Introduction

[Burman] But a builder is the cause of a house, yet for all that the house is not like him.
[Descartes] He is not the cause of the house, in the sense in which we are taking the word here. He merely applies active forces to what is passive, and so there is no need for the product to be like the man.¹

In conformity with a Galilean law of motion, René Descartes holds that bodies have a tendency or power to persist in their actual state.² As in seventeenth-century philosophy in general, Descartes’ system raises questions as to how the tendency should be explained.

Now, Descartes regards tendencies as actions that signify some effort.³ It seems, then, that bodies should carry out some efforts—have some activity—in order to obey the fundamental conservation laws. However, bodies appear to be totally inactive in Descartes’ philosophy. Bodies are to be understood in terms of geometrical properties—ultimately in terms of extension⁴—and these properties themselves can hardly generate any effort or power. In fact it is obvious that they cannot in themselves generate any action. A difficult question arises at this point: how can passive Cartesian bodies have the tendencies that require activity needed for them to obey the conservation laws?

It is obvious that Descartes believes that his philosophical system allows talk about active forces. The dialogue between Burman and

---

¹ Descartes’ conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648; CSMK, p. 340; AT V, p. 156.
² Principles of Philosophy II.43; CSM I, p. 243; AT VII, p. 66.
³ See The World chapter 7; CSM I, p. 96; AT XI, p. 44; and AT XI, p. 84.
Descartes above suggests that, according to Descartes, a builder applies active forces to passive matter, and in this way produces a house. The builder, who is a mental being, can impart active force on material things such as hammers. The movement of the hammer then has effects on nails which have effects on planks and so on. In his reply to Burman, Descartes thus seems to accept there being causal sequences that are initiated by a mental being and result in further causes and effects in the material world. Moreover, the dialogue between Burman and Descartes also suggests that, according to Descartes, causes and effects do not need to be similar in nature.

Descartes also holds that something mental, such as an idea, can be an effect of activity residing in the material world. For instance, he argues that because our faculty of sensory perception is completely passive and God is not a deceiver, our sensory ideas are products of the activity of corporeal things.\(^5\)

Finally, when a body makes another body move, it is of course very intuitive to suppose that the cause-body must display some activity. Or, if the cause-body has been set into motion by yet another body, the source of the activity may lie further down the causal chain, but some activity must be displayed somewhere in the causal ancestry of the body that is set into motion.

Activity is, then, central to causality. This is a very plausible view; it is hard to see how anything could cause anything, if nothing had any activity required in initiating causal sequences. However, it is notoriously difficult to provide a reading of Descartes’ philosophy in a way that allows there to be the kind of causal relations Descartes would want to allow.

I will begin by setting the stage by discussing some of Descartes’ key ideas about causality concerning the material world. Then, after a short digression into Descartes’ ontology, I shall move on to formulate the central principle Descartes holds to govern causal relations. After presenting two unsuccessful formulations of Descartes’ causal principle, I shall suggest a third formulation and argue that it may enable us to construct a model that would allow those causal relations that Descartes clearly wants to endorse. The key concept in the third formulation of Descartes’ causal principle is that of an active power, whose metaphysical basis is God. Namely, Descartes holds that active power is imparted to finite entities by God, who is the primary cause and constant creator.

---

\(^5\) Sixth Meditation; CSM II, p. 55; AT VII, p. 79.