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# ON THREE VARIETIES OF CONCURRENTISM AND THE VIRTUES OF THE MODERATE VERSION

Timothy D. Miller

Concurrentist views concerning Divine and secondary causes seek to establish both that secondary causes are fundamentally dependent upon God (contra deism) and that they make genuine, non-superfluous causal contributions (contra occasionalism). However, traditional (or strong) concurrentism struggles to establish a genuine, non-superfluous role for secondary causes, while weak concurrentism (aka, mere conservationism) has been accused of amounting to a sort of “weak deism” that grants too much independence to created beings. This essay introduces a *moderate* concurrentist alternative and argues that it preserves the most important benefits of the strong and weak varieties, while avoiding their most familiar difficulties.

Understanding the relationship between God’s role as primary cause and the contributions of created, secondary causes is among the most fundamental and difficult problems of theistic metaphysics. The present essay begins (section 1) by briefly discussing two opposing positions most theists have wished to avoid: deism and occasionalism. Next (section 2), it turns to the intermediate views that have garnered the most attention in the literature: traditional concurrentism and mere conservationism, or, as I will refer to them, Strong Concurrentism (SC) and Weak Concurrentism (WC).<sup>1</sup> Each of these views has been criticized for failing to adequately differentiate itself from one of the more extreme views. There is reason to suspect that SC fails to carve out a genuine, non-superfluous role for secondary causes; hence, the course it charts seems much too close to occasionalism. WC, on the other hand, has been criticized for offering an inadequate account of God’s sovereignty over the course of natural events that amounts to a sort of “weak deism.” In the remainder of the paper, I will introduce (section 3) and defend (section 4) an alternative *moderate* concurrentist position (MC) that falls between WC and SC, capturing each view’s

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<sup>1</sup>I introduced SC and WC as labels for concurrentism and mere conservationism in my “Continuous Creation and Secondary Causation.” Plantinga (“Law, Cause, and Occasionalism,” 134) refers to *mere conservationism* (aka WC) as *strong secondary causalism*.



most significant benefits while avoiding their most familiar difficulties. More specifically, I will attempt to show that MC carves out a genuine, non-superfluous role for secondary causes in a way that is comparable to WC, while preserving God's sovereignty over the course of natural events in a way that is nearly as robust as SC.

### 1. Two Poles: Deism and Occasionalism

Although the term *deism* often functions as a pejorative that carries a variety of irreligious connotations, I am using it here in a more neutral, descriptive sense to refer to the view that God's causal contribution is, in ordinary<sup>2</sup> circumstances, limited to having caused the existence of the world at the first moment of its existence. According to deism, the created world has a sort of contingent *ontological* and *functional* autonomy; that is, although its existence is contingent upon God's having initially created it, once the world exists no further divine actions are required either to conserve its existence or to cooperate with secondary causes. Thus, deism minimizes God's causal contributions and maximizes those of created beings. By contrast, occasionalism maximizes God's causal role by denying any genuine role for secondary causes. Malebranche introduces occasionalism as the view that "there is only one true cause because there is only one true God; that the nature or power of each thing is nothing but the will of God."<sup>3</sup> One of Malebranche's most influential lines of argument for occasionalism takes the doctrine of continuous creation as its starting point. He contended that God cannot create contingent beings, such as chairs or billiard balls, without giving them a complete and determinate set of properties—a certain size, shape, location, and so forth. Hence, if a chair's persistence depends upon God's continually creating it from one moment to the next, then God's causal contributions through creation will be so universal and complete that there can be nothing left over for secondary causes to account for.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The qualifier is significant here. *Deism*, as I am construing it, is not committed to denying the possibility of miracles, special revelation, and/or immortality; however, it does entail that God's bringing about such phenomena would require special "interventions." By contrast, in the ordinary course of natural events, deism insists that there is no need for God's constant involvement. In my stipulated sense, deism is closely related to the view Beaudoin ("The World's Continuance") refers to as the Doctrine of Existential Inertia, which bears the aptly deistic acronym (DEI).

<sup>3</sup>Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 448. For present purposes, I focus on a pure form of occasionalism that applies to all types of purported causal interaction. As much recent scholarship has shown, many historical occasionalists accepted various impure forms of the doctrine that endorse occasionalist analyses of some, but not all, types of causal interaction. For helpful treatments of some of these historical complexities, see Nadler, *Occasionalism*; and Platt, *One True Cause*.

<sup>4</sup>See Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, 115–117. For an account of how Malebranche uses this argument in his attempt to convince scholastic readers to convert from concurrentism to occasionalism see my "Malebranche on General Volitions," section 5.

Traditional theists have generally wished to avoid each of these extremes. For much of history, deism has been regarded as barely worth distinguishing from atheism; even if that judgement is not entirely fair to deists, the fact remains that deism has not been regarded as an acceptable view for those concerned with maintaining any sort of theological orthodoxy to endorse.<sup>5</sup> Occasionalism, on the other hand, has had some prominent advocates among more orthodox figures, including, most notably, Malebranche and Jonathan Edwards. Nevertheless, occasionalism has always been a minority view, and it is regarded by many as a position to be avoided at all costs.<sup>6</sup> Philip Quinn, for example, described occasionalism as “ugly” and “repugnant” and took pains to establish that his account of continuous creation could avoid it.<sup>7</sup> If deism is typically charged with the error of granting creation too much independence from God, van Inwagen suggests that occasionalism errs by “devaluing” created beings, rendering them so utterly and completely dependent that they are left more “shadow” than “substance.” I suspect that he expresses the sentiments of many when he characterizes occasionalism as “one of those high-minded philosophical deprecations of God’s works that come disguised as compliments to God’s person.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The Standard Alternatives: Strong and Weak Concurrentism

Although most theists have wished to avoid the extremes of deism and occasionalism, the task of finding a satisfactory intermediate position presents its own set of challenges. The debate has focused primarily on SC and WC. Both positions reject deism’s claim that created beings are *ontologically* independent after the initial creation, affirming instead that God’s continued creative activity is required to conserve their existence over time. Furthermore, both views hold that God creates and conserves beings with genuine causal powers. However, they are divided over whether created things have any sort of *functional* autonomy in their exercise of those powers.

### 2.1 Strong Concurrentism and its Difficulties

It seems natural to suppose that avoiding occasionalism and carving out a non-superfluous role for secondary causes will require placing some

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<sup>5</sup>Beaudoin (“The World’s Continuance,” 90 and 98) defends the scientific and philosophical viability of his deistic Doctrine of Existential Inertia, although he allows for the possibility of “dogmatic theological grounds” for rejecting it.

<sup>6</sup>That said, occasionalism has had contemporary proponents, including: McCann & Kvanvig, “The Occasionalist Proselytizer”; Plantinga, “Law, Cause, and Occasionalism”; Schultz, “Dispositions, Capacities, and Powers”; Schultz & D’Andrea-Winslow, “Causation, Dispositions, and Physical Occasionalism”; Vallicella, “Concurrentism or Occasionalism?”; and Vallicella, “God, Causation, and Occasionalism.”

<sup>7</sup>See Quinn, “Divine Conservation, Secondary Causes, and Occasionalism,” 72–73. However, I have contended that Quinn’s argument is only partly successful (see “Continuous Creation and Secondary Causation”).

<sup>8</sup>van Inwagen, “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God,” 215–216n4.

sort of limitations on God's causal contributions. However, proponents of traditional<sup>9</sup> SC have denied that any such limitation of the scope of Divine causation is necessary. Since SC insists that creatures are incapable of accomplishing anything apart from God's *specific* cooperation, it rejects the notion that creatures have any sort of *functional* autonomy in exercising their powers. Whenever secondary causes act—when fire heats water, a billiard ball strikes another and moves it, etc.—their effects must be jointly and *directly* caused both by God and by secondary causes in a way that involves no division of labor. God and the fire cooperate, not by each producing different parts or aspects of the water's heat, but rather, by both bringing about the *entire effect*. W. Matthews Grant has recently introduced the hyphenated "co-operate" as a technical term to refer to SC's notion of cooperation without division of labor.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he contends that such co-operation allows SC to affirm what he calls the doctrine of Divine Universal Causality (DUC).

(DUC) Necessarily, for any entity distinct from God, God directly causes that entity to exist at any time that it exists.<sup>11</sup>

To emphasize just how *universal* DUC takes God's contributions to be, Grant clarifies that it employs *entity* "as a generic term covering positive ontological items of any sort, including substance, subject, accident, attribute, feature, trope, property, matter, form, essence, act of existence, state, action, etc."<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, this notion of co-operation makes it rather difficult to see how two of SC's most fundamental claims concerning secondary causes can be reconciled and, thus, it threatens to render SC inconsistent. SC asserts *both* that,

SC<sub>1</sub> Secondary causes make genuine, non-superfluous causal contributions;  
and that,

SC<sub>2</sub> Secondary causes can accomplish nothing at all without God's specific concurrence.

The difficulty of reconciling these claims derives from the fact that causal powers are typically differentiated by their manifestations.<sup>13</sup> If God and

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<sup>9</sup>For present purposes, I will focus on the scholastic concurrentist tradition, particularly as it has been interpreted and defended by Alfred Freddoso and W. Matthews Grant. There are other concurrentist veins that could be mined for insights, such as those found in Leibniz's writings. However, it would be difficult to pursue them without getting entangled in the deep interpretive disagreements concerning Leibniz's concurrentism and its relationship to the rest of his metaphysics; for an illustrative sampling of those interpretive disputes, see Lee, "Leibniz on Divine Concurrence"; McDonough, "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence"; and Whipple, "Leibniz on Divine Concurrence."

<sup>10</sup>Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*, 39.

<sup>11</sup>Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*, 4.

<sup>12</sup>Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*, 184n29.

<sup>13</sup>Causal power theorists are somewhat divided concerning how to think about manifestations. Some contend that most effects are complex and involve the manifestations of multiple powers; hence, a power's manifestation should be thought of as a particular kind

secondary causes co-operate without division of labor, each must be capable of bringing about the *entire effect*; thus, secondary causes must possess each *kind* of causal power the manifested effect requires. (How else, after all, could the secondary cause produce the *entire effect*?) But if secondary causes make genuine, non-superfluous contributions (as per SC<sub>1</sub>) and their contributions include all the kinds of power the effect requires, then SC<sub>2</sub>'s insistence that they must *always* stand in need of God's *specific* assistance—i.e., assistance with the very contributions made by their own powers—is left utterly unmotivated and inexplicable.<sup>14</sup>

In response to this sort of concern, most advocates of SC have offered little more than defensive appeals to the unique and mysterious nature of divine action.<sup>15</sup> They have yet to offer a plausible model of co-operation that would explain how God could concur with secondary causes in a way that satisfies both SC<sub>1</sub> and SC<sub>2</sub>. Perhaps the most concrete proposal to date has been from Freddoso, who suggests that if concurrentism is to avoid cooperation by division of labor in a way that also avoids rendering either God's or secondary causes' contributions superfluous, then "[t]he only viable way to proceed, it seems, is to trace certain features of the effect primarily to God and certain other features primarily to the secondary agents."<sup>16</sup> However, *pace* Freddoso, this proposal's viability seems rather dubious. If two agents are both credited with causing an *entire effect*, then each agent must be at least *partly* responsible for the aspects attributed *primarily* to the other agent. Hence, both agents must exercise the *kinds* of causal power manifested in those aspects, and the difference between their contributions can only be one of degree. But in that case, it would seem that the basis of their co-operative action must be grounded in their need for more of the same kind(s) of power they already possess, and such models of co-operation cannot satisfy SC<sub>2</sub>'s demand that assistance should

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of contribution to an effect; see, e.g., Mumford, "Causal Powers and Capacities," 269; and Molnar, *Powers*, 195. Others defend the simpler view that a power's manifestation can be understood as essentially equivalent to an *effect*; for a defense of the latter view, along with a critical discussion of Mumford and Molnar's view, see McKittrick, "Manifestations as Effects"; and *Dispositional Pluralism*, ch. 5.

<sup>14</sup>I defended this criticism of strong concurrentism, which Grant has dubbed "The Metaphysical Objection," in my "Continuous Creation and Secondary Causation," 7–9.

<sup>15</sup>For Grant's response to the metaphysical objection see *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*, ch. 3; and "Divine Universal Causality without Occasionalism." For a more detailed development of the objection, as well as reasons to think that Grant's responses ultimately amount to an illegitimate appeal to mystery, see my "'The Metaphysical Objection' and Concurrentist Co-operation." For a similar critique of recent defenses of concurrentism that have arisen within the literature related to the Divine Action Project, see Kittle, "God is (Probably) a Cause Among Other Causes."

<sup>16</sup>Freddoso, "Pitfalls and Prospects," 145; cf. his "Introduction," xcvi in Suárez, *On Creation, Conservation, and Concurrence*. Freddoso's work predates my articulation of the metaphysical objection, so it does not respond to it directly. However, since he addresses similar criticisms of concurrentism that were raised by Durandus, it is conceptually appropriate, even if anachronistic, to treat parts of his defense of concurrentism as a response to that objection.

*always* be needed. For example, if two individuals jointly lift an object, one of them providing 80% of the required force and the other only 20%, it would be entirely appropriate to say that the first individual was *primarily* (but not *entirely*) responsible for its being lifted.<sup>17</sup> However, an agent that can provide 80% (or even 20%) of the force required to lift a heavy object would be capable of lifting many lighter objects without assistance.<sup>18</sup>

Freddoso's solution has the appearance of a thinly veiled attempt to have it both ways. On the one hand, he recognizes that if different features of the effect were attributed *entirely* or *exclusively* to God and others *entirely* or *exclusively* to secondary agents, then SC will have fallen prey to the pitfall of splitting the effect and embracing cooperation by division of labor.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he also seems to recognize that some such distinction is needed if one cause or the other is to avoid being rendered superfluous. The stipulation that certain aspects of the effect are traceable *primarily* (but not *entirely*) to one agent or the other is seemingly designed to allow concurrentism to help itself to the theoretical benefits of dividing the effect, all the while maintaining that it has not technically been divided. Nevertheless, since it appears that this convenient stipulation must ultimately reduce to a mere difference of degree, it is difficult to see how it could yield a model of co-operation that can satisfy SC<sub>2</sub>. Unless and until strong concurrentists can provide a model of concurrentist co-operation that satisfies all of SC's demands, there is reason to doubt the consistency of their position.

## 2.2 Weak Concurrentism

According to WC, God creates and conserves entities with natures that include their essential causal powers. However, since the causal powers God sustains in created entities are adequate in themselves to bring about many of the changes that occur in the world, WC denies that God needs to be directly and specifically involved in the production of those changes. Of course, there is still a sense in which every effect is a joint production of both God and secondary causes on this view; however, unlike SC, WC conceives of God and secondary agents as cooperating through a fundamental sort of division of labor. God must continually conserve

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<sup>17</sup>Freddoso ("Pitfalls and Prospects," 149) offers an example of two persons jointly lifting the back end of a car over a ridge of ice in the driveway. He suggests that the individual lifting at the right side is *primarily* responsible for the right wheel's being a certain distance off the ground, and likewise for the other individual and the left wheel. But this slightly more complex example suffers from the same difficulty as my simpler example. As long as the other agent's force is still *partly* responsible for the aspects of the effect in question, it seems that the *primacy* of one of the contributions will reduce to a difference of degree.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. my "Continuous Creation and Secondary Causation," 9; and "'The Metaphysical Objection' and Concurrentist Co-operation."

<sup>19</sup>Freddoso notes this point explicitly ("Pitfalls and Prospects," 145), although in a later essay ("Suárez on God's Causal Involvement in Sinful Acts," 14) he seems to treat the *exclusive* and *primary* versions of the strategy as equally viable options.

the existence of created beings with their causal powers, but those beings function autonomously in the exercise of their powers. In contrast to the *specific* cooperation referred to in  $SC_2$ , we might say that WC affirms that secondary causes stand in need of God's *generic* cooperation. Thus, WC joins SC in affirming  $SC_1$ , but it rejects  $SC_2$  in favor of  $WC_2$ :

$WC_2$  Secondary causes can accomplish nothing at all without God's generic concurrence.

Unlike  $SC_2$ ,  $WC_2$  seems straightforwardly compatible with  $SC_1$ . Since God's *generic* concurrence is simply a matter of sustaining the existence of secondary causes (i.e., of agents with their causal powers) and does not involve God's specifically and directly causing the very effects those causal powers produce, it is easy enough to see how such concurrence can *always* be required without its rendering the contributions of secondary causes superfluous. Furthermore, it allows WC to resist Malebranche's move from continuous creation to occasionalism by rejecting his claim that God must continually create objects with a complete and determinate set of properties. On the weak concurrentist picture, God simply conserves beings with their natural causal powers and allows the operations of those powers to determine the rest of the attributes created beings possess. Thus, when fire produces heat in a pot of water, God directly conserves the fire, the pot, and the water with their respective powers, but the water's heat is directly caused by the fire alone, and God's role in its production is entirely mediated and indirect.

Despite its apparent theoretical advantages, WC has had relatively few adherents. Indeed, Durandus of Saint-Pourçain (1275–1334) is commonly cited as its only historically significant proponent,<sup>20</sup> although Gloria Frost has recently shown that Peter Olivi (ca. 1248–98) also defended WC.<sup>21</sup> Even among contemporary thinkers, explicit endorsements of WC are relatively rare, although if Freddoso is correct to claim that WC "has enjoyed the status of an unspoken and unsupported assumption among some recent Christian thinkers" it may have more adherents than its short list of "on-the-record" devotees would suggest.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, Freddoso cautions that "almost all the important figures in the history of philosophical theology have rejected it as philosophically deficient and theologically 'unsafe.'"<sup>23</sup>

### 3. From Weak Concurrentism to a Moderate Alternative

Although I am not convinced that it is either as philosophically flawed or as theologically dangerous as strong concurrentists have alleged, for

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<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Freddoso, "Why Conservation is not Enough," 555; and "Pitfalls and Prospects," 134.

<sup>21</sup>See Frost, "Peter Olivi's Rejection of God's Concurrence with Created Causes."

<sup>22</sup>van Inwagen ("The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God") is, perhaps, its most notable advocate.

<sup>23</sup>Freddoso, "Why Conservation is not Enough," 555.



present purposes I will not attempt to defend WC's viability. Instead, I want to consider whether there might be a viable alternative position that has been generally overlooked in the discussions to date. After all, there is quite a bit of space between the extremes of deism and occasionalism, so it would be somewhat surprising if SC and WC exhausted the possible intermediate positions. I will begin by briefly considering some of the more theological considerations that have motivated strong concurrentists to reject WC. I will then introduce an intermediate form of concurrentism that satisfies those theological concerns while avoiding SC's theoretical difficulties. Thus, I will attempt to show that even if one is convinced by the theological objections to WC, they need not motivate a commitment to SC.

### 3.1 *Sovereignty, Contra Naturam Miracles, and the Breadth of Divine Power*

Theological objections to WC have focused on the general theme of God's sovereignty over nature. One objection, offered by both Molina and Suárez and defended in the contemporary literature by Freddoso, concerns the category of miracles Aquinas labeled *contra naturam*. In such miracles, God produces effects that are contrary to those secondary causes would typically produce. For example, under normal circumstances fire is naturally disposed to burn and destroy human flesh. Thus, in the commonly cited scriptural example, when God preserves Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, God produces an effect that is contrary to the fire's natural powers. It seems that SC and WC must offer quite different accounts of how God might bring about such miracles, and strong concurrentists claim that their account is superior.

Since WC grants functional autonomy to secondary causes, *contra naturam* miracles would seem to require some sort of *ad hoc* intervention on God's part. God might, for example, temporarily sustain the fire without some of its usual capacities; however, if those powers are essential to the fire, this option might not involve God's conserving the *fire* at all, but rather replacing it with a sort of simulacrum. Alternatively, weak concurrentists might conjecture that God could bring about the miracle by conserving the boys' bodies with some unusual heat resistant capabilities they do not normally possess; yet, once again, there is the worry that the addition of such capabilities would not be a way of conserving the boys' *human bodies*, but rather of temporarily replacing those bodies with something superficially similar, but of an essentially different nature. Perhaps instead of altering the natural abilities of either the fire or the boys' bodies, weak concurrentists must suppose that God temporarily creates some sort of barrier around the boys that protects them while allowing both the fire and their bodies to retain their usual causal capacities. Regardless of exactly how the effect is accomplished, accommodating *contra naturam* miracles within WC seems to require God's intervening in some way to work against or overpower the natural powers God typically sustains within created beings. Molina asserts that such an approach "derogates both the divine power and also the total subjection by which all things

submit to and obey that power"<sup>24</sup> and Freddoso suggests that casting God in such a role would be "demeaning to God's sovereignty over the created world."<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, SC's account of how God might accomplish such miracles is remarkable for its simplicity. After all, since SC denies that secondary causes can accomplish anything without God's specific concurrence with their actions, *contra naturam* miracles require nothing more than withholding concurrence. Since fire cannot burn anything unless God concurs with it in causing that effect, all God must do to protect the boys in the furnace is abstain from concurring with the fire's actions upon them. As Freddoso emphasizes, rather than conceiving of God as "counteracting" the actions of secondary causes "from without," SC allows God to, as it were, "control them from within" by withholding the assistance they essentially require.<sup>26</sup>

Freddoso notes that the objection from *contra naturam* miracles can be understood in two ways. On a strong construal, the objection is meant to show that God *must* be able to bring about such miracles by withholding concurrence from the secondary causes; thus, WC, or any other theory that denies that possibility should be rejected as offering an inadequate and theologically unacceptable account of God's sovereignty. However, this strong construal of the objection is unconvincing. After all, WC and SC equally affirm God's ability to bring about *contra naturam* miracles; thus, although they offer competing accounts of *how* God might exercise sovereign control over nature, God's sovereignty would seem to have the very same breadth on both theories. Why, then, should WC's account of God's sovereignty be rejected as decisively inadequate? However, there is a more modest construal of the objection that may still have some force. On this version, the objection aims to establish only the modest comparative claim that SC's account of God's sovereignty is preferable to WC's; thus, if other considerations are equal, we should incline towards SC.

This modest construal of the *contra naturam* miracle argument is closely related to another, which Suárez regarded as "the best argument" for preferring SC. Even if both views grant God sovereign control over the same class of events, they accomplish that result through sharply contrasting approaches to God's causal contributions. On WC, aside from God's *generic* concurrence of conserving creatures with their powers, God typically makes no *specific* contributions to their effects; events such as *contra naturam* miracles would be exceptional precisely because God specially intervenes in those rare instances. By contrast, on SC every effect requires a specific causal contribution from God, and *contra naturam* miracles are exceptional because God's specific contributions are *withheld* in those cases. Suárez suggests that SC's construal of God as "acting in and with

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<sup>24</sup>Luis de Molina, *Concordia*, pt. II, disp. 25, § 15, as quoted in Freddoso, "Why Conservation is not Enough," 574.

<sup>25</sup>Freddoso, "Why Conservation is not Enough," 573. This objection to WC is also defended by Page, "The Dispositionist Deity," 123–124.

<sup>26</sup>Freddoso, "Why Conservation is not Enough," 575.

all agents pertains to the breadth of the divine power, and on God's part it presupposes a perfection untainted by imperfection"; hence, he contends that since (as he claims to have shown) there is nothing impossible in SC's construal of divine action, it "should not be denied to God."<sup>27</sup> Freddoso concisely summarizes Suárez's argument as suggesting that "theistic naturalists should be antecedently disposed to countenance in nature the maximal degree of divine activity compatible with the thesis that there is genuine secondary causation."<sup>28</sup> Thus, we should be presumptively disposed to prefer SC over WC.

Although I am willing to concede that these two arguments carry some intuitive force, I am doubtful (for reasons discussed in section 2.1 above) that SC succeeds in giving secondary causes a genuine, non-superfluous causal role. Other things being equal, the fact that it offers a more satisfying explanation of *contra naturam* miracles and a more robust account of God's sovereign control over nature may count as reasons to prefer SC; nevertheless, it seems unlikely that other things really are equal. However, note that even if my doubts about SC are warranted, that may not automatically blunt the force of these two arguments as objections to WC. If there were a viable alternative in the space between WC and SC, those objections may provide reason to prefer that intermediate position over WC.

### 3.2 A Moderate Concurrentist Alternative

Some of Grant's and Freddoso's remarks concerning SC seem to point toward the possibility of such an intermediate position. For example, when Grant elaborates upon the universality of God's causal contributions, he suggests that God is causally involved in three distinct ways any time God and a secondary cause co-operatively produce an effect. In each such instance, God directly causes:

- (i) the existence of the secondary agent (with its causal powers); and
- (ii) the secondary agent's act of causing the effect (i.e., the exercise of its causal powers); and
- (iii) the effect itself (which God brings about in co-operation with the secondary agent's exercise of its causal powers).<sup>29</sup>

WC affirms God's causal involvement in (i); but it contends that having given genuine powers to creatures, God's involvement in (ii) and (iii) is unnecessary. By contrast, strong concurrentist views such as Grant's Non-Occasionalist version of DUC (NODUC) insist on God's universal

<sup>27</sup>Suárez, *On Creation, Conservation, and Concurrence*, 157.

<sup>28</sup>Freddoso, "Why Conservation is Not Enough," 577.

<sup>29</sup>E.g., Grant states that "in knowing God's causal activity, one would also know all the casual activity involved in the thing's production . . . the object of God's causal activity includes not only the thing in question but also the secondary cause that produced it and the secondary cause's act of causing it" (*Free Will and God's Universal Causality*, 40).

involvement in (i), (ii), and (iii). The possibility of an intermediate view seems straightforward. Between WC's endorsement of (i) by itself and SC's endorsement of (i), (ii), and (iii), there is at least logical space for a position that would affirm both (i) and (ii), while rejecting (iii) and the conceptual difficulties it brings (see section 2.1 above).<sup>30</sup> According to such a view, God creates and conserves secondary agents with their causal powers and also, in some sense, causes those agents to exercise their powers. However, since the powers God grants secondary agents are genuine, the intermediate view would deny that there is any need for God's direct involvement in producing their effects. I will refer to the view that occupies this intermediate position as *Moderate Concurrentism* (MC).

Several considerations seem to count in MC's favor. First, it ought to appeal to anyone who doubts that SC manages to preserve a genuine, non-superfluous role for secondary causes, but nevertheless shares SC's desire to give God the maximal causal role in nature compatible with genuine, non-superfluous secondary causation. Even if some ground must be ceded to make room for secondary causes, WC may cede more than is necessary. Second, although strong concurrentists like Grant and Freddoso explicitly affirm their commitment to (iii), they have each made statements that seem to imply that (iii) should be unnecessary or, at least, that it is (ii) which is most essential to concurrentism. For example, at one point Freddoso explains that a "secondary agent . . . cannot act at all or communicate *esse* to any effect independently of God's general concurrence, since its power, *even if sufficient for the effect within the order of secondary causes*, needs God's concurrence *in order to be exercised*."<sup>31</sup> If it is granted that secondary causes might be sufficient for their effects, that naturally suggests that God's involvement in (iii) would be superfluous; what the final clause of Freddoso's remark emphasizes instead is (ii)'s requirement of divine concurrence for the *exercise* of their powers. When Grant attempts to clarify how and why secondary causes should always require God's assistance, he also places the emphasis on (ii): "[t]he kind of causal power that secondary causes enjoy on [NODUC] is real, but *its exercise* is conditional; it is not possible for the power *to be exercised* without God's concurrence, but with God's concurrence, it *is exercised*, such that secondary causes truly bring about their effects."<sup>32</sup>

Although Grant and Freddoso have little to say concerning how God concurs with secondary causes in causing the exercise of their powers, I think the growing contemporary literature on dispositions and causal powers suggests at least one potentially fruitful way of thinking about

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<sup>30</sup>As I will discuss in more detail in section 4.4 below, this moderate position bears some similarities to what Frost calls the "application version" of the "augmentation of power" model of concurrentism; see "Peter Olivi's Rejection of God's Concurrence with Created Causes," 664–665 and 669–671.

<sup>31</sup>Freddoso, "Suárez on God's Causal Involvement in Sinful Acts," 15 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup>Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*, 42 (emphasis added).

it. A defining feature of dispositional properties—e.g., a vase's *fragility*, salt's *solubility*, and gasoline's *flammability*—is that they need not be manifested to be possessed; the salt in my cupboard is and will remain *soluble*, regardless of whether it ever makes its way into a pot of pasta water or soup. Dispositions are typically manifested only under certain conditions, referred to as their *triggering*, *enabling*, or *activating* conditions, among other names. Salt's being poured into a pot of boiling water activates its solubility, and a vase's being struck by a blunt object or dropped on a hard surface triggers the manifestation of its fragility.

Note, moreover, how natural it is to think of triggering conditions as causing a disposition to be manifested; it seems entirely appropriate to say that a spark can cause gasoline to ignite, that dumping a spoonful of salt into a pot of soup causes it to be dissolved, etc. Thus, it might be helpful to think about God's role in causing powers or dispositions to be *exercised* (ii) as analogous to the role of a triggering condition; perhaps we might even drop the hedging talk of analogy here and simply say that divine concurrence just *is* a type of triggering condition. If dispositions are properties that are manifested only when their activating conditions are satisfied, then it might prove helpful to think about God's concurrence with secondary causes as a sort of *supernatural* activating condition that, in addition to the various *natural* activating conditions, is a universal prerequisite for the exercise of any secondary agent's power. On such a view, divine concurrence would function as a sort of divine granting of permission that initiates or gives causal powers their final "go ahead" to operate. This conception of concurrence seems to offer a natural and coherent way of affirming (i) and (ii) without implying any need to accept (iii) and the difficulties it brings with it. God's ordinary role in natural events would include (i) creating and conserving things with their respective powers and (ii) concurring with them by granting them the "go ahead" needed to fully trigger their manifestations.

A simple analogy may help illustrate this proposal. Electricians create systems of wires and switches that grant us easy control over electricity's disposition to flow through circuits. Upon walking into a dark room, we flip a switch that closes a circuit, triggering or enabling the current to flow to the room's light fixtures. Now consider a slightly more complex circuit involving two switches connected such that both must be turned to *on* for the circuit to be closed; for any other combination (*off-off*, *on-off*, *off-on*) the circuit remains open. In such a circuit, the manifestation of the electricity's disposition has two required triggering conditions. Someone who camped out at the second switch would have complete control over whether persons entering the room by the first switch would succeed in their attempts to cause electricity to flow to the lights. If the person monitoring the second switch concurs with the person at the first and turns the second switch on, electricity flows and there is light, but if that concurrence is withheld, the manifestation cannot be triggered. If we think of the first switch as representative of a disposition's natural triggering condition(s) and the

person camped out at the second switch as representative of God's either granting or withholding that disposition's supernatural triggering condition, we have a decent analogy for how MC can conceive of God's causal role in activating the exercise of an agent's dispositions.

MC seems to grant God the sort of robust sovereign control over natural events that Freddoso contends is lacking in WC. For example, MC's explanation of how God might accomplish *contra naturam* miracles would be essentially the same as the explanation Freddoso offers on behalf of SC. To protect Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, God would not need to "counteract His creatures *from without*" through the sort of ad hoc interventions WC seems to require; rather, God could simply refrain from granting the concurrent "go ahead" to the fire's exercise of its power in this instance. Hence, MC allows God to control creatures "from *within* as their sovereign creator and governor"<sup>33</sup> through simple acts of omission, much like SC.

Of course, MC cannot grant the sort of *universal* divine causality SC desires. In ordinary cases, when God's concurrence is granted, MC agrees with WC that the secondary cause's power is sufficient to bring about the effect without God's specially tailored assistance. However, this concession allows MC to procure the other theological benefits of SC, without incurring the costs of its obscure notion of co-operation.

#### 4. Clarifications, Objections, and Replies

In this final section, I will briefly consider some initial questions and objections that might be raised concerning MC. Since several of the questions and objections discussed below relate to debated issues in the contemporary literature on dispositions and causal powers, the responses that follow will help clarify some of the ways MC might intersect with aspects of that literature.

##### 4.1 Grounded vs. Ungrounded Dispositions

I introduced MC above by referring to standard examples of dispositional attributes such as fragility, solubility, and inflammability. However, it seems entirely plausible to suppose that such familiar dispositions must be grounded in and explained by the more fundamental chemical and physical properties of glass, salt, water, gasoline, etc., and this fact raises potential questions concerning just where we should think of divine concurrence as occurring within natural processes.

Those with strong reductionist tendencies might hope that dispositional language could, with enough careful analysis, ultimately be replaced by entirely categorical base-level descriptions. If powers and dispositions were to prove inessential to our most fundamental descriptions of the world, then it may prove hard to see how MC could get a solid

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<sup>33</sup>Freddoso, "Why Conservation is not Enough," 575.

metaphysical foothold *anywhere*.<sup>34</sup> However, the hope that dispositions might ultimately be eliminated does not seem to be well-founded; even as we move toward more fundamental levels of physical description, many of the properties that play essential roles in our theories (e.g., charge and mass) remain inherently dispositional. Thus, although it might be reasonable to hope for explanatory accounts that would show how higher level-dispositions such as fragility and inflammability are grounded in, and perhaps reducible to, more fundamental lower-level dispositions, we need not assume that there must be a level of description at which dispositional properties will finally disappear. Even at the most fundamental level (assuming there is one<sup>35</sup>), it is plausible to suppose that we will still find irreducibly dispositional properties.

Metaphysically fundamental dispositions have been given a variety of labels, including “ungrounded dispositions,” “baseless dispositions,” “pure dispositions,” “potencies,” and simply “powers.”<sup>36</sup> Since concurrentism has generally been articulated in terms of the language of “powers” (albeit without such a specific sense attached to it), I will refer to such ungrounded dispositions as “fundamental powers.”

Suppose, then, that higher-level dispositions are ultimately grounded in fundamental powers that serve as their causal basis. In that case, it would seem plausible to suppose that MC should be understood as directly applicable only to the fundamental powers. Talk of God’s concurrence with the manifestations of higher-level dispositions and powers such as fire’s burning flesh or a vase’s shattering could then be understood

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<sup>34</sup>But perhaps it would still be possible. Mumford and Anjum (*Getting Causes from Powers*, 18) contend that even if it were true that “causal power disappears at a certain level of description, this should not lead us to say that there is no such thing as power in the whole of nature. Rather, we might ask what significance such a level could have in our ontology.” Mumford and Anjum affirm *pandispositionalism* (the view that *all properties* are dispositional) and they regard dispositions or powers as real at whatever levels they are found. Perhaps MC could follow them by affirming that God concurs with all dispositions at whatever levels they are found. However, it is unclear whether MC could join them in embracing *pandispositionalism*. If *all properties* are dispositional, then the manifestation of a disposition must always be another disposition; that is, *pandispositionalism* conceives of causation as a matter of “passing powers around” (see Mumford’s aptly titled, “Passing Powers Around”). Hence, if MC affirms that God continuously creates and conserves things with *all* their powers, then a *pandispositionalist* version of MC would seem to collapse into occasionalism. The only way I can see that a *pandispositionalist* version of MC might attempt to avoid that collapse would involve drawing some sort of distinction between essential powers God creates and conserves things with and accidental powers things come to possess through the manifestations of those essential powers.

<sup>35</sup>For a critique of this assumption, see Schaffer, “Is There a Fundamental Level?” I am also assuming that if there is a fundamental level, it would be the lowest or smallest one. For alternative views concerning what a most fundamental level might be, see Schaffer, “Monism: The Priority of the Whole”; and Bernstein, “Could a Middle Level be the Most Fundamental?”

<sup>36</sup>For a helpful introduction to the issues and recent literature related to ungrounded dispositions, see McKittrick, *Dispositional Pluralism*, ch. 7.

as shorthand for more complex descriptions of God's concurrence with the fundamental powers that undergird them.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4.2 Trigger-less Dispositions

When I noted above (in section 3.2) that dispositions are *typically* manifested only under certain conditions, I included the qualifier because there may be certain types of dispositions that lack activating conditions. Some dispositions seem to manifest spontaneously: uranium atoms, for example, are disposed to decaying, but there seem to be no conditions that trigger the manifestation of this disposition. A second type of example concerns dispositions, such as mass, that seem to be constantly manifesting. If a disposition is always manifesting, it is unclear what should be said about its activating conditions. Perhaps it is activated by *all* conditions, or perhaps by some condition so general that it is always satisfied. Or perhaps it is better to simply say that it does not need to be activated at all, that it is trigger-less.<sup>38</sup>

If there are some trigger-less dispositions, one might wonder whether MC can accommodate them. I think it can, although situating trigger-less dispositions within the broader framework of MC and its supernatural activating conditions does add some complexity to the ways we must think about and define the category. Dispositions that are trigger-less in the strong sense of having no triggering conditions at all (neither *natural* nor *supernatural*) would undermine MC's account of God's providence over natural events, since such dispositions would have no need of God's concurrence. Hence, if one were to insist on interpreting "trigger-less" in this strong sense, then MC would provide reason to regard the category as empty. Of course, when causal powers theorists have characterized certain dispositions as trigger-less, they have not had anything like the broader framework of MC and its supernatural triggering conditions in mind; what the label is meant to deny are *natural* triggering conditions. Thus, if we define trigger-less dispositions as dispositions that have no *natural* triggers—that is, dispositions that require only God's concurrence to be manifested—then it seems that MC could readily accommodate them. Furthermore, God would have the same sovereign control over the operation of such dispositions as God would have over the operations of more typical triggered dispositions; on any given occasion, God could prevent their usual operation simply by abstaining from concurring with them.

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<sup>37</sup>Just which powers are fundamental is, of course, an open empirical question. The version of MC sketched in this paragraph would seem to be a natural fit with Bird's account of dispositions, which distinguishes between natural and non-natural properties and identifies "fundamental natural properties" as "those with non-redundant causal powers" (*Nature's Metaphysics*, 13); MC might take divine concurrence to be directed toward the manifestations of such fundamental natural properties.

<sup>38</sup>For further discussion of triggerless dispositions, see McKittrick, *Dispositional Pluralism*, ch. 6.



### 4.3 Exercise, Manifestation, and Regress Worries

I introduced MC earlier by calling attention to Grant's three-part characterization of God's contributions to secondary causation. In each instance, Grant suggests, God causes (i) the existence of the secondary agent (with its causal powers); (ii) the secondary agent's act of causing the effect (i.e., the exercise of its causal powers); and (iii) the effect itself (which God brings about in co-operation with the secondary agent's causal powers). However, it might be objected that treating an agent's *exercise* of a power (ii) as something distinct from that power's *manifestation* (iii) is misguided and potentially problematic. After all, it sounds suspiciously akin to the sort of view that attributes to each causal power a second power to manifest itself, and views with that sort of structure are prone to generating vicious regresses.<sup>39</sup> If the manifestation of power A requires the manifestation of a second power, B, then the manifestation of B would seem to require that of a third power, C, and so on. The most natural strategy for escaping such regresses is to prevent them from ever getting started; however, when applied to Grant's three-part distinction, this strategy would seem to amount to denying that the *exercise* of a power should be treated as a distinct intermediary between the *power* and its *manifestation*. Put differently, this strategy seems to suggest that the *exercise* of a power should simply be collapsed into and identified with its *manifestation*; to emphasize this identification, we might adopt the convention of referring to the *exercise-manifestation* of a power.

However, at this point a potential difficulty seems to arise for MC. If regress worries lead us to restrict our account to just two parts—*powers* and their *exercise-manifestations*—then it might seem as though the very possibility of a moderate position intermediate between WC and SC must vanish with the elimination of the exercise (ii) as a distinct intermediate part of the process.<sup>40</sup> If that is right, the strategy of preventing the regress from starting would prove fatal to MC. Of course, unless it could resolve the regress worry in some other way, the regress itself may prove fatal to MC. Thus, MC seems to face a dilemma: either be undermined by the regress or be undermined by its most obvious solution.

Fortunately, I think MC can embrace the strategy of blocking such regresses without being undermined. I did appeal to Grant's three-part characterization of God's causal involvement with secondary causes to initially motivate my search for a moderate version of concurrentism; and Grant's three-part characterization does seem to separate a power's *exercise* from its *manifestation*. Nevertheless, MC does not ultimately depend upon that separation. The moderate theory I have sketched takes its cue from the fact that dispositions (generally) have activating conditions, and all that it really requires is the possibility that God's concurrence with secondary causes could be understood as an additional activating

<sup>39</sup>See Marmodoro, "Do Powers Need Powers to Make Them Powerful?"

<sup>40</sup>I am grateful to Walter Schultz for conversation on this point.

condition. This construal of divine concurrence allows MC to be differentiated from SC and WC even if we embrace the collapsed single category of *exercise-manifestations*. MC would be distinct from SC because it denies that God *directly* produces the effects that are the manifestations of secondary agents' powers; on MC, God plays the indirect causal roles of creating agents with their causal powers and (partly) causing those powers to be manifested by providing one of their triggering conditions. The latter indirect role also distinguishes MC from WC, since WC denies the need for a supernatural trigger over and above powers' natural triggering condition(s). Since MC can be distinguished from its stronger and weaker rivals regardless of whether the exercise of a power is distinct from or simply identified with its manifestation, the collapse of (ii) into (iii) would not, in fact, undermine MC.

#### 4.4 Peter Olivi's Objections

The final objections to MC that I will consider are drawn from Gloria Frost's recent explication of Peter Olivi's defense of WC, which rested, at least in part, upon his critique of alternative positions. Olivi distinguished between models of concurrentism in which God directly produces the creature's act (roughly equivalent to the view I have labeled SC) and indirect models in which God, in some sense, "augments" the creature's power to bring it to act. According to what Frost dubs the *application* version of the augmentation model, "created powers inherently possess what is required to operate efficaciously, but the powers cannot move themselves from a state of potentially operating to actually operating. God's concurrence is conceived of as God's moving or applying the created power to its activity."<sup>41</sup> While it may not be explicitly articulated in terms of triggers or activating conditions, this position bears a noticeable similarity to MC. Thus, I will briefly consider two interconnected criticisms Olivi raised against the application model as if they were directed at MC.<sup>42</sup>

Frost's summary of Olivi's criticisms merits quoting in full:

Olivi thought that this view . . . rested on a deficient notion of created powers. He writes, for example, that "many natural powers are sufficiently applied to action by their creation or generation, so that they do not require anything except the presence of a suitable patient." Olivi thinks that passive created powers can adequately explain why the active powers of natural agents act on a given occasion after a period of not acting. One need not invoke an application from God to explain this. Lastly, Olivi argues that even if it is granted that powers need to be applied to every one of their acts, there is no

<sup>41</sup>Frost, "Peter Olivi's Rejection of God's Concurrence with Created Causes," 670.

<sup>42</sup>Frost attributes three objections to Olivi. However, the third essentially amounts to the charge that the augmentation model fails to satisfy SC's expectation that God should be a direct or immediate cause of the effect; since MC neither claims nor aspires to satisfy this demand of SC, for present purposes, that objection can be set aside.

good reason to think that God must do all of the applying. Why would God not be able to apply one created power which then applied a second created power? Here again Olivi sees no contradiction in the idea of a created power that fills the causal role which concurrentists assign to God.<sup>43</sup>

Adaptation of these criticisms to MC is straightforward. MC too might be accused of having a “deficient notion of created powers.” Even if powers require triggers to be manifested, surely there is nothing contradictory in supposing that God could create powers that have entirely natural activating conditions. Why, then, should MC feel the need to posit the universal requirement of an additional supernatural activating condition?

As I noted previously, I am not convinced that WC is as theologically and philosophically deficient as SC’s advocates have alleged; the charges raised against it strike me as at least somewhat overstated. I am happy, then, to grant Olivi’s point that there is nothing obviously contradictory or impossible about WC’s position. However, I am not inclined to agree with Olivi’s charge that there is something “deficient” about MC’s notion of causal powers. If WC’s fundamental powers can depend upon *natural* activating conditions without that dependence being regarded as a sign that they are in some important respect deficient, then I fail to see why powers that are similarly dependent upon a supernatural activating condition should be regarded any differently.

In other words, WC and MC each seem to offer a consistent (hence, possible) account of the relationship between God and genuine secondary causes. Which view one prefers (or supposes that *God* would prefer) may ultimately depend upon the background concerns that motivate one’s theorizing. For those who reject deism and affirm God’s role in conserving the world’s existence, yet also assume that God would desire to give secondary causes as much independence as they can be granted while still preserving the ability to intervene (in *ad hoc* ways) in the course of natural events, WC may be the preferable theory. On the other hand, for those who assume that God would desire the most robust sort of sovereign control and the most extensive exercise of divine power compatible with genuine, non-superfluous roles for secondary causes, something like MC may be the preferred option.

### 5. Conclusion

Concurrentism (broadly construed) attempts to find a middle ground between the extremes of deism, which takes the created world to operate (at least mostly) independently after God’s initial act of creation, and occasionalism, which takes created entities to be so utterly dependent on God that they can make no genuine causal contributions of their own. However, since there is so much space between deism and occasionalism, it seems that there is room for a greater variety of concurrentist positions

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<sup>43</sup>Frost, “Peter Olivi’s Rejection of God’s Concurrence with Created Causes,” 670.

than the contemporary literature has generally acknowledged. I have argued that there is conceptual space between SC and WC for a moderate version that captures each of those view's most important benefits while avoiding their most familiar difficulties. MC carves out a genuine, non-superfluous role for secondary causes, and yet it does so in a way that renders each *exercise-manifestation* of their powers dependent on God's concurrence construed as an additional activating condition. As a result, MC would seem to secure an account of God's providential control over natural events that is, for all practical purposes, as robust as SC's.

Although I have briefly considered some initial questions and potential criticisms that might be raised concerning MC, there clearly are many more to consider. For example, I have made no attempt to examine how MC might relate to human agency and various approaches to free will. Moreover, I have only gestured at a few of the ways MC might intersect with the recent literature on dispositions and powers. Further consideration of those intersections will surely reveal a variety of more nuanced versions of MC that could be worked out in greater detail. Nevertheless, even if it has only taken a few initial steps, I hope this essay has revealed the potential fruitfulness of reexamining concurrentism in light of the recent literature on causal powers and dispositions.<sup>44</sup> The relationship between Divine and secondary causes may be among the most difficult problems of theistic metaphysics, yet there may still be more we can say to make sense of the matter before taking shelter behind appeals to the mysterious nature of God's actions.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Several authors have recently noted the natural fit between theism and the contemporary literature on powers and dispositions, albeit without explicit connection to concurrentism; see, e.g., Adams, "God and Dispositional Essentialism"; and Orr, "No God, No Powers"). Page ("The Dispositionalist Deity") has explicitly connected that literature with concurrentism, although he seems to have traditional SC in mind.

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