics of *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke, never before Printed, or not Extant in his Works*.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, § 14, p. 167 (*WJL* 9, p. 254).

<sup>90</sup> "The infinite eternal God is certainly the cause of all things, the fountain of all being and power. But, because all being was from him, can there be nothing but God Himself? Or, because all power was originally in Him, can there be nothing of it communicated to His creatures? This is to set very narrow bounds to the power of God, and, by pretending to extend it, takes it away" (*ibid.*, § 15, p. 168; *WJL* 9, p. 255).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69 (*WJL* 9, p. 255).

A Man cannot move his arm or his tongue; he has no power; only upon *occasion* the man willing it, God moves it. The Man wills, he does something; or else God, upon the *occasion* of something, which he himself did before, produced this will, and this action in him. This is the Hypothesis that clears doubts, and brings us at last to the Religion of Hobbes and Spinoza, by resolving all, even the thoughts and will of men, into an irresistible fatal necessity. For, whether the original of it be from the continued motion of eternal all-doing Matter; or from an omnipotent immaterial Being, which, having began matter, and motion, continues it by the direction of *occasions* which He himself has also made; as to Religion and Morality, it is just the same thing. But we must know how everything is brought to pass, and thus we have it resolved without leaving any difficulty to perplex us. But perhaps it would better become us to acknowledge our Ignorance, than to talk such things boldly of the Holy One of Israel, and condemn others for not daring to be as unmannerly as ourselves<sup>92</sup>.

In these pages, however, Locke seems to ignore – or fail to assess – the broader articulation of Malebranche’s theory. When he argues that, according to the occasionalist hypothesis, God does not communicate his power to creatures, he neglects the very argument of the communication of power on which Malebranche so often insists, and, ultimately, he reduces the theory to divine unicity, without examining the different levels through which the theory reveals itself as concerning the links between God and nature and among individual creatures within the cosmos.

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke examines the idea of power, understood as the ability to bring about or undergo some change<sup>93</sup>. Power is related to the change of perceptible ideas: we cannot observe any alteration produced in a thing or any operation thereon it except by the observable change of its corresponding perceptible idea<sup>94</sup>. In these pages Locke notes that the mind is led to believe that the same changes, which it has observed to be repeated incessantly, will also be reproduced in the future in the same things through the intervention of similar factors and in the same ways<sup>95</sup>. The idea of power, for Locke, can legitimately be counted among our simple ideas<sup>96</sup>. While almost all kinds of sensory things easily enable us to form the idea of passive

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-71 (*WJL* 9, pp. 255-56).

<sup>93</sup> “Power [...] as able to make, or able to receive any change” (J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford-New York 2011 [1975], II.xxi.2, p. 234).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., II.xxi.1, pp. 233-34.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., II.xxi.3, p. 234.

power, the clearest idea of active power is derived not from matter, but from spiritual entities<sup>97</sup>. Interestingly, according to Locke, the body does not provide us with any kind of idea of the action of thinking or any idea of the initial moment of motion: “[a] Body at rest affords us no *Idea* of any *active Power* to move; and when it is set in motion itself, that Motion is rather a Passion, than an Action in it”<sup>98</sup>. A billiard ball that sets another in motion, because it is in motion as a result of the cue stroke, merely transmits the movement received: from this we get only an obscure and confused idea of what an active power of movement of a body is<sup>99</sup>. To some extent here, Locke seems to be developing an argument which is not so different from that of Malebranche, but, unlike the Oratorian, he holds that there exists in us a power to begin or not to begin, to continue or interrupt this or that action: the actual exercise of such a power is called volition<sup>100</sup>. Nevertheless, both the communication of movement by means of thought and that which takes place by means of a bodily impulse are evident on the level of perceptible experience, but remain phenomena that cannot be understood on the level of the intellect:

Constant Experience makes us sensible of both of these, though our narrow Understandings can comprehend neither. For when the Mind would look beyond those original *Ideas* we have from Sensation or Reflection, and penetrate into their Causes, and manner of production, we find still it discovers nothing but its own short-sightedness<sup>101</sup>.

The idea of power recalls that of cause. Both arise when the mind perceives change<sup>102</sup>. In chapter 26 of the second book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that the idea of cause and effect is an idea of a relationship that we form from the sensory perception “of the constant Vicissitude of Things”, in particular from the perception that particular things (both substances and qualities) begin to exist thanks to the intervention of some other being: “[t]hat which produces any simple or complex *Idea*, we denote by the general Name *Cause*; and that which is produced, *Effect*”<sup>103</sup>. The idea of the relation of cause and effect is obtained from the consideration of any

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., II.xxi.4, pp. 234-35.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., II.xxi.5, p. 236.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., II.xxiii.28, p. 312.

<sup>102</sup> See W. Ott, “Locke and the Real Problem of Causation”, in *Locke Studies* 15 (2015), p. 80.

<sup>103</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxvi.1, p. 324.

simple idea, or substance, at the moment when it begins to exist through the operation of something else<sup>104</sup>.

Locke's conception of relations and powers brings out a different solution to the question of causal action from the occasionalist cognitive model of causality. It is useful in this regard, as Walter Ott suggests<sup>105</sup>, to rethink the alternative proposed by Theodore in the *Dialogue 7* in response to Aristes' consideration of the possibility of bodies acting on the soul "not by their own force", but by means of "a power resulting from their union with minds"<sup>106</sup>. Theodore does not understand how bodies would receive within themselves a certain power by whose efficacy they could act upon the mind. At this point he asks what such a power would be: "Would it be a substance, or a modality? If a substance, then bodies will not act, but rather this substance in bodies. If this power is a modality, then there will be a modality in bodies which will be neither motion nor figure. Extension will be capable of having modalities other than relations of distance"<sup>107</sup>. Locke inclines towards the first solution provided by Malebranche: power is not a further characteristic of the body, which is distinguished from its other modes, otherwise it could not be said that the body itself acts. Discussing the will, in fact, Locke argues that "*Powers are Relations, not Agents*"<sup>108</sup>. It is the mind that operates or exercises a certain power, it is the man who performs a certain action – for example to reflect on a certain thing or to dance a certain dance when he listens to a certain melody, not a particular faculty or modality, therefore "[...] *that which has the power, or not the power to operate, is that alone, which is, or is not free*, and not the Power itself [...]"<sup>109</sup>. Similarly, it must be said that the body has the power to act and not a particular mode or function thereof.

It remains clear that for Locke, as we have said, our experience of bodies does not provide us with the idea of a beginning of motion, but only with the idea of its transmission. Nature can certainly be considered as a network of powers, as a complex of bodies that changes through the transmission of motion from one

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., II.xxvi.2, p. 325. Lockian thinking on causality is more multifaceted than we can show in this article. On this point, see Ott, "Locke and the Real Problem of Causation", cit., pp. 72-75.

<sup>105</sup> Ott, *Causation*, cit., p. 170.

<sup>106</sup> Malebranche, *EMR*, VII, § 2, *OC XII*, p. 150 (*Dialogues*, pp. 106-7).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., *OC XII*, pp. 150-51 (*Dialogues*, p. 107).

<sup>108</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.19, p. 243. See also II.xxiii.37, p. 317, where Locke affirms that the majority of the simple ideas that make up our complex ideas of substance are "only Powers", "are nothing else, but so many relations to other Substances". The same conception appears in *ibid.*, II.xxxi.8, p. 381.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., II.xxi.19, p. 243.

to another, but the question of the origin of motion is another matter<sup>110</sup>: it is beyond the capacity of our intellect, a point on which the English philosopher insists on several occasions. This theme appears significantly in chapter three of book four of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In § 16 Locke, discussing the corpuscular hypothesis on the constitution of bodies, which he himself shares, states that “[...] the Active and Passive Powers of Bodies, and their ways of operating, consisting in a Texture and Motion of Parts, which we cannot by any means come to discover [...]”<sup>111</sup>. In § 29 he argues that the original rules and communication of motion do not have a natural connection with the ideas we have of them – similar to that we have between the idea of a right triangle and that of the equality of its angles to two right angles. The relations which concern the motion of bodies, the coherence and continuity of the parts of matter, and the very sensations produced in us by colours and sounds through impulse and motion, must be attributed “to the arbitrary Will and good Pleasure of the Wise Architect”<sup>112</sup>. We have no knowledge of the law that regulates the constant progress of things; of the relationship between causes and effects, of the incessant production of causes in such a way that effects constantly derive from them, we have only empirical knowledge:

The Things that, as far as our Observation reaches, we constantly find to proceed regularly, we may conclude, do act by a Law set them; but yet by a Law, that we know not: whereby, though Causes work steadily, and Effects constantly flow from them, yet their *Connexions* and *Dependancies* being not discoverable in our *Ideas*, we can have but an experimental Knowledge of them. From all which it is easy to perceive, what a darkness we are involved in, how little it is of Being, and the things that are, that we are capable to know. [...] we are so far from being able to comprehend the whole nature of the Universe, and all the things contained in it, [...] we are not capable of a philosophical *Knowledge* of the Bodies that are about us, and make part of us: Concerning their secondary *Qualities*, *Powers*, and *Operations*, we can have no universal certainty<sup>113</sup>.

<sup>110</sup> See Ott, *Causation*, cit., p. 171. As is well known, Locke recognises that God, the first and eternal matter, created matter as well as spiritual beings. See Locke, *Essay*, IV.x.18, p. 628.

<sup>111</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.16, p. 547.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.iii.29, pp. 559-60. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (§ 192), Locke argues that the great phenomena of nature cannot be explained by the ideas of matter and movement alone, but that the positive will of God must be called into play: “[...] it is evident, that by mere matter and motion, none of the great phenomena of nature can be resolved: to instance but in that common one of gravity, which I think impossible to be explained by any natural operation of matter, or any other law of motion, but the positive will of a superior Being so ordering it” (*WJL*, vol. 8, p. 184).

<sup>113</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.29, p. 560.



Locke believes that we must stick to sensory knowledge, to “particular Experience [that] informs us of matter of fact”: far as we are from “a perfect *Science* of natural Bodies, (not to mention spiritual Beings)”, we can only speculate, by analogy and through other experiences, what effects similar bodies can produce<sup>114</sup>. After all, as Locke writes at the end of chapter 21 of the second book of the *Essay*, the actual aim of his research concerns “the Knowledge the Mind has of Things” through ideas rather than “their Causes, or manner of Production”<sup>115</sup>.

Malebranche thinks that, by contemplating intelligible extension, an adequate knowledge of the essence of bodies is possible, which helps to exclude the possibility that they have genuine efficacy, that they can be efficient causes: in fact, if the essence of bodies is reduced to extension and their modifications are explained in terms of relations of distance, it is not also possible to attribute to them the power to produce certain effects. Moreover, according to Malebranche, efficacy remains unrepresentable for us human beings; God has not given man a clear and distinct idea of power or efficacy. However, the connections between individual phenomena remain comprehensible through the (partial and limited) intelligibility offered by occasional causes, and natural laws remain accessible to the human mind. Locke excludes the hypothesis of occasional causes because it is unsatisfactory from an epistemological point of view and because, based on the idea that there is only one genuine cause, it leads to necessitarianism. In his view, if we limit ourselves to experience, we can explain the changes that occur in terms of active and passive power and cause and effect, but we must recognise that these concepts are relational<sup>116</sup> and that we have no mathematical certainty about the essence, powers and operations of bodies (and minds), knowledge of which remains beyond our epistemological horizon. However, the relationship also appears on a more ontological level, in some way independent of the mind that perceives it: starting from the observation that the life of living creatures depends profoundly on extrinsic causes and other bodies, Locke hypothesises that there are other types of conditioning

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. In the fourth book, on the other hand, Locke argues that ignorance of the causal mechanisms by which our sensory organs operate, does not preclude us from reaching knowledge of the external world through our senses (see *ibid.*, IV.xi.2, pp. 630-31). For a discussion on this argument, see J. Marušić, “Locke on Causation and Cognition”, in D. Perler and S. Bender (eds.), *Causation and Condition in Early Modern Philosophy*, Routledge, New York and London 2020, pp. 236-40.

<sup>115</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.73, p. 287.

<sup>116</sup> Consider that relations are “not contained in the real existence of Things” (Locke, *Essay*, II.xxv.8, p. 322).

and links of dependence between things that are less obvious than those we perceive with our senses<sup>117</sup>. He therefore writes:

[...] the great Parts and Wheels, as I may so say, of this stupendious Structure of the Universe, may, for ought we know, have such a connexion and dependence in their Influences and Operations one upon another, that, perhaps, Things in this our Mansion, would put on quite another face, and cease to be what they are, if some one of the Stars, or great Bodies incomprehensibly remote from us, should cease to be, or move as it does. This is certain, Things, however absolute and entire they seem in themselves, are but Retainers to other parts of Nature, for that which they are most taken notice of by us. Their observable Qualities, Actions, and Powers, are owing to something without them; and there is not so complete and perfect a part, that we know, of Nature, which does not owe the Being it has, and Excellencies of it, to its Neighbours [...]<sup>118</sup>.

Locke, too, emphasises the links that bind creatures to one another in a system of interdependencies that exceeds what we perceive of them but, unlike Malebranche, he does not use the concept of occasional causes as ‘operators’ through which God would bind and subordinate his creatures to one another and which are capable, on the epistemological level, of rendering reason, hence of making comprehensible the individual relations between things that are defined according to a given law: in fact, according to Locke, as has been said, within the limits of our knowledge, we can assert that finite entities exercise a causal power<sup>119</sup>. Moreover, in the light of the last quoted passage in particular, Locke seems to reintroduce – something Malebranche would certainly reject – an idea of nature alongside God, a nature – the whole universe – whose parts are in a relationship of mutual dependence on each other, beyond what we perceive and our own idea of bodies<sup>120</sup>.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.vi.11, pp. 585-86.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 587.

<sup>119</sup> This is what Michael Jacovides points out: “Though he agrees with Malebranche that God plays a role in the production of natural phenomena, Locke doesn’t take Malebranche’s extra step of robbing secondary causes of their efficacy. Though Locke believes that gravity and the laws of motion are dependent on God’s will, he also believes we know through experience that finite agents exercise causal efficacy: ‘we have by daily experience clear evidence of Motion produced both by impulse, and by thought’ (II.xxiii.28)” (M. Jacovides, *Locke’s Image of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 49).

<sup>120</sup> This is what Locke writes in his second reply to Stillingfleet, rectifying his earlier position on gravitation: “The gravitation of matter towards matter, by ways inconceivable to me, is not only a demonstration that God can, if He pleases, put into bodies powers and ways of operation above what can be derived from our idea of body, or can be explained by what we know of matter, but also an un-

All in all, the confrontation of Malebranche's and Locke's theses on the structure of causality constituting the world, proves to be interesting insofar as it highlights the significant differences but also certain similarities between the two thinkers, but above all because it contributes to showing how, in the period between Descartes and Hume, philosophers question the problems of causality, of the links between beings and of the connection between events from a new perspective. In this epoch characterized by an intense inquiry into the nature of causality, beyond their different stances and their specific theoretical needs, it is possible to argue that Malebranche and Locke play a role, albeit somewhat differently, in developing the tendency to replace a cause-based model for the epistemological explanation of natural phenomena with a law-based model<sup>121</sup>.

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questionable and everywhere visible instance, that He has done so" (*Reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his second Letter*, WJL 3, pp. 467-68).

<sup>121</sup> On this theme, see N. Jolley, "Hume, Malebranche, and the Last Occult Quality", in Id., *Causality and Mind*, cit., pp. 254-55.

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