

Occasionalism at a Crossroads: Leibniz's Debt to Malebranche

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Abstract: Leibniz's attitude towards occasionalism was notoriously ambivalent. On the one hand, he strove to discredit occasionalism as a dangerous doctrine, responsible for paving the way to Spinozism. On the other hand, he presented the system of occasional causes as the immediate historical precedent of the system of pre-established harmony. Moreover, he sometimes claimed to feel indebted to the most prominent occasionalist, Nicolas Malebranche. Whereas most studies on the topic have sought to clarify Leibniz's divergences from the occasionalist doctrine, this paper aims to cast light on whether and in what way Leibniz was really indebted to occasionalism and to Malebranche in particular. By exploring, first, Leibniz's reasons for rejecting physical influence and, second, some Malebranchean remnants in Leibniz's account of miracles, the paper concludes that for Leibniz occasionalism was not only a polemical target but also a source of inspiration for rethinking causality and divine concurrence.

Keywords: Leibniz, Malebranche, Occasionalism, Mind-Body Interaction, Miracles

Leibniz's attitude towards occasionalism is known to have been exasperatingly ambivalent. On the one hand, he strove to discredit occasionalism as a dangerous doctrine, responsible for paving the way to Spinozism. His main reason for this heavy charge was that, by depriving creatures of any causal power, occasionalism makes the plurality of substances untenable. Lacking force and action, creatures lose their status of substances and turn into mere modes of the unique divine substance. Thus, occasionalism results in Spinozan monism. A straightforward formulation of this line of argument appears, for instance, in a 1702 draft of Leibniz's reply to François Lamy. The partisans of occasionalism, writes Leibniz, "will in spite of themselves fall into the opinion of Spinoza, who seems to me to have taken furthest the consequences of the Cartesian doctrine of occasional causes"¹.

¹ G.W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. by C.I. Gerhardt, Weidemann, Berlin 1875-90, repr. Olms, Hildesheim 1960 (henceforth: GP), IV, p. 590, quoted from *Leibniz's New*

On the other hand, Leibniz appears to consider the system of occasional causes to have been the immediate historical precedent of the system of pre-established harmony, in that the former foreshadowed important aspects of the latter or even contributed to laying its foundations. Whereas the difference between the two doctrines has been extensively debated in scholarship², their multiple historical and theoretical connections have received less attention. Here, my aim is to cast light on Leibniz's indebtedness to occasionalism and to Malebranche in particular, by exploring, first, Leibniz's reasons for rejecting the interactionist doctrine of physical influence and, second, certain aspects of Leibniz's account of miracles that reveal a Malebranchean inspiration.

1. *Mind and Body*

1.1. *A Post-Cartesian Bifurcation*

After the publication of his *New System*, Leibniz repeatedly acknowledged the similarity between occasionalism and pre-established harmony as a welcome circumstance that his readers had pointed out to him: "There have been very penetrating persons who have accepted my hypothesis from the start [...], and still others have even said that they understand the hypothesis of occasional causes in this same sense and cannot distinguish it from mine,

System' and Associated Contemporary Texts, transl. and ed. by R.S. Woolhouse and R. Francks, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, p. 163. The same allegation occurs in several texts. See, e.g., "De ipsa natura", GP IV, p. 515.

² See R.S. Woolhouse, "Leibniz and Occasionalism", in Id. (ed.), *Metaphysics and Philosophy of Science in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Essays in Honour of Gerd Buchdahl*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1988, pp. 165-83; R.C. Sleight, "Leibniz on Malebranche on Causality", in J.A. Cover, *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1990, pp. 161-93; Id., *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1990, pp. 151-70; S. Brown, "Malebranche's Occasionalism and Leibniz's Pre-established Harmony: An 'Easy Crossing' or an Unbridgeable Gap?", in Id. (ed.), *Nicolas Malebranche: His Philosophical Critics and Successors*, Van Gorcum, Assen-Maastricht 1991, pp. 81-93; D.P. Rutherford, "Natures, Laws, and Miracles: The Roots of Leibniz's Critique of Occasionalism", in S. Nadler (ed.), *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1993, pp. 135-58; N. Jolley, "Leibniz and Occasionalism", in D. Rutherford and J.A. Cover (eds.), *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 121-34; S. Greenberg, "Malebranche and Leibniz", in B.C. Look (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Leibniz*, Continuum, London 2011, pp. 68-85; and P. Lodge, "Leibniz on Created Substance and Occasionalism", in P. Lodge and T. Stoneham (eds.), *Locke and Leibniz on Substance*, Routledge, London 2015, pp. 186-202.

which well satisfies me”³. In a letter to Bourguet, the same reaction is ascribed to a Dutch Cartesian: “One day, a skilful Cartesian wrote to me from Holland that, having embraced the system of occasional causes, he had understood it in a manner quite similar to my own system of pre-established harmony. So much the better”⁴. Far from blaming his readers for overlooking the differences between the two doctrines, Leibniz accepts their suggestion. In this way, by granting that occasionalism allows a harmonistic interpretation, he presumably also aims to neutralize an accusation that Arnauld and others had levelled against pre-established harmony – the accusation of adding nothing new to the well-established occasionalist doctrine⁵. But regardless of his aim, Leibniz’s admission appears sincere. In scores of passages, he claims that the doctrine of occasional causes can be construed in such a way as to transform it into the doctrine of pre-established harmony: “But in any case, if someone wants to understand the system of occasional causes in a way which transforms it into mine, I will have no objections [*je n’en seray point fâché*]”⁶. When Jaquelot compares the harmonistic account of perceptions with the occasionalist account, Leibniz replies as follows: “I would be delighted if the system of occasional causes could be explained in such a way as to make it compatible with mine”⁷. Then, when Jaquelot expresses his predilection for the occasionalist system, in which it is “God who imprints on matter the motion which produces the effects that we see”⁸, Leibniz remarks that he has no problem with ascribing such a role to God: “For I agree with that system; but I believe that in developing it one will fall into mine”⁹. By viewing phenomena as the effects

³ Leibniz, “Réponse aux reflexions de Bayle”, GP IV, p. 567, quoted from Id., *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, transl. and ed. by L.E. Loemker, Kluwer, Dordrecht 21989, p. 582.

⁴ Leibniz to Bourguet, 3 January 1714, GP III, p. 561. Gerhardt identifies the Dutch Cartesian as Nicolas Hartsoeker (GP III, p. 561n). However, the only comparison between Leibniz and the occasionalists that I can find in Hartsoeker’s published correspondence with Leibniz does not concern pre-established harmony but the theory of matter: see Hartsoeker to Leibniz, 8 July 1710, GP III, p. 498.

⁵ See, e.g., A. Arnauld to Leibniz, 4 March 1687, in Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1923ff. (henceforth: A), series II, vol. 2, p. 152; I. Jaquelot to Leibniz, 7 September 1704, GP VI, p. 565; A. Parent, “Analyse des conjectures du Pere Tournemine, sur l’union de l’ame et du corps”, in Id., *Recherches de mathématique et de physique. Tome II ou suite de la III partie*, Jombert et Delaulne, Paris 1705, pp. 241-56.

⁶ Leibniz, “Réponse aux Objections contre le Systeme de l’harmonie préétablie qui se trouvent dans le livre de la Connoissance de soy-même”, GP IV, p. 591, quoted from *Leibniz’s ‘New System’*, cit., p. 164.

⁷ Leibniz to Jaquelot, 9 February 1704, GP III, p. 464, quoted from *Leibniz’s ‘New System’*, cit., p. 175.

⁸ Jaquelot to Leibniz, 26 March 1703, GP III, p. 461, quoted from *Leibniz’s ‘New System’*, cit., p. 170.

⁹ Leibniz to Jaquelot, n.d., GP III, p. 462, quoted from *Leibniz’s ‘New System’*, cit., p. 171. From the Leibniz-Jaquelot correspondence, see also GP III, p. 467, and GP VI, p. 572.

of the motion that God “imprints on matter”, one is likely to fall either into monism or into harmonism. Thus, two divergent tendencies appear to animate occasionalism: one leading to Spinozism, the other to Leibnizianism.

In particular, Leibniz mentions Malebranche as the champion of occasionalism whose views are most in keeping with his own. This conciliatory attitude emerges as late as 1714: “I do not think that Malebranche’s opinions are too distant from mine. The transition from occasional causes to pre-established harmony does not seem very difficult”¹⁰. Stuart Brown reads this passage as an expression of Leibniz’s belated sense of affinity with Malebranche. In his later years, facing the philosophical trends of the early eighteenth century, Leibniz came to perceive Malebranche’s thought as close to his own – which led him to understate the actual gap between them. According to Brown, that feeling was deceptive: “It is understandable that he should suggest that ‘le passage des Causes occasionnelles à l’Harmonie préétablie ne paroist pas fort difficile’. But the suggestion was nonetheless untrue”¹¹. However, Brown’s reading is hardly compatible with the chronology of Leibniz’s writings. For, on the one hand, it is especially in the 1700s that Leibniz intensifies his allusions to the occasionalist roots of Spinozism, as though he held the occasionalists somehow responsible for the recent spread of dangerous doctrines.

On the other hand, sympathetic statements appear long before 1714. Some twenty years earlier, Leibniz already claims to be in agreement with several points of Malebranche’s metaphysics. In 1695, for instance, he informs the Marquis de l’Hospital, a member of Malebranche’s circle of mathematicians, that he feels indebted to Malebranche: “Be so kind, my lord [...] as to tell again Father Malebranche how obliged I am for his politeness. I owe him a great deal in metaphysics and I believe that, if ideas are taken – as he does – as the immediate external object of our thoughts, he can say that we see them in God”¹². Immediately afterwards, Leibniz appears careful to both point out and circumscribe the difference between his own system and Malebranche’s occasionalism: “However, my explanation is a little different from his system of occasional causes, because of my notion of substance”¹³. A few months later, Leibniz is still concerned with making his correspondent grasp the difference between the two systems: “From my reply to Foucher, you will also see, my

¹⁰ Leibniz to Remond, 26 August 1714, GP III, p. 625.

¹¹ Brown, “Malebranche’s Occasionalism and Leibniz’s Pre-established Harmony”, cit., p. 90. See also *ibid.*, p. 81.

¹² Leibniz to Guillaume François de L’Hospital, 14-24 June 1695, A III, 6, p. 418.

¹³ *Ibid.*

lord, in what my hypothesis differs from that of Father Malebranche or the Cartesians, who agree with his view”¹⁴. Here again, Leibniz carefully delimits his disagreement with Malebranche and insists instead on their possible agreement. Moreover, eager to emphasize the continuity between occasionalism and pre-established harmony, he once again acknowledges his debt to Malebranche: “Perhaps Father Malebranche himself, after considering what I say about it, will find it consistent with reason. One may say that it is not so much a subversion as an advancement of his doctrine, and that it is to him that I am indebted for my foundations concerning this subject [*c’est à luy que je suis redevable de mes fondemens sur ce sujet*]”¹⁵. Far from subverting occasionalism, pre-established harmony is described here as developing Malebranche’s system by building on the same foundations – which would certainly help explain why occasionalism can be so easily transformed into pre-established harmony.

Of course, stressing the occasionalist and especially Malebranchian roots of pre-established harmony is part of Leibniz’s rhetoric for presenting his system in the most favourable light to one of Malebranche’s friends. However, even granting that the emphasis on shared elements may also depend on the specific situational context, there is again no reason to doubt Leibniz’s overall sincerity. This is all the more true because what Leibniz says here is entirely consistent with his usual account of the relation between his own system and Malebranche’s one as a relation that includes both a wide shared background and certain crucial points of disagreement. Whereas Leibnizian scholarship so far has paid more attention to the points of disagreement, my focus is mainly on the common background and the “foundations” that Leibniz shares (or thinks he shares) with Malebranche. But first, an overview of the reasons for disagreement will be helpful.

1.2. *Laws and Powers*

Leibniz was always explicit about his reasons for replacing occasional causes with pre-established harmony as an explanation of the union of soul and body. As is well known, these reasons mainly have to do with Leibniz’s conception of nature, its laws, and miracles. Occasionalism explains psycho-physical correspondences as the effect of the intervention of God, who produces sensations in the soul which correspond to sensory stimuli, and motions in the body which

¹⁴ Leibniz to G.F. de L’Hospital, 30 September 1695, A III, 6, p. 505.

¹⁵ A III, 6, pp. 505-6.

correspond to the soul's will. Sensations are mental states occasioned by physical states, voluntary motions are physical events occasioned by mental events, and both have God as their efficient cause. Thus, the soul's sensations do not result from the soul itself but from external causes, just as the body's voluntary motions do not result from physical causes but from extra-physical ones. As Leibniz sees it, the problem is that sensations that do not originate from within the soul would disrupt the inner evolution of the soul's causal history, just as motions that are not the effect of previous motions would disrupt the chain of mechanical causes. If occasionalism were true, both material and immaterial substances would go through states that are not the natural consequences of their own previous states: "In the system of occasional causes the substances agree because God always produces such agreement; their preceding state does not bring them to it naturally, as is the case in the new system"¹⁶.

Thus, the occasionalist account of psycho-physical correspondence is incompatible with Leibniz's assumption that both the soul and the body are causally closed systems, each of which follows its own laws – the laws of its nature. By contrast, in the system of pre-established harmony the substances agree because their natures spontaneously produce series of states that perfectly correspond to one another, God intervening only at the beginning to create such mutually expressing substances and give them the required nature or power. This leads Leibniz to claim that in his system the harmony of substances obtains by natural means, whereas in the system of occasional causes God harmonizes the soul and the body by supernatural means. Thus, the whole difference between the two systems hinges on the distinction between nature and miracle. Once deprived of its supernatural component, occasionalism turns into pre-established harmony, which therefore may appear as a naturalized version of its historical precedent: "For I agree with that system", Leibniz writes to Jaquelot (see above), "but I believe that in developing it one will fall into mine, provided that one assumes that God never acts miraculously, as the occasionalists think he does, but only in a manner conformable to the nature of things"¹⁷.

The main flaw of occasionalism is its failure to consider that changes are natural only insofar as they are determined by the laws of created natures. Following Leibniz's indications, scholars have rightly differentiated pre-established harmony from occasionalism by pointing to this fundamental disagree-

¹⁶ GP IV, p. 591, quoted from *Leibniz's 'New System'*, cit., p. 164.

¹⁷ GP III, p. 462, quoted from *Leibniz's 'New System'*, cit., p. 171.

ment concerning the conception of created nature. To avoid Spinozan monism, Leibniz rejects the occasionalist view that creatures have no genuine causal powers and restores the causal autonomy of nature by basing it on a dynamical conception of substance. Even created substances are the real sources of their actions by virtue of their natural powers. Accordingly, the laws of nature are not simply general divine volitions imposed from the top down on an inert world of creatures, as in Malebranche's picture; rather, they are "laws of *natures*"¹⁸ – laws intrinsic to the natures of created substances.

Indeed, in the letter to l'Hospital quoted above, Leibniz describes his departure from (or, as he prefers to say, his addition to) Malebranche as follows: "I only add that what God produces in A, conforming to what he produces in B, also conforms with the specific laws that he had established for A, which has not been sufficiently considered"¹⁹. No less interesting is what Leibniz says immediately before concerning his agreement with Malebranche: "We agree that the mind and the body have no influence on one another, and that all the perfections of things are always produced by the operation of God"²⁰. This passage follows the one quoted above (see Section 1), in which Leibniz admits that he owes Malebranche the very foundations of pre-established harmony. Thus, we may infer that those shared foundations have to do with the denial of mind-body interaction as well as with the doctrine of God's concurrence in the existence and actions of creatures. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

1.3. *Leibniz and Malebranche in 1679*

Leibniz's interest in the occasionalist denial of mind-body interaction dates back to his early contacts with Malebranche. Leibniz became acquainted with Malebranche during his stay in Paris. Probably shortly after (or concomitantly with) the publication of the latter's *Recherche de la vérité* (1674-75), Leibniz visited Malebranche at the Oratory²¹, then started corresponding with him while still in Paris. Leibniz's first extant letter to Malebranche resumes the conversation they had on "whether space is really distinct from matter, whether there can be any void, or whether all which is extended is matter"²². Leibniz

¹⁸ Rutherford, "Natures, Laws, and Miracles", cit., p. 145.

¹⁹ A III, 6, p. 506, quoted from Sleigh, "Leibniz on Malebranche on Causality", cit., p. 166 (translation slightly modified).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See A. Robinet, *Malebranche et Leibniz: Relations personnelles*, Vrin, Paris 1955, pp. 23-26.

²² Leibniz to Malebranche, first half of 1676, A II, 1², p. 399.

mentions that Malebranche upheld the latter view, “namely that the essence of matter consists in extension alone”²³. Thus, one of their earliest disagreements concerned Malebranche’s endorsement of the Cartesian identification of matter with extension. Later, the same topic was to turn up again in their discussion of Cartesian dualism and mind-body issues.

In 1679, back in Germany, Leibniz seeks to strengthen the link with his French correspondent by highlighting their points of agreement, like the tenet that “God acts in the most perfect possible manner”²⁴. He also praises Malebranche for his “beautiful use of final causes”, which opposes Descartes’s rejection of finalism²⁵. This tendency to praise Malebranche whenever he departs from Descartes suggests that Leibniz aims to captivate the anti-Cartesian side of his correspondent, whom he sees as a possible ally against Cartesian dominance. In the same letter, he dismisses Descartes’s physics, which are “full of errors”, and goes so far as to claim that Malebranche’s philosophy disproves Descartes’s metaphysics: “As for his metaphysics, you yourself have shown its imperfection, and I am entirely of your opinion concerning the impossibility of conceiving that a substance which has nothing but extension, without thought, can act upon a substance which has nothing but thought, without extension”²⁶. (Note that, here, the impossibility of mind-body interaction appears to be a consequence of Cartesian dualism because of its reduction of body to extension alone. I further discuss the issue below.)

Malebranche immediately turns down this implicit offer of an anti-Cartesian alliance, by pointing out that he does not believe everything Leibniz says about Descartes. Though admittedly wrong about several issues, Descartes “was right on certain things” for which Leibniz criticizes him²⁷. Thus, Leibniz’s confidence in his correspondent’s anti-Cartesianism proves groundless. In his subsequent letter, he takes note of Malebranche’s persistent Cartesian commitments²⁸ and falls back on finding some common ground directly in his correspondent’s doctrines. In particular, he praises two

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Leibniz to Malebranche, 13 (23) January 1679, A II, 1², p. 678.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., quoted from M.A. Kulstad, “Causation and Preestablished Harmony in the Early Development of Leibniz’s Philosophy”, in Nadler (ed.), *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy*, cit., p. 106.

²⁷ Malebranche to Leibniz, March 1679, A II, 1², p. 700.

²⁸ See Leibniz to Malebranche, 22 June (2 July) 1679, A II, 1², p. 725: “Je croy que ce que vous approuvés en Monsieur des Cartes et que je ne sçaurois goûter vient de ce que nous ne nous entendons pas bien”. See also the first draft of this letter, *ibid.*, p. 717.

theses: “I wonderfully approve of these two propositions that you advance, namely that we see all thing in God and that bodies do not, strictly speaking, act upon us. I have always been convinced of this by great reasons, which appear incontestable to me”²⁹. Unfortunately, this proves to be another faux pas. Leibniz extracts these propositions from the anonymous *Méditations sur la métaphysique* which he mistakenly attributes to Malebranche, but whose author – as pointed out by Malebranche himself in his reply³⁰ – is actually François de Lanion.

Nevertheless, Leibniz’s assent to the denial of body-to-mind action is especially relevant to our topic. Brown adduces this passage as evidence that Leibniz was a semi-occasionalist at the time³¹, in that, on the one hand, he denied that bodies could act on minds, but on the other hand, he did not yet doubt the action of minds on bodies until his adoption of pre-established harmony around 1686. As I will conclude in Section 5, this is hardly plausible. Furthermore, even Leibniz’s partial endorsement of occasionalism is not as straightforward as Brown takes it to be³². At a closer inspection, the passage under consideration can be seen to imply that the “great”, “incontestable” reasons that have persuaded Leibniz of the two propositions are not the ones put forward by the occasionalists – rather, they are his own. Indeed, elsewhere Leibniz appears distrustful of Malebranche’s argument against body-to-mind action. This emerges from the continuation of the passage from January 1679 quoted above:

As for his metaphysics, you yourself have shown its imperfection, and I am entirely of your opinion concerning the impossibility of conceiving that a substance which has nothing but extension, without thought, can act upon a substance which has nothing but thought, without extension. But I believe that you have gone only halfway and that still other consequences can be drawn than those which you have made. In my opinion it follows that matter is something different from mere extension, and I believe, besides, that this can be demonstrated³³.

²⁹ A II, 1², p. 724.

³⁰ See Malebranche to Leibniz, 31 July 1679, A II, 1², p. 734: “L’Auteur des *Méditations Métaphysiques* est Monsieur l’Abbé de Lanion. [...] Ainsi Monsieur ne m’attribuez point s’il vous plaist cet ouvrage”.

³¹ See Brown, “Malebranche’s Occasionalism and Leibniz’s Pre-established Harmony”, cit., p. 82.

³² This has led Tom Lennon to suspect that Leibniz “really did not understand what he was approving” (“Leibniz on Cartesianism: The Case of Malebranche”, in *Il cannocchiale* 1 (1999), p. 89).

³³ A II, 1², p. 678, quoted from Kulstad, “Causation and Preestablished Harmony”, cit., p. 106.

This passage is controversial. As mentioned above, Brown stresses Leibniz's professed agreement with the occasionalist denial of interaction. Robinet, on the other hand, takes Leibniz's claim that Malebranche has "gone only halfway" to already adumbrate pre-established harmony³⁴. By contrast, Loeb and Kulstad read the passage as evidence that, in 1679, Leibniz was not prepared to deny interactionism yet³⁵. Thus, the three classic hypotheses on mind-body union (occasionalism, harmonism, and interactionism) have all been ascribed to the author of this letter. In my view, none of these readings is entirely convincing.

Leibniz's reasoning can be reconstructed as follows:

(1) Let us assume that Cartesian dualism is true: there is a substance which has only extension without thought (I dub this the *E* substance), and there is another substance which has only thought without extension (the *T* substance).

(2) From assumption (1), it follows that the *E* substance cannot possibly act on the *T* substance.

(3) Thus, matter cannot be identified with the *E* substance – it must be something more than the Cartesian *res extensa*.

Proposition (2) is Malebranche's occasionalist conclusion, the denial of body-to-mind action. Leibniz acknowledges that it indeed follows from Cartesian dualism (whether the same applies to the reverse, namely mind-to-body action, is not specified here). However, contrary to Brown's suggestion³⁶, he does not thereby accept the proposition as unconditionally true. On the other hand, proposition (3) is a well-known tenet of Leibniz's metaphysics, stating that matter is not reducible to geometric extension but must also include force. Here, (3) appears as the further conclusion that Malebranche should have derived but failed to derive because of his commitment to Cartesian dualism.

In this elliptic form, the argument may seem to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Cartesian dualism. If so, conclusion (3) would follow from the premises simply because (2) is obviously false; that is, the impossibility of body-to-mind action would be the absurd consequence that undermines Cartesian dualism. Thus, Loeb and Kulstad seem to have a point in arguing that, in January 1679,

³⁴ See Robinet, *Malebranche et Leibniz*, cit., p. 85.

³⁵ See L.E. Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London 1981, p. 310; and Kulstad, "Causation and Pre-established Harmony", cit., pp. 106-08.

³⁶ Brown, "Malebranche's Occasionalism and Leibniz's Pre-established Harmony", cit., pp. 82 and 91.

“the preestablished harmony and the denial of interaction were still waiting in the wings”³⁷.

The problem with this reading is that it makes the passage clearly inconsistent with Leibniz’s endorsement – a few months later – of the proposition that “bodies do not, strictly speaking, act upon us”³⁸. Did Leibniz suddenly shift from interactionism to occasionalism or semi-occasionalism? Did he fluctuate between one and the other? More plausibly, his argument is not meant to provide a *reductio ad absurdum*. Leibniz is rather suggesting that the Cartesian conception of matter, though effective in denying real intersubstantial causation, fails to account for the phenomenon of apparent intersubstantial causation. If the body is mere extension and the mind is mere thought, there is no explaining why they *seem* to interact if not by postulating God’s continuous intervention. Thus, Leibniz does not accept (2), insofar as he does not believe that something like the *E* substance exists. What he accepts is that *bodies* – which are not the *E* substance – do not act on minds.

Some support to this interpretation is lent by Leibniz’s *Remarks on Lanion’s Méditations sur la métaphysique*, which can be taken to date from the spring of 1679 and thus to be roughly contemporary with the texts discussed above³⁹. Lanion defends Malebranche’s theory of vision in God by arguing that, since extension lacks “the power to make itself intelligible”, we must perceive things in the very “substance of God”, who is “the source and origin” of all our ideas⁴⁰. Leibniz comments as follows: “I deem the conclusion very true and excellent, but I find some difficulty concerning the proof. For, although

³⁷ Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, cit., p. 310; and Kulstad, “Causation and Preestablished Harmony”, cit., p. 108.

³⁸ See above. Kulstad’s reasons for dismissing this passage seem weak (“Causation and Preestablished Harmony”, cit., pp. 109-10).

³⁹ Leibniz, “Remarques touchant les Méditations sur la métaphysique de l’Abbé de Lanion”, A VI, 4, pp. 1777-83. Robinet, *Malebranche et Leibniz*, p. 121, dates this text to May-June 1679 but without much explanation (see p. 85). On the basis of the watermark, the Akademie-Ausgabe dates the manuscript to between the summer of 1678 and the winter of 1680-81. However, Robinet’s conjecture must be right. The fact that Leibniz still appears unaware of the identity of the author suggests July 1679 as the *terminus ante quem* (see above, fn. 25). As for the *terminus post quem*, the second draft of Leibniz’s letter to Malebranche of 22 June (2 July) 1679 (A II, 1², p. 724) reveals that Leibniz received the *Méditations sur la métaphysique* “shortly after” Malebranche’s letter of March 1679. Thus, Leibniz must have read Lanion’s book and written his remarks in the spring of 1679.

⁴⁰ This work, first published in 1678 and re-edited by Bayle in 1684, is now available in F. de Lanion, *Méditations sur la métaphysique*, [followed by] R. Fédé, *Méditations métaphysiques*, ed. by J.-C. Bardout, Vrin, Paris 2009, pp. 95-96. On its history and significance, see Bardout’s introduction, *ibid.*, pp. 7-40.

extension cannot make itself be sensed, it can be accompanied by some other thing which can perhaps be sensed⁴¹. Since material things cannot be reduced to extension alone, arguing that extension is not perceivable in itself is insufficient to conclude that things can be seen only in God.

This also clarifies the link between the “two propositions” from the *Méditations sur la métaphysique* that Leibniz expressly approves of when writing to Malebranche⁴². Vision in God is the only viable explanation of our knowledge of the external world, once we acknowledge that even real bodies, and not just geometric extension, can have no influence on our mind. Malebranche appears to be right in his metaphysical and epistemological conclusions but wrong in his Cartesian premises. Accordingly, we might venture that what Leibniz really shares with occasionalism (or even the “foundation” he owes to Malebranche) is not its specifically Cartesian-dualistic motivation for denying mind-body interaction. Rather, it is the intuition that our mind knows the external world without receiving any immediate influence from it.

1.4. *Physical Influence and the Primary Axiom of Physics*

In a nutshell, Leibniz shares with Malebranche and the occasionalists a rejection of the so-called system of physical influence. Even much later, he still maintains that the only plausible justification for occasionalism is the impossibility of immediate mind-body interaction. According to the 1702 draft of Leibniz’s reply to Lamy, this was also the historical origin of occasionalism, thus depicted as a sort of convenient but cheap solution to the mind-body problem:

I have always thought that the only reason or seeming proof which has given rise to and can offer some justification for the Cartesians’ occasional causes is the impossibility of influences. It is this that has made these authors turn to what came most easily to their minds; for pre-established harmony is something more profound⁴³.

Thus, among the various trends and motivations (such as the doctrine of continuous creation, the *Quod Nescis* argument, etc.) that historically contributed to the huge spread of occasionalism in the post-Cartesian period, Leibniz picks

⁴¹ A VI, 4, p. 1782.

⁴² A II, 1², p. 724. See above.

⁴³ GP IV, p. 589, quoted from *Leibniz’s ‘New System’*, cit., p. 162.

one single factor out, namely the need to provide a non-interactionist account of mind-body union. It is not that he ignored other factors. In the same text, he mentions the theological motivation of occasionalism, whose primary aim “was to bring out our dependent nature [*dependance*] and the power of God; and this would be praiseworthy if it were not at the expense of his wisdom, and if it did not have the effect of destroying our substantiality [*aneantir nostre substance*]”⁴⁴. Nevertheless, Leibniz thinks that the occasionalists failed to develop this or other motivations into a proof. In his opinion, the argument from the denial of mind-body interaction is the only acceptable argument that the occasionalists were able to provide: “Although I have often read what has been written in favour of occasional causes, I have never seen anything (with the exception of the refutation of influences) approaching a proof of it”⁴⁵.

What remains unclear, on the other hand, is how the refutation of physical influence should proceed. If Cartesian dualism, with its incomplete concept of matter, is not sufficient to rule out mind-body interaction, what are the reasons that Leibniz finds compelling? Do they also belong to the occasionalist arsenal or do they have a different origin? As mentioned above, Leibniz evokes such reasons in a 1679 letter to Malebranche:

I wonderfully approve of these two propositions that you advance, namely that we see all things in God and that bodies do not, strictly speaking, act upon us. I have always been convinced of this by great reasons, which appear incontestable to me. These reasons depend on some axioms which I do not see being used anywhere yet [*axiomes, que je ne vois encor employés nulle part*], although it is possible to make great use of them also to prove some other theses which are by no means second to the ones I have mentioned⁴⁶.

The only clue Leibniz gives here to help us identify the “great reasons” that should establish the impossibility of mind-body causation is that they depend on very general axioms. On the other hand, we know that, at the time, Leibniz had just introduced radical changes in his physics and was beginning to explore their metaphysical consequences. After discovering that “the Cartesian collision laws, governed by the principle of the conservation of quantity of motion, are inconsistent with the principle of the equality of cause and effect”⁴⁷, by January

⁴⁴ GP IV, p. 589, quoted from *Leibniz's 'New System'*, cit., p. 163.

⁴⁵ GP IV, p. 589, quoted from *Leibniz's 'New System'*, cit., pp. 162-63.

⁴⁶ A II, 1², p. 724.

⁴⁷ D. Garber, “Leibniz: Physics and Philosophy”, in N. Jolley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 279.

1678 he had come to formulate a new conservation principle, in which the quantity of motion (measured by mv , mass times speed) was replaced with the quantity of living force (measured by mv^2). This conservation principle, with its inherent concept of force, was one of Leibniz's reasons for rejecting Descartes's reduction of matter to extension, but it also provided a powerful argument against the possibility of mind-body interaction (see the next section). Thus, my guess is that the "great reasons" that Leibniz mentions in 1679 as proving that bodies do not act on minds are the conservation principles of physics⁴⁸. These principles indeed depend on the principle of equipollence, the principle that the full cause is equivalent to the entire effect, which as early as the mid-1670s Leibniz describes as "the primary axiom of physics"⁴⁹. In 1679, Leibniz approves of Malebranche's two propositions because he takes them to follow – *via* the conservation principles – from one of the most fundamental truths of physics.

1.5. *The Physical Impossibility of Mind-Body Interaction*

According to Leibniz's narrative, the connection between conservation principles and the mind-body problem can be traced back to Descartes himself. In several texts, Leibniz tells a well-known story about Cartesian concerns about mind-body interaction. Descartes, he says, realized that interaction was incompatible with his principle of the conservation of the quantity of motion, for if the soul can produce new motions in the world by putting the body in motion, then the total quantity of motion in the world can hardly remain constant. For instance, this is how Leibniz describes the issue in his 1696 public reply to Simon Foucher: "You know that M. Descartes believed in the conservation of the same quantity of motion in bodies. [...] However, the changes which take place in the body as a consequence of modifications of the soul caused him some difficulty, because they seemed to break this law"⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ R.S. Woolhouse, by contrast, identifies both the "axioms" and "reasons" with Leibniz's principle of spontaneity (every substance is the source of its changes). See his "Leibniz and Occasionalism", cit., p. 167. This interpretation fails to account for the dependency relation that Leibniz clearly establishes between the "great reasons" and his "axioms".

⁴⁹ Leibniz, "Tria axiomata primaria", A VI, 3, p. 427, a text composed between the summer of 1674 and the autumn of 1676. The derivation of the correct conservation principles from the "metaphysical axiom" of equipollence (also described as "the law of nature that I deem the most universal and inviolable") is explicit in Leibniz's 1687 reply to the Abbé Catelan (GP III, pp. 45-46).

⁵⁰ Leibniz, "Éclaircissement du nouveau système de la communication des substances" (1696), GP IV, p. 497, quoted from *Leibniz's 'New System'*, cit., p. 50.

Yet, Descartes wanted voluntary motions to be caused by the soul. Thus, he found a way to save both the mind-body interaction and the principle of conservation:

He therefore thought he had found a solution, which is certainly ingenious, by saying that we must distinguish between motion and direction; and that the soul can neither increase nor decrease the *moving force*, but does change *the direction or determination* of the course of the animal spirits: and this is how voluntary motions take place⁵¹.

This doctrine is currently dubbed the change-of-direction account of voluntary motions. According to Leibniz, Descartes “made no attempt to explain *how* the soul changes the course of bodies, which seems just as incomprehensible as its giving motion to bodies”⁵², but post-Cartesian occasionalism bridged this sort of explanatory gap by ascribing the power to change the direction of animal spirits to God instead of the soul. In this way, the change-of-direction account became part of the occasionalist account of psycho-physical correspondences:

Descartes very well recognized that there is a law of nature by which the same quantity of force is conserved [...]; he therefore thought it necessary not to give the soul the power of increasing or diminishing the force of the body but only that of changing its direction by changing the course of the animal spirits. And those Cartesians who have given vogue to the doctrine of occasional causes hold that since the soul can have no influence whatever upon the body, it is necessary for God to change the course and direction of the animal spirits in accordance with the wishes of the soul⁵³.

Although Descartes did not expressly derive the change-of-direction account from the conservation principle of his physics, Leibniz’s historical reconstruction of the occasionalist developments of that account is accurate.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Leibniz, “Considérations sur les principes de vie, et sur les natures plastiques” (1705), GP VI, p. 540, quoted from *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, cit., p. 587 (translation modified). In an earlier version of the story, Leibniz appears to attribute both the interactionist and the occasionalist account to Descartes himself: “And if someone were to say, as, it seems, Descartes wishes to say, that *the soul, or God on its occasion*, changes only the direction or determination of a motion and not the force which is in bodies [...]” (Leibniz to Arnauld, 30 April 1687, A II, 2, pp. 180-81, quoted from Id., *Philosophical Essays*, ed. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Hackett, Indianapolis 1989, p. 83, emphasis added).

Whereas proto-occasionalists like Clauberg and La Forge still granted the soul the power to determine the direction of motions, full-fledged occasionalists like Cordemoy and Malebranche ascribed this power to God alone⁵⁴. Leibniz, on the other hand, claims that the occasionalist reformulation does not fix the real problem with Descartes's account, namely the violation of a further conservation principle that the Cartesians ignored. According to Leibniz's dynamics, although collisions change the directions of moving bodies, the total sum of their directions always remains the same. Thus, no change in the direction of bodies can be performed in the world from the outside, by the intervention of an extra-physical entity like the soul or God, for any such change would violate this second conservation principle. By accepting the change-of-direction account, both Descartes and the occasionalists have left an opening in the causal closure of the physical world. On the other hand, it would have been sufficient to close that opening in order for them to come very close to the system of pre-established harmony:

Descartes recognized that souls cannot impart a force to bodies because there is always the same quantity of force in matter. However, he thought that the soul could change the direction of bodies. But that is because the law of nature, which also affirms the conservation of the same total direction in matter, was not known at that time. If he had known it, he would have hit upon my system of pre-established harmony⁵⁵.

In addition to introducing perpetual miracles, the occasionalists also fail to prevent the same violation of the laws of nature that they ascribe to the traditional interactionist doctrine⁵⁶. In 1705, Leibniz writes to Wolff that “the system of occasional causes necessarily entails that God violates the laws of bodies for the sake of minds [*occasione mentium*]”⁵⁷. Closing the letter, he urges his correspondent to study mathematics and physics rather than philosophy, by arguing that the former disciplines are also helpful to the

⁵⁴ This may even be the main difference between proto-occasionalists and full-fledged occasionalists. See M. Favaretti Camposampiero, “The Direction of Motion: Occasionalism and Causal Closure from Descartes to Leibniz”, in M. Favaretti Camposampiero, M. Priarolo, and E. Scribano (eds.), *Occasionalism: From Metaphysics to Science*, Brepols, Turnhout 2018, pp. 195-219.

⁵⁵ Leibniz, “Monadology”, § 80, GP VI, p. 620, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, p. 223.

⁵⁶ See Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée*, § 61, GP VI, p. 136. The issue of causal closure is discussed by Woolhouse, “Leibniz and Occasionalism”, cit., pp. 176-78; and Jolley, “Leibniz and Occasionalism”, cit., pp. 122-24. See also Sleight, *Leibniz and Arnauld*, cit., pp. 164-68.

⁵⁷ Leibniz to Wolff, 8 December 1705, in C.I. Gerhardt (ed.), *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolff*, Schmidt, Halle 1860, p. 50.

latter, “and I would not have come across the system of harmony [*Systema Harmonicum*], if I had not previously established the laws of motions, which subvert the system of occasional causes”⁵⁸. This counterfactual conditional about Leibniz’s possible non-discovery of pre-established harmony is perfectly consistent with the counterfactual seen above about Descartes’s possible discovery of the same system. Taken together, these two counterfactuals entail that knowledge of the conservation principles is the necessary and sufficient condition for replacing occasionalism with pre-established harmony⁵⁹.

Leibniz’s attitude towards occasionalism is now somewhat clearer. Leibniz followed the Cartesians in levelling the first conservation principle against the hypothesis of physical influence, but he also turned the same strategy against the Cartesians themselves by means of his second conservation principle. A consequence of this reconstruction is that Leibniz cannot plausibly have been a semi-occasionalist in Brown’s sense (see above, Section 3). Assuming – as his letters to Malebranche suggest – that the implications of the conservation principles were already clear to Leibniz in the late 1670s, at that time he cannot have accepted even the idea of a unilateral action of the mind on the body. For, the conservation principles rule out mind-to-body action in the first place. Now the question is, do they also rule out body-to-mind action?

1.6. *Direction of Motion and Direction of Thought*

A possible objection to our reconstruction is that the criticism of the change-of-direction account in the name of the conservation principles seems to provide no reason for denying that bodies can act on minds. This would undermine our identification of Leibniz’s “great reasons” for endorsing Malebranche’s propositions in 1679 with the conservation principles that he was then developing from the axiom of the equality of cause and effect. However, it is possible to argue that the conservation principles rule out even body-to-mind action. For instance, if we assume that bodies can cause sensations in the soul only by communicating to it – and thus losing – part of their force (or

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

⁵⁹ See also *Essais de Théodicée*, § 61, GP VI, p. 136, quoted from *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, transl. by E.M. Huggard, Open Court, La Salle 1985, p. 156: “If this rule [*sc.* the second conservation principle] had been known to M. Descartes, he would have taken the direction of bodies to be as independent of the soul as their force; and I believe that that would have led direct to the Hypothesis of Pre-established Harmony, whither these same rules have led me”.

motion), we may infer that any such mental effect brought about by physical causes would entail a transfer of force to the soul and, therefore, a decrease in its total quantity in the world.

To my knowledge, Leibniz never expressly pursues this line of argument. Nevertheless, we can find a straightforward version of it in a book that appeared some three years after Leibniz's death, Christian Wolff's *German Metaphysics*. Wolff, who defends pre-established harmony by drawing on Leibniz's refutation of both interactionism and occasionalism, maintains that the first conservation principle rules out not only mind-to-body action but also body-to-mind action:

If the body acts on the soul and the soul on the body, then the motive force in the world cannot remain the same. For, if the soul acts on the body, a motion is produced without a previous motion, since it is assumed that the soul produces the motion in the body merely by its will. [...] Likewise, if the body acts on the soul, then a motion produces a thought. Now, since after this thought the motion ceases without originating a new motion in another part of matter, in this way a force which previously existed in the world ceases to exist⁶⁰.

As such consequences compromise the conservation of living forces, physical influence is "contrary to nature"⁶¹. Furthermore, the explanation of psycho-physical correspondences in terms of physical influence postulates the transfer of some *realitas* (i.e. some real, not phenomenal, entity) from the body to the soul and vice-versa. This process of transfusion (*transfusio*) further requires a process of transmutation (*transmutatio*), whereby something corporeal is transformed into something spiritual and vice-versa⁶². The representational force of the soul must turn into a motive force in order to cause motion, and motive force must become representational in order to cause perceptions and thoughts. In Wolff's dualistic framework, such a hypothesis is inconceivable and unintelligible⁶³. "And who would want to say that a corporeal force goes from the body to the soul and therein turns into a spiritual

⁶⁰ C. Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, ed. by C.A. Corr, Olms, Hildesheim 1983 (1st edition 1720), § 762. See also Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis, methodo scientifica pertractata*, ed. by J. École, Olms, Hildesheim 1972 (1st edition 1734), §§ 576-78.

⁶¹ Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott*, § 762. See also *Psychologia rationalis*, § 579: "Physical influence is contrary to the order of nature".

⁶² See *ibid.*, §§ 567-68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, §§ 573-74.

force, and conversely, that a spiritual force moves from the soul into the body and therein becomes a corporeal force?"⁶⁴

As for the change-of-direction account of voluntary motions, Wolff predictably draws on Leibniz's argument against it⁶⁵. But there is more. The Cartesian distinction between motion and direction that grounds the change-of-direction account also inspires Wolff's revised versions of both physical influence and occasionalism⁶⁶. Indeed, Wolff deems it possible to partially correct both systems by assuming that the soul, just like the body, has the power to produce its own modifications. Even influxionists (the partisans of physical influence) and occasionalists must agree that sensations do not come from the outside by migrating from the body to the soul; rather, they originate within the soul. But then, what determines the soul's power to produce sensations and thoughts that correspond to the external world? This is where the systems diverge. According to the doctrine of physical influence, it is the motive force of the body that influences our perceptions by directing the soul's power to produce the representation that corresponds to the actual state of the body. According to occasionalism, it is God who "determines the power of the soul to produce this very sensation and no other, namely the sensation that represents the external things which produce modifications in the sense organs"⁶⁷. The basic idea in these accounts is that an external influence on the soul (whether corporeal or divine) can only determine the *direction* of the soul's force, by analogy with the determination of the direction of the animal spirits by the soul's will in voluntary motions. The soul thinks by its own force, but the actual course of its thoughts is partially directed by physical stimuli (in the system of physical influence) or divine intervention (in occasionalism). In this way, the change-of-direction account of voluntary motions provides a model for explaining perceptual activity without postulating that something enters the soul from the outside.

Now, this idea may well have been suggested to Wolff by Leibniz himself. In his *Observations on the Book Concerning the Origin of Evil*, Leibniz makes

⁶⁴ Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott*, cit., § 762.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, § 764.

⁶⁶ See Wolff, *Anmerckungen über die vernünfftigen Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*, ed. by C.A. Corr, Olms, Hildesheim 1983 (1st edition 1724), § 269, § 276. More sophisticated, further revised versions appear in *Psychologia rationalis*, § 569, §§ 597-98, but the key idea remains the same, namely to reduce influence to a mere change of direction. See also G.B. Bilfinger, *Dilucidationes philosophicae de Deo, anima humana, mundo, et generalibus rerum affectionibus*, Olms, Hildesheim 1982 (1st edition 1725), § 334.

⁶⁷ Wolff, *Anmerckungen über die vernünfftigen Gedancken von Gott*, cit., § 276.

the point that William King's position on body-to-mind action appears to be modelled on the Cartesian change-of-direction account of voluntary motions:

Our author, even though he admits with people in general this physical influence of objects upon us, observes nevertheless with much perspicacity that the body or the objects of the senses do not even give us our ideas, much less the active force of our soul, and that they serve only to draw out that which is within us. This is much in the spirit of M. Descartes' belief that the soul, not being able to give force to the body, gives it at least some direction⁶⁸.

The physical world does not provide the very contents of the soul's cognitive activity, but it merely influences the (metaphorical) direction of that activity – it determines what series of innate contents the soul actualizes so as to perceive external objects. Leibniz aptly describes this hypothesis concerning the soul's dependence on the body as an intermediate position: “It is a mean between one side and the other, between physical influence and Pre-established Harmony”⁶⁹.

Therefore, the possibility of considering the origin of sense perceptions by analogy with the origin of voluntary motions – thus making the former subject to the same constraints (the conservation principles) that bind the latter – may not have been entirely unknown to Leibniz. When realizing that the soul's influence on the body had to be rejected as incompatible with the principles of physics, he most likely assumed the body's influence on the soul to be incompatible as well.

2. *The Supernatural*

2.1. *A Nomological Account of Miracles*

Let me highlight Leibniz's rhetoric once again. Though criticizing occasionalism for failing to prevent the violation of the second conservation principle, he acknowledges that this transgression of the laws of nature was completely unintentional, for Descartes and his occasionalist fellows simply ignored that principle. Had they known about it, they would have embraced something like

⁶⁸ Leibniz, “Remarques sur le Livre de l'origine du mal”, GP VI, pp. 416-17, quoted from *Theodicy*, cit., p. 422.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

pre-established harmony. This suggests that Leibniz considers the occasionalists to largely share his commitment to the lawfulness of all natural events. His argument from the conservation principle is effective precisely because the occasionalists agree, at least in principle, that the systematic violation of such a general law of nature would be intolerable.

Leibniz's agreement with the occasionalists on the intrinsically lawful character of the physical world is also relevant to the issue of miracles, which Leibniz famously invoked to demarcate the hypothesis of pre-established harmony from the hypothesis of occasional causes⁷⁰. Here again, my focus is on the elements that Leibniz's account of miracles shares with Malebranche rather than on their differences.

From the mid-1680s at least, Leibniz claims that occasional causation – and especially mind-body occasional causation – amounts to a sort of “perpetual miracle”⁷¹. As is well known, he justifies this charge by replacing the traditional, statistical conception of miracles as infrequent or unusual events with his own characterization, according to which miracles are effects whose production surpasses the powers of any natural cause. Though aware that the issue might appear merely terminological, Leibniz maintains that his definition captures the standard meaning of the term “miracle”:

In fact, if I properly understand the views of the authors of occasional causes, they introduce a miracle which is no less miraculous for being continual. For it seems to me that the notion of miracle does not consist in rarity. [...] I admit that the authors of occasional causes might give another definition of the term, but, according to common usage, it seems that a miracle differs internally and substantively from the performance of an ordinary action, and not by the external accident of frequent repetition; properly speaking, God performs a miracle when he does something that surpasses the forces he has given to creatures and conserves in them⁷².

What is the “other definition” given by the occasionalists? The most plausible reference is Malebranche, who characterizes miracles as violations of the laws of nature. What makes an event a miracle is that God brings it about

⁷⁰ See esp. Woolhouse, “Leibniz and Occasionalism”, cit., pp. 166-71; Rutherford, “Natures, Laws, and Miracles”, cit.; Jolley, “Leibniz and Occasionalism”, cit., pp. 124-29.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Leibniz to Simon Foucher, August 1686, A II, 2, p. 90, quoted from *Leibniz's 'New System'*, cit., p. 51.

⁷² Leibniz to Antoine Arnauld, 30 April 1687, A II, 2, p. 179, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 82-83.

by a particular volition – a volition that is not subsumed under any general volition⁷³. As the laws of nature that express God's general volitions also include the laws of the union of soul and body, psycho-physical correspondences are not miraculous insofar as they conform to those established laws, even though they are directly performed by God. In the letter to Arnauld quoted above, Leibniz appears to consider Malebranche's account to be substantially equivalent to the statistical conception. This may seem unfair to Malebranche, who maintains that rarity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for an event to be a miracle⁷⁴. However, Leibniz's point is that features such as rarity and non-lawfulness are equally extrinsic to the event that they should characterize as miraculous. Whether one takes frequency or conformity to general laws to distinguish natural events from supernatural ones, in both cases the result is that miracles are reduced to exceptional events. Leibniz, by contrast, maintains that supernatural events are intrinsically such, regardless of their frequency or lawful character:

One might say that in this matter God acts only according to a general rule, and consequently he acts without miracle. But I do not grant that consequence, and I believe that God can make general rules for himself even with respect to miracles. For example, if God had resolved to give his grace immediately or to perform some other action of this nature every time a certain condition was satisfied, this action, though ordinary, would nevertheless still be a miracle⁷⁵.

Nevertheless, elsewhere Leibniz appears more willing to adopt the nomological account of miracles. In *Theodicy*, for instance, he defends the preexistence of the human soul as well as the preformation of the human body by arguing that the history of each individual soul must parallel the history of its organic body. Otherwise, the development of the human soul would elude any nomological explanation and, therefore, turn into a miracle: "Considering that so admirable an order and rules so general are established in regard to animals,

⁷³ On particular vs. general volitions, see esp. N. Malebranche, *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, Premier Eclaircissement, §§ 1-2, in *Ceuvres complètes de Malebranche*, 20 vols., ed. by A. Robinet, Vrin, Paris 1958-67 (henceforth: *OC*), vol. V, pp. 147-48. See also S. Nadler, "Order, Laws and Divine Volitions: Malebranche's Occasionalism and the Problem of Miracles", in this same issue of *Studi Lockiani*.

⁷⁴ See, e.g., N. Malebranche, *Réponse aux Réflexions*, II, 1, in *OC VIII*, p. 696: "Ainsi, qu'un effet soit commun, ou qu'il soit rare, si Dieu ne le produit point en conséquence de ses loix generales, qui sont les loix naturelles, c'est un vrai miracle".

⁷⁵ Leibniz to A. Arnauld, 30 April 1687, A II, 2, p. 179, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 82-83.

it does not appear reasonable that man should be completely excluded from that order, and that everything in relation to his soul should come about in him by miracle". Here, the epistemological role of miracles is to account for what does not conform to general laws and order.

2.2. *Nature and Angels*

Further links that Leibniz establishes between the concept of miracle and the concept of law are clearly reminiscent of Malebranche's approach. In the "Preliminary Dissertation" of *Theodicy*, eternal truths are distinguished from positive truths, which include both "the laws which it has pleased God to give to Nature" and the truths that "depend" on such laws⁷⁶. Whereas eternal truths are absolutely necessary, positive truths depend on God's wise choice of the best. As this choice is free and governed by considerations of fitness, the physical necessity of the laws of nature is based on moral necessity and not on logical necessity, which means that a different choice by God would not have made a contradiction true. Albeit very general, the laws of nature are contingent, and this modal status entails that it is possible for God to occasionally disregard a law he has chosen – though of course, since God does nothing in vain, there must be higher reasons that convince him to do so:

It is this physical necessity that constitutes the order of Nature and lies in the rules of motion and in some other general laws which it pleased God to lay down for things when he gave them being. It is therefore true that God gave such laws not without reason, for he chooses nothing from caprice and as though by chance or in pure indifference; but the general reasons of good and of order, which have prompted him to the choice, may be overcome in some cases by stronger reasons of a superior order⁷⁷.

In such cases, God's actions count as miracles, for he does not act by natural means: "Thus it is made clear that God can exempt creatures from the laws he has prescribed for them, and produce in them that which their nature does not bear by performing a *miracle*"⁷⁸. God's wisdom does not only inspect each single reason to choose but also considers their higher or lower rank so as to assess which ones prevail. This hierarchical consideration also applies to laws

⁷⁶ Leibniz, "Preliminary Dissertation on the Conformity of Faith with Reason", § 2, GP VI, p. 50, quoted from *Theodicy*, p. 74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* (translation slightly modified).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, § 3.

and their possible exceptions. Leibniz agrees with Malebranche that the laws established by God are organized into a hierarchy, which entails that miracles, too, can be classified according to the rank of the specific law they are assumed to violate.

This Malebranchian approach to the relation between miracles and laws emerges in Leibniz's works as early as 1686. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, the distinction between general order and subordinate maxims is used – along with the related distinction between general and particular volitions – to accommodate miracles within the orderly plan of creation: “Now, since nothing can happen which is not in the order, one can say that miracles are as much within the order as are natural operations, operations which are called natural because they are in conformity with certain subordinate maxims that we call the nature of things”⁷⁹. In this perspective, the set of subordinate maxims include even very general laws such as the conservation principles of physics⁸⁰. Subordinate maxims bind nature but not God, who can thus perform miracles that elude those maxims but conform to the overarching order that he has selected for the world: “For one can say that this nature is only God's custom, with which he can dispense for any stronger reason than the one which moved him to make use of these maxims”⁸¹. In Malebranche's footsteps, miracles are identified with God's particular volitions, which “are exceptions to these aforementioned subordinate maxims” but are no exception to the general law of creation. For, at the top of the hierarchy of divine laws we find one that is “without exception”; it is the law that expresses God's most general volition and “rules the whole course of the universe”⁸².

Leibniz adopts the same nomological approach to make God's “extraordinary and miraculous concurrence” compatible with his fundamental metaphysical doctrine that all that happens to an individual substance derives from its very nature⁸³. While this doctrine seems *prima facie* to rule out the possibility of supernatural interventions, Leibniz once again points out that miracles “are always in conformity with the universal law of the general order, even though

⁷⁹ Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § 7, A VI, 4, p. 1538, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 40.

⁸⁰ See Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § 17, A VI, 4, p. 1556; *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 49.

⁸¹ Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § 7, A VI, 4, pp. 1538-39, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 40.

⁸² Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § 7, A VI, 4, p. 1539, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 40.

⁸³ Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § 16, A VI, 4, p. 1554, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 48.

they may be above the subordinate maxims”⁸⁴. Just as miracles in the physical world do not violate the supermaxim of creation but only some subordinate maxims, so the miracles that God performs within an individual substance still conform to the same general order “insofar as it is expressed by the essence or individual notion of this substance”⁸⁵.

In later works, the hierarchization of the laws paves the way for the hierarchization of miracles. Once again, Leibniz agrees with Malebranche to the effect that angels can, of course, perform miracles, but these are lower-order than the miracles performed by God. For, although angelic interventions in the course of nature are exceptions to the laws of physics, they are no exception to the laws of the angelic nature, which are the laws of subtle bodies. In this context, Leibniz expressly refers to Malebranche:

As for miracles [...], they are perhaps not all of one and the same kind: there are many, to all appearances, which God brings about through the ministry of invisible substances, such as the angels, as Father Malebranche also believes. These angels or these substances act according to the ordinary laws of their nature, being combined with bodies more rarefied and more vigorous than those we have at our command⁸⁶.

Thus, the allegedly supernatural character of the angels’ interventions is in fact relative to our limited grasp of the higher orders of nature, which include more than the visible world of gross bodies. Angelic “miracles are only so by comparison, and in relation to us; just as our works would be considered miraculous amongst animals if they were capable of remarking upon them”⁸⁷. In a similar vein, Malebranche had distinguished between the epistemological sense in which a certain event is a miracle insofar as its laws elude our grasp, as in the case of angelic performances, and the metaphysical sense in which genuine miracles transcend even the laws of higher natures⁸⁸.

Most importantly, this relativization of angelic miracles leads Leibniz to the same conclusion drawn by Malebranche, namely the marginalization of genuine miracles. According to Leibniz, not only the prodigies that the Old Testament ascribes to angels but also the miracles performed by Christ might

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § 16, A VI, 4, p. 1555, quoted from *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 49.

⁸⁶ Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée*, § 249, GP VI, p. 265, quoted from *Theodicy*, cit., p. 280.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., Malebranche, *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, I, 20, Additions, in *OCV*, p. 34.

in fact conform to the laws of a nature that is simply unknown to us: “The changing of water into wine might be a miracle of this kind”⁸⁹. Thus, in both Malebranche and Leibniz, most of the traditional miracles undergo a process of naturalization. On the other hand, the conditions required for counting as a genuine miracle are so restrictive that *almost* nothing supernatural happens in this world, except the creation of the world itself, the mystery of incarnation, and perhaps a few other events that Leibniz refrains from specifying: “But the Creation, the Incarnation and some other actions of God exceed all the power of creatures and are truly miracles, or indeed Mysteries”⁹⁰.

3. Conclusion

Even though Leibniz hardly ever embraced occasionalism, his acquaintance with this doctrine and especially with its Malebranchean version played two decisive and opposite roles in the formation of Leibniz’s own metaphysics. Robert Sleight’s remark that “Leibniz introduced the theory of the pre-established harmony with Malebranche’s occasionalism very much in mind” could actually be specified by adding that Leibniz found in occasionalism not only a polemical target but also a source of inspiration for rethinking causality and divine concurrence. Acknowledging that he owed Malebranche the very foundations of his own system was Leibniz’s way to credit occasionalism with paving the way to pre-established harmony by challenging the received dogma of causal interaction. Even Leibniz’s account of miracles, which he famously invoked against occasionalism, actually incorporates several elements of Malebranche’s doctrine. Thus, Leibniz’s criticism of occasionalism takes shape against a largely shared background of assumptions and arguments. What complicates the issue is also the circumstance that the occasionalist influence in the late 1670s is not always easy to disentangle from Spinoza’s influence, as they partially overlapped in chronological terms. While charging occasionalism with leading to Spinozism, Leibniz was himself drawing on Spinozan suggestions to develop his own psycho-physical parallelism. Thus, one might say that, when working on pre-established harmony, Leibniz had both Malebranche and Spinoza very much in mind – but this is the subject for another paper.

⁸⁹ Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée*, § 249, GP VI, p. 265, quoted from *Theodicy*, cit., p. 280.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Malebranche appears to acknowledge only creation as a genuine miracle: see Nadler, “Order, Laws and Divine Volitions”, cit.

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