

A PRIMER FOR A CONTEMPORARY  
OCCASIONALIST METAPHYSICS OF NATURE

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Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's famous argument for occasionalism from his seventeenth discussion in *Tahafut al Falasifah* has been frequently compared to David Hume's treatment of causation from his *Treatise of Human Nature*. However, in the latter, Hume actually argues that the very 'course of reasoning' that leads the Cartesian occasionalists to deny efficacy of matter should also lead them to deny occasionalism itself:

For if every idea be deriv'd from an impression, the idea of a deity proceeds from the same origin; and if no impression, either of sensation or reflection, implies any force or efficacy, 'tis equally impossible to discover any such active principle in the deity.<sup>1</sup>

The Humean argument against occasionalism, then, is:

1. *Every idea is derived from an impression.*
2. *No impression implies any force or efficacy.*

*Therefore, we have no idea of force or efficacy.*

*Therefore, we have no idea of force or efficacy as an attribute of God.*

This argument rests essentially on Hume's epistemological premise, that every idea is derived from an impression. The lack of any impression that implies force or efficacy must render a global denial of the possession of any meaningful concept thereof in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Hume, (1739-40) 160.

generate the conclusion. If we are truly without any such idea, then occasionalism is a meaningless doctrine; that is, nothing is really attributed to God at all in calling Him "first cause", and nothing is really denied of creation in calling Him "only cause".

Since these philosophers, therefore, have concluded, that matter cannot be endow'd with any efficacious principle, because 'tis impossible to discover in it such a principle; the same course of reasoning should determine them to exclude it from the supreme being.<sup>2</sup>

The course of reasoning that Hume attributes to the Cartesian occasionalists here is as follows:

- 1) *It is impossible to discover any efficacious principle in matter.*

*Therefore, matter does not have any efficacious principle.*

This, and not the Humean argument, more closely resembles Ghazali's line of reasoning regarding the issue, as represented, for example, in both *Tahafut al-Falasifa* and *Iqtisad fi al-Itiqad*. Such an argument need not lead one to deny the efficacy of God. Unlike the Humean argument, nothing here shows that we have no idea of efficacy. The first premise only states that we do not discover it in matter. It is reasonable, on the basis of this premise, to draw the conclusion that matter itself is not efficacious. One need not adopt either of the first two premises of Hume's argument in order to draw such a conclusion. Thus, while it is correct that an occasionalist cannot deny the very concept of causation, the epistemological occasionalist argument, from the premise that causation is not discovered in matter, does not turn on such a denial.

It may be more accurate to understand Hume as contending, not simply that we have no concept of causation, but that we have no *logically irreducible* concept of causation. That is, we have no con-

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*