

Malebranche on Natural Evils and Grace

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Malebranche's 'Occasionalism' is one of his most distinctive doctrines holding that God is not only the true cause of all things, but simultaneously God is neither the author of natural evils nor an inequitable distributor of Grace. Malebranche reconciled these claims by appeal to the perfect being of God, God's volition, the laws of nature, the laws of motion, and Grace. Specifically, this essay will cover Malebranche's reconciliations to his philosophical position that God is not the author of natural evils and not the inequitable distributor of Grace. First, Malebranche portrays God's perfectness is His unlimited power and wisdom. Second, God acts in 'general volitions.' Third, Malebranche defines the 'laws of nature' and the 'laws of motion.' Finally, he covers God's Grace as being 'general.'

The perfect being of God, for Malebranche, is deeper than merely His omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience. God's perfection consists specifically in His power and wisdom which are necessarily efficacious and equated to one another. God's wisdom is characterized as being His intelligence, and His power is His will (XII). It is said that God, knowing all possible worlds and scenarios, has within Him a 'firmness of mind' with such clarity as not needing to change particulars in order to maintain the best world for His Glory (XIII, XIX). For the Lord's purpose is not the particular lives of mankind or the best service for everything on Earth, rather it is for His eternal glorification in the invisible and eternal Heaven (XII, XXVII, XXXI).

When God thought about all possible worlds for His glorification, in perfect harmony with His wisdom and will, He came up with the one in which we reside (XXIX). It was performed by His enlightened, eternal, and unlimited mind; unlike a limited mind which tend to be useless, limited, and momentary (XXXVIII). Thus, God primarily acts by ‘general volitions,’ as opposed to miracles which are ‘particular volitions’ (XIX). Furthermore, since God’s wisdom has no limits, He is able to act in general volition with simplicity which is to bring about the greatest amount of fruitfulness for His Eternal Church (XXXVII).

Malebranche characterizes angels and God as being ‘simple,’ which is understood as being constant, uniform, and immutable (XLIII). This simplicity is suggested to indicate greater spirituality, while humans in virtue of having bodies are less spiritual by nature (XXXVIII). In conjunction with general laws, extreme simplicity leads to God’s greatest perfection (LIII). Due to humans not being as simple as that of God or His angels, we are bound to general laws, specifically to laws of nature which are eternally constant (XVIII). As much as God wishes that all Creation be perfect for the world itself and He did not make these laws of nature to engender His creation, these laws were the simplest and constitute a sort of beauty (XXII). This is to say that God did create the universe, but did not intend the natural evils that come about because of simple laws, i.e. laws of nature. These are general laws, not particular, meaning He has established these laws “for the communication of motion, of which [negative] effects are necessary consequences” (XVIII). Some examples that Malebranche provides for these negative effects, or ‘natural evils,’ are rain falling in unfavorable areas, weather destroying crops, children born with

deformities (i.e. “monsters”), etc. (XVIII).

The production and preservation of the world are held together by the ‘laws of motion,’ “The first, that moved bodies tend to continue their motion in a straight line; the second, that when bodies collide, their motion is distributed in both in proportion to their size, such that they must afterwards move at an equal speed. These two laws are the cause of all the motions which cause that variety of forms which we admire in nature” (XV). All of Creation is bound to these principles, according to Malebranche. Natural causes, therefore, are the occasional causes, where God is the initial cause of Nature and all Creation. Malebranche’s position is that God did not author natural evils, these natural evils are a part of the simplest laws that were created in order to bring about His greatest Glory and Heaven.

If God were to change these laws, or to have begun with different laws, the world would not have benefited Him as greatly and would not have been in accordance with His simplicity (XIV). The world’s existence is for the fulfillment of Jesus Christ, who in which is the ultimate glorification of God (XXVII). The Lord, Jesus Christ, is the model of whom humans are made in the image of, and we are at His mercy (II, XXVIII). All that is beautiful in humans is only a reflection of the beauty of God, and Jesus who is the embodiment of God in the flesh (XXVII, XXVIII). Jesus went through the same trials and tribulations that mankind must suffer through, which is an example of the love and grace of the Lord (XXIV). This was necessary that He go through the struggles of mankind in order to fulfill His Glory the most (XXIV, XXV). Through His humanity, He was able to establish simple Grace for the unchosen, or “rejected,” people (XLIV, XLVII). Again, this

Grace was created by God, but He is not the author of inequitable distribution of Grace. God wills that all mankind be Saved through Jesus, but this Grace also requires most people to work for it (LI).

Malebranche says that some people are ‘elected’ by God to receive His Grace, while most others are ‘rejected’ as means of ‘predestination’ (XLVII, LIII). When these rejected persons, when seeing their relation with God, also turn away from His Grace, they are refusing the efficacy of His Saving Grace by their own determination as they still possess reason (XXIV, XXVI, L). God acts through general laws and rains down blessings on the just and the unjust alike, but it is the persons receiving these blessings that must toil the proverbial soil of their own hearts in order to cultivate proper reception for His Grace while turning away from sin that separates them from Him (L, LI, LIII). As for those that were predestined to receive His Grace through His Good Will, this is to bring forth the greatest Glory unto Him, according to Malebranche (LIII). God’s Grace, then, is general and not particular. Each particular person that sees God’s general Grace, or inherits His general blessings, must accept in order to be Saved and also throw away their “false and vain confidence” (L). Though the law of order, in which Malebranche describes, indicates that a just person should not suffer as not having sinned, a just person must still be subjected to the general law of motion as everyone else. Any acts of God’s that occur in virtue of particular volition, i.e. miracles, are done in order to best serve His Kingdom and purpose, not for the betterment of the thing or person being miraculously assisted.

Malebranche demonstrated how it is possible that God is the creator and only true

cause of all things, while God is simultaneously not the author of natural evils or inequitable distribution of Grace. Making the world as perfect as possible in order to bring the most glorification to Him and the future establishment of His Eternal Church through Christ, there are laws of nature and laws of motion which fulfill this goal. These general laws, by their nature, are what bring about natural evils and inequitable distribution of Grace, not God's particular volition.

Work Cited

Malebranche, Nicolas, and Patrick Riley. *Treatise on nature and grace*. Clarendon Press, 1992.