

Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions

Copyright © 2016 The Johns Hopkins University Press. This article first appeared in:
Journal of the History of Philosophy 54:2, April 2016, pp. 227-255

Version of record: <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/615324>

DOI: 10.1353/hph.2016.0028

Julie Walsh and Eric Stencil

Abstract: Nicolas Malebranche holds that God can act in two ways: by general volitions or by particular volitions. Malebranche is clear that general volitions are acts of God in accordance with the laws of nature or laws of grace, and always have a secondary cause that occasions the event. He is much less direct about how, exactly, to understand particular volitions and when, if ever, they occur. In this paper, we examine the nature and possibility of divine particular actions in Malebranche's system by way of an analysis of his discussions of creation, original sin, and the Incarnation of Christ.

Keywords: Malebranche, divine volitions, Arnauld, miracles, original sin

Body of paper:

Among Nicolas Malebranche's most influential contributions to philosophy are his defense of occasionalism, his highly original theodicy, and his philosophical method elaborated in greatest detail in his magnum opus *De la Recherche de la vérité* (*The Search After Truth*, hereafter: *Recherche*). In his account of occasionalism, Malebranche argues that finite things have no causal power and that God is the only true causal agent. Malebranche's theodicy—his attempt to reconcile the existence of evil in the world with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God—is most thoroughly developed in *Traité de la nature et de la grâce* (*Treatise on Nature and Grace*, hereafter: *Traité*). Malebranche's theodicy revolves around a distinction between God's acting by general volitions (*volontez générales*) and particular volitions (*volontez particulières*). While its proper interpretation is controversial, fundamental to the distinction is the claim that the former are volitions of God that are “consequence[s] of general laws which [God] has established” while the latter are “not determined at all by some general law.”¹ For [228] Malebranche, God acts, almost exclusively, by general volitions, and this fact is important for Malebranche's explanation of evil. God could have created a more perfect world, but that would have sacrificed the simplicity of His ways—which would be inconsistent with God's attributes.² Finally, in the *Recherche* Malebranche identifies the main sources of error and sin in the service of elaborating a method for the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

¹ Malebranche, *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.i–ii (OC V.147/R 195). Unless otherwise stated, translations are our own.

² For example, Malebranche's *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xiv (OC V.29/R116–17).

While Malebranche's occasionalism, theodicy, and method have all received scholarly attention, there has been little discussion of the connection among these three central features of his system. And there is good reason to consider their intersection. While most obvious in the *Recherche*, each philosophical text Malebranche wrote was concerned with the tools available for postlapsarians to search for truth. He insists that in order to use these tools properly, one must first work to understand the operation of the human mind. The starting point for achieving this understanding is the appreciation of the place of the human mind as mid-way between the infinite and the finite.³ According to Malebranche, the human mind can be considered in three ways: as intimately connected to God, as intimately connected to the body to which it is joined, and as simultaneously connected to God and the body.⁴ Considering the entity composed by these two simultaneous unions involves understanding the kinds of things that naturally make us happy and, more importantly, what *ought* to make us happy. Once this knowledge is in place, we are in a position to execute the proposed method. Coming to fully understand our intermediate place between God and material objects requires an appreciation of the causal chain that led to our existence. This causal story has two separate but complementary axes: physical, as explained by occasionalism, and moral, as explained by Malebranche's theodicy.

An aspect of this causal story that branches across both axes and which, as we argue below, has important consequences for Malebranche's method, is the metaphysics and epistemology of God's particular volitions, that is, divine volitions that are not in accordance with a general law, in other words, miracles.⁵ By this we mean both the nature and causality of divine particular volitions and the possibility for human beings to have knowledge of any such events. The metaphysical side is important for a complete understanding of Malebranche's occasionalism and theodicy. The epistemological side is important for understanding his method. Discussions of Malebranche's account of divine particular volitions have largely focused on the nature and content of natural and moral laws. Little attention has been given to whether Malebranche's God in fact acts via particular volitions and what the conditions would be for God's so acting. When commentators address the nature and content of laws on Malebranche's system, they, for the most part, seem to allow that Malebranche's God can and does, albeit rarely, act by particular volitions. Andrew Pyle, for example, claims that "it remains at least conceivable that Order (the most balanced total expression of the divine attributes) could [229] permit, or even require, the occasional miracle."⁶ Martial Gueroult argues that miracles are possible in the event that a calculation of the increase in perfection compared to the decrease in simplicity of ways yields a positive result.⁷ In this paper, we engage the questions of whether God ever does act in this way, and if so, what the circumstances are that either enable or demand such action. We argue that it is very difficult to find room in Malebranche's system for *any* particular volitions beyond creation. A key aspect

³Malebranche, *Recherche de la vérité* (Tomes I-III) (OC I.9/LO xxxiii).

⁴ Malebranche, *Recherche* (OC I.9/LO Preface, xxxiii).

⁵ We defend our identification of particular volitions and "true" miracles for Malebranche below; see section 1.

⁶ Pyle, *Malebranche*, 121.

⁷ Gueroult, *Malebranche*, 188–207. Similarly, Denis Moreau claims that there are rare cases where God is "obligated" to perform a miracle when Order demands it and that Malebranche seems to allow a 'possible' miracle where the overall perfection of the world is neither increased nor decreased by the miracle and is permitted (but not required) by Order (Moreau, *Malebranche*, 154–56).

of our discussion that will weave throughout the paper is an explanation and interpretation of the passages where Malebranche explicitly endorses the *possibility* of God's performing miracles. But whether this possible event is ever actual, after the moment of creation, is another matter. Indeed, Malebranche's commitment to the possibility of such an event coupled with his rejection of its actuality seems emblematic of the inseparable fusion of his philosophy and theology.

In order to defend the above claim and elucidate the connections among occasionalism, theodicy, and method, and to highlight the importance of Malebranche's discussion of divine particular volitions for this elucidation, we look at three candidates for specific instances of particular volitions: creation, original sin, and the Incarnation of Christ. We begin in section 1 with metaphysics. Each of these three events plays a foundational role in Malebranche's theodicy and deal fundamentally with the nature of God's causal activity. Malebranche holds that God's initial act of creation was a particular volition.⁸ He is much less explicit in his discussion of God's causal role in relation to the Fall of Adam and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We argue that given Malebranche's overall view of the connection between these three landmark events, original sin and the Incarnation of Christ are *necessarily* bound with God's initial act of creation. Creation itself was done through a particular volition, but original sin and the Incarnation, so we shall argue, are caused by general volitions.

In section 2 we move to epistemology and address the questions of (1) whether, beyond the singular act of creation any other divine particular volitions have occurred or *can* occur, and (2) if so, whether they can be known to finite perceivers. In other words, if divine particular volitions are possible, how are we able to know that they exist? To answer this question we look to Malebranche's *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion* (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, hereafter: *Entretiens*) and the *Traité*, where he sets out five categories of general volitions that govern the ordinary course of God's providence. We argue that beyond creation and these five categories of general volitions (along with a few other rather peculiar general volitions), it is very difficult to see any room for [230] particular volitions.⁹ This discussion leads us to consider an often-overlooked exchange between Arnauld and Malebranche concerning this issue of whether miracles are possible, whether we can have knowledge of them, and considerations concerning divine indifference in creation.

Finally, in section 3 we suggest that the upshot of our interpretation is that Malebranche's account of providence, pervasive throughout all of his works, is consistent—things are the way they are because God acts by a general will that gives us order, physics, and rules of conduct.¹⁰ This final observation brings us to a discussion of Malebranche's method. We argue that only within a system run by general volitions can the method proposed by Malebranche bear the fruit it promises.

⁸ *Lettres du Père Malebranche à un de ses Amis*, in *Recueil de toutes les réponses à Monsieur Arnauld*, Troisième Lettre, Réponse (OC VIII/IX.759); *Écrit contre la Prévention*, in *Recueil de toutes les réponses à Monsieur Arnauld* (OC VIII/IX 1118); *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion*, Entretien X, sect.xvi–xvii (OC XII.245/JS 189–92).

⁹ By creation, we include both the initial creation of all things *and* a second particular volition that created the first “seeds” of plants and animals; see footnote 52.

¹⁰ Malebranche, *Recherche*, Elucidation on Optics (OC III.346/LO 746); *Réponse à la Dissertation*, in *Recueil de toutes les réponses à Monsieur Arnauld* (OC VI/VII.586).

1. The Metaphysics of Particular Volitions

Central to Malebranche's account of theodicy and God's causal activity is the claim that God always acts in a way that is consistent with and proportionate to His intentions and attributes.¹¹ To understand why creation is the way it is, we must consider both the visible effects of the world and how they were produced. Despite Malebranche's insistence that God nearly always acts by general volitions, he also maintains that God *can* act by particular volitions when "God acts as much or more according to what He is by departing from His general laws, than by following them." But even in these cases God "inviolably follows the immutable Order of His own perfections, because it is in His own substance that He finds His law."¹² Here Malebranche claims that God would (or at least *could*) violate the general laws when the act willed by a particular volition follows the immutable Order of God's perfections. We develop Malebranche's account of Order below, but in brief, the "immutable Order" for Malebranche is the "essential rule of the will of God."¹³

Malebranche begins to elaborate his view on God's general and particular volitions at the outset of his polemic with Arnauld. In the *Traité* (1680) Malebranche lays out his theodicy. Unlike some of his predecessors, Malebranche acknowledges that evil is a real thing that exists in the world, and not merely the absence of good. But he is also committed to the doctrine of occasionalism. Holding these two doctrines together makes it all the more pressing for Malebranche to explain how God can be the cause of all things, including evil things, and also be benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient. He explicitly undertakes this project in the *Traité*.

The *Traité* was written, in a way, *for* Arnauld. After reading Malebranche's *Recherche*, Arnauld thought that he had found a fellow Jansenist.¹⁴ He was soon disabused of the notion as certain Jansenists began to disavow their system of [231] belief, citing Malebranche as the cause of their conversion.¹⁵ The number of such conversions was apparently sufficient to worry Arnauld and his colleagues at the Port Royal. After a personal meeting designed to reconcile Arnauld and Malebranche resolved nothing, Malebranche was convinced to elaborate his view and compose the *Traité*, with the hope of making his view clearer and, possibly, more conciliatory.¹⁶ In fact, its publication had the opposite effect. Not only did Arnauld find the content objectionable, he was further angered by the fact that he had not had the occasion promised to him to read and annotate the work before it became

¹¹ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.xi (OC XII.215/JS 165).

¹² Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien XII, sect.xii (OC XII.294/JS 231).

¹³ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xx (OC V.33/R 119).

¹⁴ Jansenism was a sect of Catholicism the central claim of which was the doctrine of efficacious grace. For a good discussion of Jansenism and its relation to Cartesianism, see Schmaltz, "What Has Cartesianism to Do with Jansenism?"

¹⁵ In her introduction to the *Traité*, Dreyfus notes that certain biographers of Malebranche have suggested that a short precursor to the *Traité* was being circulated around this time that contributed to the conversions, noting that evidence for this claim is thin; see OC V.xxiv, n. 8.

¹⁶ See Dreyfus's introduction to *Traité*, OC V.xxiv–xxv.

widely available.¹⁷ It was the beginning of close to twenty years of correspondence whose philosophical depth is often obscured by vitriol.¹⁸

The *Traité* is devoted to describing the laws of nature and grace and the consequences that follow from them. With respect to the laws of nature, there are two main points of argument. First, “an excellent creator [*ouvrier*] ought to make His action proportionate to His creation [*ouvrage*]; He never uses ways composed of many steps to create something that could be done by simpler ways.”¹⁹ Second, “all the laws of motion . . . reduce to these two: the first, that moving bodies tend to continue their movement in a straight line: the second, that when two bodies collide, their movement is communicated from one to the other, in proportion to their force and according to the direction [*ligne*] of their force.”²⁰ Because God is the most excellent of creators, He used the simplest means possible to set up the laws of motion in the natural world, the result of which is two general laws of motion. These two general points allow Malebranche to explain all manner of natural evils: they are the necessary consequences of simple and fertile general laws of motion.²¹

While Malebranche is less straightforward in his enumeration of the laws of grace, he is more direct in his description of their operation—it is exactly parallel to the laws of nature. First, Malebranche states that God acts in the very same way with respect to the order of grace as with the order of nature: as a general cause who “establishes the most simple and the most general laws which have, as their effect, a greater proportion of wisdom and fecundity.”²² The consequences of these general laws of grace are the same as those in the natural realm—because of their simplicity they sometimes bear “unhappy consequences with respect to us.”²³ God does not intervene to prevent these unfortunate by-products, because “His wisdom, [232] which He loves more than His creation, the immutable and necessary Order, that is the rule of His volitions, does not permit it.”²⁴ But what, exactly, *are* the laws of grace? Malebranche begins his answer to this question by stating that God wants “that all men generally be saved.”²⁵ But, because God is obliged by His wisdom to act by the simplest possible means, this global

¹⁷ Moreau, “The Malebranche-Arnould Debate,” 88–91; and Arnould’s January 13, 1681 letter to Neercassel, OA 2.95; May 26, 1681 letter to the Marquis de Roucy, OA 2.101; and the January 4, 1682 letter to Marquis de Roucy, OA 2.116 (these passages are cited by Moreau, 109 n. 2).

¹⁸ For a superb chronology of the stages of the debate, see Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens*, 25–28; and Moreau, “The Malebranche-Arnould Debate,” 88–91.

¹⁹ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xiii (OC V.28/R 116), translation ours.

²⁰ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xv (OC V.30/R 117), translation ours.

²¹ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xviii (OC V.32/R 118).

²² Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.2, sect.xxxvi (OC V.45/R 126 [section xxxvii in R]), translation ours.

²³ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.2, sect.xliii (OC V.49/R 129).

²⁴ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.2, sect.xliii (OC V.50/R 129), translation ours.

²⁵ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.2, sect.xlii (OC V.49/R 128), translation ours. See also the Troisième Éclaircissement of the *Traité*, sect.xxi, xxiii, and xxv (OC V.183–86). The claim that God wills that all men be saved is from the Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 2:3–4), and was a focal point in the Arnould-Malebranche debate. See Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens*, 272, n. 3; and Rutherford “Malebranche’s Theodicy,” 166. See also, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect. xlvi (OC V.52/R 130–31); Troisième Éclaircissement, sect.xxi; *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.xii (OC XII.293–94/JS 166); Entretien XIII, sect.x/JS 255. When Malebranche claims that God wills that all be saved, it seems that he must mean that God wills this by a “simple” rather than a “practical” volition. Malebranche distinguishes between simple volitions (*volontés simples*), God’s desires or wishes, all else being equal, and God’s practical volitions (*volontés*

desire cannot be fulfilled.²⁶ An aspect of acting by the simplest possible means is to set up general laws the efficacies of which are determined by occasional causes. In the case of the distribution of grace, Malebranche states that the desires or prayers of Christ or “the various movements of the soul of Jesus-Christ” serve as its occasional causes.²⁷ So, if Christ prays for soul S then, according to the general law, grace is bestowed on S. And, if Christ prays for S and S has a heart well-prepared for salvation, then grace is bestowed on S and S is saved. But, Malebranche is careful to note, just as rain sometimes falls on the sea instead of the earth, sometimes grace is given to hardened hearts rather than souls well-prepared for salvation. This is an unfortunate consequence of the generality of the law.²⁸

The material in the *Traité* speaks strongly in favor of an interpretation of God’s activity characterized by general volitions alone. There are, however, indications throughout the Malebranchian corpus that suggest that God can and does act by particular volitions. Malebranche most often defines divine particular volitions [233] in contradistinction to general ones. For instance, in the *Premier Éclaircissement* of the *Traité*, Malebranche explains:

I say that God acts by general volitions [*volontez générales*], when He acts in consequence of the general laws that He has established. For example, I say that God acts in me by general volitions when He makes me feel pain at the moment I am stung; because in consequence of the general and efficacious laws of the union of the soul and the body that He has established, He makes me feel pain when my body is ill-disposed.²⁹

He continues:

pratiques), efficacious divine volitions. Since it is not the case that everyone is saved, God cannot will that all be saved with a practical volition, for if God did, then everyone would be saved. See *Recherche* OC II.316/LO 450; *Entretiens* VIII sect.ii; OC XII.176/JS 129–30.

²⁶ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.2, sect.xxxvii; and *Additions*; OC V.46/R 126.

²⁷ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.xv (OC V.165/R 210–11). See also the long addition to Discours II, sect.xvii (OC V.76–88). Malebranche describes the grace of Christ as the grace of feeling [*sentiment*], and identifies it as the grace that determines salvation. This kind of grace is compared to the grace of the Creator or the grace of light [*lumière*]. The grace of light is distributed by two kinds of occasional cause: the motion of our wills and the interaction between sensible objects and ourselves. Malebranche states that the grace of light is “of the natural order” (*Traité*, Discours II, Pt.2, sect.xxxv [OC V.101/R 153–54]). In short, the grace of light reveals ideas to us and the grace of feeling joins pleasure to the ideas the result of which is sufficient motivation to act in order to obtain the pleasurable thing currently represented to us. For a detailed discussion, see Gouhier, *La philosophie de Malebranche*, Deuxième partie, chs.1–3, 97–142.

²⁸ In *Conversations chrétiennes*, Malebranche states that “all grace of Christ is efficient, even though it does not entirely convert the heart. It is always efficacious with respect to the will that it excites and moves, even though it is not efficacious with respect to the consent of a will that resists it. And all grace is sufficient to convert entirely the heart, in the event that it is well prepared to receive it” (Entretien IX [OC IV.189], see also 190). See also Pessin “Malebranche’s Natural Theodicy and the Incompleteness of God’s Volitions,” 53 and 62 n. 2; Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens*, 272; and Nadler, “Arnauld’s God,” 525 n. 31. That it is, in some sense, up to us to prepare our hearts highlights the role that human freedom is supposed to play in our own salvation; see Walsh and Lennon, “Malebranche, the Quietists, and Freedom.”

²⁹ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.i (OC V.147/R 195), translation slightly amended.

I say on the contrary that God acts by particular volitions [*volontés particulières*] when the efficacy of His will is not determined at all by some general law to produce some effect. Thus, supposing that God makes me feel the pain of stinging without there happening in my body, or in any creature whatsoever, any changes which determine Him to act in me according to general laws; I say then God acts by particular volitions.³⁰

The central distinction is that events that occur by general volitions are in accordance with general laws and have occasional causes, while neither is true of events that occur by particular volitions. This distinction is relevant in both body-body contact (laws of collision) and mind-body contact (laws of the psycho-physical interface). Beyond this, the best way to interpret Malebranche's view of the metaphysical nature of general and particular divine volitions is not evident. Indeed, Malebranche's contemporaries and present-day commentators alike have disagreed about the correct interpretation. Recently, the debate has been framed most often as a disagreement over how to understand the *content* of God's general and particular volitions.³¹ Central for our purposes, however, is how to understand the conditions under which each kind of volition obtains.

While Malebranche claims that the term 'miracle' is equivocal, he ultimately equates 'true miracles' [*vrai miracles*] with particular volitions.³² In the *Seconde Lettre* of Malebranche's *Lettres du Pere Malebranche à un de ses Amis*, written in response to Arnauld's *Réflexions philosophique et théologiques sur le nouveau système de la nature et de la grace* (hereafter: *Réflexions*), Malebranche claims that 'miracle' is equivocal between "a wonder [*prodige*] that surprises us" and "all the effects that are not at all natural, or which are in no way the result of natural laws." Malebranche claims that the former sense of miracle is more common, but that the latter is [234] "more exact" and "more particular to philosophers."³³ He continues, "Whether an effect is common or rare, if God does not produce it according to His general laws, which are natural laws, it is a true miracle."³⁴ He goes on to say that "God only acts by particular volitions when He creates miracles" taken in the sense of the philosophers.³⁵ Here we see Malebranche equating the category of natural law with general law—anything that occurs

³⁰ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.ii (OC V.147/R 195), translation slightly amended.

³¹ Pessin ("Malebranche's Distinction Between General and Particular Volitions," 77–78) offers this way of explaining the distinction. For the "general content" view, see Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy"; McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 99–104; Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 104–8; Clarke, "Malebranche and Occasionalism"; Wahl, "Occasionalism, Laws, and General Will." For the "particular content" view, see Nadler "Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche"; Pessin, "Malebranche's Distinction Between General and Particular Volitions"; Stencil, "Malebranche and the General Will of God."

³² Leibniz criticized this account of miracles. He argues that miracles are not events that transcend laws, but events or actions of God beyond the power of created things. Leibniz thus sees that a miracle *differs intrinsically* from an ordinary event and not "by an external accident of frequent repetition." See Leibniz's April 30, 1687 letter to Arnauld (G II.92–93/M 115–16). See also Leibniz's Response to Section 43, in his *Fifth Letter* to Samuel Clark (G VII.416–18/Leibniz-Clarke, 62–63).

³³ Malebranche, *Réponses aux Réflexions Philosophiques & Théologiques de Mr. Arnauld sur le Traité de la Nature & de la Grace*, in *Recueil de toutes les réponses à Monsieur Arnauld*, OC VIII/IX.695–96. See also Malebranche, *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, Méditation VIII, sect.26 (OC X.96).

³⁴ Malebranche, *Réponses aux Réflexions* (OC VIII/IX.696).

³⁵ Malebranche, *Réponses aux Réflexions* (OC VIII/IX.696).

according to a general law and has an occasional cause is a natural effect. This means that natural laws extend beyond the physical realm for Malebranche. This is discussed in more detail in section three below. For now, we wish to stress Malebranche's description of divine particular volitions as events that obtain when God "ceases to follow His laws or His general volitions" or, "what is the same thing," miracles.³⁶ Throughout this paper, when we discuss 'miracles' we mean the term in the "true" and philosophical sense that Malebranche equates with particular volitions, or volitions of God not in accordance with general laws.³⁷

In the same letter to Arnauld, Malebranche also offers a very short explanation of when God would act via a miracle: when Order "demands it."³⁸ In the *Entretiens* he offers a longer explanation. He states that "God never performs miracles, He never acts against His own laws by means of particular volitions, unless Order either requires or permits it."³⁹ Malebranche develops his account of Order when Théodore, his spokesperson in the *Entretiens*, claims:

God can act only according to what He is, according to the demands of the immutable Order of the necessary relation of everything He contains, the character of which the disposition of the parts of the universe must bear.⁴⁰

Later, Théodore convinces one of his interlocutors, Ariste, that:

It is in God and in an immutable nature that we see beauty, truth, justice . . . the immutable Order, which we see partly, must be the law of God Himself, written in His substance in eternal and divine characters.⁴¹

In Elucidation X of the *Recherche*, Malebranche develops this conception:

If it is true, then, that God, who is the universal Being, contains all beings within Himself in an intelligible fashion, and that all these intelligible beings that have a necessary existence in God are not in every sense equally perfect, it is clear that there will be a necessary and immutable Order among them, and that just as there are necessary and eternal truths because there are relations of magnitude among intelligible beings, there must also be a necessary and immutable Order because of the relations of perfection among these same beings.⁴²

³⁶ Malebranche, *Réponses aux Réflexions* (OC VIII/IX.698).

³⁷ See also, Radner, *Malebranche*, 30; Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens*, 220–25; Brown, "The Critical Reception of Malebranche," 273.

³⁸ Malebranche, *Réponses aux Réflexions* (OC VIII/IX.697).

³⁹ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IV, sect.x (OC XII.95/JS 59).

⁴⁰ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien VIII, sect.xv (OC XII.195 /JS 146).

⁴¹ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.xiii (OC XII.221/JS 169). See also Moreau, "The Malebranche-Arnauld Debate," 105.

⁴² Malebranche, *Recherche*, Elucidation X (OC III.137–38/LO 618). See also Riley, "Malebranche's Moral Philosophy: Divine and Human Justice," 240–49.

[235] The immutable Order, which is “contained” in God, is the eternal and immutable Order of perfections, truth and justice. Malebranche explains that God contains all beings within Himself “in an intelligible fashion” and that a necessary order of perfection obtains among these beings—for instance, that “minds are more noble than bodies.”⁴³ He then argues that this Order of perfection possesses the force of law because God “loves himself with a necessary love” and that He “loves what in Him represents or contains greater perfection more than what contains less.”⁴⁴ This law “is the principle of all human and divine laws” because “God has not and cannot have any law other than His wisdom and the necessary love He has for it” and when God decides to act, He is necessarily guided by the law of Order. This is because He can neither act “in ignorance” nor “in spite of Himself.”⁴⁵ His action is thus wholly self-determined.

In sum, particular volitions just are true miracles. These are actions of God that are not in accordance with any general law, but are in accordance with the immutable Order.

Let us return to Malebranche’s claim that God can violate the generality of His conduct when Order “permits or demands it.” Could there ever be a reason to motivate such an extraordinary event? This question is posed to Théodore by Ariste:

Ariste: But when does He [God] have these important reasons [to act against general laws]? Perhaps He never has them.

Théodore: God has these important reasons 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 He has prescribed for Himself than by following them. For God always acts according to what He is. He inviolably follows the Immutable Order of His own perfections . . . 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 indeed know that sometimes it happens. I know that, I say, because faith teaches it to me. For Reason, which shows me that it is possible, does not assure me that it happens.⁴⁶

This passage indicates that God acts by particular volitions if He glorifies Himself more with such an action, than He would in maintaining His immutability. But notice that even while asserting that there are reasons for God to act in such a way, in the next breath Malebranche further restricts the possibility of our discovery of any such events—we know *why* God would act in such a way, but we do not know

⁴³ Malebranche, *Recherche*, Elucidation X (OC III.137/LO 618).

⁴⁴ Malebranche, *Recherche*, Elucidation X (OC III.138/LO 619).

⁴⁵ Malebranche, *Recherche*, Elucidation X (OC III.640–641/LO 620).

⁴⁶ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien XII, sect.xii (OC XII.293–94/JS 230–31). See also *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xxi (OC V.34/R 119).

when, if ever, it has happened, nor do we have any hope of ever knowing. The limits of reason on this question are met in the knowledge of the possibility of such an event. [236]

As noted above, the question of whether Malebranche does, and if so whether he is entitled to, hold that God *can* and *does* act by particular volitions has received considerably less attention in the secondary literature. Some commentators suggest that it is at least possible for Malebranche's God to act by particular volitions, but they do not examine the conditions under which this event would take place.⁴⁷ A notable exception is a recent work by Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin, who considers both the possibility of divine particular volitions and the conditions under which Malebranche takes God to act in this way. We take our interpretation here to follow hers in many ways.⁴⁸

A natural way to investigate the possibility of particular volitions is to begin with the one instance of such a volition that Malebranche straightforwardly accepts: the act of creation. In the following section we discuss creation, and then turn to the fall of Adam and the Incarnation of Christ, two events which, given other Malebranchian commitments, one might think *must* be the results of particular volitions.

1.1 Creation, Original Sin, and Christ

There is a twofold explanatory problem when it comes to the Malebranchian account of creation. First, *why* does God create anything at all? For Malebranche, God only acts for His own glory.⁴⁹ We also know that God is not at all affected by the actions of His creation because God "is sufficient unto Himself [*se suffit à lui-même*]." ⁵⁰ Thus, it is difficult to see a sufficient motivating reason for creation. Second, given that creation did occur, we must ask *how* God creates. We have seen that Malebranche is very concerned to show that divine action must be consistent with the divine attributes. But so far, we have only examined what Malebranche says about divine action with respect to extant created substances. Let us address *how* creation itself was done.

Malebranche is perfectly clear: God's initial creation was done by particular volitions. This might seem surprising given the time devoted to arguing that God must act by general volitions. The explanation for why creation itself was executed by particular volitions is masterful in its simplicity. In a response to Arnauld, Malebranche claims, "[W]hen God created the world, men, animals, plants, organized bodies, that enclose within their seeds that which provides for all the ages of their species, He did it by particular volitions."⁵¹ These particular volitions included the creation of material substance

⁴⁷ See Pyle, *Malebranche*, 121; Radner, *Malebranche*, 32; Gouhier, *La philosophie de Malebranche*, 55–68; Dreyfus, *La volonté selon Malebranche*, 100–118, especially 100–105; Gueroult, *Malebranche*, 137–207, esp. 183–87; Robinet, *Système et existence*, 106–14.

⁴⁸ Pellegrin, *Le système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*.

⁴⁹ See, for example, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.iv (OC XII.202/JS 152), and sect.xii (OC 217/JS 165).

⁵⁰ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.iii (OC XII.201/JS 152). JS translates as "self-sufficient."

⁵¹ Malebranche, *Réponse aux Réflexions* (OC VIII/IX.759). See also *Recherche*, Elucidation XVII (OC III.339/LO 742); and *Entretiens*, Entretien X, sect.xvi (OC XII.246–47/JS 190). For a nice discussion of when Malebranche's God acted by particular volitions, see Radner, *Malebranche*, 30–33.

itself, the creation of the first [237] germs of plants and animals, and the introduction of motion into the system.⁵² Malebranche explains:

God cannot act by the simplest means, or, what is the same thing, by general laws, before there are occasional causes: and thus the first movements of the parts of matter towards different directions had to be produced by particular volitions; because bodies could not collide before being moved, and this collision is the occasional cause of movement.⁵³

Malebranche claims that the two general laws of nature, discussed above, would not have been able to produce the kind of things that we see today, namely, organized bodies.⁵⁴ His defense of this claim is brief. He marvels at the complexity and variety of organic bodies, and the manner in which they are organized to assure propagation. While he concedes that the laws of nature seem to “suffice to make the parts of animals grow little by little” he affirms that no one will ever demonstrate that they suffice to “form [the parts] and link them all together” because the laws are too simple to produce such complexity and variety.⁵⁵ So, particular volitions were necessary to initially create substances, which thereafter are governed by the simple, general laws of nature. While Malebranche is clear that God needed to act by particular volitions for initial creation, we now have to ask why He did so. An explanation is especially pressing since Malebranche disparages particular volitions as a mark of the action of finite beings.⁵⁶ For God to create, then, He needed to act in a way that was, in a sense, inconsistent with His attributes. The motive for such a deviation from the character of divinity must be great. We now move to the question of *why* creation occurred.

Above we noted that, for Malebranche, God is “sufficient unto Himself”; it is a mistake to imagine that God created the universe for the eventual glory of the worship of His creation. Indeed, according to Malebranche, God did not have any necessary motive for creation. Instead, “God wills to create the world with a perfect freedom and complete indifference.”⁵⁷ It seems, however, that this is

⁵² See *Recherche*, Elucidation on Optics, OC III.338–39/LO 741–42, and the detailed discussion in Detlefson, “Supernaturalism, Occasionalism, and Preformation in Malebranche,” esp. 472–79. See also Pellegrin, *Le système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, ch.3 and in particular 141–52.

⁵³ Malebranche, *Réponse aux Réflexions*, OC VIII/IX.780. Also, Malebranche’s *Réponse à la Dissertation*, OC VI/VII.594; *Entretiens*, Entretien 10, sect.xvi (OC XII.245–46/JS 190).

⁵⁴ Malebranche, *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, Méditation VII, sect.vii (OC X.71). For a different interpretation, see Pellegrin, who suggests that creation by general volitions would be “too complicated and haphazard” (*Le système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 136–37).

⁵⁵ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien XI, sect.viii (OC XII.263–64/JS 204–5), but see the dialogue in its entirety. Malebranche emphasizes in the following section that the laws of nature cannot explain the generation of plants either, for grains and seeds prove to be as complex as eggs and fetuses.

⁵⁶ *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, Seconde objection, sect.xiv (OC V.163/R 209). See also *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, Méditation VII, sect.xx (OC X.77); *Traité de morale*, Pt.I, ch.1, sect.xxii (OC XI.26). These latter two references are from Sean Greenberg’s “Things that Undermine Each Other.”

⁵⁷ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien VIII, sect.ii (OC XII.176/JS 130). Later in this dialogue, Malebranche acknowledges that another way to understand God’s creation is to take the universe to be a necessary emanation from God Himself but quickly dismisses the idea because faith tells us that this is not so (sect.iv, 202). Whether Malebranche can defend this point is another matter; see footnote 69.

the first and only act of complete indifference for Malebranche's God.⁵⁸ Thereafter, [238] God is bound by His attributes (and by Order) to act according to the character of His divinity. In the act of creation, God willed decrees and established simple and general laws that bear the divine character of His immutability.⁵⁹ Even if this offers a metaphysical account of God's action, we are still left wanting an explanation for a motive sufficient for creation. To start, what does Malebranche mean when he claims that God acted "indifferently" in creating?

In order to address this question, it is helpful to consider Malebranche's claim that some events are "required" by Order and others are "permitted" by Order. In response to Arnauld, Malebranche claims, "When this Order requires that God act by particular volitions, God always does it: and when it permits Him, He often does it."⁶⁰ Here, Malebranche seems to allow that Order requires some things of God, and permits others. The question is whether creation is required or permitted by Order. It seems that if God indifferently wills to create the world, then there is a legitimate sense in which it was open for God to choose to not create. So, Malebranche cannot hold that creation is an act required by Order. Given that creation in fact occurred, it must be an event permitted by Order. This creates a quandary for Malebranche. If creation is only permitted by Order, we must ask why God creates rather than not. A natural answer is that there were reasons sufficient to motivate God to create. If such reasons obtained, then we must further ask: in what sense was God indifferent in creating? We take this question up in section 2, but for now it is enough to say that according to Malebranche, there can be no such sufficient motive unless God "finds the secret of rendering His work divine and proportioning it to His action, which is divine." Otherwise, no matter how perfect the universe, its finitude makes it unworthy of production.⁶¹

So, why is this world sufficient to motivate God to create? Malebranche's unequivocal answer to this question is that God's ultimate plan in creation is the Incarnation of Christ and the establishment of His Church. In fact, Malebranche claims that Christ and the Church are the *only* things that could justify God's creation.⁶² As Malebranche explains in the first sentence of the *Traité*:

God, being able to act only for His own glory, and being able to find it only in Himself, cannot have had any plan in the creation of the world other than the establishment of His Church.⁶³

He continues:

⁵⁸ Arnauld does not seem to agree that on Malebranche's account, God's choice of creating rather than not is free. See, for example, Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39.599–600). This view also shocks Malebranche's contemporaries Bossuet and Fénelon, who think that such a view denies both God's freedom and generosity. See Terestchenko, *Amour et désespoir de François de Sales à Fénelon*, 246–55.

⁵⁹ See Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien VIII, sect.ii (OC XII.176–77/JS 129–30).

⁶⁰ Malebranche, *Réponse à la Dissertation* (OC IV/VII.490); see also *Entretiens*, Entretien IV, sect.x (OC XII.95/JS 59); Moreau, *Malebranche*, 155–56.

⁶¹ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.iv (OC XII.203/JS 154).

⁶² As Rutherford notes in "Malebranche's Theodicy," 169. Our argument here is in many ways a development of Rutherford's claims.

⁶³ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.i (OC V.12/R 112).

Jesus Christ, who is the head of it [His Church], is the beginning of the ways of the Lord . . . it is he who is their exemplar in the eternal plan of his Father . . . *it is only he who can make the work of God perfectly worthy of its author.*⁶⁴

[239] Malebranche is explicit: only Christ and his Church can make the world worthy of God's creation. By 'his Church' Malebranche seems to mean the totality of the Christian religion exemplified by the ties between God and the "Man-God," that is, Christ, on the one hand, and between Christ and "his adopted children, made divine [*divinisez*] in their leader [*chef*]" on the other. When God created "the first Adam," Malebranche states, "He had in mind [*pensait au*] the second."⁶⁵

Malebranche offers the following support for this statement:

There must be some relation between the world and the action by which it is produced. Now, the action by which the world is drawn from nothingness, is the action of a God; His worth is infinite; and the world, however perfect it may be, is not infinitely lovable, and cannot render to God an honor worthy of Him. So, separate Jesus Christ from the rest of created beings and see if He who can act only for His own glory, and whose wisdom has no limits, is able to form the intention to produce nothing outside Himself [*pourra prendre le dessein de rien produire au dehors*].⁶⁶

The answer here is clearly 'yes'—God can certainly decide not to create a world that is unworthy of His action. But once we join Christ to the category of created things, the nature of the world makes it worthy of creation.

Malebranche develops this claim in the *Entretiens*. There, Ariste proposes a simple solution to the problem of squaring an infinite action of God with the creation of a finite universe: why not take the universe to be infinite? An infinite creation, his reasoning goes, would be the worthy product of an infinite will.⁶⁷ Théodore dismisses this suggestion by saying that we ought not attribute anything to creation that does not suit it—in this case anything approaching the divine attributes, namely, infinitude. Instead, he says, "let us try to pull the Universe from its profanity, and by something divine, render it worthy of the divine kindness [*complaisance*], worthy of the action of a God, the price of which is infinite." The only way for this to happen, says Théodore, is by "the union [of the universe with that] of a divine person."⁶⁸ For Malebranche, the sanctification of the universe by Christ renders it more worthy of God's action than it would if it were (*per impossibile*) infinite.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.ii (OC V.13/R 112).

⁶⁵ Malebranche, *Conversations chrétiennes*, Entretien II (OC IV.48).

⁶⁶ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.iii (OC V.15/R 112–13), translation slightly amended.

⁶⁷ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.v (OC XII.204/JS 154).

⁶⁸ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.v (OC XII.204/JS 154), translation ours.

⁶⁹ Théodore's suggestion is that if we accept that the glory received by God from creation is non-essential, then we see that the world is not a necessary emanation and thus not eternal. Eternity is the mark of independence, so the world must have a beginning (*Traité*, Discours 1, Pt.I, sect.iv [OC V.18–19/R 113]). This response might seem question-begging, for we assume the non-emanation before concluding that an eternal nature is impossible for the

We see from both the *Entretiens* and the *Traité* that the Incarnation of Christ is the sufficient motive for God's creation. We can understand the process as follows: God had an idea of His creation, but this alone was insufficient to motivate its creation. The motive came with the promise of the union of mind and body in one divine person. In the event of such a union, created substances, both immaterial [240] and material, became, in a sense, sanctified. The result was that God was able to derive glory from Himself [*ne tire que de lui-même*] that He receives from the "relation between His creation and His perfections."⁷⁰

The next question to address is where original sin fits into this plan. It is commonly held that Christ was incarnated in order to relieve some of the stain of Adam's sin. But if Christ's Incarnation is necessary for creation, then it seems that Adam's sin would be necessary for the conditions for Christ's arrival to obtain. For example, in the *Traité*, Malebranche writes:

It was necessary that God alone have all the glory of the beauty and of the perfection of the future world. This work, which infinitely surpasses all others, ought to be a work of pure mercy. It was necessary that creatures might not glory in having any other part in it than that which the grace of Jesus Christ had given them. In a word it was appropriate that God let all men be enveloped by sin, in order to show all of them mercy in Jesus Christ.⁷¹

From this passage and many others like it, it is clear that Malebranche holds that God, when creating the universe, knew full well that there would be sin. But a world with sin is more worthy of God than a world without sin. As Malebranche says:

God foresaw from all eternity both original sin, and the infinite number of persons that this sin would sweep into hell. None the less He created the first man in a condition from which He knew he would fall; He even established between this man and his posterity relations which would communicate his sin to them, and render them all worthy of His aversion and His wrath.⁷²

So, according to Malebranche, God not only created the world knowing that man would sin, but that sin was *essential* to the design of the world; it might even suggest that sin was a *necessary* precursor to Christ, and thereby a necessary component of any world worthy of God's creation.⁷³

created world. One thinker who bit the bullet on this point was Giordano Bruno, who argued that a creation by an infinite being must itself be infinite and thus eternal. For a general discussion, see Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, especially chs.1–5.

⁷⁰ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.vi (OC XII.205); also, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.iii (OC V.15/R 112–13). Gueroult sees it rather more strongly, saying that "[b]ecause the Incarnation is not only a necessary condition, but a sufficient reason for creation, it is, at bottom, the only reason [for creation]" (*Malebranche* 115). See also Robinet, *Système et existence*, 56–58; and Gouhier, *La philosophie de Malebranche*, 28.

⁷¹ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt. 1, sect.xxxv–xxxvi (OC V.45/R 125–26).

⁷² Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xl (OC V.48/R 127–28).

⁷³ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xxxvi (OC V.45/R 126).

In the *Entretiens*, however, Malebranche makes a different suggestion. Ariste asks Théodore how creation could be worthy of God. Théodore responds, “[T]hrough the union with a divine person.”⁷⁴ Ariste then makes a provocative suggestion: “But if we had not sinned the Word would not have been incarnated.”⁷⁵ Théodore responds:

I do not know, Ariste. But even if we had not sinned, a divine person would not have failed to unite himself with the universe, in order to sanctify it, to deliver it from its profane condition, to render it divine, to bestow on it an infinite dignity, in order that God, who can act only for His own glory, should receive from it glory corresponding perfectly to His action. Was the Word incapable of being united to the work of God without being incarnated? He became man; but could he not have [241] become an angel? It is true that in becoming man he simultaneously became united to the two substances, mind and body, of which the universe is composed, and that through this union he sanctified the whole of nature. That is why I do not believe that sin was the sole cause of the incarnation of the Son of God.⁷⁶

Here, Malebranche seems to back off of the claim that original sin was necessary for Christ and thus a world worthy of God’s creation. Malebranche maintains that

- (1) Christ is a necessary feature of a world in order for that world to glorify God.
- (2) The universe restored through Christ is worth more than the same universe in its initial construction.

So, original sin in a legitimate sense makes the world more worthy of God, given that original sin allows Christ to restore the world. However, Malebranche remains agnostic with respect to the following claim:

- (3) Original sin was a necessary precursor to Christ in order to sanctify the world and make it worthy of God’s creation.

And he flatly denies that

- (4) Sin is the sole cause of the incarnation.

So, we suggest that while Malebranche held that Christ was necessary for creation, and that original sin was essential to the world God actually created, he remained agnostic about whether there is any world worthy of God’s creation without original sin.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.v (OC XII.204/JS 154).

⁷⁵ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.v (OC XII.204/JS 154).

⁷⁶ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.v (OC XII.204/JS 154–55).

⁷⁷ In the medieval discussion, the (majority) Thomist position, based on Augustine, held that sin was an essential prerequisite for the Incarnation, argued on the basis that God, at creation, had Christ in mind as the Savior of sinners. The (minority) Scotist position held that Christ is the predestined Son of God irrespective of sin; see Cross,

To sum up, while Malebranche's God was absolutely free in choosing to create a world, God was not *required* by Order to choose to create. In the event that God chooses to create, however, His creation and action must be consistent with the divine attributes. After creation, God governs the world with general volitions and simple laws worthy of His wisdom. No world without Christ and the Church would be worthy of God's creation, so the existence of Jesus Christ is *necessarily* bound up with God's creation. This interpretation explains a comment in Malebranche's final work, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*. There, he reiterates that God cannot act except for His own glory "which He pulls from His own self; from the plenitude of divinity, which actually resides in His Son."⁷⁸ Because one cannot derive honor [242] from oneself, Malebranche states that we must assume, and in fact faith teaches us, that there is a plurality of persons within God. In order for God to be honored, it must be that Christ is distinct from Him (in some way) and that Christ is the source of this honor. Malebranche continues:

[T]he Son is not the Father, even though he is equal to Him, and the same thing with Him: and so, not only can he honor the Father, but he is also, with the Holy Spirit, the eternal and essential glory of the Father. In this way God finds in His own society the three persons who are in Him, and one thing with Him, this glory and this happiness, that is the invincible, natural motive of His kindness [*complaisance*].⁷⁹

In this passage, Malebranche affirms that the glory God receives from Christ and the Holy Spirit serves as an invincible motive for God's kindness. So, while there is no invincible motive for creation, *given* God's decision to create, He is determined by the glory to be received from Christ to create a world that includes the person who will serve as the redeemer of sinners. Further, original sin is *necessarily* bound up with the greatness of *this* world.

2. The Epistemology of Particular Volitions, Arnauld's Objection and God's Indifference

In the *Premier Éclaircissement* of the *Traité*, Malebranche considers whether there are any possible circumstances under which we might think an effect is produced by a particular volition. He writes, "[W]hen we see an effect produced, and whose occasional cause is unknown to us . . . we have reason

The Metaphysics of the Incarnation and *Duns Scotus*. The roots of these two positions are in Anselm; see Horan, "How Original Was Scotus on the Incarnation?" Malebranche avoids explicitly aligning himself with either position, though he seems closer to the Scotists. In *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*, he claims that it is difficult to imagine that the world could exist even if Adam had not sinned (sect.xxvi; OC XVI.157). But in this same section, he wavers between the two positions, saying that while it seems true that Christ was incarnated for man, it is also clear that man was created for Christ (see sect.xxvi [OC XVI.151, 158–59]). One reason why his position might not map neatly onto either side is that, as Terestchenko observes, while the medievals were preoccupied with showing the necessity of the Incarnation of Christ and his mortal death on the cross, Malebranche and the early moderns were more concerned with the problem of the consistency between an omnibenevolent God and the existence of evil, in other words, theodicy; see *Amour et désespoir*, 340.

⁷⁸ Malebranche, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*, sect.xxii (OC XVI.130).

⁷⁹ Malebranche, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*, sect.xxiii (OC XVI.130).

to think that this effect is produced by a particular volition.” Yet, Malebranche proceeds to question whether such an event would in fact be caused by a particular volition. He gives an example of a body that seems to be moved without contact from another body. While this might seem miraculous, Malebranche stresses the possibility that the body moved according to a divine general volition unknown to us and is thus not a miracle. For example, it is possible that there is a divine general volition that states that bodies move according to the volitions of angels.⁸⁰ In this case, while it appears to an observer that the body moves without an occasional cause, such movement does not, in fact, violate the pattern of occasional cause and effect. The event is wondrous (a *prodige*), but not truly miraculous on Malebranche’s account. The main idea here is that by reason alone we can be certain that God acts by general volitions. By contrast, we cannot be assured that God acts by particular volitions, even in cases of purported miracles that many (or even most) people affirm.⁸¹ Even when something truly singular occurs, we cannot be certain that [243] it is the result of a particular volition because “an intelligent occasional cause [like an angel] can have this particular design, and thus determine the efficacy of the general law to execute it.”⁸² Notice that this view indicates that miracles, if any have happened since creation, are unknowable to us. This, one might argue, would have a negative impact on Malebranche’s theodicy—for how can we make positive claims about God’s goodness in the face of natural and moral evil if we have no way of ascertaining how much God actually does to shield His creatures, to the greatest possible extent, from these evils?

To answer this question, we must remember that for Malebranche, the laws of nature and grace are perfectly rigid. God did not intervene to stop Adam’s sin because, as Malebranche says, it would not be consistent with His attributes. The laws of nature were in place before, during, and after Adam’s sin. To interrupt these laws in order to turn Adam’s attention away from sin and toward God would be to act by a particular volition. This is not only a violation of the simplicity of divine ways, but also implies that the original laws of nature were somehow incomplete or less than perfect, given an instance where they were inadequate for God’s purposes.⁸³ But what of the laws of grace? Malebranche is clear that Christ was made the occasional cause of grace in order to determine the efficacy of God’s general laws of grace. Here we see an analogous situation in the realm of grace as we saw above in the realm of nature. Recall that on Malebranche’s view, God had to create with particular volitions before His general laws could be activated. In order for the laws to govern, they needed the tools of governance—occasional causes.⁸⁴ So too in the realm of grace, the general laws of salvation require an occasional cause to

⁸⁰ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.v (OC V.149–50/R 197), translation slightly amended. This complements Malebranche’s comments about prayer. Asking God to intervene directly to help us is presumptuous, but we may pray for the help of an angel. Angels, Saints, and the Virgin, through their prayers to Christ, can serve as occasional causes for beneficial events on earth. See *Traité de Morale*, Pt.I, ch.9, sect.vi–x (OC XI.110–13); *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, Entretien VIII, sect. x–xviii (OC X.86–89); also *Recherche*, Elucidation XV (OC III.221/LO 667). This position was, in a sense, theologically heterodox. For instance, Bossuet reacted negatively to the proposal that prayer is, in some way, prideful; see Pellegrin, *Le système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 179.

⁸¹ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.v (OC V.149–50/R 197).

⁸² Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.viii (OC V.152/R 199).

⁸³ Malebranche, *Conversations chrétiennes*, Entretien II (OC IV.41–48).

⁸⁴ The claims that the Incarnation of Christ is brought about by a general volition and that God creates via a

operate. Christ is this occasional cause. According to Malebranche, Christ's role in the distribution of grace is to pray for the salvation of the members of his church. These prayers are always answered because "occasional causes have their effect always."⁸⁵ And, just as God used particular volitions to create the finite things that would eventually serve as occasional causes, so too did he need to act by particular volitions to grant grace prior to the existence of his occasional cause, Christ.

Later in the same *Éclaircissement*, Malebranche discusses grace and the Saints of the Old Testament. He considers the objection that given his theory of [244] grace and Christ's role in the distribution of grace, anyone who existed prior to Christ could not have been saved. Malebranche suggests two potential responses to this, both of which are rather striking. First, he seems to allow the possibility of "backward (occasional) causation."⁸⁶ Malebranche acknowledges that "Jesus Christ, long before having been born . . . was able to be the *meritorious* cause of the graces" received by those from the Old Testament.⁸⁷ Further, "there is no necessary relation between *occasional* causes, and the time in which their effects are produced . . . it is not at all necessary that they [the occasional causes] exist presently in order to produce their effects."⁸⁸ So, it seems Malebranche claims that God could grant grace by way of occasional causes to those who existed before Christ. Second, Malebranche claims that even if one does not agree that God has "established any occasional cause of all the graces which were given to . . . the patriarchs," it does not follow that Christ is not the occasional cause of grace.⁸⁹ On this suggestion, Malebranche states that "before the birth of Christ, God gave grace by particular volitions . . . the necessity of the Order demanded it: the occasional cause, according to the Order, could not have been established so early: the elect were very small in number."⁹⁰ On either suggestion, however, the Incarnation was instrumental for God's attributes to be fully expressed in the realm of grace. In other words, without Christ, God would be forced to save any and all souls by particular volitions, a way unworthy of Him.

particular volition on account of the fact that for laws to be efficacious they need the tools of governance both support the Particular Content (PC) interpretation of particular volition. According to PC all volitions of God have particular contents, general volitions have particular contents that follow the laws, and particular volitions have particular contents that do not follow the laws. On the General Content interpretation (GC), general volitions have general contents and particular volitions have particular contents. Concerning the claim that Christ is brought about by a general volition, according to GC, on this view, the Incarnation of Christ is *not* a content of any volition of God. The Incarnation of Christ follows from the initial conditions set up by God and the laws willed as general volitions, but is not a volitional content of God's. On PC, however, even if the Incarnation of Christ is willed via a general volition, God has a volition with a content like "let Christ be incarnated. . . ." Concerning Malebranche's claim that creation had to be effectuated via particular volitions, if Malebranche held GC, one would expect him to claim that creation had to be via a particular volition because one needs to create individual things and not just laws in creation. That, however, is not the argument Malebranche makes, suggesting that he held PC.

⁸⁵ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.xi (OC V.154/R 201).

⁸⁶ Pyle suggests this in *Malebranche*, 156.

⁸⁷ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.xiii (OC V.158/R 204).

⁸⁸ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.xiii (OC V.158/R 204–5).

⁸⁹ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.xiii (OC V.159–60/R 206).

⁹⁰ Malebranche, *Traité*, Premier Éclaircissement, sect.xiii (OC V.160/R 206), translation slightly amended.

We can now see how original sin and the Incarnation of Christ are intimately bound with the particular volitions that determined creation. At the moment of creation, God made the occasional causes that would come to regulate the orders of nature (finite created things) and grace (Christ). The act of creation is a miracle. Anyone saved by the grace of God prior to the Incarnation was either saved by a miracle—a particular volition of God Himself—or via backward occasional causation. Any miracle occurring after creation would be required by the immutable Order itself. In these cases, God’s love of Order would trump His immutability. But what does this mean for the Malebranchean theodicy? If all of God’s acts are determined, in one way or another, by the immutable Order, it seems that there is no sense in which God’s actions have any justice with respect to the particular evils that His creatures experience. This is something that raised Arnauld’s hackles and led the two philosophers to an interesting discussion at the intersection of the metaphysics and epistemology of particular volitions—the extent of God’s indifference in creation.

Arnauld is committed to both the metaphysical existence of miracles *and* our having knowledge of them.⁹¹ In the *Réponse à la dissertation* (1685), Malebranche responds to Arnauld’s claim that the Malebranchean system does not allow for God [245] to act by particular volitions.⁹² This exchange with Arnauld in fact brings into sharp focus where we see the foundation of Malebranche’s distinction between general and particular divine volitions. Our analyses of the Malebranchean texts show that the metaphysics of God’s acting by particular volitions is clear—it is possible for God to act in this way when He would be more faithful to His attributes by violating His immutability than by honoring it. By contrast, knowledge of God’s particular volition is obscured from our (finite) perspective. For every apparently singular event, it is possible to postulate its occurrence as the effect of a general volition that is unknown to us. While particular volitions are *metaphysically possible* as far as we are able to reason, we can never be sure that they happen.

Both Malebranche and Arnauld believe that God acts only in ways that are worthy of Him. In Arnauld’s *Réflexions* (1685), the grounds for their disagreement surrounding the nature of God’s activity become evident. According to Arnauld, the true question is: which ways are worthy of God’s action? He takes Malebranche to be hedging on the position he actually holds, which is that God never acts by particular volitions. If this were true, a consequence of this view, according to Arnauld, would be that the Church would be much less perfect than it could have been if God had not been so restricted. Arnauld holds that Malebranche is committed to the following three claims: (1) God wants all men to be saved generally; (2) all men would be saved if God acted by particular volitions in order to save them; (3) God does not save all men through particular volitions because God must not act by particular volitions.⁹³ However, Arnauld argues that holding 1 and 2 makes it very hard to maintain 3. He offers

⁹¹ See, for example, *The Port-Royal Logic*, Part IV, Chapter 14 (OA 41:401–5/B 265–70). See also Hunter, “Arnauld’s Defense of Miracles and Its Context.”

⁹² Malebranche, *Réponse à la Dissertation* (OC VI/VII.485–96). Malebranche is here responding to Arnauld’s *Dissertation de Monsieur Arnauld sur la manière dont Dieu a fait des miracles par le ministère*. See also *Réponse aux Réflexions* (OC VIII/IX.661–63).

⁹³ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:590).

several arguments for this, and one is especially noteworthy. Arnauld accepts 1 and Malebranche's claim that God loves acting in simple ways (for the sake of argument). He argues,

1. God loves all men and wants to save and sanctify them all. (Assumption)
2. God loves acting by the simplest means. (Assumption)
3. God loves His wisdom and goodness invincibly, by nature and necessity. (Assumption)
4. Since God loves His wisdom and goodness invincibly, He loves His wisdom and goodness more than He loves acting by the simplest means. (2, 3)
5. God cannot exempt Himself from acting in a way that is most in accordance with His wisdom and goodness; and being wise God always proportions His means to the end, and His action to the plan He has chosen. (Assumption)
6. The wisest way of acting, and that which conforms most closely to His plan, would be the way that is most in accordance with the plan of creation that His own goodness dictated: that all men be saved. (1, 4, 5)
7. God knows that acting by particular volitions would save all men. (Assumption)

Therefore,

8. God wills by particular volitions to save all men. (6, 7)

Arnauld concludes that Malebranche ends up in a contradiction: he states that God's plan in creation is that all be saved, and at the same time holds that the way [246] for such sweeping salvation is not open to God.⁹⁴ In short, Arnauld states that the following two propositions are contradictory: 1) "God truly wants to generally save all men," and 2) "God invincibly wants to follow the counsel of His wisdom, which He knows will oblige Him to not act in a way that would give Him the means to save all men."⁹⁵ He goes on to contrast two further propositions: 1) "God can do nothing contrary to His wisdom," and 2) "God cannot avoid acting in a way that is most worthy of His wisdom."⁹⁶ For Arnauld, the first proposition is indubitable. However, we can err in how we apply the proposition, that is, we can erroneously judge something to be unworthy of God's wisdom, justice, or goodness. As far as the second proposition, things are more difficult. As we know, God can act either by general volitions or by particular volitions. Arnauld says that for Malebranche, God cannot help but act by general volitions in both the order of nature and the order of grace because such action alone conforms to God's wisdom. The heart of their disagreement comes out a few pages later when Arnauld states:

It is very odd that what the Author [Malebranche] said so justly a couple of times, *that God acts by the simplest means with respect to His plans*, he seems to forget everywhere else, and to say even the contrary. Because, *to act by the simplest means with respect to the plans that we have made, is to proportion the means to the plans*, which is reasonable. But elsewhere he suggests [*il veut*] against all reason, that God *proportions His plans to the means*, and that He can only

⁹⁴ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:592).

⁹⁵ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:593).

⁹⁶ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:593). How Arnauld understands the relation between God's wisdom and God's action is controversial. For two good (and dissenting) discussions of Arnauld's account see Moreau, *Deux Cartésiens*, esp. Chapter 10; and Nadler, "Arnauld's God."

choose the most perfect of the creations that He would like to make, *with respect to the simplicity of the means by which He acts.*⁹⁷

Here we see the contrast between the two thinkers. For Malebranche, God's wisdom dictates (though does not necessitate) all possible action, including creation. For Arnauld, this is a limitation on God's power and is thus unacceptable. One major reason why this is unacceptable for Arnauld is that Malebranche's view "leaves so little freedom and indifference for God with respect to creatures." And, once Malebranche's God has chosen to create, all the other decisions (which world to create and by what means) "are the effect of a more than Stoic fate [*l'effet d'une fatalité plus que stoïcienne*], with the exception of miracles, which He effectuates by particular volitions."⁹⁸ And Arnauld hits the nail on the head when he says "and we do not even know whether miracles ought to be excepted, because He [God] only does this [performs miracles] when the Order demands it. Now, according to him [Malebranche], this Order is the most indispensable rule for God's volitions."

Arnauld continues to push on Malebranche's account. He claims:

I said that, according to the author [Malebranche], God is free and indifferent only with respect to forming His plan: and since he says positively that He [God] is free in doing this, I do not wish to attribute the opposite view to him. But I doubt that this can be reconciled [*se puisse accorder*] with the manner in which he conceives that [247] God acts . . . he always speaks to us [about God] as he would of a man, making Him consult His wisdom in all that He wills to do; as if He was afraid of not doing well, and that His will, in order to will nothing other than good, had need of being regulated by something other than itself. . . . For, to speak of God precisely and to the letter, He is as little capable of 'consulting' as He is of 'repenting' or of 'being mad.'⁹⁹

Arnauld's concern is clear: in what sense can Malebranche hold that God creates with freedom of indifference? Because Malebranche's God consults His wisdom prior to deciding to create, He is not indifferent because the divine wisdom determines creation. Arnauld concludes, "I am very much persuaded that it is to conceive of God entirely humanly and that one cannot have these thoughts, if one only consults the idea of an infinitely perfect being."¹⁰⁰ While there is a more substantive and fundamental disagreement at the heart of the debate between Malebranche and Arnauld, namely over the appropriate way to conceive of God and God's action, Arnauld's point brings out another question.¹⁰¹ What, for Malebranche, does it mean to claim that God is indifferent with respect to creation, while not being indifferent toward *what* to create given the decision to create? In claiming that

⁹⁷ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:598).

⁹⁸ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:599). See also Arnauld's objections to Leibniz's account of substance (M 9/G II.15); and Sleigh, *Leibniz and Arnauld*, 59.

⁹⁹ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:599–600). The first two sentences are slightly amended from Sleigh's translation, Sleigh, *Leibniz and Arnauld*, 46. For a similar discussion, see also Arnauld, *On True and False Ideas*, Chapter 18 (OA 38:287/ K 109).

¹⁰⁰ Arnauld, *Réflexions*, Book II, ch. 26 (OA 39:600).

¹⁰¹ For a good discussion of the fundamental disagreement between these two thinkers, see the references in footnote 96.

God wills indifferently, it seems clear that Malebranche means that God had no reasons that necessitated creation. However, even holding this consideration fixed, Malebranche could mean at the least the two following things in claiming God's indifference:

- (a) God was free to create or not to create; God's reasons (although present) did not necessitate creation one way or another.
- (b) God had absolutely no reasons whatsoever to create or not to create.

In the *Recherche*, Malebranche states that freedom of indifference for finite beings would be a power that "contains the potential of willing or not willing, or even willing the contrary of what our natural inclinations carry us toward."¹⁰² If Malebranche extends this definition to God, then saying that God indifferently wills to create would mean that God has reasons to create (and perhaps some not to create), but is ultimately free to decide whether to follow these reasons. For clarification on this point, consider Malebranche's analysis of creation in the *Traité*:

When I say that God freely forms His plan, I do not mean that He can choose another that would be less worthy of His wisdom, rejecting that which is more worthy of Him. For, supposing that God wills to produce a work outside Himself which is worthy of Him, He is not at all indifferent in His choice; He must produce the most perfect that is possible with respect to the simplicity of means by which He acts. He owes it to Himself to follow the rules of His wisdom, He must always act in the wisest and most perfect way. But I say that God forms His plan freely, because He invincibly and necessarily loves only His own substance. Neither the Incarnation of the Word, nor for stronger reasons the creation of the world, is a necessary emanation from His nature. 248] God suffices fully to Himself—for the infinitely perfect Being can be conceived alone, and without any necessary relation to a single one of His creatures.¹⁰³

In this passage, Malebranche seems to equate God's "freely forming His plan" with God's choosing to create. But, should God freely form His plan, then He must act in the wisest way. However, later in the *Traité*, Malebranche claims, "It is better that the world be than that it not be" and that "God necessarily does that which is best."¹⁰⁴ This would suggest, at least prima facie, that God *does not* form His plan freely with an *indifferent* freedom. Malebranche continues, "Although God follows the rules which His wisdom prescribes Him, He does not necessarily do, none the less, that which is best: for being the master of His action He can choose to do nothing," and "To act, and not to follow exactly the rules of wisdom, is a defect. Thus, supposing that God acts, He acts necessarily in the wisest way that can be conceived."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Malebranche, *Recherche* (OC I.47/LO 5).

¹⁰³ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours II, Pt.2, sect.li (OC V.110/R 162).

¹⁰⁴ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours II, Pt.2, sect.liii (OC V.111/R 163).

¹⁰⁵ Malebranche, *Traité*, Discours II, Pt.2, sect.liv (OC V.111/R 163).

The best way to explain Malebranche's position is that God is *determined* to not violate Order, but *permitted* to follow it. So, *in acting*, God must not violate the demands of Order. Creation is a miracle *permitted* by Order (as are any other miracles where following the general laws and violating the general laws are equally worthy of God). This is a miracle permitted by Order because Order dictates that a world with Christ and simple laws is better than no world at all. But, while Order dictates that a world with Christ is better than no world, this in and of itself does not demand that God create. God *can* create because it is permitted by Order (in bringing the world into existence, God is actively doing something worthy of God). In not creating, God is not *acting* and so not *violating* Order.

So, while Malebranche maintains that God follows the rules that wisdom prescribes, he maintains that He does not do so necessarily since God can do nothing. However, once God has acted by bringing the world into existence, everything that follows that event is governed by Order. As Malebranche explains in the *Entretiens*:

Finally, everything depends on God because through miracles He can interrupt the ordinary course of providence and He never fails to do so when the immutable Order of His perfections requires it, that is, when what is due His immutability is of less consideration than what is due His other attributes.¹⁰⁶

God thus acts by a particular volition to bring about a miracle when Order demands that God cease acting by general volitions.

So, in acting, God must follow the rules of wisdom. God is permitted to act in accordance with Order and determined not to violate Order.¹⁰⁷ On Malebranche's view, God's decision to create was free because it was open to God to create or not to create because simply not acting would not be a violation of Order. But notice that the way that Malebranche conceives of God's free act of creation is a far cry from the kind of freedom that Arnauld takes God to have in creation. Importantly, [249] even though Malebranche's God is not determined by the content of His reason to create, He nevertheless must consult His reason in order to create the world that is most worthy. So, in a very real sense, Malebranche's God is bound in the very way that Arnauld understands Him to be.

As we saw above, Arnauld puts the point forcefully: if God's action is like that of created beings, wherein God wills based on what He understands, how could God have refrained from creating since He would have understood that it is better to create than not to? But Malebranche cleverly (or obstinately) avoids the epistemological question that interests Arnauld. Despite the fact that Malebranche avoids directly engaging the question, the response he gives seems merited. After all, throughout the Malebranche-Arnauld polemic, one of the recurring themes is Arnauld's criticism of Malebranche for holding that God and God's reasons are as accessible to us as Malebranche claims they are. In the case

¹⁰⁶ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien IX, sect.v (OC XII.256–57/JS 199).

¹⁰⁷ See also Moreau, *Malebranche*, 152–61. Our account seems to support what Moreau calls a "possible" miracle; see our footnote 7.

of creation, Malebranche has provided Arnauld with everything we can know about God's action and motives for acting: God was permitted but not demanded by Order to create. The fact that creation occurred confirms that a miracle exists and that we have knowledge of its existence—creation itself is an act performed by particular volitions and is thus miraculous.

This brings the discussion back to the question that began this section: whether we can know if the requisite conditions for miracles ever obtain post-creation. An answer to this question is that God's reasons are not fully transparent to us, and thus we cannot expect to understand the reasons for and nature of all of God's actions.¹⁰⁸ And, indeed, the lack of transparency present in the reasons that motivate a miracle, like creation, confirm this. We know that God acted because Order permitted, but did not demand, such a singular act. We might be tempted to suggest that the knowledge of both the existence of and the reasons for other such singular acts is outside the scope of finite intellectual powers. A consequence of this suggestion would be that human beings are not in a position to understand either divine motives or all events in their world. We suggest that this consequence would be unwelcome in Malebranche's system. Let us turn to this now.

3. Providence and Particular Volitions

The prevalence of divine action by general volitions raises the question of how to understand a theodicy where it seems that it is a violation of God's attributes to intervene in any way to help finite created beings. The answer, we suggest, is twofold. In the first place, Malebranche's theodicy is intimately tied to his notion of providence. This becomes clear with a reconsideration of God's role in original sin. In the *Entretiens*, Malebranche engages the question of why God did not intervene in Adam's sin in order to save His creatures from expulsion from paradise. Though Malebranche does not put it in these terms, we see that such a question is a red herring. That is, it is inappropriate to ask why God failed to intervene in Adam's sin. It is a mistake to think that Adam had a special status with respect to God—because God did not create Adam for any reason other than to eventually see His [250] divine son incarnated. God's laws of nature (the communication of motion) were the same for Adam as they are for us. Adam's sin merely changed the order of subservience between created mind and body—after his sin the body was no longer subordinated to the mind. But the communication of motion remains the same—the difference is that Adam had, compared to postlapsarians, a much greater ability to attend to the truth, that is, to God. Given that God is "sufficient unto Himself," to imagine that He had any reason to intervene in the events surrounding the Fall is absurd. He created the best possible laws (consistent with Christ) and they are the laws that did, do, and will continue to regulate the natural world. Recall that God could only have intervened in the realms of nature or grace if such an intervention via particular volition would have expressed His own attributes as much or more than if He did not. There is no way in which it would have been more God-like to intervene, especially given that *nothing* that happens in the natural realm (including what happened in Eden) could have had any effect on God. Now, if there is no possible reason for God to intervene by particular volition in the case of original sin, it

¹⁰⁸ As Gueroult suggests in *Malebranche*, 186; see also Moreau, "The Malebranche-Arnauld Debate," 104.

is very difficult to imagine any situation where such an intervention could have sufficient reason. Put another way, how could something terrestrial ever affect God to the extent that He would upset the hierarchical order of His attributes? It seems, simply, that no such event is possible.

Our second response follows a suggestion from Andrew Black.¹⁰⁹ It does not follow, Malebranche could argue, from the fact that God does not (or even could not) violate the general laws to help finite created beings that God did not create with their interests in mind. We have argued that God was indifferent (according to Malebranche's understanding of 'indifference') in creating the world. Given that God chose to create, He had to create a world that includes Christ and the Church. Further, God's action must be consistent with and proportionate to His attributes, which means according to Order and by the simplest means possible. Christ and the Church have a lexical priority over any other features of the world. If we imagine Malebranche's God surveying His understanding, considering all the possible ways that He could create, any world without Christ and the Church are immediately removed. As we argued above, original sin is a central (although not necessary) component of this world. Then, among the remaining worlds, God only considers those that are the most perfect with respect to the simplicity of His ways.¹¹⁰ Given God's decision to create, this creation must be in accordance with all of these criteria. However, when God created the initial conditions He knew every event that would follow from these initial conditions and His general laws. It seems likely that Malebranche would allow that there are any number of different initial conditions that God could have chosen that would lead to Christ and the Church and allow God to act in the simplest ways possible. In selecting to create *this* world and especially this set of initial conditions, God created a world with the richest effects possible given the other restrictions on his action. God, Malebranche [251] could claim, considered every particular agent that would exist under this set of initial conditions, compared them to other possible sets of initial conditions, and created the best world within those constraints. This line of argument is at least implied in *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*. There, Malebranche acknowledges the prima facie inconsistency between a God who is wise, just, and good, and the fact that He did not prevent Adam's sin. This failure is inconsistent with God's nature in three ways: "1) To create something He knew would be corrupted, this is contrary to wisdom, 2) To be able to stop the corruption and to not stop it, this is contrary to goodness, 3) To create an infinity of miserable people, because of a sin committed six thousand years before they were born, this is a terrible injustice."¹¹¹ According to Malebranche, there is only one way to respond to this charge: in Christ, God found a motive that was sufficient for creation. This motive "to do good to His creatures, to receive their sanctified cult offered by His Son" was sufficient for God to take on the role of creator, a role "not worthy of Him."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ See Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy," 40–44. For a passage in Malebranche that suggests this reading, see *Traité*, Discours I, Pt.1, sect.xiii (OC V.28/R 116).

¹¹⁰ On our view, it is at least possible that there are numerous different sets of laws that are equally simple. If there are such varying sets of simple laws, then God would create whichever set is conducive to a world containing both a Christ figure and the most good.

¹¹¹ Malebranche, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*, sect.xxii (OC XVI.129).

¹¹² Malebranche, *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*, sect.xxii (OC XVI.126).

So, on Malebranche's view, while it is true that God does not violate the laws of nature to help particular creatures, by creating them He has already done as well by these creatures as possible given the requirements for God to act. While it is true that God *could have* improved the lot of His creation had He not been constrained by His own wisdom, Malebranche's God exercises concern for His creatures prior to creating in His choice of initial conditions.

Malebranche all but confirms this with his enumeration, in the *Entretiens*, of God's five general laws of the ordinary course of his providence (paraphrased):

1. The general laws of the communication of movement, of which laws the collision of bodies is the natural or occasional cause.
2. The laws of the union of soul and body, whose modalities are reciprocally the occasional causes of their changes.
3. The laws of the union of the soul with God, with intelligible substance and universal reason, of which laws our attention is the occasional cause.
4. The general laws that give angels, both good and bad, power over bodies, substances that are inferior to their nature—the occasional causes of these laws are their practical desires.
5. The laws by which Jesus Christ received sovereign power in Heaven and on earth, not only over bodies, but souls too—the occasional causes of these laws are the different movements of Jesus's soul.¹¹³

Malebranche enumerates these as the general laws that regulate the ordinary course of his providence; laws 1–3 are known through “Reason and experience,” while 4 and 5 are known through “the authority of Scripture.”¹¹⁴ What does this mean? According to Malebranche, God's providence is one with His orders, both of nature and of grace. The natural order is largely governed by 1–4 above. This order gives us the laws of physics, the constant conjunction of ideas with their [252] appropriate sensory content, and the relation between ideas being revealed to us proportional to our attentive desire for them. The fourth item on this list all but discounts the possibility of God's particular volitions. The fifth item in this set of general laws orders the realm of grace. Given this list, it is near impossible to imagine any situation where the general laws instituted by God according to the immutable Order itself would demand to be lifted by that same Order. On the one hand, Malebranche insists to Arnauld that God acts “often” or even “almost always” by general volitions, thus leaving room for us to suppose that the other times God acts by particular volitions.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, Malebranche uses creation as the paradigmatic example of a divine particular volition, where the absence of pre-existing occasional causes forces God to create in a way that sacrifices simplicity. Once occasional causes exist in the realms

¹¹³ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien XIII, sect. ix (OC XII.319–20/JS 252–53).

¹¹⁴ Malebranche, *Entretiens*, Entretien XIII, sect. ix (OC XII.319–20/JS 252–53). While Malebranche is clear that these five laws govern the ordinary course of providence, he allows other possible general laws, e.g. those by which “baptismal waters have the power to purify us,” and “fire in hell” torments “demons,” which we cannot know, given our empirical and scriptural position (Malebranche *Entretiens*, Entretien XIII, sect. ix [OC XII.320–21/JS 253–54]).

¹¹⁵ See Malebranche, *Réponse à la Dissertation* (OC VI/VII.485–96).

of nature and grace, occasional causes whose governing laws have the immutable Order as their source, any demand from Order to suspend these laws seems a contradiction in terms.

That the laws governing these two realms are *general* and thus governed by occasional causes is, we argue, critical for Malebranche's understanding of providence. On his view, the central feature of divine providence is not about the pious being rewarded and the wicked being punished. Rather, God's goodness is manifest in the very *immutability* of these orders. That the orders are governed by general volitions entails that the events of each order are, at least in principle, discoverable.¹¹⁶ This possible discovery of the truth is the beginning and end of Malebranche's conception of God's providence and it is a *by-product* of his sole motivation to glorify Himself. The kind of theodicy that results from this philosophical system is unique indeed. Let us turn to that now.

When theodicy is under discussion, we are typically concerned to analyze God's motives and how they relate to the nature of divine action. These considerations are certainly relevant to Malebranche's theodicy. But an investigation of the metaphysics and epistemology of particular volitions of God results in the appreciation of the epistemological side of Malebranche's theodicy. The upshot to appreciating this aspect of God's justice is that we see the important intersection between the search for truth, Malebranche's philosophical methodology, and his understanding of God's attributes. If God did act by particular volitions, which is to say without occasional causes, we could not be as sure as we are about our [253] chances of discovering truth and avoiding error. A consequence of the view we have advanced is that the theodicy can be even further restricted to the nature of grace alone. In governing the realm of grace by general laws, God glorifies in Himself because the perfection of His attributes (simplicity and fecundity) are carried out through the divine nature of Christ. Creation, then, seems to have been in sole service of setting up the realm of grace—for, as we mentioned above, it is difficult to see how anything that occurs in the realm of nature could affect God. The realm of grace, being infused with divinity, is a different story.

Appreciating this aspect of Malebranche's thought yields a surprising result: Malebranche is not primarily interested in developing a theodicy for natural evil, for there is no reason to expect that God is affected by this kind of evil, nor that there is anything in His nature that would warrant our calling into

¹¹⁶ Malebranche suggests this, claiming, "By miracle, I mean the effects that depend on general laws that are not at all naturally known to us" (*Entretiens*, Entretien XII, sect.xiv; [OC XII.295 n.]). Here, Malebranche is considering the objection that the Old Testament contains many miracles, which his system seems to deny. We agree with Dreyfus who states that "miracles do not at all imply a change in God's will: it is by the same simple, eternal, and invariable act that he [God] imposes his general laws of ordinary Providence and the exceptions to these laws" (*La volonté selon Malebranche*, 105). She does not, however, elaborate. Gueroult argues that miracles are possible in the event that a calculation of the increase in perfection compared to the decrease in simplicity of ways yields a positive result, *Malebranche*, 188–207. Robinet shares Gueroult's view of the role of the calculation, but specifies that there are "very few miracles." In the end, however, we seem to be in agreement with him when he writes that "it is always possible to push our analysis of events taken to be miraculous to the point where we discover behind them [*par derrière*] an occasional cause obeying a general law" (*Système et existence*, 112). For a discussion of how this position distances Malebranche from Pascal and Nicole, see Pellegrin, *Le système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 171–73.

question His actions that lead to such evil. The natural realm exists for the sake of the realm of grace, and it is in this realm that questions about God's justice are relevant. The kind of theodicy that Malebranche puts forth is purely intellectual.¹¹⁷ And, indeed, it is on this point that he and Arnauld are in fundamental disagreement. Arnauld is committed to the idea that miracles are possible and actual—that God has, can, and will intervene in human affairs in order to reward or punish as He sees fit. By contrast, by acknowledging that such action is *possible* but, as we have argued, not actual, Malebranche shifts the focus of his theodicy. In fact, it is the absence of miracles that allows Malebranche's theodicy to have teeth. Miracles would, in a sense, introduce disorder into the world. An effect of such disorder would be a loss of certainty for the human search for truth. The regularity and orderliness of occasional causes in the realms of nature and grace form the foundation for certainty. God's justice can be seen and appreciated every day when we observe the regularity of natural and psychological process. Because these processes are regular, the method given by Malebranche for the search after truth can be followed and trusted. On this interpretation, every event has a set of conditions that must obtain for the event to occur. Even rare phenomena are governed by laws whose conditions are at least *in principle* discoverable. This means that there is no event so fundamentally mysterious that it is outside the scope of human knowledge. In this way, God's causal activity, justice, and creation fit nicely together: while God cannot be affected by the suffering or joy of His creation, His goodness and justice created a world that operates by immutable laws.

This position supports Malebranche's affirmation that his thought is not to be bisected into "philosophical" on the one hand and "theological" on the other.¹¹⁸ Malebranche's philosophical system is fundamentally grounded in theological concepts—they are not separable. His innovation is to shift the target of a central [254] feature of Christian theology: on his view, God's love is made manifest not by salvation, but by knowledge. Even those events that are, in fact, singular have a set of necessary conditions for their occurrence that are discoverable. While our finitude blocks the possibility of us being true causal agents, the love of God for His creation is made evident in the continual and predictable opportunities that are open to us to discover the nature and operation of the divine laws.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Our position here seems to complement Rutherford's conclusion: "For Malebranche, the *justice* of God's creation is defined by wisdom itself, which, as Order, provides the standard by which justice is conceived" ("Malebranche's Theodicy," 184–85). For an account of the intersection of Malebranche's theory of the vision of all things in God with this suggestion, see Moreau, "The Malebranche-Arnauld Debate," 104–6.

¹¹⁸ Malebranche makes this claim to Arnauld in the *Lettres du Pere Malebranche à un de ses Amis, Dans lesquelles il répond aux Réflexions Philosophiques & Theologique de Mr. Arnauld sur le Traité de la Nature & de la Grace, Avant Propos*, I (OC VIII/IX.632).

¹¹⁹ We would like to thank Steven Nadler, the audience at the September 2012 meeting of the Quebec Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, and two anonymous referees of this journal for helpful feedback on this paper. Some of the research for this paper was completed while Eric was on fellowship at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame and while Julie was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego. We would like to thank them for their support. Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Bibliography and Abbreviations

- Arnauld, Antoine. *Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*. 43 vols. Paris: Sigismond D'Arnay, 1775. [OA]
———. *On True and False Ideas*. Translated by Elmar Kremer. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.
[K]
- Arnauld, Antoine, and Pierre Nicole. *Logic or the Art of Thinking*. Edited and translated by Jill Vance Buroker. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. [B]
- Black, Andrew. "Malebranche's Theodicy." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 27–44.
- Brown, Stuart. "The Critical Reception of Malebranche, from His Own Time to the End of the Eighteenth Century." In *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, edited by Steven Nadler, 262–87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. ["The Critical Reception of Malebranche"]
- Clarke, Desmond M. "Malebranche and Occasionalism: A Reply to Nadler." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1995): 499–504. ["Malebranche and Occasionalism"]
- Cross, Richard. *Duns Scotus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
———. *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. [*The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*]
- Detlefson, Karen. "Supernaturalism, Occasionalism, and Preformation in Malebranche." *Perspectives on Science* 11 (2003): 443–83.
- Dreyfus, Ginette. "Introduction." In *Œuvres complètes de Malebranche*. Vol.5. Edited by Ginette Dreyfus. Paris: Vrin, 1958, i–lvii.
———. *La volonté selon Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, 1958.
- Gouhier, Henri. *La philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse*. 2nd ed. Paris: Vrin, 1948.
[*La philosophie de Malebranche*]
- Greenberg, Sean. "Things that Undermine Each Other: Occasionalism, Freedom, and Attention in Malebranche." In *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy Volume IV*, edited by Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler, 113–40. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ["Things that Undermine Each Other"]
- Gueroult, Martial. *Malebranche*. Vol. II, *Les Cinq abîmes de la providence*. Paris: Éditions Aubier-Montaigne, 1959. [*Malebranche*]
- Horan, Daniel P. "How Original Was Scotus on the Incarnation? Reconsidering the History of the Absolute Predestination of Christ in Light of Robert Grosseteste." *The Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 374–91. ["How Original Was Scotus on the Incarnation?"]
- Hunter, Graeme. "Arnauld's Defense of Miracles and Its Context." In *Interpreting Arnauld*, edited by Elmar Kremer, 111–26. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1996.
- Jolley, Nicholas. *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. [*The Light of the Soul*]
- Koyré, Alexandre. *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957.
- Leibniz, Gottfried. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*. 7 vols. Edited by C. I. Gerhardt. Berlin: Weidman, 1875–1890. [G]
- Leibniz, Gottfried, and Antoine Arnauld. *The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence*. Translated by H. T. Mason. Manchester University Press, 1967. [M] [255]

- Leibniz, Gottfried, and Samuel Clarke. *Correspondence*. Edited by Roger Ariew. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000. [Leibniz-Clarke]
- Malebranche, Nicolas. *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*. Edited by Nicholas Jolley. Translated by David Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. [JS]
- . *Oeuvres Complètes de Malebranche*. 20 vols. Edited by André Robinet. Paris: Vrin, 1958–86. [OC]
- . *The Search After Truth*. Translated by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. [LO]
- . *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Translated by Patrick Riley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. [R]
- McCracken, Charles. *Malebranche and British Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.
- Moreau, Denis. *Deux Cartésiens*. Paris: Vrin, 1999.
- . *Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, 2004.
- . “The Malebranche-Arnauld Debate.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, edited by Steven Nadler, 87–111. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Nadler, Steven. “Arnauld’s God.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 517–38.
- , ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . “Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): 31–47.
- Pellegrin, Marie-Frédérique. *Le système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, 2006.
- Pessin, Andrew. “Malebranche’s Distinction Between General and Particular Volitions.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36 (2001): 77–99.
- . “Malebranche’s Natural Theodicy and the Incompleteness of God’s Volitions.” *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 47–63.
- Pyle, Andrew. *Malebranche*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Radner, Daisie. *Malebranche*. Van Gorcum Assen: Amsterdam, 1978.
- Riley, Patrick. “Malebranche’s Moral Philosophy: Divine and Human Justice.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, edited by Steven Nadler, 220–61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. [“Malebranche’s Moral Philosophy”]
- Robinet, André. *Système et existence dans l’œuvre de Malebranche*. Paris: Vrin, 1965. [Système et existence]
- Rutherford, Donald. “Malebranche’s Theodicy.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, edited by Steven Nadler, 165–89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Schmaltz, Tad. “What Has Cartesianism to Do with Jansenism?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 60 (1999): 37–56.
- Sleigh, Robert C. *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. [Leibniz and Arnauld]
- Stencil, Eric. “Malebranche and the General Will of God.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19 (2011): 1107–29.
- Terestchenko, Michel. *Amour et désespoir de François de Sales à Fénelon*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2000.
- Wahl, Russell. “Occasionalism, Laws, and General Will.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19 (2011): 219–40.
- Walsh, Julie, and Thomas M. Lennon. “Malebranche, the Quietists, and Freedom.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (2012): 69–108.