Descartes on body-mind causation

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The primary focus of this paper is to discuss several aspects of the problem of secondary causation in Descartes' natural philosophy—more precisely the causation between the body and the mind. My purpose is to present three different perspectives on this problem: occasionalism, occasional causation and efficient causation in order to argue that despite its popularity occasionalism does not constitute the only real solution. Therefore, my contention is that we should give further consideration to the other two solutions: occasional causation and efficient causation.

The problem of secondary causation concerning Descartes’ natural philosophy represents an important issue referring to the coherence of his philosophical system. It is well known that Descartes' constitutive laws of the physical substrate are based on the metaphysical principles relevant for his mechanical world, and for this, he needs a certain theory of matter which has to take into account all the implications due to the metaphysical assumptions.

Taking into consideration the aspects of body-mind causation especially those revealed in the articles of Daniel Garber, Steven Nadler, Tad Schmaltz, John Yolton, Scott Davit, John Cottingham and Joseph Prost, I intend to compare their arguments regarding the occasionalist thesis applicable to the body-mind interaction and examining their consequences for Descartes’ system of thought.

In the first part of this paper I will summarize the framework of Descartes’ philosophical beliefs, which serve as an introduction to the controversial issue of the mind-body problem. The mind and the body are two different substances and the relation between them is problematic. I will note the implications of accepting a weaker or a stranger view of mind-body interaction. In the second part of the paper, I will present an analysis of the two most important conceptions about causation, occasionalism and occasional causation. These views which have been frequently considered synonymous even though they are based on different assumptions. Moreover, I will apply Nadler’s conception on body-mind causation to the Cartesian doctrine. In the third part of the paper, I will discuss Schmaltz’s thesis as another solution for problems which occasionalism leaves unsolved.

With reference to the purpose of this article, regarding the problem of causality, I want to argue that for Descartes there are four types of interactions.
among finite substances: body-body, body-mind, mind-body and intra mental causation. Each type, one of these causation has certain effects: the motion of the body, sensation, voluntary motion and ideas, respectively. In this paper, I will only discuss the second type, namely the body-mind causation.

Even though the majority of Descartes’ commentators accept the occasionalist point of view about the interaction among physical bodies, I believe that this approach deserves further analysis. The philosophers who have written about the problem of causation in Descartes’ philosophy have agreed on the fact that the most debatable case is the body-mind interaction¹.

Moreover, I think that we have to distinguish between two questions: which is the cause of motion between two physical bodies and what is the nature of sensations given the fact that this nature implies that sensory ideas are caused by the body or something different from our mind? The first question appeals to the possibility that physical bodies are the cause for motion in the world, while the second hints to the possibility that our bodies can be the (only) cause for sensations.

Another important aspect regarding the consistence of Descartes’ system of thought, is that there seems to be a cleavage between some passages. One the one hand there are fragments of the Principles of Philosophy, that propose the rejection of the active powers which exist in bodies², and on the other hand there are paragraphs in the Meditations, that suggest an acceptance of sensations as modes determined by the interaction between body and mind³. Concerning the problem of logical consistence we could accept two solutions. We could claim compatibility between body-body and mind-body causation, more explicitly between an occasionalist view about bodies and an interactionist view about the mind-body relation. Or we could, accept that Descartes' apparent failure in making a consistent philosophical system represents a pseudo problem. The latter stance holds if we take the apparent inconsistency as a consequence of the development of Descartes’ early mark or if we suppose that the body-mind causality is a special situation, since the union of the body and the mind is a distinct notion⁴. Currently, there is an interesting discussion about this issue but I have to point out that it will not be taken up in this paper.

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¹ See NADLER, STEVEN (1993), GARBER, DANIEL (2001b) and SCOTT, DAVID (2000).
² DESCARTES, R. (1984a): “Now it is obvious by the natural light that the total cause of something must contain at least as much reality as does the effect”.
³ DESCARTES, R. (1984a): “For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pains and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and intermingling of the mind with a body (The Sixth Metaphysical Meditation, pp. 50-63).
⁴ DESCARTES, R. (1984b): „I distinguished between three kinds of primitive ideas or notions, each of which is known in its own special way, and not by comparison with one another – namely the notions we have of the soul, of the body, and of the union between the soul and the body” (AT III, 691) Letter for Elisabeth 28th June 1643, p. 226.
In conclusion, my purpose here is to present the main aspects of the complex image of causality in Descartes’ works, having as supposition the fact that we should depart from an occasionalistic view in Descartes’ philosophy, since we can take into consideration other solutions, namely occasional causation or efficient causation.

The mind and the body

The theory of matter represents a controversial issue for Early Modern philosophers. The answers given to several questions such as which are the primary and secondary properties of matter, what the nature of matter is, how many kinds of substances exist in the Universe, establish boundaries for different philosophical traditions (Cartesians, atomists etc.). There are certain points of agreement among Cartesians, mainly on Descartes' division of substance in res cogitas and res extensa, and on his conviction that extension represents the essence of corporal substances, while thought is the nature of thinking substances. In the Third Meditation, Descartes proposes three degrees of perfection\(^5\), thus trying to give a definition for the modes of substance. First there is an infinite substance – God –, secondly there is a finite substance, which, in turn, is divided into indivisible (the mind) and divisible (individual bodies), and finally, there are modes of the substance, which consist of properties such as shape, size or thought\(^6\). The crucial idea of Descartes' metaphysical system is that the mind is a thinking entity without extension and which can exist apart from its body. In other words, the mind is a genuine substance distinct from the body and which has thought as its essence. This supposition makes up the final step towards Descartes’ doctrine of the immortal soul.

Furthermore, Descartes describes the mind as composed of two faculties: a passive faculty, perception, and an active faculty, the will. In this case, for instantiating these faculties we need a cause or a bundle of causes, which have as results sensations or voluntary motions. To sum up, as far as the description of the mind and body is concerned, we must accept that for a dualist philosopher, mind and body are and must be two different kinds of substances.

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\(^5\) DESCARTES, R. (1984b): “whether some of the things of which I have ideas really do exist outside me. Considered simply as modes of thought, my ideas seem to be all on a par: they all appear to come from inside me in the same way. But considered as images representing things other than themselves, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas that represent substances amount to something more – they contain within themselves more representative reality – than do the ideas that merely represent modes [= ‘qualities’]. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God – eternal, infinite, unchangeable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of everything that exists except for himself – certainly has in it more representative reality than the ideas that represent merely finite substances” (The Third Meditation, pp. 24-37).

\(^6\) DESCARTES, R. (1984a), The Sixth Meditation, pp. 50-63.
Supposing then that they can act one upon the other in some way, we have to assume other premises, which make the acceptance of a linkage between them possible. To some extent, I assume that in Descartes’ works we should agree to an interactionist approach. Interactionism incorporates Descartes’ last view that it is false to consider that the difference in the natures of the body and the mind implies an impossibility of interaction between the two. In the next paragraphs I will discuss this views with the main purpose of describing the union between the mind and the body.

Despite the differences in nature between mind and body, Descartes considers these two substances to be united in one specific place named the pineal gland. The pineal gland is the primary mediator between the sensory and the motor nerves and it is also the locus in which the mind is most closely joined with the body. An interesting question can be derived from this physical union, namely how a finite material substance, like the pineal gland, could constitute the direct link between an extended substance, the body, and a non-extended substance, the mind. This problem represents a controversial point in Descartes’ work, even though in his correspondence with Elisabeth and Gassendi he tries to clarify it, his position remains ambiguous. Thus, it is important to return to the causes and effects of the interactions of the mind and body in order to clarify another important issue.

As I have already mentioned, Descartes made one observation about the union of the mind with the body in a letter to Elisabeth, from 1643, where he wrote about three primitive notions as being irreducible:

I distinguished between three kinds of primitive ideas or notions, each of which is known in its own special way, and not by comparison with one another – namely the notions we have of the soul, of the body, and of the union between the soul and the body. What I should then have done was to explain the difference between these three sorts of notions, and between the operations of the soul by which we have them.

The central idea of this paragraph is that we can identify the mind-body union and two more different ‘notions’: the mind and the body. An interesting question which arises from this distinction is the following: assuming that Descartes accepts that the union between the mind and the body is a different substance, does he agree that it has its own attributes, or does he only suggest, by this union, a possible way of understanding the interaction between two substances that are different in nature?

The first part of the answer represents Schmaltz’s argument for supporting the idea of the possibility to have a sort of efficient body-mind causation which coincides with Cottingham’s view which I will return to in the last part of this paper.

7 DESCARTES, R. (AT IXA 213; CSM II 275).
In conclusion, the mind and the body act upon one another as finite substances, in some way, despite the differences in nature between them, and even if there are difficulties in considering and describing the finitude of substances, especially in the case of the human being as a union of a soul and a body.

**Occasionalism vs occasional causation**

It is true that the relation between the body and the mind, especially the problem of the body as a cause of the sensory ideas in the mind, probably represents the most debatable issue for those philosophers who want to establish a theory of causation in Descartes’ works. There is also the alternative view, for example that of Jonathan Bennett's. He remarks that Descartes does not have a theory of causation in the strong sense of this term and that it is even better to say that he has improved his idea about mind and body interactions, with the help of the objections formulated in his correspondence with various persons such as Elisabeth and Burman.

This suggests that Descartes at least entered the game, trying to develop an account of the nature of causation; but I shall argue later that he did not. His lack of any general theory of causation may have deterred him from coming more openly to the aid of the princess and the graduate student.

However, I assume that Descartes sketched in the Meditations, the Treatise on Man and also in Comments, a significant thesis concerning this problem which has remained unclear and about which Daniel Garber said that „[it is] not a clear-cut“.

Keeping that in mind I intend to compare these two approaches, occasionalism and occasional causation, as different perspectives about the body-mind relation. I also want to give an argumentative view concerning the problems involved by the acceptance of an occasionalist thesis.

To begin with, I want to point out the main occasionalist assumption: that the only true cause is God. In seventeenth-century philosophy, especially for the philosophers who endorsed dualism, occasionalism represents a solution

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10 Ibidem, p. 84.
11 Ibidem.
12 NADLER, S. (1993), p. 44: „He concludes that in the first case, Descartes clearly is an occasionalist, and that God is the only cause of motion in the world of inanimate bodies, and that in the second case, it is equally clear that Descartes thinks that there are besides God, genuine finite mental causations of motion in the physical world. Garber insists, however, that the third context – the case of body-mind relation and the generation of sensations – is not as clear cut“. 
primarily to the problem of mind-body interaction\textsuperscript{13}. It was very hard to describe this sort of linkage between two different kinds of substances, and thus the infinite power of divinity dismisses the case for the impossibility of this interaction.

Another relevant assumption regards the created substances. These have only passive powers such that God supplies all active casual powers in the Universe. In a formal manner:

\begin{quote}
There is $B$, which efficiently causes $e$, where $B$ is God and $e$ is the effect.
\end{quote}

Suppose that these three premises are true. When applied to Descartes’ philosophy, we deduce that the body cannot be a cause \textit{in se} for sensations in the mind. More generally, finite things are incapable of genuine causal efficacy because God is the only being able to produce and conserve all changes in the world.

Nevertheless, in the \textit{Sixth Meditation}, Descartes attempts to hold that the body is the cause of our sensations; this argument seems to be reconsidered in the second part of the French version of \textit{Principles of Philosophy} where he introduces a special concept regarding bodies. He says that ‘it seems to us that the idea we have of it forms itself in us on the occasion of bodies from without’\textsuperscript{14}.

Without going into further details, I think that there is an important difference between the meaning of ‘occasion’ in Descartes’ view and the meaning of the same word in Malebranche’s view. Moreover, the latter view is useful for pointing out the boundaries of a real occasionalist conception.

Perhaps Malebranche’s most controversial remark on the causation of sensations is the fact that active powers have no place in bodies, because bodies are by default at rest and passive. This implies that God continuously creates the body in different locations over time. Moreover, Malebranche, who holds the strongest version of occasionalism, denies that our minds are true causes based on our lack of knowledge of the intended effects. In particular, his argument requires that each agent must know how to bring about the effect in order for him to be its cause\textsuperscript{15}.

On the other hand, another philosopher who wrote about the relation between the mind and the body, namely Arnauld, denied the possibility that the body could cause mental states, even though he accepted the body-body causal interaction:

\begin{quote}
The motion of body cannot have any other real effect than to move another body [...] it cannot cause any effect in a spiritual soul\textsuperscript{16}.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} NADLER, S. (2005), p. 37.
\textsuperscript{14} DESCARTES, \textit{apud} GARBER, DANIEL (2001b).
\textsuperscript{15} For more details about the no knowledge argument see SCHMALTZ, TAD (2008), NADLER, STEVEN (2005) and YOLTON, JOHN (1984d).
Now, returning to Descartes' vocabulary, an obvious question is: what does “occasion” mean for him in the case of the body-mind interaction? In a more general context, is Descartes an occasionalist or is he only a partial occasionalist (due to his rejection of the body-body causality by considering it impossible)?

A simple answer supporting the idea that Descartes is an occasionalist, could be that God causes the sensory ideas in the mind on the occasion of some motions in the brain.

To illustrate this, I propose the following example:

Imagine that on Christmas Eve you are sitting near Santa Clause’s Bag. You will see the redness of the Bag and, if you are an occasionalist, you will say: “the redness of the Bag occasions God to cause the sensation of red in my mind”.

The idea of partial occasionalism is supported by another interpretation for the concept „occasion” in Descartes’ view, proposed by Nadler in his article Descartes and occasional causation. He argues a general notion, called „occasional causation”, which is considerably different from classic occasionalism, with which it stands in a type-token relation. The interaction revealed by this new notion can be understood as follows:

There is a state of affairs A, which is the occasional cause of an effect e, if and only if A occasions B to efficiently cause e – where B is different from God.

In Descartes’ terms, the motion of the brain particles (in the pineal gland) induces a state through which the mental faculty becomes an efficient cause for producing sensory ideas.

Returning to our example, the answer will now be that the red colour of Santa Clause’s Bag communicates with the sense organs and the nerves, which induce the motion in the brain, and this process gives occasion for the faculty of the mind to efficiently cause the sensory ideas. In others words, seeing the redness of Santa Clause’s Bag gives rise to the motion of the particles in the brain and occasions the mind to produce the sensation of red.

To sum up, Nadler’s proposal allows finite substances to be occasions for certain effects and he dismisses any synonymy between occasional causation and occasionalism.

His solution is to bring together a cause and an effect by assuming something intermediary, the motion of the particles in the brain, which has the role of giving occasion to the mental faculty to produce a certain effect.

This new type of causation involves four important assumptions: a) God has only an explicative role without permanently intervening in the process of causation; b) the state of affairs B which efficiently causes the effect e is different from God; c) occasional causation does not require substantial likeness

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17 It is an innat mental faculty which became the proximate efficient cause for sensory ideas.
between cause and effect; d) the state of affairs A has no causal powers, which means that A cannot efficiently cause e.

In conclusion a major contribution of this view is represented by the fact that the body became a cause, an occasional one, for generating sensations in the mind, even if it is not an efficient cause. Moreover, Nadler establishes this type of relation between mind and body, after it has been certified that occasionalism gives rise to different problems when applied to Descartes’ thesis.

In the next paragraphs of this part, I will describe Nadler’s position in comparison to occasionalism and I will present some inconveniences regarding the acceptance of the occasionalist conception.

The differences between these two perspectives can be underlined by four main assumptions, different for each position.

Firstly while occasionalism denies any role for created entities in causal processes, because the single true cause that is able to produce and conserve any change in the world is God, occasional causation emphasizes that God, must not be and is not an efficient cause for any effect in the mind. He has only an explicative role, because he is the one who establishes from the beginning the occasional causes between body and mind.

The reduction of all the causes in the world to God as the single cause is a controversial perspective, since we have to recognize a minimum role of the created things in the process of causation. This occasionalist problem is solved by Nadler’s thesis which permits finite substances to be occasional causes.

There is another important aspect here; this reductionism held by the occasionalist conception is not applicable in all cases, since, regarding the interaction of the mind and the body, Descartes clearly asserts that the thinking substance can act on the body, having voluntary motions as effects. The same argument could be used against Nadler’s thesis, as its purpose is to give a solution only to the problem of how the bodily motion could cause sensory ideas in the mind.

With all these in view, I state a second difference, that while occasionalism could be applied in all cases: body-body, mind-body and body-mind interaction (e.g. Malebranche’s doctrine), occasional causation presents an answer only to the latter type of relation.

The last aspect to be revealed is that in order to be an occasionalist, one should accept the fact that there is an influence between a cause and its effect, which allows for a transfer from B to e. This idea is in agreement with Descartes’ claim that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in its effect. Nadler’s position supports the idea that occasional causation does not require substantial likeness between cause and effect. There is a weak meaning of the term „influence” for the relation between body motions and sensory ideas in the mind, which does not claim that the cause

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must be more real than the effect or that it should contain something which would be transferred to the effect at the end of the causal process. On such an interpretation Descartes’ words „at least as much reality” do not mean that the cause and the effect must be on the same ontological level, or that the cause must be ontologically superior to its effect. In other words, there is a nomological correlation between the occasional cause – namely the motion in the brain – and the effect – namely the sensory ideas.

The role of finite substances in the world, as causally impotent, the view that God recreates the physical world in every moment, even if the world \( w \) at time \( T_1 \) could differ from \( w \) at time \( T_2 \), and the distinctiveness of some passages of Descartes’ work,\(^19\) represent the main problem for an occasionalist view. Even if we minimize the occasionalist claim, down to the relation between the body and the mind and we agree that Descartes is a partial occasionalist, the first two problems presented above remain important arguments, which have to be solved in some way. Nevertheless, whether or not there is a correlation between Descartes’ dualism and the occasionalist doctrine remains an open question. If the answer is yes, then which are the boundaries for this linkage?

One option for answering the question would be Daniel Garber’s idea. In \textit{Descartes and occasionalism} Garber notes:

\begin{quote}
[I]t is by no means clear how to interpret the word „occasion” in Descartes’ vocabulary […] that of an occasional cause, a case whose effect is produced through the activity of God\(^20\).
\end{quote}

We can immediately conclude that Descartes’ formulation asserts that our sensations need the help of an agent in order for them to be brought about by bodies – which are inert. Garber who emphasizes that using the term „occasion” „does not imply that God causes the idea on the occasion of the brain motions” partly accepts this opinion\(^21\), but „sensory ideas cannot come directly from the motions that cause them”\(^22\). In other words, we do not have a causal relation between motions in the brain and the sensory ideas in the mind.

Another much more categorical opinion is John Yolton’s interpretation about the theory of perception, which emphasizes the idea that Descartes is, with certainty, an occasionalist. Yolton begins his first chapter of the book \textit{Perceptual Cognition of Body} by pointing out one crucial fact. If we want to develop a coherent theory of perception in Descartes’ system of philosophy, we should have in view „Descartes’ rejection of any causal relation between the physical activity of objects in our sense and the perceptual ideas in our minds”\(^23\).

\(^{21}\)Ibidem, p. 22.
\(^{22}\)Ibidem.
The first argument supporting his thesis proposes to accept a definite occasional correspondence between ideas and objects. He notes that:

On the occasion of certain physical motions caused in nerves and brain by the motion of body, the mind by a natural faculty forms ideas24.

In this account it is held that movements in the brain cannot cause ideas, but „there are semantic and epistemic responses to it”25.

In conclusion, in John Yolton’s view, Descartes’ rejection of causation between the brain and its cognitive activity, in John Yalton’s view, is based on two important aspects. The first points out that there is a clear-cut distinction between sensation and its causes, while the second argument is based on the theory of natural signs.

I will return to the first part of this conclusion, later in the paper, because I believe that it is important for the coherence of this argumentation to present here another opinion that is relevant to an occasionalist point of view.

Joseph Prost, who gradually describes Descartes’ doctrine as a precursor for Cartesians such as Cordemoy and Malebranche, represents this option. For instance, he said that Descartes does not admit any force from which we can deduce that created things can be causes of any kind of motion. Prost added to this idea the description of Descartes’ doctrine about the union between the body and the mind, emphasizing that the notion of this union is quite obscure. Thus he concludes that there is not a causality relation between these two different sorts of substances. One last observation about our role as a created thing is that we have a limited liberty as long as God is the only one who sustains and gives rise to motion in the world. In accordance to these conclusions, Joseph Prost notes as follows:

Ce n’est donc qu’une causalité bien limitée que Descartes laisse aux êtres crées; mais, du moment qu’ils existent en soi sinon par soi, il fallait bien leur attribuer un rôle et ce rôle est celui de cause occasionnelle26.

Efficient causation

The problem of deciding between an occasionalist view and a non-occasionalist view is not a simple and clear-cut choice. Thus, the apparent disagreement regarding Descartes’ ideas about the relation between the body and the mind (I am referring to body-mind and mind-body causation) determines us to reconsider the occasionalist arguments. As solutions to the problems which occasionalism leaves unsolved I take Nadler’s conception, on the one hand, and

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24 Ibidem.
26 PROST, J. (1926), ch. II, p. 35.
Schmaltz’s thesis, on the other. Scott David, who supports an interactionist approach, discusses in his article *Occasionalism and Occasional causation in Descartes’ Philosophy* the main problems which appear in connection to different writings of Descartes. He also presents a description of Nadler’s and Schmaltz's views. In this last part of the paper, I will go through of Schmaltz’s thesis, the main purpose being to point out the solution for the problems of occasionalism.

Tad Schmaltz argues that Descartes’ views on causation were profoundly influenced by scholastic acting. In this scholastic context, the fact that the created things rather than God are causes seems to be more realistic than the occasionalist theory which has God as the only real cause. As a central argument, Schmaltz considers that Descartes’ distance from occasionalism is due to the fact that he is a mere conservationist. In other words, there are secondary causes, which did not require God’s cooperation in order to be effective, because God created causes and conserved them in existence, and they did the rest. With respect to the mind-body interaction, Schmaltz argues that the union between mind and body represents the basis for the possibility of causation. In this case the body can be the cause of sensory ideas since it is part of the mind-body union, even if an occasionalist will claim that the body is ontologically inferior to the mind, and that mind-body interaction is in agreement with the conservation laws.

In the same way, Cottingham argues that the mind-body union represents a primitive notion for Descartes, since the union of mind and body has distinct and irreducible properties, such as sensory ideas and voluntary motions. He presents the mind-body union by analogy of water. Water is not a simple mixture between hydrogen and oxygen, since it is a special composite which has its own attributes that cannot be reducible to the properties of hydrogen or oxygen.

To develop Schmaltz’s conception, I will return to one important argument against an efficient causation of the body on the mind, represented by the interpretation of the words ‘occasion’ and ‘causation’ in different texts of Descartes. Yolton mentions a paragraph of *Treatise on Man*, which describes the relation among movements of bodies, movements in the brain and sensory ideas.

Now I hold that when God unites a rational soul to this machine, as I intend to explain later on, He will place its principal seat in the brain and will make its nature such that the soul will have different sensations depending on the different ways in which the nerves open the entrances to the pores in the internal surface of the brain.

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27 SCOTT, D. (2000): „At all stage Descartes is a body-mind interactionist; and if there is any shift, if it exists at all, may foreshadow the concept of inefficacios corporal action that emerges later in Malbranche’s full-blown occasionalism” (p. 14).
28 Concurrentist theory.
29 COTTINGHAM, JOHN (1997).
However, it is true that we can read this text in a non-occasionalist key and conclude that God is not the only real cause, but the first one, because he brings into existence human beings and establishes once and for all the relations between the human body and his soul.

We can imagine a mechanism which is influenced by external movements of objects and which, when it is united with a soul, can act upon it and determine it to create sensory ideas.

In other words, we can accept that the laws are grounded in God’s will, as Nadler maintains. This suggestion changes the conclusion of any sympathizer of occasionalism concerning the fact that if we accept God as the only cause, we have to recognize a minimum role of the created things in the process of causation.

Returning to the distinction between the cause and the effect (concerning their nature), we could admit that a main idea is Descartes' description of the way in which one mechanism (the human body) reacts to bodies placed at different distances from it. He says in the *Treatise On Man* that:

> And when a soul has been put in this machine, this will allow it to sense various objects by means of the same organs, disposed in the same way, and without anything at all changing except the position of the gland $H$\textsuperscript{31}.

Regarding this view, Tad Schmaltz notes in his book, *Descartes on causation*, that: „we can take Descartes’ position to be that the soul has an innate faculty that forms certain sensory ideas when certain motions in the body with which that soul is united act on it”, but we cannot deduce Nadler’s conclusion as: Deux ex machina.

Moreover, Schmaltz proposes to give God the role of a creator and a conserver and to accept that the causal relations between the body and the mind derive from laws that are grounded in ontologically real powers in objects. In this way, the occasionalist’s claim about the violation of the principle of conservation in the case of efficient causation becomes a pseudo problem. To say that God conserves the world is to imply that substances (both expanded and thinking substances) „retain their same natures, and thus they continue to follow the laws that those natures determine”\textsuperscript{32}. Even if there are substances such as minds and bodies which can produce motion, this fact does not signify that the principle has been refuted or that God has been rejected as the first cause of the world.

As we have seen, Tad Schmaltz’s account has as a central idea the possibility of the sensory ideas to be efficiently caused by the motion of the body. My interpretation of Schmaltz’s position is confirmed by the following paragraph, in which he argues that: „Descartes attempts to retain the view that

\textsuperscript{31} DESCARTES, R. (2004), p. 155 or AT.183.

\textsuperscript{32} SCHMALTZ, TAD (2008), p. 50.
the body is some sort of efficient cause of sensation". His argumentation is based on a distinction between two degrees of sensation:

1. composed of the motion in the sensory organs and the changes in shape or position;
2. composed of „all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ that is affected in this way“.

This premise is probably the one which permits Scott to say that Descartes is an interactionist, since he accepts actions on the body (motions in brain) and on the mind (the production of sensory ideas).

However, there is an interesting question about Schmaltz’s proposal: how can sensations are caused by bodies if they are modes of the mind? The solution to this difficulty is to agree to the fact that the true cause of sensations is the union between the mind and the body. This union can have sensations as modes.

On the other hand, in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes assumes the idea that bodies also have as an active faculty. The most relevant fragment for this argument is:

> Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the senses except certain corporal motions.

Important for this discussion are three main points: (a) sensations arise from a passive power of the mind; (b) sensations are not caused by the mind itself; (c) sensations are caused by extended things or bodies. The correct conclusion seems to be that the causes of our sensations are our bodies or, more generally, sensory ideas stem from bodies. Descartes gives further clarifications of this conclusion in the following paragraph:

> For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pains and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and intermingling of the mind with a body.

The central idea of this paragraph is the fact that sensations arise in the mind because of the mind-body union. Tad Schmaltz asserts this idea with the aim of supporting the theory of the efficient causation of sensory ideas, causation which has as a cause the union of the body with the mind.

In conclusion, I would like to stress out that this argumentative structure represents only an interpretation of the problem of the body-mind interactions. The main purpose of the paper was to emphasize that the body-mind causation does not imply an occasionalism tout court. Choosing the better argument for the problem of body-mind causation implies a difficult

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decision because occasional causation and the interactionist view are two 'paradigmatic' conceptions. In my opinion it is plausible to think that Descartes’ system of thought developed during the years and thus the apparent discrepancies in Descartes' system are not based on a logical inconsistency. We can read Descartes' work in a certain key in which he is only in part occasionalist.

Since I emphasize the inconvenient and the vulnerability of an occasionalist interpretation of the body-mind causality, choosing between occasional causation and efficient causation is a matter which should be settled concurrently with finding a way to make our choice compatible with Descartes' entire philosophical system.

**PRIMARY REFERENCES**


**SECONDARY REFERENCES**


GARBER, DANIEL (2001b), op. cit., ch. 10, Descartes and Occasionalism, pp. 203-220.


