

# BERKELEY'S CARTESIAN ACCOUNT OF VOLITIONAL CAUSATION

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## Abstract

*Although the heart of Berkeley's philosophy is active substance, some argue that Berkeley's notion of causation precludes human agency, an undesirable result for Berkeley. In the hope of securing the ontological status of finite substance in Berkeley's metaphysics, this paper seeks to offer a rather different take on the Cartesian influence supporting Berkeley's views on the causal efficacy of human spirits. After demonstrating the possibility of a Malebranchian occasionalism in light of Berkeley's views on necessary connection, a close examination of Berkeley's works reveals his real stance on what type of connection counts as causal. Employing Descartes's divinely-established natural connection between a finite will and its effects, Berkeley is able to offer a coherent account of finite causation in the natural world that can accommodate free will. This naturalistic interpretation is able to situate Berkeley as one who is influenced by a Cartesian version of causation (though not the one scholars often attribute to him), but is able to legitimately resist the fall into Hume's metaphysically empty position on causation as nothing but constant conjunction.*

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## Introduction

Berkeley's human spirit is defined by its agency: "Substance of a Spirit is that it acts, causes, wills, operates..." (PC 829).<sup>2</sup> As the core of Berkeley's metaphysics, it is imperative that this elemental feature of substance be unproblematic. However, there are those who deny this very activity that establishes substance for Berkeley. Scholars argue that the Berkelian human spirit is incapable of acting, specifically in the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Not only would this undermine the foundation of Berkeley's metaphysics, but a lack of real human agency would also create problems for moral responsibility. This article will address whether Berkeley's account of human agency can be made out and defended against the charge of occasionalism.

Nicholas Jolley (1990), Kenneth Winkler (1989), Jonathan Bennett (2001) and C.C.W. Taylor (1985) argue that Berkeley cannot support his claim that finite minds are causally active in willing. They argue that there are occasionalist presuppositions within Berkeley's philosophy that undermine

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations for Berkeley citations: PC, *Philosophical Commentaries*; NTV, *New Theory of Vision*; TVV, *Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*; PHK, *Principles of Human Knowledge*; DHP, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*; DM, *De Motu*; and A, *Alciphron*

<sup>3</sup> This discussion will be limited to human bodily action and examining if Berkeley is an occasionalist only in this regard. As spirits are the only causal beings for Berkeley, there is occasionalism at the level of physical things, a.k.a. sensible ideas. Further, there is no real problem for activity on the level of spirits causing willings themselves or even imaginary ideas. Berkeley is only taken to task for finite bodily action in the natural world, i.e. creating ideas of sense by a finite act of will.

the efficacy of finite bodily action. If occasionalism lurks beneath Berkeley's notion of causation, then human agency is really divine agency. Rather than human spirits being causally responsible for their actions, human desires for actions are no more than the occasions upon which the infinite spirit acts. Under this construct, humans are able to will, yet, these willings are themselves inefficacious in producing natural effects. Although Berkeley denies occasionalism in his notebooks (PC 548), "We move our Legs our selves. 'tis we that will their movement. Herein I differ from Malbranch," Berkeley appears to maintain Malebranche's notion of necessary connection that, according to these Berkelian scholars, prevents finite causation in bodily movement.

The overall problem that concerns Berkeley interpreters is that since there is no necessary or logical connection between our will and its effects it seems that we cannot will to move our body ourselves. In order to investigate if this is indeed the situation that Berkeley is resigned to, I shall first examine Malebranche's understanding of necessary connection and its relation to finite volition. Next, I will assess the extent of Berkeley's adherence to Malebranche's principles and clarify his account of causation. An analysis of the Cartesian layout of finite causation, alongside the Malebranchian and the Humean alternatives, will illuminate Berkeley's views. I will argue that Berkeley does indeed have a coherent account of finite causation, but relations of cause and effect for finite volitions on the Berkelian system are natural, rather than necessary, and amount to more than mere regularities. God has created finite beings with certain natural connections that are neither logically necessary nor simply a chance occurrence. This naturalistic interpretation

of Berkeley's theory of causation is based upon Berkeley's ontology of spirit and is consistent with the moral and theological principles of free will.

### **Malebranche on necessary connection**

Malebranche arrives at his occasionalism from his definition of genuine causation: "A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect" (Malebranche 1997: 450). The only being that has a necessary connection between his will and its effect is God whose omnipotence guarantees that what he wills necessarily occurs. Humans lack this necessary connection between their will and its effects; it is not logically necessary that when I will to raise my arm, my arm actually rises. Human wills are limited in power and scope, and so cannot necessitate effects. Only God's will, with its unlimited power and scope, can necessitate effects. Furthermore, for Malebranche, in order to be a causal agent, one must know exactly how the will is efficacious. Since we do not know how the animal spirits are moved through the proper nerves to move the exact muscle we wish to move, we cannot be the cause of that muscular motion (Malebranche 1997: 450). God, in his omniscience, is privy to such information; however humans have no idea how, by an act of will, bodily motion is created. The result is occasionalism:

Now it appears to me quite certain that the will of minds is incapable of moving the smallest body in the world; for it is clear that there is no necessary connection between our will to move our arms and the movement of our arms. It is true that they are moved when we will

it, and that thus we are the natural cause of the movement of our arms. But natural causes are not true causes; they are only occasional causes that act only through the force and the efficacy of the will of God. (Malebranche 1997: 449)

Finite beings, both mental and material, are unable to be true causes under the Malebranchian notion of causation. Not only do they lack knowledge of how causation occurs, but they also lack the necessary connection between two events such that if one occurs, the other must occur. Our body moves when we will it to move because God has willed that this be the case. God is the true cause of finite bodily motion as God's will and our bodily movement is necessarily connected, whereas our will, lacking genuine efficacy, is only the occasional cause of our bodily motion. My willing that my arm move is the occasion upon which God moves my arm. Our false belief that we are causal agents is based upon God perfectly timing associated actions subsequent to our volitions. On this view, there is no other true cause than God.

### **Berkeley's possible occasionalism**

Jolley, Winkler, and Taylor argue that they find this Malebranchian notion of necessary connection in Berkeley's works. In his published works Berkeley repeatedly professes that there is no necessary connection between our ideas of sense.<sup>4</sup> In discussing how we judge distance in the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley is clear

that the judgment we make of near and far is based upon habit rather than on any necessary connection between ideas of sight and ideas of touch: "Not that there is any natural or necessary connexion between the sensation we perceive by the turn of the eyes and the greater or lesser distance..." (NTV 17). Necessary connections are reserved for mathematics where a conclusion may be drawn a priori from the premises (NTV 5, NTV 24). Unlike mathematics, there is a contingency in the regularities we observe in nature that we judge to be causally connected. It is only observed association that gives us evidence for a causal relation between things. "But where there is no such relation of similitude of causality, nor any necessary connection whatsoever, two things, by their mere coexistence, or two ideas, merely by being perceived together, may suggest or signify one the other, their connexion being all the while arbitrary" (TVV 39). Ideas of sense have a "habitual or customary connexion" between them that we learn from experience (NTV 17). These customary connections are not causal connections established a priori: "We infer causes from effects, effects from causes, and properties one from another, where the connection is necessary" (TVV 42). Because of this denial of necessary connection between ideas of sense, commentators take this as supporting Berkeley's rejection of causal connections in the finite world. Jolley argues that:

It is natural to suppose that Berkeley thinks that genuinely causal connections must be knowable a priori. But if this is Berkeley's position, then it poses problems for his differential treatment of bodies and spirits with respect to causality; it seems to imply that the volitions of finite spirits cannot

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<sup>4</sup> PC 246, PC 256, PC 884, NTV 5, NTV 17, NTV 23, NTV 25, NTV 28, NTV 58, NTV 62, NTV 103, NTV104, NTV 105, NTV 107, NTV 108, PHK 31, PHK 65, PHK 107

be genuinely causal. (Jolley 1990: 231)

Taylor agrees that the lack of necessary connection between the human will and natural effects in the world (bodily motion) means that Berkeley's "system allows no role whatever for human agency" (Taylor 1985: 211). If indeed Berkeley shares Malebranche's understanding of what a true cause is, then Berkeley seems forced to deny finite efficacy and therefore human agency.

Berkeley is chastised here for not realizing that his argument against causal connections between ideas of sense equally applies to finite volitions and their effects. Berkeley's description of "causation" in nature is a "description of a regular sequence of ideas" (Taylor 1985: 214). It is assumed then that Berkeley views all relations between things that lack a necessary connection to be merely constant conjunction. From this perspective, there is no causal relation between ideas of sense due to their lack of necessary connection. Scholars argue that Berkeley should also have seen that this same lack of necessary connection between the human will and its effects revealed that there was no causal relationship between the two. Winkler finds Berkeley "caught in between" Malebranche's necessary connections and Hume's constant conjunctions (Winkler 1989: 104). According to Winkler, Berkeley is viewed as having "managed to see nothing but constant conjunction in the external world, it might be said, but he could not tell that nothing more was to be found even within his own soul" (Winkler 1989: 105).

Long before contemporary critics of Berkeley, John Stuart Mill noted this apparent discrepancy in Berkeley's reasoning and chided him for not realizing that finite

spirits lack causal efficacy just as natural things do. Mill admires Berkeley for seeing that "the causation we think we see in nature is but uniformity of sequence" (Mill 1978: 462). However, he finds Berkeley mistaken in assuming that "our daily experience proves to us that minds, by their volitions, can be, and are, efficient causes" (Mill 1978: 462). The only thing we experience in our own willings, for Mill and Hume, is a constant conjunction between our will and the subsequent effects. From Mill's perspective, Hume makes the consistent conclusion that Berkeley refused to make in regards to human spirits. Our personal experience of ourselves as volitional beings does not, according to Hume, provide any evidence that we are indeed casual agents, i.e. that effects are actually produced by our volitions. As Hume explains,

but to convince us how fallacious this reasoning is, we need only consider, that the will being here consider'd as a cause, has no more a discoverable connexion with its effects, than any material cause has with its proper effect...the effect is distinguishable and separable from the cause, and cou'd not be foreseen without the experience of their constant conjunction...the actions of the mind are, in this respect, the same with those of matter...we perceive only their constant conjunction; nor can we ever reason beyond it. (Hume 1978: 632-3)

From this perspective, the only thing we can safely conclude about our volitions is that certain things follow from them. But our knowledge stops short of discovering any necessary connection therein. Since there is no discerned necessary connection,

the assumption here is that there is only constant conjunction between human volitions and their effects. Hume was willing to bite the bullet on human agency, but Berkeley, seen as a half-hearted Hume, was not. Still, Mill praises Berkeley for pointing us in the right direction: "Let us be thankful to Berkeley for half of the truth which he saw..." (Mill 1978: 462). According to Mill, Berkeley insightfully discerned the lack of real causation in physical phenomena, but failed to see that the same was true of mental phenomena.

### **Berkeley's account of causation**

Here is the upshot: if Berkeley takes necessary connection to be the requirement for causal efficacy, and human wills lack such connection with their effects, then Berkeley is indeed an occasionalist when it comes to human action. As a result, human spirits could not be genuine agents for Berkeley, and immaterial substance becomes an empty metaphysical concept in Berkeley's philosophy. Now, there is no denying that Berkeley does employ a notion of necessary connection. The only positive use Berkeley makes of necessary connection is in mathematics where the conclusion is necessarily connected to its premises. At TVV 42, one can make legitimate causal inferences where the relation is necessary. But Berkeley denies that such an essential connection can be found in the natural world between sensible things. One cannot discover what idea of sense will follow what other idea of sense simply by examining the nature of the ideas under question. There is no necessary relation discoverable in the nature of ideas of sense. In discussing how ideas of sight confer the notion of distance to us, Berkeley comments that "I shall only observe they have none of them, in their own nature, any relation or

connexion with it..."(NTV 28). Berkeley uses "nature" here in the sense that there is nothing inherent in the idea that connects it to any other idea. He repeats this view at NTV 17, NTV 147, PHK 43, TVV 39, and TVV 40. As Winkler explains, this understanding of necessary connection was common to the period: "in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a necessary connection was taken to be a connection flowing from the nature of the things connected" (Winkler 1989: 117). If a connection is discoverable within the nature of the things themselves, a simple analysis should reveal that connection. The inference should be known a priori without any assistance from experience. However, Berkeley makes it abundantly clear that we may only learn what idea is connected with what other idea based upon experience.<sup>5</sup> We learn connections by the habit or the custom of always experiencing two such items or events constantly conjoined.

So far, there is no denial of what the critics accuse Berkeley of holding: he does have a traditional Malebranchian understanding of necessary connection and he denies that such a connection is present among sensible things. There is no inherent, internal necessity between natural phenomena. Furthermore, in the spiritual realm, only the infinite spirit has a necessary connection between what he wills and the desired effects: "an omnipotent spirit can indifferently produce every thing by a mere *fiat* or act of his will" (PHK 152). It appears then that human wills, lacking this necessary connection, cannot be causally responsible for the effects produced. However, this criticism, that Berkeley is

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<sup>5</sup> NTV 62, NTV 79, NTV 102, NTV 107, NTV 108, NTV 109, PHK 30, PHK 107, TVV 22

forced to relinquish human agency due to underlying occasionalist principles, rests on the assumption that a necessary connection between a will and its effects is required for a causal connection. And this would indeed be true if Berkeley fully adhered to Malebranche's theory of causation. Yet, Berkeley does *not* follow Malebranche's lead in this: simply because there is no necessary connection between volitions and ensuing ideas does not entail, for Berkeley, that therefore there is no causal connection between those items. Berkeley simply declares that a cause is present when an effect follows from volition; there is no demand for necessity. "What means cause as distinguished from occasion? Nothing but a being which wills when the effect follows the volition" (PC 499). In fact, he even argues that there is no necessity to it since we may have volition without there being power. "There is a difference betwixt power and volition. There may be volition without power. But there can be no power without volition, power implyeth volition and at the same time a connotation of the effects following the volition" (PC 699). What we will may not necessarily produce the effect we desire. I may will to win the lottery, but I have no power to enact this effect. However, if an effect has occurred, it is always subsequent to volition. And this is sufficient to establish a causal connection for Berkeley: "The simple idea call'd Power seems obscure or rather none at all. but only the relation 'twixt cause & Effect. when I ask whether A can move B. if A be an intelligent thing. I mean no more than whether the volition of A that B move be attended with the motion of B..." (PC 461). As a further departure from Malebranche, Berkeley does not require complete knowledge of how a cause produces an effect in order for an agent to qualify as a cause: "that there is in

[thinking things] the power of moving bodies we have learned by personal experience, since our mind at will can stir and stay the movements of our limbs, *whatever be the ultimate explanation of the fact*" (DM 25).<sup>6</sup> Unlike Malebranche, a lack of knowledge of the process by which causation occurs does not cancel out the causal ability; it is evidence enough of causation that an effect follows a volition. Berkeley, then, does not hold the Malebranchian requirements (a necessary relation between a will and its effects and full knowledge) for causal relations.

### Descartes's account of natural finite causation<sup>7</sup>

By using Malebranche's version of causation as a guide to understanding Berkeley, it is unsurprising then that scholars would accuse Berkeley of occasionalism when they assume he is employing occasionalist principles. However, Berkeley's views on causation have been misplaced. The Cartesian influence on Berkeley's notion of causal connection is more likely Descartes rather than Malebranche. In the *Passions*, Descartes explains how our volitions are connected to their effects not by any necessity, but rather by habits established by nature. There are two kinds of volition for Descartes: actions that produce ideas in the mind and actions that produce bodily

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis mine

<sup>7</sup> To be clear, this account of Descartes's views is limited to a discussion of volitional (mind-body) causation. Some, such as Daniel Garber and Stephen Gaukroger, view Descartes as an occasionalist with respect to body-body causation. I am here only interested in Descartes's notion of natural connections in the mind-body relation as it may pertain to Berkeley's view of how finite minds cause bodily motion.

motion (Descartes 1984: 335). Descartes describes the process by which volitions enact their effects:

When we want to imagine something we have never seen, this volition has the power to make the gland move in the way required for driving the spirits towards the pores of the brain whose opening enables the thing to be represented... when we want to walk or move our body in some other way, this volition makes the gland drive the spirits to the muscles which serve to bring about this effect. (Descartes 1984: 344)

It is simply a fact of nature that our volitions can bring about their desired effects in most circumstances. But it requires practice and habituation to enforce this link: "Yet our volition to produce some particular movement or other effect does not always result in our producing it; for that depends on the various ways in which nature or habit has joined certain movements of the gland to certain thoughts" (Descartes 1984: 344).

There are two ways that a connection is established for Descartes: by nature and by habit. First, there are specific connections between specific volitions and specific effects established by nature. When we wish to look at an object far away, this volition produces the enlargement of the pupils, but if we simply wish to enlarge our pupils, the effect cannot be produced by that wish alone. As Descartes explains "For the movement of the gland, whereby the spirits are driven to the optic nerve in the way required for enlarging or contracting the pupils, has been joined by nature with the volition to look at distant or nearby objects, rather than with the

volition to enlarge or contract the pupils" (Descartes 1984: 344). Nature has established one connection, but not the other. Therefore, it is not within our power to bring about the enlargement of our pupils simply by desiring them to do so. Natural connections are connections we are created with—we don't choose which things are so connected. However, when it is within our power to produce certain effects, we may choose what effect follows. In other words, we can choose to connect those items that are naturally connectable, and we accomplish this by habit. In learning to speak, for example, we only focus on the meaning of the words rather than on making our mouths and tongues move in specific ways to bring about the desired sound. "For the habits acquired in learning to speak have made us join the action of the soul (which, by means of the gland, can move the tongue and lips) with the meaning of the words which follow upon these movements, rather than with the movements themselves" (Descartes 1984: 344). It is the practice of speaking that has established this connection between our volitions and their effects.

Furthermore, free will requires that there is no strict necessity between volitions and effects. Descartes is emphatic that "the will is by its nature so free that it can never be constrained" (Descartes 1984: 343). What I will is not necessary because I am a free agent, however my ability to enact my will is subject to what natural connections have been established. For example, I can will that my heart stop beating, but I cannot actually make it stop beating. I can, by practice, make my heart beat slower during questioning, but I cannot stop it from beating altogether. This ability to form habitual connections is integral for free will. In order to change our wicked ways, we must be able to choose a different effect. For example,

let's say in the past, when someone insults me, my response has been to insult that person back. I don't even think about it; I just do it because it is what I have always done. Wanting to change this bad habit, I decide that when someone insults me, I will hold my tongue rather than respond. I practice this over and over, until it is 'natural' for me to say nothing in response. If there were a necessary connection between my will and my effects, I would never have been able to change my ways. Being insulted would have necessarily produced the effect of my returning the insult. However, free will allows us the ability to change what effect shall follow in certain circumstances.

### **Finite causation naturally established by God**

Descartes's account of mind-body causation demonstrates that the human will and its effects do not need a necessary connection to be causally related. For Berkeley and Descartes, it is simply an empirical, phenomenological fact that what we will is attended by the effect we seek to produce –when it is within our power to do so.<sup>8</sup> Berkeley's belief that he is a cause is based upon his own experience that subsequent upon his willings, effects occur, and that these effects occur reliably, not haphazardly. First, we experience ourselves as causal agents: "In plucking this flower, I am active, because I do it by the motion of my hand, which was consequent upon my volition; so likewise in applying it to my nose...I act too in drawing the air through my nose; because my breathing so rather than otherwise, is the effect of my volition..." (DHP 196). It is important that

what we will more often than not comes to pass. If I will to move my leg, but my arm rises instead, and this mishap occurs as often as what I desire, our causal ability is questionable. However, since it is reliable that upon my willing that a specific limb move, that specific limb does indeed move, this is evidence enough of a causal connection for Berkeley. "That there is in [thinking things] the power of moving bodies we have learned by personal experience, since our mind at will can stir and stay the movements of our limbs..." (DM 25). Descartes describes the procedure similarly to Berkeley: "the activity of the soul consists entirely in the fact that simply by willing something it brings it about that the little gland to which it is closely joined moves in the manner required to produce the effect corresponding to this volition" (Descartes 1984: 343). It is simply a fact about how a human being is naturally constructed: we are made in such a way that what we will produces given effects. Although this connection is not necessary, both Descartes and Berkeley find finite causation a given fact about human nature.

Berkeley did not come to the same conclusion as Hume, not due to his bias towards immaterial substance, but rather because Berkeley finds spiritual substance to be a very different type of thing than ideas or bodies. Mill praised Hume for treating spiritual and material substance with parity: each lacks genuine causation since we are only able to discover constant conjunction between causes and effects, whether they are mental or physical. Physical things, for Berkeley, as inert ideas, are incapable of ever producing an effect even if the connection were necessary; ideas are by definition inactive beings (DHP 232). Berkeley finds that "all our ideas, sensations, or the things which

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<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that when we want something that is within our power to get, we will necessarily get it.



we perceive...are visibly inactive, there is nothing of power or agency included in them" (PHK 25). We are immediately aware of our ideas, and we perceive everything included in that idea (PHK 25). If there were any activity in an idea, we would perceive it. Phillip Cummins refers to this as Berkeley's Manifest Qualities Thesis which holds that "there is nothing in a perceived object but what is perceived" (Cummins 2005: 198). Since we never perceive any activity in our perception of ideas, Berkeley concludes that they cannot "be the cause of anything" (PHK 25).<sup>9</sup> Minds, however, are active substances that are at least capable of causation (DHP 232, DHP 234). Similar to ideas, we are immediately aware of our own minds, and this awareness is of their activity (PHK 28, DHP 232). Knowledge of our own mental activity is certain for Berkeley: "This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active. Thus much is certain, and grounded on experience: but when we talk of unthinking agents, or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words" (PHK 28). Berkeley then would never consider physical things as the types of things capable of causal efficacy in the first place. Mill's criticism that Berkeley should have treated mental substance in the same manner with which he treated physical substance is therefore misguided. Berkeley's ontology generated the reason for his differential treatment.

Due to this different ontological framework, Berkeley is not forced into following

Hume's footsteps where constant conjunction seems to be the only consistent empiricist position. Granted, both Hume and Berkeley agree that there is nothing more to be found amongst ideas of sense than constant conjunction. Berkeley is clear that there is no causal relation between ideas: "...the connexion of ideas does not imply the relation of *cause* and *effect*, but only of a mark or *sign* with the thing *signified*. The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it" (PHK 65). As passive entities, ideas cannot be causes for Berkeley. Minds, however, are the types of things that are at the very least capable of causal power as they are active beings. Hume recognized this activity of the mind, but he denied he could discern in experience anything other than constant conjunction between the will and its effects. In regards to the finite will and subsequent events, Hume argues that "we perceive only their constant conjunction, nor can we ever reason beyond it" (Hume 1978: 632–3). Without the necessary relation, we cannot make any inferences beyond experiencing one event following upon the other, so that what we believe to be causally connected is simply constantly conjoined and nothing more. Berkeley, however, is driven down a different path by his dualism. Given the very nature of ideas as passive, dependent beings, there exists a necessary relation between ideas and minds. By definition, "the existence of an idea consists in being perceived" (PHK 2). It is contradictory to talk about unperceived perceptions. All ideas therefore necessarily require a mind perceiving them. Berkeley's reason for using the term *idea* for *thing* is "because a necessary relation to the mind is understood to be implied by that term" (DHP 236). This necessary perceptual relation is therefore evidence of a causal relation for Berkeley.

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<sup>9</sup> There is occasionalism then in Berkeley's physical world amongst ideas of sense. When the sun "causes" my skin to burn, technically the idea of sense, sun, cannot cause another idea of sense, sunburn. My sitting in the sun too long is the occasion upon which God produces the idea of sense of my sunburn.

“Every idea has a Cause i.e. is produced by a Will” (PC 831). Berkeley’s immediate experience of the mind’s activity and ideas’ passivity together with a necessary perceptual relation between the two enable Berkeley to move past a simple experience of one event following another. As stated before, Berkeley is allowed to make a legitimate causal inference when the relation is necessary (TVV 42). The necessity in the perceptual relation and the nature of active minds guarantees a causal relation between volitions and ideas. Even as an empiricist, he is therefore able to maintain a more robust account of causation than mere constant conjunction. Lacking this ontological framework, Hume is left with an empty notion of causation. For Berkeley though, the active nature of the mind along with the necessary relation ideas have to it allow for a genuine notion of causation.

Two clarifications need to be made about this necessary perceptual relation between ideas and volitions and the natural connections between a finite will and its effects. First, the logic of perception is not a necessary relation in the sense that a given idea must come from a particular mind. It is only that a perception requires a perceiver. There is a necessary relation between any idea and a mind. As Berkeley explains, “every unthinking being is necessarily, and from the very nature of its existence, perceived by some mind; if not by any finite created mind, yet certainly by the infinite mind of God...” (DHP 236). Determining which mind it is that has caused a particular idea requires more work. As explicated further below, there will be natural connections between certain

ideas and finite minds, and then there will be necessary connections between certain ideas and the infinite mind. Second, the causal connection between finite wills and their effects is a natural rather than a necessary relation. This is not “natural” in the sense that the relation is inherent to the items in question, rather “natural” means established by God in nature. As Berkeley defines it, “A connexion established by the Author of Nature, in the ordinary course of things, may surely be called natural” (TVV 40). Finite wills can produce bodily activity because God has established a natural connection between human wills and their effects. Berkeley attributes “to thinking rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately indeed derived from God...” (DHP 237). God has created human agents with the power to move their own bodies in certain fashions. It may be argued then that there is some sort of necessity to finite causation. Whatever God wills necessarily occurs. Since God has willed that we can move our bodies in certain respects, we therefore necessarily can move our own bodies in those respects. This necessity, however, is an external construct rather than an internal feature of human agency. There is no internal necessary connection between finite wills and their effects; rather, there is an external natural connection that what finite minds will, given the proper conditions, will actually produce those desired effects. In other words, it is not the case that God creates a connection

that *must* occur. The finite agent's will is the immediate cause of his/her bodily motion, so the finite agent chooses to enact that connection or not. For example, I can choose to lift my arm or not. It is not automatically enacted from God's natural connection.

### **Naturalistic causation and free will**

Winkler provides a rather interesting interpretation of Berkeley's account of causation based upon the notion of intelligibility (Winkler 1989: 129-136). In an attempt to show how Berkeley can offer a view on causation that is not Malebranche's strict necessity nor merely Hume's constant conjunction, Winkler argues that "Berkeley links causation with intelligibility: for Berkeley, to specify its cause is to render an event intelligible" (Winkler 1989: 130). According to Winkler, Berkeley is motivated by a desire to better understand why humans act as they do, and this involves learning the underlying human reasons for a given action. Intentionality, in this respect, drives Berkeley's causal theory. Winkler explains that "Berkeley believes that we will improve our understanding of an action if we place it within the structure of a human agent's motives" (Winkler 1989: 132). Once we consider Berkeley's reasons for holding the causal position he does, it becomes clear that finite free will is integral to comprehending finite action. A human agent must be free to make his own decisions and not be compelled in any way in order for his intentions to play an explanatory role in action theory.

Although I agree with Winkler in seeing free will as certainly part of Berkeley's concerns in his causal theory, I find both

the moral and theological principles to be the fruits of his causal position rather than the ground for it. It is Berkeley's ontology that drives his causal account rather than a desire to render actions intelligible. According to Berkeley, the only efficient causes are spirits, both finite and infinite. This is simply the type of thing a spirit is: an active principle. Berkeley's ontology, then, demands that finite spirits be causal agents, and as such are fully responsible for their actions. Based upon his own experience of himself as an agent, Berkeley secures moral accountability:

It should seem, therefore, that, in the ordinary commerce of mankind, any person is esteemed accountable simply as he is an agent. And, though you should tell me that man is inactive, and that the sensible objects act upon him, yet my own experience assures me to the contrary. I know I act, and what I act I am accountable for. And, if this be true, the foundation of religion and morality remain unshaken. (A 7:19)

Winkler is satisfied with partial accountability: "If our contribution to bodily movement is one of intelligibility rather than underived power, we can be the partial cause as well" (Winkler 1989: 135). Yet, partial responsibility isn't enough for moral responsibility. Regardless of the theological implications if God is even slightly responsible for my sinful acts, how can I be held fully responsible if God contributed to my act by doing my action for me? Even if we can explain why I had the desire, on this model of partial responsibility, I didn't carry out that desire; God did. More importantly, Berkeley would be dissatisfied with partiality in action since he affirms that as causal

agents, we are fully responsible for our own actions.<sup>10</sup> As Jeffrey McDonough notes, “for such beings to be morally responsible, they must be genuine finite agents...” (McDonough 2008).<sup>11</sup> My interpretation renders his account of causation consistent with his spiritual ontology in which spirits, both infinite and finite, are causally efficacious. As a result of this interpretation of Berkeley’s causal theory, his moral and theological concerns are met. Finite actions are then intelligible given his spiritual ontology of activity.

The lack of necessity in causal connections between a will and its effects is integral to Berkeley’s spiritual ontology of free agents. Berkeley is consistent in his treatment of spiritual substance: not even the infinite mind has internal necessity to what he wills. It is indeed true that what God wills necessarily *happens* as he wills it, but this does not mean that *what* God wills is necessary. God has the freedom to choose to will anything he desires. The constraint occurs only after his willing has occurred, not before. Berkeley does not offer a Spinozian account in which what God wills follows necessarily from the very nature of God (Spinoza 1974: 193). In describing how ideas of sight and ideas of distance go together, Berkeley allows

that God could have created nature so that different ideas of sight suggested the same idea of distance we have now:

And if it had been the ordinary course of Nature that the farther off an object were placed, the more confused it should appear, it is certain the very same perception that now makes us think an object approaches would then have made us to imagine it went farther off. That perception, abstracting from custom and experience, being equally fitted to produce the idea of great distance, or small distance, or no distance at all. (NTV 26)

God could have created the world differently than he did. As Berkeley explains, “this is done in virtue of an arbitrary connexion, instituted by the Author of Nature” (TVV 43). An arbitrary connection does not mean “random” for Berkeley. Instead, “arbitrary” indicates that God could have made it other than he did make it. Berkeley agrees with Descartes that a necessary connection would result in the denial of free will: “I think not that things fall out of necessity, the connexion of no two Ideas is necessary. ‘tis all the result of freedom i.e. tis all Voluntary” (PC 884). There is thus no necessary connection between God’s will and what he wills; the only necessity is that what he does will, will follow. Like finite causation, the efficacy is based upon a consequential necessity rather than upon an antecedent one.

As part of his free will, God could have made the world differently. However, God made the world such as it is with certain regularities and order. The difference between ideas of imagination and ideas of sense is a difference of vivacity and

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<sup>10</sup> “It is true, I have denied there are any other agents beside spirits: but this is very consistent with allowing to thinking rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately derived from God, but immediately under the direction of their own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions” (DHP 237).

<sup>11</sup> My account of naturalistic connections allowing for genuine finite agency is compatible with McDonough’s view that Berkeley adheres to a concurrentist position in which God actively enables finite agency.

coherency. Ideas of sense “are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author” (PHK 30). There is a natural connection between ideas of sense that though not necessary, is not random either. Natural connections are lawful connections that we learn from experience. “Now the set rules or established methods, wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the *Laws of Nature*: and these we learn by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas, in the ordinary course of things” (PHK 30). God has created nature in such a manner that there is a regularity and order that is universal and constant. There are natural laws that govern how one thing follows another. Such regularity is imperative to human survival since the order, once learned, allows us to seek what benefits us and avoid what causes us pain (NTV 147). We know that food gives us sustenance, that sleep revives us, and that fire warms us “not by discovering any necessary connexion between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled Laws of Nature, without which we should all be in uncertainty and confusion” (PHK 31). God has so constructed nature that we can base our actions upon predictable reasonings about what will follow what. Berkeley compares this natural connection to a language: “visible ideas are the language whereby the governing spirit, on whom we depend, informs us what tangible ideas he is about to imprint upon us, in case we excite this or that motion in our own bodies” (PHK 44).

Though not necessarily connected, nature is connected in a strict, lawful fashion that

is universal. For example, that ideas of sight are connected to ideas of touch is “constant and universal...fixed and immutably the same in all times and places” (NTV 144). It is the universal language of God that is held together by the rules laid down by God. “Ideas [of sense] are not anyhow and at random produced, there being a certain order and connexion between them, like to that of cause and effect...behold such a great variety of ideas, so artfully laid together, and so much according to rule...” (PHK 64). These rules created by God are not necessary in the sense that God could not have created them differently than he did. However, as things stand in the world, things are necessarily guided by the rules of nature. There is a natural necessity then: God willed the world to be as it is, and necessarily from his will, the world is as he so willed it. “However, in the present situation of affairs, there is an infallible certain connexion betwixt the idea and the object...” (TVV 6). Given the way God made the world, the connection between items is lawful.

What is being brought to light is Berkeley's notion of connection. Just as Berkeley's critics took his views on nature to be indicative of his use of necessary connection, these passages reveal Berkeley's use of natural connection. A natural connection, established by God, maintains a lawful connection between two items. This is the connection between finite wills and their effects. Just as Descartes explains how the human will can produce effects, Berkeley has at his disposal the same natural, lawful connection. Similar to the infinite mind, there is no necessity about what a finite mind wills. Berkeley denies a necessary connection between God's nature and what he wills and this allows God to be a free agent. The same is true for

human minds. We can will whatever we choose to will. However, God's omnipotence necessitates that what he wills will occur. Finite minds, lacking omnipotence, do not have a necessary connection at this level. But this lack does not negate our causal agency. God has commanded that our finite wills be able to produce certain effects: ideas of imagination and some ideas of sense, namely, the motion of our own bodies. There is therefore a natural connection established by God between a finite will and its effects. I will to raise my arm and my arm does indeed rise—not my leg, my arm. This follows naturally from the way God has constructed me. I can choose to produce some other effects by habit, such as how some people can wiggle their ears or wrap their legs behind their head. However, it is not in my power to cause my hair to stand on end by my volition. In keeping with the Cartesian notion of finite causation, God created some natural connections and those are the ones that will be within human power to enact. A human spirit is an agent that has enough freedom of action to accommodate free will. Berkeley explains that "it is true, I have denied there are any other agents beside spirits: but this is consistent with allowing to thinking rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately derived from God, but immediately under the direction of their own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions" (DHP 237). Being active beings, we are then responsible for our activity. And this can only be the case where causal connections are natural, not necessary.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The causal model that Berkeley has in mind here is one solution to the paradox of double agency. The problem is this: since the infinite agent created the finite agent, it is difficult to assign responsibility for any given act. For example, if I am walking, did I cause this

## Conclusion

Understood in the proper Cartesian framework, Berkeley is able, therefore, to offer a coherent account of human volitional causation. Berkeley is not forced into occasionalism as Malebranche is by a strict notion of necessary causal relations. Nor is Berkeley left with mere constant conjunction as Hume is by an inert notion of spiritual substance. Akin to Descartes, Berkeley provides a naturalistic account of volitional activity that belie his real views on human agency and free will. The significance of this interpretation is that not only does it afford a consistent metaphysical position for Berkeley in which human agents are indeed causally efficacious, but it also situates him in the proper philosophical context.

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action or did God? God's action, my creation, caused me to be the sort of thing that can walk. It appears that there are two agents for one action. Rather than there being two agents for one action, there is a sequence of actions. First, God creates finite beings. Second, these finite beings themselves act. God creates finite agents so that they may freely act. So it is essentially God's will that humans can have efficacious wills. This solution to double agency, then, is similar to Berkeley's claim that God has created us with certain natural, rather than necessary, connections.

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