According to Malebranche’s occasionalism, God is the one true cause; as Malebranche himself says in places, perhaps overdramatically, it is God who does everything (SAT, Elucid. 15, OC 3:213; LO 662). However, there is surprisingly little agreement over how such a claim should be interpreted. It is clear that Malebranche is committed to ruling out any division of genuine causal labor between God and created substances; it is less clear how much causal activity is required on the part of the deity, and what form it takes. Indeed, the proper interpretation of Malebranche’s occasionalism has been debated ever since his own time. Thus, when Leibniz charged that Malebranche’s God intervenes in the course of nature and resorts to perpetual miracles, Arnauld disagreed sharply with


Leibniz’s characterization: “Those who maintain that my will is the occasional cause of the movement of my arm and that God is its real cause,” he wrote:

do not claim that God does this in time by a new act of will each time that I wish to raise my arm, but by that single act of the eternal will by which he has willed to do everything which he has foreseen it will be necessary to do, in order that the universe might be such as he has decided it ought to be.3

Arnauld may have been no friend to occasionalism or to Malebranche’s philosophy in general, but he did feel the need to defend it against what he regarded as a case of misrepresentation.

On philosophical grounds it seems clear that there are reasons for preferring what we might call a “minimalist” reading of occasionalism in the spirit of Arnauld; that is, if we abstract from the Christian miracles, God’s role is limited to willing the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of nature. On this interpretation, occasionalism is a simple and elegant philosophical theory that is far removed from the doctrine, attributed by Leibniz to Malebranche, according to which the occasionalist God is a busybody God. In the first part of this essay, I argue that the minimalist interpretation is not only philosophically superior to its rivals; it is also better supported by the textual evidence, since it is required by Malebranche’s claim that laws are efficacious. In the second part of the essay, I address the problem of reconciling Malebranche’s doctrine of efficacious laws with his occasionalist thesis that nothing created is causally active. I argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, the doctrine of efficacious laws is consistent with the thesis that laws are divine volitions, and thus are not ontologically distinct from God himself.

I

The central problem in interpreting Malebranche’s account of divine causality arises from his repeated claim that God acts by general volitions. Malebranche explains to Arnauld that, for him, to act by general volitions is the same thing as acting according to general laws (Réponse aux Réflexions, OC 8:651), but this explanation is perhaps not very enlightening; certainly, it has not settled the problem of interpretation. Steven Nadler has recently argued that to say that God acts by general volitions or according to general laws is simply to say that God’s ways are not chaotic and ad hoc, but regular and orderly.4 As Nadler points out, such a claim plays a central role in Malebranche’s whole project of theodicy, that is, the project of reconciling the justice of God with the various kinds of evil in the world.5 Absolutely speaking, God could intervene to prevent an evil such as a tile’s

3. Arnauld to Leibniz, 4 March 1687, G II 84.
5. Ibid., 35–7.
falling on a person’s head, but such an intervention would be inconsistent with the 
laws of physics that God has established, and God’s preference for a world gov-
erned by simple, fertile laws is required in order for His work to honor him. But, 
according to Nadler, the claim that God acts by general volitions or according to 
general laws is not intended to offer a complete account of divine causality. On 
this view, Malebranche’s occasionalism still requires that God implement or 
execute the laws for the universe that He has established through his general voli-
tions; that is, He must ensure, through an infinite series of individual volitions, that 
bodies and created minds behave in conformity to these laws. Thus, on this view, 
the laws of nature that He has established become no more than a series of notes 
to Himself, or aides-mémoire, on how He will act. According to Nadler, then, God 
is doubly involved in the management of the universe: not merely must He will 
the laws but He must implement or execute the laws that He has established 
through His will. In the words of Nadler, God’s activity is “constant and ubiqui-
tous”; Malebranche’s God is “personally, directly, and immediately responsible for 
bringing about effects and causal changes in nature.”

This reading seems open to a straightforward refutation; it is in conflict with 
Malebranche’s repeated claim that the laws of nature are efficacious. Such a view 
is expressed most prominently perhaps in The Search after Truth:

All natural forces are therefore nothing but the will of God, which is always 
efficacious. God created the world because He willed it: “Dixit, & facta sunt” 
[Ps. 32:9]; and He moves all things, and thus produces all the effects that we 
see happening, because He also willed certain laws according to which 
motion is communicated upon the collision of bodies; and because these laws 
are efficacious, they act, whereas bodies cannot act. (SAT 6.2.3, OC 2:314; 
LO 449)

The view is further expressed even in texts that Nadler cites in support of his more 
Leibnizian reading:

A body in motion is not at all a true cause [of the motion which it commu-
nicates]. It is not a natural cause in the sense of the philosophy of the pagans; 
it is absolutely only an occasional cause which determines by the collision 
[choc] the efficacy of the general law according to which a general cause 
must act . . . (Méditations Chrétienes, OC 10:54)

And again, in the First Elucidation of Treatise of Nature and Grace, Malebranche 
speaks of the general and efficacious laws of the union of soul and body and of 
the communication of motions (OC 5:147). Now as the passage from The Search 
indicates, to say that the laws of nature are efficacious is to say that they (in con-
junction with the initial conditions) are sufficient to bring about particular events 
in the world. In that case, there is no need for another series of individual voli-
tions by means of which God ensures conformity to the laws that He has established. And if there is no need for such a series, God will not engage in such pointless volitional activity, for as Malebranche says in the Fifteenth Elucidation to The Search after Truth, “God does not multiply his volitions without reason; He always acts in the simplest ways” (OC 3:215; LO 663).7

The evidence of the doctrine of efficacious laws is, in my view, decisive. But it is only fair to examine the considerations that Nadler advances in favor of his thesis. One source of evidence on which Nadler draws is the lengthy exchange between Malebranche and Arnauld. This exchange is indeed important for our purposes, for as has already been suggested, Arnauld interpreted Malebranche in precisely the way I believe to be correct; that is, in Arnauld’s view, Malebranche holds that general volitions are efficacious, and that there is thus no need for further acts of individual volitions. To this doctrine, Arnauld had objected on the ground that it undermines God’s paternal care for his creatures.8 Now, if Malebranche indeed believed that individual acts of volition were needed to execute the laws, it is here, in his reply to Arnauld, that we should expect him to say so; Arnauld’s polemic surely offered the ideal opportunity for correcting misapprehension about his true position. In response to Arnauld, Malebranche does indeed speak of God as having further volitions over and above His general ones; He is even prepared to speak of these volitions as particular.9 But what is striking is that these further volitions are not the individual volitions envisaged by Nadler; they have nothing to do with the execution of the laws of nature:

When a thorn pricks me, God makes me feel pain as a consequence of the general laws of the union of soul and body, according to which he acts in us incessantly. It is not at all that God acts in me by a particular volition. I mean that if the thorn had not pricked me, God would not have made me feel the pain of the prick. I do not claim that God has no particular volitions at all with regard to this pain which I suffer; but [claim] only that it is not at all the effect of a particular volition in this. To have particular volitions is not in God the same thing as acting by particular volitions, or having effective [pratiques] particular volitions. God wills in particular that I perform a certain act of charity. But he does not will to act in me to make me do it. God wills in particular everything which is in conformity with Order, everything which perfects his work. But God does not always do it, because the same Order requires that he follows the general laws which he has prescribed to himself so that his conduct may bear the character of his attributes. (OC 8:651)

7. For a similar line of criticism, see A. Black, “Malebranche’s Theodicy,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 35 (1997), 40.
9. It should be noted that Malebranche’s most characteristic definition of a miracle is that it is an event brought about by one of God’s particular volitions; see Réponse au livre des Réflexions, I, OC VIII 696.
In this remarkable passage, Malebranche is expounding one of the familiar themes of his theodicy. As a result of the general laws of soul–body union, it may happen that on a particular occasion I fail to perform an act of charity that God wishes me to perform; the laws of soul–body union have consequences that are in a sense in conflict with God’s particular volitions. But no contradiction is involved, for according to Malebranche’s theodicy, general laws take priority over particular volitions; God wills me to perform acts of charity provided that such acts are consistent with the laws He has established. Thus, strangely perhaps, there are occasions when God’s particular volitions remain without effect. Whatever we may think of the theological adequacy of such a doctrine, one thing is clear: Malebranche is not expounding the thesis that of course general laws need to be executed by particular acts of volition.

The exchange with Arnauld thus fails to supply evidence of Malebranche’s explicit commitment to a doctrine of the need for individual volitions to execute the general laws. Nadler seems to hold, however, that Malebranche is at least implicitly committed to recognizing the need for such further acts of individual volition; in particular, he is impressed by those passages where Malebranche speaks of God as acting as a consequence of the laws that He has established. According to Nadler, certain passages, such as the following, supply at least indirect evidence of Malebranche’s commitment to the need for individual acts of volition over and above the general laws:

Now it is clear that God does not at all act by particular volitions in the sense that I have often explained where he acts by general laws. When a thorn pricks me, God makes me feel pain as a consequence of the general laws of the union of mind and body according to which he ceaselessly acts in us. (OC 8:651)

The same expressions are used in the First Elucidation to the Treatise of Nature and Grace:

I say that God acts by general volitions when He acts as a 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 time that one pricks me; because as a consequence (en conséquence de) of the general and efficacious laws of the union of mind and body which He has established, he makes me suffer pain when my body is ill-disposed. (OC 5:147)¹⁰

Nadler takes Malebranche to be saying that when God makes me feel pain, He is simply acting in accordance with the laws of soul–body union; God looks to the laws He has established as a guide or manual, and then gives me the appropriate

sensations by a particular volition. But Malebranche’s meaning, I submit, is quite different. To say that God acts as a consequence of general laws is not to say that God looks to these laws as a guide; it is rather to say that God acts by virtue of the laws He has established. What Malebranche is doing is to clarify the nature of divine causality; it is precisely by willing the laws of nature, plus the initial conditions, that God brings about events in the world. The consequence in question is logical rather than the quasi-causal one that Nadler finds in the text; that is, from a statement of the initial conditions plus the laws of soul–body union, it follows logically that I shall have a sensation of pain on a particular occasion when my flesh is pricked by a thorn. Now in the case of human agency one might be inclined to doubt whether the agent is really committed to willing such a particular act; because of imperfect knowledge the agent might be surprised by the consequences of the general rule and the antecedent conditions. But in the case of God, who is omniscient, such a scruple is removed: God really wills all the particular consequences of His general volitions.

One objection that Nadler raises against the present “minimalist” interpretation is likely to occur to many readers; it concerns Malebranche’s subscription to the doctrine that God conserves the world by continuously creating it. This is not just a doctrine to which Malebranche subscribes as a good Cartesian; it forms the basis for one of his chief and most interesting arguments for occasionalism. According to Nadler, the doctrine makes the need for discrete volitional acts on the part of God “especially clear”:11

At every moment, God must recreate the universe in order to maintain it in existence. Now this continuous creation of the universe involves a continuous recreation of every object therein. Hence, God must constantly will that our billiard ball exist; otherwise it would cease to exist.12

Perhaps the first thing to be said is that the issue of time is in many ways a red herring in this debate. According to Nadler, at every moment Malebranche’s God constantly recreates the universe, and though Malebranche may occasionally write in these terms, it is common ground that this is a loose way of speaking; as Nadler himself concede, Malebranche’s God is outside time altogether.13 God indeed may eternally will in respect of events in time; He may have temporarily indexed volitions to the effect that a body \( b \) be at place \( p \) at time \( t \). But to say this is not of course to say that His volitions, whether general or particular, are events that take place in time. Thus, any discussion of the continuous creation doctrine and its implications for occasionalism must recognize the strict atemporality of the divine volitions. The real issue, then, is not whether God wills in time, but whether the doctrine of continuous creation implies that, to sustain the universe, God must eternally have a series of discrete, individual, and temporally indexed volitions.

11. Ibid., 42.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 44.
One way of responding to this problem would be to question Malebranche’s commitment to the doctrine of continuous creation. As we have seen, the chief role played by the doctrine in Malebranche’s thought is as a key premise in the argument for occasionalism. According to Malebranche, when the doctrine is properly interpreted, it will be seen that it leaves no room for a realm of secondary causes. For in conserving or recreating bodies, for example, God does not simply will that they be in some place or other and then leave it up to bodies themselves to determine their specific states in accordance with the laws of physics; rather, God’s volitions are fully specific with regard to such things as the location and velocity of bodies. Thus, the doctrine of continuous creation enables Malebranche to argue that even orthodox Cartesians, who of course accept the doctrine of continuous creation, are implicitly committed to occasionalism. It might be wondered, then, whether the doctrine of continuous creation forms the basis for an argument against the Cartesians that is merely *ad hominem*; on this view, even if the doctrine of continuous creation does imply a commitment to discrete acts of divine volition, we could not thence infer that Malebranche was committed to recognizing such volitions. The suggestion is intriguing, but there is no direct evidence that the argument is intended to be merely *ad hominem*.

Fortunately a more promising strategy is available; it consists in showing that the doctrine of continuous creation can be reductively analyzed in terms of God’s efficacious general volitions. Such a strategy gains plausibility when we consider the point of the doctrine of continuous creation; as Malebranche’s spokesman emphasizes, the doctrine does justice to the essential dependence of creatures on God in all their states (DM VII.8, OC 12:157; JS 113). Now other philosophers had emphasized that the doctrine of continuous creation implies that creatures depend on God as a causally necessary condition of their states; in other words, they had conceived of God’s continuous creation as a kind of background condition, like the presence of oxygen in the air. Malebranche, by contrast, goes further: creatures depend on God as a causally sufficient condition of all their states. As we have seen, God does not simply will that a particular billiard ball continue to exist in some way or other; He is causally responsible for all its determinate properties, such as its particular location and velocity. It is easy to see how a reductive analysis can accommodate such a claim. To say that all of the billiard ball’s states depend on God as a causally sufficient condition is to say that they can all be genuinely explained in terms of God’s general volitions (the laws of physics) and the initial conditions which he wills. The doctrine of continuous creation is thus very far from requiring particular discrete volitions corresponding to each state of a creature.

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14. Malebranche’s fullest statement of the argument for occasionalism from the continuous creation doctrine is found in *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* VII.

15. In the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* (VII.x), Malebranche even says that the conservation of creatures is “simply a continuous creation, a single volition subsisting and operating continuously” (OC 12:160; JS 115).

16. It might be thought that Nadler’s interpretation is required if Malebranche is to be able to do justice to the theologically orthodox doctrine that God has a providential care for His creatures. However, Andrew Black has shown how this doctrine can be accommodated by an inter-
Malebranche’s doctrine of efficacious laws thus seems to be decisive evidence against the thesis that God needs to execute the laws by discrete individual acts of volition. But the doctrine of efficacious laws raises its own problems of interpretation, for it may seem to be inconsistent with the central tenet of occasionalism, namely, that God is the one true cause. Recall that, according to Malebranche, “God . . . willed certain laws according to which motion is communicated upon the collision of bodies; and because these laws are efficacious, they act whereas bodies cannot act” (SAT 6.2.3, OC 2:314; LO 449). On the face of it, by claiming that laws, not bodies, are efficacious, Malebranche may seem to be simply reintroducing genuine secondary causes into the world by the back door. That is, instead of attributing causality to particular events or bodies, he is attributing it rather to the laws where these are understood to be general nomological facts. Causality, then, has been clandestinely shifted from particular bodies or events to structural features of the created world. But if this is so, then causal efficacy would still belong to creatures, and this claim would be inconsistent with the fundamental occasionalist tenet that God is the sole true cause.

At first sight, there is a straightforward way of reconciling occasionalism with the doctrine of efficacious laws. The key to solving the problem of consistency seems to be furnished by Malebranche’s insistence that efficacious laws are divine volitions. In Dialogues on Metaphysics XII.1, Malebranche’s spokesman claims that the laws of soul–body union are “but the constant and invariably efficacious volitions of the Creator” (OC 12:279; JS 218). But if efficacious laws are simply divine volitions, then they are not ontologically distinct from God Himself. Thus, there is no danger that the doctrine of efficacious laws will reintroduce genuine causality into the world by the back door. On the contrary, it simply clarifies the nature of God’s unique causal activity in the world.

This is a promising suggestion, but unfortunately the issue is not as straightforward as this; it is complicated by the fact that, where divine volition is con-

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17. Some such criticism of occasionalism was made by Ralph Cudworth in his True Intellectual System of the Universe (1678), Book I, ch. III, Sect. XXXVI. Cudworth criticizes “Mechanick Theists” who “would have God to contribute nothing more to the Mundane System and Oeconomy, than only the first impressing of a certain Quantity of Motion, upon the Matter, and the After-conserving of it, according to some General Laws.” Cudworth argues that these philosophers are, in spite of themselves, committed to his own theory of plastic natures: “Forasmuch as they must of necessity, either suppose these their Laws of Motion to execute themselves, or else be forced perpetually to concern the Deity in the Immediate Motion of every Atom of Matter throughout the Universe, in order to the Execution and Observation of them. The former of which being a Thing plainly Absurd and Ridiculous, and the Latter that, which these Philosophers themselves are extremely abhorrent from, we cannot make any other Conclusion than this, That they do but unskillfully and unawares establish that very Thing which in words they oppose; and that their Laws of Nature concerning Motion, are Really nothing else, but a Plastick Nature . . .” See C. A. Patrides (ed.), The Cambridge Platonists (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 294. I am grateful to David Cunning for drawing my attention to this passage.
cerned, certain distinctions need to be drawn. In the first place, there is no doubt that, quite generally, Malebranche wishes to distinguish between volitions and their upshots. Consider the case of a human being who raises his or her arm, for example; here Malebranche will say that there is a volition that is the occasional cause of its effect or upshot, namely, the movement of the arm (SAT 6.2.3, OC 2:315; LO 449). Moreover, prima facie we need to distinguish between the act of divine volition and its propositional content: a volition is a mental act whereby one wills that something or other be the case. Strictly speaking, then, when I will to raise my arm, I will that my arm go up. If efficacious laws are divine volitions, it seems clear that they must be identified with the propositional contents of these volitions, and not with the acts themselves. As we shall see, each of these distinctions generates problems of interpretation for the doctrine of efficacious laws.

**Volition and Upshot: The Problem of Necessary Connection**

According to Malebranche’s version of occasionalism, it is efficacious laws that bring about particular events in the world. It is clear, then, that efficacious laws belong on the volition side of the divide between divine volitions and their upshots; particular events, on the other hand, are the upshots of these volitions. In this way Malebranche can legitimately claim that laws are not part of the created furniture of the world. But if laws are volitions, and not their upshots, then Malebranche has some explaining to do. For though Malebranche prefers to understand agency in general in terms of the volition/upshot model, he is clear that volitions and upshots may be related in quite distinct ways. In the case of human beings, the volition that one’s arm go up is, as we have seen, only the occasional cause of the movement of the arm. In the case of God, by contrast, volitions are genuine causes of their upshots or effects by virtue of the fact that there is a necessary connection between the two. As Malebranche says in *The Search after Truth*, “the mind perceives a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects” (SAT 6.2.3, OC 2:316; LO 450). Malebranche is famously committed to what we may call the “necessary connection” principle concerning divine causality. Thus, if Malebranche claims that efficacious laws bring about particular events in the world, he is committed to holding that there is a necessary connection between these laws and the events that they produce. And it is not clear that Malebranche can satisfy the demands of the “necessary connection” principle.

To appreciate the force of the problem, let us consider an alternative way of applying the volition/upshot model to the case of divine agency. Suppose that laws of nature were to be regarded, not as divine volitions, but rather as the upshot of divine volitions. In this case there would be a straightforward and elegant way of satisfying the demands of the “necessary connection” principle. To say that there is a necessary connection between God’s volitions and their upshots would be to

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say that it is a necessary truth that if God wills the law of inertia, for example, then the law of inertia obtains in our world. Of course this model is unsatisfactory on other grounds. If laws of nature are the upshots of divine volitions, then their home, as it were, is in the world; on this model they are to be identified with those general structural features of the world that are the truth-makers for nomological propositions. But in that case, laws of nature become creatures of a special sort; and thus, according to the fundamental tenet of occasionalism, incapable of genuine causal efficacy. But flawed as it is, the model does have the merit of accommodating the “necessary connection” principle.

Although there are compelling reasons for regarding the laws of nature as volitions, not upshots, this approach cannot so easily accommodate the “necessary connection” principle. Recall that this principle states that there is a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects. But it is natural to object that there is no necessary connection between the laws of nature, taken by themselves, and particular events in the world; that is, descriptions of such particular events do not follow from the laws of nature alone. As Jonathan Bennett remarks in another context, “if a particular clap of thunder were necessitated by the laws of physics, there would be thunder everywhere and always.”19

The proper response to this objection is that our account of divine volitions is incomplete as it stands. According to Malebranche, laws of nature are God’s general volitions, and it is true that no such purely general volitions necessitate particular events in the world, such as claps of thunder. But, as we have seen, God does not merely will the laws of nature; He also wills the initial conditions. Thus, the divine volition that is necessarily connected with its effect is not simple, but compound; it is constituted by a general volition regarding the laws of nature and a particular volition regarding the initial conditions of the universe.20 On the assumption that the laws of nature are not merely probabilistic, all particular events in the universe are indeed logically fixed by this compound divine volition.

**Act and Content: The Problem of Efficacy**

Malebranche, then, is not merely committed to a volition/upshot model of divine agency; he is also committed to holding that the laws of nature belong on the voli-


20. As Donald Rutherford emphasizes, creation itself must be regarded as the product of a “particular volition” that establishes the initial conditions of the world; see his “Malebranche’s Theodicy,” S. Nadler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 171. It is not entirely clear how many volitions (miracles aside) Malebranche wishes to ascribe to God: If, as Malebranche says at DM VII.x, the conservation of creatures is a “single volition subsisting and operating continuously,” it is possible to see the natural order of the world as fixed by a single compound volition. In the *Treatise of Nature and Grace* (I.17, OC V 31), however, Malebranche says that God is able to “produce an infinity of marvels with a very small number of volitions.” In any case, it is clear that Malebranche wishes to keep the number of divine volitions as low as possible.
tion side of the divide. But if this is the case, the doctrine of efficacious laws is confronted by a new difficulty. Divine volitions are acts that have propositional content, and it is with these propositional contents that laws of nature are to be identified; more strictly, laws of nature are the propositional contents of divine general volitions. But understood in these terms, laws of nature seem to be of the wrong ontological type to be capable of causal efficacy. For propositional contents would appear to be abstract entities, and abstract entities are not the sort of item that can cause anything. Thus, the doctrine of efficacious laws may seem to rest on something like a category mistake. It may, then, be doubted whether Malebranche subscribes to the doctrine in this form.

One way of responding to the objection is to draw on an analogy with Malebranche’s theory of ideas. Throughout his career, Malebranche is famously committed to the thesis that all ideas are in God; by virtue of the fact that they possess such properties as infinity, eternity, and necessity, God is the only possible locus for ideas. At least in his later philosophy, Malebranche comes to add a new property to the list: ideas in God are said to be efficacious; that is, they have the power to cause perceptions in finite minds.21 Scholars who have noted this development in Malebranche’s teachings have wondered why he was led to the theory of efficacious ideas. At least part of the answer seems to be that Malebranche felt the need to respond to a challenge thrown down by Regis (see OC 17-1: 293–4). Malebranche is committed to the thesis that in perceiving ideas the mind is united to God, and he had been pressed by Regis to explain the nature of this union. Malebranche seems to have come to the conclusion that the only way of explaining the union was in causal terms. A further motive for the doctrine of efficacious ideas may have been more theological. Malebranche seems to have felt the need to offer a stricter interpretation of the patristic thesis that the mind is an illuminated light (*lumen illuminatum*), not an illuminating light (*lumen illuminans*). To this end, he comes to deny that the human mind possesses an inborn Cartesian faculty of pure intellect whereby it apprehends ideas in God; the mind finds in itself only modalities full of darkness. But having deprived it of a faculty of pure intellect, Malebranche needed to offer some account of how a purely passive mind was in touch with the divine ideas: the theory of efficacious ideas fills the lacuna in his thought left by the disappearance of the faculty of pure intellect.22

The relevance of the doctrine of efficacious ideas for interpreting the doctrine of efficacious laws should now be clear. It is widely agreed that ideas, for Malebranche, are not psychological items, as they are for Descartes; by virtue of the fact that their locus is God who is outside space and time, they are more like Platonic forms than Cartesian thoughts (*cogitationes*). Thus, in his later philosophy Malebranche is not reluctant to ascribe genuine causal properties to abstract entities whose locus is God. Malebranche’s argument for the attribution of causal


properties to ideas is straightforward: Ideas are in God, and whatever is in God is efficacious; hence, ideas are efficacious (Malebranche to De Mairan, 12 June 1714, OC 19:884). Whatever we think of the merits of this argument, it is nonetheless instructive for our present purposes, for it serves to show that a similar argument can be constructed for the strict efficacy of laws:

1. Laws are propositional contents of divine general volitions.
2. Propositional contents of divine general volitions are in God.
3. Therefore, laws are in God.
4. Whatever is in God is efficacious.
5. Therefore, laws are efficacious.

Like the argument for the efficacy of ideas, this one is vulnerable to philosophical criticism. For instance, we might wish to dispute the premise that whatever is in God is efficacious; indeed, it seems to run together different aspects of the divine nature that Malebranche had earlier insisted on distinguishing. Nonetheless, it is clearly an argumentative strategy to which Malebranche might have appealed to defend his doctrine of efficacious laws against the charge that it is guilty of a category mistake.

Impressed by the strangeness of ascribing causal properties to abstract entities, some scholars have been inclined to doubt whether the theory of efficacious ideas should be taken at face value. Alquié notes that Malebranche sometimes says, not so much that it is ideas that are efficacious, but rather that it is God who acts in us by means of his ideas; in the *Dialogues on Death*, for instance, Malebranche writes that God alone... acts on our souls by the idea of extension which he contains (OC 12:409). In other words, in such passages Malebranche is expressing himself more carefully; he is correctly attributing efficacy to the divine will rather than the divine ideas. In a structurally similar way, some readers may wonder whether it is laws themselves that are efficacious. It may be said that talk of efficacious laws is merely a *façon de parler*, and that efficacy strictly belongs not to the laws but to the act of God’s volition in willing them.

Alquié’s scruples are understandable, but there are powerful considerations on the other side. For one thing, it is not clear that passages like the one from the *Dialogues on Death* really do offer a more careful alternative to the theory of efficacious ideas. To say that God acts on our minds by means of His ideas may mean simply that God acts on our minds precisely *qua* locus of efficacious ideas. Moreover, not merely does Malebranche state the thesis of efficacious ideas in uncompromising terms, as when he says that ideas are only the efficacious substance of the divinity (Conversations Chrétiennes, OC 4:79); he also offers a direct argument for the thesis that suggests he is untroubled by the objection that abstract entities cannot have causal properties. As we have seen, Malebranche has the resources to offer a parallel argument for the efficacy of laws themselves. But even if, in the spirit of Alquié, we decide to say that talk of efficacious laws is a *façon de parler*, one thing is clear: such a concession has no tendency to give aid and comfort to the proponents of the Nadler thesis. For what is at issue is whether it is laws them-

selves or God’s action in willing the laws to which efficacy properly belongs. Neither thesis has any tendency to imply that in order to bring about particular events in the world God has to do more than will the laws and the initial conditions.

A striking feature of Malebranche’s discussions of causality is that they tend to run the claim that laws are efficacious in tandem with the thesis that God acts by virtue of or in consequence of His laws. This, I believe, is just what we would expect, for Malebranche may well be seeking to assuage the worry that to talk of efficacious laws is to reintroduce secondary causality into the world by the back door. Malebranche seems to be responding to this objection by emphasizing that it is precisely by means of efficacious laws that God, the unique causal agent, acts in the world; the doctrine of efficacious laws is thus in no way inconsistent with the central tenet of occasionalism. But whatever his reasons for running the two doctrines in tandem, it is fortunate for our purposes that he does so; for he thereby makes it clear that God does not need to implement the laws that he has willed through a series of discrete individual volitions.