Concurrentism and Consequent Necessity
An 'Ancient-Modern' Proposal of Theistic Causation

Abstract: Theistic causation is a tricky beast. In addition to the widely discussed problems faced by all genres of causation theories, theistic views have to provide explanations for particularly worrisome issues, to include such considerations as the existence of evil, the problem of sin, and the thorny tangle of complications entailed by the accepted attributes of God as they intersect with the putative free will of rational agents. Additionally, most traditional variants of theism will need to provide some plausible account of the 'laws of nature', explaining their genesis, their function and alethic status, and cases in which this function is short-circuited, allowing for divine miracles. In this paper, I introduce an initial sketch and preliminary arguments motivating an ancient-modern theory of theistic causation which combines divine concurrentism with a recent account of theistic natural necessity.

Were I to take the glass in front of me that currently holds a (wonderful) double cappuccino and push it off the counter-top, I could reasonably expect it to 1) fall at a predictable rate towards the tile floor below the counter and 2) shatter once it impacts said floor. The explanatory narrative about those expectations will, presumably, involve a story that includes facts about the laws of nature and facts about causes and effects as they relate to those laws. That explanation might take the form of a regularity theory of causation – e.g. when experiencing mishaps of this type, I regularly note 'fallings' and 'shatterings' occur after glasses are pushed off of counter-tops. These types of views, of course, typically eschew any form of necessitation in their formation. Another explanation might appeal to a counter-factual account of the event – i.e. had the glass not been pushed off the counter-top, the falling event and the shattering event would not have occurred. Yet another take on causation proposes physical processes as explicative of the causes and effects observed in this scenario.

Against this backdrop of competing views on causation and how (if at all) the laws of nature figure into those accounts, the theist has additional work to do. Not only does she need to provide an explanation for both causation and the laws of nature, she also needs to allay unique worries entailed by traditional variants of theism. This will not be easy. Theistic theories of causation and the laws of nature face many challenges, to include (among others) reconciling the attributes of God with the existence of evil and the capacity of rational agents to sin. They must also explain just what a law of nature would be in a way that allows for those laws to be plausibly 'violated' in the case of divine miracles. Any account of these laws and their putative causal relationships also requires a corresponding treatment of their alethic status – in what way are they (if they are at all) necessary? The way in which this is cashed out will, obviously, have implications on what can be said about God's nature and attributes and about what might have been the case in other, possible worlds.

In this paper, I will motivate, in the form of an initial proposal, an ancient-modern, theistic approach to natural necessity and causation. I will begin by briefly reviewing the three most common genres of
theistic causal proposals, concluding that divine concurrentism (in a specific formulation) seems most promising. As part of this effort, I will attempt to show how, by my lights, concurrentism perhaps best handles the traditional worries entailed by theistic causation in general.¹ I then examine a recent proposal of natural necessity, referred to as ‘consequent necessity’, and suggest ways in which it provides an explanation for the genesis and alethic status of the laws of nature that obtain in the actual world. This is, admittedly, a *lot to try to accomplish in one paper. Accordingly, my aim will be to provide several positive arguments to encourage further exploration, and as such, I will concentrate on what I perceive as substantive motivations for the theory in conjunction with its explanatory fruitfulness. I will not be able to canvas all conceivable facets (or ramifications) of the view, and while I highlight or mention several extant or possible objections, the scope of the paper will preclude their in-depth analysis here.

S.1 Theistic causation revisited

There are certainly more than three extant theories of theistic causation; however, most views can be contentfully described as being (categorically) aligned with occasionalism, concurrentism, or conservationism. There are, of course, varieties of each proposed by philosophers writing during the medieval period and continuing into contemporary debate. In this section, I will summarize each view and briefly comment on how they typically address the common worries with theistic interpretations of causality and natural necessity. I begin with occasionalism, ultimately leaving it aside as a result of what I conclude are irremediable problems. I then turn to a comparison of conservationism and concurrentism, and evaluate each in light of traditional motivations for theistic explanations of causality and the laws of nature. I conclude that concurrentism is perhaps best poised to both answer those worries as well as more adroitly avoid some well-known objections in the literature.

S.1.1 Occasionalism

Although associated with several philosophers and theologians (and referred to, negatively, by Aquinas), occasionalism (in its most sophisticated treatment) is usually attributed to Nicolas Malebranche.² In his interpretation of occasionalism, the only causal agent is God. There is no effectual secondary causation in nature (i.e. in creation or in created things), and any interpretation we might have of secondary causation is mistaken. He appeals to the observation that our natures are such as to deceive us when we “perceive” anything like cause and effect in nature. To use the familiar example of billiard balls, when one ball hits another, this provides an ‘occasion’ for God to act such that one ball stops and the other moves in the expected direction and with the expected velocity and duration. All causation in nature is to be explained in this manner. While this may, prima facie, seem odd, Malebranche’s view of causation is precisely what Hume leveraged when proposing his regularity theory of causation without necessitation.³

¹ And Christian theories, in particular.
² Cf. Schmalz (2016) for a helpful summary of Malebranche’s philosophical positions. The gloss provided here is based on his work and, of course, the Recherche itself (Malebranche, 1997).
³ Hume does, if grudgingly, give credit to Malebranche for this view, even if (in the same passage), he writes more about the
(Of course, Hume just subtracted God from the antecedent of the causal conditional.) He (Malebranche) notes that we can’t have any clear and distinct notion of causation with our confused senses, and as such, we need to resist the idea (or, to use his words, the “heresy”) that created things can causally contribute to interactions generally within the created order. (It should also be noted that another, powerful motivation for his position (that only God is an efficacious causal agent) was the Cartesian theory that matter was passive in nature, and extended matter shouldn’t be accorded “forces” or “powers”.)

This conclusion, of course, requires occasionalism to take on the familiar commitments of contemporary regularity theories of causation, to include proscribing against necessary connections between distinct essences in general, as well as demanding a plausible way to explain the regularities we do observe that form our ideas of necessitation in a pragmatic sense.\(^4\) Malebranche does this by proposing a theory of natural laws that cast God's 'general volitions' as what we perceive as the laws of nature. God, on this view, can certainly also exercise 'particular volitions' in the case of miracles or other deviations from these general volitions. In this way, what we perceive as regular and expected interactions in the natural world follow these general volitions within the created order of things (i.e. in the actual world).

It is, to be sure, not at all clear how occasionalism treats the modality of these general volitions. For Malebranche, God’s attributes require that he create the world most in accord with his nature – as defined by that world requiring the least number of general volitions to sustain it. This, supposedly, allows God to be the only causal agent while not requiring him to be responsible for sin. Setting aside the most common objections to this claim (for now), it seems that Malebranche held that the actual world is the best (in a certain sense) world that could have been created, given this constraint. Unlike Leibniz, however, he does believe that God “could have” created a more perfect world if, in that world, he instituted more (than absolutely efficient) general volitions. This would be contrary to God’s nature, however, so Malebranche doesn’t seem to allow for this possibility in reality, leaving the alethic status of his system of general volitions open. Of course, this obscurity is also entailed by the very concept of general versus particular volitions and the associated proscription against necessary connections between natural “things”.

So what about occasionalism’s theoretical fruitfulness? It must be said, from a specifically Christian viewpoint, that the theory is more intuitive than it might first appear. In the sense that biblical scripture supports a view according to which everything depends on God’s sustenance and active work within creation, occasionalism provides a very rich narrative for how that might look. To this end, its etiology is remarkably simple while retaining enormous explanatory resources. It additionally provides a general context against which a redemptive view of creation, and God’s work within it, aligns particularly well. While I won’t explore the theodicies of these theories here, occasionalism has a consistent and plausible explanation for evil’s presence in the world (even if it falls short explaining how human agents can truly

\(^4\) Consider the regularity with which 2+3=5 and the earth rotates once per 24 hours (or, if you like, “the sun rises”). Regularity theories must posit a plausible distinction between obviously non-causal coincidences like this one and the ‘relevant’ type of regularity, whatever that may be. In this regard, both occasionalism and regularity theories seem compelled to consider nomic versions of their views.
choose to do evil) as well as providing a putative morally sufficient purpose for evil's presence in creation.\footnote{In this, Malebranche follows Descartes in proposing a 'morally sufficient reason' for creation, with all of the evil within it, as part of God's plan and redemption of creation. For Malebranche, the person of Jesus Christ (specifically, his incarnation, redemptive work, and glorification as God's son and perfect man) is the morally sufficient reason for the actual world and all it entails.}

Malebranche also has, it seems, no problem handling counterfactuals for defining truth conditions for causal claims. Returning to the billiard ball example, were God to refrain from providing the 'force' or 'power' to cause the struck ball to move, the ball would remain motionless. Occasionalism is thus, like most Humean theories of causation, fully reductive. What is not so clear is how this idea (that of God's acting on every 'occasion' for causal interaction) explains the uniqueness of miracles. The temptation would be to say that occasionalism's allowance for particular volitions (as direct interventions with the 'laws' of nature) easily explains both the occurrence and mechanism for divine miracles. But this can't be right. Note that everything is fully dependent on God's volitions. As such, every causal interaction is equivalent to a miracle – it just happens to be the case that some miracles occur fairly regularly (maybe they just don't “surprise” us) and others are more sensational (and less regular) such that we categorize the latter as miracles and the former as laws of nature. The problem then becomes how to appropriately 'bracket off' our perceptions of general volitions in a way that allows a plausible delineation and recognition of 'real' miracles.\footnote{Some might think this task would be unnecessary on this view. This would be a mistake for the Christian theist, as she (presumably) subscribes to scripture as authoritative in some sense, and scripture is clear that miracles specifically provide evidence of God's supernatural work and ability for the purpose of his glory and to encourage belief. Without a reliable way to discriminate between general and particular volitions it is hard to see how occasionalism squares with scripture in this regard. See, for example, Locke, 1701.}

This brings us to the more commonly discussed objections to occasionalism. It is perhaps not clear how occasionalism can allow for free will in the case of rational, human agency. Malebranche appeals to an unexplained inner sense of freedom and stipulates that God's causal work in the 'order of nature' and the 'order of grace' still allows man to be the responsible agent when choosing to sin. But how can he can say this (in a substantial, non-stipulative way)? If the only causal agent is God, then how can we bracket off a portion of the created order (within, say, an 'order of grace') in some non-causal way that allows human to freely choose to sin? It seems obscure how choice can be cast as non-causal in this context, and to the extent that we are not offered a contentful explanation, occasionalism will leave crucial questions unanswered.

In response to these objections, contemporary occasionalists cite the difference between “force” and “liberty” in Malebranche’s writings to try to elicit a way in which we (as agents) have freedom to make choices, but no inherent power to carry them out. The choice made, the causal power to effect the action is provided by God. On some readings, this is described as “weak” occasionalism, but unfortunately I don't see how the more common objections to the view are avoided in this way, given that the actual efficacy of any action is attributable solely to God.

It should be mentioned that occasionalism is experiencing a revival in contemporary, theistic literature. This seems to be the result of the widespread, intuitive pull of Hume's assertion that, try as we might, we can't “see” anything that contentfully describes the causal connection between objects or
Occasionalism aligns with this intuition of regularity and was, in fact, the original version of its articulation as a theory of causation. Notwithstanding this recent interest, I think that occasionalism, as a theistic view of causation and natural laws, is irremediably flawed due to the objections canvassed thus far. It seems unlikely that a satisfactory account can be made, according to the lights of traditional theism, to support human agency and causation in the case of evil and sin. Additionally, the view requires a very "loose" view of the laws of nature that doesn't seem to capture what we seem to recognize as natural necessity (or, at least, regularity) in causal relationships. I'll turn now to theories that seem to be motivated by these very worries.

S.1.2 Mere Conservationism and Divine Concurrentism

In this section, I'll briefly gloss conservationism and concurrentism, outlining their major tenets, virtues, and commonly discussed objections. I'll then compare and contrast the two views in light of their ability to accommodate primary and secondary causation (according to the lights of theism) as well as elucidate the role any laws of nature would play in clarifying the (alleged) causal relationships they entail. I will also compare their relative virtues when explaining the occurrence of miracles. My goal will be to show that concurrentism seems to demonstrate the most promise for theists, all things considered.

From the late modern period until very recently, conservationism was perhaps the "majority" view of theistic philosophers. Roughly stated, this is the idea that God created the actual world and the laws of nature that obtain and, then, conserves those substances, with their powers, in existence (from afar, as it were). Created things, when causally active, are the effective causes of their effects, and God's intervention in creation is kept at an absolute minimum. He remains an active, even the primary, cause within creation, but he is not an immediate cause of the effects of his creations (more below). His causal efficacy is often referred to by these theories as 'remote' in the sense that his action consists in the conservation of the powers unique to the essences of created beings.

It's easy to understand the motivation for such a theory. It is, in a theistic sense, quite 'clean' in many respects. By "many respects", I refer to the fact that most of contemporary debate concerning causation, modality, and natural laws can be carried on between a theistic conservationist and a non-theist without any qualification to the rhetoric. If conservationism turns out to be right, certain worries faced by the occasionalist can be avoided altogether. Consider that human agency, for example, can more easily be accommodated by this type of view without any messiness required to parse "force" and "desire" with respect to causation, etc. Issues of sin and evil can potentially be described in a way that doesn't intertwine God's personal interaction with them as closely (in the sense that God is not "as" directly responsible for them as occasionalism seems to imply). According to the conservationist, the actions of created objects are

7 Cf. Plantinga (2015) for an example of an exploration into the debate between occasionalism vs. concurrentism that *very tentatively concludes that occasionalism might be the better candidate for Christian theism. I agree with him that both views face unique objections; however, I disagree with his conclusion. Of note, Plantinga sees occasionalism as supporting natural laws (and their resulting causal relations) as either (or both) decretalism (as in causation according to God's decrees about the laws of nature) or as "counterfactuals of divine freedom" (e.g. "under conditions C, God would cause state of affairs S" Ibid, p. 136).

8 Note that even this brief summary illustrates conservationism's sympathy with essentialism. More below.
fairly straightforwardly their own (and only God's in a remote way – in that he created them with essences and thereafter conserves them). Put more succinctly, conservationism allows for robust secondary causation in that creatures are genuine and sole (in a certain sense) causes of their effects.

The upshot is that mere conservationism can provide explanations for causation and the laws of nature that are grounded in God's creative work (and his remaining the primary causal agent) while retaining the ability to be ecumenical when debating causation, necessity, and the laws of nature in much the same way as non-theistic theories.

So what's the downside? Two things come immediately to mind – miracles and the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Theism, at least in its Christian interpretations, relies on a redemptive narrative concerning God's work both in and for his created order. Conservationism, while avoiding the aforementioned pitfalls of constant divine intervention in nature, can be cast as separating God from almost any direct interaction.

As I will show below, it tends to, on further analysis, devolve into a type of deism with respect to God's relationship with his creation, and as such, it is hard to reconcile the role and existence of miracles with a conservationist view of the laws of nature and divine causation. Additionally, the incarnation of Jesus Christ becomes especially difficult to explicate on this account. It's hard to imagine a more "direct" example of God's causal interference in the natural order of creation than this phenomenon, and if a theistic theory is committed to its occurrence, conservationism has some work to do accommodating it.

I mentioned earlier this view could participate more easily in contemporary debate about free will; however, the unwritten subtext to that assertion was that “free will” should be understood in its weak interpretation (e.g. as in my free will to choose what to eat today, etc.). From a certain perspective, I think the theory might have difficulty endorsing a variety of free will that would be considered 'strong' in the current literature. If God creates, then conserves what he created from outside his creation, determinism might be the default position – especially when considering the claims of scripture that speak of his “redeeming all things” as part of his plan for creation. In fact, the idea of “working all things together for good” intimates that God is actively engaged in an ongoing process of ultimately mitigating (and, indeed, redeeming) the evil and sin that occur in the world according to a vast and intricate plan that we cannot comprehend. While it is not obvious that this issue is insurmountable for the conservationist, I think it does highlight a difficulty it must consider.

Parochial (i.e. scriptural) claims notwithstanding, the majority of traditional theistic views seem to want a way of explaining God's causal interaction such that it is integral to the laws of nature and causal relationships in the natural world while allowing for the free will of rational agents. Divine concurrentism is

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9 There is an active body of recent literature on metaphysical grounding. Here I am referring to a substantive, explanatory version of grounding that might be represented by the "metaphysical foundationalism" construct explicated by Bliss and Trogdon (2016) in the sense that these laws would be 'well founded' (as a result of God's creative work and in accordance with his nature) as well as have a truth-maker for them (namely, God).

10 An obvious objection here would be to insist that God is 'outside of time' and can conduct this redemptive campaign from a perspective not available to finite agents. Perhaps this is plausible, but it is not obviously so. See Wolterstorff (1982) for an argument claiming that, at least in this world, God has a time strand while remaining everlasting (and not eternal).

11 I will not here explore the concept of God's omnipresence, although I think that this, also, poses problems for conservationism that do not touch occasionalism or concurrentism.
a competing view that attempts to satisfy this intuition while striving to avoid the most extreme commitments of occasionalism. It seeks to occupy a “middle ground” between the other two theories, and as such, it inherits some of the benefits and deficiencies of both.

Concisely put, concurrentism allows for secondary causation in a moderate sense of the term. Created things are (to the extent that they are created to be) efficacious causes; however, their requisite powers require the concurrence of God to cause their effects. More formally stated, in the case of natural causation, 'creaturely' powers are necessary but insufficient causes for their effects. (I should clarify “natural causation” in this context. As a first pass, let natural causation be a case of cause and effect within the natural, created order of the actual world that is also not a case of divine intervention and/or a miracle.)

Considering again our familiar billiard balls, when the first balls strikes the second, concurrentism holds that physical causation obtains in that the first ball acts on the second ball such that it moves off in the appropriate direction. The caveat, however, is that this physical act of causation is secondary and insufficient to cause the second ball to so move. This is what is meant by 'moderate' secondary causation, namely that the secondary cause makes a genuine causal contribution to the effect produced, and that this effect is somewhat determined by the specific character of that secondary cause. God concurs with the laws of nature when the first ball strikes the second and this primary causation, in conjunction with the secondary, allows the second ball to move. Note that in most variants, this view defines this concurrence as God's general concurrence with the laws of nature. In other words, God's policy is one of generally concurring with the laws of nature as he has created them (to include causal powers inherent in created objects according to their natures). This characterization has the felicitous result of not requiring every natural cause to be a 'little miracle' and resists the specter of occasionalism that looms in that direction. Note that it also can support the regularity theorist's claim that there are metaphysically possible worlds in which the first ball strikes the second and it does not move. This would just be a world in which God does not cooperate with the “normal” movement of the second ball.

This idea has, I think, an obvious advantage over occasionalism when explaining God's role with respect to human agency and our ability and predilection to sin, while still allowing for God's active, integral role in creation. Noting the italicized text just above, God's required concurrence with the laws of nature (and their effects qua consequences) does not obviously entail his concurrence with any human's choice to do evil. There is certainly some work to be done fully explaining just how this might work, but concurrentism certainly doesn't intertwine God's action within nature as tightly to human action and intention as occasionalism does.

Concurrentism easily supports the theistic intuitions of God's redeeming work within his natural creation, and it also aligns with perceptions of our own causal efficacy (even if this is only allowed in a secondary sense). In contrast to the conservationist's explanation for miracles (namely, God reaching into creation from outside it, as it were, to violate the laws of nature and perform the miracle), this view explains miracles as cases when God chooses to not concur with the laws of nature. As a familiar example,
when the three Hebrew young men were thrown into the fire by Nebuchadnezzar, concurrentists explain the miracle of their survival as a case of God's non-concurrence with the fire's ability to burn. (Note that both conservationism and concurrentism can support the appropriate counterfactuals in this case – Had God either not intervened in nature or withheld his concurrence, the miracle would not have occurred. I will have more to say on how well each view explains miracles later, so I will postpone that debate for now.)

Despite these apparent explanatory advantages, concurrentism is not without its challenges. Although it fares better than occasionalism when defending God's innocence from sin and evil, it is not clear how it escapes objections in this arena as handily as conservationism. Another set of problems is more insidious. How can the view accommodate the joint contribution of God and created beings in causal interactions without falling afoul of either 1) devolving into occasionalism if the creaturely effects are simply superfluous or, on the other hand, 2) dissolve into conservationism by making God's contribution to the effects superfluous? A related (but importantly different) objection would be to ask for a plausible explanation of how the conjunction of these causal contributions doesn't entail a worrisome overdetermination of every natural cause.

By my lights, there is, given what has been said to this point, no clear winner. Both views can claim explanatory advantages, yet they remain vulnerable to objections that threaten their credibility, either philosophically or theologically. In what immediately follows, I will compare how both views fare with respect to explaining natural causation generally and miracles specifically.

**S.2 Conservationism vs. Concurrentism – Natural Causation**

In this section, I will leverage work done by Alfred Freddoso in two papers that attempt to 1) rigorously formulate the tenets of concurrentism and conservationism for the purpose of comparison and 2) clarify what seem to be the two most difficult objections to concurrentism together with suggestions for resisting them. Following his approach, I first compare the two theories in question with regard to how well each provides an explanatorily plausible account of causation that remains consistent with the claims and intuitions of traditional theism. I'll begin by more clearly outlining where the views disagree and then proceed by analyzing their entailments in this context. I'll also consider several arguments from asymmetry developed by Suarez against conservationism that demonstrate its perhaps irresistible tendency to devolve into a form of deism that cannot accommodate the kind of things theists seem to want from metaphysical theories in general and causation in particular. Lastly, I'll briefly canvas the two objections I mentioned earlier and suggest promising defensive strategies against them.

I'll start with the following two principles (as proffered by Freddoso):

**CON** Necessarily, for any participated being \( x \) and time \( t \) such that \( x \) exists throughout a temporal

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12 Daniel 3:1-30 (The Bible, revised standard edition)
13 Cf. Freddoso (1994) for a helpful clarification of these objections, as well as explanations for how concurrentism can resist them.
14 To be clear, I owe the general argument, its form, and the definitions/principles of this section to Freddoso (1991, 1994). The analysis applicable to the present paper, to include the comparisons with traditional theistic intuitions, is mine.
interval that includes \( t \) but begins before \( t \), God conserves \( x \) \emph{per se} and immediately at \( t \).

\textbf{(SC)} In general, created substances causally contribute, both actively and passively, to the existence of various entities at various times.

Note that \textbf{(CON)} and \textbf{(SC)} are accepted by both mere conservationism and divine general concurrence; however, the following two principles distinguish them:

\textbf{(MC)} Necessarily, for any entity \( x \) and time \( t \) if any created substance produces \( x \) at \( t \) as an immediate and \emph{per se} cause, then God is a \emph{merely remote} cause of \( x \) at \( t \) and not an immediate and \emph{per se} cause of \( x \) at \( t \).

\textbf{(DGC)} Necessarily, for any entity \( x \) and time \( t \), if any created substance produces \( x \) at \( t \) as an immediate and \emph{per se} cause, then it is also the case that God is an \emph{immediate} and \emph{per se} cause of \( x \) at \( t \).

I should clarify what “efficient causation” is as it pertains to these theories. Aristotelians, of course, hold that this concept entails a relation obtaining between an actor (agent) and a recipient (patient). A corresponding delineation can be made between active and passive causal powers (or roles).

Conservationism and concurrentism follow this characterization of the principle players in the causal 'game'. The comparison to follow will turn on the ideas of 'active' and 'immediate' causation\(^\text{15}\) (or, efficient causation at some time \( t \)). Remember that mere conservationism claims that God contributes to the ordinary course of nature by creating and then remotely conserving natural substances and their accidents, including their active and passive causal powers. Created substances are genuine causes, and when they produce an effect, they are the \emph{sole} and \emph{immediate} causes of their effects. Divine concurrence is the very different view that a natural effect is produced immediately by \emph{both} God and created substances. The latter make a genuine causal contribution to the effect and its character, but only in concert with God’s general concurrence. More formally:

- \( x \) is an \emph{immediate} cause of \( y \) at \( t \) if and only if:
  - \( x \) exists at \( t \), and
  - \( x \) is an active cause of \( y \) at \( t \), and
  - there is no set \( M \) such that (i) neither \( x \) nor \( y \) is a member of \( M \), and (ii) each member of \( M \) is an active cause of \( y \) at \( t \), and (iii) \( x \) is an active cause of \( y \) at \( t \) only in virtue of the fact that \( x \) causally contributes to the members of \( M \) existing at \( t^* \) (at or before \( t \)).
- \( x \) is a \emph{merely remote} cause of \( y \) at \( t \) if and only if:
  - \( x \) is an active cause of \( y \) at \( t \), and
  - \( x \) is not an immediate cause of \( y \) at \( t \).

Before continuing, I'll say a bit more about what is meant by '\( x \) giving \emph{esse} to \( y \) at \( t \)'. Here I follow Aquinas (\textit{Summa Theologiae} 1, q. 44) and consider \emph{esse} a principle of actuality/perfection: 'giving \emph{esse}’ just is giving perfection of some sort (and in some amount) to a created, finite thing. While it is not identical to the 'essence' of that thing, \emph{esse} is a principle of actuality that corresponds with, and is proportional to, that thing’s essence. Note that a finite entity thus "participates" in \emph{esse as such} (i.e. it shares in all possible perfections as limited by its nature to \emph{such-esse} – where “such” is the essence and accidentals of that entity). Let a '\emph{per se}’ cause of any entity be any agent that can give \emph{esse} to that entity. So:

\footnote{The debate between \textbf{DCG} and \textbf{MC} hangs on this distinction.}
– $x$ is a **per se** cause of $y$ at $t$ if and only if:
  – $x$ exists at $t$, and
  – $x$ is an active cause of $y$ at $t$, and
  – $x$ gives *esse* to $y$ at $t$.

Concurrentism holds that God is a **per se** and **immediate** cause of every natural effect\(^\text{16}\). Created beings are contingent and finite and receive *esse* from distinct causes (to use Aquinas' words, they have 'participated' *esse*). God is 'unparticipated' *esse* – with all possible perfections to an infinite degree – and is the **only** being able to give *esse as such*\(^\text{17}\). Thus:

– $x$ gives *esse as such* to $y$ at $t$ if and only if:
  – $x$ is a **per se** cause of $y$ at $t$, and
  – for any $z$ such that $z$ is either a constituent of $y$ at $t$ or an accident of $y$ at $t$, $x$ is a **per se** cause of $z$ at $t$, and
  – $x$ has the power to give *esse to* any possible participated being.

We can then also formulate what *creation ex nihilo* looks like. Note that something can create in this way **only if** it can give *esse* from the 'bottom up' to an entity that did not exist beforehand. Thus:

– $x$ newly creates $y$ *ex nihilo* at $t$ if and only if:
  – $x$ gives *esse as such* to $y$ at $t$, and
  – either (i) $y$ is a substance, and neither $y$ nor any of the constituents of $y$ exists immediately before $t$, or (ii) $y$ is an accident, and the substance which is the subject of $y$ at $t$ does not exist immediately before $t$.

Turning then to conservation, consider the following basic definition:

– $x$ conserves $y$ at $t$ if and only if:
  – $x$ is an active cause of $y$'s existing at $t$, and
  – for some temporal interval $i$ that includes $t$ but begins before $t$, $y$ exists throughout $i$.

So $x$ can, in this sense, conserve $y$ at $t$ without giving *esse* to $y$ at $t$ (i.e. *per accidens*\(^\text{18}\)). A stronger definition (one that includes conservation **per se**) seems to be needed:

– $x$ conserves $y$ **per se** at $t$ if and only if:
  – $x$ conserves $y$ at $t$, and
  – $x$ is a **per se** cause of $y$ at $t$.

But concurrentism and conservationism can both accept that secondary causes are able to conserve something **per se**. So we'll need something even stronger for divine conservation\(^\text{19}\):

– God conserves $x$ **per se and immediately** at $t$ if and only if:
  – God conserves $x$ at $t$, and
  – God gives *esse as such* to $x$ at $t$.

We can then generalize **CON** using our clarified definition of God's conserving action to:

\(^{16}\) Mere conservationism denies this.
\(^{17}\) This is needed in the composition of 'ESSE' below. Note that it is formed in reference to any constituent of a thing.
\(^{18}\) *Per accidens* here refers to some created entity (here referred to as $x$) merely counteracting or eliminating agents that might 'corrupt' or eliminate $y$ should they not be so hindered. See Freddoso (1991, p. 563).
\(^{19}\) This definition is also required to formulate ESSE.
(ESSE) Necessarily, for any created entity $x$ and time $t$ such that $x$ exists at $t$, God gives esse as such to $x$ at $t$.

The result is that DGC follows logically from ESSE. On Suarez' interpretation, accepting ESSE amounts to rejecting MC. This seems right. He goes on to say that conservationists must choose between concurrentism or deism as a result, and he posits several arguments to substantiate this claim. I'll briefly look at three of them here.

The first argument considers the symmetry of esse and fieri (existing and coming to exist).\(^{20}\)

Dissecting the conservationist's position, there is an odd asymmetry between what happens with regard to conservation when compared with creation. There is, in effect, a wholly different dependence on God while an effect is produced compared to after it has been produced, to whit: secondary causes are (alone) per se and immediate in producing it, while God must conserve it per se and immediately afterward. However, the belief that there are secondary producing causes would seem to be epistemically identical to believing there are secondary conserving causes. At the very least we would seem to need some story telling us why we should treat them differently in this case. Once ESSE is denied, there seems to be no reason to maintain CON – leading to more deistic view of divine causation in the case of conservationism.

The second argument also follows from this proposed asymmetry; however, it focuses on the nature of transeunt action (action outside of an agent). This type of action can be plausibly cast as an entity separate from the agent, its active power, the patient, and the form the action takes in the patient.\(^{21}\) The argument takes the same form as the one above: if God is not necessary for this entity/action to come to exist, then the action/entity does not require His influence in order to exist. The first argument focused on the entity that terminated the action; this one targets the action itself. Again, if conservationists deny ESSE in this case, then CON would seem otiose.

The third argument concerns contra naturam miracles. I'll gloss this type of miracle as one in which the natures involved hold a disposition (or power) contrary to the effect God produces. Given this definition, Suarez maintains that conservatism must hold that God performs this type of miracle from without, as it were. Thus a more coherent account of these miracles would be that they occur by omission rather than action over and, perhaps, against his creatures (i.e. “withholding His concurrence” from an agent's natural action in a given case seems to be less intrusive on this interpretation). Take the earlier example of the young men not being burned in the fiery furnace, the fact that the guards throwing them into the same fire were killed by its “relevant natural causes” or powers seems relevant. This is, to be sure, an indirect inference, but I will have more to say concerning this in the next section.

While perhaps not a knock-down set of arguments for concurrentism, the seemingly entailed move towards deism seems problematic for its rival. To the extent that theism seems to interpret God as being both causally active (immediately) and engaged at redemptive work within his creation, concurrentism

\(^{20}\) To clarify what is being said here, the generalization of CON to ESSE in light of the previous definitions is enlightening.

\(^{21}\) This is controversial. See Freddoso (1994, pp. 138-139) for an argument to the effect that the 'action' that occurs in causal interactions inheres in the patient and not in the agent.
seems to enjoy a theoretical and explanatory advantage.

Concerning the objections mentioned earlier, concurrentism still needs to provide a story for 1) how the joint causal contributions of God and finite agents remain genuine and not superfluous and 2) how the conjunction of causal contributions avoid charges of implausible overdetermination. As promised in the introduction, I will not attempt to resist these objections in any detail here. This said, I will, however, offer a brief response that indicates a way in which substantive defenses could proceed.

The first problem mentioned needs clarifying, for a start. Recall that the issue at hand concerns the very construct of concurrentism. If God and created agents jointly act to cause an effect, we need a characterization of that conjunction of 'inputs' to the causal event that both allows God to be an immediate, efficacious contributor without rendering the created agent's contribution meaningless. This would amount to occasionalism. On the other hand, if God's contribution is effectively only that of conserving the created agent's inherent causal powers, then why not opt for mere conservationism instead? A successful reply, it seems, has to do more than suggest a simple conjunction of contributions. If both contributions are supposed to be alike direct and independent, concurrentism is in trouble. What is needed is a complementary account of these joint effects, one that leverages both of them while maintaining their distinctness. I think a contentful response must appeal to God's being the universal or general cause of every effect, while the created agent acts as the determinate cause (i.e. as in its distinction or mode). 22 Take the case of a new baby, God would be the universal \textit{qua} general cause of the baby's being itself, while the parents' causal contribution would determine the distinctiveness of that particular child.

Objection: but doesn't this trace all causality, in a real sense, back to God alone? Remember Aristotle's examples of a man creating a statue and this man creating this statue – a man and this man differ only conceptually, but not in reality. 23 Answer: not necessarily, for consider that there any number of counterexamples where we can differentiate between various truths about about the combined effect of cooperative action such that some of those truths are plausibly thought to primarily be the result of one of the agents rather than the other one without making trivial the unity of the effect as a whole. As an example, suppose I need to move a table that I cannot lift alone. I ask you to lift the far side, while I lift the near side. Together we can lift the table, yet it can be plausibly maintained that I am primarily the cause of the near side lifting, while you remain the primary cause of the far side lifting. (One could also appeal to examples of cooperating agents working contrary to each other to produce certain effects. 24)

The second objection can be cashed out as requiring the concurrentist to hold that God is somehow \textit{imperfect} in the sense of being incomplete as a causal agent as a result of this view. This is a result of the overdetermination worry mentioned earlier. The only way to avoid this charge (and the accompanying

\textit{imperfect} in the sense of being incomplete as a causal agent as a result of this view. This is a result of the overdetermination worry mentioned earlier. The only way to avoid this charge (and the accompanying

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22 See Freddoso (1994, pp. 146-148)  
23 This is taken from Durandus' writings – specifically in the context of defending conservationism against concurrentism.  
24 Freddoso notes Geach's example of a heating and cooling unit working together (or against one another) to effect temperature changes of different sorts. (Cf. 1994, p. 149.)
epiphenomenalism that is entailed – leading to one of the other views), is to maintain that God and created agents must work together to cause their effects; neither of their contributions is sufficient in itself to effect them. I think that this, however, reduces to a semantic objection vice a substantive one. More needs to be said, of course, but the simple answer seems to be that if God’s construct of causation in the actual world turns out to be concurrentist in nature, his deciding that this state of affairs obtains hardly results in any imperfection, simpliciter, in himself. Put more simply, if God willed at creation that this is the way he chooses to work with created agents, nothing contradictory about his nature would be entailed.

S.3 Conservationism vs. Concurrentism – Explaining Miracles

In this section, I consider a recent proposal by Nate Rockwood arguing for the plausibility of a specific conservationist account of miracles, one inspired by Locke. I begin by providing some background information clarifying Locke’s essentialism and his resultant view of divine miracles. I continue by outlining Rockwood’s positive argument for Locke’s theories in a contemporary context. I then present, and argue for, a counter-proposal that favors concurrentism as being (at least) equally (and perhaps more) efficacious for this purpose.

Let essentialism be described as the view holding that the real essences of material objects determine all of their properties. On this account, an object’s real essence will be that in virtue of which the object behaves, this relationship is a necessary one, and an object’s behavior will be deducible from its real essence. Locke seems (this is controversial) to subscribe to some form of this theory. In addition to essentialism, he also clearly endorses the occurrence of miracles, not in some contingent sense but as necessary acts of God serving as the only evidence we have for establishing his divine mission and grounding our belief in the authority of scripture.

Prima facie, these two commitments might be taken as contradictory. If the essences of material objects just are the laws of nature – if they determine all the properties of their requisite entities – then it would seem problematic for God to “make” the object behave contrary to those laws. Those committed to essentialism thus face a problem reconciling the necessary connection between real essences and laws of nature with the putative possibility of divine miracles. If, with Locke, someone agrees that miracles are essential for any warrant we might have for religious belief, she will have significant philosophical and theological problems to solve. In a recent paper, Nate Rockwood argues that these beliefs are not contradictory and can be reconciled satisfactorily.26

To clarify Locke’s definition of just what a miracle might be, Rockwood points out two alternatives. A miracle in the objective sense is a case of God actually violating the laws of nature. A miracle in the subjective sense occurs when it just seems like God has worked contrary to these laws. An important point to emphasize here is that a miracle, to count as evidence for faith, needs to be a miracle in both senses27.

25 See, for example, his 1690, Book III. It can be argued that Locke only subscribed to a very weak nominal variant of essentialism, but this will not be important in what follows here (or impact Rockwood’s proposal in a significant way).
26 Rockwood (2016a).
27 Note that I am including both Locke and Rockwood’s senses of “evidence” in this claim. Locke was committed to the fact that a
mentioned here. Someone would have to see (experience/sense) the event, and God must actually work contrary to the laws of nature while performing it. These types of miracles (subjective and objective) are the ones allegedly made problematic by essentialism.

While interpretations of Locke’s commitment to essentialism vary, I will continue on the presumption that Locke is an essentialist as glossed above. Some have argued that Locke was committed to the occurrence of miracles in the subjective sense alone – and insofar as these do not actually violate the laws of nature, Locke can be seen as both an essentialist and a believer in miracles. The problem with this type of view, Rockwood claims, lies in the fact that ‘subjective-only’ miracles cannot provide good evidence for divine revelation. We can put this in terms of possible worlds. For any miracle in the subjective sense, there is a possible world in which a well-informed person, recognizing the supposed miracle as not actually running counter to the laws of nature in that world, would not even “sense” the event as a miracle in the subjective sense! Carry this counter example to its logical conclusion, and for an ideally informed person nothing would count as a miracle and thus nothing would then be evidence for divine revelation. Add to this the textual evidence that Locke can be read as asserting that God is able (and does) work contrary to the laws of nature (specifically that he “has the power to change the course of nature...”), and what really seems to need explaining is how essentialism can be endorsed while consistently allowing for miracles that are both subjective and objective. These are the only types of miracles that can give 'good' evidence for God’s revelation and, according to Locke, they are necessary occurrences as they serve as the only means by which we can have evidence for the truth of scripture.

To state the worry clearly: real essences (according to essentialism) entail the laws of nature; however, God has the power to cause events that require those laws to be overruled if he so desires. If we are to reconcile these claims, the only path that seems open is to claim that the causal powers of things, while remaining necessary in virtue of a thing’s essence, are not sufficient by themselves to produce their effects. There are, then, two strategies available:

1) Concurrentism – the view that any natural event is caused both by the causal powers of the natural objects involved and God's general concurrence with those powers, or:

2) Rockwood’s proposal (as perhaps Locke’s view) – the view that any natural event is caused both by the causal powers of the natural objects involved and the absence of God's non-concurring will.²⁸

Let’s consider concurrentism first in contrast with standard (perhaps “stark”) essentialism. If, on an essentialist view, X is some cause that entails event Z. This could be represented by the proposition X→Z. On a concurrentist view, this proposition would be expressed as (X&Y)→Z, where Y stands for God’s general concurrence with the laws of nature. This has the felicitous result of God having the ability to withhold his concurrence in the case of miracles (in the objective sense) without changing the real essence of the miracle needed to be subjective to be efficacious. This seems fairly intuitive. Rockwood, however, points out that an actual violation of the laws of nature needs to occur for a miracle to plausibly provide genuine (or ‘good’) evidence for revelation.

²⁸ Note that this just is conservationism defined in different, but equivalent, terms.
natural objects in question. While this seems like a nifty solution, at least two entailments of this view might be considered a bit worrisome. First, take the case of, say, fire burning wood. What causes the fire to burn is then both the real essence of fire and God's concurring with it's causal power – namely, to burn. Now take the case of that fire being set to a saint who is being martyred – the fire would burn the saint both as a consequence of the fire’s essence and God’s concurrence with the fire’s causal powers. Secondly, Locke seems to imply that there has to be some positive intervention of God when performing miracles – there seems to be something he does to work contrary to real essences.

To Rockwood’s lights, a Lockean view of the possibility of miracles which remains consistent with essentialism would express the same proposition mentioned above as (X&¬Y)→Z. In this case, a thing's real essence and the absence of God's non-concurring will would (together) be sufficient to explain the laws of nature. (Note that this is, as a result, an absence theory of causation. X is still, in all 'normal' cases in the actual world, sufficient for Z.)

In the case of a miracle, God would intervene (so, in our proposition’s case, this would result in X&Y) and Z would no longer be entailed. As I’ve mentioned, if the causal efficacy of natural causes is counterfactually dependent on the absence of God’s intervention, then the real essences of the objects in question are the only immediate causes of their behavior (even if they are not, perhaps, sufficient to bring about their effects). This, Rockwood argues, more accurately represents the literary evidence we have for Locke’s thought, and it is a plausible way in which to consistently be an essentialist qua conservationist and believe in divine miracles.

Let me offer a counter proposal that I find (to my lights) to be least as explanatory (if not more so). While Rockwood’s position is plausible, it might seem a bit contrived given its counterfactual dependence on an absence (specifically, in a case involving divine causation). As he notes, any number (approaching an infinite number) of things could be cast in the role of being true counterfactuals in just about any happenstance. To get his idea off the ground we need the “absence of God’s intervention” to not count as an immediate cause (remember the preceding section), while remaining the counterfactual on which all natural causation depends. This seems, to me, a bit odd as an explanation for divine causality (in conjunction with natural causality). Additionally (as Rockwood concedes) this solution relies on the fairly counterintuitive claim that natural causes, while remaining the only immediate causes of natural events, are (at the same time) not sufficient for them. There is, of course, nothing inconsistent with this theory, and it certainly seems to reconcile the dilemma posed at the beginning of the section. However, this reconciliation comes at the cost of two fairly odd entailments.

But doesn’t this also seem to be, in a certain interpretation, the same case for concurrentism? If we

29 I will say more about this shortly as I do not find this problematic for concurrentism.
30 Note that Y, in this case, denotes God’s non-concurring will.
31 I'm not sure, though, it is clear how, logically, it wouldn't be possible for Z to still be the case!
32 It also is, to my mind, something a Humean (or perhaps any atheist) would grant freely while then going on to argue that, in fact, since there is (putatively) no God, his non-concurring will is always absent and real essences coincide regularly with observed phenomena to make up the laws of nature as we define them. This is tangential to my purposes here; however, I am concerned about the propagating repercussions of a view that posits the absence of an attribute of God as explanatory – especially with regard to phenomena reported to go over and above natural laws.
plump for this view, we take on the (seeming) commitment that God’s intervention (in the case of miracles) winds up being his non-intervention. And what about the so-called “hard” cases like the saint being burned by the fire. In the rest of this section, I will argue that, in fact, concurrentism incurs no significant (or unique) costs as a result of this construct. If I am right, it might offer a more plausible and satisfactory way to reconcile essentialism with (and explicate) divine miracles.

If natural causation consists of both the natural cause and God’s general concurring will, then the proposition we have been considering thus far would look something like: \((X\&Y)\rightarrow Z\). Nature’s laws would be efficacious only in virtue of God concurrently willing that it be so. The putative counterintuitiveness of the idea might be the seeming ‘non-intervention’ of God’s will being necessary for miracles. I think that this interpretation is mistaken. If, as most of the scholastics and early moderns agree, God works in the most efficient way possible in everything he does, then perhaps a better way of interpreting his concurring will is in the context of creation – specifically the aspects of his creation involved in designing and implementing the laws of nature.33 The upshot might be that his concurrence with natural laws would be a (relatively) fixed entity, something that he, as God, could accomplish as part of the construct of how creation unfolds. This also aligns with the majority view of concurrentism casting the theory as “God’s general concurrence with secondary causation”. Holding his concurrence fixed in this way, his active decision to not concur with some particular law (or laws) of nature is then required when performing a miracle. More formally: to perform a miracle, God *intervenes in nature to withhold his general concurrence in a specific case*. This seems at least as intuitive as the idea that natural laws might be counterfactually dependent on the absence of God’s non-concurring will to be efficacious. My proposal *requires* some kind of direct action or purpose (or perhaps *intent to withhold for a specific purpose*), and thus is not simply non-intervention in the sense of an absence of engagement on God’s part.

Turning briefly to the cases that seem hard to square with concurrentism, I think we face no particular difficulty in at least two respects. First, as just mentioned, if God is maximally efficient, he necessarily will intervene in nature to the minimal extent possible, while still carrying out his redemptive plan for creation34. Thus he will not intervene in every case of human suffering (incurred by either saints or non-saints) as this would be contrary to his nature. Our human intuition that is offended by such cases is exactly that – a human intuition which, on reflection, is easily countered by taking into account the nature of God. Consider that, on Biblical authority, it “rains on the just and unjust alike”. I think a theist’s stronger intuition is that God does not interfere with the laws of nature on an ad hoc basis – that doing so would compromise our conception of God as the perfect and most efficient creator and planner. When he does interfere with these laws, he has a specific reason for doing so – a reason that could not be accomplished otherwise and one that fits into his overall plan for creation in such a way as to *necessitate* divine intervention.

33 Here we are on familiar ground. Aquinas, Suarez, Descartes, Malebranche, etc. would all agree, despite their different constructs for causation in general, that God, *being God*, necessarily works in the most efficient way possible (i.e. he would intervene in a way contrary to the laws of nature to the minimal degree possible).
34 e.g. according to Locke – only when necessary to substantiate faith in divine revelation. See his 1701, p. 257-258.
This leads me to the second respect in which I think these hard cases are not problematic for concurrentism. This just is another way of framing or posing the problem of evil and suffering in general. Every extant theodicy attempts to explain why and how evil exists concurrently with an omnipotent and benevolent God. As such, every case is a hard case – there is nothing special or unique about the saint burning in the fire contrasted with a baby being sacrificed to Molech in the Old Testament. Here, I think, the resources offered by the idea roughly glossed as a “morally sufficient reason” is especially germane (and, I think, right) to answer these concerns. I cannot explore this further here; however, my point is that every occurrence of evil and suffering requires an explanation of the same type. There is no unique burden borne by concurrentism in this respect.

I think it will be tough to claim that conservationism provides a more plausible explanation for miracles (in the objective case). To my lights, concurrentism offers the more intuitive theory; however, all I need for my purposes is an equally successful narrative and we have at least accomplished that much. This, combined with conservationism's arguably entailed deistic leanings (as demonstrated in section two) is, I think, enough to motivate my tentative conclusion that concurrentism provides the best framework from which to construct a theory of causation that accommodates the beliefs and intuitions of theism while remaining relevant and plausible within the confines of contemporary metaphysical debate.

My thoughts aside, it is, I think, quite clear that any theory of theistic causation relies heavily on a corresponding view of natural laws that entails the relationships explicated by the theory in question. What would it mean for something to be a law of nature, and in what way would it be necessary? This is the gauntlet I take up briefly in the next section in the hopes of elucidating an explanation that I believe aligns well with concurrentism and provides additional resources for the further development of this 'ancient-modern' proposal of theistic causation and natural necessity.

### S.4 Consequent Necessity

It would seem fairly uncontroversial to assert that we have two strong intuitions about the laws of nature: (1) that they are in some way necessary, and (2) that they could have been different. Most extant theories about natural laws emphasize one or the other of these intuitions (e.g. a Humean would emphasize their contingency but might not capture their seeming necessity). In another recent paper, Nate Rockwood puts a 'neo-Cartesian' theory of natural necessity on the table, one that might have the potential to explain the necessity of these laws in the actual world while allowing for their contingency in other possible worlds (in addition to supporting counterfactuals both about how the laws “could have been” in those worlds and about miracles and their occurrence or non-occurrence in different worlds). Importantly, this view resists a regularity theorist's interpretation of 'constant coincidence' and posits metaphysically robust laws of nature that are, in themselves, immediate body-body causes. Before examining this idea, however, I'll try to set the stage.

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35 Descartes, Malebranche, and several others offer a defense of this genre.
36 Rockwood (2016b).
For starters, what could “being a law of nature” even mean? According to David Armstrong:

“Suppose it to be a law that Fs are Gs. F-ness and G-ness are taken to be universals. A certain relation, a relation of non-logical or contingent necessitation, holds between F-ness and G-ness. This state of affairs may be symbolized as ‘N(F, G)’.”

Lewis objects that this is simply giving a name to the laws. This might be useful, but it also seems unhelpful when trying to explain the laws and their function. A name, in and of itself, cannot explain what it is to be that thing "...anymore than one can have mighty biceps by just by being called 'Armstrong'." (1983, p. 366) This granted, I think Armstrong’s account does more than merely name a certain state of affairs. Given an expression of such a law in the form of $(\forall x)(Fx \supset Gx)$, Armstrong claims that (per the quantifier) F-ness and G-ness are universals and that a certain relation holds between them – that of contingent, vice absolute, necessity. This is more than a name, but it falls short of giving us a full explanation for them, to include their ontology, their modal status, and their scope.

Take this latter explantions first. What scope would these laws have? Put another way, over what would they hold sway? The set of governed entities in this case can’t, I think, include God. If, as we will see below, when creating any world he decides to create he decrees what laws of nature obtain in that world, then it’s hard to see how he would be subordinate to those laws. Additionally, given that the definition of a miracle entails the violation of law of nature, it seems necessary that God can so act. However, in virtue of the fact that they are laws, there should be some univocal sense in which they obtain and a description of their domain. Plantinga uses the term ‘creaturely inviolable’ to describe this state of affairs, and this seems plausible to 1) explain their scope in the actual world, and 2) how to correctly parse them across all possible, created worlds. In those worlds, the laws of nature that would obtain would be inviolable by the created objects while remaining subject to God’s intervention if he so chooses.

How about their ontology? The easy answer would be to say, “Well, of course, God just creates them!” But there are repercussions that lurk just under the surface of this kind of response. What kinds of things could be candidates for these laws? When, with respect to any world’s creation, would they be implemented? Are there any restraints on the way God could go about this task? What about the ‘necessary truths’ of logic and math? For now, I’ll leave these worries aside, as they form much of the motivation for what follows. I think it clear, however, that more needs to be said than simply stipulating divine creation when discussing the ontological status of the laws of nature.

What kind of necessity would these laws have? Absolute necessity seems implausibly conservative, and Armstrong’s description (namely, that they are contingent) seems intuitive in this regard. Note that, unfortunately, many (perhaps most) theistic accounts of the laws of nature attempt to walk a worrisome fine line between absolute and contingent necessity. I think it fairy clear that any theory requiring absolute necessity for the laws of nature would then have to hold that they would then have to have the same modal status as the truths of logic, say $(A \lor \sim A)$. To accommodate this, they often cast the necessary truths of

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37 Armstrong (1983, p. 85)
38 Plantinga (2015, p. 129) agrees this only names the proposal. I think it does more while remaining insufficiently explanatory.
39 Plantinga (2015, pp. 132-133)
logic, math, etc. as being entailed somehow by the attributes (or something of the sort) of God in order to claim that these attributes are what causes those truths to be the way they are.

I think these theories are in the grip of a certain intuition concerning God's omnipotence such that absolutely nothing can be allowed to stand in an independent relationship with respect to God. As a result, they experience difficulties allowing or accounting for God's having a unique nature, because having such a nature would mean that God would be both dependent and subject to that nature. Theories positing absolute necessity in this way will face challenges in numerous fields of philosophical inquiry. If the necessary truths of logic and math, etc. are dependent on the arbitrary choice of God, then what constrains him when instituting moral properties and deciding what will be 'right' and what will be 'wrong'? Consider that, on this interpretation, something like the *Euthyphro* dilemma threatens any number of interpretations concerning how God could act within creation (and while creating, of course). This, I think, is responsible for motivating the theory I'm considering here. It seems plausible that the laws of nature could have been different than they are, and this aligns with Descartes' assertion that God could have made *anything* the case when creating the actual world. But that can't be the whole story if we want to avoid the dilemmas above. Perhaps a 'neo-Cartesian' theory of theistic natural necessity can provide the resources needed to flesh out a theistic theory of natural laws that is explanatorily fruitful while remaining analytically plausible.

Rockwood's theory seeks to interpret Descartes' assertion as the claim that God can make a law, say \((\forall x)(Fx \Rightarrow Gx)\), hold with *consequent necessity*. To unpack this concept, what would consequent necessity *mean*? As a foil, let's assume that the necessary truths of logic and math (and truths about God's nature), are *antecedently* necessary. That is to say they are *not* dependent on God's will. Any truth that is created by and dependent on God's willing it to be so in the act of creating is then *consequently* necessary in that world. These consequently necessary truths then could have been different than they are. As noted above, Descartes argues (in effect) that there are *no* antecedently necessary truths; God had the freedom to make anything at all necessary (or contingent). This seems very obscure indeed, for note that on this view even the truths of God's nature (his omniscience, goodness, omnipotence, even his existence) turn out to be contingent. As Rockwood argues (agreeing with Plantinga), Descartes' position denies God a nature, and given that he argues from God's immutability to ground consequent necessity, it would seem he would have to, in the end, accept antecedent necessity in the case of God's nature to intelligibly explicate this notion. It is in this way that Rockwood's theory is neo-Cartesian, in the sense of it being a fairly significant revision of Descartes' widely understood philosophical commitments, while remaining consistent with most *theistic intuitions about God's creative action in the actual world*. He accepts (as do I) that God's nature (and the necessary truths of logic, etc.) are antecedently necessary and *not* dependent on God's will.

Note that this is the crucial premiss motivating the argument under consideration. If God's creative

40 Where \((\forall x)(Fx \Rightarrow Gx)\) picks out a law of nature in this context. Of course, Descartes insists that God can make *all* logical or mathematical truths necessary as well (in the sense that they are contingent on his making them so). As theists, I think we should resist this claim. Frankly, we don't need it, and accepting it leads to implausible logical and modal commitments.

41 Where that truth is, as a result of the efficacious act of God's will during creation, necessary.

42 Not to mention the counter-intuitive proposition that \(2+3=5\) could have been false.

43 1980, p. 141 and following.
work designing the laws of nature in the actual world determines that they hold of consequent *qua dependent* necessity, then their nature must be such that they do not contradict anything that is antecedently *qua independently* necessary. Thus the natural laws in any possible world will be constrained by at least 1) the necessary truths of logic, etc., and 2) God’s nature (such as to be loving, good, merciful, etc.). God is then constrained (and, I think, unproblematically so) by his nature and the necessary truths when creating and designing the natural laws that obtain in any world he creates. This has the happy result of bypassing the dilemmas noted earlier and delimiting the subject matter in a way that is both plausible and subject to philosophical inquiry such as not to be uniquely worrisome due to its theistic genesis.

So how does consequent necessity play out with respect to, to use Descartes' example, the laws of motion? If we grant that there is no absolute (or antecedent) necessity connecting property F and property G (in this case, having mass and gravitating towards other objects with mass), then, if God wills that (∀x) (Fx ⊃ Gx), his efficacious will and his immutability simply make it the case that all Fs *must* be Gs. In this sense, (∀x)(Fx ⊃ Gx) is explained as consequentially necessary as an act of creation and remains necessary (explained by his immutability). This can be illustrated simply by considering the law of conservation of motion - once God creates motion (and how that concept “plays out” in the actual world), the same quantity of motion must be preserved thereafter (as a result of his immutability).

There is an objection here based on the way Descartes presents his view of the laws. He claims that the immutability of God ensures that the laws will always hold. Objection: what if God were, from the beginning, to stipulate that (∀x)(Fx ⊃ Gx) would obtain between a limited time frame, say t1 to t2, and then not obtain between t2 and t3? God could theoretically remain immutable in this way, undermining the ontological move from his immutability to the law of motion under consideration. There are two replies available to Descartes (and, by extension, Rockwood). The first is an appeal to confidence in two facts: (1) that God’s willing in the case of natural laws would remain constant unless we were forced to say otherwise (due to “experience or revelation”), and (2) that if God does will that a different relation obtains between t2 and t3 (in the above case), that he has a *good reason* for doing so. Note that this would then become, in Locke’s sense (and the sense I am using in this paper, a *miracle*). If we preserve the ability for God to violate the laws of nature in the sense of performing miracles (but not the ability of created things to do so), then the objection doesn’t touch the theory. This aligns with the scope and type of necessity I discussed earlier.

The second response appeals to the resources deployed in the explication of consequent necessity above – if God wills at t1 that it be *necessary* that (∀x)(Fx ⊃ Gx), then the inference from God’s immutability to the conclusion that the regularity holds universally is justified. Consequent necessity thus explains the intuition that the laws of nature are, in some way, *necessary* while allowing for the fact that they could have been different had God willed them to be otherwise.

(Permit me an aside. So what about *regularity* theories of the laws of nature instead of what is being suggested here? In a theistic construct, this entails an occasionalistic view of causation and the way

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44 Another moniker would be ‘dependent’ necessity. Truths like tautologies and facts about mathematical addition obtain in an ‘independently’ necessary sense with respect to God, if I am right about how this is supposed to work.
laws of nature would be defined. The literature doesn't seem to suggest that a Cartesian theory of this type would support this interpretation. Descartes clearly appeals to the laws of nature as “secondary and particular” causes of motion. This would mean that the laws have to be something 'real' in the fabric of the world that make things move. Additionally, he specifically denies in certain passages that God is responsible for all the motions of bodies. This precludes the laws of nature just being identical with God's will.

Remember that, according to occasionalism, at each moment in time, God decides what motion every object has. This makes it unclear how to explain the necessity we seem to have about the laws of nature. One might posit that God's general volitions do the needed work. God could will “in general” that bodies behave a certain way. This might look somewhat like natural/consequent necessity ontologically, yet there can't be any humanly-understood necessity on this view. So what type of necessity would work? It can't just rest on God's nature qua immutability. If we look again at the objection above according to which God could (immutably) will from the beginning that from t1 to t2 (∀x)(Fx ⊃ Gx) obtains, then from t2 to t3 it does not, it seems that unless God makes it necessary that (∀x)(Fx ⊃ Gx) obtains, the objection goes through.

Occasionalism cum regularity theory, then, does not satisfy our intuitions about the necessity of the laws of nature, either in the particular or general case of God's volitional will. Descartes certainly thinks that God can make the laws of nature necessary, so we should reject an occasionalist interpretation of his theory in particular and, with regard to theism, a regularity theory of natural laws in general.)

Of course, as mentioned before, Descartes is most often interpreted as holding that the laws of nature are antecedently necessary. This is, prima facie, difficult to reconcile with some of his other writings, given that he also claims that nothing is antecedently necessary. Nonetheless, Descartes elsewhere seems to rely on some of God's attributes as being antecedently necessary. As an example, he claims that (a) the three laws (of motion) or (b) the eternal truths have to be necessary in all possible worlds – but tries to explain this as a result of these theses somehow following deductively from God's nature. I think, with Rockwood, that the only position that is both plausible and defensible here is the view on which the laws of nature are consequently necessary. If Descartes' view concerning eternal truths allows God to make the equation 2+3=5 false, we would also have to assume he would also have to allow for God to have imposed an entirely different concept of motion on creation. Descartes' position, then, is either hopelessly obscure or inconsistent (or even incoherent). A neo-Cartesian theory seems better positioned to give us a plausible theistic view of the laws of nature. They are not, it seems, antecedently or logically necessary; God willed them as nomically necessary relations in the actual world (as in the example of (∀x)(Fx ⊃ Gx) with respect to laws of motion) in the act of creating this world, and as such they are consequently necessary and persistent. He certainly could have, in the act of creating other possible worlds, willed other natural laws to obtain, consistent with the natural and/or physical facts in that world. This would just be the natural necessity that obtains in those worlds, and it satisfies the intuition that natural laws, while contingently necessary in our world, could certainly have been different in others.

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45 Something occasionalism (or, in this context, 'theistic regularity theory') cannot accept.
I think this might be exactly the kind of natural necessity theism needs to explicate the creation and function of the natural laws, and their relation to causation, in the actual world. It additionally supports robust counterfactual analysis without being implausibly conservative with respect to its modality. While a view of this type certainly doesn’t entail concurrentism as its partner, it certainly is consistent with it.

Let me also note an additional benefit of this interpretation of natural law qua necessity. It seems to provide a common foundation for inquiry across multiple philosophical disciplines. Take, for example, morality. The literature is rich with differing perspectives concerning the nature of moral truths (if there are any) and their metaphysical status. Consequent necessity seems very apropos to that discussion, perhaps even informing new interpretations of normative supervenience and the modality of ethical truths. As such the theory seem, at first blush, to have significant explanatory potential.

So What Next?

As stated in the introduction, future work is needed in order to fully articulate this combined theory of causation and natural laws. Much more also needs to be said to answer overdetermination and epiphenomenal worries about concurrentism and the way in which primary and secondary causation “play out” pragmatically and theoretically. To give an example of the challenges remaining, those replies will need to provide positive accounts that do not rely solely on “time determinant” general concurrence, as that might seem to lead to a type of conservationism instead. I think this can certainly be accomplished, but I cannot do it here.

This being said, I think I have, at the least, shown that concurrentism and consequent necessity merit further exploration and explication as they offer plausible and consistent theories that do not incur objections based solely on their formation being bizarre or baroque in any significant way. They additionally support and provide substantive, explanatory narratives that satisfy widely-held theistic intuitions while remaining relevant to contemporary, metaphysical debate.

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