The Will of God and the Damned

Divine Volition and the Economy of Grace in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Arnauld

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I reconstruct the central aspects of an extended debate between Leibniz, Malebranche, and Arnauld concerning the nature of the will of God and the restricted economy of salvation, known as the ‘Jansenist controversy.’ I show that their respective positions exemplify different visions of the hierarchy of divine attributes, and disagreements concerning the nature of God’s volition and its relationship to the good. The article seeks to contribute to the philosophical and historical study of early modern theology and metaphysics, and at the same time to develop resources for a critique of capitalist political theology.

KEYWORDS: Leibniz, Malebranche, Arnauld, early modern philosophy, philosophical theology, political theology, theodicy

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Introduction: Divine Economies

Not everyone will be saved. There is a restricted economy of grace and salvation, internal to and distinct from the general economy of creation, preservation, and annihilation. The issue of who will be saved is an economic problem: it is a question of *distribution*, the distribution of a grace that, by definition, must be excessive and gratuitous from the vantage of the nature it selectively redeems. And the gratuity of this gift, the contingency of God's election of the saved, is also the gratuity of the suffering of the damned; the logic of salvation is of necessity also the logic of damnation, in a cruel dialectic of divine economy and soteriological ecstasy.

This is an idea central to seventeenth-century European philosophical theology, in which theodicy names the effort to demonstrate the unassailable moral necessity of this restricted economy, this distribution of grace and damnation, and its reconciliation with the goodness of God and the world. I want to suggest that it is no accident that this discursive problematic flourished during the historical period in which nascent capitalism, as a social mechanism for the selective distribution of extravagant wealth and desperate poverty, of material security and suffering, strove to establish itself ideologically as ineluctably necessary. Karl Marx once wrote: "Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolidation and justification."[1] My guiding hypothesis in what follows is that we may be able to discern, in the intense debates over how best to formulate and carry out the tasks of early modern philosophical theodicy, cracks in the edifice of capitalist political theology, which today continues impassively to repeat the same dictum: not everyone will be saved, but nevertheless this is the best of all possible worlds.

Recently scholars have begun to focus on the conceptual architecture specific to capitalist political theology, as opposed to political theology in general. In *Neoliberalism's Demons*, Adam Kotsko argues that "neoliberalism represents an account of the sources of legitimacy for our social institutions and of the moral order of the world,"[2] in which a political-theological framework serves to 'demonize' the vast majority of subjects as guilty for their own failures in the hypercompetitive marketplace that supposedly constitutes the condition for the realization of their freedom. Joshua Ramey's *The Politics of Divination* analyzes divinatory practices, which attempt to negotiate with ineliminable chance in futural speculation, as being central to the "disavowed doctrine of *providence* that is in the last instance determined by the experience of the subject within markets and market forces;"[3] Ramey suggests that the neoliberalism might indeed be best understood as a "*theodicy*, a justification to suffering humanity and the dying earth of the sacrificial ways of the sacrifices and devastations demanded by markets."[4] Similarly, Robert Vogl in *The Specter of Capital* asks after "the validity, possibility, and tenability of a liberal or capitalist *oikodicy*, a theodicy of the economic universe: the inner consistency of an economic doctrine that—rightly or wrongly, for good or ill—views contradictions, adverse effects, and breakdowns in the system as eminently compatible with its sound institutional arrangement."[5] Following these lines of research, in this article I will reconstruct how the problem of theodicy was articulated in seventeenth-century philosophical theology, arguing that this articulation provides keys to understanding the ways in which mass suffering under capitalism is justified to this day.

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[1] Marx, "Contribution", 175.

[2] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 36.

[3] Ramey, *Politics of Divination*, 12.

Methodologically, I follow Hans Blumenberg's proposed model for interpreting modern categories in light of the history of theological discourse, which proceeds by way of what he calls 'reoccupation', as opposed to Carl Schmitt's better-known model of 'secularization'.[6] In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg writes:

> What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization, at least (so far) in all but a few recognizable and specific instances, should be described not as *transpositions* of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.[7]

Adopting this model, I will present a conceptual analysis of the problematic of the necessity of damnation in early modern philosophical theology, and the answer-positions provided it by Arnauld, Malebranche, and Leibniz. As we will see, the rigor with which these thinkers articulated and responded to this problematic is such that its analysis allows us to grasp its range of answer-positions in exacting detail, shedding light on the stakes and limits of their reoccupations in late capitalist apologetics. I will argue that the move toward depersonalizing divine volition in distributing grace, which we can track in the shift from Arnauld's voluntarist to Malebranche's and Leibniz's law-governed resolutions of the problem of theodicy, mirrors the way in which suffering under capitalism is justified as an inevitable consequence of impersonal, putatively natural laws of the market.

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[4] Ibid., 54.

[5] Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 16.

[6] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, ch. 3. On the nature and stakes of the methodological disagreement between these two thinkers, see Hammill, "Blumenberg and Schmitt".

[7] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 65.

Let us begin with a look at Leibniz and his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686). The text opens with the relatively typical assertion that God is "an absolutely perfect being."[8] He immediately affirms his position on the classical Euthyphro dilemma, rejecting the idea that God's works are called good *because God has created them*; Leibniz argues that this would make of God a despotic tyrant, and would strip the category of 'goodness' of its essentially moral meaning. On the contrary, he says, God's will is subordinate to the divine understanding, so that what God wills is willed precisely *because God understands it to be good*.[9] Thus what God wills is maximally perfect, and "to act in perfection according to sovereign reason," is, according to Leibniz, the very essence of divine freedom.[10] What is it, then, about this world that makes it good in itself, so that God wills its existence? Leibniz argues that it is a question of the relationship between means and ends; this world, he says, has the most perfect ratio between the simplicity of divine means of production and the variety or richness of worldly ends: it exhibits the maximal proportion of diverse effects to simple laws.[11] In section 6, he argues that disorder is not only impossible, but that it is in fact *unthinkable*: everything that happens in the world is absolutely orderly, and those things that seem extraordinary are only irregular in relation to some particular order, or subordinate rule, within the order of the world as a whole: "when a rule is very complex, that which conforms with it passes for irregular."[12] We can recognize this as an articulation of Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason: the apparent irregularities of an immensely complicated world cannot truly be thought to testify to anything like real disorder. There must always be a *ratio*.

Then we come to section 7, in which Leibniz aims to discuss miracles and the will of God. Miracles, he says, cannot be exceptions to the absolute or universal order of the world; in this sense, they are "as subject to order as natural operations."[13] However, he continues, miracles can genuinely constitute exceptions to the subordinate rules just outlined, those complex subsets of the absolute order of the world, whose particulars sometimes appear as irregular. He then writes:

> As for general or particular volitions, depending on how one understands things, one can say that God does everything according to God's most general will, which conforms with the most perfect order that God has chosen; but one can also say that God has particular volitions, which are exceptions to these subordinate

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[8] For texts by Leibniz, I will provide references to the volume and page numbers of Gerhardt's critical edition of *Die Philosophischen Schriften* (GP) and the page numbers of Loemker's English translation (L). I have modified nearly all of these translations. GP 4:427; L 303.

[9] GP 4:427-8; L 304.

[10] GP 4:429; L 305.

[11] GP 4:430; L 305-6.

[12] GP 4:431; L 306.

[13] GP 4:432; L 307

> maxims. For the most general of God’s laws, which rule the whole succession of the universe, is without exception.[14]

Leibniz goes on to argue that God “wills everything which is an object of his particular volition,” but that God merely *concurs* with everything that is an object of his general will.[15] With regard to an object of God’s general will, this can either be something that is good in itself, so that God wants it “*even though it does not take place*;”[16] or else it can be something that is not good in itself, or which is even bad in itself, but which, because it will lead to some greater perfection down the line, God allows without wanting it directly. These claims require clarification. Even if one grants that God might will a relative evil for the sake of a more profound good, how could it possibly be the case that what God wills does not in fact come to pass? What does Leibniz mean by this language of general and particular volitions, and what motivates his argument in this passage?

In fact, these brief remarks constitute one of Leibniz’s forays into a wide-ranging debate, the ‘Jansenist controversy,’ concerning the nature of God’s volition and the distribution of grace, which had been raging since the 1640s. For our purposes, the most significant interlocutors in this debate were the Catholic Oratorian Nicolas Malebranche and the Port-Royal Jansenist Antoine Arnauld. In what follows, I will first outline the basic terms and stakes of this debate, which concerns no less than the relationship between the necessity of God’s will and the restricted economy of human salvation, starting with the disputants’ shared point of reference, Augustine’s theory of grace. Then, I will reconstruct the positions and arguments of Arnauld and Malebranche, respectively. Finally, I will return to Leibniz, to reassess his contribution to this issue in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and some related passages in other late texts.

I argue that each of these thinkers articulates a vision of the relationship between God and the world whose economy is governed by the superordinance of one of the divine attributes over the others: freedom, for Arnauld; wisdom or order, for Malebranche; and understanding, for Leibniz. At the same time, these figures disagree about the classic Euthyphro dilemma concerning divine voluntarism, or the relationship between God’s will and the good: Leibniz and Malebranche hold that God wills what is good because it is good, whereas Arnauld argues that what God wills is good simply because God wills it. And finally, whereas Arnauld and Leibniz agree that this world is the best of all those that God could have possibly created—albeit for very different and even incompatible reasons—Malebranche, for his part, confesses that our world is manifestly imperfect and that better ones could surely have been created. In the course of my analysis I will seek to illuminate the connections between these central themes in early modern philosophical theology. In so doing, I aim to lay some of the groundwork for a more sustained and rigorous critique of the foundations of capitalist political theology.

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[14] GP 4:432; L 307.

[15] GP 4:432; L 307

[16] GP 4:432; L 307

1. Augustinian Grace and the Jansenist Controversy

St. Augustine had no greater adversary than the Pelagians. In *On Grace and Free Choice*, he cites the prophet Jeremiah: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord.”[17] This sort of person, Augustine explains, denies the necessity of grace: they put their faith in the inadequate powers of human finitude, seeking salvation directly through their own free will, without the aid of God. “Such is the Pelagian heresy.”[18] Human nature, according to Augustine, cannot be sufficient for salvation on its own. For Augustine, the notion that human nature might be sufficient for salvation passes from merely incorrect to heretical in light of its consequences for Christology. If salvation were possible through purely natural means, then one of the central defining features of Christian theology would become patently absurd: Christ, on that account, would ultimately have died in vain.[19] Augustine argues that salvation is exclusively a matter of grace, and emphatically not a matter of the will: “the choice of the human will is not sufficient unless God grants victory to the one who prays that he not enter into temptation.”[20]

At issue here is the relative autonomy of grace in relation to nature, and of God’s freedom in granting it. For the Pelagian, grace is granted, and thus salvation is secured, *in accordance* with what one wills: a good will is rewarded by God with the gift of grace. However, Augustine argues, this reduces the distribution of grace, which is supposed to be a freely given gift of God, to an effect of nature. Hence, he writes, the Pelagians “labor as hard as they can to show that God’s grace is given in accordance with our deserts, that is, to show that grace is not grace.”[21] In order for grace to properly be grace, it must necessarily be irreducible to nature as such. But this relative autonomy of grace entails troubling consequences for the economy of salvation. Augustine writes: “God’s grace is not given in accordance with our deserts, since we see that it is given, and given daily, not only where there are no previous good deserts but even where there are many previous evil deserts.”[22] The disarticulation of grace from the order of nature, which Augustine defends in order to preserve the freedom of God’s gratuitous election, entails that some people may be saved whose actions seem not to warrant it, at least by the lights of human understanding. Perhaps even more troubling is the idea that God, acting freely, does not bestow saving grace to everyone—for, as scripture clearly attests, some are surely damned.

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[17] Jeremiah 17:5.

[18] Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice*, 147.

[19] Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 23-4.

[20] Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice*, 149.

[21] Ibid., 150.

[22] Ibid., 152.

Cornelius Jansenius, the Bishop of Ypres, died in 1638; two years later, his masterwork, the *Augustinus*, was published in three volumes. These works revived interest in this question of election and the distribution of grace, which involves trying to reconcile the classical divine attributes—benevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence—with two apparently contradictory passages from scripture. God, according to St. Paul's letter to Timothy, "wills that all men be saved:" "nostro Deo, qui omnes homines vult salvos fieri."[23] However, as Christ says in the Book of Matthew, "many are called, but few are chosen:" "multi autem sunt vocati pauci vero electi."[24] The elect, the recipients of God's grace who are actually saved, are few in number. Under these conditions, we can articulate the theological problem presented by the restricted economy of salvation in the form of an apparently inconsistent trilemma: 1. God wills that all are saved; 2. What God wills necessarily comes to pass; 3. Few are actually saved. The question is whether and how it is possible to reconcile these three claims.

As Nigel Abercrombie says in his classic study on the origins of Jansenism, the *Augustinus* "makes no pretence to be a disinterested study of Augustine, but is undisguisedly polemical in intention."[25] The main target of Jansenius's polemic was the neo-scholasticism that was popularly expounded in his day primarily by the Jesuits, and especially their doctrine that God bestows grace not just sufficiently, or efficaciously, but universally—that is, that God's grace is both irresistible and granted to everyone. Jansenius contests this notion in Book III of the third volume of his work, arguing to the contrary that grace is in no way universal but is selectively distributed. As a consequence, he argues, it will sometimes be impossible for God's commands to be carried out, since God does not bestow grace on all:

> Nothing in the doctrine of St. Augustine is more certain or better founded, than that some precepts are impossible, not only to infidels, or to 'blinded and hardened' men, but also to faithful and just men who will and try to perform them with all the power at their present disposal; and that the grace whereby these precepts might be made possible, is lacking to them.[26]

To this, one might object that Christ's redemption of all humankind should entail the universality of salvific grace. Jansenius responds by denying that this consequence truly follows, and by pointing to the absence of textual support for the comforting notion that salvation is universal. “Augustine never admits in his writings that Christ gave himself a redemption, or was crucified, or died, for all men without exception, but only for those who profit by his death.”[27] He deems the idea that Christ died for the salvation of absolutely everyone a “semi-Pelagian error,” as it decouples salvation from the gratuity of the order of grace and renders it a feature or function of the natural course of things. For Jansenius, claiming to follow Augustine on this point, what mattered most was the preservation of the absolute freedom of God’s will in bestowing grace; this freedom would be unacceptably contravened by God’s being bound to a principle of universal salvation.

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[23] 1 Timothy 2:4.

[24] Matthew 22:14.

[25] Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism*, 125.

[26] Jansenius, *Augustinus*, 3:334. (Quoted in Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism*, 146).

By 1653, these two claims—that certain of God’s commands are impossible to fulfill due to an absence of grace, and that it is a semi-Pelagian error to assert that Christ died for the sake of everyone—were included in a list of five Jansenist propositions condemned as heretical by Pope Innocent X, in a papal bull entitled *Cum Occasione*. The intervening years were rife with theological dispute and political conflict. As the *Augustinus* was published posthumously, Jansenius never saw the dramatic consequences of his life’s work. But others took up the mantle and began propagating his radical vision of the restricted economy of salvation in the name of divine freedom. Crucial in this regard was Jean du Vergier de Hauranne, Abbé de Saint-Cyran, a close friend of Jansenius and the aggressively partisan spiritual director of the Port-Royal-des-Champs from 1634 until his imprisonment in 1638.[28] Under Saint-Cyran’s influence, Port-Royal became a hotbed of Jansenist theological activity and clandestine political organization. One of the most significant thinkers who flourished under this aegis was Antoine Arnauld, who, perhaps rivalled only by Blaise Pascal, would become the preeminent Jansenist theologian of the seventeenth century.[29]

2. Arnauld’s Jansenism and Divine Freedom

At Notre Dame in 1642 and 1643, at the behest of Cardinal Richelieu, the preacher Issac Habert gave three sermons publicly condemning Jansenist theological positions. In response, Arnauld published his *Premiere apologie pour Jansénius*. According to Abercrombie, this text was probably written immediately after Habert’s sermons were delivered, although its publication was delayed for various reasons until 1644.[30] Prior to that, in 1643, Arnauld had published *De la Fréquente Communion*, a text whose theological orientation was also identifiably Jansenist. The relatively narrow purpose of that text was to articulate a radically conservative critique of then-current penitential practices by means of a historical survey of early church disciplinary rites and an analysis of scriptural evidence in favor of their legitimacy. The *Premiere apologie* had the much broader goal of defending a Jansenist vision of the relationship between nature and grace, and it is in this text, according to Patrick Riley, that the term *volonté génerale* appears for the first time.[31]

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[27] Jansenius, *Augustinus*, 3:384-6. (Quoted in Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism*, 148.)

[28] See Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism*, 179-89.

[29] Tad Schmaltz compellingly argues that there are good reasons to consider Robert Desgabets as the exemplary Jansenist Cartesian (Schmaltz, “Cartesianism”, 37-56). Nevertheless, we will focus on Arnauld in this article, since his position on these issues provides such an illuminating contrast to those of Leibniz and Malebranche.

[30] See Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism*, 199-205.

Habert's sermons took Jansenism to task for several of its doctrines, including the idea that election is restricted or limited. Habert condemned the Jansenist claim that it is a semi-Pelagian error to think that that Christ died for the sake of everyone; indeed, according to Habert, just the opposite is true, and Christ did in fact die for the salvation of all, thus maintaining fidelity to the scriptural assertion that "God wills that all men be saved." Arnauld's response, following Augustine's lead, involves deflating the sense of *all* in "all men." Augustine devotes numerous passages to the question of how to interpret this passage. In the *Enchiridion*, he writes: "when we hear and read in sacred Scripture that God 'willeth that all men should be saved,' although we know well enough that not all men are saved, we are not on that account to underrate the fully omnipotent will of God."[32] Augustine proposes a solution to this puzzle as follows: "by 'all men' we are to understand the whole of mankind, in every single group into which it can be divided … just as we should interpret 'every herb' to mean 'every kind of herb,' so also we can interpret 'all men' to mean 'all kinds of men'."[33]

In the *Premiere apologie*, Arnauld reiterates and defends this deflationary reading of the sense of "all." Against the semi-Pelagians, who took the passage to mean that God wills the salvation of all individuals, Arnauld argues that we must understand grace and salvation to be extended to "men of all sorts of conditions, of age, sex, and country, as it is indubitable that in a hundred places in Scripture, the term *all men* cannot be taken to mean all men in particular."[34] This formulation, according to which God wills the salvation of 'all men' in general but not in particular, enables Arnauld to claim that his Jansenist interpretation is uniquely capable of holding together the senses of the passage from Timothy with the fact that not everyone is saved, and, more importantly, preserves the absolute autonomy of God's freedom in choosing the elect. For if Christ's death entailed the salvation of everyone thereafter, the gratuity according to which grace is granted would be annulled, effectively determining God to grant grace universally to all human beings. For Arnauld, even after the death of Christ the redeemer, the bestowal of grace must remain a radically free act of divine generosity. As he writes in his translator's introduction to Augustine's *De Correptione et Gratia*, God "gives grace to some, because he is good, and not to others, because he is just; and does not wrong anyone, since, because all are guilty, he owes nothing to anyone."[35]

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[31] Riley, "Introduction", 5.

[32] Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 401.

[33] Ibid., 402.

[34] For texts by Arnauld, I will provide a reference to the volume and page numbers of Du Pac De Bellegarde and Hautefage's edition of the *Œuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld* (OA). All translations are my own. OA 16:184-5.

In preserving this absolute divine freedom in the distribution of grace, Arnauld seems to go farther even than Augustine by affirming that God directly wills the damnation of some (indeed, likely most) human beings in particular. In the same chapter of the *Enchiridion*, Augustine had proposed another possible interpretation of the Pauline epistle. *Deo omnes homines vult salvos fieri*, he writes, might be taken to mean that "no man is saved unless God willeth his salvation: not that there is no man whose salvation he doth not will, but that no one is saved unless He willeth it."[36] This is the 'sufficiency' or 'efficacy' of grace: without grace, there can be no salvation for human beings, and with it, their salvation is directly and immediately secured. Augustine often argues that while God always and only wills what is good, the means by which God's will is executed may involve the damnation of certain persons. Such damnation is ostensibly not a good in itself, but this does not constitute a problem, since it is not the direct object of God's volition. However, Arnauld's Jansenist critique of the semi-Pelagian conception of the relationship between grace and human volition affirms both that God wills the damnation of many people in particular, and that there is no contradiction between this fact and the postulate of God's absolute benevolence.

> For it is certain that the source of all the errors of the semi-Pelagians lies in their not being able to bear that absolute and immutable decree of God, which St. Paul established on unshakeable grounds, and which the Church teaches: that God has chosen, from all eternity, without any regard for merit, a certain number of human beings, who he has destined for glory—leaving the rest in the common mass of perdition, from which he is not obligated to take them.[37]

Arnauld's position on grace, then, involves two distinctly Jansenist theses. First, grace is absolutely sufficient, that is, its bestowal directly and uniquely entails the salvation of the elect; and second, its distribution is completely disarticulated from the order of nature, being determined entirely by particular volitions chosen freely by God. With the sufficiency of grace, Arnauld means to maintain God's omnipotence against the threat of Pelagianism: human beings can never earn salvation without God's bestowal of grace, no matter how sincere their efforts at performing good works. With the particularity of divine volitions, Arnauld means to maintain God's freedom against the horn of the Euthyphro dilemma according to which God's will is in any sense constrained by the necessity of choosing to do only what he understands to be good.

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[35] OA 11:594.

[36] Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 402.

[37] OA 16:246.

When many years later he read Malebranche's *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1680),[38] which, as we will see in the next section, affirms the *generality* of God's will, Arnauld responded with an utterly uncompromising vision of the particularity of divine volition in a text called *Reflexions philosophiques et theologiques sur le nouveau systeme de la nature et de la grace*:

> One cannot say, at least not without strangely abusing the meaning of the terms … that God does anything by general volitions. For everything that happens, happens in particular, and in no way in general. For as *willing* and *doing*, in God, are the same thing, since God creates each soul by a particular action, God must also have willed the creation of each by a particular volition. And so, all that one can say, to speak exactly, is that God acts by particular volitions in consequence of general laws—which is far from being able to say, as [Malebranche] does on every page, *that the universal cause must in no way act by particular volitions*.[39]

Shortly thereafter, summarizing what he takes to be Augustine's correct position on the matter, Arnauld writes:

> this Saint has no doubt that nothing happens in the world, that not a single leaf or fruit falls from a tree, and stronger still that no animals are born or die, except by the volition of God, applied to each event; so that, in order to be convinced that there is nothing in all these things that would be unworthy of being determined by the particular orders of his providence, it suffices to know that his wisdom reigns in duration, according to what is suitable for the beauty of the harmony of the Universe.[40]

If, then, Arnauld is indeed the originator of the term "general will," ironically enough he introduced the concept precisely in order to denounce it.[41] Everything that happens, according to Arnauld, is an effect of God's willing it to happen in particular. It is true that, ordinarily, these particular volitions accord with general laws, but this is not the same as saying that God's will itself is general; the latter position Arnauld denies outright. For if God's will were general, then there would be worldly events that God did not will directly, but which merely followed as consequences of God's general volitions. But, as we have seen, Arnauld claims that God does in fact will each and every thing's existence in particular; he holds that it would be "unworthy" of the divine nature to will merely generally, since this would mean that God's volitions have literally unintended consequences, and this is incomprehensible to the point of heresy. Therefore, that God wills 'that all human beings in general are saved', must also be a particular divine volition—that is, God wills in particular that all kinds of human beings are among the elect. Thus, while is true that human beings in general are saved, the volitions according to which God saves individual persons are always radically particular, following no rule of distribution other than the utter gratuity of God's absolute freedom to bestow it.[42]

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[38] See Moreau, "The Malebranche-Arnauld Debate".

[39] OA 39:175.

[40] OA 39:197.

[41] See Riley, "The General Will before Rousseau".

In the end, for Arnauld, it is God's absolute freedom that functions as the superordinate divine attribute, to which the others play a secondary role. Grace is not universally but selectively distributed, on the basis of particular divine volitions, and thus the salvation of the elect is a necessarily unmotivated gift, one that cannot be deserved or merited under any conditions. Moreover, it is this coincidence of freedom and the restricted economy of salvation that makes the election of the few a matter of justice. For what God wills is good precisely because it is what God freely and indifferently wills; and hence this world, as what God in fact willed and created, with all those countless individuals who God willed in particular not to save but to damn and 'leave in perdition', is still *de facto* the best of all possible worlds. There is no external rule of the best, as Leibniz holds, according to which God's freedom is constrained to produce this world rather than others. The will of God, according to Arnauld, determines itself out of itself in absolute freedom, and nothing can contravene this eternal necessity.

This image of volitional self-determination accords with an anthropocentric conception of God at least to the extent that human beings tend to think of themselves as free volitional agents. While Malebranche and Leibniz, as we will shortly see, hold that their conceptions of God leave divine freedom intact, they both argue that God's will is self-determined in accordance with some set of rational laws—whether their rationality is defined in terms of orderly simplicity or in terms of a maximal ratio of effects to causes. These lawful constraints *depersonalize* the operation of theodicy, such that the distribution of damnation and election no longer appears as the result of an anthropomorphic volition; rather, it appears as an unfortunate but unavoidable lawful consequence. This depersonalization bears a close affinity with the manner in which the suffering of the poor is justified under capitalism, which is similarly construed not as a consequence of any particular free volition, but as a systematic consequence of the functioning of the putatively immutable laws of economics. Let us now turn to Malebranche to see how he effectuates this depersonalization in terms of divine simplicity.

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[42] As Steven Nadler notes, Arnauld's insistence that absolutely everything happens precisely due to a particular volition of God makes him look like the 'textbook occasionalist' that Malebranche, as we will see, was clearly not (Nadler, *Occasionalism*, 100-103).

3. Malebranche's Occasionalism and Divine Simplicity

Recently scholars like Steven Nadler have gone to great lengths to dispel what he calls the 'textbook mythologies' regarding occasionalism, but Malebranche, usually taken to be its primary expositor, remains a deeply misunderstood and misrepresented figure in the history of post-Cartesian philosophy. The misrepresentation, it must be said, begins with Leibniz, who in the *New System on the Nature and the Communication of Substances* (1695) presents occasionalism as an *ad hoc* solution to the problem of volition raised by Cartesian dualism: if *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are substantially and essentially distinct, their interaction seems to be metaphysically impossible. The problem is, since bodies can only be affected by a modification of the relations of their extended parts, how could a putatively nonextended immaterial substance, the mind, affect them at all? Leibniz says that, for the 'Cartesian disciples,' the solution was to assert that God constantly intervenes in the world to move bodies on the occasion of instances of willing, and give rise to mental impressions and ideas on the occasion of corresponding cases of physical affection, crossing the metaphysical divide. "But," he writes, "in order to resolve problems, it is not enough to make use of a general cause and calling on what is called a *Deus ex machina*. For when this is done without offering any other explanation drawn from the order of secondary causes is, properly speaking, to make recourse to the miraculous."[43] Of course, this is hardly a fair picture of occasionalism, which, as Nadler shows, is a robust and sophisticated philosophical theory of causality. It would be necessary, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of occasionalism, to consider the arguments advanced by other post-Cartesians such as Louis La Forge and Géraud de Courdemoy, in addition to those in Malebranche's earlier *The Search After Truth* (1674), although this would be well outside the scope of the present inquiry.

Instead we will here focus on Malebranche's *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, which was written at least in part as a critical response to the Jansenist thesis on the particularity of divine volition in the distribution of grace. Our reading of this text will nevertheless illuminate some of the broad contours of Malebranche's occasionalism. As we will see, the text argues for the generality of God's will in almost all cases, which Malebranche takes to be the only way to render the non-universality of grace ethically defensible. For unlike Arnauld, Malebranche on the one hand accepts the second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma: that is, there is a principle determining what counts as good which is external and prior to the fact of what God wills; and on the other hand, he denies that this is the best of all possible worlds, but insists that it is the one God is determined to create, on the basis of a different hierarchy of divine attributes, which he refers to as Order. When, in the 'Excerpt of a Letter' by Malebranche that serves as its preface, he writes that his aim in the text is "to make God lovable to men, and to justify the wisdom of his conduct in the minds of certain philosophers who push metaphysics too far, and who, in order to have a powerful and sovereign God, make him unjust, cruel, and bizarre,"[44] it is hard not to imagine that he has Arnauld in mind.

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[43] GP 4:483; L 457.

The basic conceptual tactic of the theodicy put forward in the *Treatise* is as follows. Malebranche argues that the realms of both nature and grace are lawfully ordered in accordance with God's will, which is simple and general.[45] He begins his analysis with nature. Divine omnipotence is such, he argues, that God could have created an infinity of distinct worlds in an infinity of different ways. The question is, why did God create just this world in just this way? Malebranche notes that a skilled artisan "does not accomplish by quite complex means that which he can execute by simpler ones, he does not act without an end, and never makes useless efforts,"[46] and reasons by analogy that this must be all the more true of an infinitely wise being than it is of a human, whose understanding is only finite.

> From this one must conclude that God, discovering in the infinite treasures of his wisdom an infinity of possible worlds (as the necessary consequences of the laws of motion which he can establish), determines himself to create that world which could have been produced and preserved by the simplest laws, and which ought to be the most perfect, with respect to the simplicity of the ways necessary to its production or to its conservation.[47]

Whereas for Arnauld, as we saw, it is freedom that functions as the superordinate divine attribute, for Malebranche it is divine wisdom that governs the relationship between God as creator and the lawful orders of both nature and grace. Wisdom refers not simply to understanding, but to a certain prudential economy informed by understanding, which Malebranche sometimes refers to as Order, as in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (1688).[48] One important consequence of this subordination of God's will to the divine attribute of wisdom or order is the fact that, as Malebranche himself openly admits in the *Treatise*, this is not the best possible world that God could have created.

> God could, no doubt, make a world more perfect than the one in which we live. He could, for example, make it such that rain, which serves to make the earth

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[44] For Malebranche's *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*, I will provide references to the volume and page numbers of Robinet's *Œuvres complètes de Malebranche* (OC) and the page numbers of Riley's English translation (TNG). OC 5:3-4; TNG 107.

[45] See Rutherford, "Malebranche's Theodicy".

[46] OC 5:28; TNG 116.

[47] OC 5:28; TNG 116.

[48] For Malebranche's *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion*, I will provide references to the volume and page numbers of the OC (see note 39, above) and the page numbers of Scott's English translation (DMR). OC 12:97-8; DMR 63-4.

> fruitful, fall more regularly on cultivated ground than in the sea, where it is unnecessary. But in order to make this more perfect world, it would have been necessary that he have changed the simplicity of his ways … for our world, however imperfect one wishes to imagine it, is based on laws of motion which are so simple and so natural that it is perfectly worthy of the infinite wisdom of its author.[49]

Malebranche rejects the possibility that God acts by particular volitions on the grounds that it would be unworthy of the divine nature to will in this way. For God to intervene constantly in the order of nature by willing particular events would testify to the imperfection of that order; but since that order is itself a product of God's will, this would amount to a demonstration or an admission that God was imperfectly wise in the production of nature. Hence, God's volition in constituting the order of nature must be general. Ironically, this conception of a God who 'steps in' to make things happen in the natural world by particular volitions, which Malebranche unequivocally rejects as unworthy of the divine nature, bears more than passing resemblance to the typical caricatures of the occasionalist divinity. By contrast, Malebranche's God wills in a maximally general way.[50]

Malebranche argues that the wisdom of God, which leads to the simplicity of divine volition and a less-than-perfect order of nature, similarly produces a recognizably imperfect but maximally economical order of grace.

> God being obliged to act always in a way worthy of him, through simple, general, constant, and uniform means—in a word means conformed to the idea that we have of a general cause whose wisdom has no limits—he had to establish certain laws in the order of grace, as I have proved him to have done in the order of nature.[51]

Malebranche's insistence here on the simplicity and generality of the nature of divine volition is the core of his answer to the problem of theodicy. At the level of the economy of salvation, Malebranche says, God's general volitions have "unhappy consequences for us": "[God] makes the rain of grace fall on hardened hearts, as well as on prepared grounds; men resist it, and make it useless for their salvation."[52] This foreshadows arguments for the unavoidability of mass immiseration under capitalism: it would perhaps be possible to distribute economic resources in a more recognizably just way, but this would unacceptably require that we contravene the systematic simplicity of the natural laws of the market. Malebranche's claim is that if we think that it is possible that God sometimes acts by particular volitions, the consequences are theologically unacceptable: we will end up having to concede that God is unwise, incapable, or malevolent.[53] On the other hand, "if grace is bestowed on men by laws which are very simple and very general, all these great difficulties vanish. The order of grace which God has established having a greater relation of wisdom and of fruitfulness to his work which it produces than any other, God had to choose it."[54] Thus Malebranche's affirmation of the generality of God's volition reconciles God's general will to save all human beings with the fact of an actual infinity of individual damned souls,[55] by restraining God's freedom in accordance with a principle of wisdom as it relates to the means of divine production.

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[49] OC 5:29; TNG 116-7.

[50] See also Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 446-452; OC 2:316-20.

[51] OC 5:49; TNG 128-9.

[52] OC 5:48; TNG 128.

Moreover, the generality of God's volition also implies the rejection of another Jansenist thesis, namely that grace is always efficacious or sufficient. As we saw, Arnauld argued that salvation is uniquely a function of God's particular will to distribute grace; salvation is not earned or merited by human actions, and God's grace cannot be resisted or rejected by the power of a finite will. This means that, once God freely wills the distribution of grace to a particular person, their salvation immediately and inescapably follows. For Malebranche, by contrast, grace is not always sufficient for salvation. He proposes a kind of calculus according to which degrees of 'concupiscence,' or sinful desire, must be outnumbered by degrees of grace in order for salvation to be secured.

> If God gave grace by particular wills, no doubt he would not take it into his head, in order to convert a sinner who has four degrees of concupiscence, to give him three degrees of spiritual delectation, supposing that those degrees were not sufficient to convert him … For to what purpose is it to give three degrees of spiritual delectation to one for whom four degrees are necessary, and to refuse them to him to whom they would be sufficient to convert him? Does this agree with the idea that we have of the wisdom and goodness of God? Is this to love men, is it to will to save them all, is it to do for them everything that can be done? … What wisdom is there in giving, by particular wills, so many useless graces to sinners, supposing that God wills their conversion?[56]

Consequently, the fact that grace is only relatively, and not absolutely, sufficient for conversion and salvation, constitutes another argument in favor of the generality of God's will. Here again the theological argument bears a striking affinity to conservative arguments against rectifying the excessive harms done by capitalist exploitation through social provisions: what wisdom would there be, asks the apologist for capitalist relations of production and exchange, in providing for those whom the market's lawful operations have destituted?

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[53] OC 5:51; TNG 130.

[54] OC 5:52; TNG 130.

[55] OC 5:47; TNG 127-8.

[56] OC 5:51; TNG 130. Translation modified.

It is worth noting that Malebranche concedes that there must be at least some particular volitions of God. Indeed, God's will to create some world in the first place must be particular, since it cannot be determined by the wise preference for lawful and orderly simplicity that inheres in one particular world more than another. As Malebranche has the interlocutor Theodore say in the *Dialogues*, "[God] is able not to act, but He cannot act in vain."[57] This is why the postulate of God's general volition implies, and is completed by, the theory of occasional causes: a general will brings about nothing unless something particular occasions its actualization. Hence the completed conceptual image involves God's willing in particular the coming into existence of the world, and willing in general a set of maximally simple laws that are actuated by occasional causes whose distribution in space and time are a function of this set of worldly initial conditions.[58] Occasional causes are required in conjunction with God's general volition in order to suffice for individuation; neither a general will, nor an occasional cause, can constitute a principle of sufficient reason for existence on their own. Still, Malebranche's entire theoretical edifice, motivated as it is both by theodicy and philosophical reflection on the nature of lawful causality, tends to minimize the number of such particular wills and to maximize the generality of God's volition as much as possible.

In sum, Malebranche argues that the superordinance of divine wisdom, with its economic preference for order and simplicity regarding the means by which things are produced, entails a restriction on God's freedom, within which the world chosen for existence is the best possible; but this still means that it is only relatively the best, and he constantly reminds us that this world is imperfect, full as it manifestly is of monsters and injustices. God's volitions are maximally general, which according to Malebranche is the only kind of volition that is worthy of divine wisdom, whereas particularity is a feature of anthropomorphic willing; and under this crucial limiting condition, God wills in accordance with what is understood to be good in itself. Thus suffering and damnation are necessary as consequences of the simplicity of the laws of distribution. As we will see in the next section, Leibniz rejects this theodicy on the grounds that it exhibits a too-narrow focus on the means of divine production, since this leaves intact the possibility that there may be better possible worlds than the actual one in which we live. But Leibniz's own manner of depersonalizing divine volition, which invokes the principle of a maximal ratio of diverse effects to simple causes, also involves justifying damnation as a matter of lawful rationality.

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[57] OC 12:215; DMR 164.

[58] See Jolley, *Causality and Mind*, 92-104.

4. Leibniz's Syncretism and Divine Understanding

Let us finally return to Leibniz's *Discourse*. First, it should now be clear that Leibniz targets both Arnauld and Malebranche in the early sections of the text. In section 2, Leibniz writes: "I am far removed from the opinion of those who maintain that there are no rules of goodness and perfection in the nature of things, or in the ideas that God has of them; and that the works of God are good only for the formal reason that God has made them."[59] While this statement easily reads as a condemnation of Spinoza, it evidently implicates Arnauld as well, since, as we saw, the Jansenist steadfastly refuses to subordinate God's freedom to any external standard of goodness. And the very next section, which challenges the idea that God could have a better world than this one, is obviously directed against the melancholia of Malebranche's theodicy.[60] Leibniz takes what might be described as a holistic apology for the apparent existence of imperfections in the order of nature: from the perspective of the whole, or in God's infinite understanding, these temporally situated imperfections are seen to contribute to the overall perfection of the world. In this light, Leibniz contends, these are not really imperfections at all, but instead are simply diverse elements in the harmonious composition of the world, whose complexity requires the inclusion of more than what is uniformly consonant.

But while he criticizes both Arnauld and Malebranche, it is also true that Leibniz's deeper aim is to reconcile their philosophical positions by synthesizing them. Leibniz is one of the great syncretists, perhaps matched only later by Hegel in his desire to demonstrate the ultimate harmony and fidelity of thinkers that appear to be at odds with one another. But this synthetic approach is itself based on the primacy he accords to the understanding and his interpretation of the nature of reason or *ratio*. In contrast to Arnauld's emphasis on freedom and Malebranche's on orderly simplicity, in Leibniz we find that the understanding is superordinate among the divine attributes. It is this absolute understanding that grounds the structure of Leibniz's theodicy: particular existents are only taken to be worldly imperfections by partial or finite understanding, whereas the absolute infinity of God's understanding is able to grasp them as necessary and harmonious. The argumentative affinity to capitalist apologetics here is also clear: the suffering of the poor is a necessary feature of even the best of all possible economic orders, in whose totalizing light they are retroactively justified.

However, there is something of a paradox here: if God is, as we saw, beholden to some *extrinsic* standard of goodness—contra Arnauld, Leibniz's God is literally not free to will what is not the best—Leibniz also attempts to render the criteria for goodness *immanent* to the totality of possible worlds comprehended by the divine intellect, so as to avoid the charge of arbitrariness. How, then, can the standard of goodness be both immanent and extrinsic, meeting both of the systematic demands at play? Leibniz's solution is that the world God wills into existence is the best on the basis of a *differential*, a ratio of two variables. Whereas Arnauld argued that the world is good insofar as it is a work of God, with total disregard for the manner of its nature or production, and Malebranche emphasized the simplicity of the means by which God produces it as essential to its perfection, Leibniz seeks to retain both criteria through the mediation of God's infinite understanding: this world, the best of all possible worlds, is neither absolutely simplest in its means of production nor absolutely most complex in its diversity of effects, but exhibits the optimal ratio of these two principles. In this proportionality lies the maximal perfection that determines God's will to create this world and no other. And this determination of the divine will, which amounts to a restriction on God's absolute freedom, is no source of anxiety for Leibniz, who says that acting in accordance with sovereign reason just is the essence of freedom. Therefore, in Leibniz's formulations here there is an implicit critique of Arnauld's conception of divine freedom as absolute indifference; it is once again not a pure self-determining volition but a depersonalized accordance with a particular conception of lawfulness that leads to unequal distributions in the actual world.

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[59] GP 4:427; L 304.

[60] GP 4:428-9; L 305.

Thus it should not be surprising to find, as we return to the initially perplexing lines in section 7 of the *Discourse*, that Leibniz attempts to show that both Arnauld's conviction that God wills only in particular, and Malebranche's rationalist generalization of divine volition, are both correct in their own way. And his language suggests that he thinks he has gotten past the apparent opposition between these two positions. When it comes to the question of general or particular volitions, he writes: "depending on how one understands things, one can say that God does everything according to God's most general will, which conforms with the most perfect order that God has chosen."[61] As in Malebranche, this general will establishes the total order of nature and grace, which involves the 'subordinate maxims' according to which things unfold. He continues: "but one can also say that God has particular volitions, which are exceptions to these subordinate maxims."[62] These particular wills do not contradict the general order, which remains exceptionless and absolute, but their effects constitute excessive productions from the vantage of the natural order of things. Leibniz agrees with Arnauld that everything willed in particular by God must be a good in itself. But, like Malebranche, Leibniz admits that local events following from the natural order, as consequences of God's general will, can be either good or bad in themselves. If actual local events are bad in themselves, they transpire not because God wills them in particular, but because, again, from the perspective of the whole universe or infinite understanding, God's recognition that their occurrence will lead to a greater overall perfection makes allowing them possible and necessary.

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[61] GP 4:432; L 307.

[62] Ibid.

Finally, Leibniz's formulation of the relationship between the orders of nature and grace as one of pre-established harmony can also be seen as charting a third way between Arnauld, who argued for their radical disarticulation, and Malebranche, who admitted their distinction as realms of creation, each ordered in a similarly lawful manner by the generality of God's volition, but in such a way that they can only be related to one another by miraculous means.[63] The very conception of pre-established harmony itself relies on and expresses the superordinance of the understanding in the hierarchy of divine attributes to which Leibniz is committed. The holistic apology for worldly imperfections, grasped in the infinite understanding as necessary features of the best of all possible worlds, coincides with a conception of a market economy that distributes resources in a lawful way that is just by definition, even when it turns out not to be equitable. As Marx writes, miming the apologist's description of the sphere of capitalist circulation: "Each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the others. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest."[64]

Conclusion

I have here sought to explicate Leibniz's claims about the nature of divine volition in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* by reconstructing the debate between Arnauld and Malebranche to which they constitute synthetic responses. Along the way I hope to have shed light on some of the relationships among three aspects of the problematic of early modern philosophical theology that I identified at the beginning: first, the question of the nature of divine volition, whether as general or particular; second, the Euthyphro dilemma regarding the relationship between God's will and the good; and finally, the question of the hierarchy of divine attributes. But the significance of these particular questions does not cease at the limits of speculative theology; they also illuminate the stakes of philosophical inquiry on the nature of specifically human volition in its relationship to finite understanding. Moreover, as with all discussions of the divine nature in early modern rationalism, they constitute explorations of the various figures of necessity, determination, and freedom that present themselves to critical reflection.

Finally, I suggest that reading this problematic of the restricted economy of salvation and the divine necessity of human damnation as a symptomatic discursive formation opens fruitful lines of inquiry for the purposes of developing a more sustained critique of capitalist political theology, which likewise justifies human suffering and perdition under contemporary capitalism as a necessary evil in this supposedly best of all possible social arrangements. The logic of this justification is depersonalized as a matter of systematic lawfulness—this suffering is not a consequence of any particular volition, but is rather a consequence of the supposedly natural laws of the market, whose simplicity of means and abundant productivity, we are told, cannot be contravened even in the name of a moral imperative for equity or justice. Today, as the logic of capitalist damnation promises to gratuitously extinguish whole ecologies and decimate populations across the globe for the sake of its elect few, a rigorous critique of this political-economic theodicy is crucially necessary.

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[63] See also GP 6:605; L 640.

[64] Marx, *Capital*, 280.

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