Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) was a philosopher and priest. He has a traditional scholastic education, including three years at the Sorbonne. He entered the Oratory in 1660 and was ordained in 1664. The Oratory was surely responsible for the Augustinian influence on his philosophy, but an accidental discovery in 1664 of Descartes’ Treatise on Man provided Malebranche with his other major influence. His first and most significant work, The Search after Truth, was published initially in 1674-75 and subsequently printed with an increasingly long set of Elucidations. The work elicited critiques by Simon Foucher and Arnauld; although he denied having a taste for polemics, Malebranche engaged in lengthy debates with these two critics, as well as others (e.g. Leibniz and the Cartesian Pierre-Sylvain Régis). In Search after Truth, Malebranche presents and defends the two doctrines for which he is best known, the occasionalism that denies causation between any finite substances and the claim that we see all things in God.¹

**Class 11: Nicolas Malebranche, The Search after Truth (1674-75)**

Book III, Part I: The Understanding: Pure Mind²

Chapter 4

I. The mind cannot long dwell on objects that have no relation to it, or that do not in some way involve the infinite. It cannot be doubted that God is the author of all things, that He created them for Himself and that through an invincible natural impression that He continuously impresses in it, He inclines the heart of man toward Himself. God cannot will that there be a will that does not love him or that loves him less than some other good (if there could be any other good), because he cannot will that a will not love what is supremely worthy of love or love what is less worthy of love. Thus, natural love necessarily leads us toward God, and since it comes from God and nothing can arrest its impulse but God himself who impresses it. There is, then, no will that can fail to follow the impulse of this love. The just, the impious, the blessed, and the damned all love God with this love. Given that this natural love we have for God is the same thing as our natural inclination toward the good in general, toward the infinite good, toward the sovereign good, it is clear that all minds love God with this love because only He is the universal good, the infinite good, the sovereign good…

II. Inconstancy of will is the cause of the mind’s lack of attention and, consequently, of error. Thus, with the will always parched by a burning thirst, always driven by anxieties and desires for the good it does not possess, it cannot comfortably allow the mind to dwell for any time over abstract truths that do not affect it and that it judges incapable of making it happy. Thus, it continuously urges the mind to consider other objects, and when in the course of being driven by the mind encounters an object bearing the mark of goodness, i.e., an object whose presence makes the soul feel a calm interior satisfaction, the heart’s thirst is then renewed, these desires and longings are rekindled, and the mind, required to obey them, attends only to the object causing them, or appearing to cause in order to bring it near the soul, which then tastes and feeds on it for a while. But since the emptiness of created things cannot fill the infinite capacity of man’s heart, these trifling pleasures, instead of quenching its thirst, only aggravate it and give the soul the vain and foolish hope of being satisfied by the multiplicity of terrestrial pleasures. This leads to a further inconstancy and inconceivable weakness on the part of the mind whose duty it is to find these goods for the soul.

It is true that when by chance the mind encounters an object involving the infinite, or containing something of great magnitude, its inconstancy and agitation temporarily cease. For, realizing that the object bears the mark desired by the soul, it pauses and attends to it for a while. But this attachment, or rather, obstinacy on the part of the mind in examining objects that are infinite or too vast, does it no more good than


the weakness with which it considers suited to its capacity. The mind is too weak to complete such a difficult undertaking, and only in vain does it try to do so. What must make the soul happy is not, as it were, the comprehension of an infinite object—of this it is incapable—but the love and possession of an infinite good, which the will is capable of though the impulse of love continually impressed on it by God. . . .

**Book III, Part II: The Pure Understanding. The Nature of Ideas**

Chapter 1

1. *What is understood by ideas. That they truly exist and are necessary to perceive all material objects.* I think everyone agrees that we do not perceive outside of us by themselves. We see the sun, the stars, and an infinity of objects outside of us; it is not likely that the soul leaves the body and, as it were, goes wandering about the heavens in order to contemplate all these objects. It does not therefore see them by themselves; the immediate object of our mind when it sees the sun, for example, is not the sun, but is something intimately united to our soul, and this is what I call an *idea.* Thus, by the word *idea,* I understand here nothing other than the immediate object, or the object closest to the mind, when it perceives something, namely, what touches and modifies the mind with the perception it has of an object.

   It must be noted that for the mind to perceive an object, it is absolutely necessary for the idea of that object to be actually present to it—it is not possible to doubt this—but it is not necessary for there to be something similar to that idea outside it. For it very often happens that we perceive things which do not exist and even which have never existed; thus, we often have in the mind real ideas of things that have never existed. When, for example, a man imagines a golden mountain, it is absolutely necessary that the idea of this mountain be really present to his mind. When a madman, or someone with a high fever or who is sleeping, sees some animal as if before his eyes, it is certain that what he sees is not nothing, and that, thus, the idea of this animal really exists—but this golden mountain and this animal have never existed.

   However, since men are led as if by nature to believe that only corporeal objects exist, they judge of the reality and existence of things in a completely different way than they should. For once they perceive an object, they want it to be quite certain that the object exists, even though it often happens that there is nothing outside. They want, in addition, for the object to be exactly as they see it, which never happens. But, with respect to the idea that exists necessarily and that cannot be other than as it is seen, they ordinarily judge without reflection that it is nothing—as if ideas did not have a great number of properties—as if the idea of a square, for example, were not quite different from that of a circle or of a number and did not represent completely different things—which can never happen for nothingness, since nothingness has no properties. It is therefore indubitable that ideas have a very real existence. But now let us examine what their nature is, and their essence, and let us see what in the soul can be capable of representing all things to it.

   All the things the soul perceives are of two kinds: they are either in the soul or outside the soul. Those in the soul are its own thoughts, that is, all its different modifications, for by the words *thought, manner of thinking, or modification of the soul,* I understand generally all those things that cannot be in the soul without the soul perceiving them through the internal sensation it has of itself—such as its own sensations, imaginings, pure intelllections, or simply its conceptions, even its passions and natural inclinations. Now, our soul does not need ideas in order to perceive all these things in the way it perceives them, because these things are inside the soul, or rather because they are only the soul itself in this or that fashion, just as the actual roundness and motion of a body are only that body shaped and moved in this or that fashion.

   But as for things outside the soul, we can perceive them only by means of ideas, assuming that these things cannot be intimately united to the soul. There are two kinds of these, spiritual and material. As for the spiritual ones, it seems that they can be revealed to the soul without ideas and by themselves. For although experience teaches us that we cannot communicate our thoughts to one another immediately and by ourselves, but only through speech or other sensible signs to which we have attached our ideas, it might

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3 Translated by Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene.
be said that God has decreed it thus only for the duration of this life, in order to prevent the disorder that would happen if people could communicate as it pleased them. But when justice and order reign and we are delivered from the captivity of our body, we shall perhaps be able to communicate through the intimate union among ourselves, as the angels seem to be able to do in heaven. Thus, it does not seem to be absolutely necessary to have ideas represent spiritual things to the soul, because it can happen that they are seen through themselves, though in a very imperfect fashion.

I shall not examine here how two minds can be united to one another and whether they can in this way reveal their thoughts to each other. I believe, however, that there is no purely intelligible substance other than God’s, that nothing can be discovered with evidence except in its light, and that the union of minds cannot make them visible to each other. For although we are closely united to ourselves, we are and will be unintelligible to ourselves until we see ourselves in God, and until he presents to us the perfectly intelligible idea he has of our being contained in his being. Thus, although it seems I am here allowing that angels can by themselves make known to one another both what they are and what they are thinking—which at bottom I do not believe to be true—I warn that this is only because I do not want to argue about it, as long as you grant me what is incontestable, namely, that material things cannot be seen by themselves and without ideas.…

Chapter 3

That the soul has no power to produce ideas. Cause of the error we make concerning this matter. The second opinion belongs to those who believe that our souls have the power of producing the ideas of the things about which they want to think—that they are moved to produce them by the impressions objects make on the body, even though these impressions are not images resembling the objects that cause them. They claim that this is how man is made in the image of God and how he participates in God’s power. Further, just as God has created all things from nothing and can annihilate them and create new ones, so can man create and annihilate ideas of all things as it pleases him. But there is good reason to distrust all these opinions that elevate man. They are normally thoughts arising from his pride and vanity, which the Father of lights did not issue.

This participation in God’s power that men boast of for representing objects to themselves, and for performing several other particular actions, seems to involve a certain independence, as it is generally explained. But it is also a chimerical participation, which the ignorance and vanity of men makes them imagine. Their dependence on God’s power and goodness is much greater than they think, but here is not the place to explain this. Let us try only to show that men do not have the power to form ideas of the things they perceive.

No one can doubt that ideas are real beings, since they have real properties, that they differ from one another, and that they represent completely different things. Nor can we reasonably doubt that they are spiritual and very different from the bodies they represent. This seems sufficient to make us doubt whether the ideas by means of which we see bodies are not more noble than the bodies themselves. Indeed, the intelligible world must be more perfect than the material and terrestrial world, as we will see in what follows. Thus, when someone claims that men have the power to form such ideas as please them, he runs the risk of claiming that men have the power of creating beings more noble and more perfect than the world God has created. Yet we never reflect upon this, because we imagine that an idea is nothing, since it cannot be sensed, or if it is considered as a being, it is only as a meager and insignificant being, because we imagine that it is annihilated as soon as it is no longer present to the mind.

But even if it were true that ideas are only lesser and insignificant beings, they are nevertheless beings, and spiritual beings; since men do not have the power to create, it follows that they cannot produce these beings. For the production of ideas in the way it is explained is a true creation, and although they may try to palliate and soften the audacity and harshness of this view by saying that the production of ideas presupposes something existing, whereas creation presupposes nothing, still they have not resolved the difficulty.

For we ought to take heed that it is no more difficult to produce something from nothing than to produce it by supposing another thing from which it cannot be made and which can contribute nothing to its production. For example, it is no more difficult to create an angel than to produce it from a stone, because a stone is something of a totally contrary kind
and cannot serve in any way toward the production of an angel. But it can contribute toward the production of bread, of gold, etc., because stone, gold, and bread are just the same extension differently configured, and all of these are material things.

It is even more difficult to produce an angel from a stone than to produce it from nothing, because to make an angel from a stone, insofar as that can be done, the stone must first be annihilated and then the angel must be created, and nothing needs to be annihilated simply to create an angel. Therefore, if the mind produces its ideas from the material impressions the brain receives from objects, it is always doing the same thing, or something as difficult, or even more difficult, than if it created them. Since ideas are spiritual, they cannot be produced from material images, which are in the brain and have no common measure with them.

If it is said that an idea is not a substance, I would agree; but still it is a spiritual thing, and just as it is not possible to make a square out of a mind, even though a square is not a substance, it is also not possible to form a spiritual idea from a material substance, even though an idea would not be a substance. But even if we granted to the mind of man a supreme power to annihilate and to create the ideas of things, it would still not be adequate to produce them. For just as a painter, no matter how skillful he is in his art, cannot represent an animal he has never seen and of which he has no idea (in such a way that the picture he would be required to produce could not be similar to this unknown animal), so a man cannot form the idea of an object unless he knew it beforehand, that is, unless he already has the idea of it, which does not depend on his will. But if he already has an idea of it, he knows the object, and it is useless for him to form a new idea of it. It is therefore useless to attribute to the mind of man the power to produce its ideas.

We could perhaps say that the mind has general and confused ideas it does not produce, and that those it produces are plainer and more distinct particular ideas. But this is still the same thing. For just as a painter cannot draw the portrait of a particular person in such a way that he is certain of having succeeded if he does not have a distinct idea of him (even if the person is present), so also a mind that has, for example, only the idea of being or of animal in general, cannot represent a horse to itself, or form a very distinct idea of it, or be sure that the idea exactly resembles a horse, if it does not already have a first idea to which it refers the second. And if it already has a first idea, it is useless to form a second, and therefore the question concerns the first idea; therefore, etc.

It is true that when we conceive of a square through pure intellec­tion, we can still imagine it, that is to say, perceive it in us by tracing an image in the brain. But it should be noted, first, that we are neither the true nor the principal cause of that image (but it would take too long to explain this here) and second, that far from the second idea accompanying the image being more distinct and more accurate than the first idea, on the contrary, it is accurate only because it resembles the first, which serves as rule for the second. For finally, we must not believe that the imagination and even the senses represent objects to us more distinctly than does the pure understanding, but only that they affect and move the mind more. For the ideas of the senses and of the imagination are distinct only through the conformity they have with the ideas of pure intellec­tion. The image of a square that the imagination traces in the brain, for example, is only accurate and well formed through the conformity it has with the idea of a square that we conceive through pure intellec­tion. It is this idea that rules the image. It is the mind that leads the imagination and requires it, so to speak, to consider from time to time whether the image it depicts is a figure composed of four straight and equal lines, whose angles are exactly ninety degrees—in a word, whether what one imagines is similar to what one conceives.

After what we have said, I do not think we can doubt that those who assert that the mind can itself form ideas of objects are mistaken, since they attribute to the mind the power to create, and even to create with wisdom and order, even though it does not have knowledge of what it does—for this is not conceiv­able. But the cause of their error is that people never fail to judge that a thing is the cause of some effect when the two are joined together, assuming that the true cause of the effect is unknown to them. This is why everyone concludes that a moving ball meeting another is the true and principal cause of the motion it communicates to the other, and that the soul’s will is the true and principal cause of motion of the arm, and other such similar prejudices, because it always happens that a ball moves when it is struck by another, that our arms move almost every time we want them
to, and that we do not sensibly see what other thing could be the cause of these motions.

Even when an effect does not so often follow something which is not its cause, still, there are a great number of people who believe that the thing is the cause of the effect that happens, though not everyone falls into this error. For example: a comet appears and afterwards a prince dies; stones are exposed to the moon and they are eaten by worms; the sun is in conjunction with Mars at the birth of a child and something extraordinary happens to the child. This is enough to convince many people that the comet, the moon, and the conjunction of the sun with Mars are the causes of the effects just noted and others similar to them; and the reason why not everyone is of the same belief is that these effects are not always observed to follow these things.

But since all persons normally have ideas of things present to their mind as soon as they want them, and this happens to them many times a day, almost everyone concludes that the will accompanying the production, or rather, the presence of ideas is their true cause, because they see nothing at the time they can attribute to them as their cause, and because they imagine that ideas no longer exist once the mind no longer sees them and begin to exist again when they are represented to the mind. This is also why some people judge that external objects transmit images resembling them, as we have just pointed out in the previous chapter. Since it is not possible to see objects by themselves, but only through their ideas, they judge that the object produces the idea: once it is present, they see it; as soon as it is absent, they no longer see it; and the presence of the object almost always accompanies the idea representing it to us.

Yet if people were not so precipitous in their judgments, from the fact that the ideas of things are present to their mind as soon as they want, they would conclude only that according to the order of nature their will is generally necessary for them to have these ideas, and not that the will is the true and principal cause that makes them present to their mind, and still less that the will produces them from nothing (or in the way they explain it). Nor should they conclude that objects transmit species resembling them because the soul ordinarily perceives them only when they are present, but only that the object is ordinarily necessary for the idea to be present to the mind. Finally, they should not judge that a moving ball is the true and principal cause of the motion of the ball it finds in its path, since the former ball does not have the power to move itself. They can only judge that the collision of two balls is the occasion for the Author of all the motion of matter to execute the decree of his will, which is the universal cause of all things. This he does by communicating to the second ball part of the motion of the first—that is, to speak more clearly, by willing that the latter ball should acquire as much motion in the same direction as the former loses—for the motive force of bodies can only be the will of the one who preserves them.

Chapter 6

That we see all things in God…. It is absolutely necessary for God to have in himself the ideas of all the beings he has created, since otherwise he could not have produced them, and thus he sees all these beings by considering those perfections he contains to which they have a relation. We must know, further, that God is very closely united to our souls through his presence, so that we can say that he is the place of minds in the same way that spaces are, in a sense, the place of bodies. Assuming these two things, it is certain that the mind can see what in God represents created beings, since the latter is very spiritual, intelligible, and present to the mind. Thus, the mind can see in God the works of God, assuming that God does indeed will to reveal to the mind what it is in him that represents them. Now, here are the reasons that seem to prove that he wills this rather than the creation of an infinite number of ideas in each mind.

Not only is it in strict conformity with reason, but it is also apparent in the economy of all of nature, that God never does by very difficult means what can be done by very simple and easy means. For God never does anything in vain and without reason. What shows his wisdom and his power is not his doing small things with great means—this goes against reason and indicates a limited intelligence—on the contrary, it is doing great things with very simple and easy means. Thus, it was with extension alone that he produced everything we see that is admirable in nature and even what gives life and motion to animals. Those who absolutely insist on substantial forms, faculties, and souls in animals to perform their functions (different from their blood and bodily organs) at the same time would have it that God lacks intelligence, or that he cannot make all these admir-
able things with extension alone. They measure the power and supreme wisdom of God by the smallness of their mind. Thus, since God can reveal everything to minds simply by willing that they see what is in their midst, that is to say, what is in him which is related to and represents these things, there is no likelihood that he does it otherwise and that he produces for this as many infinities of infinite numbers of ideas as there are created minds.

But it should be carefully noted that we cannot conclude that minds see the essence of God from the fact of their seeing all things in God in this way. God’s essence is his own absolute being, and minds do not see the divine substance taken absolutely, but only as relative to creatures or as they are able to participate in it. What they see in God is very imperfect and God is most perfect. They see matter shaped, divisible, and so forth, but in God there is nothing divisible or shaped, for God is all being, because he is infinite and comprises everything; but he is no particular being. However, what we see is only one or several particular beings and we do not understand this perfect simplicity of God, which contains all beings. In addition, it might be said that we do not see so much because of ideas as things themselves represented by ideas; when we see a square, for example, we do not say that we see the idea of the square united to the mind, but only the square outside it.

The second reason for thinking that we see beings because God wills that what is in him representing them be revealed to us—and not because we have as many ideas created with us as we can see things—is that this puts created minds in a position of complete dependence on God, the most complete possible. For this being so, not only would we see nothing unless God wills that we see it, but we would see nothing unless God himself made us see it. [...] But the strongest argument of all is the way the mind perceives all things. It is certain, and everyone knows it from experience, that when we want to think about some particular thing, we first glance over all beings and then apply ourselves to considering the object we wish to think about. Now, it is indubitable that we could not desire to see a particular object we had not already seen, though confusedly and in general. Thus, since we are able to desire to see all beings, sometimes one, sometimes another, it is certain that all beings are present to our mind; and it seems that all beings cannot be present to our mind without God—he who contains all things in the simplicity of his being—being present to it.

It even seems that the mind would not be capable of representing to itself universal ideas of genus, species, etc., had it not seen all the beings contained in one. Since every creature is a particular being, we cannot say that we see something created when, for example, we see a triangle in general. Finally, I do not think that we can account for the way the mind knows abstract and general truths, except through the presence of him who can illuminate the mind in an infinity of different ways.

Finally, the most beautiful, highest, most solid, primary proof of God’s existence (or the one that makes the fewest assumptions) is the idea we have of the infinite. For it is certain that the mind perceives the infinite, though it does not comprehend it, and that it has a very distinct idea of God, which it can have only by means of its union with him, since we cannot conceive that the idea of an infinitely perfect being—the one we have of God—should be something created.

But not only does the mind have the idea of the infinite, it even has it before that of the finite. For we conceive of infinite being merely by conceiving of being, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite. But, in order for us to conceive of a finite being, we must necessarily subtract something from this general notion of being, which consequently must come first. Thus, the mind perceives nothing except in the idea it has of the infinite; and as for this idea being formed from the confused assemblage of all our ideas of particular beings, as philosophers think, on the contrary, every particular idea is only a participation in the general idea of the infinite: In the same way, God does not derive his being from creatures,
while every creature is only an imperfect participation in the divine being.

Here is a proof that may constitute a demonstration for those accustomed to abstract reasoning. It is certain that ideas are efficacious, since they act in the mind and illuminate it, and since they make it happy or unhappy through the pleasant or unpleasant perceptions by which they affect it. Now nothing can act in the mind immediately unless it is superior to the mind; nothing but God alone can do this. For only the Author of our being can change its modifications. Therefore, it is necessary that all our ideas are located in the efficacious substance of the divinity, which alone is intelligible or capable of illuminating us, because it alone can affect intelligences. [...]

Finally, it is not possible for God to have any other principal end for his actions than himself. This is a notion common to all people capable of some reflection; and Sacred Scripture does not allow us to doubt that God has made all things for himself. It is therefore necessary that not only our natural love—I am referring to the impulse he produces in our mind—tends toward him, but also the knowledge and light he gives the mind must allow us to know something in him, for everything coming from God can only be for God. If God made a mind and gave it the sun as an idea, or as an immediate object of knowledge, it seems to me that God would be making this mind and the idea of this mind for the sun and not for himself.

God, therefore, cannot make a mind in order for it to know his works without that mind in some way being able to see God in seeing his works. Thus, it might be said that if we did not see God in some way, we would not see anything, just as if we did not love God—I mean if God did not continuously impress upon us the love of good in general—we would not love anything. For, this love being our will, we cannot love or will anything without it, since we cannot love particular goods except by determining toward these goods the motion of love God has given us for himself. Thus, in the same way that we do not love anything except through the necessary love we have for God, we do not see anything except through the natural knowledge we have of God; all the particular ideas we have of creatures are only limitations of the idea of the Creator, just as all the motions of the will toward creatures are only determinations of the motion toward the Creator. [...]
the heart is Christian, the mind is at bottom pagan. Perhaps it will be said that substantial forms—for example, those plastic forms which produce animals and plants—do not know what they are doing and that, thus, lacking intelligence, they have no relation to the divinities of the pagans. But who will be able to believe that what produces works manifesting a wisdom surpassing that of all the philosophers produces them without intelligence? [...] 

In order that we shall no longer be able to doubt the falsity of this unfortunate philosophy and recognize with evidence the soundness of the principles and the distinctness of the ideas we use, it is necessary to establish clearly the truths that are opposed to the errors of the ancient philosophers, and to prove in a few words that: there is only one true cause because there is only one true God; the nature or power of each thing is but the will of God; all natural causes are not at all true causes but only occasional causes; and some other truths following from these.

It is evident that bodies, large and small, do not have the power to move themselves. A mountain, a house, a rock, a grain of sand—in brief, the smallest or largest body conceivable—does not have the power to move itself. We have only two sorts of ideas, ideas of minds and ideas of bodies; and since we should say only what we conceive of, we should reason only according to these two. Thus, since the idea we have of all bodies makes us know that they cannot move themselves, it must be concluded that it is minds which move them. But when we examine the idea we have of all finite minds, we do not see any necessary connection between their will and the motion of any body whatsoever. On the contrary, we see that there is none and that there can be none. We must also conclude, if we wish to reason according to our lights, that no created mind can move any body whatsoever as a true or principal cause, just as we have said that no body could move itself.

But when we think of the idea of God, that is, of an infinitely perfect and consequently omnipotent being, we know that there is such a connection between his will and the motion of all bodies, that it is impossible to conceive that he wills a body be moved and that this body not be moved. We must therefore say that only his will can move bodies if we wish to say things as we conceive of them and not as we sense them. The motive force of bodies is therefore not in the bodies that are moved, for this motive force is nothing other than the will of God. Thus, bodies have no action; and when a moving ball collides with and moves another, it communicates to it nothing of its own, for it does not itself have the force it communicates. However, a ball is the natural cause of the motion it communicates. A natural cause is therefore not a real and true, but only an occasional, cause, one that determines the Author of nature to act in such and such a manner in such and such a situation.

It is certain that all things are produced through the motion of bodies, visible or invisible, for experience teaches us that bodies whose parts have more motion are always those that act more and produce more change in the world. All natural forces are therefore nothing but the always efficacious will of God. God created the world because he willed it—"He spoke and it was done"—and he moves all things, and thus produces all the effects we see happening, because he also willed certain laws according to which motions are communicated upon the collision of bodies; because these laws are efficacious, they act, and bodies cannot act. There are therefore no forces, powers, or true causes in the material and sensible world; and we must not admit forms, faculties, and real qualities for producing effects that bodies do not produce and for sharing with God the force and power that are essential to him.

Not only can bodies not be the true causes of anything whatsoever, but the most noble minds are similarly powerless. They can know nothing unless God illuminates them. They can sense nothing unless God modifies them. They are capable of willing nothing if God does not move them toward good in general, that is, toward himself. I admit that they can determine toward objects other than himself the impression God gives them toward himself, but I do not know if that can be called power. If the ability to sin is a power, it will be a power that the Almighty does not have, as Saint Augustine says somewhere. If people held of themselves the power to love the good, we could say they had some power; but people can love only because God wills that they love and because his will is efficacious. People can love only because God constantly pushes them toward the good in general, that is, toward himself; for God having created them only for himself, he never preserves them without turning and pushing them toward him. It is not they who move toward the good in general, it is God who moves them. They merely follow this impression through an
entirely free choice according to the law of God, or they determine it toward false goods, according to the law of the flesh, but they can determine it only through their view of the good; since they can do only what God makes them do, they can only love the good.

But if we were to assume what is true in one sense that minds have in themselves the power to know the truth and to love the good—if their thoughts and wills produced nothing externally, we could always say that they can do nothing. Now it appears to me quite certain that the will of minds is not capable of moving the smallest body in the world; for it is evident that there is no necessary connection between the will we have to move our arm, for example, and the motion of our arm. It is true that the arm moves when we will it, and that we are thus the natural cause of the motion of our arm. But natural causes are not at all true causes; they are merely occasional causes acting only through the force and efficacy of the will of God, as I have just explained.

For how could we move our arm? To move it, we must have animal spirits, we must send them through certain nerves toward certain muscles to inflate and contract them, for that is how the arm attached to them moves; or according to some other views, we still do not know how that happens. And we see people who do not even know that they have spirits, nerves, and muscles move their arm, and move it even with more skill and ease than those who know anatomy best. Therefore, people will to move their arm, and only God is able and knows how to move it. If a person is not able to knock down a tower, at least he knows what must be done to knock it down; but no person knows what must be done to move just one of his fingers by means of animal spirits. How, then, could people move their arm? These things appear evident to me and, it seems, to all those willing to think, though they are perhaps incomprehensible to all those willing only to sense.

But not only are men not at all the true causes of the motions they produce in their body, it even seems contradictory that they could be. As I understand it, a true cause is a cause 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, only God is the true cause who truly has the power to move bodies. In addition, I say that it is inconceivable that God could communicate to people or to angels the power he has to move bodies, and that those who claim that the power we have to move our arm is a true power must admit that God can also give minds the power to create, annihilate, and to do all possible things—in short, that he can render them omnipotent, as I shall show.

God needs no instruments to act; it suffices that he wills in order for a thing to be, because it is contradictory that he should will and that what he wills should not be. Therefore, his power is his will, and to communicate his power is to communicate the efficacy of his will. But to communicate this efficacy to a person or an angel can signify nothing other than to will that, for example, when a person or angel shall will this or that body be moved, the body will actually be moved. Now in this case, I see two wills concuring when an angel moves a body—that of God and that of the angel—and in order to know which of the two is the true cause of the motion of this body, we must know which cause is efficacious. There is a necessary connection between the will of God and the thing he wills. God wills in this case that, when an angel wills this or that body be moved, the body will be moved. Therefore, there is a necessary connection between the will of God and the motion of the body; and consequently God is the true cause of the motion of the body and the will of the angel is only an occasional cause.

But to show this still more clearly, let us suppose that God wills to produce the opposite of what some minds would will, as might be thought for demons or some other minds deserving of this punishment. We could not say in this case that God would communicate his power to them, since they could do nothing they wished to do. However, the wills of these minds would be the natural causes of the effects produced. Such bodies would be moved to the right only because these minds willed them to be moved to the left; and the desires of these minds would determine the will of God to act, as our will to move the parts of our bodies determines the first cause to move them. In this

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4 Malebranche: I am clearly speaking here about practical volitions, or those God has when he claims to act.
way, all the volitions of minds are only occasional causes.

But if after all these arguments someone still wanted to maintain that the will of an angel who moved a body would be a true and not an occasional cause, it is evident that this same angel could be the true cause of the creation and annihilation of all things. For God could communicate his power to create and annihilate bodies to the angel, in the same way he does the power to move them, if he willed all things to be created and annihilated—in short, if he willed all things to happen as the angel would wish it, just as he willed bodies to be moved as the angel would will. Therefore, if someone claims that an angel and a person are truly movers because God moves bodies when they wish it, he must also say that a person and an angel can truly be creators, since God can create beings when they would will it. Perhaps he could even say that the vilest animal, or matter all alone, would effectively cause the creation of some substance, if he assumed, as do the philosophers, that God produced substantial forms when required by matter. Finally, because God resolved from all eternity to create certain things in certain times, he could also say that these times would be the causes of the creation of these beings—just as he claims that one ball colliding with another is the true cause of the motion it communicates to the latter, because God willed through his general will, which causes the order of nature, that when two bodies collide, such a communication of motion would occur.

There is therefore only a single true God and a single cause which is truly a cause, and we should not imagine that what precedes an effect is its true cause. God cannot even communicate his power to creatures, if we follow the light of reason: He cannot make true causes of them; he cannot make them gods. But even if he could, we cannot conceive of why he would. Bodies, minds, pure intelligences, all these can do nothing. It is he who makes minds, who illuminates and moves them. It is he who created heaven and earth, and who regulates their motions.

In the end, it is the Author of our being who executes our wills: “Once God judges, the will always obeys.” He even moves our arm when we use it against his orders; for he complains through his prophet (Isa. 43.24) that we make him serve our unjust and criminal desires. [...]