

## **Causal Powers and Ontology in Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz**

Jeffrey K. McDonough

It is a quirk of philosophy that the study of philosophy belongs to philosophy itself. As philosophers, we can ask not only “What is the fundamental nature of the world?” but also “What is the *study* of the fundamental nature of the world?” We can ask not only “Are there causal powers in the world?” but also “How should we understand debates about causal powers in the world?”

The focus of this essay is an intriguing cycle in early modern ontology – that is, in the early modern study of what exists. René Descartes (1596–1650) helped to usher in a new era in ontology by putting pressure on the causal powers posited by his scholastic forbearers. Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) went a step further in flatly denying the existence of created causal powers. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), however, demurred. Returning full circle, he insisted that any satisfactory account of the created world must appeal to causal powers reminiscent of scholastic ontology.

Having explored the decline, fall and rise of causal powers in the ontologies of Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz, the essay will turn briefly to meta-ontology – that is to the study of the study of ontology. It will be argued that early modern debates concerning causal powers do not lend support to recent deflationary meta-ontological views. Difficult, protracted, and inconclusive though they may be, early modern debates over the existence of causal powers were

nonetheless substantive. The deep disagreement among Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz over causal powers suggests that metaphysics is very, very hard, perhaps intractable, but not merely verbal or vacuous.

## 1. Descartes: The Decline of Causal Powers

Born in the Touraine region of France, Descartes was sent to the Jesuit college of La Flèche at roughly the age of ten. There he studied languages, grammar, literature, logic, physics, and philosophy. And it was there that he came to understand the scholastic ontology that he would one day help to topple. At the explanatory heart of the scholastic philosophy taught at La Flèche was the notion of a substantial form. A substance’s substantial form defines the kind of being it is and grounds the substance’s characteristic qualities and powers. The bear’s substantial form is what makes it a bear and grounds its brown color, bear-shape, and its capacities to eat, sleep and give birth to cubs. The honey’s substantial form is what makes it honey and gives rise to its yellow hue, sweet taste, and sticky texture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the scholastic background to the theories of Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz, see Roger Ariew and Alan Gabbey, “The Scholastic Background,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, Volume 1*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 425–53. For discussion of causal powers in the Aristotelian tradition, see the essays by Anna Marmodoro, Sarah Pessin, Peter King, and Jon McGinnis in this volume. For an overview of Descartes’s life and intellectual interests, see Desmond Clarke, “Causal Powers and Occasionalism from Descartes to Malebranche,” in

After leaving La Flèche, Descartes developed a philosophical system that put tremendous pressure on the ontological framework of scholastic substantial forms, qualities, and powers. The pressure flowed in part from Descartes’s own austere ontology. Descartes insists that the created world contains only two kinds of substance: mental substance and physical substance. The whole essence of mental substance is thought. The whole essence of physical substance is extension. All other properties of minds and bodies must be what Descartes calls modes of thought and modes of extension – that is, ways of thinking or being extended. Thus, the thought of something sweet is a mode of thought while having a bear-shape is a mode of extension. Descartes’s austere ontology promised a safe haven for our mental-spiritual lives while nonetheless offering an especially austere foundation for a hardnosed mechanical account of the natural world. But it left little room for scholastic causal powers. For it is difficult to see how, say, the capacity to move a body might be a mode of either thought or extension. Can a power to move a body be a *way* of thinking? A *way* of being extended? Descartes’s austere ontology thus represented one source of pressure for rejecting scholastic powers.

Further pressure flowed from Descartes’s understanding of divine power and its relation to the created world. Scholastic philosophers commonly held that creatures depend upon divine power both for their creation – their coming into being – and for their conservation – their staying in being. With their doctrines of creation and conservation, scholastic philosophers sought to strike a delicate balance between divine and creaturely causation. Following tradition, Descartes similarly accepts that all creatures depend upon divine creation and conservation. In

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*Descartes’ Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton (New York: Routledge, 2000), 131–48.

several places, however, he suggests that God conserves creatures by *re*-creating them at each instant. So, for example, he writes:

For the whole time of my life can be divided into innumerable parts, each of which is in no way dependent upon the rest, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me again (*rursus*) at this moment – that is, which conserves me. (AT 7:48–49/CSM 2:33)<sup>2</sup>

Descartes’s understanding of divine conservation raises deep puzzles about how creatures could possibly bring about any causal effects of their own. If God recreates me wholly anew at each instant, how can my current thoughts give rise to my thoughts at a next instant? If God recreates me wholly anew at each instant, how can my current bodily movements give rise to other bodily movements at future moments? Descartes’s understanding of the traditional doctrine of divine conservation thus placed further pressure on the scholastic idea that creatures enjoy their own causal powers capable of affecting change in the world.

Finally, Descartes’s work also put pressure on causal powers by introducing new explanatory norms. Descartes rose to fame in part due to his mechanical accounts of natural phenomena – his explanations, for example, of the formation of the world in terms of colliding parts of matter and his account of the human body understood as a complex machine. When

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<sup>2</sup> I have used standard abbreviations listed in this volume to refer to primary texts by Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz. Abbreviated citations are typically, first, to an original language text and, second, where available, to a standard English translation. I have generally followed the cited English translations but with occasional minor revisions.

contrasted with such mechanical explanations, Descartes found scholastic explanations in terms of substantial forms and their concomitant qualities and powers deeply unsatisfying. He argues, for example, that attributing a substantial form and a power to burn adds nothing to a proper mechanical explanation of fire (AT 11:7–8/CSM 1:83; see also AT 6: 239, AT 3:492/CSM 3:205, AT 3:500/CSM 3:207). He insists that scholastic substantial forms, qualities, and powers are themselves irredeemably obscure, complaining that substantial forms “were introduced by philosophers solely to account for the proper actions of natural things. ... But no natural action at all can be explained by these substantial forms, since their defenders admit that they are occult and that they do not understand them themselves” (AT 3:506/CSM 3:208, see also AT 9b: 319–20/CSM 1:286–87). If Descartes’s views on ontology and divine power made it hard to see how causal powers might fit into the world, Descartes’s views on explanation made it hard to see what explanatory work they could do, and thus what reason we could have for postulating the existence of scholastic forms, qualities, and powers.

Keenly aware of the pressures Descartes’s philosophical system places on causal powers, many commentators have held that Descartes himself meant to reject causal powers.<sup>3</sup> And, indeed, there are passages in which Descartes appears ready to maintain that God is the only genuine active cause – a position known as occasionalism. Thus, for an example, in a letter to Elizabeth on 6 October 1645, Descartes writes:

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<sup>3</sup> For readings along these lines, see Daniel Garber, *Descartes’ Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992) and Gary Hatfield, “Force (God) in Descartes’ Physics,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 10 (1979): 113–40.

All of the reasons which prove that God exists and is the first and immutable cause of all effects that do not depend on human free will, prove similarly, it seems to me, that he is also the cause of all the effects that do so depend. For the only way to prove that he exists is to consider him as a supremely perfect being; and he would not be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world without coming entirely from him. . . . God is the universal cause of everything in such a way as to be also the total cause of everything; and so nothing can happen without his will. (AT 4:313–14/CSM 3:272)

In this passage, Descartes begins by assuming that God is the first and immutable cause of all creaturely effects that are not the result of human free will – in his day, an utterly uncontroversial position. He next argues that God is the first and immutable cause of all the effects which do depend on human free will. This, again, needn't be controversial in itself. As the assumed first and immutable cause of humans, God could also be considered the first and immutable indirect cause of all that humans do. The second and third sentences, however, suggest a view that was radical even in Descartes's day. For those two sentences suggest that everything that happens in the world derives "entirely" from God and that God is the sole total cause of all creaturely effects. Such remarks, taken at face value, imply a full-blown occasionalism.

Was Descartes then an occasionalist? In spite of the pressures of his philosophical system and some suggestive remarks, I don't think that Descartes meant to reject creaturely causal powers altogether.<sup>4</sup> For there are simply too many texts in which Descartes explicitly attributes

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<sup>4</sup> For readings along these lines, see Desmond Clarke, "Causal Powers and Occasionalism from Descartes to Malebranche," in *Descartes' Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton (New York: Routledge, 2000), 131–48; and Michael Della Rocca, "If

causal powers or faculties to creatures. For example, in the *Meditations*, he attributes faculties of imagination and sensory perception to finite minds (AT 7:78/CSM 2:54). Likewise, he maintains that we must suppose that bodies have powers to act on our minds on pain of God’s otherwise being a deceiver, and that the fact that we can affect bodies is “something which is shown to us not by any reasoning or comparison with other matters, but by the surest and plainest everyday experience” (AT 7:79–80/CSM 2:55; see also AT 5:222/CSM 3:358). Indeed, Descartes even allows that bodies enjoy causal powers to act on one another, telling us that

the power (*vis*) of any given body to act on, or resist the action of, another body ... consists simply in the fact that everything tends, so far as it can, to persist in the same state ... so that what is joined to another thing has some power of resisting separation from it; and what is separated has some power of remaining separated ... what is at rest has some power of remaining at rest ... and what is in motion has some power of persisting in motion. (AT 8-A, 66/CSM 1:244)

Even if we can find reasons within Descartes’s system for rejecting causal powers, and even if we can find occasionalist-friendly texts in his writings, I think we have good evidence that Descartes did not altogether abandon the causal powers more generally associated with his scholastic predecessors. In Descartes, I suggest, we find the decline, but not yet the fall, of created causal powers.

## **2. Malebranche: The Fall of Causal Powers**

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a Body Meet a Body’: Descartes on Body-Body Causation,” in *New Essays on the Rationalists*, ed. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48–81.

Born in Paris, Malebranche studied at the Collège de la Marche, the Sorbonne and the Oratory before being ordained as a Catholic priest in 1664. Physically frail, it is said that when he first came across Descartes’s *Treatise on Man* (*Traité de l’homme*) he was so enthralled with its mechanistic descriptions of the body that he suffered “such violent palpitations of the heart that he was obliged to leave his book at frequent intervals, and to interrupt his reading of it in order to breathe more easily.”<sup>5</sup> Surviving his initial encounter, Malebranche subsequently threw himself into Descartes’s philosophical system, often seeing in it deep affinities with the teachings of his other intellectual hero, St. Augustine.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, Descartes’s ontology raised real, if often implicit, difficulties for the scholastics’ postulation of created causal powers. Many of Descartes’s early followers pressed those difficulties. A variety of “occasionalisms” thus emerged in the writings of early Cartesians such as Johann Clauberg, Louis de La Forge, Géraud de Cordemoy and Arnold Geulincx.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Y. M. André, *La vie du R. P. Malebranche* (Paris: Ingold, 1886; Geneva: Slatkin Reprints, 1970), 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Malebranche’s life and intellectual interests, see Tad Schmaltz, “Nicolas Malebranche,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/malebranche/>; and (the now quite dated) André, *La vie du R. P. Malebranche*.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of Cartesian occasionalisms, see Steven Nadler, *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Tad Schmaltz, *Early*



Among Descartes’s followers, however, Malebranche provided the most systematic, influential, and powerful defense of the doctrine that God is the only genuine, active causal power in the world. It was thus left to the sickly priest of the oratory order to state boldly what neither of his philosophical idols – Descartes and Augustine – had dared to say, namely, that there simply are no created causal powers in the world. God does it all (OCM 3:213/LO 662).

Malebranche launched a broadside of arguments in support of occasionalism. Many of those arguments clearly have roots in tensions in Descartes’s system. So, for example, Malebranche presses the point that there seems to be no place in Descartes’s ontology for bodily causal powers. He asks rhetorically, “For what would this power be? Would it be a substance, or a modality?” If the former, Malebranche reasons, then bodies wouldn’t have powers, but rather powers would be substances – *contra* Cartesianism. If the latter, then bodies would enjoy modes other than motion and figure – again *contra* Cartesianism (OCM 12:151/DMR 107). Similarly, Malebranche develops the thought that traditional doctrines of creation and conservation imply occasionalism. In his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, he first implicitly concedes that conservation is not a continuous re-creation, allowing that it is rather “a continuous creation, a single volition subsisting and operating continuously” (OCM 12:160/DMR 115). Even so understood, however, he insists that the doctrines of creation and conservation entail occasionalism. For if God creates and conserves a body, he must create it somewhere at every instant. Indeed, he must determine all of its properties at every moment that it exists. Given such

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*Modern Cartesianisms: Dutch and French Constructions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

total determination by God, there seems to be nothing left for a body to cause. Essentially similar reasoning leads to the same conclusion for minds (OCM 11:160/TE 174).

Not all of Malebranche's arguments for occasionalism, however, have obvious roots in Descartes's work. Perhaps Malebranche's most famous argument for occasionalism aims to show that only God is capable of linking causes and effects in the way that is required for genuine causation. In a famous passage from his *The Search after Truth*, Malebranche writes:

A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect. Now the mind perceives a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects. Therefore, it is only God who is the true cause and who truly has the power to move bodies. (OCM 2:316/LO 450)

Malebranche's thought here is that genuine causation requires a necessary connection between a cause and an effect. God's omnipotent will is capable of establishing such a necessary connection. If an omnipotent being wills that my hand is raised, then, of necessity, my hand is raised. But no finite, fallible creature can establish such a connection. I may will to raise my hand, and my hand may nonetheless not be raised. But might not God give me a power to raise my hand myself? No, Malebranche insists: To give me a causal power would be to make me omnipotent, for only if I were omnipotent could I forge a necessary connection between my volitions and the movements of my body (OCM 2:316/LO 450).

It is not easy to know what to make of Malebranche's occasionalism today. The arguments in its favor are certainly not ironclad. The arguments that spring from tensions in Descartes's system can be no more persuasive than Descartes's system itself. And while Malebranche's "no necessary connection" argument has cast a long shadow through its influence on David Hume, early modern and contemporary readers of Malebranche may find it easy to

deny that causal connections must be absolutely necessary.<sup>8</sup> But to say that Malebranche's arguments are not ironclad isn't to say much. Philosophical arguments are seldom (ever?) ironclad.

In an age where most professional philosophers are naturalists, it is Malebranche's reliance on God to do everything that is likely to spark the greatest dissent. Philosophers have typically been led to posit causal powers in order to explain effects in the world. The cotton burns when placed by the candle because fire has the power to burn. The candle goes out in the rain, because water has the power to extinguish fire. Of course, it could be the case that it is really God who burns the cotton and makes the candle go out. But to explain all effects by appealing directly to the will of an omnipotent God is likely to strike many today – to paraphrase Bertrand Russell – as akin to theft over honest toil.<sup>9</sup>

But it is, I submit, precisely because Malebranche's full-blown occasionalism is less compelling today that it is worth making the effort to appreciate the coherence and power of his position. As we have noted, in Malebranche's day (and perhaps in ours) the belief in an active, providential god who creates, sustains, and intervenes in the order of creation was widely shared. Indeed, it was so widely shared as to transcend even the divide between scholastics and Cartesians. Like any good philosopher, Malebranche set out numerous arguments trying to show that God alone could be an active causal power. But given the widely shared assumption of a providential god, perhaps the most direct argument for occasionalism would have been an argument from parsimony. If one supposes that an omnipotent god is causally involved in absolutely every creaturely event, why not go one step further and suppose that God is actually

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<sup>8</sup> For Hume's treatment of causal powers, see the essay in this volume by Antonia LoLordo.

<sup>9</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1919), 71.

causally sufficient for every creaturely event? Why not suppose that God is not just a contributing cause of everything that happens in the world, but the only cause of everything that happens in the world? For the theologically minded, it is a stunningly good question. And in an era during which almost everyone was theologically minded, the best negative reply would include a clarion call to return, at least in part, to the scholastic ontology that Descartes had hoped to overturn.

### **3. Leibniz: The Rise of Causal Powers**

Born far from the centers of European scholarship, Leibniz studied languages, logic, law, and philosophy at the universities of Leipzig, Jena, and Altdorf. Like Descartes and Malebranche, Leibniz was raised on the ontology of the scholastics and, like Descartes and Malebranche, he soon came to feel the pull of the new mechanical philosophy. According to his own legend, as a young man Leibniz used to walk in a grove on the outskirts of Leipzig in an area known as the Rosental. There, he reports, at the age of fifteen, he debated whether he should preserve the ontology of the scholastics or embrace the moderns. The new philosophy prevailed and spurred his interests in mathematics (G 3:606/L 655). Leibniz's youthful decision would have tremendous implications. He threw himself into the mechanical philosophy, discovered the infinitesimal calculus, and helped to shape the development of early modern philosophy and its transition to the modern era.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview of Leibniz's life and intellectual interests, see especially Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

In contrast to Descartes, Leibniz was at heart more progressive than revolutionary. In spite of his youthful resolution to follow the moderns, he never seems to have fully turned his back on the views of his teachers. In keeping with his general conciliatory outlook, Leibniz would later maintain that there are truths to be found in *both* scholastic and modern philosophy. As he puts it:

I have found that most of the sects are right in a good part of what they propose, but not so much in what they deny. ... [B]oth sides are right provided that they do not clash with each other; that everything in nature happens mechanically and at the same time metaphysically but that the source of mechanics is in metaphysics. It was not easy to uncover this mystery, because there are few people who take the pains to combine both types of study. (L 655/G 3:607)

Leibniz thinks that there is something right in both scholastic and modern philosophy. There are, in particular, lessons to be learned from scholastic metaphysics, lessons that the moderns reject or ignore at their own peril. Conversely, the moderns have made great and promising advances in the natural sciences, advances that must not be held back by a dogmatic commitment to the philosophy of the schools. One of Leibniz's many ambitions was thus to show how modern views in science could be successfully reconciled with key components of scholastic ontology.

Nowhere is Leibniz's conciliatory attitude towards scholastic ontology more apparent than in his reintroduction of substantial forms and their concomitant qualities and powers. Although he agrees with Descartes and Malebranche that substantial forms should not be used to explain particular phenomena – we shouldn't explain fire's capacity to burn by citing its substantial form or its power to burn – nonetheless it is necessary, he thinks, to follow the scholastics in postulating substantial forms. Thus, for example, in his famous exchange of letters

with the renowned Jansenist theologian and philosopher, Antoine Arnauld, Leibniz argues that substantial forms are necessary to provide the true unity required of genuine substances. In short, without substantial forms, there would be no true unities, and without true unities there would be no genuine substances, and therefore no genuine, created being. By Leibniz's lights, the moderns are right that substantial forms are of no help in doing physics, but the scholastics are right to insist that we need them nonetheless.

Having reintroduced substantial forms, Leibniz argues that we must also acknowledge their concomitant causal powers. Some of his reasons for bringing back causal powers are broadly theological. Since at least the time of Augustine, Christians had wrestled with various versions of the problem of evil. Why, if God is wholly good and the source of all being, is there evil in the world? Augustine had answered this question, in part, by placing the blame for evil on free acts of human volition. God gave us the gift of freedom. We have used it badly and have thereby introduced sin into the world. Leibniz, who wrote an entire book on the problem of evil, was understandably concerned that occasionalism might undermine this familiar theodicy. If God is the only genuine cause in the world, how can creatures be free? If creatures are not free, how can they be responsible (T 288/H 302–3)? Indeed, going a step further, if creatures do not enjoy their own causal powers, how can the heresy of Spinoza be avoided (G 4:515/WF 221)? How, that is, if God is the only causal power in the world, can creatures be anything more than modes of God (T 393/H 359)? From a panoply of worries, Leibniz thus concludes that occasionalism must be rejected and that we must return to an ontology – like that of the scholastics – that frankly acknowledges the existence of created causal powers (G 444/AG 51–2).

Beyond theological concerns, Leibniz also had natural philosophical reasons for reintroducing causal powers. At the heart of the new natural philosophy of the moderns was the

notion of a natural law. In many ways, occasionalism provided Malebranche with an especially elegant account of the foundations of natural laws. Given that God is the sole efficient cause of everything that happens in the world, Malebranche reasoned, we may identify the laws of nature with God's general volitions (OC 3:213/LO 662). If bodies obey the law of inertia, they do so because God – having resolved to move bodies in accordance with the law of inertia – moves bodies in accordance with the law of inertia. What could be more straightforward? Nothing perhaps. And yet, one can sympathize with Leibniz's suspicion that Malebranche's account is, as it were, too straightforward. Deeply committed to the intrinsic intelligibility of the natural world, Leibniz insists that the laws of nature must be grounded in something present, something real in the actual world (G 2:170–71/AG 172–73). According to Leibniz, when God establishes a law of nature, he must establish something in nature that will bring about effects in accordance with that law (G 4:520/WF 205). In short, according to Leibniz, when God establishes a law of nature, he must establish intrinsic causal powers capable of bringing it about that bodies obey that law of nature. To fail to recognize causal powers is, according to Leibniz, to imagine God as a poor watchmaker forever committed to moving the hands of his own watch rather than providing it with its own springs and gears (G 4:520/WF 205).

Not for the last time, Leibniz saw considerations drawn from metaphysics, theology and physics as all pointing in the same direction. Modern mechanists are right to favor explanations of the natural world in terms of laws of motion and bodily movements. They are right to favor explanations of particular phenomena in terms of mechanisms and specific quantities rather than qualitative powers. Nonetheless, reflections on theology, philosophy, freedom and the laws of nature reveal the necessity of acknowledging substantial forms and their concomitant powers. Scholastics may have erred in appealing too readily to substantial forms and causal powers in

their explanations of natural phenomena, but mechanists err no less in failing to see the absolutely essential roles causal powers play in theology, metaphysics, and the grounding of natural philosophy (L 655/G 3:607).

#### **4. Causal powers and meta-ontology**

The debate over causal powers in Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz may encourage a cynical view of ontology. Within the course of less than a century, we seem to have traveled full circle from the scholastics’ postulation of causal powers, to their decline in Descartes, their fall with Malebranche, and their restoration by Leibniz. As other chapters in this volume will attest, similar debates raged in other circles, at other times, and continue to the present day. Attending to the seemingly endless debate over causal powers might prompt one to an anti-ontological outlook. Seeing how causal powers have gone in and out of fashion might lead one to suspect that ontological debates are somehow superficial or misguided.

In meta-ontological discussions, views that see ontological debates as superficial or misguided are often referred to as deflationary views.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly there are a wide variety of deflationary meta-ontological positions. One of the most prominent positions suggests that ontological disputes may be superficial because they are, as it were, more about language than

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<sup>11</sup> For helpful overviews of positions in metaontology, see Matti Eklund, “Metaontology,” *Philosophy Compass* 1, no. 3 (2006): 317–34; and David Manley, “Introduction: A Guided Tour of Metametaphysics,” in *Metametaphysics New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David J. Chalmers, David Manley and Ryan Wasserman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–37.



about the structure of the world itself.<sup>12</sup> In a mantra, ontological disputes are merely verbal disputes. Applied to our case: arguments over the existence of causal powers are merely arguments over how we should understand words such as “cause” and “power.” When philosophers argue over the existence of causal powers their arguments are shallow in much the same way as when my kids argue over whether “a few cookies” means “exactly three cookies” or means “three or four cookies.” What is primarily at stake in the few cookies case – and allegedly in ontological cases – is the meanings of our terms and not the structure of the world. Certainly, it seems possible – and we will have no reason to deny – that some philosophical disputes may be merely verbal. Perhaps, for example, some disputes over whether final causes are *really* causes have been more about how we use, or should use, the word “cause” than about the structure of the world itself.

Were early modern debates over causal powers merely verbal? Interestingly, some aspects of the debates we have looked at might be thought to be more about language than the structure of the world itself. So, for example, there seems to have been some disagreement over what exactly is meant by divine conservation and by causation itself. Should the words “divine conservation” be heard as signifying a a continuous re-creation, or a continuous creation? Is it built into the very definition of a cause that causes must involve necessary connections, or is the notion of a non-necessary casual connection coherent? In spite of such disagreements about

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<sup>12</sup> See, for prominent examples, Rudolf Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4 (1950): 20–40; David Chalmers, “Verbal Disputes,” *The Philosophical Review* 120, no. 4 (2011): 515–66; Eli Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” *Philosophical Issues* 12 (2002): 51–73.

language and meanings, it is nonetheless implausible to suppose that early modern debates about causal powers were, in general, merely verbal. It is difficult to suppose that when Malebranche and Leibniz disagreed about whether God causes everything or whether creatures have causal powers, they were simply talking past each other. Malebranche had a particular picture of the causal structure of the world as well as reasons for thinking that only God could be a genuine active cause. Leibniz had a very different picture of the causal structure of the world and his own reasons for thinking that God had better not be the only genuine active cause. Their dispute may have involved disagreements over how to best understand particular words and concepts, but it is implausible to suppose that their disagreement might be fairly construed as being *merely* verbal.

But if early modern debates about causal powers were not merely verbal, why do we see so little linear progress in the disputes that raged during the period? Another deflationary meta-ontological view – sometimes referred to as “epistemicism” – suggests that at least some ontological disputes may be in principle irresolvable.<sup>13</sup> Consider the much-discussed case of the problem of special composition: what are the general conditions under which some things compose another thing? When – if ever – do two atoms compose a two-atom thing? When they are next to each other? When they are chemically bonded? When they are constituents of a

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<sup>13</sup> For discussion of particular cases in this vein, see Gideon Rosen and Cian Dorr, “Composition and Fiction,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics*, ed. Richard Gale (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 151–74; and Karen Bennett, Karen, “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology,” in *Metametaphysics New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David J. Chalmers, David Manley and Ryan Wasserman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38–76.

single, living organism? Philosophers have disagreed dramatically about how to answer the question of special composition. *Universalists*, for example, insist that any two things compose a third thing. An atom on the tip of my nose and an atom on the dark side of the moon compose a thing that is exhaustively and exclusively constituted by those two atoms. In contrast, *nihilists* insist that no two things ever compose a third thing. Strictly speaking, not even the protons and the electrons that constitute the atom on the tip of my nose make up something that is truly one. Perhaps universalists and nihilists disagree so dramatically in answering the question of special composition because there is, in principle, no more evidence for one answer rather than the other. As the epistemicist would have it, our evidence for accepting universalism is not, and never will be, any stronger than our evidence for accepting nihilism and vice versa.

Perhaps epistemicism is the right view to take with respect to the question of special composition. Just as we have no reason to deny here that some philosophical disputes may be merely verbal, we have no reason to deny here that epistemicism may be the right attitude to take to some ontological disputes. But is it the right attitude to take to the impasse sketched above concerning the existence of created causal powers? Again, it seems unlikely. Later in the eighteenth century, David Hume would argue that we have no direct perceptual experience of causal powers.<sup>14</sup> If he's right, then perhaps we have no more direct perceptual evidence for one view of causal powers over another. But so what? As we've seen, early modern views on causal powers were intertwined with a wide variety of other beliefs in such a way that evidence for those other beliefs might reasonably be counted as evidence for or against causal powers themselves. For Malebranche and Leibniz, for example, questions concerning the existence of

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<sup>14</sup> See Hume (*Enquiry* 7.1) as well as the essay by LoLordo in this volume.

causal powers were intertwined with questions concern human responsibility and agency, the foundations of laws of motion, and theology. Given the ways in which their views on causal powers tied into their wider constellations of beliefs, evidence for any number of these other views must be reckoned as evidence for or against the existence of causal powers. An epistemicist view of early modern debates over causal powers could thus be maintained only by upholding an epistemicist view of nearly all of early modern philosophy, science, and theology. Epistemicism with respect to causal powers would collapse into a broad, implausible skepticism.

If epistemicism with respect to causal powers is untenable, and if early modern philosophers were not simply talking past each other, what lesson should we draw from the cycle of views we surveyed above? The true moral of the story is, I think, the one that lies on the surface, namely, that ontology is hard, and that we should not expect quick or decisive resolutions to ontological questions. Asking if there are causal powers in the world is not like asking if the stove is on or if it is raining today. In the case of some questions, evidence may be local and ready to hand. If I want to know if the stove is on, I go back inside and check. If I want to know if it is raining today, I look out the window (or, more likely, at my phone!). But there are many, many questions that are not like that. Like more abstract questions of science and theology the evidence in favor of any particular answer may well draw on almost anything we believe. One's views on evolution, for example, may be impacted by one's views on fossil remains or the age of the earth. One's views on the existence or nature of God may turn on one's views of evolution and the dating of ancient manuscripts. Philosophers of the early modern period continued to disagree over the existence of causal powers not, I think, because they couldn't understand each other. Nor because there are principled reasons why more evidence cannot be amassed for one view over the other. Rather, early modern philosophers continued to disagree

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about causal powers in large because their beliefs concerning causal powers were supported by a wide range of other views, views about which they also disagreed. In short, the debate over the existence of created causal powers among Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz shows not that such debates are superficial or misguided but rather that they are hard, hard, hard.

### **Abbreviations Used:**

AG = G. W. Leibniz. *Philosophical Essays*. Edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.

AT = R. Descartes. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–74. Cited by volume and page.

CSM = R. Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Edited and translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and (vol. 3) Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1985, 1991. Cited by volume and page.

*Enquiry* = David Hume. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. In *Enquires concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

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G = G. W. Leibniz. *Die Philosophische Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*. Edited by C. I. Gerhardt. Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1960. Cited by volume and page.

H = G. W. Leibniz. *Theodicy*. Edited and translated by E. M. Huggard. LaSalle: Open Court, 1985.

L = G. W. Leibniz. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Edited and translated by L. E. Loemker, 2nd edition. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969.

LO = N. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, edited and translated by T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997b; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980.

DMR = N. Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*. Edited and translated by N. Jolley and D. Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

TE = N. Malebranche, *Treatise on Ethics*. Edited and translated by C. Walton. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993.

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