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## **FORTY YEARS AFTER: RECONSIDERING THE PROBLEM OF DESCARTES'S NATURAL INSTITUTION THEORY VS THE COEXTENSION THEORY**

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### **0. Introduction**

2018 marks double anniversary in Cartesian scholarship: important books by Margaret Wilson, *Descartes*, and Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism*, were published 40 and 20 years ago respectively.

One of the central and most widely discussed topics in Wilson's book was the distinction of the two theories of mind-body union that can be found in Descartes texts, the Natural Institution theory and the Coextension theory. On Wilson's view, these theories are in conflict because the former takes particular ways in which mind and body interact as sort of primitives that require no further explanation (it was just established by God that way, because he willed so), whereas the latter seems to hold that the mind-body union explains the interactions. Wilson also suggested that the Natural Institution theory is by far the best and that Descartes would better cling to it and abandon the Coextension theory.

Marleen Rozemond, among other things, took issue with Wilson on that point and proposed a different account of Descartes's notion of the mind-body union as, in a sense, explanatory of both the mind-body interaction and the qualitative nature of sensations. Despite Rozemond's book's being highly appreciated, this account and its merits and demerits *vis-à-vis* Wilson's account were not widely discussed and critically evaluated.

Recently, Minna Koivuniemi and Edmond Curley developed yet another account of Descartes's views on the mind-body union. This account explains away the purported conflict between the Natural Institution theory and the Coextension theory; however, it seems to be in conflict with both Wilson's and Rozemond's accounts in presenting the mind-to-body and body-to-mind directions of causality as symmetrical (while Wilson's and Rozemond's accounts both point out strong asymmetry, the dominance of the body-to-mind causal direction in Descartes's notion of the union).

The relationship between these three accounts and the possibility of their (partial) reconciliation and synthesis is the topic of the following discussion.

### **1. Margaret Wilson's account: the Natural Institution theory vs. the Coextension theory**

According to Wilson [Wilson, 1978: pp. 205-220], the best Descartes's account of the mind-body union, the Natural Institution theory, is that «what we call the close union or intermingling of this mind with this body is nothing but the arbitrarily established disposition of this mind to experience certain types of sensations on the occasion of certain changes in this body, and to refer these sensations to (parts of) this body» [Wilson, 1978: p. 211]. However, Wilson thinks that this theory conflicts with some Descartes's statements, such as that sensations «are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body» (AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56)<sup>1</sup> and that «the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body» (AT VII, 86/CSM II, 59).<sup>2</sup> She thinks that such statements converge into another conception (although vague and underdeveloped, «seemingly almost ineffable» [Wilson, 1978: p. 207]), the Coextension theory, which conflicts with the Natural Institution theory. Wilson identifies two points of conflict.

First, Wilson thinks that the statement that sensations «arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body» sits badly with Natural Institution theory:

«[o]n the Natural Institution theory, ... it would seemingly be wrong to say that we experience sensations in different parts of our bodies *because of* a state of affairs

<sup>1</sup> Here and forthwith, references to the texts of Descartes and his correspondents are made to the classical French/Latin edition by Adam and Tannery [Descartes, 1996], abbreviated as AT, and the English editions: Volumes I and II of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, transl. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch [Descartes, 1985], abbreviated as CSM; Volume III of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, transl. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny [Descartes, 1991], abbreviated as CSMK; *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, transl. by E. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross [Descartes, 1931], abbreviated as HR. The abbreviation is followed by a blank, the volume (if any, in Roman numerals), a comma, and the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson quotes the latter statement imprecisely, replacing «seems to be» with «is» [Wilson, 1978: p. 206]. (She refers not to CSM but to HR; however, the translation of this fragment in (HR I, 196) is the same as in (CSM II, 59).)