Margaret Cavendish

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Objectives

1. To explore the view in Cavendish that motion is inseparable from the body that has it;
2. To compare the doctrine of patterning with the doctrine that in sense perception external bodies stamp images of themselves on the sense organs;
3. To lay out the arguments that Cavendish offers for the conclusion that minds are material;
4. To lay out the arguments that Cavendish offers for the view that mentality is ubiquitous in Nature;
5. To ask what kinds of entities and properties are fundamental in Nature, and what kinds of entities and properties arise from these;
6. To consider the relative dependence and independence of creatures;
7. To think about different conceptions of freedom and how they might fit into Cavendish's metaphysical system;
8. To introduce some of the wonderful interpretive controversies on all of the above.

Commentary

Introduction

Margaret Cavendish (1623-53) was a British philosopher who defended the view that the universe of creatures is entirely material. Minds and bodies are material both, and generally speaking bodies are far more sophisticated than the tradition of the Seventeenth Century tended to allow. Cavendish argued against prominent contemporaries like Descartes, Hobbes, More, and Van Helmont on the perennial questions of philosophy. At the same time, she expanded the range of what counts as philosophical. Her arguments are extremely compelling, and in many cases they are well ahead of their time.

I. All motion is self-motion

A central tenet that Cavendish defends is that motion is never transferred from one body to another. Instead, the motion of a body is inseparable from it and is always self-motion. As she puts the view,
"there can be no abstraction made of motion from body, neither really, nor in the manner of our conception… Wherefore Motion is but one thing with body, without any separation or

abstraction soever" (*PL*, 97). She adds that "motion cannot be transferred without matter, as being both inseparably united, and but one thing" (Ibid., 445). The view might seem counterintuitive – because a body that appears to be at rest is often catapulted by a body that collides into it – but Cavendish is in effect asking us to imagine what it would mean for a feature like motion to hop from one body to another. A feature like motion is never free-floating, but is always the motion of the body that has it, and so motion would never be able to transfer unless there is also a corresponding transfer of substance: "[i]f one body did give another body motion, it must needs give it also substance" (Ibid., 82); "the one would grow less, and the other bigger, that by loosing so much substance" (Ibid., 447). But a body does not become smaller when it impacts a second body and the second body moves differently. Whatever motion the latter has – it had that motion all along. We might think of the example of a balloon that is resting on the floor after a party, where the physicist would tell us that internal to the balloon there are electrons and other bodies that are moving quite rapidly. We do not observe such motions with the naked eye, but they are present (*PPO*, 31), and when a hand or other external body sends the balloon into flight, it is redirecting motion that was in the balloon all along: "though a particular motion doth not move in that same manner as it did before, nevertheless it is still there, and not onely there, but still moving…: Wherefore what is commonly called cessation from motion is onely a change of some particular motion, and is a mistake of change for rest" (*PL*, 436).

For Cavendish a body that redirects the self-motion of a second body is the occasional cause of the redirection of that motion: "I say that some things may be Occasional causes of other things, but not the Prime or Principal causes…" (Ibid., 79). The first body would not effect a change in the motion of the second body unless the second body had (self-)motion already. Here Cavendish is anticipating a version of the contemporary distinction between potential and kinetic energy.

Cavendish appears to hold that occasional causes operate by touch or contact. She says about the sensory perception of distant bodies – "if their light comes to our Eyes, I know no reason against it, but their effects may come to our bodies" (Ibid., 301-302). She adds in the same passage that a disease can only affect a body if it comes into contact with that body (Ibid.). If so, she subscribes to the view that an occasional cause redirects the motion of second body via contact or touch. As we will see, however, the attribution of that view to Cavendish is controversial. Some commentators argue that she holds that the self-motion of a creature is wholly autonomous motion by which a creature is able to alter its motion without an explicit or literal nudge.

II. Sensory perception as patterning

Cavendish holds that motion is always self-motion, and she accordingly supposes that the motion by which sensory images form in an eye or other organ is *self*-motion. A common view in the early modern period was that external bodies stamp or imprint images of themselves on the sense organs of a perceiver (for example in Hobbes, and later in Hume). That *can't* be right,

according to Cavendish. First, sense organs would exhibit dings and dents as a result of the near constant bombardment of external bodies (*PL*, 22, 72, and 489), but more importantly the bodies that compose a sense organ are not passive. They are teeming with self-motion, and the best that an external body could do is to redirect motions that are internal to a sense organ already. Cavendish thus holds that in sense perception the eye and other organs *pattern* the images of external bodies – and that the motion by which such images form is self-motion. She writes that "the motions of the sentient in the act of perception, do figure out or imitate the motions of the object, so that the object is but as a copy that is figured out, or imitated by the sentient, which is the chief agent in all transforming and perceptive actions that are made by way of patterning or imitation" (*OEP*, ¶17 of "To the Reader"). The sense organ is the chief agent in sense perception, but it is not the only agent; the occasional cause makes a contribution as well.

Cavendish holds that the occasional causes in an act of sense perception are many. There is the external object that is perceived, but the air and light that lie between the object and the perceiver are operative as well. She holds that "as for air, it patterns out the light of the Sun, and the sensitive motions in the eyes of animals pattern out the light in the air" (*PL*, 83). She owns as a consequence that there is a lot of patterning that takes place that we do not notice and that there are objects that we and other creatures pattern but that are below the threshold of awareness (*OEP*, 211).

There are some passages that might seem to suggest that Cavendish does not hold that sense perception is due in part to patterning that occurs between object and perceiver. For example, she writes that "all Motions are not Impressions, neither do all Impressions make such dents, as to disturb the adjoyning Parts: …they are out, that say, there can be no communication at a distance, unless by pressing and crowding; for the patterning of an outward object, may be done without any inforcement or disturbance, jogging or crowding…" (*PL*, 182-83). But here Cavendish is just indicating that interaction from a distance is not a matter of air and light molecules dinging and denting each other. She also writes that air and light (and sound) do not pass through walls to reach a perceiver (*PL*, 73). But that is not to say that occasional causes operate without a medium. There is a mechanism by which external bodies interact with the bodies on both sides (and inside) of a wall – namely, patterning. Note that some commentators argue that Cavendish subscribes to the view that action-at-a-distance often takes place without the involvement of a medium (for example Detlefsen 2007). If she takes self-motion to be wholly autonomous motion, it easy to see how that would be her view: if the motions of a body are due entirely to that body itself, there is nothing for surrounding bodies (or distant occasional causes) to do. But if self-motion is just the motion of a body that is inseparable from it, then air, light and other bodies would have a role to play in the trajectory of that motion.

III. Material minds

Cavendish offers a number of arguments for the view that minds are material. One is that minds and bodies interact, but "it is… more probable, that one material should act upon

another material, or one immaterial upon another immaterial, than that an immaterial should act upon a material or corporeal" (*PL*, 207). She adds that "Immaterial and Material cannot obstruct each other" (Ibid., 10). Another argument that Cavendish offers is from the premise that "Though Matter might be without Motion, yet Motion cannot be without matter; for it is impossible (in my opinion) that there should be an Immaterial Motion in Nature" (*GNP*, 2). Minds and their ideas partake of motion – for example *GNP*, 34, 20; *PL*, 34; *OEP*, 238-39; *PPO*, 105 – and so they are material. Cavendish also regards as a datum that thinking takes place in the brain and larger nervous system: she "would ask those, that say the Brain has neither sense, reason, nor self-motion, and therefore no Perception; but that all proceeds from an Immaterial Principle, and an Incorporeal Spirit, distinct from the Body, which moveth and actuates corporeal matter; I would fain ask them, I say, where their Immaterial Ideas reside, in what part or place of the Body? …If [the spirit] have no dimension, how can it be confined in a material body?" (*PL*, 33). There is at least some sense in which our minds reside in bodies, but if there is *any* sense in which they reside in bodies, they are material themselves. Cavendish holds that "all that is a substance in Nature, is a body, and what has a body, is corporeal" (Ibid., 194). If there exist any other entities, we do not detect them, and we cannot think or converse about them. Anything about which we inquire is material.

IV. Nature as a material, minded, and eternal plenum

Matter thinks at the level of the brain, according to Cavendish, and it also thinks at the level of the constituent bodies that make up the brain. She supposes that it would be magic if mental states somehow emerged from the interaction of bodies that exhibit zero trace of mentality themselves: "I shall never be able to conceive, how senseless and irrational Atomes can produce sense and reason, or a sensible and rational body, such as the soul is…. 'Tis true, different effects may proceed from one cause or principle; but there is no principle, which is senseless, can produce sensitive effects; nor no rational effects can flow from an irrational cause…" (*OEP*, "Observations Upon the Opinions of Some Ancient Philosophers," 375). The most microscopic bodies of the brain exhibit mentality, for Cavendish, but the most microscopic bodies of the brain are not different in kind from the rest of the "elemental" (*PL*, 147) bodies in the universe, and so mentality (for Cavendish) is ubiquitous. She holds that "life and knowledg is animate matter, and is in all parts and all Creatures…" (*PL*, 514).

One of the reasons that Cavendish thinks that the elemental bodies of the brain are not especially different from the rest of the elemental bodies in the universe is that she takes macroscopic bodies to exhibit intelligence across the board. She writes poems about the sophisticated and thoughtful behavior of ants, bees, and spiders, for example, and she touts the wisdom of birds, crocodiles, and other creatures. They build a nest; they anticipate a storm; there is much that they notice that we do not (*OEP*, "Further Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 296-97). Cavendish then argues that animals and insects are just the tip of the iceberg: the entire natural world exhibits a kind of order and organization that would be impossible if bodies were not guided by a level of perception and knowledge (*PL*, 439, 481). The cells of the immune system, the bodies that compose a plant, the bodies that organize into a

larger ecosystem – these exhibit mentality as well. Not surprisingly, Cavendish has very negative things to say about artefacts (like lenses) and very positive things to say about productions (like the human eye) that are wholly natural (*PL*, 285, 500; *NP*, 76). Relatively speaking, artefacts are strung together quickly and are clunky, but the bodies that enter into a natural composite have a history of coordinated activity. They are perceptive, collaborative, and smart, and it shows.

For Cavendish the universe is a collection of minded bodies. It is a plenum, which is to say that bodies are contiguous and there is no empty space (*PL*, 521). There are overtly visible bodies – or bodies that are overtly visible to *us* – and between there is air and other materiality that is below the threshold of human awareness. The universe is a plenum, and it is also eternal: for nothing can come from nothing, and nothing can be annihilated (*PL*, 53-55, 431; *PPO*, 37). We might argue that matter is not eternal and that it was blasted into existence by God, but Cavendish refrains from appealing to God in her attempts to explain natural phenomena. She holds that finite (material) minds have no ability to conceive of God (*PPO*, 119), and in a philosophical argument she will not include a premise that references the nature of God unless she is responding to such a premise in the work an opponent. She takes it to be "not onely an absurdity, but an injury to the Profession of Divinity to draw her to the Proofs in *Natural Philosophy*: wherefore I shall strictly follow the Guidance of *Natural Reason*, and keep to my own ground and Principles as much as I can…" (*PL*, 3).

The universe is a minded and eternal plenum, according to Cavendish. But not all bodies are as minded as the human brain, and the bodies that compose an idea are more swift and agile and ephemeral than most of the matter that surrounds us (*OEP*, "An Argumental Discourse," unnumbered; *PL*, 531). Ideas form and dissipate very quickly, but other bodies are more lasting and cumbersome. Cavendish thus makes a distinction between rational matter, sensitive matter, and inanimate matter, though she takes them be intermingled throughout all of nature (*PL*, 444; O'Neill 2013). There is at least *some* rational matter present in each body, however, or else that body would not exhibit the order and organization that it does.

V. Normativity

Cavendish does not appear to leave any room in her metaphysical system for good, bad, right, or wrong. She holds that everything is material, and she attributes to elemental bodies features like figure, extension, motion, and perception, but she nowhere attributes to them normative properties. She does not posit these at the most elemental level of bodies, and on her view it is difficult to see how they would arise from features that are wholly non-normative. She devotes very little ink to the issue. In a piece entitled "No Judge in Nature" she says that "No *Intreaty*, nor *Petition* can perswade *Nature*, nor any Bribes [c]an corrupt, or alter the course of *Nature*. Justly there can be no complaints made against *Nature*, nor to *Nature*" (*PF*, 5). Throughout her political writing she speaks of societal arrangements that are better or worse for human beings, for example in her promotion of monarchy over other forms of government (*NP*, 634-36). But she would appear to have in mind what does (and does not) meet the interests of humanity,

without making a further assessment as to the value of those interests. She does not appear to have the resources to posit the existence of value, and she does not appear to see its non-existence as a loss. She posits the existence of bodies and the properties of bodies. Note however that at least one extremely prominent commentator (Boyle 2017) argues that Cavendish holds that there is normativity in Nature and that (inherently perceptive) bodies consult it as a guide to their behavior.

VI. The interdependence of creatures

Cavendish holds that Nature is a continuous plenum of bodies surrounded by bodies, and she supposes that each body depends for its structural integrity and constitution on the bodies that surround it. She gives the example of a seed that becomes a plant: "some conceive Nature to be like a Granary or Store-house of Pinebarley, or the like; which if so, I would fain know in what grounds those Seeds should be sown to produce and increase: for no Seeds can produce of themselves if they be not assisted by some other matter; which proves, that Seeds are not the prime or principal Creatures in Nature, by reason they depend upon some other matter which helps them in their Productions: for if Seeds of Vegetables did lie never so long in a store-house, or any other place, they would never produce, until they were put into some proper and convenient ground" (*OEP*, 40-41). A seed on its own remains a seed, though there is a sense in which a seed on its own is *not* a seed, if it would never become a plant. But a seed is never on its own; it is part of a plenum. Cavendish continues in the same passage: "It is also an argument, that no Creature or part of Nature can subsist singly and divided from all the rest, but that all parts must live together; and since no part can subsist and live without the other, no part can also be called prime or principal" (Ibid.). No creature is an island, according to Cavendish, and indeed not even an island is an island – if it depends on the water that surrounds it and if it depends on the mountain of body that extends to the ocean floor.

Cavendish appreciates that the social and political features of a body – for example a human being – depend on the behavior of the bodies that surround it also. In her fiction and her plays she creates alternate worlds in which women inhabit very different environments than they do on the real-world earth, and they are philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, rhetoricians, military strategists, etc. She is not thereby suggesting that it is a fiction that women can inhabit any of these roles; instead she is pointing out how the social and political features of women would be different on earth if the surrounding environment were as hospitable to women as it is to men. She is also working to make visible the numerous supports that prop up men but that go almost entirely unacknowledged. The creation of alternative worlds is a political act, for Cavendish, and it is also a not-unpleasant respite into territory in which she and other women are able to recognize and in some sense *be* a self with which they identify (preface and epilogue to *BW*, unnumbered; *WO*, 100-101).

VII. Freedom

Cavendish holds that creatures exhibit freedom, though there is controversy among commentators about what it is to which that freedom amounts. Some argue that Cavendish holds that creatures are free in the sense that they have a two-way libertarian ability to do otherwise; some argue that Cavendish holds that there never exists the possibility that things happen other than they do and that creatures are free in a compatibilist sense.

First it might be noted that Cavendish allows that there are many instances in which a creature is not free. She says that "although Nature is free, and all her parts self-moving; yet not every part is free to move as it pleases, by reason some parts over-power others, either through number, strength, slight, shape, opportunity, or the like advantages" (*OEP*, "Further Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 85). The motion of a body is always self-motion, according to Cavendish, but often the direction of motion of a body is due to an occasional cause that moves the body in a way that it would not have moved otherwise and in a way that it does not prefer and that it resists. In another passage she says that "Though Nature's Parts are Self-moving, and Self-knowing, yet they have not an infinite or uncontroulable Power; for, several Parts, and Parties, oppose, and oft-times obstruct each other; so that many times they are forced to move, and they may not when they would" (*GNP*, 105). She adds that "the spirits work more easie, at least more freely, when they are not taskt, than when they are like Apprentices or Journey-men; and will be any times more active when they take or have liberty to play, or to follow their own Appetites, than when they work (as I said) by constraint…" (*NP*, 590). Cavendish is happy to describe bodies as having appetites, and as doing what they please (at least in circumstances in which other bodies do not foil their efforts). As we have seen she attributes mentality to bodies very broadly – they try; they resist; they overpower; they are forced to move in ways that they would rather not.

Cavendish holds that there is a sense in which what it means for a creature to be free is for the creature to move as it pleases. She appears to hold that generally speaking the bodies of the plenum are free in that sense, insofar as they work collaboratively and seamlessly to bring about the order and organization that is so familiar in Nature. She writes for example that "Nature's Creating, Generating, and Producing actions are by an easie connection of parts to parts, without Counterbuffs, Joggs and Jolts, producing a particular figure by degrees, and in order and method, as humane sense and reason may well perceive" (*PL*, 152-53). She adds that "the several parrs of Matter have a more easie way of communication,… in all which is a mutual agreement without noise or trouble" (Ibid., 151-52).

Cavendish also speaks of another sense in which creatures can be said to be free: the sense in which their activity is independent of the bodies that surround them. She writes for example that "by voluntary actions I understand self-actions; that is, such actions whose principle of motion is within themselves, and doth not proceed from… an exterior agent" (*OEP*, "To the Reader," unnumbered). By "self-action" Cavendish is not picking out the self-motion of a body; she holds that *all* motion is self-motion. Instead she is picking out motion that is not "forced" or "occasioned" by a second body (*PL*, 443; Lascano 2021). But much of the behavior of the bodies of the plenum is occasioned – for example in the case of sensory perception, and in the case of a body that redirects the motion of a second body.

To flesh out the second sense in which creatures can be said to be free, Cavendish provides examples of bodies that act in ways that are independent of the bodies that surround them. She speaks of the voluntary formation of sensory images in dreams and imagination, for example, as opposed to the formation of images that are occasioned (and forced) in waking perception (*PPO*, 280-82; *PL*, 19). In a plenum of bodies that are always surrounded by further bodies, no individual body will ever be entirely independent, but Cavendish is surely correct that some bodies are able to surround themselves with a buffer that weakens or neutralizes the impact of bodies further out.

Cavendish appears to hold that many bodies are free in the sense that they act as they please, but a far smaller subset of bodies would be free in the sense that they are independent. Bodies that are free in the first sense are not automatically free in the second sense – for example bodies that cooperate in the course of an episode of patterning but whose motions are occasioned. It is not entirely clear from the texts if Cavendish holds that one of the two kinds of freedom is primary, or if each is just a different kind of freedom, or if she wants to use the term 'freedom' in the case of the one and the term 'voluntariness' in the case of the other.

There is a third sense in which Cavendish might appear to hold that creatures are free. That is, she might be thinking of freedom as a libertarian two-way ability to do otherwise at the moment of action. In one passage she says that "every Self-moving Part, or Corporeal Motion, have free-will to move after whatever manner they please" (*GNP*, 6). Here she says that each and every body has free will. The freedom that she has in mind is not the ability of a body to do as it pleases; she makes very clear elsewhere that bodies are often over-powered and are forced to move in ways that they would rather not. Nor does she have in mind freedom in the sense of being independent, for she is clear only some bodies are independent and that many are not. She has in mind a different sense of freedom. Perhaps it is libertarian freedom (Detlefsen 2007, Boyle 2017), or perhaps she is speaking of a kind of spontaneity that is inherent to all creatures and that they would exhibit if they existed in isolation.

One of the reasons in favor of the latter interpretation is that Cavendish says things like this: "As for *Chance,* it is the visible Effects of some hidden Cause; and *Fortune,* a sufficient Cause to produce such Effects: for, the conjunction of sufficient Causes, doth produce such or such Effects; which Effects could not be produced, if any of those Causes were wanting" (*GNP*, 16). It is difficult to imagine a text that speaks more strongly against the view that there exists the possibility that bodies ever behave differently than they do. Bodies have the particular motions that they have, and the only way that they could act differently is if they had different motions or if the bodies of the surrounding plenum had different motions. Sometimes bodies act as they please, and sometimes bodies are independent in the sense that a material buffer separates them from bodies that would forcibly redirect their motion, but motions that appear to be random or uncaused are always the result of the specific particular motions that are already in existence.

Another reason for thinking that Cavendish does not subscribe to a libertarian view of freedom is that she holds that there are no disorders or irregularities in Nature. She writes for example that "there cannot be confusion amongst those parts of Nature, but there must be a constant union and harmony betwixt them; for cross and opposite actions make no confusion, but onely a variety; and such actions which are different, cross and opposite, not moving always after their usual and accustomed way, I name Irregular, for want of a better expression; but properly there is no such thing as Irregularity in Nature... (*PL*, 538-39). She adds that "regularity and irregularity hath but a respect to particulars, and to our conceptions, because those motions which move not after the ordinary, common or usual way or manner, we call Irregular" (Ibid., 359-60). If there were instances of disorder in Nature, we might explain them by attributing libertarian freedom to bodies that choose exhibit order (or not). But Cavendish appears to hold that bodies exhibit an immutable order in their activity, whether they like it or not.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Why does Cavendish hold that all motion is self-motion?
2. Why does Cavendish suppose that sensory perception occurs via patterning and not via the stamping of impressions?
3. What are the reasons that Cavendish offers for the view that minds are material?
4. Why does Cavendish hold that mentality is ubiquitous in Nature?
5. Why does Cavendish posit that bodies are eternal?
6. What kinds of features are had by elemental bodies according to Cavendish? What are the implications for the rest of her metaphysical system?
7. In what sense are creatures interdependent, according to Cavendish?
8. What are the different conceptions of freedom that Cavendish employs, and how do these fit into her larger system?

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