

Order, Laws and Divine Volitions: Malebranche's Occasionalism and the Problem of Miracles

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Abstract: Malebranche's definition of a miracle as an event brought about by a particular volition in God – a volition that is not in accordance with any law – combined with his account of God's mode of action, which is always through general volitions (that is, volitions that are in accordance with some law), seem to rule out the possibility of miracles. Many of the "miraculous" events of the Hebrew Bible, then, do not qualify as true miracles, because God brings them about as a result of the laws of angelic motion or the laws of grace. Even those rare events that are exceptions to *all* the laws created by God, and thus which seem to be miracles in a strict sense, appear to follow from a yet higher law, which Malebranche calls "Order". Thus, Malebranche's philosophical system seems to rule out any truly particular volitions whatsoever, and, thereby, miracles.

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Writing to Leibniz in March of 1687, after receiving an outline of his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Antoine Arnauld is, among other emotions, a bit puzzled. He does not see any difference between the Cartesian theory of "occasional causes" and Leibniz's doctrine of preestablished harmony. An occasionalist like Malebranche, whose views on causation were well known by then, claims that substances in nature do not, despite appearances, really causally interact¹. Rather, they and their states of being serve only as occasions for God to exercise His unique and ubiquitous causal efficacy. Leibniz, too, insists that finite substances do not interact; rather, each substance generates its own states and actions by virtue of its intrinsic nature, although the natures of all sub-

¹ Malebranche's first substantive presentation of his occasionalism is in Elucidation 15 of the *Recherche de la vérité*, which appeared in the third edition of the work (1677-78). This was followed in 1680 by his *Traité de la nature et de la grace*. Perhaps the doctrine's most thorough and systematic presentation, however, is in the *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la mort* (1688).

stances in this best of all possible worlds are synchronized in their activity by God at creation so as to bring about a harmonious and providential state of affairs. Arnauld suggests, with respect to Leibniz's view, that

[i]t seems to me that this is to say the same thing in other terms that those say who maintain that my will is the occasional cause for the movement of my arm and that God is its real cause; for they do not claim that God does this at the moment by a new act of will each time that I wish to raise my arm, but by a single act of the eternal will by which he has chosen to do everything which he has foreseen that it will be necessary to do, in order that the universe might be such as he has decided it ought to be².

Arnauld wonders whether the causal picture of substances that Leibniz offers in the summary of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and in subsequent letters and what the occasionalists say essentially come to the same thing³.

In his reply, Leibniz appeals to what he takes to be an important difference between his doctrine of preestablished harmony and occasionalism—namely, that the occasionalists introduce perpetual miracles into nature. “[The] authors of occasional causes”, he says, “introduce a miracle which is no less so just because it is continual. For it seems to me that the notion of miracles does not consist in rarity”. A miracle, according to Leibniz, is an event or state of affairs “that surpasses the forces of creatures”⁴; it is something whose occurrence cannot be explained by the natural powers of finite substances. He explains that “God performs a miracle when he does something that surpasses the forces that he has given to creatures and that he conserves therein”; and since the occasionalists do not allow there to be *any* natural powers in finite substances in the first place, everything that occurs among those substances through God's activity must be a miracle⁵.

Malebranche, Leibniz and their respective partisans (including Pierre Bayle) would end up debating whether in fact Malebranche's theory of causation does

² Arnauld to Leibniz, 4 March 1687, in G.W. Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. by C.I. Gerhardt, Olms, Hildesheim 1965, vol. 2, p. 84; translation from G.W. Leibniz: *Discourse on Metaphysics/Correspondence with Arnauld/Monadology*, trans. by G.R. Montgomery, Open Court, La Salle (IL) 1980, p. 173.

³ In fact, Arnauld's description of occasionalism is a misreading of the theory; see S. Nadler, “Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche”, in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993), pp. 31–47.

⁴ “Eclaircissement des difficultés que Monsieur Bayle a trouvées dans le système nouveau de l'union de l'ame et du corps” (Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, cit., vol. 4, p. 520).

⁵ To Arnauld, 30 April 1687, Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 93.

introduce “perpetual miracles” into nature. And this, of course, requires each philosopher’s camp to specify what exactly constitutes a miracle⁶.

In his response to Leibniz and elsewhere, Malebranche states that a miracle is *not* defined as an event that is directly caused by God rather than by natural substances, since *all* events are directly caused by God. Rather, a miracle is an event that occurs in nature but is an exception to or violation of the general laws of nature. This seems straightforward enough ... sort of. For there is, in fact, a complexity and interesting set of ambiguities in Malebranche’s account of miracles, which I explore in this essay. What we will see is that Malebranche’s position seems, in the end, to lead to a rather radical conclusion, one that may possibly have been his intention – namely, the conclusion that, strictly speaking, other than the initial act of creation of the cosmos by God, there are no miracles; indeed, on one possible reading of Malebranche’s view, it may turn out that even the act of creation itself does not qualify as miraculous.

1. *Theodicy*

The central text of Malebranche on this topic is the *Traité de la nature et de la grace* (*TNG*), first published in 1680. In this work, Malebranche addresses the problem of evil, that is, the question of why there are imperfections – physical traumas, disabilities and disasters, moral crimes, etc. – in a world created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, wise and just God. The centerpiece of Malebranche’s theodicy, or resolution of this problem, is his account of the nature of God’s causal activity and especially his distinction between different kinds of volitions in God.

Malebranche insists that God is “obliged always to act in a manner worthy of himself, by simple, general, constant and uniform means” (*TNG*, Premier Discours, § 43: OC V.49). He puts this in his own terms by saying that God acts only by “general volitions” and (almost) never by “particular volitions”. Here is how Malebranche distinguishes these sorts of volition: “God acts by general volitions when he acts in consequence of general laws that he has

⁶ For Leibniz vs. Malebranche on miracles, see D. Rutherford, “Natures, Laws and Miracles: The Roots of Leibniz’s Critique of Occasionalism”, in S. Nadler (ed.), *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism and Preestablished Harmony*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park (PA) 1993, pp. 135-58; and S. Brown, “Malebranche’s Occasionalism and Leibniz’s Pre-established Harmony: An ‘Easy Crossing’ or an ‘Unbridgeable Gap’?”, in S. Brown (ed.), *Nicolas Malebranche: His Philosophical Critics and Successors*, Van Gorcum, Assen 1991, pp. 81-93.

established ... I say, on the other hand, that God acts by particular volitions when the efficacy of his will is not determined by some general law to produce some effect" (*TNG*, Premier Elucidation, §§ 1-2: OCM V.147-48)⁷. A general volition is a will to do something that is in accordance with or follows from some law or general principle. A law of physics, for example, specifies that if a body of a certain size at rest is struck by a body of a certain size in motion, then it will be moved in a certain way. When Malebranche's God then moves a body in the appropriate way on the occasion of its being struck by another body, He is acting by a general volition. Similarly, if God causes a feeling of pain in some person's mind on the occasion of his body being pricked by a needle, this is done through a general volition, since it is in accordance with the laws of mind-body union that He has established. A particular volition, on the other hand, does not obey any law, but is (relative to the laws) *ad hoc*. If God were to move a body without its having been struck by another body, or if He were to cause pain in someone without anything having happened to that person's body, He would be acting by a particular volition. (Strictly speaking, as we shall see, it is a truly particular volition only if the abrogation of the law in question is not required by and in conformity with some other, higher-order law.) Thus, Malebranche's God not only institutes the most simple laws when creating the world, but He also is bound by his own nature – as a wise, good, immutable, and absolutely simple being who acts with perfect constancy – to follow those laws in the ubiquitous causal operations through which He makes nature function.

Why, then, is there evil in the world? Why are individuals born without limbs, why are there floods and droughts, why is there sin and suffering, and why do virtuous people sometimes suffer while vicious people prosper? And why, especially, are not all human beings saved by the grace of a God who, we are told by Scripture, wants everyone to be saved? Malebranche believes that it is important, above all, to bear in mind that God does not will any of these evils with a particular volition. God does not choose them for their own sake and regardless of what else happens to be the case.

⁷ The recent literature on general vs. particular volitions includes J. Walsh and E. Stencil, "Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54 (2016), pp. 227-55; A. Pessin, "Malebranche's Distinction Between Particular and General Volitions", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001), pp. 77-99; A. Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997), pp. 27-44; and A. Pyle, *Malebranche*, Routledge, London 2003.

If the rain falls on certain lands while the sun burns others; if a time that is favorable for the harvests is followed by a hail that ravages them; if a child comes into the world with a malformed and useless head, which rises from his chest and makes him miserable, it is not at all because God wanted to produce these effects through particular volitions. (*TNG* I.18: OC V.32)

These unfortunate events occur because God allows them to occur – or, rather, given God’s unique and ubiquitous causal role in the world, brings them about – as a part of the ordinary course of nature as this is regulated by its most simple laws. General laws have a wide variety of effects. As anyone whose picnic plans have ever been upended by the weather knows, these laws, which on the whole make for an orderly and predictable world, cannot take into account the convenience and wishes of particular individuals or even an entire species. Birth defects, earthquakes, and other natural disorders are but “the necessary consequences [of laws] so simple, and at the same time so fecund, that they serve to produce everything beautiful that we see in the world” (*TNG* I.18: OC V.32). God, obliged as he is to following the laws of nature, makes it rain on fallow lands as well as on those that are cultivated because that is the meteorological result to which the laws lead. Likewise, “if, for example, one is dropping rocks on the heads of passersby, the rocks will always fall with an equal speed, regardless of the piety or condition, the good or bad disposition of those passersby” (*TNG* I.59, OC V.63). Just as the rain falls where it must, regardless of what lies underneath, so the rocks, falling as rocks do, will land on the heads of the virtuous and the vicious alike. In these and other cases, God is simply carrying out the natural consequences of the laws of nature – laws that are so simple that they admit of no exceptions, and that specify that when certain things occur, other things must happen.

God, then, is more committed to acting in a general way and to a nature governed by the most simple laws than He is to the well-being of individuals and the justice of the distribution of rewards and punishments. As the universal cause, He follows those laws, come what may to those affected by them. For this reason, Malebranche says that God “permits disorder, but he does not create it, he does not will it” (*Entretiens sur la métaphysique* [*EM*] IX.9, OC XII.212; JS 161). But the word ‘disorder’ is ambiguous. An event is a disorder in one very relative sense if it frustrates the ends or ambitions of an agent. A rock falling on one’s head is certainly a disorder for the injured party. But from a more global perspective, such an event is perfectly ordered, since it follows from the sequence of previous events in a law-like way. “It is no disorder for lions to

eat wolves, wolves sheep, and sheep the grass that God tends so carefully that he has given it all the things necessary for its own preservation" (*Recherche de la vérité*, Elucidation XV, OC III.218; LO 665). For Malebranche, nature is perfectly well-ordered – and that is exactly why disorders happen.

Thus, there is sin and suffering in the world, rain falls on the oceans while inseminated soil suffers drought, there are murders, deformities of birth, and tsunamis, and not every individual receives the grace necessary to move him to faith. But none of this happens because God directly wills it. Rather, such things happen as a result of the simple laws of nature and grace instituted by God at creation and which He is committed to carrying out, come what may for many individuals affected by them.

2. *Miracles*

Of course, Malebranche admits, as he must, that God can always intervene in the ordinary course of nature and keep the rain from falling where it does no good, prevent a tornado from hitting a town, or stop a person from committing some sin. But this, Malebranche says, would be for God to depart from the law-like generality of His ways and thus perform a miracle; and we must not expect, much less demand constant miracles from God.

Which brings us to our first point. Malebranche – who, like many other philosophers (including Leibniz), is committed to a rationalist conception of God, a God who is an agent that always acts for reasons – is clearly uncomfortable with miracles. His primary fealty is to the simplicity and generality of God's ways and to the regularity and predictability of nature. He believes that God's wisdom, goodness, and power are revealed more by the regular, law-like course of nature than by any unusual supernatural intervention.

Malebranche identifies a miracle with God acting "by a particular volition". "God", he says, "only acts by particular volitions when he brings about miracles" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* II.1, OC VIII.696). A miracle, he says, in "the most exact and particular [sense] of philosophers" refers to "all effects that are not natural, or that are not the consequence of natural laws [...]" Thus, whether an effect is common or rare, if God does not produce it as a consequence of his general laws, which are the natural laws, it is a true miracle. If, for example, a thought comes to my mind, or if I have some sensation of pleasure or pain without there being in my brain any disturbance that is its natural

cause, this effect will be a miracle, even though there seems to be nothing extraordinary about it" (OC VIII.696). Thus, every miraculous event is the performance of a particular volition in God; and every practical or effective particular volition in God brings about a miracle⁸.

Now Malebranche seems *prima facie* to rule out the occurrence of miracles altogether, if not in principle then at least as a matter of fact. He says explicitly that "God never acts by particular volitions" (*TNG* I.19: OC V.32). While leaving open the possibility that God can, of course, bring about a miracle, Malebranche seems here to be saying that God never in fact does so. This may be what one scholar calls an "incautious exaggeration" on Malebranche's part, but, on the basis of some texts I will consider, I am not so sure⁹. Malebranche does backtrack in the face of Arnauld's accusation that Malebranche's philosophy rules out miracles and says that he did not literally mean that God absolutely, positively *never* acts by particular volitions. The age of miracles may be over, but Malebranche seems not to want to say that God has never performed and never will perform a miracle. In one of his replies to Arnauld during their decades-long debate, Malebranche insists that "I do not claim to prove that God *never* acts by particular volitions" (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]* V.3: OC VII.503, emphasis in original text). What he does say, in another reply to Arnauld, is that "it is very rare that God acts by particular volitions" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* I.1.vi: OC VIII.661). But, as we shall see, Malebranche's considered, albeit somewhat obscured, position might not even concede this much.

But first, what exactly constitutes a miracle/particular volition for Malebranche? Here is where the trouble begins.

⁸ On the distinction between simple vs. practical volitions in Malebranche, see OC VIII.651. See J.-C. Bardout, *Malebranche et la métaphysique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1999, pp. 259-63. M.-F. Pellegrin apparently does not agree with the identification of miracle with particular volition. In her *Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, Vrin, Paris 2006, she does say that "toutes les volontés particulières de Dieu sont des miracles" (p. 175); but in communication with me she claims that for Malebranche being a particular volition is only a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for being a miracle—the volition must also represent a violation of an *existing* law. And since before creation there are no laws, the act of creation, while the product of particular volitions, is not a miracle. Pyle agrees with her on this point (*Malebranche*, cit., p. 176). This seems a rather arbitrary distinction, however. If a particular volition is, by definition, a volition that is not in accordance with any law, then any volitions that occur in the absence of laws altogether should qualify as "particular".

⁹ R.M. Adams, "Malebranche's Causal Concepts", in E. Watkins (ed.), *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature: Historical Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 67-104: 69.

The laws of nature, narrowly construed, are only one kind of law for Malebranche. In fact, he distinguishes five sets of laws. They are hierarchically ordered, with lower level laws capable of being suspended for the sake of higher order laws. The sets of laws are as follows:

1. Laws governing the communication of motion between bodies. The occasional causes of the operation of these laws are collisions among bodies. When one body collides with another body, the subsequent behavior of these bodies—how God moves them, on the occasionalist account—will be governed by the laws of the communication of motion and rest.

2. Laws governing the union between mind and body. These laws dictate how the body will be moved on the occasion of certain thoughts in the mind; and what sensations will occur in the mind on the occasion of certain motions in the body.

3. Laws governing the union of the soul with God, “the intelligible substance of universal reason.” These laws cover the ordinary access that human minds have to ideas in God’s understanding in thinking and perception—Malebranche’s infamous doctrine of the Vision in God. The occasional causes of the operation of these laws are acts of human attention, a kind of “natural prayer” whereby one’s impulse (voluntary or not) to think or perceive something occasions the presence of the relevant idea to the mind.

4. Laws that provide angels and demons with the power to move bodies. The efficacy of these laws is related to the desires of these benevolent and malevolent spiritual beings. God can move a body on the occasion of a desire by an angel or a demon that it be so moved.

5. Finally, there are the laws of grace. These govern the distribution of interior grace among souls, and their operation is occasioned by the desires in Jesus Christ; that is, God will confer grace upon an individual whom Christ wants to be saved, whether or not the person’s soul is properly prepared to receive grace and make proper use of it¹⁰.

Now what is perfectly clear in Malebranche is that if the following two conditions are *both* satisfied, an event is *not* a miracle: (1) the event is the effect of a general volition in God, that is, a volition that is carrying out some law on the appropriate occasion; and (2) the law being carried out belongs to one of the first three sets of laws. These are, I presume, all “laws of nature” in a narrow sense for Malebranche, in so far as the occasional causes for the operation of these laws are a familiar part of nature: they are all either physical items or

¹⁰ The laws are detailed in *Entretiens sur la métaphysique* XIII.9: OC XII.319-20; JS 252-53.

events (for example, the collision of bodies) or items or events in the human mind (ideas and volitions). The laws of physics, the laws setting correlations between states of the body and states of the mind, and the laws determining how all human minds regularly have access to ideas in God are all laws that God follows in the ordinary course of nature.

It often seems that Malebranche intends *only* these three types of laws to constitute the set beyond which lies the domain of miracles. That is, perhaps a miracle is an event that is brought about by God but just not in accordance with these laws of nature. For example, when God moves a body on the occasion of a desire by an angel (rather than that of a human soul), in accordance with the fourth set of laws, this is a miracle; or the distribution of grace by God on the occasion of desires in the soul of Christ, according to the fifth set of laws, is always a miraculous event.

There is indeed some textual support for this reading. In the *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, Malebranche has his spokesperson, Theodore, say that

when God performs a miracle and does not act as a consequence of the general laws which are known to us, I maintain that God acts as a consequence of other laws unknown to us, or that what he does then is determined by certain circumstances he had in view from all eternity in undertaking that simple, eternal and invariable act which contains both the general laws of his ordinary providence and also the exceptions to these very laws. (*EM* VIII.3: OC XII.177; JS 131).

Here Malebranche allows that a miracle might be an event brought about by a general volition, as long as the law being thereby carried about by God is not among those laws generally known to us. While the first three sets of laws are, he says, known to us by “Reason and experience” (*EM* XIII.9: OC XII.319; JS 253), he explicitly says elsewhere that the contents of the laws governing angelic motion and the laws governing grace are not, in fact, known to us¹¹ – such events, then, do not belong to nature but to the supernatural. Likewise, in a note to *Entretiens sur la métaphysique* XII.13, Malebranche states that “by ‘miracle’ I mean the effects which depend on general laws which are *not known to us naturally*” (OC XII.295; JS 231, my emphasis).

Moreover, there is this important passage, which allows that events brought about in accordance with the laws of grace are miraculous:

¹¹ *TNG* I.20.Addition: OC V.34; *Recherche de la vérité*, Eclaircissement XV: OC III.221.

There are yet some very rare occasions where these general laws of motion must cease to produce their effect. But it is not that God changes these laws or corrects himself. Rather, such miracles happen in certain circumstances because of the order of Grace, which the order of Nature must serve. (*TNG* I.21: OC V.34)

It is thus apparently a miracle when God suspends the laws of nature to do something that is in accordance with, even demanded by, the laws of grace.

Finally, Malebranche suggests that the miracles of the Old Testament can be accommodated by his account of divine volitions. To believe otherwise would be to assume that

I do not recognize any other general laws according to which God executes his designs that those governing the communication of motions [...] I am persuaded that most of the miraculous effects of the ancient Law are brought about as a consequence of some general laws, since the general cause must not execute his designs by particular volitions [...] But I am far from believing that these extraordinary effects are the consequence only of natural laws of the communication of motions. (*TNG*, Last Elucidation: OC V.197-98)

All of this suggests that miracles *can* be the result of what should be called general volitions, albeit general volitions that answer to the higher order laws of angelic motion and of grace, as opposed to the physical and psycho-physical laws of nature or the laws of human understanding¹².

However, the problem with this reading is that it clashes with Malebranche's frequent claim that miracles are equivalent to events caused by particular volitions, and particular volitions are those divine volitions that are *not* in accordance with or the carrying out of *any* general laws, whether it be the laws of nature (in the narrow sense) or the angelic laws and the laws of grace¹³. On the suggested reading, events brought about by God in accordance with the two higher-order sets of general laws – those governing the angelic motion of bodies and those governing grace – would be miracles even though in such cases God is definitely acting by general volitions. But if this were the case, Malebranche could not then say, in the very same works, that “miracles are

¹² Adams is willing to countenance for Malebranche miracles that are nonetheless events brought about by general volitions through the laws of grace (“Malebranche’s Causal Concepts”, cit., p. 71).

¹³ There are some texts that seem to include the laws of angelic motion and the laws of grace among “natural laws” (in a broad sense – that is, laws willed by God); see, for example, *Réponse aux Réflexions* [d’Arnauld] II.1: OC VIII.696.

such only because they never come about according to general laws” (*TNG* I.59: OC V.63), and “anything that God does by a particular volition is certainly a miracle, because it does not at all happen according to the general laws that he has established” (*TNG*, Elucidation I.13: OC V.160)¹⁴. Moreover, Malebranche also explicitly notes elsewhere that as long as God is following the laws of grace – and presumably any laws whatsoever – God is *not* performing a miracle (*Recherche de la vérité*, Éclaircissement XV: OC III.221; LO 667)¹⁵. (There is thus continuity on this point between 1680, when the *Traité de la nature et de la grace* was published, and 1700, when this *éclaircissement* was first published in the fifth edition of the *Recherche*¹⁶.)

The proponent of this first reading could reply that the notion of a *particular* volition is a relative one: relative, that is, to a specific set of laws. A particular volition would then comprise not a divine volition that is undirected by any law whatsoever, but rather a divine volition that is an exception to some specified laws, but nonetheless required by another, higher set of laws. However, this seems to be an especially *ad hoc* solution to the problem. I see no reason for thinking that Malebranche’s particular volitions are supposed to be anything but *absolutely* particular – that is, not in accordance with any general laws whatsoever – and not merely relatively particular. Malebranche himself could not be more clear about this: “I have said that God never acts by particular volitions when he is acting as a consequence of general laws” (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d’Arnauld]* I.1.iii: OC VIII.651).

But what, then, are we to do with the above passages that specify that a miracle is a contravention of laws “known to us naturally” and the problematic reading they seem to support? The laws of angelic motion and the laws of grace are certainly *not* known to us, so is it a miracle when something happens in accordance with *these* laws? Moreover, these texts come from various stages of Malebranche’s career, including both the 1680 *Traité de la nature et de la grace* and, eight years later, the *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, so they cannot be dismissed as representing an immature and eventually abandoned position.

¹⁴ Nor could Malebranche say that “when I say that God always follows the general laws that he has prescribed for himself, I am talking only of his general and ordinary providence. I do not exclude miracles or effects which do not follow from his general laws” (*EM* VIII.3: OC XII.177; JS 130).

¹⁵ As Bardout notes, “des événements qui nous paraissent miraculeux est en fait identique à celui de n’import quel événement naturel”, because they too are the function of occasional causes whose secondary efficacy is governed by laws (*Malebranche et la métaphysique*, cit., pp. 263-64).

¹⁶ It is also the position he takes in the *Méditations chrétiennes* of 1694 (VIII.26: OC X.92).

It seems to me that what Malebranche is doing in these instances is slyly and cautiously suggesting that many of the so-called “miracles” of the Hebrew Bible, “the Ancient Law”, are in fact not, strictly speaking, miracles at all. All those phenomena reported by the authors of Hebrew Scripture that involve God and angels acting in this world are “miraculous” in one sense but – despite appearances and despite their rarity – not truly miracles. This is because while such events are violations of the laws of nature (“laws known to us”), they occurred as a consequence of higher-order general laws (“laws unknown to us”) and so were not really brought about by particular volitions. This would be in keeping with Malebranche’s apparent desire to minimize the number of miracles in history. At one point in the *Traité de la nature et de la grace* he explicitly notes that the angelic motion of bodies, common in the Hebrew Bible, does *not* count as a miracle. He says that those things that occurred under “the Law of the Jews” that were “contrary to the natural laws known to us” were *not* miracles because they were not produced by God through particular volitions; to support this he cites the fact that angels have powers in the present world because of general laws unknown to us (*TNGI.20.addition: OC V.34*).

In fact, Malebranche is emphatic in his debate with Arnauld that “most of the miraculous effects of the ancient Law occurred as a consequence of some general laws” (*OC VII.489*), and so they are not truly miracles but only “miraculous” in a secondary sense, as wondrous and unusual events (*des prodiges*), because we do not know the relevant laws. This distinction between *miracle* (in the strict, true and primary sense) and *prodige* is crucial. Events that are *prodiges* are unexpected and surprising (given our ignorance of certain laws that allow for them to happen), as well as rare and unusual; and they are typically violations of the (known) laws of nature; but they are perfectly law-governed (by higher, unknown laws). Elsewhere, Malebranche notes that “the term ‘miracle’ is equivocal. First, it can be taken to refer to an effect that does not at all depend on the general laws known to human beings”; in this epistemological sense (“the common sense”), a “miracle” is an event that surprises us because of its novelty (*un prodige*). Or, second, it can be taken to refer “more generally to an effect that does not depend on any laws, neither known nor unknown” (*Méditations Chrétiennes VIII.26: OC X.92; Réponse aux Réflexions [d’Arnauld] II.1: OC VIII.695-96*)¹⁷. The angelic events of the Old Testament, such as when a

¹⁷ See H. Gouhier, *La Philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse*, Vrin, Paris 1948, pp. 65-66. A. Robinet notes that “l’équivocité du terme de miracle est dénoncée dans toutes les

person walks on water, are miracles only in the first sense, thus not really *true* miracles but only *prodiges* or “marvels.” As Malebranche says, “the frequent miracles of the Ancient Law do not at all prove that God often acts by particular volitions” (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d’Arnauld]* XV.6: OC VII.593)¹⁸.

It is the second sense of ‘miracle,’ however, that offers a stricter and more proper Malebranchian notion of what a miracle is, and it seems *prima facie* to restore their status as products of truly particular volitions. According to the more appropriate reading of Malebranchian miracles, then, a miraculous event is one whose occurrence transcends *all five orders of law*: all the laws of nature *and* all the laws of angelic action and of grace. A miracle is an event brought about by a divine volition that is not the carrying out of some law, neither the familiar laws of nature nor the higher-order “laws that are unknown to us”. That is, we should take Malebranche at his word when he says that “miracles are such only because they do not at all happen according to general laws” (*TNG* I.59: OC V.63). Thus, before the birth of Christ and so in the absence of his desires functioning as occasions for the operation of the (general) laws of grace, God distributed grace to the Patriarchs through particular volitions. This was miraculous, just because “everything that God does by particular volitions is certainly a miracle, since they never happen by the general laws that he has established” (*TNG*, Elucidation I.13: OC V.160). Similarly, God’s creation of this world had to be a particular volition – in fact, it had to involve an extraordinary number of particular volitions (or at least a single, all-encompassing particular volition with an extraordinary number of details). This is because it includes the initial creation of many members of each of the species of fauna and flora and the initial setting of bodies into motion, not to mention all future human souls, and before the creation of the world there were no laws to follow and no natural substances to occasion their operation. “When 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” (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d’Arnauld]* III: OC VIII-IX: 759)¹⁹. Before creation and the establishment of laws, there could be no general volitions in God.

oeuvres de la pleine maturité. Ce qu’on prend d’ordinaire pour miracle n’est que du ‘merveilleux’” (*Système et existence dans l’oeuvre de Malebranche*, Vrin, Paris 1965, p. 112).

¹⁸ The reference in Malebranche’s text to a man walking on water, of course, might also serve to include the reports of miracles in the Christian Gospels as well.

¹⁹ See also *EM* X.16: OC XII.245-46; JS 190-91.

3. *Order*

It is important to bear in mind, however, that for Malebranche any divine departures from the laws of nature and grace are not unmotivated; God's particular volitions do not happen indifferently, arbitrarily or ad hoc. Malebranchian miracles are, in fact, in accordance with a higher law that Malebranche calls "Order". God, he says to Arnauld, "never acts by particular volitions without important reasons [*sans des grandes raisons*]" (*Réponse aux Reflexions* [d'Arnauld] I.1.vi: OC VIII.661), and those more weighty reasons are found in Order. Malebranche says that "the immutable Order that consists in the necessary relation among the divine perfections is his [God's] inviolable law and the rule of all his volitions" (OC VIII.753; see also *TNG* I.20: OC V.33). Order is "the Eternal Wisdom" in God Himself, and bears the uncreated principles of truth, beauty, and justice. It dictates that God is more worthy than a creature, that a soul is more worthy than a body, and that a human being is more worthy than a beast. Above all, Order informs God that His wisdom, justice and other attributes also stand in hierarchical relations, and that one or another attribute is sometimes better honored by an exception to divine simplicity and immutability in action, more glorified by suspending the laws of nature and grace than by following them.

In one of his responses to Arnauld, Malebranche defends himself against the accusation that on his view God *never* acts by particular volitions, and thus never performs miracles. On the contrary, Malebranche replies, he has said many times that God acts by these kinds of volitions, always when Order demands it and often when Order permits it, since Order is the inviolable law of divine volitions (*Réponse à la Dissertation* [d'Arnauld] III.9: OC VII.490). In the *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, Theodore notes that God has compelling reason to suspend the laws of nature and grace and depart from the simplicity and generality of his ways "when the glory that he derives from the perfection of his work counterbalances that which he receives from the uniformity of his conduct. He has these important 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" (XII.12: OC XII.293-94; JS 230-31). For example, if the honor that God can do to His justice – and the contribution that He can make to the building of His Church – by intervening to stop the suffering of a virtuous person more than compensates for the departure from the generality of His ways, then Order requires Him to do so. God has necessary and sufficient reason to execute a particular volition and perform a miracle "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" (XII.12: OC XII.294; JS 231).

But if this is the case, then notice that once again we have a problem about particular volitions. What this account of Divine Order means is that Malebranche inscribes even miracles in the strict and proper sense within a law-like framework²⁰. To be sure, divine acts demanded by Order do, in a sense, represent departures from the *generality* of God's conduct in the realms of nature and grace; but they do not represent a departure from the "legality" of God's conduct²¹. A miracle may transcend all five sets of laws of nature and grace, but it still remains within the domain of divine reason and, more importantly, is still a consequence of law – this time the highest-order law, an eternal law that can require the suspension of all other laws. After all, what is Order but a law that God must follow. "Order", he says, "has the force of law [*loy*] with regard even to God"²². So it might be objected that even here we are not dealing with absolutely particular volitions – that is, with divine volitions that, while certainly purposive and not capricious, are truly ad hoc and do not represent the carrying out of some general law²³.

In the end, maybe this is precisely Malebranche's point. Perhaps he really did mean it when he said that God "never acts by particular volitions", since even "miracles" in Malebranche's second, more proper sense are in accordance with some law or general principle – the law of Order. Absolutely particular

²⁰ As Pellegrin puts it, Malebranche subjects even miraculous events to a kind of "legalité" (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, cit., Ch. 3).

²¹ Bardout puts this nicely: "Dieu se voit cependant contraint de déroger parfois à la généralité de sa conduite. En ce cas, néanmoins, la causalité particulière de Dieu demeure soumise aux exigences de l'ordre" (*Malebranche et la métaphysique*, cit., p. 264).

²² *Recherche de la vérité*, Eclaircissement X: OC III.138. Perhaps one will object that Malebranche does not necessarily equate the prescriptions of Order with "demands" that God *must* obey; after all, as we have seen, Malebranche distinguishes between what Order "demands" and what order "permits." However, as Robinet notes (*Système et existence dans l'oeuvre de Malebranche*, cit., p. 110, n. 157), this distinction is a rare one; it appears in only three places, all near each other within the same text (the *Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]*, III.6, 9 OC VII.488-90; V.5, OC VII.505). The term '*demandé*', on the other hand, appears throughout the corpus, from his earliest to his later writings. Malebranche's wording to Arnauld suggests that '*demandes*' is the more considered and operative word: "I am persuaded that God does not act often by particular volitions [...] He acts always by particular volitions when order demands it, and often when [order] permits it" (OC VII.505).

²³ As Pellegrin puts it, "le miracle n'est plus ainsi pensé comme un effet hors de loi, mais comme un effet relevant d'une législation supérieure, intérieure à Dieu même" (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, cit., p. 182).

divine acts in the world – acts that are unbound by any law whatsoever – are, in theory, absolutely possible for an omnipotent being, but they will never happen; God will never act in the realms of nature and grace in a way inconsistent with the demands of Order.

4. *Creation*

Are there, then, in Malebranche's system, *any* divine actions that are beyond even the rational demands of Order – true and pure miracles in the sense that they are the result of absolutely particular volitions and do not follow from *any* law whatsoever? As a matter of fact, there seems to be only one plausible candidate: God's decision to create something distinct from himself in the first place. Because God is all-perfect and completely self-sufficient, God's decision to create something outside himself is apparently not motivated by any law or principle or need. Having decided to create, God's choice to create *this* world, with all its particular creatures, rather than some other world was dictated by Order; but the decision to create in the first place was, he says, a matter of “a perfect liberty and complete indifference [*une liberté parfaite & une entière indifférence*]” (*EM* VIII.2: *OC* XII.176; *JS* 130)²⁴. Malebranche, as we have seen, distinguishes between those things that Order “demands” and those that Order “permits” (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]* III.9: *OC* VII.488-90). Almost all of the particular volitions that are supposed to constitute proper Malebranchian miracles – as opposed to the merely apparent miracles or “wonders” (*prodiges*) of the Hebrew Bible – are exceptions to the laws of nature and grace that Order *requires*. By contrast, God's decision to create something in the first place is not required by Order. But neither is that decision contrary to Order, and so is permitted by it. The decision to create is, however, in its apparent arbitrariness, the exception that seems to prove the rule²⁵.

And yet, even here Malebranche's position is not without complications. Malebranche never goes so far as to say that Order requires or demands that

²⁴ Pellegrin, if I read her correctly, may be missing this point when she says that for Malebranche “la création s'effectue en dehors de toute loi” (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, cit., p. 134). She conflates the decision to create *per se* with the act of creating this world; for Malebranche, it seems, the latter is not “en dehors de toute loi”, since it follows the law of Order.

²⁵ Pellegrin wants to deny that creation is a miracle, since, while it is the result of a particular volition that does not answer to any law, it is not a violation of some law (since the laws did not exist yet); see note 8 above.

God create something outside Himself. But there are texts in which he seems to back away from the claim that the decision to create is made in “perfect liberty and complete indifference”. He insists that “it is clear that God cannot will without motive [...] To will with freedom, it suffices that the motive for willing is not invincible”²⁶. *How* God acts in creating the world is invincibly determined by Order; but *that* God should act in the first place (to create a world) is only defeasibly motivated.

Supposing God wills to act, He can act only for His glory [...] since He can only act according to what He is and through the love He has for Himself and His divine perfections. But as He is self-sufficient, this glory cannot invincibly determine Him to will to act, and I even believe that this glory alone cannot be a sufficient motive to make Him act, unless He finds the secret of rendering his work divine and proportioning it to His action, which is divine²⁷.

In fact, Malebranche proclaims, there *is* a compelling reason for God to create. “It is better that the world exist than that it does not exist. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ renders God’s work worthy of its author” (*TNG* II.2.liii: *OC* V.112). The existence of a world containing the Incarnation and, through it, the salvation of human beings and the building of the Church that honors His divine glory is a reason for God to create a world – not an “invincible” reason, to be sure, but one that sufficiently moves God to undertake the action. So what Malebranche must mean by ‘freedom’ and ‘indifference’ is not that there are no motivating reasons one way or the other, but rather that the motivating reasons in one direction are “not invincible” (unlike the reasons imposed by Order when it “demands”).

Malebranche knew that this was an unstable position, but seems not to be troubled by this fact²⁸. With regard to God’s decision to create, he sought some space between complete indifference and the kind of invincible determination that Order imposes²⁹. God is moved to create something, but could decide not to create at all. However, is it really conceivable that God, seeing a possible world with the Incarnation that honors His attributes, could resist creating that world? How can God choose not to create when creating only adds to His

²⁶ *Réflexions sur la prémotion physique*, § 23, *OC* XVI.133.

²⁷ *Entretiens sur la métaphysique* IX.4: *OC* XII.203; *JS* 154.

²⁸ See *TNG* IX.4: *OC* XII.202-8; *JS* 152-58.

²⁹ As D. Moreau puts it, Malebranche is seeking to establish “une action qui n’est ni arbitraire ni nécessité” (*Malebranche*, Vrin, Paris 2004, p. 159).

glory?³⁰ Does Order and God's essentially self-serving, self-glorifying activity really leave God even relatively "indifferent" and undetermined in the decision to create?

This is precisely what drove Malebranche's critics, like Arnauld and Fénelon, to distraction. Arnauld, for one, who insisted that God acts only by particular volitions, albeit in a regular, law-like manner, was deeply bothered by the implication that even miracles are demanded by the higher law of Order. But he is even more troubled by the implication that the creation of the world itself is determined, even necessitated by God's wisdom.

Following the ways in which he conceives God, I do not see that [God] was able to be indifferent as to whether to create or not create something outside himself, if he was not indifferent in choosing among several works and among several means of producing them. For what made it the case, according to the Author, that [God] was not indifferent with respect to the latter is that, having consulted his wisdom, he was determined necessarily to produce the world that it showed him to be the most perfect and to choose the means that it showed him also to be the most worthy of him. But then with equal right it may be supposed that, before determining to create the world or not to create it, [God] consulted his wisdom. And there is thus the same reason to believe that, his wisdom indicating to him that it would be better to create, he was determined necessarily to create it³¹.

Malebranche's shrinking of the number of miracles and his reduction of even true miracles to law-governed events, in effect "naturalizing" them and making them appear to be *necessary* events (because they are demanded either by higher-order laws or by Order itself—that is, by God's nature), seemed to his opponents only to confirm that he was, at heart, a Spinozist³². After all, it was Spinoza who made not the mere (Humean) epistemological claim that one is never justified in believing that some event is truly a miracle, but the metaphysical claim that miracles are in principle impossible. In Chapter 6 of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Spinoza insists that

³⁰ For a good discussion of this, see Walsh and Stencil, "Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions", cit., pp. 236-42.

³¹ *Réflexions philosophiques et théologiques sur le nouveau système de la nature et de la grace* II.26, OA XXXIX.600.

³² For Arnauld's critique of Malebranche on miracles, see, for example, *Dissertation de M. Arnauld sur la manière dont Dieu a fait les fréquens miracles de l'ancienne loi par le ministre des anges*, in OA XXXVIII. See also Pellegrin, *Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, cit., pp. 178-79; and Gouhier, *La Philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse*, cit., p. 56.

nothing, therefore, happens in Nature which is contrary to its universal laws. Nor does anything happen which does not agree with those laws or does not follow from them [...] Thus, from these considerations—that nothing happens in nature that does not follow from its laws, that its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine intellect itself, and finally that Nature maintains a fixed and immutable order—it clearly follows that the term ‘miracle’ cannot be understood except in relation to men’s opinions, and means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by the example of another familiar thing³³.

Similarly, Malebranche’s system appears, to his opponents, to have the radical implication that even miracles, while epistemologically secure as events that are unusual and whose causes are unknown, are nonetheless necessitated – if not by natural events and laws of nature, then by higher principles that govern and determine the divine will. Even the decision to create a world now seems to be grounded in invincible reasons. Everything, thus, follows necessarily from God, or so it seemed³⁴. For Arnauld, Fénelon and others, Malebranche’s attempt to defend the generality of God’s ways ends up falling into a necessitarian vortex.

Abbreviations

- EM = Nicolas Malebranche, *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*.
 JS = Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*.
 LO = Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*.
 OA = Antoine Arnauld, *Œuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*.

³³ B. Spinoza, *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., ed. by C. Gebhardt, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 1925, vol. 3, pp. 83-84; B. Spinoza, *Spinoza: Collected Works*, 2 vols., trans. by E. Curley, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016, vol. 2, p. 155.

³⁴ In his various critiques of Malebranche’s account of miracles and divine volitions, Arnauld does not explicitly accuse Malebranche of Spinozism on this question, although the implication is hard to miss. However, N. Aubert de Versé, a contemporary critic of Cartesian philosophy, which he sees as leading directly to Spinozism, does indeed make it explicit. Writing in 1684, he insists that “Le Père Malebranche, qui définit Dieu comme Spinoza, par l’Être absolument infini, le seul Être, l’Être universel, l’Être abstrait, etc, ne peut éviter de tomber dans un précipice qui n’est éloigné que de deux doigts de celui de l’impie Spinoza, savoir que l’univers n’est qu’une émanation de Dieu, et ne peut être qu’une émanation de Dieu [...]”; see *L’Impie Convaincu, ou Dissertation contre Spinoza*, ed. by F. Benigni, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome 2015, p. 64.

OC = Nicolas Malebranche, *Ceuvres completes de Malebranche*.

TNG = Nicolas Malebranche, *Traité de la nature et de la grace*.

[All translations of passages other than those from *The Search After Truth* and the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* are my own.]

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