

“More than an Occasion for a Cause: Louis De la Forge on Real Mind-body Interaction”

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Commentators generally agree that Descartes and his successors believed that God was the total and efficient cause of everything in the universe. This commitment to God as a universal cause seems to have left no need for secondary causes, occult qualities or final causes in nature or in explanation. This has led many commentators to assert that Descartes and his early successors such as Clauberg, Cordemoy, Desgabets, Le Grand, and De la Forge were occasionalists—at least with respect to body-body causation, and likely with respect to mind-body interaction.

The argument for occasionalism in body-body interaction goes roughly as follows: bodies in essence are extended in three dimensions; the modes of body are passive not active; therefore, two bodies, entirely passive in their nature, cannot truly cause but only occasion the movement of the other. A related and more formidable problem is how body, which shares nothing in common with the non-extended mind, could be said to interact with and cause change in the mind. The problem of mind-body causation is resolved by occasionalism by denying real interaction and positing the mere concurrence of thoughts in the mind and motions in the body.

In this paper, I argue that de la Forge was not an occasionalist but rather asserted real causal interaction in all three types of Cartesian causation, namely body-body, mind-body, and body-mind. I focus my analysis on De la Forge's account of mind-body interaction to show that he does create room for particular and determining causes, not merely occasional causes. I suggest that this result may be generalized to explain the causal accounts in the work of other Cartesians prior to Malebranche, namely, Desgabets, Clauberg, Cordemoy, and Le Grand.