

MALEBRANCHE AND MIRACLES

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ABSTRACT

Michaela Tiller: Malebranche and Miracles
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Malebranche is an occasionalist philosopher, which is to say he believes that God is the only cause with all creations being passive. He is also a Catholic priest, and therefore committed to the truth of his faith. Malebranche therefore must account for what miracles are in a metaphysical system where their direct causation by the divine does not provide any special distinction. This paper locates Malebranche's solution to the apparent difficulty in a division between cases where God acts according to laws of nature and those where intervention is necessary lest the laws of nature lead God to negate any divine attribute.

To Trey, for your loving support.

To Amina and Mike, for your certain faith.

To Alan, for your patient assistance.

To every teacher who showed me the beautiful parts of philosophy.

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One of the most famous positions of Nicolas Malebranche, if not one of the most clearly understood, is his occasionalism. This is to say, Malebranche is committed to the position that the only causal power is that of God. It is relatively common for religious philosophers to describe God as the First Cause; what makes occasionalism a notable extension of the position is that it requires that God be the Only Cause. To put this in terms of concretes, for Malebranche, the destruction of a building hit by a wrecking ball is not caused by the wrecking ball or the demolition crew, but directly by God himself; the wrecking ball's movement, the hand on the controls, and the mind desiring the movement of the hand are all mere occasions without any causal force. Due to his strict Catholicism, however, Malebranche is also committed to the idea that miracles, as confirmed by the Church and described in the Bible, are real occurrences. Given the common understanding of a miracle as God's direct intervention in what would otherwise have occurred, and therefore the implication that what differentiates a miracle from a normal event is its being caused directly by God, there seems prima facie to be an inconsistency in Malebranche's position, whereby all events are "miraculous", diminishing the significance of any traditionally significant miracle. That this is problematic is clear if we consider the impacts of the Burning Bush which appeared to Moses being called a miracle rather than a hallucination, whereas one might think that Malebranche makes any hallucination a miracle equally directly a product of God's action. I think that this apparent criticism can be resolved through close examination of how Malebranche perceives God's action in both the normal causal case and the miraculous one. A further aim of this work is that it allows me to participate in the long

effort to clarify the particulars of Malebranche's occasionalism, a position which has prompted significant debate among commentators from Malebranche's contemporaries to the present day.¹ Given the size of Malebranche's oeuvre, and the possibility of changes in his views over time, I have chosen in this paper to limit my scope to the *Dialogues* and to attempt to clarify his position at that particular juncture, as his final view, since extensive work would be warranted to extrapolate the position across his earlier writings on the subject.²

This paper will be organized in the following fashion, privileging some initial period of reconstruction, in the hopes of making my argument clear. First, I will argue for why the *Dialogues* are a sufficient text to understand Malebranche's mature position and introduce the characters who serve as his mouthpieces. Secondly, I will elucidate the position of occasionalism. Once the Malebranchean system of causation and its motivations are explained, I will proceed to the problem of miracles. I will contrast the miraculous case against the typical case in an effort to explain the seventh dialogue passage which is the nexus text for his view (Malebranche, 131). This entails looking at two possible misunderstandings for how the typical and miraculous ought to be distinguished before I am able to introduce what I believe is the correct view, having corrected the errors of the mistaken readings. I will then test my own reading by looking at another significant text for Malebranche on miracles, from the twelfth dialogue's discussion of providence (Malebranche, 230-231). Finally, I will locate my view with reference to other Malebranche

¹ See Nadler 2011, Chapter 3 and its postscript for summary (Nadler, 48-73)

² A significant body of text I ignore, as do many English language commentators due to its unavailability in translation, is Malebranche's correspondence with Arnauld.

commentators and illustrate why my reading of him on miracles even works for those who read Malebranche's occasionalism at opposite ends of the possible spectrum of accounts.

I choose the *Dialogues* as my source for Malebranche's view because as a later work, produced after both the *Search After Truth* and the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* were published and after the beginning of his exchanges and disagreement with Arnauld, it seems likelier to contain his mature position. Furthermore, the *Dialogues* have the benefit of being organized as a didactic text, and therefore Malebranche takes his reader from complete ignorance of his position to full knowledge and theoretical understanding in the course of series of lessons, which lay particularly bare the structure of his argument and what he thinks results from what. It is also useful insofar as Malebranche presents what those objections are that a contemporary reader might be tempted to give. Given his experience with the reception of his earlier works, he is fully aware of his objectors' opinions. As a result, the *Dialogues* are comparatively explicit on the set of the common interpretational traps which he wishes for the reader to avoid.

The *Dialogues* are written as they are titled, which is to say in the form of discussion between characters. Two characters are present throughout, and their roles are easily explained. Theodore is a well-versed Malebranchean who is undertaking to explain the system to his friend Aristes. Whatever Aristes' original views, he takes the role of a thorough skeptic at the beginning of the *Dialogues*, even as regards the tenets of the Christian faith which he likely does share with Malebranche and Theodore. In some respects, Aristes takes a starting position much like that of Descartes' meditator, having cast off his views so that he might judge Theodore's by the light of reason alone. The third, Theotimus, occupies a slightly more complicated role. Theotimus, in contrast to the other speakers, only arrives for

the first time in the seventh dialogue. This dialogue, in accord with its title, regards “the inefficacy of natural causes” (Malebranche, 104) and is the location of Malebranche’s argument for occasionalism. Theotimus then remains for the rest of the discussion until the end of the *Dialogues*. He is therefore present for the vast majority of the discussion on which I draw for my arguments. He is also a spokesperson for Malebranche's views, but by and large he performs this role by coaxing Theodore to speak on issues which would be implausible for Aristes, as a less experienced philosopher, to perceive as relevant. Theotimus often does this by posing possible objections to Theodore, so as to reassure Aristes of his new convictions against arguments or examples which non-Malebrancheans might raise and which Aristes might be unable to answer. One important thing to recognize, however, is that by the time of Theotimus' arrival, Aristes has set aside his original doubts regarding God and faith. He remains less experienced with Malebranche's theory than the other speakers and therefore he still functions in the student role. Significantly, though, by convincing Aristes to move the *Dialogues* into the realm of discussion amongst Christians, Malebranche has allowed himself access for all further argument to a certain set of commitments regarding God's existence and nature now shared among his characters.

To give an example of what these shared commitments are, all three are now firm theists. What defines God for many theists, including these and Malebranche himself, is that God is the prime mover or first cause. While there is ambiguity in how this role ought to be understood and disagreement persists even as to what Malebranche thought the act of Creation was, the terms “prime mover” and “first cause” denote that God began that which leads to the events we ourselves believe ourselves to be certain of through experience. Let us consider a very skeptical theist, on par with Descartes’ meditator in the early stages of the

process: for such an individual, knowledge may be limited to something as sparse as the Cogito (merely the certainty of the existence of a thinking substance), yet one still may prove the necessity of some creator of that substance. That creator is to be identified with the singular Creator, God. This applies even if one believes strongly in an interpretation of Creation as an eternal action as yet incomplete, perhaps because of intuitions that creation involves sustenance. Furthermore, as a priest in the Paris Oratory, Malebranche as an individual is particularly dedicated to the truths of the Gospel and of Catholic faith and therefore to God's identity as the cause of all creation, something which I believe he takes to be stronger than being merely the first cause. To possess causal power is to be able to bring about an effect by oneself as far as Malebranche seems able to understand, and therefore it is an act of creation. Malebranche, however, thinks that only God is capable of such an act of creation.

Malebranche's solution to this dilemma is his aforementioned occasionalism, the position that God causes all. This is despite the fact that we frequently speak in terms of causal language about common events, and sometimes explicitly identify the objects we describe as a cause and an effect: one billiard ball moves another, a man lifts his arm, a needle causes me pain. What are commonly called causes do not have any causal power in themselves. The minds and bodies involved in my prior examples- billiard ball, man desirous of lifting his arm, needle, etc.- are mere "occasions" for God to exercise his causal power when they enter certain conditions, which is to say exist in various relations to other objects or in such a way as to instantiate some property. All actions are God's, with his creations being passive, and so whenever one event appears to "cause" another, this is an uneducated misunderstanding of God regularly taking that event as the occasion for his own causation of

the associated “effect”. I say “regularly” because Malebranche makes clear his commitment that there is predictability in God’s action (outside the case of miracles): “let us conceive that this ball is moved and that in the line of its motion it strikes another ball at rest. Experience teaches us that this other ball will be moved inevitably and according to certain proportion which are always exactly observed” (Malebranche, 117). Aristes is applauded for learning that “all this [phenomenal experience] is a necessary consequence of the laws of the union of the soul and body and of the communication of motion.... God communicates his power to us only through the establishment of certain general laws, whose efficacy we determine by our various modalities” (Malebranche, 122). It seems reasonable to read such text as somewhat anticipatory of Hume in terms of regularity of experience giving rise to our belief in laws of nature. God’s actions conform to general laws, which is to say that whatever observable phenomena results from His action, it will occur in constant conjunction with its occasion, which may also be sensible, leading us to observe that constant conjunction in the cases of some laws. While these laws of God may in fact be limited to two- the one governing the interaction of bodies of pure extension and the one governing the interaction of bodies and minds, given that these are the only ones explicitly taught to Aristes (Malebranche, 116-120)- I will speak in slightly less strict terms and admit all the generalizable consequences of these two laws as well into what I mean by the word law. This is to say, since “All wood burns” is true in my experience as a result of the two basic laws, it is as regular and as predictive of God’s action as though it were willed by God particularly instead of as consequence of the basic laws. We initially recognize these relations between circumstances and effects as regularities, and therefore formulate statements which we believe are always true through description of the experience of our sensory perceptions.

Thus what makes the billiard ball move, a body lift its arm, and a mind feel pain is always God, rather than the vernacular “causes” and real “occasions” of a billiard ball, a man desirous of lifting his arm, and a needle.

One might think that miracles are not an unusual case for Malebranche. If we assume that what truly defines a miracle is its being caused by God, then every event might appear to be a miracle in an occasionalist system. However, such an argument would miss a significant quality of miracles as commonly recognized: they violate the general laws of God's actions regarding his usual causal role. The Burning Bush is significant because it was not consumed; Mary is the only instance of human parthenogenesis (which should further result in a female child by our biological laws); Christ's resurrections and healings during his time of ministry are performed in circumstances that belie our understanding of biology. It is this that makes them potent symbols of faith and of power in the Christian tradition in which Malebranche was steeped. In the typical cases, those common instances of contact between billiard balls and my will triggering the movements of my body, “all this is a necessary consequence of the laws of the union of the soul and body and of the communication of motion” (Malebranche, 122). The usual case is one that does not conflict with the laws of nature as we know them, which is to say the regularity of God's usual action; the miraculous cases do conflict for Malebranche. This is evident from the sort of miracles to which Malebranche is committed; when Theotimus introduces miracles as a problematic case, he does so in this way: “But what, I ask you, is to become of miracles? The impact of bodies, for example, is the occasional cause of the communication of motion from the striking body to the struck one. What! Cannot God in such a case suspend the effect of the general law of the communication of motion, and has He not often suspended it?” (Malebranche, 130). This

indicates that Malebranche himself also saw their illustrative potential, Theotimus being the character in the dialogues who challenges the understanding of Aristes and Theodore with tricky questions. I take Malebranche, therefore, to distinguish, at least for examination, between two types of cases: God causing effects for occasions in such a way as to follow the laws of nature (the typical) and God intervening somehow in the operation of the law (the miraculous).

A full description of the typical case is necessary groundwork to understanding the miraculous, since the miraculous is redefined late in the *Dialogues* as an “interrupt[ion of] the ordinary course of providence” (Malebranche, 199). One might be tempted to suppose that the omniscient God of Christianity is simply aware of every occasion and so able to cause the effect with which that occasion is associated. The difference between the typical case and the miraculous would then merely be that the former is in compliance with the laws of God's predictable action whereas the latter is an exceptional case only because God is acting unusually. However, this is not a route open for Malebranche. The laws of nature are much stronger regularities than would be the mere human predictions of God's likely action. This was hinted at above, as Malebranche describes the miraculous case as “suspend[ing] the effect of the general law”. Since God is the only cause for Malebranche, describing something as a direct effect of the law is striking, as is the word “suspend”, which suggests that God is temporarily halting the force (be it causal, volitional or of another kind entirely) of the law. Malebranche is also more explicit about the force of the natural laws in the standard case elsewhere: “all this [experienced phenomena] is a necessary consequence of the laws of the union of the soul and body and of the communication of motion. All this depends on these two principles of which I am convinced: it is only the creator of bodies who

can be their mover; and God communicates his power to us only through the establishment of certain general laws” (Malebranche, 122).

Malebranche gives his exposition as to what these laws ought to be in the seventh dialogue discussion of causality. He believes in two types of substance, body and mind, of which we have experiences as though of causation: we see billiard balls hit each other, and other such bodily interactions, on the one hand; on the other, certain mental states seem to regularly either precede or follow certain states of our physical bodies, as when I desire to wiggle my toes. Since these substances cannot in any way have the power to bring about these regularities, Malebranche determines that we have experiential evidence of God causing two types of regular interaction, and therefore two laws: how God acts when bodies interact and how God acts in the case of mind-body interaction. These laws exist for Malebranche since “because God must act in a simple and uniform manner, He had to formulate laws which were general and as simple as possible” (Malebranche, 119). They are also a result of God's goodness to his creatures, because the alternative to such laws is “the confusion and irregularity of a kind of chaos in which minds could never understand anything” (Malebranche, 116). This is to say that God is still the only cause or actor, but he must, because of his nature, act simply and uniformly, which he achieves by determining a law for what effect follows upon an occasion.

Anything described as a law in the *Dialogues* is general and applies across all which exists, so it seems to obviously qualify as a law of nature in regards to how the term is used in the philosophy post-Hume, to describe a regularity in the mosaic of phenomena. Malebranche describes these laws in the following way: “the divine decrees are the indissoluble connections between all parts of the universe and the wondrous chain of the

subordination of all causes” (Malebranche, 121). This is odd in that it appears to suggest by “subordination of all causes” that there are multiple efficient causes which can be traced back to God as the final cause. However, that is not Malebranche's intent. Rather, the decrees are rules by which God binds his volition, and therefore whatever causal force they have is as dispositions of God, being construed as perhaps second order volitions or a set of God's volitions for similar occasions.

The Catholic God is necessarily immutable, because to change implies being within time, whereas God created time and therefore exists outside and prior to it. God is responsible for the creation of the world as an act of will, but also for the continued existence of the world as part of that same act of will. As all his other attributes affected the laws of nature, so too does his immutability: “given these decrees, they cannot be changed whatever He wills He wills without succession by a simple and invariable act” (Malebranche, 130). This raises an issue for the account of miracles suggested above, whereby they consisted in “suspension” of the laws, which now seems impossible given that the decrees cannot be changed; indeed, Theotimus raises the problem in the passage quoted above almost immediately after Theodore describes the laws as unchanging.

Theodore's response offers two solutions to Theotimus' problem: “when God performs a miracle and does not act as a consequence of the general laws which as known to us, I maintain either that God acts as a consequence of other laws unknown to us, or that what He does then is determined by certain circumstances he had in view from all eternity in undertaking that simple, eternal, and invariable act which contains both the general laws and also the exceptions to these very laws” (Malebranche, 131). There are a number of ways, however, that these options can be parsed. I will consider a couple of interpretations which

might occur to the reader and explain why they are not correct readings of Malebranche in my view, and then elaborate on how I think Malebranche does conceive of miracles.

There is a possible reading of Theodore's response in which miracles are not anomalies in the system: it could rather be that God, for Malebranche, did give us a complete understanding of the laws of motion and those of mind-body interaction, but that was not knowledge of all of the divine decrees. Let us suppose that there is some special type of substance called miraculon, and we are not capable of perceiving it and God has given us no knowledge of it. Nonetheless, miraculon-body interactions do occur, and God has a set of regular laws of nature for them. Since we perceive bodies, we can perceive the effects on those bodies which are occasioned by miraculon, but since we do not understand miraculon-body interaction and perceive only the body, we describe the event as a body acting in a way not predicted by the laws of nature (as known to us) and therefore as a miracle. Further textual support for such a view could be drawn from Malebranche's footnote very late in the *Dialogues*: "By "miracle" I mean the effects which depend on general laws which are not known to us naturally" (Malebranche, 230). This would obviously be less than appealing because it would suddenly introduce a new and never discussed substance to Malebranche's ontology, but it is theoretically possible. However, I think that Theodore explicitly rules out the idea that there is any general law, in the style of the law of the conservation of motion or that of the law of the interaction of mind and body, which governs miracles for the simple reason that there is a lack of regularity in miracles: "God did not make general laws in order to regulate uniformly the efficacy of his volitions.... For in the exceptions to the general laws God acts sometimes in one way, sometimes in another" (Malebranche, 131).

In fact, this same piece of text is useful to rule out another potential reading. We might think that God has given us access to the laws of nature, but not to their domain: the exceptions we consider to be miracles are baked into the law as instances in which it will not apply. It would be difficult to understand why Malebranche would so stress that laws are general when they include exceptions, but it is logically possible. To illustrate, let us suppose that it is a known general law that all unicorns have horns. Eventually, however, a foal is born to our unicorn herd with a congenital defect that leaves her hornless. We could say that the law that all unicorns have horns was true while still calling the foal a unicorn if we say that the law was intended to be restricted to the domain of healthy and phenotypically normal animals. This is frequently known as adding a *ceteris paribus* clause to the law: technically the law only applies while all things are equal, and the introduction of the foal's deformity makes it relevantly different to the other members of the set of all unicorns, the regularity of whose having a horn is the basis of the law. To apply this back to Malebranche, let us take the Burning Bush as the analogue of the hornless foal. It is a law of nature that wood is combustible, and yet we are told of a miraculous case wherein wood was on fire but was not consumed by the flame. If the Burning Bush is to be excepted by means of a *ceteris paribus* clause, it would imply that the bush is relevantly different from other kinds of wood in a way that renders it an exception, explaining the law's failure to apply. We do recognize some normal *ceteris paribus* clauses for the rule that wood is combustible: for example, wood treated with asbestos will not be combustible, nor will wood be in the absence of oxygen or when doused in water. However, we know that "in the exceptions to the general laws God acts sometimes in one way, sometimes in another" (Malebranche, 131), therefore we can't assume that there is a regularity to the exceptions such that the Burning Bush is marked out

by anything aside from God's particular volition for it at that moment nor that what marks it out occasions its incombustibility in the way that the foal's genetic defect occasions her hornlessness. Indeed, from Theotimus' case- that is, the question "What! Cannot God in such a case suspend the effect of the general law of the communication of motion, and has He not often suspended it?" (Malebranche, 130)- Malebranche seems to express that God is "suspending" what ought usually to apply, rather than implying that the miraculous event in question was outside the scope of the law properly understood with its *ceteris paribus* clauses. In seemingly identical circumstances, let us suppose five minutes after the initial miraculous flames cease, it seems fully possible, if not likely, that the Bush would be consumed by fire were it to be lit again, given that God's purpose for intervening was met.

Let us examine then, the positive answer which Theodore gives before dismissing the "digression" of miracles: "in the exceptions to the general laws God acts sometimes in one way, sometimes in another, though always according to what is required of Him by whichever one of His attributes is, as it were, most valuable to Him at that moment. I meant that if what He owes to His justice is then more important than what He owes to his wisdom or to all His other attributes, in this exception He will follow the path of His justice" (Malebranche, 131).³ There seem to be a number of things which we can read directly from

³ It is important to note, however, that Malebranche does not expect us to be able to truly understand what he means by God's attributes. He states that "we must attribute to Him only incomprehensible attributes... since God is the infinite in every sense, since nothing finite pertains to Him, and since anything that is infinite in every sense is incomprehensible in every respect to the human mind" (Malebranche, 136). Nonetheless, those same attributes explicitly govern when God wills miracles to occur, so despite the inability of a finite mind to grasp the infinite, Malebranche puts his readers and Aristes through trying to somehow grasp the attributes of God for the whole of the eighth dialogue. Theodore explains the attempt on these grounds: "God is [not] good... according to common ideas. These attributes, as they are ordinarily conceived, are unworthy of the infinitely perfect Being. But God does possess these qualities in the sense that Reason teaches us this and Scripture, which cannot contradict itself, has us believe it" (Malebranche, 145). This means that all terms referring to God in human discussion are being used somewhat as metaphor or analogy, introducing unavoidable vagueness even to Malebranche's position.

this piece of text. The first is, proceeding sequentially through the quoted passage, that God does not act consistently in the cases of miracles. In what way he is acting “sometimes in one way, sometimes in another”, Theodore, and therefore Malebranche, here is unclear.

We might perhaps extrapolate that God does not act consistently in those cases which we view as exemptions even though what appear to us to be identical conditions may arise. For example, let us take the Biblical example of the Fiery Furnace: when three Hebrew youths were placed in a furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar, they were not burned. Therefore, we might suppose that there is an exception in the general laws of the behavior of fire which exempts any case in which three virtuous and devout members of God’s chosen from being one in which it applies: for example, fire damages human flesh and causes pain upon contact except when three devout youths are in a furnace. However, when we replicate the conditions, experience shows us that we will often find that God permits his faithful in the furnace to burn. This means we cannot append general exceptions to each law as to what happens even in the exceptional case.

Malebranche seems to be implying rather that the exceptions are particular cases which cause conflict among God’s attributes. Malebranche uses language of temporal immediacy and location, which is odd considering that he is speaking of God, who exists outside of time: “...most valuable to Him *at that moment*.” The only way that this can be consistent with Malebranche’s view of God is if the “moment”, identical to typical occasions for God’s causal action in terms of the circumstances of the bodies and minds in question, was known by God (the knowledge of what one is creating being part of the act of creation) outside of time, and prompted what appears to humans to be an exception centered on a particular moment rather than a generalizable set of conditions. This is to say, God knew

there would be a conflict of His attributes when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were placed in the furnace, and therefore carved out a particular exemption to the general laws of fire for them then. The “exceptions to the general laws” that Malebranche describes are the set of those instances where God’s attributes appear to conflict in with His ability to will the general law in the particular case. The variance of God’s action is then a little more complicated than the lack of replicability in similar or identical conditions: rather, the discrepancy is that in the exceptional cases it isn’t always the same attributes which conflict and therefore He acts in priority with different aspects of His nature in the particular instances of the set of miracles.

An appeal to conflict among God’s attributes seems superficially odd. The normal Christian conception, or even Cartesian definition, of God is given in terms of his attributes: God is infinite existence, God is infinite goodness, God is infinite power. If at some points God experiences conflict among his attributes, that suggests that while God ought to do what is simple because to act as God is to act simply, and similarly, God is good and ought to act morally, there are times when it is impossible to do both. Let us, however, return to Theodore’s speech for clarification of why this objection is not appropriate. Theodore does not suggest that when miracles occur, it represents a negation of any of God’s attributes, but rather a resolution of potential conflict by God willing unusually in terms of which attribute governs the outcome of an occasion: “I meant that if what He owes to His justice is then more important than what He owes to his wisdom or to all His other attributes, in this exception He will follow the path of His justice” (Malebranche, 131).

Let me suggest, then, my own reading for what Theodore (and so Malebranche) means when he describes what happens in the course of a miracle as God pursuing the path

of a different attribute than the one which He normally allows to govern Him: God does not prioritize any particular attribute or order them in vacillating ranks of value, but rather, God is always compelled to act against the negation of any of His own attributes, and occasions where the general laws would result in a negation of God's attributes are sufficiently rare by his ordering of creation that miracles remain the "unusual" case. I will then test this reading against some other later texts about miracles in the *Dialogues* to prove that the position can be identified with Malebranche's fully elaborated view rather than a temporary didactic stance.

Let us emphasize, then, the Cartesian intuition that attributes cannot be negated by the substance which possesses them: a body would not be a body were it not extended; a mind would not be a mind did it not think. The primary attribute of a substance is almost analogous to its existence, since it is the only thing necessary for the substance to be identified as a particular substance. God cannot fail to be good or to act simply or to otherwise express, in some way, the attributes which identify the substance as God. General ill consequences are not, for Malebranche, so significant an evil that they negate the gift of our creation and eventual resurrection. Therefore, God remains the good, identified as a substance with and by attribute, even as he allows small evils to befall his creation. Similarly, God is not always obliged to answer human prayers, knowing particularly that human desires often lead to ill consequences, despite His great love for creation. In the miracles of the Bible, however, God acts with greater motivation than either of these: God has spoken to a prophet and therefore is bound by what he has said to that individual as by a promise. To a certain extent, this also covers the miracles recognized by the Catholic Church which Malebranche would believe in outside of those described in the Bible: God has granted authority to the Church, and

therefore when it declares a miracle it is by proxy a promise on His word that something special has occurred. Malebranche indicates that there may be miracles beyond these, but since these are the ones he knows, they are the ones to which his characters limit their discussion. A significant quote explains this position: “If you ask me when it happens that God acts as much or more according to what He is by departing from His general laws, than by following them, I reply that I know nothing of this. But I do know indeed that sometimes it happens. I know that, I say, because faith teaches it to me” (Malebranche, 231). It is also a tenet of faith for a Oratorian like Malebranche that God has the attribute of the true (which may be equivalent with reality here, given that Cartesians admit of both representation and existence as types of reality), if only because all that is true is true only by God’s volition. Let us consider the example of the first plague inflicted on Egypt in Exodus. Moses is instructed by God to dip his staff into the Nile, and upon this occasion, an unusual effect occurs contrary to the laws governing interactions of wood and water, which is to say that there is a miracle, and the river water turns to blood. This miracle is in a sense necessary by the nature of God, because since God is not a deceiver (to use the formulation inherited from Descartes), once Moses was told that would be the effect resulting from the occasion, as indeed he was: “This is what the Lord says: ...With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood” (Exodus 7:17), God must keep the promise.

Malebranche returns to the subject of miracles in the twelfth dialogue as part of his discussion of divine providence, having moved from the dialogues “on metaphysics” to those more clearly “on religion” by this point. Aristes questions whether there is ever reason for God to depart from his general laws, and therefore whether miracles do occur. Theodore

answers him in a way which I feel is strongly consonant with my reading of his position earlier in the *Dialogues*:

“God has these important reasons [to cause a miracle] when the glory He derives from the perfection of His work counterbalances that which He receives from the uniformity of His conduct. He has these serious reasons when what He owes to His immutability is equal to or of less consideration than what He owes to another one of His attributes in particular. In a word, He has these reasons when he acts as much or more according to His nature by departing from the general laws than by following them. For God always acts according to what he is. He inviolably follows the immutable order of His own perfections, because it is in His own substance that He finds His law” (Malebranche, 230-231).

There is much to parse in this passage, but I think it all amounts to textual evidence in favor of the reading I have already given. Malebranche informs us that God’s volitions stem directly from his nature, and in particular the perfections which are his attributes and thereby constitute His nature. Malebranche uses the terminology of owing something to each attribute here as elsewhere, but I think it is helpfully couched in the explanation that God must always will what is most expressive of His own nature. If God must always act according to what He is, what most firmly constrains Him in that is that He must never act in a way that is not good, unjust, not gracious or any lacking perfection in any respect. Furthermore, the laws are only binding to God insofar as He created them as such, and so if something must give way, it is far less significant for there to be an anomalous event among humans, who, through failures of sensory perception, hallucinogens or neurochemical imbalance for example, already often enough have experiences functionally indistinguishable from miracles without any actual deviations from general laws, than for God to act in a way that would not be in keeping with his nature. God merely “owes” his attributes that He continue to possess and act in accordance with them.

There is little in the way of secondary literature particularly on the issue of miracles in Malebranche. However, more has been written on his occasionalism, and there may be some utility in situating my view against other readings of Malebranche. Here I rely particularly on Nadler's 'Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche' (Nadler, 48-73) for its overview of writings on the subject. Nadler identifies two strands in the scholarship on Malebranche's occasionalism and how it ought to operate. One camp, populated with figures such as Charles McCracken and Nicholas Jolley, read Malebranche to say that God's volitions are few and general, perhaps to the point that God simply wills as part of creating and sustaining the world "general decrees instituting universal laws of motion, of thought, and of mind-body union [which] are sufficient by themselves to determine how bodies will behave, or what state a thing will be in on any particular occasion" (Nadler, 58). Nadler places himself as a corrective to this first camp, and argues that while Malebranche speaks of "general volitions" he means only "individual volitions in accordance with general laws" (Nadler, 61). Supposing Nadler to capture the spread of opinion amongst contemporary commentators, I think it can be argued that my solution for the problem of miracles works in either case: whether God set the world in motion and then permits the extended and thinking substances to move like clocks in unison with certain regularities and correspondence relations, which is to say, created things so that certain laws would be predictable with near-total accuracy although not necessarily without exception and appear "true" to human reason of the whole of creation; or God makes a set of similar volitions about identical circumstances. However, I take myself to be closer to Jolley and McCracken in how I read Malebranche, and therefore to have written my account of occasionalism in a way that accords with theirs, wherein Malebranche speaks of the general volitions as something quite

different from collections of particular volitions; Nadler's reading seems somewhat dissonant with Malebranche's emphasis on the simplicity of laws and on the singular act of creation immutably made outside of time. This disagreement largely comes on the strength of representative quotes from the *Dialogues*: "because God must act in a simple and uniform manner, He had to formulate laws which were general" (Malebranche, 119) tying God's action to the law's manifestation itself. God's need to act simply, to take an opposite example, did not lead him to create fewer and less diverse particular objects, because they are all created in the same act, meeting the criteria for simplicity. Admittedly, Nadler does seem to emphasize the *Treatise of Nature and Grace* as his primary source for Malebranche's position, and therefore our disagreement could simply stem from changes in the view itself in the period between the writing of the two books. I believe that my view would still then be likelier to align with that of the mature Malebranche, given my earlier reasons for preferring the *Dialogues* text.

If we suppose that Nadler is correct, though, it is simple to blend my account of miracles with his of occasionalism. God has set general laws with which His particular volitions at circumstances are usually in accordance. It is these general laws, and their particularized instances (to take one example of instantiation to particular law from the general: if any objects collide, force is conferred; if two cars crash, force is conferred) which we humans describe as the laws of nature. However, sometimes God "suspends" the general law to permit Himself a particular volition which violates the law but which better expresses His nature, and this case is the miraculous one. God set the general law as a typical constraint on any volitions, but may still freely act outside it as He wills. God cannot but be good, just

and otherwise perfect because that is His nature, and therefore it is necessary to disregard the constraint if otherwise He would not act in accordance with an attribute.

If we suppose a near-Leibnizian type of occasionalism in Malebranche, as Nadler describes Desmond Clark espousing (Nadler, 59), then God simply at the time of creation established a sequence of events for the mental world and the physical world, which play alongside each other like parallel projectors on parallel screens. God determined the events so there would be regularities in what scene follows another on each screen and in certain types of scene on one screen being screened prior or contemporaneously with certain types of scene on the other screen. What we can apprehend of these regularities, or what God makes apparent to our reason of them, we call the laws. Again, my account of miracles can blend with such an understanding of the typical case. Miracles are those cases where God, in order to act in accordance with an attribute, has broken the regularities of these relationships between scenes. This was done of a piece with the creation of everything else, but it is still distinguished because it does not comply with the “general” rule.

I believe therefore that my account of how Malebranche wants miracles to be understood is helpful to commentators beyond those who share any idiosyncrasies of my view. It is a useful adoption to any variety of position on occasionalism in Malebranche to be able to account for the miraculous cases, as this is something Malebranche clearly desires to do. I also think that my view raises interesting consequences for Malebranche scholars outside the limited scope of miraculous cases. For instance, I would like to attend to the consequences of Malebranche’s occasionalism on explanation. He so diminishes the laws of nature as to reconstrue them as not infrequently broken constraints on volitions which only exist by the force of God’s same will; these are most analogous to, I would say, a human’s

constraint upon herself, freely enough broken, to not eat chocolate. Are these general laws worthy of being considered as knowledge in the way which Cartesians typically give weight to the sciences? If there always remains the possibility of God's intervention, known both by reason and by faith, it seems as though there are significant reasons to doubt our ability to make any sort of prediction on the basis of the laws of nature. In this way, it might be argued that Malebranche prefigures more of Hume than is usually recognized.

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