

Final Causes and Necessary Connections

Robert Pasnau – University of Colorado

The First Occurrence of ‘Determinism’ in English

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it comes quite late: in William Hamilton’s notes to his edition of Thomas Reid in 1846:

“There are two schemes of Necessity

—the Necessitation by efficient

—the Necessitation by final causes.

The former is brute or blind Fate; the latter rational **Determinism**.”

The verb ‘to determine’ is common in Middle English, for instance:

“Where al þing is gouerned bi wisdom, þerbi falliþ no þing bi happe or chaunce but ... for a **determyned** special purpos and eende.” (Reginald Pecock, ca. 1443)

Malebranche

The Argument from Necessary Connections to Occasionalism

“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” (*Search after Truth* VI.2.3, tr. p. 450).

Malebranche

The Argument from Necessary Connections to Occasionalism

“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” (*Search after Truth* VI.2.3, tr. p. 450).

- The argument is valid, but why believe the first premise?

Malebranche

The Argument from Necessary Connections to Occasionalism

“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” (*Search after Truth* VI.2.3, tr. p. 450).

- The argument is valid, but why believe the first premise?
 - It's an answer of a sort to say that this is the common view of the time. But why is this the common view?
 - It's another sort of answer to say that this is just what 'cause' means. But why is this what it means?

Malebranche

The Argument from Necessary Connections to Occasionalism

“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” (*Search after Truth* VI.2.3, tr. p. 450).

- The argument is valid, but why believe the first premise?
 - It's an answer of a sort to say that this is the common view of the time. But why is this the common view?
 - It's another sort of answer to say that this is just what 'cause' means. But why is this what it means?
- And why believe the second premise? Evidently, Malebranche is supposing that every other sort of relationship between cause and effect is non-necessary. But why think that?

Final Cause in Ibn Sīnā

- Famously, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) describes the final cause as the “cause of causes” (*Shifā’ Metaphys.* VI.5 n. 2).

“In a certain respect, the agent is a cause of the end. And how could it be otherwise, when the agent is what makes the end exist? In another respect, however, the end is a cause of the agent. And how could it be otherwise, when the agent acts only for the sake of the end and otherwise does not act? So the end moves the agent so as to be an agent” (*Shifā’ Physics* I.11 n. 1).
- The final cause is the cause of all causes because all things act for an end. In non-sentient beings, their teleological orientation obtains in virtue of the First Cause, the “Necessary Existent.”

Ibn Sīnā on the First Cause

- The First Cause has only Itself as a final cause:
“All things are willed owing to the Necessary Existent, and this willed thing is not the end because the end with respect to Its consenting to the procession of those things from It is that It requires Itself as what It desires. So Its consenting to those things is for the sake of Itself, which is the final cause of Its very action” (*Notes [Ta ‘līqāt]*, tr. Ruffus and McGinnis, “Avicenna’s Philosophy of Action,” p. 191).
- A wonderful analogy: if pleasure were a conscious being with its own voluntary actions, it would similarly have itself as its final cause (*ibid.*, p. 190)

Ibn Sīnā on Causation as Necessary Connection

- “With the existence of the cause, the existence of every effect is necessary; and the existence of its cause necessitates the existence of the effect” (*Shifā’ Metaphys.* IV.1 n.11).
- “When that thing exists but is not moved, then there cannot exist the motive cause or states and conditions on account of which the mover moves the mobile, but thereafter they will exist. In that case, there will be a change of state before that motion, for the motion and whatever did not exist and then does has some cause that necessitates its existence after its nonexistence. If not, its nonexistence would be no more fitting than its existence” (*Shifā’ Physics* III.11 n. 2).

Why Is Causation Necessary Connection?

- It's true enough to say that authors embrace this idea because they suppose that one hasn't identified the cause until one's sufficiently described the factors that *necessitate* the effect. If your causal story hasn't reached the point of necessitation, you're not finished with your task.

Why Is Causation Necessary Connection?

- It's true enough to say that authors embrace this idea because they suppose that one hasn't identified the cause until one's sufficiently described the factors that *necessitate* the effect. If your causal story hasn't reached the point of necessitation, you're not finished with your task.
- But why suppose that, in every case, there will be a necessitating story? (Think back to how much mileage Malebranche is able to get from this assumption. And, later, Hume.)

Why Is Causation Necessary Connection?

- It's true enough to say that authors embrace this idea because they suppose that one hasn't identified the cause until one's sufficiently described the factors that *necessitate* the effect. If your causal story hasn't reached the point of necessitation, you're not finished with your task.
- But why suppose that, in every case, there will be a necessitating story? (Think back to how much mileage Malebranche is able to get from this assumption. And, later, Hume.)
- It's also true enough that authors embrace this view because they accept the Principle of Sufficient Reason. But why accept that principle?

Ibn Sīnā's Necessitarian Worldview

For Ibn Sīnā, the necessary connection between cause and effect arises from his conception of God. Take these premises:

- (1) God is an unchanging and necessarily existent being;
- (2) God wills everything that happens;
- (3) God has his own necessary self as his final cause;

These don't *entail* necessitarianism. Plenty of Latin Christian authors accept the premises and reject necessitarianism. But if you add as a further premise

- (4) There's a unique way for things to be, that best advances God's own end;
- then you're awfully close to a valid argument.

Ibn Sīnā's Necessitarian Worldview

For Ibn Sīnā, the necessary connection between cause and effect arises from his conception of God. Take these premises:

- (1) God is an unchanging and necessarily existent being;
- (2) God wills everything that happens;
- (3) God has his own necessary self as his final cause;

These don't *entail* necessitarianism. Plenty of Latin Christian authors accept the premises and reject necessitarianism. But if you add as a further premise

(4) There's a unique way for things to be, that best advances God's own end;
then you're awfully close to a valid argument.

It looks to me like this line of thought is independent of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

Does Necessitarianism Lead to Occasionalism?

Recall Malebranche's argument:

1. "A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect."
2. "Now the mind perceives a necessary connection only between the will of an infinitely perfect being and its effects."
3. "Therefore, it is only God who is the true cause and who truly has the power to move bodies."

Let's turn from Premise 1 to Premise 2. Grant that we've got a picture of God's causal engagement with the created world that leads us to demand necessary connections. The question then becomes whether we'll be able to find necessitating causes other than God.

Malebranche's negative answer rests on the way creaturely causes can always be disrupted, either by natural causes or, ultimately, by God directly. Is there a way out of this?

How Ibn Sīnā Holds onto Necessitarianism without Occasionalism

The key idea is to redescribe what counts as a real cause.

- First, Ibn Sīnā disallows the efficient cause. The builder of the house, the father of the child, the fire that heats the water—”these are not, in reality, causes for the subsistence of these effects” (*Shifā’ Metaphys.* VI.2 n. 1).

How Ibn Sīnā Holds onto Necessitarianism without Occasionalism

The key idea is to redescribe what counts as a real cause.

- First, Ibn Sīnā disallows the efficient cause. The builder of the house, the father of the child, the fire that heats the water—“these are not, in reality, causes for the subsistence of these effects” (*Shifā’ Metaphys.* VI.2 n. 1).
- Second, he shifts attention to those causes that coexist with the effect for the entirety of the effect’s existence: “The true causes coexist with the effect. As for those that are prior, they are causes either accidentally or as helpers. For this reason, it must be believed that the cause of the building’s shape is combination; the cause of that is the natures of the things being combined and their remaining in the way they are composed; and the cause of that is the separable cause that enacts the natures. The cause of the son is the combination of his form with matter through the cause that endows forms” (*ibid.*, n. 5).

How This Refutes Malebranche's Argument

- The proximate causes he describes necessitate, in the sense that *if the causes obtain, then not even God can prevent the effect from obtaining*. This is a kind of metaphysical necessity.

How This Refutes Malebranche's Argument

- The proximate causes he describes necessitate, in the sense that *if the causes obtain, then not even God can prevent the effect from obtaining*. This is a kind of metaphysical necessity.
- This satisfies the demand for a necessary connection.

How This Refutes Malebranche's Argument

- The proximate causes he describes necessitate, in the sense that *if the causes obtain, then not even God can prevent the effect from obtaining*. This is a kind of metaphysical necessity.
- This satisfies the demand for a necessary connection.
- The argument, to be sure, doesn't show that God plays no causal role.

How This Refutes Malebranche's Argument

- The proximate causes he describes necessitate, in the sense that *if the causes obtain, then not even God can prevent the effect from obtaining*. This is a kind of metaphysical necessity.
- This satisfies the demand for a necessary connection.
- The argument, to be sure, doesn't show that God plays no causal role.
- But the argument does show that these proximate causes are both necessary and sufficient for their effect.

How This Refutes Malebranche's Argument

- The proximate causes he describes necessitate, in the sense that *if the causes obtain, then not even God can prevent the effect from obtaining*. This is a kind of metaphysical necessity.
- This satisfies the demand for a necessary connection.
- The argument, to be sure, doesn't show that God plays no causal role.
- But the argument does show that these proximate causes are both necessary and sufficient for their effect.
- So these creaturely causes are real causes, defeating this particular Malebranchean argument for occasionalism.

What about Voluntary Action?

- Malebranche's argument focused on voluntary agency—in particular, on human action. How will Ibn Sīnā's story work there?
- The story will be the same, but difficult to spell out: “Concerning issues involving volition, however, it is difficult to produce the cause completely, for the will is incited to act [only] after a number of factors are fulfilled, the enumeration of which is not easy. Also, one might not even be conscious of many of them so as to include them in the account” (*Shifā' Physics* I.15 n. 5).
- So this is to say that Ibn Sīnā accepts a deterministic story even here.
- In all: Ibn Sīnā conception of causation as a necessary connection helps refute occasionalism, but the whole story turns on a deterministic picture that ultimately derives from God's having his own necessary existence as his unique final cause.

What's a Christian Philosopher to Do?

This sort of necessitarian worldview is not open to Christian philosophers. When Abelard tried (independently) to defend this sort of view in God's case, he was condemned, in 1140:

“That God can do only the things that he does, or that he can cease from doing only the things that he ceases from doing, and that he can do so in that way only, and at that time, and no other.” *Quod ea solummodo potest Deus facere, quae facit, vel dimittere, quae dimittit, vel eo modo tantum, vel eo tempore, et non alio.*

That this was a condemned article was well-known among scholastic authors.

And What about Creaturely Contingency?

- It's obviously problematic, in a Christian context, to suppose that voluntary human acts are necessitated. The problems appear particularly starkly in two famous test cases:
 - The fall of Satan
 - The first sin of Adam and Eve

And What about Creaturely Contingency?

- It's obviously problematic, in a Christian context, to suppose that voluntary human acts are necessitated. The problems appear particularly starkly in two famous test cases:
 - The fall of Satan
 - The first sin of Adam and Eve
- Here there's no complex prior history of sin and ignorance to appeal to, but an initial bad choice, seemingly coming out of a background that was created wholly good.

And What about Creaturely Contingency?

- It's obviously problematic, in a Christian context, to suppose that voluntary human acts are necessitated. The problems appear particularly starkly in two famous test cases:
 - The fall of Satan
 - The first sin of Adam and Eve
- Here there's no complex prior history of sin and ignorance to appeal to, but an initial bad choice, seemingly coming out of a background that was created wholly good.
- It seems unacceptable, here, to say that this is what God wanted to happen, and that God set up the prior conditions so that this would happen, because that would undermine moral blame for these horrendously bad choices.

Appealing to Mystery

- In the absence of any intelligible explanation for these original sins, the usual medieval story appeals ultimately to an inexplicable mystery. So, e.g., Anselm:
“Why did he will what he ought not? – No cause preceded this will, except that he could will it – Why did he will it? – Only because he willed it. For this will had no other cause that would have somehow incited or attracted it, but it was for itself its efficient cause, if this can be said, and its effect” (*De casu diaboli* 27).

Appealing to Mystery

- In the absence of any intelligible explanation for these original sins, the usual medieval story appeals ultimately to an inexplicable mystery. So, e.g., Anselm:

“Why did he will what he ought not? – No cause preceded this will, except that he could will it – Why did he will it? – Only because he willed it. For this will had no other cause that would have somehow incited or attracted it, but it was for itself its efficient cause, if this can be said, and its effect” (*De casu diaboli* 27).
- And Aquinas, also discussing angelic sin:

“There is no need to search for any cause of this non-use of the aforesaid rule, because for this the very freedom of the will is sufficient, by which it can act or not act” (*De malo* I.3c).

Appealing to Mystery

- In the absence of any intelligible explanation for these original sins, the usual medieval story appeals ultimately to an inexplicable mystery. So, e.g., Anselm:

“Why did he will what he ought not? – No cause preceded this will, except that he could will it – Why did he will it? – Only because he willed it. For this will had no other cause that would have somehow incited or attracted it, but it was for itself its efficient cause, if this can be said, and its effect” (*De casu diaboli* 27).
- And Aquinas, also discussing angelic sin:

“There is no need to search for any cause of this non-use of the aforesaid rule, because for this the very freedom of the will is sufficient, by which it can act or not act” (*De malo* I.3c).
- Here there are no necessary connections, and no teleology either, inasmuch as there is no reason for the act or omission.

Intellectualism? Voluntarism?

- These sorts of accounts make for a challenge to determinism, but it's not clear that this sort of indeterministic story is all that helpful in accounting for *freedom* or *moral responsibility*. Why should a brutally inexplicable act within an agent make the agent any more free?

Intellectualism? Voluntarism?

- These sorts of accounts make for a challenge to determinism, but it's not clear that this sort of indeterministic story is all that helpful in accounting for *freedom* or *moral responsibility*. Why should a brutally inexplicable act within an agent make the agent any more free?
- In these sorts of cases, where there is some basic, inexplicable voluntary act, we're familiar with the debates over whether the account is intellectualist or voluntarist. But, at this juncture, that decision seems not so important. Why should it make much of a difference whether the mystery comes on the intellectual side or the volitional side? Its very inexplicability seems to make it possible for it to happen on either side, and also to make the question rather inconsequential.

Intellectualism? Voluntarism?

- These sorts of accounts make for a challenge to determinism, but it's not clear that this sort of indeterministic story is all that helpful in accounting for *freedom* or *moral responsibility*. Why should a brutally inexplicable act within an agent make the agent any more free?
- In these sorts of cases, where there is some basic, inexplicable voluntary act, we're familiar with the debates over whether the account is intellectualist or voluntarist. But, at this juncture, that decision seems not so important. Why should it make much of a difference whether the mystery comes on the intellectual side or the volitional side? Its very inexplicability seems to make it possible for it to happen on either side, and also to make the question rather inconsequential.
- But, that's not to say there are no reasons for looking toward the volitional side. One very important reason is that that's where we have the opportunity to restore the teleological nature of the story, and so to restore intelligibility to the explanatory narrative.

Scotus, Stage One

This brings us to John Duns Scotus. One element of Scotus's voluntarism is to try to bring under theoretical control the notion that the will has an indeterministic power for alternatives:

“The way a power elicits its proper operation can be in only one of two genera: for either the power is of itself determined to its action, so that as far as itself is concerned it cannot not act when it is not impeded by something external; or it is not of itself determined, but can perform this act or the opposite act, and can also act or not act. The first power is commonly called a *nature*; the second is called a *will*.” (*Quaestiones in Metaphysicam* IX.15) *Iste autem modus eliciendi operationem propriam non potest esse in genere nisi duplex: aut enim potentia ex se est determinata ad addendum, ita quod quantum est ex se non potest non agree quando non impeditur ab extrinseco; aut non est ex se determinata, sed potest agere hunc actum vel oppositum actum, agere etiam vel non agere. Prima potentia communiter dicitur natura, secunda dicitur voluntas.*

This doesn't fundamentally improve on the sort of mystery that earlier authors appealed to. By abandoning necessary connections, the will's choices are left inexplicable. One can insist on ascribing responsibility to such choices, but it's not a satisfying position.

Scotus, Stage Two

Scotus goes much farther when he takes Anselm's dual affections—one for our own benefit and one for justice—and makes them permanent features of the will's nature:

“This affection for justice is the first check on the affection for benefit, both insofar as the will need not actually desire that toward which the affection for benefit inclines, and insofar as it need not desire it above all else.... This affection for justice is the will's innate freedom, because it is the first check on such affection.” (*Ordinatio* II.6.2) *Illa igitur affectio iustitiae, quae est prima moderatrix affectionis commodi et quantum ad hoc quod non oportet voluntatem actu appetere illud ad quod inclinatur affectio commodi et quantum ad hoc quod non oportet eam summe appetere (quantum scilicet ad illud ad quod inclinatur affectio commodi), illa – inquam – affectio iustitiae est libertas innata voluntati, quia ipsa est prima moderatrix affectionis talis.*

I regard this as the most important idea of the voluntarist movement. It puts an end to what had been two millennia of consensus around the idea that everything has a single ultimate teleological orientation.

Consequences of Scotus's Dual Affections

- The necessary connection between cause and effect is lost: the will can do one thing or another, holding constant all the surrounding details of the case.

Consequences of Scotus's Dual Affections

- The necessary connection between cause and effect is lost: the will can do one thing or another, holding constant all the surrounding details of the case.
- To that extent, voluntary action remains ultimately mysterious: there's no completely adequate explanation to be had, in the way that, in Ibn Sīnā's story, there always is.

Consequences of Scotus's Dual Affections

- The necessary connection between cause and effect is lost: the will can do one thing or another, holding constant all the surrounding details of the case.
- To that extent, voluntary action remains ultimately mysterious: there's no completely adequate explanation to be had, in the way that, in Ibn Sīnā's story, there always is.
- Still, Scotus gives us a partial explanation, inasmuch as he can say in broad terms why an agent chose to sin or to act rightly. Satan, for instance, fell because he excessively pursued what appeared beneficial to him.

Consequences of Scotus's Dual Affections

- The necessary connection between cause and effect is lost: the will can do one thing or another, holding constant all the surrounding details of the case.
- To that extent, voluntary action remains ultimately mysterious: there's no completely adequate explanation to be had, in the way that, in Ibn Sīnā's story, there always is.
- Still, Scotus gives us a partial explanation, inasmuch as he can say in broad terms why an agent chose to sin or to act rightly. Satan, for instance, fell because he excessively pursued what appeared beneficial to him.
- This counts as an explanation precisely because it restores teleology. Without the monolithic teleology of Ibn Sīnā, there's no determinism, no necessity, and no *ultimate* explanation. But the dual teleological framework gives us significantly more than a brute appeal to mystery.

Consequences of Scotus's Dual Affections

- The necessary connection between cause and effect is lost: the will can do one thing or another, holding constant all the surrounding details of the case.
- To that extent, voluntary action remains ultimately mysterious: there's no completely adequate explanation to be had, in the way that, in Ibn Sīnā's story, there always is.
- Still, Scotus gives us a partial explanation, inasmuch as he can say in broad terms why an agent chose to sin or to act rightly. Satan, for instance, fell because he excessively pursued what appeared beneficial to him.
- This counts as an explanation precisely because it restores teleology. Without the monolithic teleology of Ibn Sīnā, there's no determinism, no necessity, and no *ultimate* explanation. But the dual teleological framework gives us significantly more than a brute appeal to mystery.
- In particular, the dual framework goes farther toward explaining why people are morally responsible for their free choices, inasmuch as they choose either the right or wrong end.

End

