

In my presentation, I will investigate Descartes' theory of an "institution of nature". Since Descartes maintains that the nature of bodies consists in nothing but extension, we must indeed explain why we happen to perceive them as colored and, even more specifically, why with this specific color rather than any other (and so for the other sensible qualities we usually ascribe to material objects). Although Descartes thinks that, at the bottom level, it remains a brute fact that such and such a physical change occurring in sense organs (and, thus, in the brain) because of the body's action gives rise to such and such a sensation in the mind, he argues that the relation between the two is not random, but governed by a psycho-physiological law – or, to cast the issue in his terms, by an "institution of nature". I will show that Descartes has a quite sophisticated theory about the modal status of this law, especially as contrasted with logical norms or the physical laws of motion. Delving into this theory, I will explain what, in Descartes' views, would distinguish human experience from the experience of any other *res cogitans*. I will prove that, according to Descartes, what makes a human being a human being is not his rationality, this being one and the same for all "thinking things", humans and non-humans alike. Nor is it the mere fact of having sensations, or passions: all embodied minds are indeed on a par under this regard. It is still to be determined, though, which specific sensations would follow from a certain brain state. It is precisely at this point, I claim, that Descartes' theory of an "institution of nature" comes in: an institution that is to be qualified as "natural" inasmuch as it is in the nature of the (human) mind to have these specific sensations rather than another and, at the same time, a psycho-physiological law that has been positively "instituted" (by God), who could therefore have decided to settle it otherwise. According to Descartes is yet precisely in this apparent contradiction, halfway between nature and norm, that resides the uniqueness of human experience.