

# 6

## Law, Cause, and Occasionalism

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Think of natural theology as the activity of coming up with arguments for the existence of God—arguments, roughly, from some feature or other of our universe. Richard Swinburne is certainly the outstanding natural theologian of our day; indeed, his work over the last thirty years or so has resulted in the most powerful, complete, and sophisticated development of natural theology the world has so far seen. One of his arguments starts from the premise that there are *natural laws*, and in particular, *simple* natural laws. As Swinburne sees it, the existence of simple natural laws is much more likely given that there is such a person as God, than it is on the proposition that there is no such person as God.

Now I am strongly inclined to agree with Swinburne here, even though there are questions. (For example, is it clear that we can come up with anything like a decent probability for the existence of such laws, given the claim that there is no such person as God? And do we have to factor in the antecedent probability of there being such a person as God, and if so, how do we estimate that?) I do not plan to explore these questions, inviting though that prospect is. Furthermore, my project, unlike Swinburne's, is not apologetic; I do not propose to offer a theistic argument here. Instead, I want to begin by looking at some questions about natural law or laws of nature. Are there good reasons for thinking there are any such things? If so, what sort of things are they? How are they related to *determinism*? How are natural laws (if there are any) related to God and what are the most promising ways to think of laws of nature from a Christian perspective?

I will argue that the three most promising ways are (1) the idea that laws of nature reflect the causal powers of the creatures God has made, (2) the idea that natural laws are divine ordinances, part of God's way of directing and ordering creation, and (3) the idea, due to Del Ratzsch, that laws of nature are counterfactuals of divine freedom. The first, so I will argue, fits best with the thought that there are secondary causes as well as divine causation; the second and third fit best with occasionalism, the thought that all causal activity is divine causal activity. I will conclude by giving qualified support to occasionalism.

## 1 Natural Law and its Nature

First, the question of the nature of natural laws—what sorts of animal would a natural law be, if indeed there are such things? Newton's Gravitational Law and his three Laws of Motion would be putative examples, as would be the laws of conservation of momentum, energy, and angular momentum. Laws of nature, typically, are universal generalizations, although perhaps there are also some probabilistic natural laws.

But of course not just any universal statement is a law: *All the books on my desk belong to me* and *All the birds in Sam's backyard are sparrows* are universal in form but hardly laws. We might think the problem here is that these propositions make essential reference to a particular time or place or person. But this is not the real problem. Here are a couple of historically important examples (van Fraassen 1989: 27):

- (1) All solid spheres of enriched uranium have a diameter of less than one mile

and

- (2) All solid spheres of gold have a diameter of less than one mile.

Neither makes reference to any particular time or place or person; still, one is inclined to doubt that (2) is a law of nature, but much more likely to afford that status to (1).<sup>1</sup> Why? What makes the difference? Something along the following lines: One wants to say that (2), if true, is just

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, (1) is a consequence of natural law, not itself a law of nature.

an accident—there certainly could have been a solid sphere of gold more than a mile in diameter, and if one were discovered—say, on the moon—all the civilized nations would fight over it. But there could not have been a solid sphere of enriched uranium a mile in diameter; the critical mass for enriched uranium is only about 110 pounds. The point is that laws of nature seem to be, in some sense, *necessary*. The thought is that it is necessary that material objects attract each other with a certain force; it is necessary that momentum is conserved in an isolated system; it is not possible that energy increases in a closed system, or that a material object attains a velocity greater than the speed of light. So another and crucially important characteristic of laws of nature, if there are any, is that they are necessary.

## 2 The Necessity of Law

### 2.1 *Absolute necessity*

This necessity, however, while it may be their glory, is also, so to speak, their Achilles' heel. First, what kind of necessity are we talking about here? Some philosophers, for example Sydney Shoemaker (1980) and more recently, Chris Swoyer (1982: 203 ff.), Evan Fales (1990), and Alexander Bird (2005: 353 ff.), argue that the laws of nature are *absolutely necessary*,<sup>2</sup> or *strictly necessary*, or necessary in the broadly logical sense—necessary in the same way as *bachelors are unmarried* or that *red is a color* or that  $7 + 5 = 12$ .

Clearly the laws of nature are not among the truths of mathematics or the truths of logic. Of course there are many absolutely necessary propositions that are neither truths of logic nor truths of mathematics: for example, *whatever is red is colored*, and *no human beings are prime numbers*. But the laws of nature do not seem to be of this kind either. The fact is, so we are told, that any two objects attract each other with a force directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them; this is a law of nature. But it does not seem to be absolutely necessary. It certainly seems

<sup>2</sup> We cannot really give a *definition* of absolute necessity here—or if we can, it will be in terms of other notions just as much (or little) in need of explanation (possibility and impossibility, for example). But we also do not really need a definition: we can get the idea from examples.

that this attractive force could have been inversely proportional to some other power of the distance between them; if it had been, no doubt things would have been different, but that is not to say that it is absolutely impossible. That nothing can travel faster than light is thought to be a law of nature;<sup>3</sup> but it certainly seems possible, in the strict sense, that elementary particles of some sort (or, for that matter, a spaceship) should do that. And even if we humans could not make a spaceship capable of that feat, could God not do so?

True, there may be (and perhaps are) absolutely necessary propositions whose necessity we cannot detect just by thinking about them. But our best guide to necessity is intuition; we see that some propositions are necessary, and we learn that others are by way of seeing that they follow from those of the first sort. So if the laws of nature *seem* to be contingent (i.e., not absolutely necessary), we should suppose they *are* contingent, in the absence of powerful argument for their (absolute) necessity. And as far as I know there is no decent, let alone powerful, argument for their absolute necessity.

## 2.2 *Contingent necessity?*

D. M. Armstrong suggests that the laws of nature are *necessary*, but not *absolutely* necessary:

Suppose it to be a law that *Fs* are *Gs*. *F*-ness and *G*-ness are taken to be universals. A certain relation, a relation of non-logical or contingent necessitation, holds between *F*-ness and *G*-ness. This state of affairs may be symbolized as '*N(F, G)*' (Armstrong 1983: 85).<sup>4</sup>

This does seem to square pretty well with our intuitions about laws of nature. There does seem to be necessity of some kind associated with them, but they do not seem to be absolutely necessary. But what is this relation of non-logical or contingent necessitation? So far, Armstrong has told us nothing at all about this relation, except that it is non-logical and contingent. Of course he has given it a *name*: he says it is a relation of non-logical and contingent *necessitation*. As David Lewis says, however,

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, nothing can accelerate from a velocity less than that of light to a velocity greater than that of light; perhaps there are tachyons that are always moving faster than light. In what follows I shall ignore this qualification.

<sup>4</sup> Others who adopt this same approach (i.e., take it that laws are “contingently necessary”) are Dretske (1977: 248 ff.) and Tooley (1977: 667 ff.).

there has to be more to this relation than just that name: just bearing the name cannot equip it to explain laws of nature: it cannot do that just by bearing a name, “anymore than one can have mighty biceps just by being called ‘Armstrong’” (1983: 366). But what is this more? Laws of nature, therefore, if there are any such things, are necessary in some sense, but not necessary in the broadly logical sense. And this is the problem: what *is* that sense in which laws of nature are necessary? How are we supposed to understand that? Strict necessity we know and love; but what is this nonstrict necessity?<sup>5</sup> How are we supposed to construe it? Armstrong does not tell us.

### 2.3 *Humean conceptions of law*

If it is so hard to say what kind of necessity is enjoyed by natural law, perhaps we should follow David Hume and Lewis in rejecting the whole idea of necessity for laws of nature. Thus, the late David Lewis took it that laws of nature are simply the theorems common to the true axiomatic systems that enjoy a best combination of strength and simplicity (e.g., Lewis 1973 and 1983). Some axiomatic systems enjoy great simplicity: for example, one in which the only axiom is  $2 + 1 = 3$ . Others enjoy great strength: for example, a system in which every true proposition is an axiom. The former system, however, lacks strength, and the latter lacks simplicity. Strength and simplicity clearly compete; a maximally simple system—e.g., one whose only axiom is  $2 + 1 = 3$ —will be weak; a maximally strong system—one such that every true proposition is a theorem—will not be simple. We do not have much of a grasp on what Lewis’s best systems will be like,<sup>6</sup> but presumably they will display a great deal of strength, but also a great deal of simplicity. There is little reason to think there is just *one* such system—perhaps there are a multitude of systems each unsurpassed by any other.

There is more than one problem with this view of the laws, but I wish to point out a particularly interesting consequence of this way of looking at the matter: it is that *determinism* (at least as widely understood) and *freedom* are compatible. Here I am thinking of freedom in the classical libertarian sense. A person is free, with respect to a given act, and at a

<sup>5</sup> Van Fraassen’s (1989) discussion remains perhaps the best discussion of this problem.

<sup>6</sup> We do not even know that strength and simplicity are equally important: perhaps strength counts for more than simplicity, or simplicity for more than strength.

particular time, if and only if at that time he has the ability (it is within his power) to perform that act, and also, at that time, the ability to refrain from performing it. If I am now free with respect to the action of raising my left hand, then right now I can raise it, and also right now I can refrain from raising it. And even if I do raise it, I could have refrained from doing so.

Now the most common definition of determinism goes as follows. Let  $U_t$  and  $U_{t^*}$  be the complete states of the universe at times  $t$  and  $t^*$ , respectively; and let  $L$  be the conjunction of the laws of nature. Then determinism holds just if the conjunction of  $L$  with  $U_t$  entails  $U_{t^*}$  (e.g., van Inwagen 1983: 16). To put it more colloquially, determinism holds just if the state of the universe at any one time together with the laws of nature entails the state of the universe at any other time. But now suppose that the laws of nature are partly dependent upon what, as a matter of particular fact, does happen: past, present, or future. And suppose on a given occasion I raised my left hand (maybe to volunteer an objection to Lewis's view). Given determinism, the laws together with the state of the universe, say, 1,000 years ago (call it  $U_{\text{minus } 1000}$ ), entail that I raise my hand then. But it does not follow that it was not within my power, then, to *refrain* from raising my hand. What the laws are depends upon, among other things, what I do. I *did* raise my hand on that occasion, and the axioms of some favored system together with  $U_{\text{minus } 1000}$  entail that I did so; but that fact does not entail that it was not within my power to *refrain* from raising it then. Of course if I *had* refrained on that occasion, then (given  $U_{\text{minus } 1000}$ ) some proposition that *was* a law of nature would have been false, and hence *would not have been* a law of nature.

So the important point here is that on these broadly Humean conceptions of laws of nature are at bottom merely descriptive of what actually happens, the laws of nature are (or can be) within my power in the sense that I have the ability to act in such a way that their conjunction would have been false. We ordinarily think of the laws of nature as outside our power, but on these Humean conceptions this is not true. If indeed we do have libertarian freedom, it will be within our power to break the laws, i.e., the laws that actually hold are such that it is within my power to go contrary to them.

This gives us a good reason, I think, to reject these Humean conceptions of the laws. If there are any laws of nature, it is not within my

power, or even yours, so to act that what is a law would not have been. This is of course connected with the apparent necessity of these laws; the Humean accounts leave out that necessity and hence, so I say, they cannot be thought of as correct accounts of the laws. Indeed, these Humean accounts are really versions of anti-realism with respect to the laws. One way for an anti-realist to proceed would be to say forthrightly: “there are no laws of nature; there are only non-necessary universal generalizations (of one sort or another).” But another way to be an anti-realist with respect to laws is to say: there are laws of nature, and what they are, are non-necessary universal generalizations of a certain sort.<sup>7</sup>

#### 2.4 “*Creaturely inviolability*”

Natural laws, therefore, are universal generalizations that enjoy a certain kind of necessity. But what kind? Not broadly logical necessity, but what other kind is there? Perhaps we can approach this question along the following lines. The Apollo 11 was launched on July 16, 1969 from Kennedy Space Centre and landed on the moon on July 19. It took a total of 3 days, 3 hours, and 49 minutes to fly to the moon. Later, the NASA Pluto probe New Horizons, at a speed of 58,000 km/hr, took only 8 hours and 35 minutes to get to the moon from Earth. Perhaps future technological innovations will be able to reduce that time to 1 hour, or, indeed, even 1 minute. No matter how good our technology gets, however, we will not be able to reduce that time to 1 second. That is because nothing can travel faster than the speed of light; but the speed of light is about 186,000 miles per second and the moon is 238,900 miles from earth. The speed of light is a sort of universal speed limit; nothing can exceed it. No matter how good our technology gets, we will not be able to build a spaceship that travels faster than light.

That nothing can travel faster than the velocity of light is a law of nature; and we might say that it is *creaturely inviolable*. No creature can act in such a way as to violate this law (or bring it about that it was not a law). But the same holds for the other laws of nature: no matter how

<sup>7</sup> Compare nominalism:

- (a) there are no universals; what there are instead are nomina, names;
- (b) There are universals, and they are nomina, names.

good our technology gets, we will not be able to build a machine that violates a law of nature or in some other way acts so as to falsify any of them. So what sort of necessity do the laws have? A first approximation would be this: laws of nature are necessary in the sense that they enjoy creaturely inviolability, but no creatures can develop a technology whereby they can act in such a way as to violate a law of nature. No doubt God can act in such a way; but we cannot. So the necessity of law is a matter of their being creaturely inviolable—or at any rate humanly inviolable.

### 3 God and the Laws

So much for a preliminary and general description of the laws of nature. But how are they related to God? There seem to be three possibilities, three ways in which God could be related to the laws of nature, again assuming that there are some. For the sake of concreteness, let us consider a particular law: Newton's Law of Gravitation (and here I will not be concerned with special or general relativity or quantum mechanics). How is this law related to God? One possibility is *secondary causalism*: that laws of nature reflect the causal powers of the creatures God has made. God creates material objects with a certain nature or certain powers, and in such a way that they have the property P of being such that any two of them attract each other in the way specified by Newton's Law; that is, they exercise a certain kind of force with respect to each other. Newton's Law specifies the degree and nature of this force. A second possibility would be *decretalism*. Newton's Law is or represents a divine decree, a decree God issues which specifies how material objects will move under various conditions. A third possibility is given by Del Ratzsch's very interesting suggestion that natural laws are *counterfactuals of divine freedom*: Newton's Law specifies how God acts and would act, how he would treat the stuff he has made, under various different conditions (Ratzsch 1987). Let us take these one at a time and in order.

#### 3.1 *Secondary causalism*

God creates concrete objects with causal powers, the power to cause behavior of certain kinds. According to this way of looking at things, there are two kinds of causality: primary causality, exerted by God alone; and secondary causality, exerted by some of God's creatures. God creates



all the concrete objects;<sup>8</sup> God also sustains them in existence. But they are so created that they too can get involved in causation—not just as effects, but also as causes. Here we must make two distinctions. First, there is *strong* secondary causalism, the notion that a secondary cause, given God’s sustaining it and its powers, can cause something to happen without any further divine action or aid. But there is also concurrentism: the more common idea that any causal transaction involving secondary causation must also involve God’s *concurrence*—his, so to speak, ratifying that particular exertion of causal power. Concurrence, of course, is not simply the absence of objection or countervailing activity; it is instead a positive activity on the part of God. (Peter van Inwagen thinks concurrentism merely pays God empty metaphysical compliments.)

That’s the first distinction: the second is this. We might think concrete objects have these causal powers *by nature*, so that it is an essential property of a material object to exert the forces it does exert. No physical object could have existed without exerting that force; not even God could have created a physical object that did not exert this force. On the other hand, we might think that material objects do indeed exert those forces, but their doing so is not essential to them, and God could have created material objects that lacked this property.

Secondary causalism is perhaps the common-sense way of thinking of the matter. We ordinarily take it for granted that many created objects can cause changes in other created objects. I can cause a row of dominoes to fall by exerting a small force on the first domino; then each domino causes the succeeding domino to fall by hitting it. I can cause the billiard ball to roll by striking it with a cue stick; that billiard ball can strike another ball, thereby causing that other ball to roll away. (Does that *cue ball* cause the other ball to roll away? Or is it rather *the event of the cue ball’s striking the other ball* that causes the event consisting in the other ball’s rolling away? The first would be a matter of agent causation and the second of event causation.) This way of thinking also has impressive historical pedigree; it is fully developed by Thomas Aquinas, who, as is his wont, follows Aristotle. Nonetheless, it has problems and difficulties.

<sup>8</sup> Except, of course, for himself. There are also abstract objects such as numbers, propositions, properties, and the like; I take these to be necessary beings but dependent upon God. Here I will not be concerned with abstract objects.

Perhaps the main difficulty here, is that the very idea of creaturely causality is obscure. Of course we can use other terminology: we can speak of forces, or powers, or bringing it about that, or . . . But do we really understand any of these locutions when we are speaking of creatures? Is there a reasonably clear and coherent concept or idea associated with these terms? It pains me to agree with Hume, but is he not right here? We see the first billiard ball roll up to and strike the second, and we see the second roll away. We do not, of course, see or experience anything like a causal connection between the first ball and the second, or the motion of the first ball and the motion of the second, or the event consisting in the first ball's striking the second and the second's moving away. We just see the first ball roll up to the second and become juxtaposed with it, we hear a click, and then we see the second ball roll off. Furthermore, we do not seem to have a coherent idea of a necessity linking the two events. What is this idea of creaturely causation?

Of course we can just "take it as primitive," refusing to offer an explanation for it. But again, of course, that does not really help. If we really do not grasp this idea of creaturely causation, it will not do a lot of good to take it as primitive. Alternatively, we might try to follow Immanuel Kant, who, wakened by Hume from his dogmatic slumbers, argued that causation must be a sort of prism or lens through which we look at the world, a sort of idea that we impose on the world, one that the world as it is in itself does not display. But again, this does not really help. If we do not have a good grasp of the notion, it will not help to declare that it is a contribution from our side—we still do not have a grasp of it.

### 3.2 *Decretalism*

A second possibility is decretalism. Perhaps the relation between God and the laws is that God just decrees that objects—material objects, say—shall behave in accordance with the laws. Material objects do not, in fact, exert force on each other and they do not, in fact, display causal efficacy; rather, God issues a decree. He says: let it be that material objects behave as if there is an attractive force between any pair of them, a force that varies directly with the product of their masses and inversely according to the square of the distance between them. On this alternative, there is not really any force between them—i.e., they do not exert forces on each

other—but they behave as if there were. These objects do not really have any causal powers; they do not in fact exert any forces on each other. They simply behave in accord with the divine decree.

### 3.3 *Counterfactuals of divine freedom*

On this third possibility, natural laws are or represent counterfactuals of divine freedom: they specify how God would (freely) treat the stuff he has made under various different conditions. They are of the general form *under conditions C, God would cause state of affairs S*. On this suggestion as on the second, objects do not have causal powers; they do not exert forces on each other or in other way act as causes. And on this suggestion, as on the second, all causal activity is divine causal activity.

The second and third possibilities are related in an interesting way. On each of them, the only causal activity is divine activity. But on decretalism, it is as if God, in issuing the decree in one causal act, the issuing of that decree causes whatever happens at any time. On the other suggestion, the suggestion that laws are counterfactuals of divine freedom, God's causal activity consists in many different actions spread out over time. But again, on either suggestion, all causal activity and all causal power is divine. And this means that both of these suggestions are variants on what has traditionally been called *occasionalism*.

## 4 Occasionalism

This is the view that the only causal power is divine causal power. God causes every change that occurs. God is the only real cause. Sometimes, however, there is a correlation between certain events and God's causing some other event; for example, there is a more or less constant correlation between my willing to raise my arm and my arm's rising. That is because God ordinarily takes my willing to raise my arm as the *occasion* for causing my arm to rise. Occasionalism may go back to Nicholas of Autrecourt (1300–d. after 1350). Sadly enough, his ideas met with less than overwhelming approval: his works were burned and Nicholas himself was prohibited from lecturing.

Another Nicholas, Nicholas Malebranche, is the best-known occasionalist in our tradition, and he put it like this: "There is only one true cause because there is only one true God; . . . all natural causes are not *true*

causes but only *occasional* causes.”<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he says, “But *natural* causes are not true causes: they are only *occasional* causes that act only through the force and efficacy of the will of God” (trans. Lennon and Oscamp 1997: 449). On occasionalism, therefore, there is no creaturely causation; creatures do not have the power to cause events or changes or anything else. All causal power is divine causal power.

Now one advantage of occasionalism is just the other side of the main problem with secondary causalism. We do not have a clear conception of creaturely causality, but that problem does not arise with divine causality. Divine causality, as we may suppose, just goes by way of divine fiat: God says, “Let there be light” and there is light. God wills that there be light, or that there be light at a particular time and place, and there is light then and there. And the connection between God’s willing that there be light and there being light is necessary in the broadly logical sense: it is necessary in that sense that if God wills that  $p$ ,  $p$  occurs. Insofar as we have a grasp of necessity (and we do have a grasp of necessity), we also have a grasp of causality when it is divine causality that is at issue. I take it this is a point in favor of occasionalism, and in fact it constitutes a very powerful advantage of occasionalism.

## 5 Which is Best?

Should we therefore award the palm to occasionalism, taking it to be proved, or, since proofs rarely occur in philosophy, in better shape than its rivals? Hardly. That is because occasionalism might have serious difficulties of its own. After all, one cannot establish that the set of non-self-membered sets is not a member of itself by showing that it could not be a member of itself. Are there serious difficulties for occasionalism? As far as I know, it is not a presently popular doctrine: what do people see as problems with it? Well, for one thing the idea that created substances often cause events and changes in the world seems to be no more than part of common sense: for example, I go over to the fridge and open its door. This certainly seems a pretty clear case of my causing something to happen, namely the refrigerator’s door opening. Now perhaps an idea’s just being common sense gives it an initial

<sup>9</sup> *The Search after Truth and Elucidations of the Search after Truth*, trans. Lennon and Oscamp (1997: 448), cited in Lee (2014).

advantage or an initial claim on our credence. But here this is not much of an advantage: if the idea of creaturely causation really is wholly obscure, the fact that it is apparently endorsed by common sense will not help a lot.

### 5.1 *Strong occasionalism*

Still, there may be something in the neighborhood that really is a serious point against occasionalism—at any rate one version of it. I can easily see how it could be that when at  $t$  I undertake to raise my arm, God does the actual raising, my undertaking being the occasion for his so acting. But what about my willing this in the first place? Here we have a change, a change in myself, i.e., my self. Before  $t$  I have not undertaken to raise my hand; after  $t$  I have. Does God cause *that* change? As far as I can see, the problem does not depend on any particular position on the relation between mind or self and body; just for definiteness, however, and because this is a volume on Swinburne, I will think of the problem in terms of substance dualism. I myself am a substance; I am not a body or material object, but am closely and uniquely related to a certain particular physical object, namely, my body. And of course changes occur in me or perhaps to me. My finger gets hit with a hammer; I am in pain. (Perhaps I then also say something to myself, wisely keeping it to myself.) You ask me what I had for lunch; I think for a moment, and then form the belief that what I had for lunch was a hotdog. I try to remember the name of the person talking with me, and suddenly it comes to me. As I sit at my computer, I try to figure out how best to put the next point I am trying to make.

So there are changes in me, in my self. Presumably these changes have causes. But what is the cause of these changes? According to *strong* occasionalism, all causation is divine causation; God, therefore, is the cause of these changes. I idly decide to think about the Exum Ridge route on the Grand Teton and then immediately do so; it is God who causes that decision, and causes my thinking of that route. Can that be right? We think of making decisions along the following lines: I marshal the reasons for one course as opposed to another, think about the matter, and then opt for one course. On strong occasionalism, when I marshal the reasons for the decision, it is really God who does the marshaling; it is God who causes me to think of a given circumstance as a reason for a

particular line of action, God who causes that circumstance to come to my mind, and God who causes me to make the decision I do indeed take.

But then does it make sense to say that it is *I* who takes that decision? How can it be that I take that decision, when it is God who causes every circumstance in the whole process? Is there any room left for agency, for me to be an agent? It looks like the answer is no. Nothing I do here exemplifies anything that could be thought of as *my* agency; it is all God's agency. How can I be thought of as an agent under these conditions?

Now materialists and others sometimes appear to be willing to give up the notion of human agency. But from a Christian point of view this is not a real possibility. If God causes me to do whatever I do, then, when, for example, I make a wrong decision, deciding to act in a self-aggrandizing way, it is not I who am responsible for or who causes that decision; it is God who does so. Indeed, I do not really do anything that could sensibly be called "making" that decision: it is rather that God just causes a particular mental state to occur at that time. So consider an occasion on which I fall into sin—I make an unpleasant and unflattering remark about someone mainly because I resent that person's academic success. What happens on this occasion? God causes me to resent this person's success; God also causes me to make that remark, and it is not the case that my resentment causes the remark. The only connection between my resentment and my remark is that God causes each of them, causes them to occur in the order in which they do occur, and causes them for reasons of his own.

An important aspect of Christian belief is that we human beings are proper subjects for moral evaluation, for praise and blame. The central truth of Christian belief is that we human beings have sinned, to which God's magnificent response is Incarnation and Atonement. But if it is true that God causes my every thought, my every "decision," as well as my every action, how can I possibly be blamed, or even thought responsible, for that remark? I had no agency either in its occurrence or in the resentment out of which it arose. But then my actions and mental states are not the proper subject of moral evaluation. More exactly, *I* am not the proper subject of moral evaluation. It is not merely that I could not have avoided taking this action or being in this mental state; it is that I did not really do anything here at all. God did whatever was done.

Still another obvious difficulty for strong occasionalism: God is perfectly loving and perfectly good. But if God causes whatever happens,

causes it to happen by willing that it happen, then is God not the cause of evil? Indeed, is he not, then, the cause of all the evil that occurs?

Christian belief, therefore, precludes strong occasionalism. According to Christian belief, I am a proper subject of moral evaluation; but if so, I am responsible for my envious condition, and I am responsible for that snide remark. God is not the cause of the evil the world contains; it is creatures that cause evil.

### 5.2 *Me and my undertakings*

But do we now not have a problem? The attraction of occasionalism is just that divine causality, involving as it does just logical necessity, is clear and understandable; but causation on the part of creatures is not. If we reject strong occasionalism, however, taking it that human beings and perhaps other persons cause changes—decisions, for example, or undertakings—in themselves, in the way in which I cause the event consisting in my taking a certain decision, then are we not back to obscurity of the notion of creaturely causation?

Well, perhaps we are confronted with an obscure notion here, but it is a *different* obscure notion. The relation between me and one of my decisions or undertakings, even if it is properly thought of as causal, is very different from a causal relation between me and my hand's going up. Suppose I undertake to raise my hand; the relation between me and that undertaking is very different from a causal relation (if there is one) between me and my hand's going up. Perhaps we can see this by turning to the divine case. I said that we can understand divine causality, just because it is a matter of broadly logical necessity: necessarily, if God wills that so and so, then so and so happens. But there is not anything like that in the case of the relation between God and that willing itself. God causes there to be light by willing that there be light; he does not cause it to be the case that he wills that there be light by willing that he wills that there be light. This question of the relation between a person and certain of his or her mental states such as decisions and undertakings is quite a different question from the question about (possible) causal relations between a person and such events as her arm's rising. As for the first, we know that people do in fact make decisions, they do in fact will that certain states of affairs be the case, they do in fact undertake certain actions, even if we cannot say a lot about how they do it, or what is involved in such cases, or whether it is *causation* that is involved in these cases.

Objection: you said earlier that the obscurity of creaturely causation was a strong point in favor of occasionalism; here you say that we must just accept this relation between persons and certain of their mental states, even if we cannot really say what is going on there. Why should we not say the same about creaturely causation? Reply: because there is an alternative in the case of creaturely causation: we can instead opt for occasionalism. But there is no alternative in the case of that relation, whatever precisely it is, between me and my decisions and undertakings. In particular, we cannot sensibly say that they are caused by God.

### 5.3 *A problem for weak occasionalism?*

Strong occasionalism, therefore, is too strong. Let us distinguish strong occasionalism from weak occasionalism. I will not take the time to try to give a serious definition of weak occasionalism: let us just say, for present purposes, that it is the thought that the only creaturely causation is of the sort involved in my causing my decisions, volitions, and undertakings (if indeed that relation is one of causation). According to weak occasionalism, I am the cause, in that peculiar sense, of my decisions and undertakings, but when I will to do something—raise my hand, for example—it is God who causes my hand to rise.

But is weak occasionalism not really subject to one of the same difficulties that beset strong occasionalism? One objection to strong occasionalism is that it makes God the cause of evil in the world; God is the sole cause of my evil decisions and volitions. On weak occasionalism, that is not true, but God still causes whatever evil effects in the world are associated with my decisions and volitions. I decided to rob a bank; in the course of the robbery I shot someone. God does not cause me to decide to rob the bank or to shoot the guard, but he does cause all of the motions of my limbs, including my shooting the guard, and he also causes the guard's injury or death. Does this not make God the cause of evil?

This is not an easy question. First, however, we must make a distinction. Evil, I take it, is a matter of some person's performing a wrong action—in the context of weak occasionalism,<sup>10</sup> performing an evil act of will or an evil undertaking. God does not cause any such acts of will or

<sup>10</sup> Henceforth I will drop the 'weak' of 'weak occasionalism.'



undertakings. However, in addition to evil, there are bad situations or states of affairs—someone’s suffering, or being treated unjustly, for example. Let us refer to these situations or states of affairs, inelegantly, as “the bad.” Is not God, on occasionalism, responsible for the bad? God is not the cause of evil, but he is the cause of the bad, and is that not bad enough?

Perhaps we can approach this question by asking how the other main position, secondary causalism, fares with respect to this matter. Does secondary causalism do better with respect to the question of God’s causing evil? Here we must distinguish two cases: the scenario in which only immaterial personal agents have causal powers, and the scenario in which both personal agents and material substances, material objects, have such powers. First, what about material objects as causes? It is obvious, I take it, that material objects as such are not personal agents and do not act freely. Therefore, whatever they do is by way of chance or by way of determination by prior cause. But that material objects do what they do by way of chance is implausible. How could something occur just by chance, given the existence of God? We might think that God could issue a decree and say, “Let it be that A or B, and I don’t care which.” But being omniscient, God would know which of A and B would occur if he issued that decree. And how would that differ, in any significant respect, from his just decreeing A or decreeing B?

So what about the case of material objects acting as they do by virtue of their being caused to cause whatever they do? Take any particular event E: it could be that there is an unbroken chain of causality ending in E and going all the way back to creation. If so, God’s relation to E would be as follows: God created an initial set of these objects, with those causal powers, sustained them and their successors in existence, knowing that E would eventually occur as a result of his creation and sustenance. God indirectly causes E, i.e., sets in motion and sustains a train of events that issues in E. Suppose E is a bad event: on occasionalism, God *directly* causes E, but in the current scenario, he does so *indirectly*. Is there any reason to think that in the first case, God bears more responsibility for the bad than in the second case? I do not think so. So far, secondary causalism fares no better than occasionalism on this point.

Turning to the other alternative, suppose that a created personal agent freely causes some event in the causal ancestry of E—for example, suppose I undertake to stab someone. On secondary causalism, my

undertaking (presumably) causes certain events in my brain, which in turn set in motion a causal chain of events, the last member of which is the stabbing. On the (weak) occasionalist reading, God takes my undertaking as the occasion for his causing the events in my brain as well as the event issuing in the stabbing. In each case my undertaking results in the stabbing's occurring. Presumably God endorses and underwrites this arrangement in order to confer on us significant freedom; my undertakings can result in morally significant events, including events that are part of the bad.

On both occasionalism and secondary causalism, God permits me to undertake something bad. On the occasionalist reading, God then directly causes the events that are posterior to my undertaking, and that culminate in the stabbing; on the secondary causalism reading, my willing causes the events in my brain, and God establishes the causal relations that hold between the brain event and the subsequent members of the chain culminating in the stabbing, thereby indirectly causing those events, including the stabbing. On occasionalism, God directly causes the brain events; on secondary causalism, I not God cause those events (although of course God conserves me in existence and concurs with my causal activity).

But this difference does not seem relevant to the question whether God causes the bad in a way incompatible with his being wholly good. On occasionalism, God directly causes the events subsequent to my undertaking, including the stabbing; on secondary causalism, God indirectly causes these events, including the stabbing. In either case God directly or indirectly causes the bad. As I have argued, however, it is hard to see how God is more responsible for causing the bad if he causes it directly than if he causes it indirectly. It is hard to see how it could be that his causing the bad *directly* is incompatible with his being wholly good, while his causing the bad *indirectly* is not. Still, I have to admit that there remains a sort of intuitive pull toward the thought that God's directly causing the bad involves him more intimately with the bad than does his indirectly causing it.

## 6 Conclusion

Let us take stock. The problem with secondary causalism is that we have no clear conception of causation as accomplished by creatures; we

understand divine causation, but creaturely causation is at best dubious. On occasionalism, of course, there is no creaturely causation, so that on this head occasionalism enjoys a clear advantage. On occasionalism, however, there is that intuitive idea that God's direct causation of the bad fits less well with his being wholly good than his indirectly causing the bad. These two considerations are not really commensurable; but it does seem to me that the problem with occasionalism is a smaller problem than the problem with creaturely causation. I therefore suggest that the best compromise is weak occasionalism.

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