



## Causal Powers in the German Ramifications of Occasionalism

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**Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero**

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CRITICAL NOTICE

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## Causal Powers in the German Ramifications of Occasionalism

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In recent decades, occasionalism has attracted increasing attention from historians of philosophy, spurred in part by current work and debates in the metaphysics of causality and, most recently, in the study of grounding. This rediscovery has challenged several traditional assumptions about the origin, scope, and development of this philosophical trend. Old questions have received new answers, and new questions have arisen. The focus has shifted from canonical figures to less canonical ones, from the privileged domain of mind-body issues to other dimensions of occasional causation, and from the predominantly Cartesian, early modern framework to other (non-Cartesian or even pre-modern) sources. In short, the focus has shifted from the uniformity of occasionalism to the variety of occasionalisms. Despite these improvements to the historical picture, post-Cartesian occasionalism is still primarily viewed as a French (and partly Flemish) phenomenon. With a few exceptions, the spread of occasionalism to other countries has remained largely unexplored. This makes Henkel's book on early modern German occasionalism a welcome novelty and a genuine contribution to expanding the philosophical canon – all the more so as it spans an entire century of philosophical production, namely from the late 1670s to the early 1780s. The seventeenth century is represented by Erhard Weigel (Chapter 1) and Christoph Sturm (Chapter 2), the eighteenth century by Christian Wolff (Chapter 3) and Gottfried Ploucquet (Chapter 4). Henkel provides a helpful biographical sketch of each of them in the Appendix.

Though belonging to different generations of German thinkers, the four protagonists of this book are connected by strong biographical and intellectual links, which Henkel thoroughly investigates. Even Ploucquet, whose career appears to be independent of his predecessors, is nevertheless clearly influenced by the post-Wolffian metaphysical climate: his occasionalism bears the marks of Wolff's contributions to the debate (I will have something to say about this below). Thus, presenting these four authors as emblematic of German occasionalism and making them part of one story is a perfectly justified choice.

In several passages, Henkel also adumbrates a line of development in the period of intellectual history he investigates. He suggests that the trajectory of

German occasionalism gradually shifted from theory to practice: ‘We can observe a transition’, he writes, ‘from using occasionalism in metaphysics via natural philosophy to using it in psychology – a transition from the more theoretical to the more practical, from more metaphysically invested disciplines to more descriptive ones’ (2; see also 117 and 147–148, on Wolff and Ploucquet, respectively). He even suggests that this application ‘to more and more practical issues’ may have been ‘some kind of survival strategy’ for a metaphysical doctrine in an age of growing practical concerns. He also speculates that this may have been detrimental, since ‘by opening up to more practical issues occasionalism was outmanoeuvred by causal theories that were at least *prima facie* more easily compatible with the phenomena to be explained’ (156). Even setting these latter speculations aside, I do not see why shifting the discussion of occasional causes from ontological and cosmological issues to the domain of psychology should entail a transition from theory to practice. The psychological framework within which both Wolff and Ploucquet discussed occasionalism remained metaphysical and purely theoretical. Wolff strenuously denied (against his Pietist enemies, of course) that the choice to explain the soul-body union in terms of physical influx, occasional causes, or pre-established harmony had any practical implications: for him, these systems were merely philosophical hypotheses, all equivalent from a practical point of view.

Yet, Henkel is correct to emphasize the predominantly psychological nature of the eighteenth-century German debate on occasionalism – plausibly, an effect of the centrality acquired by psychology in Wolffian and post-Wolffian metaphysics. On the other hand, he fails to acknowledge the direct impact of this psychological shift on the historiography of occasionalism. His helpful overview of the relevant scholarship begins with mid-nineteenth-century French historiographers and claims that it was not until the 1860s that occasionalism made ‘its way into German history of philosophy’ (6). This perspective disregards the role of eighteenth-century German historiography in establishing the canonical picture of occasionalism as a purported solution to the mind-body problem. Following Leibniz, German thinkers primarily discussed the system of occasional causes in relation to the mind-body problem – that is, as one of the three systems available to metaphysically explain the phenomenon of psychophysical harmony. As mentioned elsewhere, this view was adopted as early as 1744 by Brucker’s *Historia critica philosophiae* (Favaretti Camposampiero, Priarolo, and Scribano 2018, 11). Thus, it is possible that nineteenth-century historiographers did not borrow their ‘psychophysical’ picture of occasionalism directly from Wolff and his followers, as Henkel suggests (6), but rather from their fellow historiographers of the previous century. Moreover, since this early historiography of philosophy was contemporary with the last period covered by Henkel’s book, it might have been helpful to consider its interplay with philosophical debates. For example, Ploucquet sought to revive occasionalism at a time when this doctrine had already become a topic in history of philosophy textbooks, and a particular interpretation of it had become established.

Other gaps are worth mentioning. Henkel’s book is not intended to provide an exhaustive overview of its subject matter, which is perfectly acceptable.

However, no attempt is made to at least define the scope of German occasionalism. Thus, the reader is left wondering whether the handful of works analyzed in the book are merely specimens of a wider philosophical trend or its main and nearly sole representatives. Especially the huge gap between the young Wolff's only occasionalist work (1703) and the young Ploucquet's only one (1753) raises an obvious question: during these fifty years, did no German philosopher endorse occasionalism? Did this doctrine survive only through the works of its critics? It is of course possible that Leibniz's and Wolff's harmonist campaigns were so successful in the German debate that pre-established harmony completely supplanted occasionalism as the main alternative to physical influx. However, the fact that both harmonists and influxionists continued to oppose the occasionalists suggests that they still perceived them as real enemies.

The period after 1703 is partially covered in the remainder of the chapter on Wolff, where Henkel outlines Wolff's endorsement of pre-established harmony and his mature critique of occasionalism. However, the section on Wolff's maturity spans more than twenty years of his philosophical activity, bringing together works such as the 1713 *German Logic* and the 1734 *Psychologia rationalis*, which belong to quite different phases of his intellectual trajectory. For example, Wolff's mature concept of possibility differs from the one he adopted in 1713, and his later position on infinite regress and the grounding of the world no longer aligns with that endorsed in the *German Metaphysics*. Henkel overlooks these changes (see 102 and 104, respectively), as well as the evolution of Wolff's critical account of occasionalism. A crucial step in this evolution, Wolff's (1718) report of his teaching (*Ratio praelectionum wolfianarum in mathesin et philosophiam universam*), is not even mentioned, despite being a primary source of information about his early occasionalism. In this work, Wolff connects this position to his early endorsement of the Cartesian doctrine of arbitrary essences (i.e. the creation of eternal truths), which he also rejected following Leibniz's intervention (Favaretti Camposampiero 2018a, 20–22). Henkel recognizes a potential connection between the two doctrines (see e.g. 98), but his failure to consider the *Ratio praelectionum* prevents him from explaining this association, which Wolff traces back to the theological doctrine of God's arbitrary will.

Wolff's *Ratio praelectionum* is also helpful in assessing the extent of his early occasionalism. In keeping with recent scholarship, Henkel emphasizes that an author's endorsement of occasionalism is also a matter of degree: while some French and Flemish philosophers 'subscribed to occasionalism across the board, that is, for all causal dimensions – body-body; body-mind; mind-body; the mind itself – others [...] preferred to limit their occasionalism to one or more of these causal dimensions' (7). Henkel applies this distinction to German occasionalists as well, thus singling out the young Wolff as the only German to reduce all bodily and mental activity to occasional causation: his 'occasionalism is wholesale and, therefore, more radical than that of his predecessors Weigel and Sturm' (117). I do not see sufficient evidence for this claim. The piece of evidence cited by Henkel (90) – namely, Wolff's assumption that 'our mind thinks and is aware of its thoughts because of [God's] will' (Wolff 1703: §12) – does not, by itself, strip the mind of all active power; nor does his analogy between minds and beings of

reason (our mind depends on God's will just as our *entia rationis* depend on our will). Of course, this analogy establishes our radical ontological dependence, but it also implies that our will is effective in producing beings of reason – i.e. mental contents – thereby disproving wholesale occasionalism. This is consistent with Wolff's delimitation of his early occasionalism in the *Ratio praelectionum*: in the 1703 dissertation, he writes, 'I made use of the *Cartesian* principles concerning the communication [*commercio*] between mind and body to establish some theses' (Wolff 1718: Sect. II, Ch. 2, §7). As concerns the mind, Wolff's adoption of occasionalist principles was limited to the psychophysical dimension. He denied transeunt causation over bodies and other minds, but not the existence of powers in the mind itself. On the contrary, he clearly asserted that in intellectual operations the mind 'exercises partly its judgment, partly its power [*vim*] of reasoning' (Wolff 1703: §6).

Let me now turn to the pre-Leibnizian era of German philosophy. Henkel's exclusive focus on Weigel and his circles in Jena and Altdorf raises the question of whether this was the sole avenue through which French occasionalism penetrated German universities and challenged their Aristotelian mainstream. Of course, it was not. Johannes Clauberg is the name that immediately comes to mind. His almost complete absence from this book is indeed striking (he is mentioned only twice briefly in the text and twice in the footnotes). Although the extent of Clauberg's endorsement of occasional causation remains controversial, he unquestionably belongs to the history of German occasionalism. Furthermore, given his well-known influence on Wolff, we cannot attribute Wolff's early reception of occasionalism solely to Weigel and Sturm. More likely, several trends of occasionalism were present in Germany at the end of the seventeenth century, and Wolff was receptive to more than one. My impression is that Henkel's book explores one branch of what Rainer Specht calls 'the ramified history of German occasionalism' (editor's excursus in Wolff and Specht 2019, 97). However, further research is needed to map and measure the penetration of occasionalism into German universities and culture.

In the concluding section, Henkel usefully takes stock of his investigation by outlining 'the common philosophical ground' (154) shared by the four authors under scrutiny. He lists four tenets: '(1) thin essences, (2) the notion of substancehood in terms of independent existence, (3) a rejection of Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy, and (4) concerns about a truly Christian worldview' (154). Interesting as it is, this conclusion invites another question: do these common features also *characterize* German occasionalism? More generally, are there any traits that distinguish this trend from 'classic' French occasionalism? Although this issue is not directly addressed, the chapter on Sturm suggests a possible answer by highlighting the Aristotelian elements in this author's effort 'to reconcile mechanical and scholastic philosophy' (75). Here again, a comparison with Clauberg might be helpful. At the same time, the possibility that some kind of scholastic legacy was characteristic of German occasionalism should caution us against describing the 'rejection of Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy' (see above) tout court as a common feature of German occasionalists.

Another issue is specifying the contents of this traditional background. For example, Henkel describes Sturm's commitment to final causes as the surprising adoption of an 'Aristotelian-scholastic position' (72), and concludes that 'Sturm retains finality as a central aspect of nature contra Descartes, but in line with the Aristotelians and Leibniz' (75). Of course, natural teleology was not Cartesian; however, post-Cartesian occasionalists were by no means strangers to conceiving of natural bodies as machines designed by the divine maker to perform their functions (Malebranche's preformation theory is a case in point). Therefore, before evoking the Aristotelians, it would be worth considering whether Sturm's finalism might simply have been borrowed from occasionalist sources.

The relationship between German and French occasionalism is also relevant to the reconstruction of the argument that Henkel ascribes to Sturm and refers to as 'the argument from spatio-temporal grounding' (59–65). According to Henkel, Sturm argues that the protracted existence of matter through infinite moments of time and infinite points in space requires existential grounding by an infinite power. 'Furthermore, since matter [...] can also be moved [...] the need for a ground that is itself infinitely powerful [...] is once again pressing' (62). This ground can only be God, 'the only being capable of supporting matter's infinite existence', and 'the only being capable of supporting matter's existence when it is being moved around' (63). Apart from the problem that this seems to be an argument for God's existence rather than for occasionalism, Henkel himself raises another difficulty: 'At this point, one might wonder whether and to what extent Sturm's *argument from spatio-temporal grounding* differs from the occasionalist version of the argument that God's conservation (of the world) is but continuous creation' (64). In my view, this problem stems from a misunderstanding. Sturm's argument does not aim to prove that God's infinite power conserves matter in existence through infinite points of time: this is what he simply takes for granted as a premise that anyone would admit ('Indeed, no one can have any doubt that ...': Sturm 1697, 161; quoted from Henkel: 62). Of course, this premise is merely the occasionalist doctrine of conservation as continuous creation. But the crux of the argument begins after this appeal to a well-established principle. It begins when Sturm argues that motion is just another 'mode of existence', whereby a part of matter exists not only at different points in time (which is simple conservation), but also at different points in space at different times: 'Hence, why do we not acknowledge that also this other mode of existence – the mode whereby matter or some parts of matter are observed to exist here, there, or elsewhere at different moments [*singulis momentis*], that is, to move – must be attributed solely to the same highest and most efficacious will?' (161; quoted from Henkel: 62, translation modified). My impression is that Henkel misses the core point of this argument: that motion is existence in different places and must therefore be treated on a par with conservation, namely as continuous creation; hence, no less than conservation, it requires an infinite cause. In the final analysis, the novelty of Sturm's argument lies in applying the argument from conservation as continuous creation to motion. To move is to be re-created elsewhere at every instant of time – something that can only be effected by God.

Concerning the use of secondary literature, some of the understandable gaps I have mentioned above could have been avoided by more careful engagement with past scholarship. For example, Mariano Campo's landmark monograph *Cristiano Wolff e il razionalismo precritico* remains an essential reference on several aspects of Wolff's thought – notably, his intellectual background and early works. This book includes an important section on 'The Occasionalism of *De loquela*' ('L'occasionalismo del *De loquela*': Campo 1939, 1:256–264). My 2009 book also features a chapter on Wolff's *De loquela* and its occasionalist account of linguistic communication, along with a lengthy reconstruction of how the post-Cartesian debate on language – specifically, what I call occasionalist semiology – influenced Wolff's reception and reformulation of Leibniz's theory of symbolic cognition (Favaretti Camposampiero 2009, 73–159, 499–512). Thus, although Henkel correctly observes that 'Wolff's position regarding occasionalism (unlike other aspects of his philosophy) has received little scholarly attention', his claim that three contributions alone (Specht 1985; Favaretti Camposampiero 2017, and Specht's commentary in Wolff and Specht 2019) 'by and large exhaust the existing literature' on this subject (87) is inaccurate.

Finally, I must strike a blow for my own interpretation. While Henkel embraces my thesis regarding the role of causal closure in both Leibniz's and Wolff's critique of occasionalism (98–99, 116–117; see Favaretti Camposampiero 2018b), he rejects my idea that Wolff's late discussion of occasionalism is intended less as a historically faithful account of this doctrine and more as a form of rational reconstruction. One of the main points I emphasized is that, in Wolff's version of the system of occasional causes, souls possess a causal power responsible for producing their perceptions, while God merely determines the perceptual content. Henkel relegates this issue to an endnote and presents it as follows:

I need to point out one complication: [...] According to Wolff, every mind-body system accepts that the soul has a representative force (*Rational Psychology*, §547). This leads Wolff at a certain point (*Rational Psychology*, §598) to believe that even in occasionalism God concurs with the mind's force and steers it as is necessary. While this 'slip' of Wolff has led Favaretti Camposampiero (2017) to argue that Wolff ultimately offers a 'rational reconstruction' of a modified or corrected occasionalism wherein substances have forces, I do not think that Wolff eventually does so. (128, n. 93)

As I showed in my paper, this 'complication' first appeared nearly a decade before the 1734 *Rational Psychology*. As early as 1724, Wolff outlined his proposal for improving occasionalism by making occasional causation compatible with the recognition of the inalienable active power of substances: '[W]e can very much improve [*verbessern*] Descartes's system if we ascribe to the soul a force that brings about all that happens in the soul itself in a natural way' (Wolff 1724, §276; see also §269). Here, Wolff already explains in detail how this amelioration can address the main shortcomings of the system of occasional causes, particularly with regard to its intelligibility and theological respectability. In 1734, he devoted eight sections of

*Rational Psychology* (§§598–605) to fully developing this emended version of occasionalism, presenting it as the only way to reconcile this system with the sound (i.e. Wolffian) theory of the soul. *Pace* Henkel, all this textual evidence shows that Wolff’s emendation of occasionalism is not a mere ‘slip’ but rather an intentional, long-considered, and thoroughly implemented strategy.

Henkel raises three objections to my interpretation. First, he mentions ‘the fact that inconsistencies with Wolff’s prior definition would arise – and definitions do not change for Wolff’ (128–129, n. 93). Henkel is presumably alluding to Wolff’s definition of occasional causes as ‘those which are deprived of their own force to act, but give God occasion to act’ (Wolff 1734, §590). However, the alleged inconsistency also arises in Henkel’s interpretation, when he claims that Wolff ‘believe[s] that even in occasionalism God concurs with the mind’s force’ (see above): for how could this belief be consistent with the definition of occasional causes as powerless? The point is that Wolff did not ‘believe’ anything so wrong concerning historical occasionalism. He was able to distinguish between what the occasionalists actually said (‘occasional causes are powerless’) and what they should have said (‘the soul is essentially endowed with power’) in order for their system to be metaphysically acceptable. Far from creating an inconsistency, my interpretation avoids one by distinguishing between actual, historical occasionalism on the one hand, and its ideal, emended version on the other: although Wolff was perfectly aware that the former ascribed no power to secondary causes (hence the definition just mentioned), his mature account of occasionalism focuses on the latter, which includes creaturely powers as part of the system.

Second, Henkel claims that ‘Favaretti’s reading renders less intelligible how to understand Wolff’s critique of occasionalism at the end of Chapter 3 (Section 3.5) of the *Rational Psychology*’ (129, n. 93). Quite on the contrary, my reading makes the final part of this chapter perfectly consistent with Wolff’s overall strategy. After demonstrating how occasionalism can incorporate the assumption that substances possess powers, Wolff shows that even this best possible version of the system ultimately fails (§§606–608) because of its violation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Finally, he presents two arguments in favor of his emended version: in §609, he contends that the ascription of a force to the soul is (no less) compatible with God’s action (than the traditional occasionalist tenet that substances are powerless); in §610, he argues that this ascription solves the problem of free will, which plagued the traditional version of occasionalism. ‘If the soul is deprived of all active force [...], it does not seem the freedom of the will can be safe’ (Wolff 1734, §610). Thus, I think that the final part of Wolff’s chapter actually poses a problem for Henkel’s reading, not for mine – unless, of course, we dismiss all references to the active force of substances as mere ‘slips’. But if we decide that the ascription of power to the soul is merely a slip, then we must consider most of Wolff’s treatment of occasionalism in the *Rational Psychology* to be based on a mistake. Would this be a charitable reading?

Third, Henkel remarks that ‘Wolff himself also did not attribute a force to the soul in occasionalism when discussing this system in the *German Metaphysics* (§764)’ (129, n. 93). I agree, but this is consistent with my claim that Wolff’s emendation strategy first appeared in the 1724 *Annotations on German Metaphysics*, four years after the *German Metaphysics* was published. This is not surprising, because the 1724 work contains several novelties compared to the earlier one. In the 1720s, Wolff’s thought was still evolving. Thus, I do not see why this difference between the two works should undermine my reading.

I would even venture that Henkel’s book offers some interesting indirect support for my interpretation. In Chapter 4, Henkel notes that Ploucquet’s occasionalism is limited to the psychophysical dimension – that is, it is only used to explain the soul’s perceptions and the body’s voluntary motions. When it comes to purely mental activities such as abstract thought, Ploucquet ascribes the action to the mind itself, which he regards as endowed with an active principle or force (144). Whereas he denies real transeunt causation, he admits some immanent, intramental causation (138). Henkel correctly reports this position, yet he leaves it unexplained. In my view, a possible explanation could come precisely from my interpretation of Wolff. If I am correct, it is Wolff who theorized an occasionalist system in which the soul nevertheless possesses an active power – something that would be anathema in Malebranche’s occasionalism (Ploucquet’s only explicit reference). In a sense, Ploucquet appears to have taken Wolff’s proposal seriously: in developing his own system, he followed Wolff’s model of an emended occasionalism, purged of the error of positing powerless, inert minds.

The issues I have touched upon are but a small selection of the variety of topics discussed by Henkel. One of the book’s chief merits is indeed its ability to provide a fine-grained yet essentially coherent picture of the multifaceted philosophical phenomenon of German occasionalism. Another merit is its potential to revive the research on early modern occasionalism by stirring debate and suggesting new lines of investigation. Henkel concludes by warning readers that his book ‘is meant to spark increased future discussions’ rather than deliver ‘the final word’ on the subject (157). May this critical notice add a few more sparks.

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Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero  
 Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy  
 [matteo.favaretti@unive.it](mailto:matteo.favaretti@unive.it)

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