

Rethinking Occasionalism: John Locke and the Power(s) of Nature

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Abstract: Although, in recent years, the literature on early modern occasionalism, its different expressions and its dissemination has increased, the number of inquiries on the British reception of such a doctrine is still very limited. However, the spread of Malebranche's philosophy in Britain suggests that some of the discussions on God's role in relation to causal actions and the nature of bodies which took place across the Channel were driven by the same questions raised by occasionalist doctrines in the rest of Europe. The aim of this article is to suggest that Locke's definition of natural powers, with all the difficulties that it entails, can also be read as an answer to the problems posed by occasionalist arguments, in particular by the denial of the claim that by observing natural phenomena we can infer the existence of causal powers. The first section will briefly summarize Locke's criticism of occasionalism in his writings on Malebranche and John Norris, while the second will analyse Locke's treatment of the notion of power. Through this survey, it will be demonstrated that the weight of experience in Locke's philosophy is strictly connected to the problem of accounting for the actions of finite beings that we find in the occasionalist criticism of causal action.

Keywords: John Locke, Nicolas Malebranche, John Norris, Occasionalism, Power, Laws Of Nature

1. *Introduction*

Despite scholars' growing interest in occasionalism and its dissemination all over Europe, the number of inquiries on the early modern British reception of such a doctrine is still very limited¹. This should not come as a

¹ A notable exception is Peter Anstey's work on Robert Boyle's occasionalism (P. Anstey, "Boyle on Occasionalism: An Unexamined Source", in *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1999), 40, pp. 57-81 and Id., *The Philosophy of Robert Boyle*, Routledge, London-New York 2000), which, incidentally, is not universally acknowledged by scholars, cf. Ott's remarks on Boyle's notion of power in *Causation*

surprise, considering that for a long time the seventeenth-century version of occasionalism was interpreted as a (more or less) necessary consequence of Descartes' thought², which appears to have received more criticisms across the Channel than on the Continent in the second half of the seventeenth century³. However, the spread of Malebranche's philosophy in Britain⁴ – Malebranche arguably being the most relevant representative of occasionalism in the early modern age – suggests that some of the discussions on the role of God in relation to causal actions and the nature of bodies which took place across the Channel were driven by the same questions raised by occasionalist doctrines in the rest of Europe. If matter is a mere extension devoid of any intrinsic power, what is the source of motion? Are nature's laws arbitrary effects of God's action or are they grounded in the specific features of bodies? Is there a necessary connection between the action of a body and its apparent effect or just a constant correlation, a regular succession, that we are wont to consider a causal relationship, even if we have no compelling reasons to do so? It is well known that this latter issue played a pivotal role in the criticism that Hume famously addressed against the law of cause and effect and which was deeply indebted to Malebranche's so-called 'no

and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, pp. 140-50 and D. Layman "Robert Boyle's Reductive Occasionalism", in *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 1 (2019), available online (<https://jmphil.org/articles/10.32881/jomp.6/>).

² As the editors of the collective volume *Occasionalism. From Metaphysics to Science* have explained, the idea that all power lies in God could be seen as "a genuine philosophical offspring of monotheism" (p. 7). Nonetheless, mostly because of its Muslim interpretations, between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries occasionalism was staunchly opposed by Christian theologians, especially for the problems it raised for ascribing responsibility to human actions (Cf. A. Freddoso, "Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case Against Secondary Causation in Nature", in T.V. Morris (ed.), *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988, pp. 74-118). In the seventeenth century, the fear of occasionalism apparently diminished, and many authors – most famously, Nicolas Malebranche – supported such a view by means of various arguments. Despite this, a long-standing reading of early modern occasionalism has seen it as resulting from the difficulties posed by Descartes' conception of the mind-body relationship. Even if, more recently, this reading has been disputed, the thesis that Descartes is the main source of early modern occasionalism has not been abandoned, see for instance S. Nadler (ed.), *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park (PA) 1993 and Id., *Occasionalism: Causation among the Cartesians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

³ See S. Hutton, *Cartesianism in Britain*, in S. Nadler, T.M. Schmalz, and D. Antoine-Mahut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to Descartes and Cartesianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 496-510.

⁴ On this subject see the now classic work C.J. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983, part II.

necessary connection' argument⁵. But what is less known is how important all these questions were for a philosopher that Hume had in mind when formulating his attacks on causality: John Locke⁶.

If we only consider Locke's *Essay*, the discussion of causal action can be found at least in two contexts: on the one hand, within Locke's analysis of the different relations that we can grasp in comparing ideas⁷; on the other hand, within the enquiry on the notion of power, which Locke deeply revised between the first and the second edition. The aim of this article is to suggest that Locke's definition of natural powers, with all the difficulties that it exhibits, can also be

⁵ According to the 'no necessary connection' argument, usually shortened as NNC, A is a true cause of B if and only if we perceive a necessary connection between A and B. Malebranche used this argument especially in *Recherche de la vérité*, VI, 2, 3. The first occurrence of this principle, which Malebranche reiterates twice in the following pages, is the following: "It is clear that no body, large or small, has the power to move itself. [...] We have only two sorts of ideas, ideas of minds and ideas of bodies; and as we should speak only of what we conceive, we should only reason according to these two kinds of ideas. Thus, since the idea we have of all bodies makes us aware that they cannot move themselves, it must be concluded that it is minds which move them. But when we examine our idea of all finite minds, we do not see any necessary connection between their will and the motion of any body whatsoever. On the contrary, we see that there is none and that there can be none. We must therefore also conclude, if we wish to reason according to our lights, that there is absolutely no mind created that can move a body as a true or principal cause, just as it has been said that no body could move itself. But when one thinks about the idea of God, i.e., of an infinitely perfect and consequently all-powerful being, one knows there is such a connection between His will and the motion of all bodies, that it is impossible to conceive that He wills a body to be moved and that this body not be moved. We must therefore say that only His will can move bodies if we wish to state things as we conceive them and not as we sense them", *Recherche de la vérité*, in Malebranche, *Œuvres complètes*, 20 vols., Vrin/CRNS, Paris 1958-67, I, p. 312, Eng. trans. *Search after Truth*, ed. by T.M. Lennon and P.J. Olscamp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 448. Malebranche scholars disagree about the nature and role of NCC in Malebranche's occasionalism, and some of them think that the most important argument is the so-called 'conservation is but continuous creation' (CCC) one. In support of the pre-eminence of NCC see, for instance, Nicolas Jolley ("Berkeley and Malebranche on Causality and Volition", in J.A. Cover and M. Kulstad (eds.), *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1990) and Louis Loeb (*From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1981); in support of the pre-eminence of CCC, see Steven Nadler (*Malebranche on Causation*, in S. Nadler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 112-38), Sukjae Lee ("Necessary Connections and Continuous Creation: Malebranche's Two Arguments for Occasionalism", in *Journal of the history of philosophy* 46 (2008), pp. 539-66) and Andrew Pyle (*Malebranche*, Routledge, London 2003). On Hume's reception of Malebranche's occasionalism see S. Bergont, "Hume au "pays des fées". Destins de l'occasionalisme malebranchien dans la philosophie humienne", in R. Carbone, C. Jaquet, and P.F. Moreau (eds.), *Spinoza-Malebranche: À la croisée des interprétations*, ENS Éditions, Lyon 2018, pp. 221-42.

⁶ On the relationship between Hume's criticism and Locke's position, see A. Coventry, "Locke, Hume, and the Idea of Causal Power", in *Locke Studies* 3 (2003), pp. 93-111.

⁷ On this topic see the above mentioned Ott, *Causation and the Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy*, cit., Ch. 19.

read as an answer to the problems posed by occasionalist arguments, in particular by the denial of the claim that by observing natural phenomena we can infer the existence of causal powers. In this regard, as we will see, Locke's appeal to experience to demonstrate the existence of natural powers should be considered the result, on the one hand, of the separation he posited between the essence of a being and its capacities – which can be detected, for instance, in the famous hypothesis of the thinking matter –, and, on the other hand, of the role that, according to Locke, God's free decisions play in providing the natural world with its specific laws and powers. To this effect, in the first section I will briefly summarize Locke's criticism of occasionalism in his writings on Malebranche and John Norris – who has been described as “the English Malebranche” by John Sergeant⁸ – while in the second section I will analyse Locke's treatment of the notion of power.

1. *Locke and occasionalism*

Although, according to scholars, the writings addressed against Norris and Malebranche were written between 1692 and 1693⁹, Locke first became acquainted with Malebranche's thought in 1676, when he bought Malebranche's *Search after Truth*¹⁰. Nevertheless, as Paul Schuurman has shown, the first brief notes on this book, mostly devoted to the teaching of mathematics, were composed almost ten years later, namely in 1685¹¹ – the same period in which Locke was reading the writings of Antoine Arnauld, one of Malebranche's worst enemies¹², and concluding his *Essay*. However, to know

⁸ See McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, cit., p. 179.

⁹ See for instance P. Schuurman, *Vision in God and Thinking Matter: Locke's Epistemological Agnosticism Used Against Malebranche and Stillingfleet*, in S. Hutton and P. Schuurman (eds.), *Studies on Locke: Sources, Contemporaries, and Legacy*, Springer, Dordrecht 2008, pp. 177-93, p. 177.

¹⁰ See G. Bonno, *Les relations intellectuelles de Locke avec la France (D'après des document inédits)*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1955, p. 243.

¹¹ See Paul Schuurman's *Introduction* to his edition of Locke, *On the Conduct of Understanding*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Keele 2000, p. 75. Schuurman refers to MS Locke, f. 8, p. 264.

¹² As is widely known, Locke was familiar not only with the Port-Royal Logic, whose weight on the philosopher's notion of ideas is a much discussed topic in the specialist literature (for a summary of the *status quaestionis* see the recent K.L. Pearce, “Locke, Arnauld, and Abstract Ideas, in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27/1 (2019), pp. 75-94), but also with the treatise addressed against Malebranche's doctrine, *Des vraies et fausses idées* (1683). See C. Giuntini, *Presenti a se stessi. La centralità della coscienza in Locke*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2015, Ch. 2 “Platonici ed 'entusiasti'. Locke e la 'visione in Dio'”.

Locke's explicit opinion on occasionalism we must wait almost ten years, until the time when he replied to John Norris' criticism of his *Essays*¹³ and, in the same period, wrote *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*, published posthumously in 1706¹⁴.

Despite the differences between Norris and Malebranche, Locke seems to consider their theories to be interchangeable¹⁵, and accuses both thinkers of attributing too much to the human mind by stating that it has direct access to

¹³ Five months after the issuing of Locke's *Essay*, Norris published his *Cursory Reflections upon a book called An Essay on Human Understanding*, which was appended to *Christian Blessedness or, Discourses upon the beatitudes of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (S. Manship, London 1690). Commentators stated that Locke's reaction was delayed by the good relationship between the two philosophers, which eventually fell apart up because of Locke's belief that Norris had broken a seal on a letter addressed to him. Robert Pawling suggested that Norris was responsible for this. See Robert Pawling's letter to Clarke, enclosed in Clarke's letter to Locke, 22 October 1692 (No. 1548): "My Maid asked the young man from whom he brought the letter, he said from a Doctor in the City. She shewed him that the letter was crackt, as she called it, he said that was nothing but desider it might be sent. So I guess by the whole it comes from Norris, and is the letter from my Lady Masham which he hath been peeping into. God deliver me from such proud Clergy men. They are not fit for human Society, unsavory salt etc." (Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., vol. 4, p. 548). W.J. Mander has analysed the different phases of this controversy in detail: see W.J. Mander, *The Philosophy of John Norris*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, Ch. 6.

¹⁴ The editors of the Digital Locke Project (<http://www.digitallockeproject.nl>) have dated Locke's writings against Norris and the *Examination* of Malebranche to 1692 and 1693. From Locke's correspondence with Molyneux we can deduce that the *Examination* was ready by the first months of 1695, since he claimed to have written a "little treatise" on Malebranche's vision in God, which he did not intend to publish: "[f]or I love not controversies, and have a personal kindness for the author" (Locke to Molyneux, 26 April 1695 (no. 1887), in Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., vol. 5, p. 353. The passage is a bit of mystery, for according to the editor of Locke's correspondence, Esmond Samuel De Beer, Locke did not know Malebranche personally.

¹⁵ See J. Locke, *Of Seeing All Things in God (=Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God. Hereinafter Examination)* § 5: "And though this pregnant Author [=John Norris] tells us p. 185 [Locke is referring to 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*, Manship, London 1689] That this [=the vision in God] is a notion which he very early lighted upon by the Natural parturiency of his owne mind before he had consulted with any authors that might inbue him with it, Yet since P. Malbrance had the luck by being first in print to rob him of the Glory of this discovery He will pardon me if I have recourse for my information to him that is looked on as the author of it; and see what light I can gain from him purposing not to overlooke what this Gent tells us he has farther done to establish it by other considerations of his own, wherein it is not my designe to confute what either the one or the other has writ on this subject, but only to see whether this hypothesis when Examined and the parts of it put together can be thought to cure our ignorance or is more intelligible and satisfactory to one who would not deceive himself; take words for things; and thinke he Knows what he Knows not". Since a critical edition of the text is still missing, and the published editions are not complete, I quote from the transcription of Locke's manuscript (MS Locke d.3, pp. 1-86) made available by the aforementioned Digital Locke Project.

God¹⁶. Instead of giving value to God, to his power and wisdom, as they mean to do, the two philosophers achieve precisely the opposite effect through their theocentricism. This is particularly evident with regard to occasionalism, the doctrine according to which only God is a true cause. Malebranche and Norris, who claim that we can know even God's aims, base their belief in occasionalism not only on the idea that God alone is powerful and does everything in the world, but also on a principle of 'economicity'. This is the so-called 'principle of the simplest ways'¹⁷, which nonetheless is challenged more by occasionalism than it is by the attribution of some internal power to nature:

P. Malebranche says, "God does all things by the simplest and shortest ways", i.e. as it is interpreted in Mr. Norris's *Reason and Religion*, "God never does anything in vain". This will easily be granted them; but how will they reconcile to this principle of theirs, on which their whole system is built, the curious structure of the eye and ear; not to mention the other parts of the body? For if the perception of colours and sounds depended on nothing but the presence of the object affording an occasional cause to God Almighty to exhibit to the mind the idea of figures, colours, and sounds; all that nice and curious structure of those organs is wholly in vain¹⁸.

According to Locke, occasionalism fails to account for certain phenomena like the ceasing of a sensory perception when we become used to it, as happens when we spend a long time in a room "perfumed with sweet odours" and we do not smell any perfume after a while¹⁹. Even if he agrees that it is God who "has

¹⁶ "To say that we partake of the knowledge of God or consult his understanding is what I cannot receive for true. God has given me an understanding of my owne, and I should thinke it presumption in me to suppose I apprehended any thing by God's understanding; saw with his eyes; or shared of his knowledg. I thinke it more possible for me to see with other men's eyes and understand with another man's understanding, than with God's; there being some proportion between mine and another man's understanding, but none between mine and God's" (*Examination*, § 59).

¹⁷ Malebranche introduced this principle incidentally in *Recherche* and used it at length only in his *Traité de la nature et la grâce* (1680), which Locke owned, see J. Harrison and P. Laslett (eds.), *The Library of John Locke*, 1881, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, p. 183. Locke's edition was the one in 12^o, published in Rotterdam in 1684.

¹⁸ J. Locke, *Remarks upon some of Mr. Norris's Books Wherein he asserts P. Malebranche's Opinion of our seeing all Things in God*, in *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*, 12th edition, C. and J. Rivington, London 1824, vol. 9, p. 249. Locke's manuscript (MS Locke d.3, pp. 89-109) is available at <http://www.digitallockeproject.nl>.

¹⁹ § 14, p. 254. It has to be said that Locke's theory of knowledge too struggles to explain why, if the production of ideas depends on "the operation of the object on the organs of sense" (*ibid.*), one should stop smelling a perfume while still in the presence of the object producing it.

appointed that a certain modified motion of the fibres, or spirits in the optic nerve” should produce “the ideas of light and colours”; this does not mean that he did not do so through a real cause: “[f]or I hope they will not deny God the privilege to give such a power to motion, if he please”²⁰. To ascribe the perceptive process to occasional causes established by God “is in effect to say he has given this motion in the optic nerve a power to operate on himself, but cannot give it a power to operate on the mind of man”²¹. Far from exalting the power of God, occasionalists therefore reduces it, because they do not understand that providing creatures with the capacity to act autonomously is more difficult than depriving them of it:

for which [...] is the perfectest power; to make a machine, a watch for example, that when the watchmaker has withdrawn his hands shall go and strike by the fit contrivance of the parts; or else requires that whenever the hand by pointing to the hours, minds him of it, he should strike twelve upon the bell?²²

According to Locke, denying creatures any power, as occasionalism does, entails the disappearance of the world, since this must ultimately be identified with God himself²³. It is worth noting that we can find a very similar thesis in Locke’s future counterpart, Gottfried Leibniz, who in his *De Ipsa Natura* (1698) – a work addressed against Johann Christopher Sturm’s *De idolo naturae* – discussed all philosophical positions that reduced the power of nature to God’s action. In this category, Leibniz included not only overt occasionalists like Malebranche or Cordemoy, but also mechanical philosophers like Boyle, who, to his eyes, by refusing to assign nature any internal principles of action, inevitably slipped into the occasionalist position²⁴. Occasionalism, however,

can lead to dangerous consequences [...]. For this view is so far from increasing the glory of God by removing the idol of nature that, quite the contrary, it seems with Spinoza to make of God the very nature of things, while created things disappear into mere modifications of the one divine substance, since that which does not act, which lacks active force [...] can in no way be a substance²⁵.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ “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?” (ibid., p. 255).

²⁴ On Boyle’s occasionalism see above, n. 1.

²⁵ Leibniz, *On Nature Itself*, in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1989, pp. 155-67, pp. 165-66.

Like Leibniz, Locke compares occasionalism to Spinozism, by particularly stressing the repercussions it has for the moral and religious behaviour of human beings. Indeed, Locke claims, if God does everything, “whatever a man thinks God produces the thought; let it be infidelity, murmuring, or blasphemy”²⁶. This would imply not only that humans cannot be accountable for their actions, with all the problems that this would entail for theodicy, but also that it becomes very difficult to make sense of human freedom. As a result, such a view “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”²⁷.

The two main points in Locke’s rejection of occasionalism are therefore the following: 1) far from highlighting God’s power, occasionalism undermines it and actually reduces nature to a ghost; 2) if God does everything, there is no space for human responsibility, which is particularly relevant for religious reasons, as witnessed by the example Locke chose (“infidelity, murmuring, blasphemy”). Both statements suggest that Locke does not consider occasionalism wrong because of the pre-eminent role it ascribes to God in ruling nature, but rather because, despite its intentions, it fails to glorify God. For this reason, we must acknowledge that all finite beings have some kind of power.

In this respect, it is important to remark that, as we will see, in Locke’s work we can find a lot of passages strictly connecting the discussion of the properties of matter to God’s role in producing these properties. Consequently, Locke’s conception of nature would not appear to jettison the idea of God in order to explain the behaviour of bodies. On the contrary, Locke’s explanation of the notion of power, which – as is widely known – he deeply revised in the second edition of his *Essay*, as well as the complex difference between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ power, attests to the difficulty of keeping together the autonomy of nature and the thesis that ultimately the source of every action is God. This difficulty seems to depend on two theses that Locke shares with the occasionalists, and more generally with Cartesian philosophy, i.e. the conception of matter as an inert being and the claim that God rules the world through his decisions. So one may ask: how can Locke hold both these views without his system collapsing into occasionalism? I will try to give an answer to this question in the following section through an analysis of Locke’s notion of power.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 255-56.

2. *Locke's conception of nature: actions and powers*

As Walter Ott has shown in his study on causation and the laws of nature, early modern philosophers were very uncomfortable with the notion of power²⁸. The widespread rejection of Scholasticism and its 'occult qualities' and the problem of explaining causal activity within the mechanical definition of bodies gave rise, on the one hand, to the refusal to ascribe any power to bodies, as in the case of occasionalism, and, on the other hand, to the attempt to reassess such a notion. In this regard, according to Ott, Locke should be regarded as a champion of the notion of powers, which he interpreted in terms of a relation between properties that could be seen precisely as "an alternative to the occasionalists cognitive model of causality"²⁹. A discussion of Ott's position on Locke's definition of relations and powers falls beyond the scope of these pages, but I wish to suggest that Locke's endorsement of the reality of powers is less evident than it might appear at first sight.

Let us consider the famous *incipit* of *Essay II xxi*, the most extensive treatment of the notion of power:

The mind, being every day informed, by the senses, of the alteration of those simple ideas, it observes in things without; and taking notice how one comes to an end, and ceases to be, and another begins to exist, which was not before; reflecting also on what passes within it self, and observing a constant change of its ideas, sometimes by the impression of outward objects on the senses, and sometimes by the determination of its own choice; and concluding from what it has so constantly observed to have been, that the like changes will for the future be made, in the same things, by like agents, and by the like ways, considers in one thing the possibility of having any of its simple ideas changed, and in another the possibility of making that change; and so comes by that Idea which we call power³⁰.

In this sense, Locke explains, when we say for instance that "the sun has a power to blanch wax, and wax a power to be blanched by the sun", we are only stating that we perceive a change in our ideas of these two objects and their relations, and not that we really grasp what is happening. As Locke puts it,

²⁸ See Ott, *Causation and Laws of Nature*, cit., pp. 10-14.

²⁹ Ott, *Causation and Laws of Nature*, cit., p. 170.

³⁰ Locke, *An Essays concerning the Human Understanding*, ed. by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, II, xxi, 1, p. 233 (hereinafter "E", followed by the book, chapter, paragraph and page numbers).

we cannot observe any alteration to be made in, or operation upon any thing, but by the observable change of its sensible *Ideas*; nor conceive any alteration to be made, but by conceiving a Change of some of its *Ideas*³¹.

In other words, the mediated nature of our knowledge, i.e. its occurring by means of representations – Locke’s ideas – implies that we have no certainty about the real source of our idea of power. This uncertainty is conspicuous if we consider the idea of an active power, which is not, according to Locke, as clear as we might expect. Despite our having several “instances” of ideas of both passive and active powers, the idea of an active power derives more “from reflection on the operations of our minds” than from our consideration of bodies³². Indeed, if we admit that we call ‘power’ something related to action, we are able to identify only “two sorts of action, whereof we have any idea, *viz.* thinking and motion”³³. Nonetheless, Locke observes, it is evident not only that bodies produce no idea of thinking in us, but also that we cannot derive from them “any idea of the beginning of motion”, since:

[a] body at rest affords us no idea of any active power to move; and when it is set in motion it self, that motion is rather a passion, than an action in it. For when the ball obeys the stroke of a billiard-stick, it is not any action of the ball, but bare passion: Also when by impulse it sets another ball in motion, that lay in its way, it only communicates the motion it had received from another, and loses in it self so much, as the other received; which gives us but a very obscure Idea of an active power of moving in body, whilst we observe it only to transfer, but not produce any motion. For it is but a very obscure idea of power, which reaches not the production of the action, but the continuation of the passion³⁴.

Hence, to Locke’s eyes, experience only shows that a change appears to be first in body A and later in body B but not that body A is truly responsible for this “transfer”. The idea of power is therefore inferred only by reflecting on our being able to “move the parts of our bodies”³⁵ when we decide to do so, and it is not some property that we find in the world outside us. In this regard, as Locke writes in the chapter dedicated to the ideas of substance (E II

³¹ E II xxxi 1, pp. 233-34.

³² E II xxxi 4, p. 235. On the ‘psychological’ origin of Locke’s notion of motion see B. Lotti, “Nature and Origin of Motion in Locke”, in *Studi Lockiani* 1 (2020), pp. 89-129.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

xxxiii), it is very difficult to accept that bodies are endowed with “motivity”, i.e. “the active power of moving”, “since two bodies, placed by one another at rest, will never afford us the Idea of a power in the one to move the other, but by a borrowed motion”³⁶. On the contrary, the mind appears to actually possess such a power, so it seems reasonable to say that the “proper attribute of spirits” is the active power, whereas the proper attribute of matter is the passive one. But if this is true, we could suppose that “pure spirit, *viz.* God, is only active; pure matter is only passive; those beings that are both active and passive we may judge to partake of both”³⁷. However, once again, all these statements are based on evidences that derive from our representation of the world, namely our ideas, which are caused by a “constant experience” which “make[s] us sensible” to the transmission of motion from the mind to the body and from one body to another, but can make us “comprehend neither”³⁸. It is also for this reason, because we do not know the deep structure of reality but only the way in which it appears to us, that we cannot in principle deny that God has given matter the ability to think, “since we know not wherein thinking consists, nor to what sort of substances the almighty has been pleased to give that power, which cannot be in any created Being, but merely by the good pleasure and bounty of the creator”³⁹. Therefore, the power to think – which, as we have seen, is the source of every idea of power – is not a constitutive property of any finite being, but directly depends on God’s decision. In this sense, all natural phenomena are ultimately grounded in God’s will, which is the only way to explain their behaviour. As we read in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*,

it is evident, that by mere matter and motion, none of the great phaenomena of nature can be resolved, to instance but in that common one of gravity, which

³⁶ E II xxiii 28, p. 311.

³⁷ E II xxiii 28, p. 312.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ E IV iii 6, p. 541. As is well known, Locke’s hypothesis of thinking matter is a classic and widely discussed topic in Locke scholarship, from the studies by John Yolton (*Thinking Matter. Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983 and *John Locke and French Materialism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991) and Michael Ayers (*Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, Routledge, London 1991) to more recent publications (Schuurman, *Vision in God and Thinking Matter*, *cit.*; J. Bennett, *God and Matter in Locke: an Exposition of Essay IV.10*, in E. O’Neill and C. Mercer (eds.), *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 161-82). An overall interpretation, which frames Locke’s hypothesis within the broader context of his thought and shows the intellectual roots of his growing interest in such an argument is provided by Giuntini, *Presenti a se stessi. La centralità della coscienza in Locke*, *cit.*, Ch. 3 “Materia pensante e corpi immortali”.

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 ordering⁴⁰.

This means, as Locke's explains in a reply to Edward Stillingfleet⁴¹, that *any* activity to be found in nature can be considered the outcome of a divine "superaddition", and cannot therefore be considered essential to the being to which it is ascribed⁴²:

If the Omnipotent Creator had not superadded to the earth, which produced the irrational animals, qualities far surpassing those of the dull dead earth, out of which they were made, life, sense, and spontaneous motion, nobler qualities than were before in it, it had still remained rude, senseless matter; and if to the individuals of each species, he had not superadded a power of propagation, the species had perished with those individuals. But by these essences or properties of each species, superadded to the matter which they were made of, the essence of properties of matter in general were not destroyed or changed, any more than any thing that was in the individuals before, was destroyed or changed by the power of generation, superadded to them by the first benediction of the Almighty⁴³.

What, then, is the answer to the question raised in the previous section, i.e. how can Locke hold both the view that matter is an inert being and the view that God rules the world through his decisions without slipping into occasion-

⁴⁰ Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1695 ed.), § 192, ed. by J. Yolton, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989, p. 246.

⁴¹ For a presentation of the discussion between Locke and Stillingfleet, see M. Stuart, *The Correspondence with Stillingfleet*, in M. Stuart (ed.), *A Companion to Locke*, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford 2016, pp. 354-69.

⁴² In this respect I agree with the position held for instance by Margaret Wilson, who stated that Locke's claim that some properties of bodies, namely the secondary qualities, cannot be deduced from the primary 'Boylean' qualities, does not depend on an alleged human ignorance, but on the fact that "they *cannot* be the natural consequences of the operations of Boylean corpuscles", and for this reason must be seen as 'superadded' to bodies (cf. M. Wilson, "Superadded Properties. The Limits of Mechanism in Locke", in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), 2, pp. 143-50, p. 144 – Wilson's emphasis–, and "Superadded Properties. A Reply to M.R. Ayers", in *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982), 2, pp. 247-52) and Matthew Stuart (cf. M. Stuart, "Locke on Superaddition and Mechanism", in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6 (1998), 3, pp. 351-79). This position has been discussed by authors like Michael Ayers and, more recently, Walter Ott (see M. Ayers, "Mechanism, Superaddition, and the Proof of God's Existence in Locke's *Essay*", in *Philosophical Review* 90 (1981), 2, pp. 210-51 and Ott, *Causation and the Laws of Nature*, cit., Ch. 21).

⁴³ Locke, *Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter*, Churchill, London 1699, pp. 399-400.

alism? The ‘obvious answer’, namely that finite beings too have the power to act, seems in fact to run up against at least two difficulties.

First, according to Locke, as we have seen, one can know these powers only indirectly, through the effect that they produce on us (i.e. the ideas), and therefore can never “be certain that they [i.e. the powers] are in any subject by the connexion with any of those ideas, which *to us* make its essence”⁴⁴. Since knowledge occurs by means of representations obtained from experience, we can only be certain that we have ideas of powers but not that powers are really within the beings we know. In brief, we are sure that we perceive powers, but cannot be sure of their real existence, a position which is not really different from Malebranche’s. Indeed, as we can read in the *XV Elucidation* to the *Search after Truth* devoted to the occasional causes, for Malebranche too sensory experience shows that bodies are responsible for their (apparent) actions. Nonetheless, the “true cause” is not something that we can detect by means of our senses, as it can only be identified through reason, which reaches a very different conclusion:

When I see one ball strike another, my eyes tell me, or seem to tell me, that the one is truly the cause of the motion it impresses on the other, for the true cause that moves bodies does not appear to my eyes. But when I consult my reason I clearly see that since bodies cannot move themselves, and since their motor force is but the will of God that conserves them successively in different places, they cannot communicate a power they do not have and could not communicate even if it were in their possession. For the mind will never conceive that one body, a purely passive substance, can in any way whatsoever transmit to another body the power transporting it⁴⁵.

In this sense, by limiting knowledge to what experience shows us, Locke abandons the idea that we can actually grasp the real way in which things are by other means, and therefore – against Malebranche – that we can have the last word on the ultimate source of motion⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ E IV iii 16, p. 547, my emphasis.

⁴⁵ Malebranche, *Œuvres complètes*, cit., III, pp. 208-9, Engl. transl. *Search after Truth*, cit., p. 660.

⁴⁶ It is clear that what is crucially at work here is Locke’s (different) notion of idea: whereas for Malebranche ideas, being the archetypes of creation, describe the essence of things, for Locke they only express how objects appear to us. On this point see N. Jolley, “Locke and Malebranche. Intelligibility and Empiricism”, in P. Hamou and M. Pécheran (eds.), *Locke and Cartesian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, pp. 205-18.

The second difficulty concerns the fact that Locke does not consider powers to be intrinsic properties of bodies, since, on the contrary, as the discussion on the thinking matter hypothesis attests, they can be arbitrarily assigned to bodies by God. Accordingly, they cannot derive from the properties that we know to belong to them for sure, i.e. extension and solidity. As Locke puts it,

the coherence and continuity of the parts of matter; the production of sensation in us of colours and sounds, etc. by impulse and motion; nay, the original rules and communication of motion being such, wherein we can discover no natural connexion with any ideas we have, we cannot but ascribe them to the arbitrary will and good pleasure of the wise Architect⁴⁷.

Since the properties of objects and the way in which they are related to one another derive on a free decision of God, recourse to experience appears therefore inevitable, since it is impossible to deduce the features of bodies from other features which are only arbitrarily related to them. In this regard, even the laws of nature, which, as Locke states in his early *Essays on the Law of Nature*, are nothing but “the decree[s] of a superior will”⁴⁸, can be identified only by turning to experience:

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 dependencies being not discoverable in our Ideas, we can have but an experimental knowledge of them⁴⁹.

But if the thesis that nature possesses a true activity and for avoiding occasionalism is strictly – and exclusively – based on our experience, which limits knowledge to our representations, we can never be sure that the occasionalist hypothesis has really been refuted.

⁴⁷ E IV iii 29, pp. 559-60.

⁴⁸ Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, in *Political Essays*, ed. by M. Goldie, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 83.

⁴⁹ E IV iii 29, p. 560. We can therefore understand why, as Peter Anstey has observed, Locke “has [...] little to say about nomological explanation” (P. Anstey, *John Locke and Natural Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 162): since the laws of nature depend on “the good pleasure of the wise Architect”, there is no necessary connection between them and the properties of things: thus, knowledge of the former must go hand in hand with knowledge of the latter, and cannot precede it.

Conclusion

As Angela Coventry claims, “[Locke’s] treatment of power is one of the least satisfying discussions in the *Essay*, which is unfortunate considering its importance”⁵⁰. Even if such a reading is widely shared by commentators⁵¹, Coventry differs from them, for she does not consider Locke’s position to foreshadow Hume’s criticism of causality. In her view, unlike Hume,

Locke allows that the experience of change in objects, of motion transference for example, provides an idea of power in the objects, albeit an obscure one, and it is this experience that is central in forming the conclusion that there is power enabling the production and/or receiving of changes in objects⁵².

Nevertheless, as we have seen in the previous section, according to Locke, although experience shows changes in objects, which allow us to suppose that there is something, a *power*, which is the source of such changes, the same experience does not allow us to infer the real existence of powers. Locke’s battle against occasionalism by means of a recovery of the notion of powers therefore seems more of a statement of principle than the outcome of a dismantlement of occasionalist arguments. In this respect, as the first section of this article indicated, Locke’s rejection of occasionalism appears to mostly depend on moral and religious convictions, particularly the idea that occasionalism, far from giving value to God’s power, undermines it – a point that has been not adequately stressed in the literature devoted to Locke’s criticism of Malebranche’s philosophy, which has especially focused on the philosopher’s rejection of Malebranche’s vision in God⁵³. In this context, Locke’s negative opinion about occasionalism has been viewed as part of his intellectual battle against a theory of knowledge that he considered likely to lead to a dangerous form of enthusiasm, while proposing an illusory image of the human ability to

⁵⁰ Coventry, “Locke, Hume, and the Idea of Causal Power”, cit., p. 96.

⁵¹ Coventry provides a summary of such positions in Locke literature in “Locke, Hume, and the Idea of Causal Power”, cit., p. 97. See also P. Connolly, “The Idea of Power and Locke’s Taxonomy of Ideas”, in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 1 (2017), pp. 1-16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

⁵³ See for instance Schuurman, *Vision in God and Thinking Matter*, cit.; S. Roux, “De Malebranche à Locke et retour. Les idées avec ou sans la vision en Dieu”, in D. Antoine-Mahut (ed.), *Les Malebranchismes des Lumières. Études sur les réceptions contrastées de la philosophie de Malebranche, fin XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2014, pp. 78-123, Giuntini, *Presenti a se stessi*, cit., ch. II “Platonici ed entusiasti. Locke e la ‘visione in Dio’”.

grasp universal truths. What has been underlined, therefore, is more the radical difference between Locke's and Malebranche's principles than their points of contact, such as for instance the aforementioned thesis of the absolute power of God in governing nature and establishing the properties of – and relationships between – different beings. With regard to this, our examination of Locke's notion of power has shown that his empiricism can be seen not only as a starting point, an assumption from which every other tenet derives, but as a necessity grounded in the impossibility of comprehending God's decisions. In this regard, it must be noted that, as John Milton has already remarked⁵⁴, a similar view is also shared by Malebranche, who closes his troubled treatise on the laws of motion⁵⁵ with an admission that only experience can reveal what these laws are:

It is certain that in this case one cannot discover the truth except by experience. For since we can neither grasp the designs of the Creator nor understand all the relations which he has to his attributes, whether to conserve or not to conserve a constant absolute quantity of movement seems to depend on a purely arbitrary decision by God, about which we cannot become certain except by a kind of revelation, such as is given by experience⁵⁶.

However, while, according to Malebranche, the appeal to experience is necessary only with regard to part of the physical domain, for direct access to God's ideas allows human beings to grasp the real essence of bodies, Locke's denial of such an access, as well as of innatism, entails a major consequence. Indeed, since the only way to know God's creation is through experience, we cannot but attain what experience presents to us. This implies that, if the actions of created beings cannot be explained by invoking the real properties of those same beings, whose essences we are unable to grasp, causality can only be interpreted in terms of a relationship between different states of affairs. In Locke's words, the idea of causality must be considered the idea of a relation,

⁵⁴ See J.R. Milton, "Laws of Nature", in D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 680-701, pp. 698-99.

⁵⁵ Previously included in the first editions of *Recherche de la vérité*, this treatise was rewritten a number of times, mostly because of Leibniz's criticism, before being finally published as a self-standing essay in 1700. See M. Priarolo, "L'amor che move". Volonté et 'physique de l'âme", in J.C. Bardout, D. Moreau, and V. Carraud (eds.), *Nouvelles recherches sur La Recherche de la vérité*, Vrin, Paris 2020, pp. 215-28.

⁵⁶ Malebranche, *Œuvres Complètes*, cit., XVII-1, p. 55, Engl. transl. (slightly modified) by J. Milton ("Laws of nature", cit., p. 699).

which, like all relations, is “capable ... of being more perfect and distinct in our minds, than those of substances”⁵⁷. As a result, since causality is identified as the mental representation arising from the “constant vicissitude of things”⁵⁸, and not as a set of properties truly belonging to the things known, to understand causality it is more relevant to focus on the subjective experience of it, and to analyse the ways in which human beings decipher nature, rather than the structure of nature itself – precisely the philosophical approach that David Hume will propose.

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⁵⁷ E II xxv 8, p. 324

⁵⁸ E II xxvi 1, p. 324.

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