**Teaching and Learning Guide for: Mind-Body Commerce: Occasional Causation and Mental Representation in Anton Wilhelm Amo**

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***Author’s Introduction***

Causation is a central issue in Early Modern metaphysical debates and it was widely assumed (although there were exceptions, such as Leibniz) that the mind and body causally interact with one another. That may well seem like a very commonsensical claim; after all, I need only will that I lift my finger and lo and behold it moves! But *how* do the mind and the body causally interact with one another? Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, who exchanged a series of letters with Descartes, pointed out that if the mind and body are radically different kinds of entities (as they appear to be), it is not clear how they could interact. Material (or physical) objects interact by ‘bumping into’ or ‘pushing’ one another. But a human mind (which, according to Descartes, is immaterial) cannot be pushed. Nor, it would seem, can it do any pushing.

This type of problem led Early Modern thinkers to distinguish between different kinds of causation. Take the example of my willing my finger to move ‘causing’ my finger to move. Different accounts of causation say different things about what is going on here. *Efficient* causation says that my volition for my finger to move is the direct cause of my finger’s movement (but faces the kind of problem introduced by Princess Elisabeth). *Occasionalism* (defended by Malebranche)is the view that my volition is actually an ‘occasion’, or prompt, for *God* to move my finger. Meanwhile, *occasional causation* (despite the misleadingly similar name) says that my volition is the prompt for my finger to *move itself.* Different versions of occasional causation were defended by thinkers like Anton Wilhelm Amo and Margaret Cavendish.

Some of these views can sound strange, and the appeal to God stepping in and making things happen can feel alien to a contemporary audience, but this is the direction that Early Modern philosophers were forced to go down to try and make sense of the everyday phenomenon of mind-body interaction, while also defending a consistent mind-body metaphysics.

***Author Recommends***

1. *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes.* Edited and translated by Lisa Shapiro. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2007).

Shapiro’s translation provides both sides of Elisabeth and Descartes’ correspondence. Here, Elisabeth challenges Descartes to explain how his ‘substance dualism’ (his view that mind and body are two radically different substances) can make sense of mind-body interaction.

1. Nadler, Steven. *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2011).

Nadler’s whole text is helpful in outlining Cartesian debates about how the mind and body are related, but chapter one specifically (‘Occasionalism and the Mind-Body Problem’) is essential reading for anyone hoping to get to grips with the distinction between occasionalism and occasional causation.

1. Walsh, Julie. ‘Amo on the Heterogeneity Problem’ *Philosophers’ Imprint* 19:41 (2019), 1-18.

Walsh’s paper is one of the first to argue that Amo accepts a model of ‘occasional causation’. Walsh contrasts this reading of Amo with a ‘Leibnizian’ reading where, like Leibniz, Amo is said to have denied that there is any genuine interaction between mind and body.

1. Meyns, Chris. ‘Anton Wilhelm Amo’s Philosophy of Mind’ *Philosophy Compass* 14:3 (2019).

Meyns provides a helpful outline of Amo’s philosophy of mind, his connections to Cartesian thought as well as more ‘empiricist’ thinkers like Locke. Like Walsh, Meyns also reads Amo as an occasional causation theorist.

1. Meyns C. Teaching and learning guide for Anton Wilhelm Amo's philosophy of mind. *Philosophy Compass*. 2019.

Meyns has also provided a teaching and learning guide that gives a more detailed background to Amo’s writing and his philosophy of mind in particular. This would be a useful supplement to this guide.

1. O’Neill, Eileen. ‘Margaret Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes, And Early Modern Occasional Causes’ *Revue Philosophique de la France Et de l'Etranger* 138 (3):311-326 (2013).

O’Neill, a pioneer in scholarship recovering the work of Early Modern women philosophers, argues that Cavendish understands interaction between things in the world in terms of occasional causation. She also argues that reading Cavendish in this way impacts how we ought to read more canonical figures like Descartes.

1. McDonough, Jeffrey K. ‘Berkeley, Human Agency, and Divine Concurrentism’ *Journal for the History of Philosophy*. 46: 4 (2008), 567-590.

McDonough explains how Berkeley may have employed a Medieval account of the mind-body relation, known as ‘divine concurrentism’, in order to account for human causal agency. The paper provides a helpful history and overview of concurrentism, which is the same account of the mind-body relation that I attribute to Amo in my paper.

***Online Materials***

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/elisabeth-bohemia/

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/occasionalism/

https://blog.apaonline.org/2018/02/08/anton-wilhelm-amo-the-african-philosopher-in-18th-europe/

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-mind/

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-femhist/

***Sample Syllabus***

**Week 1: Mind-Body Interaction Problems**

Extracts from the Elisabeth-Descartes correspondence in Shapiro (ed.), pp.61-73 and pp.85-95.

SEP article ‘Feminist History of Philosophy’, sections 1 & 2.

**Week 2: Occasionalism**

Nadler (2011), chapter one.

SEP article ‘Occasionalism’.

**Week 3: Pre-established Harmony**

Leibniz, *Monadology*, sections 56-79.

Francks, Richard. *Modern Philosophy: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. London: Routledge (2008), p.124-133 & 142-143.

**Week 4: Occasional Causation (Amo)**

Amo’s *Inaugural Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Human Mind*, 161-183.

Walsh (2019)

Meyns (2019)

**Week 5: Occasional Causation (Cavendish)**

O’Neill (2013)

Peterman, Alison. ‘Margaret Cavendish on Motion and Mereology’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57 (3): 471-499. 2019.

**Week 6: Concurrentism**

McDonough (2008)

West, Peter. ‘Mind-Body Commerce: Occasional Causation and Mental Representation in Anton Wilhelm Amo’ *Philosophy Compass*.

***Focus Questions***

1. What do you think it would take to provide a satisfying account of the mind-body relation?
2. Which of the views covered here comes closest to achieving that and why?
3. How problematic are accounts of the mind-body relation that appeal to God?
4. What is the most significant problem for theories of occasional causation? Can that problem be overcome?
5. Are mind-body interaction problems a good reason to reject ‘substance dualism’, the view that the mind and body are radically different substances?