



## Quasi-Occasionalistic Causation in the Philosophy of René Descartes

Hasan Ahmadizade\*

Received: 2019/10/22 | Accepted: 2020/01/25

### Abstract

One of the key issues in the philosophy of Descartes that is very important today for researchers of the philosophy of the middle Ages and the New Period in the West is Descartes' approach regarding the causal relation between different things in the world. Descartes' view on the relation between soul and body is an Occasionalistic view. According to this view, it is God that is the final causation in the relation between soul and body. But in this article, the key question is whether Descartes' view on the relation between all things in the world, material or immaterial an Occasionalistic one. And can we call him the founder of Occasionalism; or should we trace this view back to the books of Medieval Age philosophers? Therefore, in this article we will try to show that, based on Descartes' different books, and according to some Medieval Age texts, we can ascribe to Descartes a Quasi-Occasionalistic, according to which, besides God, we can ascribe a causal faculty to material and physical things in the world.



### Keywords

René Descartes, Causation, Occasionalism, Medieval age.

---

\* Assistance Professor, Department of Religions & Philosophy, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran. | ahmadizade@kashanu.ac.ir



## Introduction

One of the most important issues in medieval and modern philosophy is the quality of causal relationship between things in the world. This issue has different approaches in Islamic and western philosophy. Descartes is one of the thinkers who has a specific attitude on causality especially between material and immaterial things. Some of the researchers on Cartesian philosophy have raised a question about Descartes' attitude on the issue of causality and whether we can ascribe an Occasionalistic view to his attitude. In other words, today some claim that Occasionalism is not a medieval issue but it is Descartes who noticed this issue for the first time; especially in the mind-body problem. So, according to this view, Occasionalism is rooted in the Cartesian dualism. One of the reasons this view is based on is Descartes analysis on the relation between material world and immaterial as a whole, and between immaterial mind and material body particularly. According to his analysis, when the human body starts to have any motion or behavior, it is God who prepares conditions for the body to affect the mind. On the other hand, when the human mind starts to think and wants to have any effect on the human body, it is God who prepares conditions for the mind to affect the body. This is the same thing that is called Occasionalism.

On the other hand, some of researchers on the philosophy of Descartes say that Occasionalism is not a theory that is rooted in the Cartesian dualism; rather, some of medieval philosophers and theologians, before Descartes, raised this issue in their books and analyzed the causal relationship in the world according to the God's Will and His Interference in the world. According to this view, Cartesian Occasionalism in his philosophy is affected by the medieval Occasionalism. In the present article, we will try to show that based on Descartes' different books, and according to some the Medieval Age texts, we can ascribe to Descartes a Quasi- Occasionalistic approach, according to which, beside God, we can ascribe a causal faculty to material and physical things in the world. In this vein, we first will discuss the medieval background about casualty and its relation to God's Will especially in Suárez and Thomas Aquinas' philosophical and theological views, and also briefly in Islamic theology. In medieval Islamic theology, many thinkers, especially those known as the Asharites, have raised issues on causality according to an Occasionalistic view, based on which, it is God who has the final effect in the world. For example, Al-Gazali raised many criticisms against philosophers in some ontological problems and said that the relation between things is not necessary because it is God who determines the causal relation between things in the world. On the other hand, in the western medieval context, some thinkers like Malbranch,

viewed causality as an Occasionalistic issue; but some, like Aquinas, thought on this issue moderately and believed that besides God, material things too have effects on each other.

Descartes in some of his writings, especially *Meditations*, has raised some issues, according to which, we can analyze his view on the causality question in his philosophy. The causal relation between things in the world can be summarized into three kinds:

1. causal relation between two material or physical things. In other words, this relation is usually called the body-body relation, especially in the philosophy of mind. Here we can say that Descartes has an Occasionalistic approach and believe that it is God who finally affects the body – body causal relationships.

2. Causal relationship between an immaterial or metaphysical thing and a material or physical thing. In other words, this relation is usually called the mind-body relation; like the causal relation between the human soul and his material body. Here, Descartes believes that besides God, we can see the effects of other immaterial things on material or physical things.

3. Causal relationship between a material or physical thing and an immaterial or metaphysical thing. In other words, this relation is usually called the body-mind relation; like the causal relation between the human body and his immaterial soul or mind. Here we cannot achieve a clear view in Descartes' writings, because he, – for example in the sixth meditation, in the issue of demonstration of physical world – clearly believes that some material or physical things can have effects on immaterial things. For example, bodily motions in human beings can affect his soul or mind and so humans become tired spiritually.

Descartes, in the sixth meditation considers the human body as an active faculty that can shape many concepts in the human mind. But in other cases, he takes the human body not as an active faculty that always affects the mind or soul, but believes that *occasionally* the human body can affect his mind and shape some concepts in the human mind. Here, we cannot easily translate and interpret the word “occasion” in Descartes' terminology, but undoubtedly this word, means occasion, later raised many issues that called Occasionalistic issues. The key subject in these issues was the interference of God and His final causality in the world, material and immaterial. So, Descartes in his analysis of causality sometimes take an Occasionalistic approach and sometimes takes a Quasi-Occasionalistic approach. In other words, for some relationships in the world he accepts God's interference completely and, in another cases, he believes that material or immaterial things can have effects on different phenomena.