

Descartes's Account of Sensation  
in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*

by  
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## Table of Contents

Chapter I: <i>Introduction</i>	1
Chapter II: <i>The Problem of Body-to-Mind Causation</i>	
Introduction	4
Body-to-Mind Action	4
Three Theories of Sensation	7
The God Requirement	10
Conclusion	12
Chapter III: <i>General Occasional Causation</i>	
Introduction	13
Cartesian Occasionalism	13
Scott's Refutation of Garber	15
The Answer: Occasional Causation	16
Issues with Occasional Causation	20
Conclusion	21
Chapter IV: <i>Descartes and Inefficacious Transmission</i>	
Introduction	23
Inefficacious Transmissionism in the <i>Comments</i>	23
Assessing Scott's Interpretation of the <i>Comments</i>	27
The Intelligibility of Inefficacious Transmissionism	31
Two Possible Revisions	34
Conclusion	35
Chapter V: <i>The Dissimilarity Problem in the Comments</i>	
Introduction	37
Deflationary Transmission	37
A Problem for General Occasional Causation	39
Rozemond and the Dissimilarity Problem	40
The Dissimilarity Problem, Occasional Causation, and Interactionism	43
Conclusion	47
References	48

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Descartes's substance dualism has been one of the biggest problems in interpreting his view on mind-body interaction. His commitment to the fundamental separation of extended substance from mental substance raises questions about how one can act causally on the other. This paper will focus specifically on the issue of body-to-mind action and what kinds of causal theories allow for bodies to cause the production of sensory ideas in the mind while remaining consistent with Descartes's other commitments. Body-to-mind causation is particularly interesting because some of the most contentious passages come from his discussions of sensation; this case most clearly shows the way in which very different kinds of causation can be attributed to Descartes.

In various passages, Descartes uses different language to refer to the action of body on mind, and these writings suggest different kinds of causal connections. For example, in the Sixth Meditation, he speaks of an active faculty in bodies that produces sensory ideas, which may sound as if he believes they have efficient causal power. But some of his later writings describe an 'occasioning' process on which bodily motion merely occasions the mind to produce sensory ideas. How to interpret the word 'occasion' and whether these two passages are compatible are two of the main issues in the debate over Descartes's account of sensation.

Some philosophers have thought that Descartes's reference to motions as occasions should be understood as a solution (whether successful or not) to the problems that dualism creates for body-mind causation. When Descartes speaks of occasioning, he claims that the source of sensory ideas is in the mind rather than bodies, so this can arguably make mind-body interaction intelligible despite their difference in nature. As Marleen Rozemond argues, however, this was not actually Descartes's motive in writing the occasioning model of causation. Instead,

he was primarily concerned with explaining the lack of resemblance between sensory ideas and the motions that cause them, not between the mind and the body. That is, it is not a problem that the ideas are mental; instead, it is a problem that the *content* of ideas is dissimilar from the motions that cause their production.

In this paper, I will investigate how we should interpret Descartes's use of the word 'occasion' to describe body-to-mind action, and I will show how Rozemond's distinction between the two problems contributes to this debate. In Chapter II, I will introduce the most relevant passages from Descartes and discuss how they relate to each other. In Chapter III, I will look closely at the theory Daniel Garber attributes to Descartes based on these passages, which is that Descartes's view evolved over time from interactionism to occasionalism, according to which God is the cause of sensations. Next, I will discuss how Steven Nadler effectively rejects the theory of occasionalism by proposing occasional causation, which is a more general form of occasioning that does not necessarily require direct agency from God. In Chapter IV, I will consider a theory by David Scott, which amounts to a combination of occasional causation and straightforward interactionism. I will argue that Scott's reading of the text is too literal, and that the two causal theories he attempts to combine are actually incompatible. Although he claims to endorse Nadler's view of occasional causation, Scott's view fails to follow some of the fundamental tenants of Nadler's theory.

Finally, in Chapter V, I will give my own view of Cartesian body-to-mind action. First, I will provide a reading of the text that is more consistent with Nadler's theory than Scott's reading was. Next, I will discuss the biggest problem with attributing general occasional causation to Descartes, which is that it is not clear how the mind knows when to act if it is only

passively induced to do so. From there, I will draw attention to the fact that straightforward interactionism is still a plausible reading of the passage.

In order to understand the relationship between occasional causation and interactionism as opposing interpretations of the text, I will focus in Chapter V on Rozemond's discussion of Descartes's concern with the dissimilarity between the content of ideas and bodily motions, rather than the difference in nature between mind and body. The distinction between these two problems illuminates that Nadler did not effectively rule out straightforward interactionism. Although his concept of occasional causation was useful in eliminating Garber's occasionalism and Scott's literal transmissionism, it is still possible that Descartes merely uses the word 'occasion' to refer to efficient causation. Although I lean toward the attribution of occasional causation, I recognize that there are problems with this view, and Nadler's version of it is not entirely accurate. I will conclude that both occasional causation and straightforward interactionism are plausible interpretations of the text. While this conclusion does not settle on one theory, the main purpose of this thesis will be to definitively eliminate occasionalism and literal transmission, and then get a clearer understanding of the two possible theories using Descartes's concern in writing the passages.

## CHAPTER II: THE PROBLEM OF BODY-TO-MIND CAUSATION

### INTRODUCTION

Descartes's discussions of causation are usually specific to one of three kinds: body-to-body, mind-to-body, or body-to-mind. This paper focuses on body-to-mind causation. As I mentioned previously, Descartes's descriptions of the production of sensory ideas contain peculiar language that has led to the attribution of different kinds of causal theories to him.

In this chapter, I will introduce the passages that are central to this debate and point to the potentially problematic ways in which they relate to each other. In addition, I will introduce three causal theories that have been attributed to Descartes based on these passages, and examine the ways in which these theories reject or elaborate on each other.

### BODY-TO-MIND ACTION

The process of body-to-mind causation has at least four parts: motion occurs in an external object, an effect occurs in the sensory organs, something happens in the brain that results in a shift to mental activity, and ideas of sensation form in the mind. The first two steps, which include the motion of an external object causing motion in the brain, are not as controversial as the other two; the second and third steps, especially the shift from physical to mental, are what the debate is about. There are several questions at play here: Is the actual cause of sensory ideas corporeal or mental? Do the motions in the brain act as an efficient cause, or some other kind? Is the mind purely passive in sensation?

In order to answer these questions, philosophers generally turn to two passages in Descartes that most clearly relate to body-to-mind causation. The first passage occurs in the *Meditations* (1641) as part of Descartes's proof of the existence of the material world:

Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects; but I could not make use of it unless there was also an active faculty, either in me or in something else, which produced or brought about these ideas. But this faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me.<sup>1</sup>

Descartes distinguishes our own “passive faculty of sensory perception” from an “active faculty” that brings about sensory ideas.<sup>2</sup> He claims that the faculty cannot be in the mind, so it must be external; later, he rules out the possibility of it being God by claiming that if it were, God would be deceiving us through such false perceptions of objects. Thus, the active faculty exists in bodies.<sup>3</sup> This conclusion suggests that bodies have a form of causal power, but he does not explicitly say whether they act as efficient causes of sensory ideas.

In contrast, Descartes uses slightly different causal language several years later, in 1648. In a passage in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, he claims that sensory ideas are innate to the mind, which has a special faculty of forming them at certain times:

[I]f we bear well in mind the scope of our senses and what it is exactly that reaches our faculty of thinking by way of them, we must admit that in no case are the ideas of things presented to us by the senses just as we form them in our thinking. So much so that there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to experience, such as the fact that we judge that this or that idea which we now have immediately before our mind refers to a certain thing situated outside us. We make such a judgment not because these things transmit the ideas to our mind through the sense organs, but because they transmit something which, at exactly that moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it. Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the sense organs except certain corporeal motions....But neither the motions themselves nor the figures arising from them are conceived by us exactly as they occur in the sense organs, as I have explained at length in my *Optics*. Hence it follows that the very ideas of the motions themselves and of the figures are innate in us. The ideas of pain, colours, sounds and the like must be all the more innate if, on the occasion of

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<sup>1</sup> CSM II, p. 55. CSM = Descartes, 1984-1985.

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

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



certain corporeal motions, our mind is to be capable of representing them to itself, for there is no similarity between these ideas and the corporeal motions.<sup>4</sup>

This is a more detailed account of the production of sensation in the mind based on a causal process that originates with bodily motion. Descartes clearly says here that sensory ideas are innate to the mind, and the mind has an inherent faculty that allows it to form such ideas at particular times. He also says that bodily motions play a role in prompting the mind to use this faculty, but the exact role of these motions and the nature of the ‘prompt’ are unclear.

These two passages are not necessarily incompatible, but there is undeniably some tension between them. In the Sixth Meditation, the mind seems to be passive, while in the *Comments*, it sounds more active. In addition, the Sixth Meditation could be interpreted to mean that ideas originate in bodies and are somehow transferred to the mind, but the *Comments* passage does not allow for this. This will be relevant because if our interpretation of the *Comments* passage contradicts the Sixth Meditation, we either need to alter our interpretations of the passages in light of each other, or propose a reason for the discrepancy. Attributing a theory to Descartes for body-to-mind causation requires consideration of discrepancies such as this; although most views will be centered on the language in the *Comments*, its relation to other passages will also play a significant role.

Another thing to note about the *Comments* passage is Descartes’s reference to a discussion in the *Optics* of 1637. The passage he refers to says the following:

[I]t often happens that in order to be more perfect as an image and to represent an object better, an engraving ought not to resemble it. Now we must think of the images formed in our brain in just the same way, and note that the problem is to know simply how they can enable the soul to have sensory perceptions of all the various qualities of the objects to which they correspond – not to know how they can resemble these objects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> CSM I, p. 304

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166

Descartes claims that our sensory ideas do not need to resemble the objects that they represent. So, our problem is in figuring out how ideas correspond to motions in such a way that we have accurate sensory perception. Descartes's concern for this issue will be an important part of my view. The crucial implication here is that he points to the lack of resemblance between ideas and motions; he is *not* expressing concern for the lack of likeness in nature between mental ideas and material causes. Descartes's reference to this *Optics* passage in the *Comments* provides a clear link between the two, and I will use the first to understand his motives in writing the second.

### THREE THEORIES OF SENSATION

For the remainder of this chapter, I will introduce three theories of interpretation of the *Comments* passage and how they relate to each other. In addition, I will go over the different ways that the philosophers I survey explain the apparent discrepancy between the Sixth Meditation and the *Comments*. I will return to each of these theories in later chapters to explain and assess them in detail.

Daniel Garber refers to both of these passages in order to argue that Descartes's view of causation evolved over time. He believes that the language in the *Comments* is different from that in the Sixth Meditation because Descartes's theory of body-to-mind causation actually changed from interactionism, when Descartes said bodies have an active faculty, to occasionalism, when Descartes stopped mentioning such a faculty.<sup>6</sup>

According to occasionalism, God is the only being that can act as an efficient cause. Finite things may appear to us as if they are acting as causes, but they do not actually have the power to do so. Instead, they provide the *occasion* for God to intervene; God's intervention then

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<sup>6</sup> Garber 1993, pp. 21-24

completes the causal process as he asserts his efficient causal power. Garber believes that the passage from the *Comments* is a description of occasionalism because Descartes says the mind forms ideas when it is given the “occasion” to do so.<sup>7</sup> It is important that in his final conclusion, Garber only attributes occasionalism to Descartes in a restricted sense, since he claims it does not apply to all kinds of causation, and it only appeared after some evolution in Descartes’s view. However, for the purposes of this thesis, we can think of him as a proponent of Cartesian occasionalism.

Steven Nadler rejects Garber’s theory on the basis that his reading of the word ‘occasion’ goes too far. To argue this, Nadler explains that occasionalism is simply a specific kind of a more general process that he calls occasional causation. In the process of occasional causation, one thing provides the occasion for another thing to act as an efficient cause. The first thing is merely an occasional cause of the effect, but it does not efficiently cause the effect on its own. Nadler clarifies that divine occasionalism, as Garber attributes it to Descartes, is merely one form of general occasional causation in which the efficient cause is always God.<sup>8</sup>

Nadler does not explicitly comment on the relation between the *Comments* passage and the Sixth Meditation outside of his discussion of Garber’s theory. He could agree with Garber about an evolution in thought and still be consistent with his theory that Descartes espouses general occasional causation in the *Comments*. Nadler does not deny the fact that the Sixth Meditation suggests interactionism, and he notes that the language in the *Comments* is different from that in the Sixth Meditation.<sup>9</sup> But instead of thinking that Descartes’s view evolved from interactionism to occasionalism, Nadler may hold that Descartes’s view evolved from

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>8</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 41

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

interactionism to general occasional causation. Contrarily, he could claim that the “active faculty”<sup>10</sup> of bodies in the Sixth Meditation is what produces brain motions that provide the occasion for the mind to produce sensory ideas. Nadler does not argue this in his paper, but it is consistent with his theory.

Although Garber and Nadler interpret the passages differently, they both attribute a form of occasional causation to Descartes for body-to-mind action. Garber’s occasionalism is a more extreme view, while Nadler’s occasional causation just makes the causal agency finite rather than divine. The final theory that I will discuss comes from “Occasionalism and Occasional Causation in Descartes’ Philosophy,” in which David Scott proposes a reading of Cartesian occasional causation that moves toward interactionism in some ways. He argues that, based on the *Comments* passage, Descartes believes in what he calls “inefficacious body-mind transmissionism.”<sup>11</sup> Since the passage states that something is transmitted to the mind, but we know that it is not ideas being transmitted, Scott concludes that Descartes thinks it is *motion* that is transmitted to the mind.<sup>12</sup>

To begin, Scott agrees with Nadler that Descartes’s use of the word ‘occasion’ in the passage refers to general occasional causation, not to divine occasionalism. He believes the transmission of motion to the mind is what makes up this occasional causation: it occurs *prior* to the mind’s efficient causation of ideas, it is not itself an efficient cause of ideas, and hence it is “inefficacious.”<sup>13</sup> Scott still classifies his theory as interactionist because both the body and the

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<sup>10</sup> CSM II, p. 55

<sup>11</sup> Scott 2000, p. 504

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 520-21

mind perform actions, but he means this only “as long as interaction is construed solely in terms of transmission.”<sup>14</sup>

Scott claims his theory is interactionist in that the body commits an action that gets through to the mind (hence ‘transmission’), but it is a form of occasional causation in that the body’s action is not an efficient cause (though it prompts the mind to be an efficient cause). It is clear that Scott calls the bodily motions inefficacious because they are not immediate efficient causes of sensory ideas, but he does not explicitly say whether the bodily motions are efficient causes of the mind’s production of ideas. The relation between occasional causation and interactionism in Scott’s theory is complex, and I will evaluate it critically in Chapter IV.

Regarding the relation between the Sixth Meditation and the *Comments*, Scott claims that, at least for body-to-mind causation, Descartes was consistently an interactionist, even given the apparent change in causal language over time.<sup>15</sup> Scott refutes each of Garber’s arguments that certain passages from Descartes support occasionalism, and he points to opportunities that Descartes had to “occasionalize” his view, which he deliberately did not take.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE GOD REQUIREMENT

In attributing any causal theory to Descartes, it is necessary to assign a unique power or role to God. The progression of theories from Garber to Nadler and Scott suggests a move away from purely divine explanation; Nadler rejects the view that God is the efficient cause of the mind’s sensory production, and Scott goes further to unite occasional causation with interactionism. But even when a theory has ruled out occasionalism, it does not follow that God

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 520

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 504

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512

has nothing to do with the process. Instead, each non-divine theory is tasked with explaining what special role Descartes assigns to God in the body-to-mind causal picture.

What distinguishes causal theories is not whether they rely on God, but just how much of a role they give to God. For example, God's role could be limited only to conservation. This idea is based on Descartes's belief in God's continuous preservation of created beings. In the Third Meditation, he says:

For a lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment – that is, which preserves me. For it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and actions are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence.<sup>17</sup>

Descartes asserts that the same thing that created a finite being – namely God – also must consistently preserve it at every moment of its existence. This concept of consistent divine conservation is crucial to Descartes's metaphysics, including body-to-mind causation, because it implies that God is involved with everything that occurs in the finite world, even if only insofar as he is directly responsible for all beings' continued existence. Some theories of Cartesian causation allow for bodies to be partial efficient causes of sensory ideas, such that conservation is all they need from God. Thus, even in straightforward interactionism, God has a unique and necessary role.<sup>18</sup>

But in other theories, God is more involved in the causal process. Of course, with divine occasionalism, God acts as an efficient causal agent. However, the nature of general occasional causation does not clearly specify what God's role is since it only requires finite causal power.

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<sup>17</sup> CSM II, p. 33

<sup>18</sup> In Schmaltz 2008, there is an argument for mere conservationism, on which bodily motions act as partial efficient causes of ideas by efficiently causing the mind's activity; God's causal role consists only in creating and actively conserving finite beings at every moment.

Although God's role does not have to be as direct as in occasionalism, this is still an important part of the view. As I will explain in the next chapter, Nadler claims there is a divine law that bodies and minds should correspond in such a way for occasional causation to occur. When I give my own view, I will evaluate Nadler's solution and explore this issue further.

## CONCLUSION

The taxonomy that I have set up involves three theories: occasionalism, occasional causation, and transmissionism. Each view claims to be an adaptation of the former: while occasional causation acts as a revision of divine occasionalism, Scott's transmissionism is also a revision of non-interactionist occasional causation. Both Nadler's occasional causation and Scott's transmissionism significantly distance themselves from the theories they claim to be responding to, but they also present themselves as less extreme versions of those theories.

In this chapter, I have introduced the main theories that will motivate my discussion in the remainder of this thesis. In the next two chapters, I will provide detailed accounts of the theories proposed by Garber, Nadler, and Scott. Then, I will critique Scott's theory and offer a new analysis of the *Comments* passage.

## CHAPTER III: GENERAL OCCASIONAL CAUSATION

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the several different ways in which we can interpret Descartes's remarks on the production of sensory ideas, there is a bit of a tradition of attributing occasionalism to him. This tradition has its origins as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but many philosophers have recently questioned the accuracy of this attribution. In this chapter, I will summarize Daniel Garber's theory of occasionalism in Descartes, and then examine Steven Nadler's theory of general occasional causation.

### CARTESIAN OCCASIONALISM

It should be clear by now that philosophers have found evidence in Descartes's writings to support fundamentally different theories of body-to-mind causation. The attribution of divine occasionalism is what Nadler and Scott react to, so it serves as a kind of baseline theory from which to depart. To begin exploring this issue, I will look at Garber's "Descartes and Occasionalism." Although he does lean toward occasionalism in relation to body-to-mind action, Garber's theory is more complicated since he believes that Descartes's view evolved over time.

First, Garber is clear about his views on body-to-body and mind-to-body causation: he finds sufficient evidence to conclude that Descartes was an occasionalist for body-to-body action and an interactionist for mind-to-body action. Body-to-mind action is where Garber finds some complexity due to Descartes's use of different causal language in different passages.

For one thing, Garber admits that, if we grant that Descartes did not believe bodies have any true causal power in physics, neither could they in sensation. It simply follows logically that



bodies that cannot act on each other also cannot act on minds.<sup>19</sup> When he examines the texts, though, Garber decides that Descartes's view on body-to-mind causation evolved over time. He contrasts the Sixth Meditation of 1641 with the *Principles of Philosophy* of 1644. While in the former writing Descartes discusses an active faculty in bodies causing a passive faculty in the mind to generate ideas, such causal language does not appear in the latter writing.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Garber points to a translation discrepancy between the Latin version of the *Principles*, which states that an idea "comes from" the body, and the later French translation, which states that ideas are formed "on the occasion of bodies."<sup>21</sup> Garber takes these discrepancies to be evidence that Descartes altered his view on body-to-mind causation between 1641 and 1647. Since the trend shows Descartes using weaker causal language later in time, Garber thinks this suggests that he later believed that causal power lay outside of the bodies themselves.<sup>22</sup> This evolving view, as Garber understands it, moves from interactionism toward occasionalism.

What is most relevant to my discussion is Garber's interpretation of the word 'occasion.' He mentions this word as it appears in the French version of the *Principles* and also in the passage from the *Comments*. In looking at these passages, Garber says: "...While it is by no means clear how to interpret the word '*occasion*' in Descartes's vocabulary, the word is certainly suggestive of what is to become a technical term in later Cartesian vocabulary, that of an occasional cause, a cause whose effect is produced through the activity of God."<sup>23</sup> Two paragraphs later, he says the *Comments* passage also supports his belief that this word indicates a move toward occasionalism.

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<sup>19</sup> Garber 1993, p. 20

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21-22

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

## SCOTT'S REFUTATION OF GARBER

In the next chapter, I will discuss David Scott's interactionist interpretation of body-to-mind causation in Descartes. Before offering a theory in his paper, though, Scott refutes Garber's claim that occasionalism exists at any point in Descartes's writings. Garber admits that Descartes uses efficient interactionist causal language in the Sixth Meditation, but argues that Descartes shifted away from that view over the next several years. Scott's main object in the first part of his paper is to argue that Descartes's causal language suggests interactionism in the Sixth Meditation, and then does not change at any time afterward. So while Garber and Scott agree on the implications of the "active faculty"<sup>24</sup> in bodies that Descartes discusses in his proof of matter, Scott holds that Descartes was consistently an interactionist for the remainder of his life.<sup>25</sup>

First, Scott argues in multiple contexts that Descartes uses causal language that may seem (as it did to Garber) to be significantly different from a previously published view, but we are not to be deceived by this. For example, Garber's argument relies on his claim that Descartes's language in the *Principles* of 1644 is causally weaker than that in the Sixth Meditation, since the latter references an active faculty in bodies but the former does not. Scott argues that although it is true Descartes does not make an explicit reference to an active faculty in bodies in the *Principles*, he is still implicitly referring to the same faculty when he speaks of our dependence on an external thing that acts on our senses.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Scott sees no significant difference between the Latin and the French versions of the *Principles*; the Latin translation says an "idea comes from"<sup>27</sup> an external body, whereas the French translation says an idea "forms itself in us

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<sup>24</sup> CSM II, p. 55

<sup>25</sup> Scott 2000, p. 505

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507

<sup>27</sup> CSM I, p. 223

on the occasion of bodies.”<sup>28</sup> Garber believes this difference is consistent with the trend he espoused, since the latter translation “weakens the causal implications further.”<sup>29</sup> Questioning this interpretation, Scott examines a larger portion of the French translation, where Descartes does say, “everything we sense comes from something other than our thought”<sup>30</sup> – this is the same kind of language as in the Latin translation. Scott argues that even when Descartes uses slightly different language at times, he refers to a process that is just as causal as the one in the Sixth Meditation.

Finally, Scott’s refutation of Garber includes the claim that Descartes’s use of the word ‘occasion’ does not imply a dependence on God. In opposition to Garber, Scott references passages, including those from the *Comments* and the *Optics*, that contain the word ‘occasion’ but nothing about divine power or presence. If Descartes were talking about occasionalism in these passages, it would seem strange that he does not mention God. This negative observation seems to be the biggest problem for Garber’s view. Although it is possible to conceive of the word ‘occasion’ being used to refer to divine occasionalism, Garber has not demonstrated that that is necessarily the case here.

#### THE ANSWER: OCCASIONAL CAUSATION

While it may seem tempting to read occasionalism in these passages from Descartes, there is actually little reason to believe that Descartes’s use of the word ‘occasion’ indicates this position. Like Scott, Steven Nadler refutes Garber’s argument for the shift toward occasionalism, but he focuses mainly on Garber’s problematic interpretation of the word ‘occasion.’ In

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<sup>28</sup> AT IXB, p. 64. AT = Descartes 1964-1974.

<sup>29</sup> Garber 1993, p. 22

<sup>30</sup> AT IXB, p. 63

“Descartes and Occasional Causation,” Nadler provides important insight into the distinction between divine occasionalism on the one hand, and general occasional causation on the other hand. By illuminating the difference between these two kinds of causation, Nadler shows that Garber wrongly assumes Descartes’s use of the word ‘occasion’ indicates he is discussing divine occasionalism.

As Nadler explains it, occasional causation occurs when an effect is caused directly by something that is occasioned to cause it by another thing.<sup>31</sup> Efficient causation may look like this, where the single arrow signifies efficient causation:

$$A \rightarrow e$$

One object, A, directly produces an effect, *e*, in another object. Occasional causation, on the other hand, may look like this, where the double arrow signifies occasional causation:

$$B \Rightarrow A \rightarrow e$$

One object, B, gives another, A, the occasion to directly produce effect *e*. In both of these examples, A is the only efficient cause of the effect, while B is not an efficient cause at all. However, B is an occasional cause of the effect, and it was B that provided the opportunity for A to exercise its efficient causal power.

Once the distinction between divine occasionalism and occasional causation is understood, Nadler’s argument against Garber is simple: in the case of body-to-mind causation, Descartes’s remarks indicate a form of occasional causation, but not necessarily occasionalism. Recall that Garber argues that Descartes’s view of body-to-mind causation changed over time from interactionism to occasionalism; the biggest problem that Nadler sees in his argument

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<sup>31</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 41

occurs in his interpretation of the word ‘occasion’ as it appears both in the sensation passage from the *Comments* and in the French translation of the *Principles*.

Despite his interpretation of the word ‘occasion,’ Garber does not actually insist that Descartes was an occasionalist. He clarifies that he merely aims to show there is some evidence in these passages to support that theory. The problem, though, is that he only considers divine occasionalism, whereas he should consider finite occasional causation. The appearance of the word ‘occasion’ certainly may indicate that Descartes is referring to occasional causation, but there is no reason to believe that the efficient cause of ideas is God and not a finite thing. It is especially problematic for Garber that Descartes does not even mention God in either of the passages on body-to-mind causation. So while Garber may have been on the right path in the beginning, he seems to jump to the conclusion of divine occasionalism, and “reads too much into” the word ‘occasion.’<sup>32</sup>

In this way, Nadler uses the distinction between the two kinds of causation to refute Garber’s argument. The crucial mistake is failing to see the distinction and wrongly attributing divine occasionalism, when only an attribution of general occasional causation is warranted.<sup>33</sup> Nadler believes that Garber has committed this mistake by seeing the word ‘occasion’ and assuming it refers to God’s efficient causal power. An essential part of understanding Descartes’s causal theory is resisting exegetical temptations such as this one.

One reason for the prevalence of the belief that Descartes was an occasionalist may be that this belief already existed by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as it was influenced by the fame of Descartes’s occasionalist successors such as Nicolas Malebranche. Since Malebranche was famously dedicated to occasionalism and self-identified as a Cartesian, some have mistakenly

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

read his theory back into Descartes. Although Garber believes there is evidence elsewhere in Descartes of the lack of causal power in bodies, Nadler cautions readers that, whatever the reason, occasional causation should not be overlooked in favor of divine occasionalism. Such “philosophical confusion” between occasionalism and general occasional causation generates mistakes both in philosophy and in our historical understanding of thinkers such as Descartes.<sup>34</sup>

I find Nadler’s argument to be convincing, and I applaud the way he draws attention to a subtle but crucial distinction to illuminate one source of misinterpretation of Descartes. While I agree with Nadler’s refutation of Garber, however, there is still a lot of merit in Garber’s theory of Cartesian sensation. One of his primary conclusions of the *Comments* passage is, “Descartes’s main point is simply that sensory ideas...[must] be elicited by the motions communicated to the brain.”<sup>35</sup> It is true that Descartes’s main point has to do with some activity being *elicited* – this describes the essence of occasional causation, so Garber seems to have been on the right track at this point.<sup>36</sup>

There is an important difference between Garber’s and Nadler’s theories: although occasionalism and occasional causation share the principle that the bodily motions beginning the causal process do not act as efficient causes, Garber and Nadler differ in their reasons for believing this. Garber labels the motions as occasional causes because he believes that for Descartes, bodies are causally inefficacious in all contexts. Garber establishes this in the beginning of his paper when he claims that Descartes was an occasionalist in the case of physics. But Nadler does not make such a generalization. Instead, it is consistent with his view for bodies

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>35</sup> Garber 1993, p. 23

<sup>36</sup> Garber eventually concludes that Descartes is a “quasi-occasionalist” who endorses occasionalism for body-to-body action, finite interactionism for mind-to-body action, and possibly occasionalism for body-to-mind action (Garber 1993, p. 24).

to have efficient causal power in contexts other than body-to-mind action. He claims there is a certain kind of intelligibility apparent in pure bodily collisions and motion transfers: “We can see why a body moving in a certain direction with a given speed should cause a second body with which it collides to move in a determinate and predictable way.”<sup>37</sup> This intuitiveness is not present with body-to-mind causation because of the difference in material and mental substances. Such lack of intelligibility is what motivates Nadler to attribute occasional causation to Descartes, making his theory distinctly different from Garber’s.

#### ISSUES WITH OCCASIONAL CAUSATION

The most important things to remember about general occasional causation as Nadler explains it are that it is not efficient causation (not even partially),<sup>38</sup> but it is a real causal relation in its own right,<sup>39</sup> and it is significantly distinct from divine occasionalism.<sup>40</sup> With respect to the examples I gave above, occasionalism holds that, regardless of what B is, the efficient cause in the occasional causal process, A, is always God.<sup>41</sup> But the efficient causal agent is the only difference between the two kinds of causation, and they can be understood as species and genus.<sup>42</sup> Whether a particular case of occasional causation is divine or finite is the most important point regarding Garber and Nadler’s disagreement.

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<sup>37</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 50

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40

<sup>41</sup> One reason the doctrine of occasionalism has been popular among philosophers for centuries (dating back to the Middle Ages) is that it allows for causal processes to occur in the finite world without taking power away from God. One may object that this allows for a lack of natural law determining what will be caused and what will not, since it is merely based on God’s will. To answer this, Nadler points out that on most understandings, God responds at least for the most part to occasional causes in accordance with laws of the natural world (Nadler 1993, p. 4).

<sup>42</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 41

An important question with occasional causation is whether it can be considered a real causal relation. If so, we may also ask whether it is *just as* real as efficient causation. It may be tempting to think that an occasional cause is not a cause at all because it lacks effectiveness on its own. However, Nadler insists that it is indeed a real causal relation, “albeit an inferior or secondary variety if efficient causation is taken to be the standard,” which he believes is Descartes’s view.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, occasional causation has to answer to the requirement that there be a divine presence in Descartes’s theory of body-to-mind action. In the previous chapter, I explained that, regardless of his views on causation, it is clear that Descartes gives God a special role in metaphysics, and this commitment needs to be accounted for. Descartes’s view here, according to Nadler, is that God allowed for the possibility of body-to-mind action by establishing their union and willing occasional causation to occur in the way that it does.<sup>44</sup> Nadler admits that this appeal to divine law is a kind of *deus ex machina*, but again, this divine function is not to be mistaken for occasionalism.<sup>45</sup> So, despite the occurrence of occasional causation from body to mind without dependence on divine power (other than for continual conservation), God has a special role that does not involve the actual production of sensations.

## CONCLUSION

Garber and Nadler propose interpretations of Descartes’s writings on body-to-mind causation that have a complex relationship. While they are certainly opposing theories, they do have similarities. Garber and Nadler disagree about how to interpret the word ‘occasion’ as it

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51



appears in the *Comments*, but both of their theories attribute a form of occasional causation to Descartes based on the idea that ‘occasion’ is the crucial word (as opposed to focusing on other causal language in the passage or on other passages entirely). Garber and Nadler start off on similar paths, giving priority to the way Descartes talks about motions eliciting the production of sensory ideas in a particularly remote way.

Of course, Garber diverges from Nadler significantly when he continues with his interpretation of this remote causation and the word ‘occasion,’ going on to attribute divine occasionalism to Descartes. While both theories allow for God to have an important role, the nature of this role is fundamentally different in each of them. For Garber, God is the efficient cause of the mind’s production of sensory ideas, but Nadler’s theory removes God from the actual process of occasional causation. Finally, Garber’s view is based on the causal inertness of bodies, but Nadler’s does not require this. In contrast to these views, the next chapter will describe Scott’s theory of inefficacious transmissionism and examine how it fits into this taxonomy.

## CHAPTER IV: DESCARTES AND INEFFICACIOUS TRANSMISSION

### INTRODUCTION

Once we have ruled out divine occasionalism, there are a number of ways that we can assign causal power to bodies. After rejecting that God's power is necessary for prompting the mind to produce sensory ideas, we must allow for bodies themselves to do so; the question is how much causal power and what kind the bodies have. On the one hand, Nadler's occasional causation allows for bodies to be real causes, but they merely provide an occasion for the mind without efficiently acting on it. On the other hand, straightforward interactionism holds that bodily motions act as efficient causes of mental activity, and therefore are partial efficient causes of sensory ideas.

David Scott's theory essentially tries to combine these two views: he makes the distinct claim that bodies transmit motion to the mind while characterizing his theory as a form of both interactionism and occasional causation. In this chapter, I will offer a detailed explanation of Scott's view along with my criticisms. His theory essentially amounts to a combination of occasional causation and interactionism, but these two kinds of causation are not necessarily compatible, and this results in a certain tension that needs to be resolved. I will examine the ways in which this conflict appears in Scott's theory and analyze what options he has for revising his view.

### INEFFICACIOUS TRANSMISSIONISM IN THE *COMMENTS*

As I explained in the previous chapter, the first section of Scott's paper is devoted to rejecting the attribution of occasionalism to Descartes. As he examines passages that use the word 'occasion' but do not mention God, Scott creates links between the appearance of this word

and interactionism. For example, Scott cites a passage from *The Passions of the Soul*, in which Descartes uses the word ‘occasion’ to describe a causal chain between nerve fibers and the pores of the brain, an instance of body-body action.<sup>46</sup> For Scott, this is strong evidence that we can understand Descartes’s use of the word ‘occasion’ to refer to same-substance as well as different-substance interaction, making it different from occasionalism and even from non-interactionist occasional causation. Even in the section focused on Garber, Scott distances himself from both Garber (by holding that ‘occasion’ does not refer to divine occasionalism) and Nadler (by holding that ‘occasion’ does refer to a form of interactionism).

The next section of Scott’s paper is a detailed analysis of the *Comments* passage, including an explanation of what he calls “inefficacious body-mind transmissionism.”<sup>47</sup> Something to keep in mind as I work through the details of Scott’s theory is that he begins with a foundation that accepts much of Nadler’s discussion of the *Comments*. Although Scott spends more time rejecting each piece of Garber’s argument, he also endorses Nadler’s simpler claim that the word ‘occasion’ in this passage refers to general occasional causation rather than divine occasionalism. Scott introduces his theory as a description of “[w]hat Descartes’ occasional causation amounts to”<sup>48</sup> – so although he does not argue in support of occasional causation in general, he assumes it before he gets into the details of the passage. Once we accept Nadler’s distinction between occasionalism and occasional causation, the most obvious next step is to return to the text and attempt to interpret it more accurately. I will not agree with all of Scott’s conclusions, but I do endorse his project at this point.

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<sup>46</sup> Scott 2000, p. 514

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 504

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Although Descartes uses the word ‘occasion’ in other places, Scott points out that the *Comments* passage is where we find the most detail on occasional causation.<sup>49</sup> Because of this, Scott’s primary aim for the remainder of the paper is to extract the most accurate description of the theory that Descartes advances in this passage alone.<sup>50</sup> For reference, here is the passage:

[I]f we bear well in mind the scope of our senses and what it is exactly that reaches our faculty of thinking by way of them, we must admit that in no case are the ideas of things presented to us by the senses just as we form them in our thinking. So much so that there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to experience, such as the fact that we judge that this or that idea which we now have immediately before our mind refers to a certain thing situated outside us. We make such a judgment not because these things transmit the ideas to our mind through the sense organs, but because they transmit something which, at exactly that moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it. Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the sense organs except certain corporeal motions....But neither the motions themselves nor the figures arising from them are conceived by us exactly as they occur in the sense organs....Hence it follows that the very ideas of the motions themselves and of the figures are innate in us. The ideas of pain, colours, sounds and the like must be all the more innate if, on the occasion of certain corporeal motions, our mind is to be capable of representing them to itself, for there is no similarity between these ideas and the corporeal motions.<sup>51</sup>

What Scott is trying to glean from the passage is a detailed description of the relation between the occasional cause (here, a bodily motion) and the efficient cause (the mind’s innate faculty). His conclusion is essentially a combination of the following pieces:

(1) Bodies *transmit something*.

Admittedly, it is clear that Descartes is talking about something that he calls transmission; after all, he explicitly states that the things we come into contact with by experience “transmit something.”<sup>52</sup>

(2) Bodies transmit something *to the mind*.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 516

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515

<sup>51</sup> CSM I, p. 304

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

On this point, Scott claims that there is “no other way to read” Descartes<sup>53</sup> given that the subject of this passage is the exact nature of what the body transmits to the mind during the causal process of sensory experience.

(3) Bodies do not transmit *ideas* to the mind.

This point is generally understood to be true about the passage, which is known for its claim that sensory ideas are innate to the mind and do not come from the external world. The fact that ideas do not come directly from the physical realm is what motivates the central question of how, on Descartes’s view, bodily motion can cause their formation at particular moments in time.

(4) Bodies, instead, transmit *motion* to the mind.

This is the most radical component of Scott’s theory. Scott qualifies this claim by pointing out that immediately after Descartes says something (which is not an idea) is transmitted to the mind, “in the very next breath,” he states that corporeal motion reaches the mind from the external world.<sup>54</sup> This motion reaching the mind “seems to be what Descartes has in mind when he speaks of ‘transmission.’”<sup>55</sup>

In sum, the core of Scott’s theory is that in this passage, Descartes refers to body-to-mind occasional causation consisting in the transmission of corporeal motion to the mind, which acts as a cue for the mind to produce sensory ideas via its innate faculty. The most obvious way that this theory distinguishes itself from the others is that it connects occasional causation to straightforward interactionism and attempts to fall under both categories at once.

On the one hand, Scott accepts the attribution of occasional causation to Descartes based on this passage, and he maintains that the transmission of motion occurs at a “pre-efficiency

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<sup>53</sup> Scott 2000, p. 517

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

stage,”<sup>56</sup> prior to the efficient production of ideas. He avoids pure efficient interactionism because he believes that the motion that is transmitted does not act as an efficient cause (though, as I will argue in the next section, exactly *what* the bodies are inefficacious in causing is very important but ambiguous on Scott’s view).

On the other hand, Scott admits that his theory of transmission differs from Nadler’s theory, because he believes Nadler’s theory is one of non-transmission. Nadler claims outright that nothing passes into the mind – ideas do not and neither do motions. It would seem, then, that Scott believes the presence of interaction in the form of transmission of motion does not rule out occasional causation.

#### ASSESSING SCOTT’S INTERPRETATION OF THE *COMMENTS*

The two main flaws in Scott’s theory have to do with his reading involving the transmission of motion to the mind and the incompatibility of interactionism and occasional causation. In this section, I will focus on the first: I argue that the transmission of motion to the mind is not necessarily in the *Comments* passage.

The most radical part of Scott’s view is that it involves literal transference of corporeal motion from body to mind. To come to this conclusion, he is mainly drawn to the relationship between Descartes’s claim that something is transmitted to the mind and the statement, “Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the sense organs except certain corporeal motions.”<sup>57</sup> Immediately after Scott establishes that something is being transmitted directly to the mind itself, he says, “In the very next breath Descartes tells us that something – corporeal motion – from the external world *actually reaches our minds*, and this seems to be what Descartes has in

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 520

<sup>57</sup> CSM I, p. 304

mind when he speaks of ‘transmission.’”<sup>58</sup> From this, Scott concludes that the occasional causation in this passage amounts to a transmission of motion to the mind.<sup>59</sup>

The main problem here is that Scott reads Descartes’s words in the most literal way, even though we cannot make much sense of the claim that motions are literally transmitted to the mind. This reading is problematic because it clearly conflicts with one of Descartes’s biggest commitments: substance dualism. Bodies exert influence primarily through imparting motion, but it is not intelligible to think of the immaterial mind moving in this way. Drawing on Nadler’s discussion of dualism, there is at least some intelligibility in the idea of bodies transferring motion to each other through collision; the intuitiveness of this case comes from the fact that they are both of the same kind of substance. But how is it possible for motion to pass into the realm of the immaterial soul? Scott does not seem to think Descartes answers this question in the *Comments* passage, but he maintains that the transmission of motion is still the only way to accurately read it.

After claiming that the passage is about the transmission of motion to the mind, Scott immediately acknowledges that a reader may object, Descartes “could not possibly *mean* such a thing” since “the Cartesian mind is simply not the kind of thing to which motion can be transmitted.”<sup>60</sup> To answer this objection, he first lists four quotes from the passage, which, he maintains, all amount to the reading he has given, insisting that Descartes’s words clearly support it. This does not quite answer the objection as I am formulating it, though, which is that Scott’s understanding of the words is too literal.

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<sup>58</sup> Scott 2000, p. 517

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 518

More importantly, Scott claims that the objection “confuses facts and values; it confuses what Descartes actually says with what he should say in philosophical rigour.”<sup>61</sup> He says we must avoid reading simply what we think Descartes *should* say, especially in the face of opposing textual evidence. But there is merit in interpreting Descartes’s words beyond their strict, literal meanings, especially if this is a way of making sense of them.

When Scott warns against confusing facts and values, he seems to acknowledge that the transmission of motion reading is less plausible than what is ideal. What Scott does not acknowledge, though, is that when a passage sounds implausible on the surface, this gives us reason to consider alternative interpretations. Although we should not blindly misread what we think Descartes should say, we can recognize what Descartes should say and use that to determine what he is saying. After all, the entire project of debating what certain texts mean is based on the fact that they can be interpreted in different ways.

The less literal reading that Scott avoids is one on which the transmission that Descartes refers to just *is* the giving of an occasion in the sense of passive inducement – this description is consistent with how Nadler defines occasional causation. This reading is not entirely in opposition to Scott’s, since he does, after all, accept Nadler’s claim that the *Comments* passage describes a process of occasional causation. Although Scott calls Nadler’s reading “non-transmissionist,”<sup>62</sup> this is not necessarily accurate, since Nadler of course could not deny the presence of the word ‘transmission’ in the passage. Instead, Nadler could hold that transmission just is the motion’s giving occasion to the mind to produce sensory ideas. Likewise, Garber might claim that Descartes’s discussion of transmission refers to the process of providing the occasion for God to cause the production of sensory ideas. Although we rejected Garber’s view

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



because he reads too much into the word ‘occasion,’ the transmission was not a problem for him. These are both weaker readings of ‘transmission’ than Scott’s stronger interpretation.

Finally, Scott’s claim that the transmission of motion also appears in the *Optics* is unconvincing. He is, though, correct in looking at it: we should expect the *Optics* passage to aid our understanding of the *Comments* since Descartes himself refers us to it. Here is the relevant portion of the passage:

[W]hen our blind man touches bodies with his stick, they certainly do not transmit anything to him except in so far as they cause his stick to move in different ways according to the different qualities in them, thus likewise setting in motion the nerves in his hand, and then the regions of his brain where these nerves originate. This is what occasions his soul to have sensory perception of just as many qualities in these bodies as there are differences in the movements caused by them in his brain.<sup>63</sup>

Immediately, Scott claims Descartes is talking about “a causal connection in the form of transference of motion.”<sup>64</sup> However, Descartes simply says bodies do not transmit anything to the blind man except insofar as they cause motions that occasion the soul to have sensations; at no point does Descartes talk about actual motion being transmitted to the man’s mind. In fact, this example may even be antithetical to Scott’s view. Descartes merely describes a chain of causes that eventually “occasions his soul to have sensory perception”<sup>65</sup> – he never uses the word ‘transmit’ as he does in the *Comments*, though Descartes himself tells us these two passages are about the same process. This description in the *Optics* seems to provide more support for the view that transmission refers to something less literal, such as the motions’ passively giving occasion for the mind to act.

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<sup>63</sup> CSM I, p. 166

<sup>64</sup> Scott 2000, p. 513

<sup>65</sup> CSM I, p. 166

So far, I have argued that the transmission of motion to the mind is present in neither the *Comments* nor the *Optics* passage. But even if I grant Scott the transmission of motion, there is a bigger problem with his theory: transmissionism is not compatible with occasional causation as Nadler describes it. I will argue that Scott departs from Nadler in more ways than he admits. At the same time, Scott expresses that he accepts most of Nadler's theory and that his inefficacious transmissionism is nothing more than a detailed description of the nature of body-to-mind occasional causation. Thus, Scott's declared acceptance of Nadler's theory makes his divergence from it problematic.

Scott's theory is a unique combination of interactionism and occasional causation. He begins his discussion by stating that Nadler was correct in saying the *Comments* passage is about general occasional causation. Scott claims he will examine the passage to extract from it what the details of this occasional causation are, but then he goes on to give his account of transmission and call it interactionism.

Unfortunately for Scott, it seems that Nadler requires occasional causation to be non-interactionist. Nadler's language about the nature of occasional causation involves frequent use of the word 'induce.' In a definition of occasional causation, he says "one thing or state of affairs brings about an effect by inducing...another thing to exercise its own efficient causal power."<sup>66</sup> Later, he says, "one thing...occasions or elicits another thing"<sup>67</sup> to cause the effect, which "does not literally pass from the cause, either by transference or emanation."<sup>68</sup> Although Scott is comfortable distancing himself from Nadler on the point of transmission of motion, it seems that

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<sup>66</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 39

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42

Nadler's conception of occasional causation rules out transference of anything other than what passively gives occasion to the mind. Once he has established transmission as a central part of his view, Scott does not give an explanation of how it complies with Nadler's definition of occasional causation.

If we are to accept that motion does somehow get transmitted to the mind, it is unclear how this can be inefficacious at all. If motion enters the realm of the immaterial soul (whatever that actually means), its arrival into the world of mentality is much closer to an application of force than what Nadler is willing to allow. It seems that Nadler's language of induction requires a denial of any efficient causation, especially by way of literal transmission, and this is fundamental to the nature of occasional causation.

Since Scott's theory is too forceful for occasional causation, it seems instead to collapse into efficient interactionism. If motion enters the mind but does not act efficiently, what exactly distinguishes it from a genuine efficient cause? This is where Scott's labeling of the motions as 'inefficacious' is most relevant. He applies this label to the motions because they occur at a "pre-efficiency stage,"<sup>69</sup> meaning they are distinguished from and prior to the mind's activity as an efficient cause of the formation of sensory ideas. Scott is clear that the motions are not efficient causes of the ideas, but we may still wonder why they cannot be efficient causes of the mind's activity.

Scott does anticipate the objection that bodies might play an efficient role by transferring motion to the mind. His response, though, does not address precisely the right question. Scott clarifies that motions are not efficient causes of the final product, sensory ideas – after all, Descartes's main argument in the *Comments* passage is that ideas are formed by a faculty innate

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<sup>69</sup> Scott 2000, p. 520

to the mind. But this answer focuses on the relation between the motions and the ideas when the question is actually about the relation between the motions and the mind's activity in producing ideas. Even if we grant that the motions are not immediate efficient causes of sensory ideas, it does not follow that they are not efficient causes of the mind's activity. Since Scott does not address this question, the option remains open that on his view, bodily motions act as efficient causes of the mind's sensory production.

A final way that Scott's theory significantly departs from Nadler's is in the implications that it has for the relationship between divine occasionalism and general occasional causation. On Nadler's view, occasionalism is just one form of occasional causation; both work in the same way, but they differ on whether the efficient cause is God or something finite. Scott and Nadler primarily disagree about the relation between the motions and the mind – that is, between the occasional cause and the efficient cause. For Scott, the occasional cause in this case is the transmission of motion to the efficient cause. But if this is to be consistent with Nadler in terms of divine occasionalism, Scott must also hold that occasionalism involves the transmission of motion to God. This is not something that proponents of occasionalism generally hold, and Scott may be hesitant to endorse it. If he does not endorse it, he could argue that God does not require a transfer of motion due to his omniscience and omnipotence. But with this view, Scott must accept that occasionalism and occasional causation work in fundamentally different ways, which is inconsistent with Nadler's description of them as species and genus.

To summarize the conceptual flaw in Scott's theory, there is a tension between his endorsements of both occasional causation and transmissionist interactionism. His description of the process of occasional causation is inconsistent with the way Nadler defines it, and we cannot simply allow for Scott to differ from Nadler on these points, because Scott accepts Nadler's view

before even getting into his main discussion. Once he has given his theory, he fails to provide us with reason to remain loyal to occasional causation. Since Scott does not directly answer the question of whether bodily motions are efficient causes of the mind's activity, he does not rule this out; even his use of the word 'inefficacious' can be understood as consistent with a picture on which bodily motions are efficient causes. The only way that Scott does not seem to allow for this is in his endorsement of Nadler, but he simultaneously rejects some of the fundamental parts of Nadler's view.

## TWO POSSIBLE REVISIONS

I have argued that the main source of incoherence in Scott's view is the tension that arises between his acceptance of Nadler's occasional causation and his belief that the passage describes a form of interactionism. However, Scott can potentially resolve at least some of the problems by choosing to go one way or the other. In this section, I will examine the two options he has for revising his theory to be more coherent.

If Scott chooses to endorse occasional causation over interactionism, he will have to make significant changes to his reading of the passages. On this view, he can still speak of transmission (as Descartes does), but he will have to allow for it to be a weaker kind, where motion is not an efficient cause but is transmitted only in the sense that it provides the occasion for the mind to form ideas. Of course, this would give Scott room to focus on the 'inefficacious' part of his theory by specifying that the motions are not efficient causes of the mind's activity. He could continue to assume the truth of Nadler's theory, but he would need to be more careful in adhering to it.

His second option, and what seems to be closer to what Scott actually believes, is to endorse a full-fledged theory of efficient interactionism. This would certainly be more in line with Scott's inclinations in reading the *Comments* passage and his view that Descartes's account remains consistent from the Sixth Meditation to the *Comments*. He would only have to eliminate his assumption of occasional causation.

Recall that although Scott claims the motions are inefficacious in producing ideas, he never addresses the question of whether they are efficient causes of the mind's activity. Since he does not give an answer to this, there is room for a charitable reading of his view on which motions come into contact with the mind in the sense that they apply force and efficiently cause the mind to produce ideas. This view checks out as genuine interactionism, and he can still speak of the motions as inefficacious insofar as they do not directly produce the final product, sensory ideas.

## CONCLUSION

The taxonomy that I set up in the beginning of this paper illustrated how two views act as revisions of their predecessors. Nadler's occasional causation revises Garber's occasionalism by removing efficiency from God and giving it to the mind, while maintaining that the efficient cause is occasioned to act by bodily motion. Scott's view, as it stands prior to my proposed revisions, can be understood as an attempted alternative to Nadler's; although he consistently claims to endorse Nadler's theory, Scott's understanding of it and the passages moves toward interactionism.

I have argued that Scott departs from Nadler in more ways than he admits, and this is a problem for his theory because of his baseline endorsement of general occasional causation.

Scott's attempt to unite interactionism with occasional causation fails because they are fundamentally incompatible. I proposed that to eliminate the tension, Scott must choose either non-interactionist occasional causation or genuine interactionism. In the next chapter, I will give my own reading of the *Comments* passage drawing on the complex relationship between Scott's and Nadler's views.

## CHAPTER V: THE DISSIMILARITY PROBLEM IN THE *COMMENTS*

### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I concluded that Scott's attempt to unite occasional causation and interactionism is not effective since the two are incompatible. Scott's endorsement of Nadler is particularly problematic, but I suggested he could revise his theory by keeping some elements and discarding others. Drawing on my argument against Scott and my understanding of Nadler's theory, I will present in this chapter a reading of the *Comments* passage that adheres more strictly to Nadler's view. I will examine Marleen Rozemond's discussion of what Descartes's precise concern was in writing the *Comments* passage, which is crucial to understanding why he uses the language that he does. Looking at the implications of Rozemond's theory, I will conclude that although occasional causation is a possible alternative to straightforward interactionism, interactionism still cannot be ruled out based on the textual evidence.

### DEFLATIONARY TRANSMISSION

Scott and Nadler are both correct in their refutations of Garber. Descartes's use of the word 'occasion' clearly does not indicate occasionalism; the strongest piece of evidence for this is that he speaks of occasioning in multiple places, as Scott points out, without any mention of God or a need for divine causal power. He alludes to this process of occasioning without mentioning God in the *Comments*, the *Optics*, and the *Passions of the Soul*. At least for body-to-mind action, general occasional causation may be the theory that Descartes espouses in these passages. To illustrate this, I will argue that Nadler's theory can be more strictly applied to the text than the way Scott understands it.



As I argued in the previous chapter, applying Nadler's theory to the *Comments* passage requires a deflationary kind of transmission. On this weaker, less literal reading of the word, the transmission that Descartes refers to just is the occasion that bodily motion provides for the mind to act. Providing the occasion in this way involves passivity, and nothing else occurs in terms of transmission (i.e. neither ideas nor motions are transmitted to the mind from the body). In this way, Nadler does not have to deny that any transmission is occurring, especially because that word is in the text, but the transmission in occasional causation is not the active, strong kind that Scott believes it must be.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the relationship between the *Optics* and the *Comments* passages provides support for the deflationary reading of transmission rather than Scott's literal reading. In the *Optics*, Descartes describes the process by which a series of bodily motions occasions a blind man's soul to have sensory perception. On the deflationary view, motions are only 'transmitted' to the mind insofar as they induce it to produce sensory ideas. Unlike with Scott's reading, this is consistent with Nadler's classification of occasional causation and divine occasionalism: they are two instances of the same process, but with different efficient causes. On divine occasionalism, motion occurs in our world, God is 'alerted' to it (though in fact, he knew from eternity when the motion would occur), and this provides the occasion for him to act as an efficient cause of our sensations. In both general occasional causation and divine occasionalism, the efficient cause is passively induced to act, which is not the case on Scott's reading of transmission.

This deflationary reading of the passage does not have the same problems that Scott's reading does. Although Scott declares an acceptance of Nadler, this weaker view actually is more consistent with Nadler's theory and description of occasional causation, particularly with respect

to the passivity of the occasional cause and the relation between general occasional causation and divine occasionalism. This view is not unintelligible given Cartesian metaphysics, and it is supported by the relevant passages at least as much as, if not more than, Scott's reading.

#### A PROBLEM FOR GENERAL OCCASIONAL CAUSATION

The most salient problem for this view is that it has to explain how the mind knows when to act. In body-to-mind occasional causation, bodily motions must somehow induce the mind's activity without doing any of the following things: they cannot literally transmit motions or ideas to the mind (I have already ruled that out in this thesis); they cannot necessitate divine assistance (that would simply be divine occasionalism, which I have ruled out); and they cannot be sensed by the mind (because mental sensation is the process I am trying to explain). So this leaves the question: on passive occasional causation, when bodily motions occur, how does the mind know to act?

Nadler does not explicitly address this question in his paper, but it seems he would answer it the same way he answers the question about God's role in the process of body-to-mind occasional causation: "God, in establishing the union of mind and body, has ordained that the body should, under certain conditions, occasion the mind to produce ideas; and has willed, moreover, that particular motions in the body should occasion the mind to produce particular ideas."<sup>70</sup> Nadler draws this conclusion from the following passage in Descartes:

Now I maintain that when God unites a rational soul to [a body]...he will place its principal seat in the brain, and will make its nature such that the soul will have different sensations corresponding to the different ways in which the entrances to the pores in the internal surface of the brain are opened by means of the nerves.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 50

<sup>71</sup> CSM I, pp. 102-3

From this, Nadler concludes that God's establishment of a law is what explains the correlation between the presence of motion and mental activity.

This straightforward appeal to divine law can sound like a form of *deus ex machina*. Nadler does admit this and seems comfortable with it,<sup>72</sup> but it is not an ideal way to answer the objection. Nadler's occasional causation is part of a group of theories recognizing Descartes's belief that bodies act causally without direct and immediate agency from God. Although Descartes speaks of body-mind correlations being based on divine will, he does not include God as a direct agent in the process of occasional causation. In order to counteract the attribution of occasionalism with a non-divine theory, we should at least try to distance it as much as possible from *ad hoc* divine explanations. What would be more fitting in the scheme of occasional causation is an explanation that relies on natural processes rather than supernatural law.

However, the place for divine law and power in Nadler's theory is certainly more removed from the production of sensory ideas than it is in Garber's, and there is a small amount of textual evidence for it. So, despite the problems with Nadler's divine law explanation, I maintain that it is actually the best option Nadler has for answering the question of how the mind knows when to act on the occasion of bodily motion. Although this is still a problem for the theory, it is not a reason to rule out general occasional causation.

#### ROZEMOND AND THE DISSIMILARITY PROBLEM

At this point, there is one reason why I do not entirely endorse this theory of occasional causation based on deflationary transmission: straightforward interactionism has still not been ruled out. Recall that Scott never actually gave an argument for why the transmission of motion

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<sup>72</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 51

cannot just be considered the first of two efficient causes; yes, the motions are inefficacious in producing sensations, but what about in causing the mind to act? The same question holds for the deflationary reading of transmission: why is it not that the occasioning Descartes speaks of just refers to bodily motions efficiently causing the mind to produce sensory ideas?

The possibility of general occasional causation as Nadler describes it is a great way to rule out divine occasionalism, and the deflationary reading is less problematic than Scott's literal reading. Occasional causation is attractive as an alternative to Garber's and Scott's views, but the possibility of straightforward interactionism has still not been ruled out. In order to understand this problem and the particular relationship between occasional causation and interactionism, I will use an important distinction made by Marleen Rozemond in "Descartes and Mind-Body Interaction: What's the Problem?"

Rozemond makes a subtle but crucial distinction between two issues, which she calls the Heterogeneity Problem and the Dissimilarity Problem. The Heterogeneity Problem refers to the lack of substantial likeness between mind and body: one is an unextended thinking substance while the other is an extended corporeal substance. This difference, as some have thought, calls into question the intelligibility of mind-body interaction and causation. But regardless of whether this is a problem for Cartesian metaphysics, Rozemond argues that Descartes himself was not concerned about it.

Instead, Descartes expressed concern for a significantly different problem, the Dissimilarity Problem, which refers to the lack of resemblance between sensory ideas and the motions that caused them. Descartes refers to this problem in the *Optics*, which in turn explains why he gave the complex model of occasioning that he did in the *Comments*. Here is the full quotation from the *Optics*:

Thus it often happens that in order to be more perfect as an image and to represent an object better, an engraving ought not to resemble it. Now we must think of the images formed in our brain in just the same way, and note that the problem is to know simply how they can enable the soul to have sensory perceptions of all the various qualities of the objects to which they correspond – not to know how they can resemble these objects. For instance, when our blind man touches bodies with his stick, they certainly do not transmit anything to him except in so far as they cause his stick to move in different ways according to the different qualities in them, thus likewise setting in motion the nerves in his hand, and then the regions of his brain where these nerves originate. This is what occasions his soul to have sensory perception of just as many qualities in these bodies as there are differences in the movements caused by them in his brain.<sup>73</sup>

Descartes immediately draws attention to the lack of similarity between sensory ideas and the corporeal motions that cause them; in the first sentence, he claims that an image does not necessarily have to resemble an object in order to properly represent it. But when we apply this concept to the case of sensation, we need a model of causation that accounts for that lack of similarity.<sup>74</sup>

This formulation of the Dissimilarity Problem is to be understood as distinct from the Heterogeneity Problem: the *Optics* passage has nothing to do with the difference in nature between body and mind. According to the Heterogeneity Problem, the very fact that ideas are mental serves as evidence that there cannot be straightforward body-to-mind causation of sensory ideas. The Dissimilarity Problem, on the contrary, is concerned with the *content* of the ideas. The problem is not so much the fact that an idea is mental as it is the fact that its content does not resemble bodily causes. While the Heterogeneity Problem is one for mind-body interaction, the Dissimilarity Problem is asymmetrical, only functioning as an issue for body-to-mind action. This asymmetry alone is evidence that it is Descartes's concern in the *Comments* and *Optics* passages, because they are about the production of sensory ideas in particular.

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<sup>73</sup> CSM I, p. 166

<sup>74</sup> Rozemond 1999, p. 451

In fact, Rozemond shows that Descartes was not concerned about the Heterogeneity Problem at all, even as his contemporaries challenged him on it. She cites his claim that this difficulty “proceeds from a supposition that is false and that cannot be proved, namely that if body and soul are two substances with different natures, that prevents them from being able to act on one another.”<sup>75</sup> Rozemond relates this directly to the language of occasioning in the *Comments* by saying that if Descartes had proposed a special kind of causal model in order to address the Heterogeneity Problem, this would have been inconsistent with his obvious lack of concern for it.<sup>76</sup> Instead, “the point of the model is not to deny the causality of the bodily state, but to introduce a complex model that includes a substantial causal role for the mind.”<sup>77</sup> This means that Descartes specifies that sensory ideas are innate to the mind in order to explain their dissimilarity from the bodily motions causing them.

#### THE DISSIMILARITY PROBLEM, OCCASIONAL CAUSATION, AND INTERACTIONISM

Although Rozemond suggests that she endorses Nadler’s view of the *Comments* passage,<sup>78</sup> her explanation of the Dissimilarity Problem actually does not rule out the possibility of motions acting as efficient causes on the mind. She sets out to establish that Descartes’s paradigm of innateness and occasioning is motivated by a concern for the Dissimilarity Problem. Not only is that what he refers to in the *Comments* and *Optics* passages, but he was also not

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<sup>75</sup> CSM II, p. 275

<sup>76</sup> Rozemond 1999, p. 451

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461

<sup>78</sup> Rozemond says, “the body merely triggers the mind’s activity” (Rozemond 1999, p. 458) and repeatedly refers to Descartes’s language of ‘occasioning’ as “the sign model” (460). Although Nadler does not himself use the word ‘sign,’ this language suggests that Rozemond thinks the passage is about occasional causation rather than interactionism. She also believes the bodily motion acts as “a secondary and remote cause” (459), which is the same way Nadler describes occasional causes.

concerned with the Heterogeneity Problem at all. According to Descartes's solution to the Dissimilarity Problem, sensory ideas originate in the mind and bodily motions are not to be thought of as responsible for their content. From the way Rozemond describes the distinction, it seems that although motions do not explain the content of ideas, they can still be responsible for the mind's *production* of ideas. On this view, motion acts as an efficient cause of the mental activity. While some may have thought efficient causation by bodies is unintelligible because of the Heterogeneity Problem, it is now clear that this did not trouble Descartes. So, the possibility that bodies occasion the mind to act by efficiently causing it to do so is still a viable reading of the passage on Rozemond's view.

In addition to this, Rozemond's distinction shows why Nadler did not succeed in ruling out interactionism either. It is central to Nadler's definition of occasional causation that "nothing literally passes from the body into the mind."<sup>79</sup> When he interprets the *Comments* passage, he says, "What Descartes is particularly struck by in this situation is the utter lack of similarity between corporeal motions and mental event," so this and the fact that nothing literally passes "rules out transeunt<sup>80</sup> efficient causation as the explanation of the correlation between the two."<sup>81</sup> It is clear that Nadler thinks Descartes does not allow for efficient causation because of the fact that ideas are mental while motions are corporeal – this is an articulation of the Heterogeneity Problem. But once Rozemond's distinction is brought into play, we know this cannot be the explanation of Descartes's causal model, and Nadler's elimination of interactionism is no longer effective.

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<sup>79</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 48

<sup>80</sup> Nadler distinguishes between two kinds of efficient causation from the early modern period. Immanent causation involves something producing a change in itself, whereas transeunt causation involves something producing a change in something else (Nadler 1994, p. 37).

<sup>81</sup> Nadler 1994, p. 49

So, although Rozemond does not say so, I argue that her clarification of the Dissimilarity Problem does not actually rule out the possibility of motions acting as efficient causes. Secondly, Descartes's dismissal of the Heterogeneity Problem voids Nadler's argument against efficient causation. And thirdly, recall that Scott does not answer why on his view, bodily motions cannot be efficient causes of mental activity. There is no apparent reason to rule out straightforward interactionism based on the textual evidence, especially with this new understanding of the Heterogeneity Problem. Interactionism also more easily allows for consistency with Descartes's language in the Sixth Meditation regarding an active faculty in bodies.

At the same time, though, I argue that the theory of occasional causation by deflationary transmission also has not been ruled out. Nadler's appeal to divine law is not ideal, but it is not enough of a reason to throw out the theory. In addition, Descartes's indifference toward the Heterogeneity Problem allows interactionism to be a possibility, but this alone does not rule out occasional causation. The Dissimilarity Problem merely suggests that he had a different reason for establishing the innateness of ideas, but this does not directly mean anything for the process by which the mental faculty is set in motion.

Although Rozemond's discussion of the two problems seems to suggest that she would attribute interactionism to Descartes, my understanding of the distinction is slightly weaker. Our new understanding of the Dissimilarity Problem merely shows that Descartes had a different reason for establishing the innateness of ideas, which was to explain their content. This does not directly suggest anything about the process by which the mental faculty is set in motion. So, rather than limiting the possible theory to interactionism or occasional causation, Rozemond's distinction merely opens the passage to either of these interpretations.



In addition, while the Dissimilarity Problem does not rule out interactionism, I think it lends at least some support to occasional causation. By placing the source of sensory ideas in the mind, Descartes emphasizes a certain separation between them and the corporeal motion. He sets up a system on which bodily motions *could* efficiently cause the mind to produce sensory ideas, but they only *need* to cause its action passively and occasionally, since the content of the ideas is already in the mind. I argue that while Descartes may not necessarily be denying bodies the role of efficient cause in this situation, he could be doing so while solving the Dissimilarity Problem. This is also relevant for the fact that occasional causation is not consistent with the Sixth Meditation the way interactionism is. Like Garber, I am inclined to take Descartes's difference in language to suggest a change in his view; perhaps his later attention to and concern for the Dissimilarity Problem is what evoked an evolved conception of body-to-mind causation.

My main reason for leaning toward the attribution of occasional causation is the mere fact that Descartes uses the word 'occasion.' General occasional causation was originally attractive as an alternative to occasionalism, but I maintain that Garber was correct in paying close attention to this word as the biggest indicator of Descartes's beliefs. Although occasionalism became much more widely adopted after Descartes's death, he certainly would have been familiar with it as a causal theory. Descartes could not have been oblivious to the fact that the word 'occasion' evokes non-interactionist causal associations. He speaks of such an occasioning process in several different places rather than choosing to use more interactionist language, and by standards of philosophical discourse, we can take his word choice to be careful and deliberate.

## CONCLUSION

The view I proposed in this chapter amounts to an uncertainty between occasional causation and straightforward interactionism. These two options can be seen as alternatives to the theories proposed by Garber and Scott, and I have attempted to show definitively that divine occasionalism and literal transmission are not plausible interpretations of the text. The way Rozemond rules out the Heterogeneity Problem suggests that interactionism is still in the cards, and an understanding of this problem shows why Nadler's rejection of interactionism is not valid. Although I gave some reasons why occasional causation may be more understandable than interactionism given Descartes's choice of language and primary aim in the *Comments* passage, I maintain that it is a problematic view as it stands, and neither of the two has been ruled out.

Throughout this paper, I have shown why it is critical to keep in mind Descartes's purpose in writing the *Comments* passage. He was concerned with the Dissimilarity Problem rather than the Heterogeneity Problem for body-to-mind action, which gives us insight into why Descartes believed that sensory ideas are innate to the mind. Since he was primarily concerned with explaining the lack of resemblance between ideas and motions, we also know why he did not answer other pressing questions about the specific nature of this causation.

There are a lot of factors that come into play when attributing a causal theory to Descartes. When we interpret this passage from the *Comments*, we have to remember that our conclusions apply only to body-to-mind action, and they must fit within the larger scheme of Descartes's metaphysics, including his other writings and commitments. By more closely examining occasional causation and interactionism as the two possible interpretations of Descartes's occasioning model, we may come closer to an accurate understanding of Cartesian body-to-mind action.

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