

**Signs Established by Nature:
Occasional Causation, Cartesian Sensory Ideas & the Language Analogy**

In the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, Descartes claims that ‘there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind’ and that sensory ideas, ‘ideas of pain, colours, sounds and the like’, are ‘all the more innate’ (AT VIIIB 358-359). At first glance, this seems like a radical claim. If our sensory ideas are innate, then it seems to follow that objects and features in the external world cannot be responsible for causing their existence, since they already exist in the mind. However, Descartes certainly does not want to deny that the material body and material world have a crucial causal role in sensory perception. We know this is so because the Sixth Meditation proof for the existence of the external world relies upon it. So, what is that role?

In my paper, I draw attention to the subtle distinction that Descartes makes between two different kinds of causes: ‘proximate and primary’ causes and ‘remote and accidental’ causes (AT VIIIB 360). I argue that this distinction can help us to make sense of Descartes’ account of how sensory ideas arise in the mind. External things are the remote and accidental causes – or occasional causes – of our sensory ideas. This means that they do not bring our sensory ideas into *existence*, but only bring them, already formed, to the forefront of our minds for consideration. I explain how this distinction helps to solve the apparent tension between the passages in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* and the *Sixth Meditation*.

Descartes draws an analogy with language (in the *Optics*, the *Meditations*, and the *Principles*) which further illuminates this species of causation. He tells us that words and signs are capable of triggering ideas in the mind, even though they are not responsible for causing the existence of those ideas. I draw on the work of the Cartesian Lodewijk Meyer, who offers comprehensive theory of language, to help explicate the quasi-causal role of words and signs. I argue that the language analogy gives us a way of understanding the quasi-causal process that leads to the stimulation of sensory ideas.