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Samuel Clarke on Agent Causation, Voluntarism, and Occasionalism

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It is the searching after, and endeavouring to understand those signs instituted by the Author of Nature, that ought to be the employment of the natural philosopher, and not the pretending to explain things by corporeal causes.

G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, sect. 66

Argument

This paper argues that Samuel Clarke's account of agent causation (i) provides a philosophical basis for moderate voluntarism, and (ii) both leads to and benefits from the acceptance of partial occasionalism as a model of causation for material beings. Clarke's account of agent causation entails that for an agent to be properly called an agent (i.e. causally efficacious), it is essential that the agent is free to choose whether to act or not. This freedom is compatible with the existence of conceptually necessary connections. Hence, Clarke can harmonize God's freedom of choosing with the existence of eternal and necessary relations among things. Moreover, in Clarke's account, only intelligent entities can be properly understood as efficacious causes. Beings deprived of intelligence are not agents or efficacious causes at all and their effects are thus the result of the immediate action of some intelligent being operating upon them.

1. A Clear and Distinct Idea of Active Power

In his *Essay*, Locke writes: "bodies, by our senses, do not afford us so clear and distinct an idea of active power, as we have from reflection on the operations of our minds" (Locke 1812, II.21.4). This observation is symptomatic of a broader controversy that animates the debate about the nature of causation across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This controversy revolves around two opposite poles, which are both reflected in Locke's observation. On the one hand, it becomes increasingly difficult for early modern authors to consider material bodies as genuine efficacious causes (pace the

scholastic view, which is in the process of being dismantled during the period). On the other hand, human beings do seem to have immediate and internal access to what an efficacious causal power looks like, by simply reflecting on their volitions and capacity of bringing about voluntary effects. Locke himself, for instance, maintains that “the idea of the beginning of motion we have only from reflection on what passes in ourselves; where we find by experience, that, barely by willing it, barely by a thought of the mind, we can move the parts of our bodies, which were before at rest” (II.21.4). If one puts together the idea that bodies do not seem to provide a reliable instance of genuine efficacious causal powers, while the human experience of voluntary actions does, it is possible to conclude that causation is in fact best understood as *agent causation*, namely, as the kind of efficacious causality exercised by free intelligent agents.

In this paper, I argue that Samuel Clarke offers a particularly thorough development of the idea that agent causation is the *only* acceptable model of causation in nature. In Clarke’s account, proper causal efficacy can be attributed only to intelligent entities endowed with the freedom of choosing whether or not to bring about their effects. Freedom of choice is the only genuine causal power that makes it possible, for the agent that possesses it, to be a genuine initiator of causal processes. In Clarke’s account, the idea of a necessary agent becomes a contradiction in terms, while the idea of a necessary connection between the agent and the obtainment of certain effects turns out to be untenable. Any causal chain can be traced back to the free decision of some intelligent agent who initiated it in virtue of its power of freely deciding whether or not to do so. Moreover, since only intelligent entities can be properly understood as efficacious causes, beings deprived of intelligence are not agents or efficacious causes at all and their effects are thus the result of the immediate action of some intelligent being operating upon them. In what follows, my goal is to fully unpack Clarke’s account of agent causation and explore its broader implications. Before engaging in this task, however, it is important to clarify why an investigation of Clarke’s account of agent causation significantly contributes to three related areas in the current debate on the history of early modern philosophy and science.

First, recent years show a growing methodological discussion about the need to broaden the canon of early modern history of philosophy and science by taking into account those authors who have been so far understood as “minor figures” and have been considered ancillary to elucidate the position of the “major figures” (Shapiro 2016; Beaney 2018). Although Clarke was surely an authoritative voice in his own time, today he is still most often portrayed as Newton’s spokesman. However, when it comes to fundamental questions in metaphysics, philosophy of science, and moral philosophy, he often develops these issues with a systematicity and degree of analysis that is rarely present (and that sometimes has no clear parallel at all) in Newton.¹ This paper offers the first systematic reconstruction of Clarke’s account of causation

¹Recent scholarship on Clarke acknowledges the originality and relevance of Clarke as an independent and influential thinker in his own right. For instance, Vailati 1997 stresses that Clarke takes an original position in a number of crucial passages during his correspondence with Leibniz. Schliesser 2012 draws attention to the

presented in its own right, and explores its historical and philosophical justifications and implications. I contend that it is methodologically necessary to first understand Clarke's position in his own terms in order to fully assess how it relates to that of other authors. In order to create a more inclusive and open-minded history of early modern philosophy and science it is necessary to allow the (until now) "minor figures" to speak for themselves, setting their own philosophical priorities and goals, rather than approaching them through the prefabricated cliché of the "spokesmen" of "canonical" authors. In section two, I thus provide the fundamentals of Clarke's own account of agent causation as they emerge from Clarke's own philosophical project.

Secondly, Clarke is usually characterized as a voluntarist, insofar as he stresses God's freedom of acting without that action necessarily being determined by his intellect. Clarke's voluntarism is most often discussed in the context of his correspondence with Leibniz. As John Henry puts it: "the correspondence reveals, above all else, a clash between the differing worldviews of the voluntarist and the intellectualist" (Henry 2009, 89).² However, the label "voluntarism" requires further clarification. Peter Harrison has mounted a sustained case against the "voluntarism and science thesis," according to which voluntarism would have played a major role in the emergence of early modern science. Harrison's overall objection is that "the term 'voluntarist' is used to characterize such a range of positions that it, too, has probably outlived its usefulness" (Harrison 2002, 17). Among the problems of the voluntarism and science thesis, Harrison raises two points that are specifically connected with the voluntarist reading of Clarke. First, Clarke is often characterized as a voluntarist because of his emphasis on the fact that the created world depends on God's arbitrary will. Harrison claims that, in this context, the label 'voluntarism' conflates two rather distinct ideas. On the one hand, voluntarism is taken to be a synonym for expressing the world's *dependency* on God's will. The problem here is that this dependency "is a straightforward implication of classical theism" (ibid., 6) and nothing distinctive in itself. On the other hand, voluntarism is taken to stress the *immediate* involvement of God in the course of nature. However, Harrison rightly points out that this latter position is better understood as occasionalism: "voluntarism (a doctrine about the divine will) ought not to be equated with occasionalism (a doctrine about causation). Occasionalism, moreover, is quite consistent with intellectualism." Harrison's second criticism concerning the characterization of Clarke as a voluntarist is that Clarke believes that moral laws are grounded in "eternal reasons." According to Harrison, this view was shared by Newton and Cudworth and it "is an unmistakably intellectualist position" (ibid., 15).

I am sympathetic to Harrison's methodological call for precision in the use of broad and potentially ambiguous labels such as "voluntarism." In section three, I argue that

originality of Clarke's treatment of the principle of sufficient reason in his *Demonstration*. Thomas 2018, chap. 9, notes that Clarke published his views on space and time before Newton, and might have articulated these views independently of him.

²Shapin 1981 reconstructs the socio-political implications of the clash between Clarke's voluntarism and Leibniz's intellectualism in their correspondence.

Clarke's account of agent causation provides a more precise ground to construe Clarke's position as a form of moderate voluntarism. Clarke's account entails a distinction between two kinds of necessities, which allows Clarke to maintain that there are "eternal reasons" that ground moral laws, while at the same time these reasons do not bound in any way God's free decision to act and create a world according to them.³

Thirdly, Clarke's account of agent causation makes it convenient for Clarke to exploit a version of *partial* occasionalism (i.e. the view according to which only material beings are completely devoid of causal powers and all their effects are brought about immediately either by God or by intermediary intelligent agents appointed by God). The implications of Clarke's account of agent causation and of partial occasionalism are relevant for both our understanding of Clarke's positioning within the early modern debate on causation, and for today's scholarly debate on the impact of occasionalism on early modern theories of causation.

The scholarly literature on Clarke's attitude towards occasionalism is scarce, but when the topic is addressed it is framed in terms of Clarke's relationship with the specific brand of occasionalism popularized by Malebranche. In his extensive study on the reception of Malebranche in England, Charles McCracken (1983) does not discuss Clarke's case. John Gay (1963) mentions only briefly that Clarke would have been opposed to Malebranche's occasionalism because it would have "made human, as well as divine, freedom impossible." On the contrary, Paul Russell (2008, 151–152) claims that Clarke advanced an occasionalist interpretation of Newton's physics for apologetic reasons. As a result, Russell maintains that Hume's "critique of occasionalist doctrine had irreligious implications that reached well beyond the specific targets he mentions in the Treatise (i.e. Malebranche and other Cartesians)" (Russell 2008, 161), namely, it includes Clarke among its targets. The scholar who has devoted the most sustained attention to the issue of Clarke's confrontation with occasionalism is Ezio Vailati. However, Vailati's assessment remains ambiguous. On the one hand, Vailati maintains that Clarke's view clearly differs from Malebranche's insofar as Clarke admits that not only God but also minds are endowed with causal powers (Vailati 1995; 1997; Clarke 1998, xxiv–xxv). On the other hand, Vailati also grants that Clarke would have endorsed some aspects of Malebranche's account of the laws of nature: "for both philosophers the laws governing bodies are extrinsic denominations, and that miracles, to the extent that they are exceptions to these laws, are viewed as mere deviations from God's general volitions" (Vailati 1997, 159). More recently, Yenter and Vailati conclude that despite similarities Clarke should *not*, ultimately, be considered an occasionalist: "Clarke was

³Harrison 2004 argues that what allows Clarke to combine the seemingly conflicting claims that moral laws are eternal while God can arbitrarily change the course of nature is "the conviction that many features of the universe were morally neutral or 'indifferent'" (Harrison 2004, 45). Harrison also suggests that Clarke's view may be in line with that of Malebranche. In section three, I argue that Clarke's account of agent causation provides a more specific reason in support of Clarke's position, which is also capable of dispelling the apparent paradox that Harrison detects in Clarke's view and shows more clearly the gulf that separates Clarke from Malebranche.

not, strictly, an occasionalist. Unlike the occasionalists, Clarke did not think that God was the real cause of interactions between finite minds and matter. Furthermore, matter has a single ‘*Negative Power*’ of staying at rest or continuing in motion” (Yenter and Vailati 2014). Henry supports a similar conclusion, but for a different reason. In his reply to Harrison, Henry points out that “occasionalism is intrinsically incompatible with voluntarism” (Henry 2009, 85). The reason is that occasionalism would amount to a “circumscription of God’s omnipotence based on what a human thinker decides to be impossible” (Henry 2009, 85). Henry does not refer directly to Clarke, but rather as an example of occasionalism, he mentions Malebranche.

In section four, I argue that (pace Henry and Vailati), *some* form of occasionalism (i.e. partial occasionalism) is not only compatible with some form of voluntarism (i.e. Clarke’s moderate voluntarism) but it also establishes a mutual argumentative synergy with it.⁴ In order to assess Clarke’s position with respect to occasionalism it is crucial, on the one hand, to fully appreciate Clarke’s account of agent causation, and on the other hand, not to conflate occasionalism in general (which is a family of arguments rather than a unified doctrine) with Malebranche’s own version of it. Agent causation is the key to both understanding why Clarke accepts only a partial version of occasionalism and why partial occasionalism strengthens Clarke’s case for agent causation. Clarke’s complex and sophisticated position demonstrates that occasionalism can be adapted and appropriated well beyond the limits of Cartesian debates and for reasons that Cartesian occasionalists in fact rejected.

This point contributes to the current efforts of better mapping the varieties of occasionalism circulating across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the different argumentative strategies and justifications used to support them.⁵ Clarke’s case reveals how his concerns for securing a sharp distinction between free intelligent agents and mere material beings led him to combine distinctive themes of Newtonian natural philosophy (such as the quest for the cause of gravity and the preoccupation with securing divine providence in the natural world) with an occasionalist theory of body-body causation.

2. Clarke’s Account of Agent Causation

Clarke’s account of agent causation is established in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*.⁶ For present purposes, sections VIII and IX are particularly relevant

⁴In his reply to Henry 2009, Harrison 2009 maintains that it is “basically correct to regard voluntarism and occasionalism as natural bedfellows,” although he does not further discuss the case of Clarke in particular. My discussion supports Harrison’s point here, by showing however that occasionalism itself needs qualification and not all kinds of occasionalism may be compatible with all kinds of voluntarism. For a further reply to Harrison, with special focus on the issue of God’s absolute and ordained power, see Oakley 2018.

⁵See Nadler 2010; Sangiacomo 2014 and 2017; Schmaltz 2016, 165–227; Platt 2017.

⁶In discussing Clarke’s views, I focus mainly on Clarke’s *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (first delivered as a Boyle’s Lecture 1704, henceforth referred to simply as *Demonstration*), and on his *Discourse Concerning*

since it is in these sections that Clarke argues that the self-existent being (i.e. God) must be intelligent (section VIII) and free (section IX).

Section VIII discusses the attribute of intelligence against the materialist view on which matter could be an eternal and self-existent *but non-intelligent* being. The bulk of Clarke's discussion here depends on his exploitation of the scholastic "causal containment axiom."⁷ In Clarke's formulation: "it is impossible that any effect should have any perfection which was not in the cause" (*Demonstration VIII*, 39). In order to argue that the self-existent being is not intelligent Clarke faces the atheist with a dilemma: either "there is no intelligent being at all in the universe, or intelligence is no distinct perfection but merely a composition of figure and motion" (*Demonstration VIII*, 39). The first option is clearly at odds with the fact that human beings (at least) are usually considered to be intelligent beings. The second option is the one that Clarke most forcefully aims to reject by extensively arguing that intelligence cannot be conceived of as somehow resulting from purely mechanical configurations of matter.⁸ For present purposes, I shall leave aside the details of Clarke's argument on this point and stress that the upshot of his discussion is that an intelligent being cannot be purely material and that intelligence cannot be produced by a non-intelligent cause.

Section IX seeks to demonstrate that "the self-existent and original cause of all things is not a necessary agent but a being endowed with liberty and choice. The contrary to this proposition is the foundation and the sum of what Spinoza and his followers have asserted concerning the nature of God" (*Demonstration IX*, 46). While Spinoza's account of the communication of motion is targeted by the end of section VIII,⁹ Spinoza certainly did not deny that God is intelligent, since he maintained that thought is an attribute of God. From this point of view, section VIII did not fully counter Spinoza's own position. However, Spinoza did deny that God had "liberty and choice" (to use Clarke's phrasing), since he maintained that God's freedom consists in acting in virtue of the necessity of its own nature and not being coerced by external causes.¹⁰ In order to refute this position, the task of section IX is to show that freedom does not consist in the mere absence of external coercion. In fact, being free from the determination of external causes is neither necessary nor sufficient to define freedom. Clarke explains: "Without liberty, nothing can, in any tolerable propriety of speech, be said to be an agent, or cause of any thing. For to act necessarily is

the Unalterable Obligations of Natural Religion (first delivered as a Boyle's Lecture in 1705, henceforth referred to simply as *Discourse*). In quoting Clarke's *Demonstration*, the page numbers refer to Clarke 1998. Quotes from Clarke's *Discourse* are taken from Clarke 1823.

⁷See e.g. Suárez, DM 18.2.2 and 26.1.2. For the use of this axiom in Descartes, see Schmaltz 2008a, 52. For the use of the axiom in Malebranche, see Sangiacomo 2017.

⁸This point is further developed in the Clarke–Collins correspondence. On this, see Rozemond 2008 and 2009.

⁹Concerning Clarke's arguments against Spinoza, see Schliesser 2012.

¹⁰See Spinoza 1985, *Ethics*, part 1, def. 7.

really and properly not to act at all but only to be acted upon” (*Demonstration* IX, 46).

It may well be the case that a necessary agent is not be coerced to act by anything but its own nature (as in the case of Spinoza’s God). However, according to Clarke, this kind of necessary agent is in fact no agent at all. Proper agency requires liberty or freedom understood as a positive power of choosing to act or not to act. To use early modern terminology, this kind of freedom can be labelled ‘freedom of indifference’ and results from a positive power of the will (i.e. the power of acting or refraining from acting), rather than from a mere absence of external coercion. In the absence of freedom of indifference, the agent cannot be taken to be genuinely responsible for the effects that it brings about. Let me unpack how Clarke’s argument works.

In order to appreciate Clarke’s position, it is important to first distinguish between two kinds of necessity. In section III of the *Demonstration* (III, 14–18) Clarke distinguishes between “antecedent” and “consequent” necessity and considers antecedent necessity a form of “absolute” necessity. Antecedent necessity is grounded in the nature of the thing itself and does not depend on any supposition. According to Clarke, antecedent necessity consists in being non-contradictory:

a necessity not relatively or consequentially, but absolutely such in its own nature, is nothing else but its being a plain impossibility or implying a contradiction to suppose the contrary. For instance, the relation of equality between twice two and four is an absolute necessity only because it is an immediate contradiction in terms to suppose them unequal. (*Demonstration* III, 14)

Clarke applies the notion of antecedent necessity to God in order to demonstrate that God’s nature contains the sufficient reason for its own existence (*ibid.*, 12–13). By contrast, consequent necessity concerns the necessity with which something follows or obtains given a prior assumption or condition.

Antecedent necessity is a relation of necessity which holds between properties of a thing and the nature or essence of it. In the rest of my discussion, I shall refer to antecedent necessity as “conceptual” necessity in order to stress that this kind of necessity focuses on the necessary connection between a thing’s essence, or concept, and its properties, or consequences. The causal containment axiom mentioned above (e.g. the fact that material entities can only cause material effects and cannot produce intelligence) entails conceptual necessity. A violation of the causal containment axiom would lead to there being something in the effect that either does not depend on the nature of its cause or that is created *ex nihilo*, which Clarke considers contradictory (*Demonstration* II, 12). Conceptual necessity, however, does *not* entail that certain entities necessarily exist or that certain effects necessarily obtain. When referring to the necessity with which something exists or some effect obtains (given the required causes and conditions), I shall use the term “obtainment” necessity. Obtainment necessity may be regarded as a specification of what Clarke calls consequent necessity, insofar as it

focuses on whether a certain effect or consequence actually exists or obtains necessarily in reality.¹¹

The interplay between conceptual and obtainment necessity is at work in the following passage:

a free agent cannot choose whether he shall have a will or no will, – that is, whether he shall be what he is, or no; but (the two contradictories of acting or not acting, being always necessarily before him,) he must of necessity, and essentially to his being a free agent, perpetually will one of these two things, either to act or to forbear acting The essence of liberty consists ... in his being an agent, that is, in his having a continual power of choosing, whether he shall act, or whether he shall forbear acting. Which power of agency or free choice (for these are precisely identical terms, and a necessary agent is an express contradiction) is not at all prevented by chains or prisons. For a man who chooses or endeavours to move out of his place is therein as much a free agent as he that actually moves out of his place. (*Demonstration X*, 74–75)

Clarke's account of freedom of indifference is consistent with the existence of both external coercions preventing the agent from bringing about its action, and with the internal necessity imposed on the agent by its own nature. This latter kind of necessity is a conceptual necessity imposed by the nature of the agent itself.¹² This conceptual necessity becomes particularly relevant in the case of a self-existent agent that is not acted upon by external causes (such as Spinoza's God). Clarke's argument in section VIII relies heavily on the causal containment axiom, which entails conceptual necessity. It is not viable for Clarke, thus, to deny conceptual necessity as such, since this would jeopardize his whole argument for considering the self-existent cause intelligent and denying that matter can think. However, what *is* viable for Clarke, is to deny that conceptual necessity entails obtainment necessity. This denial is the kernel of Clarke's account of agent causation.

In Spinoza's ontology, conceptual necessity entails obtainment necessity.¹³ Clarke has two main arguments for denying this implication. The first argument builds on his

¹¹Fisher 2011 presents a slightly different distinction between “logical” (which may be related to what I call here conceptual necessity) and “causal” necessity (which may be related to what I call here obtainment necessity) in the case of Malebranche. For further discussion on this point, see Sangiacomo 2017.

¹²In *Demonstration X*, 75 Clarke stresses that “a free agent may be, and indeed essentially every free agent *must* be, necessarily free; that is has it not in his power not to be free.” The kind of necessity invoked here is conceptual necessity.

¹³Spinoza takes as an axiom the fact that “from a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow” (*Ethics*, part 1, Ax. 3). A determinate cause has a specific nature entailed by its conceptual description. The necessity with which the effect follows from this kind of cause is an obtainment necessity. Spinoza exploits the implication between conceptual and obtainment necessity in order to demonstrate that God necessarily entails (conceptual necessity) infinitely many things in infinitely many ways (*Ethics*, part 1, prop. 16), and that this in turn entails that God necessarily brings about (obtainment necessity) this whole infinite array of effects in the same act in which God is the cause of itself (*Ethics*, part 1, prop. 25, *scholium*). On this point, see Lærke 2009 and 2012; Sangiacomo and Nachtoomy 2018.

empirical considerations about the fact that the world, as it presently exists, is contingent and this contingency is incompatible with the existence of a self-existent necessary agent. The second argument shows instead that the very idea of accepting that effects necessarily obtain in virtue of their cause generates a paradox of infinite regress.

Concerning the contingency argument, Clark demonstrates in section III that the material world is contingent. As he writes:

Now that the material world does not exist thus necessarily is very evident. For absolute necessity of existing and a possibility of not existing being contradictory ideas, it is manifest that the material world cannot exist necessarily, if without a contradiction we can conceive it either not to be or to be in any respect otherwise than it now is. Than which nothing is more easy. For whether we consider the form of the world, with the disposition and motion of its parts, or whether we consider the matter of it, as such, without respect to its present form, every thing in it, both the whole and every one of its parts, their situation and motion, the form and also the matter, are the most arbitrary and dependent things, and the farthest removed from necessity, that can possibly be imagined. (*Demonstration III*, 18)

Clarke assumes that if “we can conceive [matter] either not to be or to be in any respect otherwise than it now is,” then we can prove the contingency of matter. Clarke takes as mutually connected the contingency of the *existence* of some entity and the contingency of the *way* in which it exists. Since the material world and all its parts could exist in many other different ways, or could even not have existed at all, matter is intrinsically contingent. In section IX, Clarke restates this claim about the contingency of the natural world, in opposition to Spinoza’s view. Clarke explicitly asserts: “all things in the world appear plainly to be the most arbitrary that can be imagined, and to be wholly the effect not of necessity but of wisdom and choice” (*Demonstration IX*, 49).

Clarke’s contingency argument consists in showing that obtainment necessity, especially when ascribed to the self-existent cause, is incompatible with the contingency of the world (which is observed empirically and thus established independently of considerations on the self-existent cause). If the self-existent cause is the cause of the world and its frame, and if the self-existent cause produced these effects with obtainment necessity, then nothing in the world could be contingent, because the production of the world and its configuration would have been a necessary effect of the self-existent cause’s action. However, Clarke stresses that it is (a posteriori) evident that the world and its frame are contingent. Hence, the contingency of the world cannot be accounted for by assuming that the self-existent cause has produced the world with obtainment necessity. There may well be conceptual necessity in the world, but this does not entail that the world itself is brought about with obtainment necessity.

Clarke’s regress argument concerns the paradoxes involved by the notion of obtainment necessity itself. If one accepts obtainment necessity, then all effects produced are produced necessarily and no cause can avoid necessarily producing its own effects.

This entails that there cannot be any beginning of the causal process. In this argument, ‘beginning’ should not be understood as a mere temporal determination, but more specifically as the point of discrimination t , before which the relevant causal operations do not obtain and it is not necessary that they obtain, while after t the relevant causal operations do obtain. If one accepts that the causal chain of dependent beings unfolds with obtainment necessity, then finite things always produce their effects necessarily when they are brought about by their own causes, which in turn produce them necessarily. In this case, there is no beginning of the causal process because every cause in the process is the necessary effect of a previous cause and the necessary cause of a subsequent state. Hence, there is no node in the causal chain that actually begins the chain itself, which leads to an infinite chain of dependent beings.

In section II (*Demonstration* II, 11–12), Clarke ruled out the possibility of an infinite chain of dependent beings, since the existence of such a chain would ultimately violate the principle of sufficient reason (*Demonstration* I, 10). Clarke demonstrated that in order to block the regress it is necessary to posit the existence of a self-existent being. Section IX shows that positing a self-existent being that is not also a free agent could not provide a genuine beginning to the chain of dependent beings, and thus could not solve the regress paradox.

Consider the scenario in which the self-existent being operates with obtainment necessity. Since the self-existent being is eternal, it has been necessarily producing its own effects since eternity. Hence, the self-existent being itself never began the causal process and the very idea of creation would be absurd (which is in fact Spinoza’s point).¹⁴ However, if the self-existent being never began the causal process, then the infinite regress of causes cannot actually be halted and the whole causal process would be an infinite and ungrounded hierarchy of causes. The infinite chain of dependent beings would remain a “one entire endless series of dependent beings” (*Demonstration* II, 10). The existence of such an endless series of dependent beings is, in Clarke’s terms, “an express contradiction and impossibility” (*Demonstration* II, 11).

As Clarke writes:

If the supreme cause be not a free and voluntary agent, then in every effect, for instance in motion, there must have been a progression of causes *in infinitum*, without any original cause at all. For if there be no liberty anywhere, then there is no agent, no cause, mover, principle, or beginning of motion anywhere. Everything in the universe must be passive and nothing active, everything moved and not mover, everything effect and nothing cause. (*Demonstration* IX, 52)

¹⁴In Spinoza’s ontology, since the unfolding of God’s effects necessarily follows (with both conceptual and obtainment necessity) from God’s own nature, the production of these effects never properly “begins” but it is in itself an eternally unfolding process. Concerning Spinoza’s own discussion of the regress argument, see Lærke 2011.

To avoid an infinite regress of dependent causes it is not enough to simply posit a self-existent being, it is also necessary to assume that this self-existent being is a free agent. The only way to avoid the regress paradox and make sense of the contingency of the world is to admit that the self-existent being has the power of beginning causal processes. The power of beginning a causal process amounts to the power of determining a moment *t*, with respect to which the agent is directly and solely responsible for some effect obtaining or failing to obtain. This power is the power of freely choosing whether or not to bring about the effect. In virtue of this power, there is no necessity for the causal chain to obtain or unfold *before* the agent's own decision of bringing it about. Hence, the causal chain has a genuine beginning in the agent's free decision. In the case of God, this power allows God to be the creator of the world.

According to Clarke, if and only if an agent is endowed with freedom of choice, then the agent can efficaciously cause its own effects. A free agent has the power of determining by itself whether or not to bring about a certain effect. The kind of effect that the agent brings about may well be necessarily connected with its own nature (i.e. it may be a matter of conceptual necessity). However, the agent's power of either beginning the causal process or not beginning it, makes the agent the genuine starting point of the causal chain. Independently of how strong and vast the determinations acting on a free agent may be, if the agent is endowed with freedom, this agent can choose *not* to bring about the effect that it is determined to produce. Hence, if the agent freely decides to bring about the effect, it is the agent itself that begins the ensuing causal process, not the whole array of determination that acted upon it. Even if the external causes are such that they ultimately prevent the action from taking place (as in the example of the prisoner mentioned above by Clarke), the agent would still be the genuine initiator and solely responsible for the causal chain that was set in motion.

This is the reason why Clarke equates the lack of freedom with causal passivity: "if there be no liberty anywhere, then there is no agent, no cause, mover, principle, or beginning of motion anywhere" (*Demonstration IX*, 52). An agent without liberty is no agent at all, because for any given effect, it would not have been the agent itself that set in motion the relevant causal chain. Only if an agent is endowed with liberty and freedom of choice, can the agent account for the production of its own effects as the result of its own free choice. Only in this way, can an agent genuinely possess the "power of beginning motion" (or more generally the power of initiating causal processes) that constitutes the benchmark of causal efficacy.

Clarke's account of agent causation concludes by defining the notion of "agent, or cause" (*Demonstration IX*, 46), identifying its essential property as a "principle of acting, or power of beginning motion, which is the idea of liberty" (*Demonstration IX*, 54). Without liberty or choice, there are no causal powers that may be genuinely efficacious or compatible with the causally active role of agents.¹⁵ Having demonstrated that liberty

¹⁵ Clarke restates this point in his correspondence with Leibniz, see LC 1956, Clarke's fifth reply, 97-98.

is an essential attribute of God (and thus that liberty is possible), and given that God is omnipotent, Clarke concludes in section X that liberty and agency are freely bestowed by God to created intelligent spiritual substances (*Demonstration X*, 57). Clarke's account of agent causation thus encompasses both God and created spiritual agents (including, but not limited to, human minds).

Finally, it is important to stress that freedom, in Clarke's account, is the *continuous* exercise over time, moment by moment, of the agent's own power of choosing either to act or not to act. As Clarke writes:

[God] must of necessity every moment, either choose to act or choose to forbear [from] acting because two contradictories cannot possibly be true at once. ... Man is also by necessity (not in the nature of things, but through God's appointment) a free agent. ... The necessity, I say, of continually choosing one of the two, either to act or to forbear [from] acting, is not inconsistent with, or an argument against, liberty, but it is itself the very essence of liberty. (*Demonstration X*, 75)

A free agent cannot choose only once and forever. A free agent is free because its power of choosing is constantly exercised over time. Each moment the agent is faced with two mutually contradictory possible states (to act or not to act) and the agent must constantly choose which one will obtain. This entails that the effects that follow from the agent's choice remain constantly dependent on the agent's own choice. Clarke's account of agent causation excludes the possibility of there being only one original act of choice that sets in motion the chain of causes, which then unfold necessarily and without further intervention. Rather, the fact that the exercise of freedom requires a continuous reiteration of the act of choice entails that causal chains are constantly dependent upon the agent that began them (even after their proper beginning), since the agent's choice of beginning a causal chain needs to be constantly confirmed and may be freely changed at any moment. As will become clear in the next two sections, the continuous character of the power of choosing has important implications for Clarke's understanding of how God (and finite intelligent agents) dictates the course of nature.

3. Clarke's Moderate Voluntarism

Voluntarism, as a theological position, is usually contrasted with intellectualism. Both voluntarism and intellectualism deal with the way in which intellect and will are related in God. Intellectualism holds that God's will is determined by God's intellect. Malebranche and Leibniz, for instance, develop different versions of this intellectualist claim. Voluntarism, on the contrary, makes God's will somehow independent of God's intellect. While God may be morally determined to act on the basis of what he understands to be the best, God's freedom is in no way restricted to acting in any particular way, or to keeping the same course of action for any determinate amount of

time. Descartes, Boyle, and Newton, for instance, are usually taken to be representative of different strands of voluntarism.¹⁶

For present purposes, I maintain that Clarke's account of agent causation offers independent philosophical support to Clarke's voluntarism and simultaneously helps to further qualify it. From a strategic point of view, the philosophical machinery entailed by his account of agent causation is particularly effective in the context of Clarke's apologetic refutation of atheism and deism. Since Clarke's opponents are not receptive to purely theological arguments, Clarke's philosophical account of agent causation paves the way for a defense of voluntarism while remaining on a purely philosophical footing.¹⁷ From a philosophical point of view, moreover, the same account contributes to qualifying the kind of voluntarism endorsed by Clarke as a moderate voluntarism.

The philosophical junction between Clarke's account of agent causation and his voluntarism is established in section IX of the *Demonstration*. Clarke's account of agent causation entails that for an agent to be properly called an agent (i.e. causally efficacious), it is essential that the agent is free to choose whether to act or not. This freedom of indifference is what endows the agent with the power of beginning motion. Conversely, by denying freedom of indifference, the agent is reduced to a mere necessitated and passive agent which is, ultimately, no agent at all. Clarke argues that it is necessary to consider God as a free agent in this sense. The kernel of Clarke's voluntarism is thus that God is ultimately free to choose whether or not to bring about an effect. Any one of God's actions is arbitrary, in the sense that it follows uniquely from God's free decision of pursuing that course of action. Such a decision does not put any constraints on God's absolute freedom of changing it. God must be free in this way in order to be an agent. Hence, Clarke's voluntarism is not just a theological presupposition, but is the only viable philosophical option left by Clarke's rigorous understanding of causation in terms of agent causation.

In turn, Clarke's account of agent causation clarifies the scope of his voluntarism. As discussed in section two, Clarke's account of agent causation does not reject conceptual necessity, but rather it rejects that conceptual necessity entails obtainment necessity. Clarke's account is compatible with the existence of conceptually necessary connections, although it does not allow that these connections constrain an agent's freedom of choosing. Descartes' doctrine of the free creation of eternal truths is often taken to represent a radical form of voluntarism, since it entails that both conceptual necessity and logical connections or laws depend on the mere will of God. In this respect, Clarke's voluntarism (in contrast) can be qualified as moderate. Clarke maintains that God is somehow bound by the laws of logic (*Demonstration* X, 55; XII, 88).

¹⁶ Whether and to what extent these authors can qualify as voluntarist or intellectualist is matter of controversy. See e.g. Harrison 2002 and 2004; Henry 2009. It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with this controversy.

¹⁷ This is in line with Clarke's methodological principle, announced in the introduction to the *Demonstration*, of avoiding arguments based on Revelation and "confin[ing] myself to the rules of strict and demonstrative argumentation" (*Demonstration*, 7).

Moreover, Clarke does not deny the existence of conceptual necessity, and instead crucially exploits the causal containment axiom to support his case against thinking matter. All that Clarke rejects is that conceptual necessity entails obtainment necessity.¹⁸

Qualifying Clarke's voluntarism as moderate and understanding how it makes room for conceptual necessity is important in order to appreciate the overall consistency of Clarke's philosophical project and how he reacted to objections raised by his interlocutors. In the rest of this section I shall focus on two relevant cases: (i) the objection raised by William Carroll against Clarke's doctrine of the "eternal reasons" of things; and (ii) the discussion of the principle of sufficient reason and the issue of miracles in the context of Clarke's correspondence with Leibniz.

(i) In the last two sections of the *Demonstration* Clarke establishes that "there is, therefore, such a thing as fitness and unfitness, eternally, necessarily, and unchangeably in the nature and reason of things" (*Demonstration* XII, 83). This claim is the basis for Clarke's ethics, which is developed in the *Discourse*.¹⁹ However, there seems to be a contradiction between the discussion of contingency of matter and the material world and the treatment of "eternal reasons" holding among things and generating "unalterable" relationships of good and evil.

At the beginning of the *Discourse*, Clarke engages in a set of replies to William Carroll, who attacked his *Demonstration* with a series of *Remarks* (published in 1705). Clarke summarizes one of Carroll's major criticisms as follows:

[Carroll] says ... that I am guilty myself of what I groundlessly imputed to Spinoza, viz. of making God a mere necessary agent; namely, by affirming that there is a necessary difference between good and evil, and that there is such a thing as fitness and unfitness, eternally, necessarily, and unchangeably in the nature and reason of things, antecedently to will and to all positive or arbitrary appointment whatsoever. This, he says, is a groundless and positive assertion, and plainly imports the eternal necessary co-existence of all things as much as Spinoza's hypothesis does. (*Discourse*, 129)

Clarke is not much impressed by this criticism. As he swiftly rebuts:

Is not this an admirable consequence? because I affirm the proportions of things, and the differences of good and evil, to be eternal and necessary, that therefore I affirm the existence of the things themselves to be also eternal and necessary? because I affirm the proportion, suppose between a sphere and a cylinder, to be eternal and necessary, that therefore I affirm the existence of material spheres and cylinders to be likewise eternal

¹⁸I agree in this respect with Vailati 1997, 142, who briefly presents Clarke's voluntarism as "moderate" in comparison to Descartes' "extreme" voluntarism "since necessary and moral laws are independent of the divine will and even the *potentia dei absoluta* is limited to what is logically possible. Nor is the divine will inscrutable. ... Moreover, the 'arbitrariness' of God's will is not to be construed as irrationality." Vailati does not discuss the distinction between the two kinds of necessities I introduced here.

¹⁹See, in particular, *Discourse*, 156–166. On Clarke's moral philosophy, see Rossignol 1892; Ferguson 1976; Hutton 2015, 212–213 and 219–225.

and necessary? because I affirm the difference between virtue and vice to be eternal and necessary, that therefore I affirm men, who practise virtue or vice, to have existed eternally? This accusation shows both extreme ignorance, and great malice, in the author of the remarks. (*Discourse*, 129)

Clarke's reply to Carroll is built on the exploitation of the distinction between conceptual necessity and obtainment necessity. Clarke's claim concerning the "eternal reasons" that link the nature of different things concerns conceptual necessity. Given the nature of a sphere and a cylinder, for instance, it is necessary that they stand in a certain relationship, just because the very nature of being a sphere and being a cylinder entails so. However, Clarke emphasizes, this does not entail that one has to admit that there are any really existent spheres or cylinders. Conceptual necessity does not entail obtainment necessity.

The "eternal reasons" that Clarke mentions originate from the relationship among ideas. However, God is a free agent. The very nature of freedom, according to Clarke, consists in constantly having the power of withdrawing action. Hence, God is not bound in any way to create the world (or conserve it in the same shape) because the very nature of freedom of indifference entails that there is no obtainment necessity that bounds God's will to create a certain world or maintain it. This entails that the "eternal reasons" among things are "eternal" insofar as they concern God's ideas. However, God's free and arbitrary decision to create a world according to his ideas (and to continue to maintain it) could be withdrawn at any moment (in principle). In this way, Clarke develops his strong account of moral values based on eternal relationships (and entailing conceptual necessity) without undermining his argument about the contingency of the created world (which concerns obtainment necessity).²⁰

²⁰In *Demonstration XII*, 84, Clarke stresses that the "eternal reasons" of things entail only a *moral* necessity with respect to God's action: "[God] must of necessity (meaning not a necessity of fate, but such a moral necessity as I before said was consistent with the most perfect liberty) do always what he knows to be fittest to be done." Despite this qualification, Clarke stresses that the conjunction of God's attributes entails that God must necessarily act in the wisest way: "infinite knowledge, power, and goodness in conjunction may, notwithstanding the most perfect freedom and choice, act with altogether as much certainty and unalterable steadiness as even the necessity of fate can be supposed to do" (*Demonstration XII*, 86). To use the terminology introduced in section two, it may be said that it is conceptually necessary for God, given his nature, to act in accordance with his moral attributes and that this conceptual necessity determines the content of God's volitions, while God's freedom ensures that the obtainment of the results of these volitions remains entirely dependent on God's power of acting or forbearing action. This point is made explicit in *Demonstration XII*, 87–88: "an infinitely wise and good being endowed with the most perfect liberty can no more choose to act in contradiction to wisdom and goodness, than a necessary agent can act contrary to the necessity by which it is acted ... There was indeed no necessity in nature that God should at first create such beings as he has created, or indeed any beings at all. ... But it was fit, and wise, and good, that infinite wisdom should manifest, and infinite goodness communicate itself. And therefore, it was necessary (in the sense of necessity I am now speaking of) that things should be made at such time ... And when and whilst things are in being, the same moral perfection makes it necessary that they should be disposed and governed according to the most exact and most unchangeable laws of eternal justice."

(ii) The moderate nature of Clarke's voluntarism emerges at two crucial junctions in Clarke's correspondence with Leibniz: in connection with the discussion of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) and with the issue of miracles.

Leibniz introduces PSR in his second paper:

By that single principle, viz. that there ought to be a sufficient reason why things should be so, and not otherwise, one may demonstrate the being of a God, and all the other parts of metaphysics or natural theology; and even, in some measure, those principles of natural philosophy, that are independent upon mathematics. (LC 1956, Leibniz's Second Paper, 16)

Leibniz's formulation of PSR is broad enough to encompass *both* the existence of things and their nature. In the course of the correspondence, Leibniz's strategy consists in relying on PSR (which Clarke does not formally reject) in order to show, for instance, that the Newtonian doctrine of absolute space is incoherent (LC 1956, Leibniz's Third Paper, 26). For present purposes, I shall leave aside the details of the argumentation against absolute space and how it relates to PSR.²¹ I focus instead on how Clarke deals with PSR in relation to God's will. As Clarke writes:

Nothing is without a sufficient reason why it is, and why it is thus rather than otherwise. ... But this sufficient reason is oft-times no other, than the mere will of God. For instance: why this particular system of matter, should be created in one particular place, and that in another particular place; when (all place being absolutely indifferent to all matter) it would have been exactly the same thing *vice versa*, supposing the two systems (or the particles) of matter to be alike; there can be no other reason, but the mere will of God. Which if it could in no case act without a predetermining cause, any more than a balance can move without a preponderating weight; this would tend to take away all power of choosing, and to introduce fatality. (LC 1956, Clarke's Second Paper, 20–21)

This formulation reflects the formulation that Clarke previously provided in the *Demonstration* (I, 8). According to Clarke, the "mere will of God" counts as a sufficient reason for the existence of certain things and an explanation as to why they should be created in a certain way. This is a restatement of Clarke's rejection of the inference from conceptual necessity to obtainment necessity: the existence of things depends entirely on God's free decision of creating them, independently of any further predetermining reason. Clarke's account of agent causation applied to God entails that God's free will is always the necessary and sufficient reason for the existence of things, and the same freedom prevents anything else from being considered equally necessary or sufficient. Clarke reaffirms here the point made in the *Demonstration*: God must have freedom of indifference in order to be an agent at all. PSR must be thus accommodated with God's

²¹These details are matters of some controversy (see Palmerino 2018).

freedom of indifference in order to avoid fatalism (i.e. Spinoza's position and that of his followers).

It is worth noting that Clarke's understanding of PSR does not rule out the possibility that, in some cases, a sufficient reason might be something more than the "mere will of God." As Clarke says, the "mere will of God" is "oft-times" the sufficient reason of things (especially when it comes to their existence), but this does not preclude that some sufficient reasons may have a further grounding in other considerations.²² Clarke's view about the "eternal reasons" that link the nature of things may offer a good example in this direction. The sufficient reason as to why certain configurations of the world are better than others can be accounted for by the way in which, in these configurations, the nature of different things fit together in virtue of the "eternal reasons" that connect their natures. Clarke is not explicit about this kind of sufficient reason in the context of his correspondence with Leibniz, because this would not be a matter of disagreement with him. However, Clarke does rule out (as in his reply to Carroll) that any of these considerations may constrain God's ultimately free decision of following them or not.

Leibniz immediately notices that Clarke's use of PSR aims to secure God's indifference, which Leibniz strongly rejects. As Leibniz writes:

My axiom [i.e. PSR] has not been well understood; and that the author [i.e. Clarke] denies it, tho' he seems to grant it. 'Tis true, says he, that there is nothing without a sufficient reason why it is, and why it is thus, rather than otherwise: but he adds, that this sufficient reason, is often the simple or mere will of God But this is plainly maintaining, that God wills something, without any sufficient reason for his will: against the axiom, or the general rule of whatever happens. This is falling back into the loose indifference, which I have confuted at large, and showed to be absolutely chimerical even in creatures, and contrary to the wisdom of God, as if he could operate without acting by reason. (LC 1956, Leibniz's Third Paper, 27)

According to Leibniz, accepting any form of indifference (in either creatures or in God) amounts to denying PSR altogether. Since Clarke's account of agent causation is built on the idea that agency requires indifference, Leibniz is eager to stress the incompatibility of Clarke's account with PSR. Clarke's appeal to the "mere will of God" is not intended to show that the "mere will of God" is necessarily the cause of "eternal reasons" among things. Rather, his point is more moderate: it aims to safeguard God's indifference, especially concerning God's act of bringing about the existence of things. Nonetheless, even Clarke's moderate voluntarism is still too strong for Leibniz, and it is

²²Clarke explicitly concedes this point to Leibniz (LC 1956, Clarke's third reply, 32): "Where there is any difference in the nature of things, there the consideration of that difference always determines an intelligent and perfectly wise agent. But when two ways of acting are equally and alike good ... to affirm in such case, that God cannot act at all ... seems to be a denying God to have in himself any original principle or power of beginning to act."

too strong because of Clarke's acceptance of indifference and Leibniz's firm rejection of it. For present purposes, thus, it is important to stress that the correspondence does not prove that Clarke supports a radical version of voluntarism, but rather that the genuine crux of the controversy with Leibniz is Clarke's account of indifference, which is at the core of his account of agent causation.²³

Another connected point of disagreement between Leibniz and Clarke concerns miracles. Leibniz raises the question of whether natural operations are commensurate with the nature of things that are supposed to be their causes. A few years earlier, Leibniz had explicitly charged Malebranche's occasionalism of reducing all natural operations to a kind of perpetual miracle insofar as occasionalism denies that natural operations depend upon the nature of things.²⁴ Leibniz understood Malebranche as holding that the nature of created things does not maintain any traces of God's laws and thus God has to constantly reiterate his commands in order to produce regular effects over time. In his *De Ipsa Natura* (1698), Leibniz explains: "it is not sufficient to say that God, creating things in the beginning, willed that they follow a certain definite law in their change [*progressus*] if we imagine his will to have been so ineffective that things were not affected by it and no lasting effect was produced in them" (G 1875–90, IV 507/AG 1989, 158). In writing to Clarke, Leibniz contends: "that which is supernatural, exceeds all the powers of creatures. ... I maintain that the attraction of bodies, properly so called, is a miraculous thing, since it cannot be explained by the nature of bodies" (LC 1956, Leibniz's Third Paper, 30). As in the *De Ipsa Natura*, Leibniz focuses on whether or not a certain effect follows from the nature of the thing that is supposed to be its cause. Against Malebranche, Leibniz argued that occasionalism entails God's perpetual intervention. Against Clarke, Leibniz tries to push a similar argument, by insisting that since gravity or attraction cannot be accounted for by the nature of bodies, gravity too entails a perpetual miracle on God's part.²⁵

In his reply to Leibniz, Clarke maintains that "nature" is an empty word:

I affirmed that, with regard to God, no one possible thing is more miraculous than another; and that therefore a miracle does not consist in any difficulty in the nature of the thing to be done, but merely in the unusualness of God's doing it. The terms, *nature*, and *powers of nature*, and *course of nature*, and the like, are nothing but empty words; and signify merely, that a thing usually or frequently comes to pass. (LC 1956, Clarke's Fifth Reply, 114)

Clarke disagrees with Leibniz's definition of what counts as a miracle. Contrary to Leibniz, Clarke does not accept that the distinction between the domain of the natural

²³At the end of the correspondence, Clarke explicitly acknowledges this point (see LC 1956, Clarke's fifth reply, 119–120).

²⁴See Leibniz to Arnauld, 14 July 1686, G II 57–8; *New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances*, §§ 12–13, G IV 483–4; AG 1989, 143; *Theodicy*, § 61, G 1875–90, VI 136.

²⁵On Leibniz's strategy, see Vailati 1995.

and that of the miraculous depends on whether a certain effect can be accounted for by the nature of its supposed natural cause. Echoing Augustine, Clarke rather maintains that the distinction between the natural and the supernatural lies merely in the frequency with which God himself brings about a certain phenomenon.²⁶

Once again, it is important to distinguish what this claim denies from what it does not deny. Clarke uses “nature” to refer to the whole of nature, the course of nature, and powers that can be attributed to Nature. “Nature” here is taken to be a collective term for the whole of the natural world and the causal relationships that it entails. Arguing against this notion at the beginning of the eighteenth century is not a novelty per se.²⁷ However, the argument can be developed in different ways.

Malebranche (whose position is often in the back of Leibniz’s mind during the correspondence with Clarke) most explicitly rejected the (scholastic) tenet that finite things can have their own individual natures, which can express some degree of causal efficacy in their own right. The course of nature as a whole is nothing but the result of God’s direct ruling of creatures. According to Malebranche: “I derive nothing from my nature, nothing from the imaginary nature of the philosophers. Everything comes from God and His decrees” (OC.xii–xiii.165/JS 121).²⁸ The nature of things has no causal efficacy and entails no causal implications independently of God’s laws. As mentioned, Leibniz criticized this claim in his *De Ipsa Natura*.²⁹

However, in his reply to Leibniz, Clarke does not refer to the individual nature of things but to the whole course of nature understood as a collective term. This means that, in order to counter Leibniz’s view, Clarke does not need to rule out that things have natures that may somehow account for particular phenomena.³⁰ Clarke does not enter at all in the discussion of this issue with Leibniz. Rather, he simply points out that whatever nature things may have, since they depend on God, and God’s will is free and unbounded, the “course of nature” is absolutely contingent. Once again, Clarke does not seem to push his voluntarism to the extreme of rejecting that, in some relevant sense, different things may have their own individual natures, which are connected by “eternal reasons.” Such a rejection would not square with Clarke’s moral project.

²⁶See Augustine, *The City of God*, XXI.8.2 (in Augustine 1909): “a portent ... happens not contrary to nature, but contrary to what we know as nature”; *On the Profit of Believing*, XVI.34 (in Schaff 1887a): “I call a miracle that which seems difficult or unusual beyond the expectations or the capacity of him who wonders at it”; *Against Faustus the Manichaean*, XXVI.III (in Schaff 1887b): “this we call nature: the known and ordinary course of nature; when God does something against this [these things] are called great miraculous deeds.”

²⁷See e.g. Boyle’s *Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature* (published in 1686, now Boyle 1996, henceforth referred to simply as *Free Enquiry*), 36–37; 110–111.

²⁸For a similar claim, see also the fifteenth Elucidation to the *Search*: OC 1958–1984, iii.213/LO 662; *Meditations*: OC.x.50–55; *Dialogues*: OC.xii–xiii.164; Malebranche [1688] 1997 JS 118.

²⁹Before Leibniz, Boyle advances a similar criticism of Malebranche’s position (see *Free Enquiry*, 25).

³⁰Notice that Malebranche is committed to denying that the bare fact of being extended, for instance, has any causal significance independently of God’s laws (see Schmaltz 2008b). Clarke does not have to endorse this radical claim and can grant that matter may well have purely negative powers, without this entailing that these powers would have any proper causal efficacy on their own. For Clarke’s view on this point, see section four below.

Clarke's account of agent causation provides him with a much easier and safer way to counter Leibniz.

The laws of nature concern the actual and regular obtainment of certain effects in the natural world. The course of nature is the result of God's choice and thus falls within the domain of God's freedom of indifference. As mentioned at the end of section two, Clarke maintains that the essence of freedom consists in the agent's continuous exercise of its power of choosing. In the case of God, God's establishment of certain laws of nature cannot be done instantaneously and thereby hold permanently. Rather, insofar as it is the result of a free choice, it has to be reiterated at every moment and remains open to be freely changed at any time. Hence, whatever nomological regularity may be observed in nature, such a regularity cannot be regarded as obtaining necessarily, since it continuously depends on God's freedom of choosing otherwise. Clarke's account of agent causation shows that there is no obtainment necessity in the natural world. Insofar as the world depends on a free agent, the world is necessarily contingent.

Leibniz's strategy is to collapse Clarke's position with Malebranche's. However, Clarke has two very good reasons to resist this move and instead develop his own version of the denial of the course of nature. Firstly, both Leibniz and Malebranche reject the notion of indifference and subscribe to some form of intellectualism.³¹ Freedom of indifference is, however, at the core of Clarke's account of agent causation and puts him on the voluntarist side of the dispute. Secondly, Clarke's denial of any obtainment necessity in the ordinary course of nature does not commit him to reject (as an extreme voluntarist would do, *pace* Henry 2009) the idea that things may have their own natures, related by "eternal reasons" (which entails a form of conceptual necessity). However, Clarke's account of eternal reasons is not a concession to the intellectualist party either (*pace* Harrison 2002 and 2004), since it does not put any constraints on the exercise of God's own freedom, which remains completely unbounded and indifferent. Clarke's account of agent causation and his moderate voluntarism thus allow him to resist Leibniz's charges without having to come close to, let alone endorse, anything like Malebranche's own position.

4. Partial Occasionalism in Support of Agent Causation

Occasionalism tackles two different questions: (1) what is the kind of causality that belongs to certain entities? and (2) what is the source of causal efficacy in nature? Although these two questions are connected, they must not be conflated. Often,

³¹Malebranche understands the laws of nature as God's general volitions, which are regular and bounded to God's wisdom, and he rejects the idea that there might be any indifference in God (OC.iii.85–86; Malebranche 1997 LO 586–587). Moreover, Malebranche explicitly rejects at the beginning of the *Search* that the will can be indifferent (OC.i.47/LO 5). Arnauld, in particular, pushed Malebranche on this point. See Nadler 2011, 168–175. In this respect, Malebranche's account is diametrically opposed to Clarke's moderate voluntarism and his account of agent causation.

the solution to the second question leads one to identify God's immediate causal involvement in nature as the only source of causal activity in the world, and this has often been taken to be the most distinctive feature of occasionalism. Partial occasionalism, however, maintains that God's causal intervention is only directly needed in a certain domain, which is usually identified with that of body-body causation. Partial occasionalism allows both God and certain entities to be genuine causes of certain phenomena, while it rules out that other entities are. With respect to the first question, both partial and unrestricted occasionalism consider the entities devoid of efficacious causal powers as *sine quibus non* conditions for the genuinely efficacious agent(s) to operate. This does not mean that non-efficacious entities are irrelevant for the causal processes, but rather that they play only a passive role and that, by themselves, they are neither sufficient nor responsible for directly bringing about the relevant effects.³²

Late scholastics and a number of early modern authors rejected occasionalism and embraced concurrentism instead.³³ To the first question, concurrentist accounts reply that while God is the primary cause of all effects, creatures are secondary causes, which are genuinely efficacious (or *per se* causes), although their efficacy requires God's concurrence to work. To the second question, therefore, concurrentist accounts reply that, at least in the ordinary course of nature, causal efficacy has two roots: God and the nature of creatures themselves.

Unrestricted occasionalism and concurrentism are mutually exclusive insofar as unrestricted occasionalism denies and concurrentism defends that creatures are genuinely efficacious. Without genuine causal efficacy rooted in the nature of things, God has nothing to concur with and is left as the sole genuine cause. To use scholastic terminology, this divergence is captured by saying that, in the concurrentist scenario, not only God but also creatures are *per se* causes (even if only in their own ontological order and subordinated to God's concurrence), while in the unrestricted occasionalist scenario God is the only *per se* cause and creatures are mere *sine quibus non* conditions for God's operations.

Despite this radical divergence, however, concurrentism and *partial* occasionalism may be combined. Insofar as partial occasionalism restricts the occasionalist account of causation to one specific domain of creatures (bodies and material entities), it leaves room in other domains (e.g. minds) to be genuinely efficacious. God has thus to be directly involved as the sole source of causal efficacy in the purely physical domain, while in the spiritual domain (and in every domain in which God decides to make minds responsible for certain bodily effects, such as in the case of mind-body union) minds also are active. Louis de la Forge is one of the first early modern authors to

³²From a scholastic point of view, early modern occasional causes can be understood as what scholastics (especially in the Franciscan tradition following Ockham) called *sine quibus non* conditions. On this point, see Sangiacomo 2019 and forthcoming 2020.

³³For a review of the different versions of concurrentisms, see Schmutz 2001 and Sangiacomo 2016 and 2018. For a reading of Descartes' account of causation as a form of concurrentism, see Hattab 2000 and 2007.

defend this kind of partial occasionalism.³⁴ I contend that Clarke too develops his own version of partial occasionalism, which is distinctively shaped by his account of agent causation and his commitment to Newtonian physics.

From a systematic point of view, partial occasionalism (in the physical realm) follows as an immediate consequence from Clarke's account of agent causation. Agent causation (which is the only account that Clarke accepts) simply does not allow non-intelligent beings to act as genuine efficacious causes. Every effect attributed to non-intelligent beings must be caused by the intervention of some intelligent being. However, in terms of argumentative efficacy, Clarke can also exploit partial occasionalism itself as an independent resource to strengthen the case for his account of agent causation. If material bodies cannot be properly considered to be agents or causes, then the only kind of proper causation in nature must be ascribed to either God or to intelligent spiritual beings.

This latter strategy is fully developed in Clarke's *Discourse*, which follows the *Demonstration* and continues Clarke's fight against atheists and deists. Clarke has a good reason for adopting this strategy. As I discussed in section two, Clarke's account of agent causation relies on the argument put forward in section VIII of the *Demonstration*, according to which purely material beings cannot cause or give rise to intelligence. This point is controversial in itself.³⁵ If Clarke can exploit partial occasionalism to offer an independent proof that non-intelligent (i.e. material) beings are devoid of causal efficacy anyway, he can render it more plausible that agent causation is the only viable account of causation.³⁶

³⁴ La Forge's *Traité de l'esprit de l'homme*, was available in Latin from 1666 (*Tractatus de mente humana* ..., Paris) and circulated in the British context. William Coward (1657–1725) in his *Second Thoughts* (1702) attacks La Forge for confusing *mens* and *anima* (Coward 1702, 102). Thomas Emes (d. 1707), in his *Vindiciae Mentis* (1702), replies to Coward and, although he does not mention La Forge by name, develops an account of mind-body union similar to La Forge's partial occasionalism, in which the mind's will remains active, while bodies are conceived as passive (see Emes 1702, 59–60). Clarke arguably echoes or engages with La Forge's argument at several points. In the Leibniz–Clarke correspondence, Clarke objects to Leibniz that the only justification for the theory of pre-established harmony is the alleged difficulty of understanding how an immaterial entity can act on a material body. This difficulty is spurious, since “what greater difficulty is there in conceiving how an immaterial substance should act upon matter, than in conceiving how matter acts upon matter?” (LC, Clarke's Fifth Reply, 116). This point was used by La Forge himself: “it was no more difficult to conceive how the mind moves the body than to know how one body moves another because, in fact, one must have recourse to the same universal cause in both cases” (La Forge 1997, 143). Clarke made a similar point already in *Demonstration* X, 61. Some familiarity with La Forge emerges also in *Demonstration* X, 63 where Clarke rejects La Forge's claim (La Forge 1997, 151) that the soul might have the power of “determining” motion but not of increasing or decreasing the quantity of motion created and conserved by God.

³⁵ On the early modern controversies about the possibility of thinking matter, see Yolton 1984.

³⁶ Defending partial occasionalism is not an obvious move in the intellectual milieu in which Clarke operates. For instance, Boyle was seemingly reluctant (as on several other metaphysical issues) to openly and unambiguously settle the matter, although he does at some point seem to embrace what Anstey called a form of “nomic occasionalism” (see Anstey 1999 and 2000, 158–204; for a “concurrentist” reading of Boyle, see Shanahan 1988). Newton himself struggled throughout his career to offer a satisfying account of the nature and cause of gravity. Gravity received clear mathematical treatment, but its ontological status remained unclear (Janiak 2007 and 2008;

To establish partial occasionalism in the physical domain, one must rule out the possibility that bodies or material beings can be genuine per se causes. Bodies could play a causal role in natural processes in two (unexclusive) ways: (i) by contributing to the causal process in virtue of some intrinsic efficacious causal power that they would have (as traditional Aristotelian scholastic authors, for instance, would maintain); or (ii) by operating on the basis of certain laws of nature that would be intrinsically connected with the nature of bodies (as Leibniz would contend). In the *Discourse*, Clarke offers arguments against both these options.

Concerning causal powers, in the *Discourse* Clarke explains: “matter being evidently not at all capable of any laws or powers whatsoever, any more than it is capable of intelligence, excepting only this one negative power, that every part of it will, of itself, always and necessarily continue in that state, whether of rest or motion, wherein it at present is” (*Discourse*, 341). Some scholars (e.g. Yenter and Vailati 2014) maintain that inertia associated with matter can be responsible for the production of some positive effect. This reading would be supported by several passages, especially in Clarke’s commentary on *Rohault’s System of Natural Philosophy* (first Latin edition published in 1697) in which Clarke connects inertia and the power of resisting motion.³⁷

I contend that this reading should be resisted and that Clarke’s considered view suggests that all causal powers that might be attributed to matter are merely negative powers, which do not have any causal efficacy on their own. I argue two main points in

Ducheyne 2012). Newton’s attempts to explain the cause of gravity range from considering gravity the result of the operation of an ethereal substance, to viewing it as the effect of God’s constant operation in the physical world (for a reconstruction of these different phases, see Westfall 1971; McGuire 1968; Dobbs 1982 and 1991). As John Henry (1994) suggests, it is likely that Newton never actually arrived at a coherent and definitive account (for further discussion of Newton’s position, see Ducheyne 2011 and 2014). The idea that gravity is connected with God’s direct operation in the natural world is openly defended by Richard Bentley (e.g. Bentley 1838, *Works*, 75). However, Bentley does not rule out the possibility that, although passive, matter can be endowed by God with extrinsic but yet efficacious powers. Bentley endorses the view that God impresses or “superadds” gravity to material bodies, which will then behave in accordance with it (see, e.g. Bentley 1838, *Works*, 86, 100, 157, 163; Henry 1994 and 2009). Bentley’s position does not seem to fully coincide with the stronger occasionalist tenet according to which bodies do not play any role in the causal production of natural phenomena (although Connolly 2017 further discusses more systematic and philosophical reasons to support an occasionalist reading of Bentley’s position). Nonetheless, Newtonians working after Clarke, such as Andrew Baxter (1686–1750) and George Berkeley, were open advocates of an occasionalist interpretation of the force of gravity. Concerning Berkeley’s occasionalism regarding bodies see *De Motu*, in Berkeley, *Works*, vol. 4, 34–34; see further discussion in Bardout 2002 and McDonough 2008. Concerning Baxter, see Ablondi 2013. Remarkably, neither of them accepted unrestricted occasionalism but they both restricted it to partial occasionalism.

³⁷See Rohault 1697, I, 39: “*vis seu conatus, quo corpora tum mota tum quiescentia perstant, quo coeperunt, statu; est mera Inertia materiae: Ideoque si fieri posset, ut Deus nihil vellet; corpus, quod jam movetur, tam moveretur aeternum; quam corpus, quod jam quiescit, aeternum quiesceret. Hujus autem Inertiae materiae Effectus est, ut corpora omnia pro Densitate sua, hoc est, pro quantitate Materiae suae, resistant.*” It should be noted that this passage appears in the context of Clarke’s discussion of the controversy on the nature of rest. Clarke contrasts Descartes’ original view of rest as a “force of rest” with Malebranche and Le Clerc’s view that rest is merely a privation. In this context, Clarke takes the position with Descartes against Malebranche. Note that for the 1723 English edition of Clarke’s commentary, John Clarke asked Charles Morgan to expand the original commentary by Clarke (see, on this point, Gascoigne 1989, 157–158).

support of this contention: (1) inertia, impenetrability or any other properties that can be attributed to matter do not have any intrinsic causal efficacy; and (2) matter cannot ground the laws of nature that are required for the unfolding of natural processes.

First, understood in the context of seventeenth-century natural philosophy, an efficacious (or active) causal power is taken to be what allows a certain substance to initiate a new course of action or bring about some change. Clarke conforms to this conceptual usage. As discussed in section two, when he wants to stress the real causal efficacy of intelligent agents, he stresses their “power of beginning motion.” However, inertia merely expresses the fact that matter, by itself, cannot produce anything and thus simply continues to remain in the same state until some external cause changes it. This permanence in the same state amounts to nothing but the sheer lack of causal activity to which matter is abandoned when it is not acted upon by some efficacious cause. This is why Clarke calls inertia a “negative” power (which corresponds to what, in scholastic terminology, is more usually called a passive power, namely, the capacity of receiving some change produced by a genuinely efficacious agent). According to Clarke, inertia is not the only negative power of matter. In fact, all features usually attributed to matter count in the same way as negative powers. As he writes: “figure, divisibility, mobility, and other such like qualities of matter, are not real, proper, distinct, and positive powers, but only negative qualities, deficiencies, or imperfections” (*Demonstration VIII*, 41). None of these features, in Clarke’s eyes, mean that matter acts as a genuinely efficacious cause which is able to initiate new courses of action. In this way, Clarke endorses the widespread claim at the time that matter is utterly passive.³⁸

Second, Clarke rules out the possibility that matter operates on the basis of certain laws of nature intrinsic to it. Clarke argues that matter by itself is incapable of obeying any laws. As he writes:

[S]eeing matter is utterly incapable of obeying any laws, the very original laws of motion themselves cannot continue to take place but by something superior to matter, continually exerting on it a certain force of power according to such certain and determinate laws. (*Discourse*, 142)³⁹

³⁸Clarke makes a similar point against Leibniz, see LC, Clarke’s fourth reply, 51: “every action is (in the nature of things), the giving of a new force to the thing acted upon. Otherwise ‘tis not really action, but mere passiveness; as in the case of all mechanical and inanimate communications of motions. If therefore the giving a new force, be supernatural; then every action of God is supernatural and he is quite excluded from the government of the natural world: and every action of man, is either supernatural, or else man is as mere a machine as a clock.” For the discussion of the passivity of matter in the early modern context, see Yolton 1984, 90–106. Wiggelsworth 2009, 84–85 stresses the anti-deist role of Clarke’s emphasis on the passivity of matter and God’s constant intervention in the natural world. The idea that matter is passive is compatible with the claim, endorsed by Clarke (e.g. *Demonstration X*, 58), that physical effects are brought about by impacts, a claim that even Malebranche would not deny (see, e.g. OC.iii.213/LO 662).

³⁹At some point Clarke weakens this point by writing: “all inanimate and all irrational beings, *by the necessity of their nature*, constantly obey the laws of their creation, and tend regularly to the ends for which they were appointed; how monstrous then is it that reasonable creatures, merely because they are not necessitated, should

Clarke's argument relies on the empirical observation that "the very original laws of motion" apply from one moment to the next and remain seemingly constant and regular over a certain amount of time. Of course, God may change the course of nature at any time. However, the argument here concerns the empirical observation that the laws of nature do seem to remain constant for at least some time. Clarke's point is that even this minimal form of nomological constancy over time cannot be grounded in the nature of matter as such. As discussed in sections two and three, Clarke holds that matter is intrinsically contingent and thus cannot provide the sufficient reason for the regular obtainment of natural effects captured by the laws of motion.

In Clarke's account, the denial that matter can obey any law and the claim that matter is utterly passive mutually support each other. For, on the one hand, if matter by itself is utterly passive, it cannot account for the regular production of natural effects that follow according to the laws of nature, because matter could not produce any of those effects in the first place. While on the other hand, if matter by itself is incapable of obeying any laws, and natural effects occur in a lawful order, then matter by itself cannot account for these effects because it cannot account for their regular and lawful unfolding.⁴⁰

This argument paves the way towards recognising God as the only immediate cause of natural effects in the physical realm. As Clarke argues:

[A]ll the great motions in in the world are caused by some immaterial power, not having originally impressed a certain quantity of motion upon matter, but perpetually and actually exerting itself every moment in every part of the world. Which preserving and governing power, whether it be immediately the power and action of the same supreme cause that created the world, of him without whom not a sparrow falls to the ground, and with whom the very hairs of our head are all numbered; or whether it be the action of some subordinate instruments appointed by him to direct and preside respectively over certain parts thereof; does either way equally give us a very noble idea of providence. (*Discourse*, 142–143)

Clarke's claim that God is "perpetually and actually exerting" his power "every moment in every part of the world," conjoined with the fact that material entities cannot concur

abuse that glorious privilege of liberty" (*Discourse*, 179; emphasis added). I interpret the reference to "the necessity of their nature" as a form of conceptual necessity, which Clarke has no problem in accepting. Moreover, Clarke's point in this context is that if irrational creatures follow God's laws, rational creatures such as human beings should not abuse their freedom by turning against God's laws. This does not entail that Clarke's reference to the "necessity" of the irrational creatures' nature presupposes any causal power that would allow them to genuinely contribute to causal processes.

⁴⁰Descartes explicitly affirms that the "laws of nature" are "secondary causes." In a series of papers, Helen Hattab (2000, 2003, and 2007) investigated how Descartes' account can be seen to be in line with certain trends in later scholastic thought and can thus be reconciled with a form of concurrentism. However, there is no evidence that Clarke ever referred to the laws of nature as secondary causes. Moreover, there is no evidence that Clarke takes the laws of nature as something that follows from God's immutability, as Descartes does. Concerning the relevance of Descartes' account for the early modern debate on the laws of nature, see Hattab 2018.

in any active way with the production of natural effects (neither through intrinsic powers nor by following natural laws intrinsic to their nature), leads to the conclusion that only God can be the genuine cause of natural phenomena associated with bodies.

Clarke's position is even more explicit when he restates his view later in the *Discourse*:

So that all those things which we commonly say are the effects of the natural powers of matter and laws of motion, of gravitation, attraction, or the like, are indeed (if we will speak strictly and properly) the effects of God's acting upon matter continually and every moment, either immediately by himself, or mediately by some created intelligent beings. (Which observation, by the way, furnishes us, as has been before noted, with an excellent natural demonstration of Providence.) Consequently, there is no such thing as what men commonly call the course of nature, or the power of nature. *The course of nature, truly and properly speaking, is nothing else but the will of God producing certain effects in a continued, regular, constant, and uniform manner*; which course or manner of acting being in every moment perfectly arbitrary, is as easy to be altered at any time as to be preserved. (*Discourse*, 341; emphasis added)

In the passage here emphasized, Clarke does not merely state that God is constantly involved in the operations of nature, but he rather advocates that the whole course of nature is “nothing else but” God's will of producing certain effects. This phrasing (which is similar to his reply to Leibniz) entails that God's will is the *immediate* cause that sets in motion and guides the course of nature.

However, in both the passages here quoted, Clarke makes room for the possibility that God does not cause all phenomena associated with bodies directly and immediately. Clarke admits that God may use “some subordinate instruments appointed by him to direct and preside respectively over certain parts thereof” (*Discourse*, 142–143); or that God acts “upon matter continually and every moment, either immediately by himself, or mediately by some created intelligent beings” (*Discourse*, 341). As this latter reference makes clear, the instruments that God can use to act mediately upon matter are intelligent beings.⁴¹

It may be problematic to maintain partial occasionalism if intermediary intelligent agents are *always* responsible for the production of effects in the physical realm. To better

⁴¹ Clarke's acceptance of an intermediary spiritual agent may suggest that Clarke could be sympathetic to some form of Cambridge Platonism. However, the intermediary spiritual entities introduced by More and Cudworth are conceived of as hierarchically *inferior* (in terms of perfection) to human minds since they are deprived of reason, free will, and consciousness (on Cudworth's view of plastic natures, see Cunning 2003; on More's view, see Reid 2012, 313–348). Clarke maintains that “action supposes in the very notion of it life and consciousness” (Clarke 1998, 130). Given Clarke's account of agency and spiritual substances, hylarchic principles or plastic natures cannot count as spiritual substances because they lack what for Clarke is the distinctive property of spiritual substances, namely consciousness (*Demonstration* VIII, 39–40; X, 57). For further discussion of the proximity between Clarke's views about absolute time and More's, see Thomas 2018 (chap. 9), who nonetheless acknowledges that there is little direct textual evidence in Clarke's writings about a direct reading of More. Downing 2005 mentions in passing Clarke's opposition to Cambridge Platonism.

understand the nature of this problem, consider again the two questions (outlined at the beginning of this section) that an occasionalist account of causation aims to address: (1) what is the kind of causality that belongs to certain entities? and (2) what is the source of causal efficacy in nature?

I contend that Clarke is not reticent about the first question. It is clear, from the texts quoted so far, that Clarke does not allow purely material entities to be endowed with any efficacious causal power and that he maintains that all effects attributed to these entities must be the result of some spiritual entity operating on them. Clarke's account emphasizes that, in the case of entities that cannot begin causal processes or do not have powers of bringing about certain effects (i.e. material and non-intelligent beings), some other kind of agent (i.e. intelligent and free agents) must be directly involved in the production of these effects. The causal role of material entities is that of occasional causes, which operate as *sine quibus non* conditions for the relevant spiritual agent to bring about its own effects. In order for gravitational phenomena to take place, for instance, material bodies must exist, have a certain mass and share spatial relationships among them. These features, by themselves, are only negative powers, meaning that they are not able by themselves to initiate causal processes. However, they determine the circumstances in which causal processes take place and are in this sense necessarily required (although not sufficient) for the real agents to operate. Intelligent agents operating on matter cannot be conceived as concurring with matter and its powers in jointly bringing about certain effects, since the powers of matter are purely negative, as Clarke stresses. This means that matter, by itself, does not have any power to determine any particular effect. Genuinely efficacious agents do not have anything to concur with. Material beings only provide the *sine quibus non* conditions for genuine agents to freely decide which effects they wish to bring about in these material beings.

Clarke, however, is admittedly reticent about the second question. He does explicitly stress the possibility of God allowing intermediary spiritual entities to act as genuine causes of certain phenomena. Nonetheless, I shall now argue that Clarke's considered view is that God does not rely on these intermediary spiritual entities to rule all phenomena. In the end, thus, Clarke supports the partial occasionalist claim that God is immediately and solely causally responsible for at least some natural phenomena.

Consider the following passage:

[T]hat most universal principle of gravitation itself, the spring of almost all the great and regular inanimate motions in the world, ... cannot possibly be the result of any motion originally impressed on matter, but must of necessity be caused (either immediately or mediately) by something which penetrates the very solid substance of all bodies, and continually puts forth in them a force or power entirely different from that by which matter acts on matter: Which is, by the way, an evident demonstration, not only of the world's being made originally by a supreme intelligent cause, but moreover that it depends every moment on some superior being, for the preservation of its frame. (*Discourse*, 142–143)

Gravity seems a universal principle that can account for “almost all the great and regular inanimate motions in the world.” Now, gravity itself is not a *cause* but the *effect* of the force exercised by some agent on matter. Clarke also stresses that the force of gravity exercised by this agent is “entirely different from that by which matter acts on matter,” meaning that it is not a *mechanical* force or anything like the *vis inertiae* that belongs to matter.⁴² Hence, as the context of the passage makes clear, the agent that causes gravity must be an immaterial, intelligent agent. Clarke also remarks: “necessity be caused (either immediately or mediately) by something which penetrates the very solid substance of all bodies.” This line may be invoked as evidence for the fact that Clarke accepts some intermediary principle always mediating between God and nature. If gravity is a universal principle that shapes the whole of nature, and if gravity is caused by a single agent that is different from God, then God is not immediately involved in the ruling of nature. Rather, in such a case, he appoints an intermediary agent to take care of the course of natural phenomena (at least those connected with gravity).

However, from a textual point of view, the scenario in which all phenomena are ruled by intermediary agents is at odds with Clarke’s remark later in the *Discourse* according to which “the course of nature, truly and properly speaking, is nothing else but the will of God producing certain effects in a continued, regular, constant, and uniform manner” (*Discourse*, 341). If the course of nature is the result of the decision of any number of agents different from God, then the course of nature cannot be taken to be *nothing but* God’s will, since the volitions of intermediary agents, in virtue of their freedom, cannot be taken to be identical to God’s own will. Although the intermediary agent’s freedom is subordinated to God’s own decision to bestow such a freedom to that agent, it remains a genuine freedom packed with the power of beginning (*or not* beginning) motion. When God appoints an intermediary agent to rule a certain phenomenon, then this phenomenon depends immediately on the intermediary agent’s free decision

⁴²John Henry (1999) suggests in passing that Clarke implicitly adopted Bentley’s account of superaddition, although he would have been reluctant to state it explicitly. However, Clarke’s account of agent causation is at odds with the idea of superaddition. Clarke explicitly states that God’s power cannot bring about what is logically impossible (*Demonstration* X, 55). According to Clarke, the very idea of thinking matter is a contradiction in terms because thinking is defined by properties (such as intellect and will) that cannot possibly be ascribed to (or arise from) matter and its properties (*Demonstration* X, 70). As a result, God could not make matter think. Since true causal efficacy belongs only to spiritual intelligent agents, if God were to superadd a true force to matter, this would require making matter some kind of agent, which is absurd, since it would entail making matter somehow intelligent and thinking. It is true that Clarke’s own account of the way in which God endows finite minds with the power of beginning motion can be envisaged as a kind of superaddition. Nonetheless, superaddition works in the case of finite intelligent agents only because they are already defined as being intelligent and immaterial substances and thus capable of receiving a power that is consistent with their intelligent spiritual nature. This condition is not satisfied by matter, which Clarke strongly maintains to be utterly devoid of any intelligence. If superaddition reduces to the fact that some spiritual agent constantly exercises a force on material bodies by thus producing the effects of gravity, then the difference between superaddition (thus understood) and partial occasionalism vanishes. Concerning Clarke’s arguments against the superaddition of gravity, see Vailati 1997, 145; Wolf forthcoming 2019.

and no longer immediately on God's own will (unless God makes the *further* decision of overpowering the agent or destroying it).

Given the constraints of Clarke's account of agent causation, it is also not possible to use a form of concurrentism (between God and intermediary agents) in order to simultaneously maintain that (i) God is immediately involved in ruling the course of nature *and* that (ii) God appoints intermediary agents to rule all natural phenomena. This is because God can immediately concur with the intermediary agent only in the sense of upholding in existence the agent's own power of beginning motion and its freedom (*Demonstration X*, 62). However, this concurrence cannot extend to the fact that God concurs with the agent's way of using its freedom to begin certain causal chains or refrains from beginning them. Divine concurrence with respect to this choice itself would in fact be a genuine causal interference and, given God's omnipotence, it would always result in God overpowering the finite agent. Since this would undermine the agent's own freedom of indifference, the agent itself would cease to be a genuine agent at all (by Clarke's standards). Moreover, it would not make sense to appoint an intelligent agent as responsible for some effect (which means establishing that that effect follows from the intermediary agent's own free choice), if God would then have to overpower the agent's free choice and undermine the agent's own agency. Hence, in Clarke's account, God cannot be both immediately responsible for the course of nature and appoint an intermediary agent to rule the same natural phenomena that God rules.⁴³

Clarke's remarks about intermediary agents are meant to leave open the discussion about which intermediary agents are responsible for certain phenomena and which phenomena are ruled by intermediary agents rather than by God himself. However, Clarke also explicitly states that the course of nature is nothing but (and thus immediately depends) on God's own will. Hence, the use of intermediary agents cannot be so extensive that no phenomenon in nature is ruled immediately by God.

This conclusion is supported by the way in which Clarke's discussion continues just after the previous quote. Clarke argues:

[God] must actually direct and appoint every particular thing and circumstance that is in the world, or ever shall be, excepting only what by his own pleasure he puts under the power and choice of subordinate free agents. If, therefore, God does not concern himself in the government of the world, nor has any regard to what is done therein, it will follow that he is not an omnipresent, all-powerful, intelligent and wise being; and, consequently, that he is not at all. Wherefore the opinion of this sort of deists stands not upon any certain consistent principles, but leads unavoidably to downright atheism. (*Discourse*, 144)

⁴³ Clarke makes a similar point against Leibniz (LC, Clarke's second reply, 23): "If God's conserving all things, means his actual operation and government, in preserving and continuing the beings, powers, orders, dispositions and motions of all things; this is all that is contended for. But if his conserving things, means no more than a king's creating such subjects, as shall be able to act well enough without his intermeddling or ordering any thing amongst them ever after; this is making him indeed a real creator, but a governor only."

Clarke stresses here that God's appointment of created intelligences as agents directly responsible for certain processes is more an exception to God's general immediate ruling of the course of nature. Clarke does not suggest that God appoints an intermediary created intelligence for every phenomenon in nature. Clarke takes the core of deism (and atheism) to entail that "God does not concern himself in the government of the world." For this reason, Clarke has good reasons to refrain from accepting that God may have delegated the whole course of nature and of all natural phenomena to created intelligences, since in this case it would be hard to see in which sense one may still maintain that God governs the world, given that, insofar as free intelligent agents are responsible for certain phenomena, they are the agents that initiate and bring about the relevant causal chains.

My interpretation is also consistent with Clarke's reference, later in the *Discourse*, to the role of angels. Clarke writes:

[I]f (as seems most probable,) this continual acting upon matter be performed by the subserviency of created intelligences appointed to that purpose by the supreme Creator, then it is as easy for any of them, and as much within their natural power, (by the permission of God,) to alter the course of nature at any time, or in any respect, as to preserve or continue it. (*Discourse*, 341)

This passage might suggest that created intelligent agents (angels in this context) are most probably the constant intermediaries between God and the production of natural effects. However, in the context of this passage, Clarke discusses the issue of miracles in connection with the ordinary course of nature. As already mentioned, if Clarke had maintained that angels are always the intermediary agents that mediate between God and the production of natural effects, then he would have to deny that God is immediately involved in the operations of nature altogether. Yet Clarke seems far from willing to claim that God cannot be immediately responsible for the ordinary course of nature (e.g. *Discourse*, 341). In fact, this is far from the most obvious and natural reading of the passage quoted above. Arguably, Clarke is restating the claim, already discussed, that the course of nature is nothing but God's decree of operating in a constant and regular way. For this reason, the course of nature is fundamentally arbitrary, although it appears regular. *If* intelligent agents, such as angels, are considered to be intermediaries between God and nature, and *if* they are considered to be responsible for *some* phenomena, then (Clarke's argument goes) these phenomena would still remain fully arbitrary (in the sense that they would still depend on the free decision of intelligent agents, which in this case would be angels rather than God). Clarke's point is that the course of nature remains arbitrary (i.e. dependent on the free decision of intelligent agents) even if one assumes that there are intermediary agents between God and nature.⁴⁴ Clarke does not

⁴⁴See a parallel discussion in LC, Clarke's fifth reply, 115.

take a definite position on how extensive the involvement of intermediary agents is and how the division of labour between them and God works. However, this does not mean that Clarke holds that natural phenomena are always immediately caused by intermediary agents, nor is this the only or more plausible reading suggested by the texts themselves.

From Clarke's point of view, the most appealing aspect of partial occasionalism is in relation to the problem of causality, more than the source of causal activity. Insofar as partial occasionalism rules out the fact that certain kind of entities (i.e. material beings) could be the right kind of entity to have genuine causal efficacy, it strengthens the case for Clarke's own account of agent causation, which shows that God and created intelligent agents can be the only source of causal efficacy. From this point of view, what may appear to be an ambiguity in Clarke's position concerning whether God is the only cause operating in nature is in fact more plausibly the result of Clarke's instrumental use of partial occasionalism to strengthen his case for agent causation. Clarke's goal is not to demonstrate that God is the only cause, but rather to show that intelligent agents are the only kind of entity that can be an efficacious cause at all, since material beings lack causal efficacy in any relevant sense.

These considerations suggest that, from Clarke's point of view, partial occasionalism is not just an alternative to unrestricted occasionalism *à la* Malebranche, but that it is the only viable kind of occasionalism and that unrestricted occasionalism is to be denied on both philosophical grounds (because it denies that God can communicate the power of beginning motion to created beings) and moral grounds (because it ultimately leads to some form of fatalism).⁴⁵ Recently, scholars (Nadler 2010, 123–141) have expressed reservations about the extent to which partial occasionalism can be a consistent position. Clarke's endorsement of partial occasionalism shows that, in the early eighteenth-century context, (at least some version of) partial occasionalism was not only sound, but was taken to be much less problematic than unrestricted occasionalism.

⁴⁵ Malebranche (OC.ii.318/LO 451) argues against the possibility, admitted by scholastics, that God can communicate causal powers to creatures. Clarke (*Demonstration X*, 61–62) maintains instead that this possibility is perfectly legitimate and does not make creatures less dependent on God (pace Malebranche), since the power of beginning motion does not belong to the nature of created beings but is freely bestowed and constantly maintained only by God himself. In this respect, Clarke echoes a line of argument that can be found in Suárez (DM 18.1.8–9; Suárez 1994, 42–43) and that Malebranche rejected. Moreover, Clarke attributes to the “maintainers of fate” the idea that the power of beginning motion would make creatures independent from God (*Demonstration X*, 62). Malebranche himself may well fall under this criticism, since in the *Search* he repeats *ad abundantiam* that finite creatures are neither conceivable nor could they do anything without totally depending on God (e.g. OC.ii.314/LO 449). Malebranche had been in fact already charged in this way before Clarke. Locke argued that Malebranche's views (popularized in Britain by John Norris) are doomed to collapse in a form of fatalism *à la* Spinoza (see Locke, *Remarks on some of Mr. Norris's Books*, written in 1693 but published only in 1720, in *Works*, vol. 10, sec. 16, 255–256). Leibniz advances a similar charge to Malebranche in his *De Ipsa Natura* (G IV 515/AG 165).

To conclude, partial occasionalism and Clarke's account of agent causation mutually support one another. On the one hand, agent causation entails that material and non-intelligent beings cannot be the right kind of thing to play any properly efficacious causal role, since they lack intelligence and freedom, which are required for genuine agency. On the other hand, Clarke's main arguments for partial occasionalism concern the fact that (i) matter is utterly passive from a causal point of view, and (ii) matter cannot by itself follow any law. Both arguments are purely negative and do not directly invoke Clarke's positive view about agent causation. However, insofar as these arguments for partial occasionalism rule out the idea that unintelligent material bodies can be genuine causes, they also make it more plausible that agent causation is the only viable model of causality and provides what Locke called a "clear and distinct idea of active power" (II.21.4).

From a historical point of view, Clarke's account of agent causation highlights three main features of the debate on causation across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. First, a crucial concern at the time consisted in rethinking the nature of causal efficacy and the requirements that an entity must satisfy in order to count as a causal agent in a proper sense. Instead of offering a general account of causation that encompasses both intelligent and non-intelligent agents, Clarke's account of agent causation shows that only free intelligent agents (like humans, and angels) can be genuine causal agents. Second, the issue of the passivity of material beings and the direct involvement of God's causal efficacy in nature play a crucial role in shaping this debate. Clarke is ready to trace a sharp boundary between material beings and free intelligent agents. While free intelligent agents receive their causal powers from God, who then allows them to operate as genuine (though subordinate) causal actors, material beings are utterly devoid of efficacious causal powers. Natural phenomena thus require God's immediate and continuous intervention (or that of other subordinated free intelligent agents) in order to take place. Third, occasionalism must be understood as a family of arguments and cannot be reduced to the specific variety of occasionalism developed by Malebranche. Clarke's account of agent causation is at odds with Malebranche's denial of the causal efficacy of human minds. Nonetheless, Clarke's endorsement of partial occasionalism is both a theoretical consequence of his account of agent causation and an external support for strengthening it. From this point of view, occasionalism travels and evolves well beyond Cartesian circles and plays a systematic role in the broader rethinking of the notion of causation during the early modern period.

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