Cavendish on the Supernatural

Draft for the *Oxford Handbook of Margaret Cavendish*

Stewart Duncan

In his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, the Cambridge professor Ralph Cudworth briefly criticized Margaret Cavendish's materialist view of nature. Cudworth said that people with this view 'seem to be Well-wishers to Atheism', but ultimately 'are but mere *Novices in Atheism*, and a kind of Bungling *Well-wishers* to it'.[1] He thought that Cavendish's materialist view tended towards atheism. It is implausible that Cavendish herself was an atheist—that she denied the existence of God—if only because she kept saying that God existed. Still one might wonder, as Cudworth seems to have done, just how much Cavendish thought could be explained by the workings of the three degrees of matter. Given her approach, how much if anything was left to be accounted for by either the immaterial or the supernatural?

Cavendish, after all, rejected several notable views about the immaterial and the supernatural. She rejected the Cartesian view that human cognition was explained by an immaterial soul. She rejected the view (shared by Cudworth and his Cambridge colleague Henry More) that the matter of the natural world was guided in its regular behaviour by immaterial beings (More's spirit of nature or Cudworth's plastic natures). She compared talk of natural immaterial substances to talk of 'Hobgoblins to fright

[1] Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: 1678), 137. The plural here is plausibly just a quirk of Cudworth's style. At least, I know of no evidence he identified followers of Cavendish.

Children'.[2] And as for witches, 'that there should be any such devillish Witchcraft, which is made by a Covenant and Agreement with the Devil, by whose power Men do enchaunt or bewitch other Creatures, I cannot readily believe'.[3]

Not all of that is about the supernatural. Some of it is about immaterial beings that are alleged to be part of the natural world. But these two issues were intertwined at the time. Cavendish's philosophical contemporaries Henry More and Joseph Glanvill were known for defending belief in supernatural tales of ghosts and witches, and tied those beliefs to (seemingly more religiously orthodox) beliefs in immaterial spirits. Thus More felt the need to attack Hobbes's criticisms of beliefs in ghosts and witches, as well as his arguments against human immaterial souls.[4] Cavendish meanwhile was not only a materialist, but also a sceptic about some tales of the supernatural: replying to More, she said that 'concerning Witches … I do not believe any, except it be the witch of *Endor,* which the Scripture makes mention of'.[5]

Given that context, this chapter addresses two questions. First, just how did Cavendish distinguish the supernatural from the natural? Beyond that, what did Cavendish think about alleged supernatural entities—fairies, ghosts, witches, the

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[2] Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664) 2.18, 187. In giving references to this work I provide section and letter numbers as well as page numbers.
[3] Cavendish, *Letters*, 3.16, 298. She does grant in that passage that there is something one might call 'Natural Witchcraft', a category that includes all sorts of strange phenomena we struggle to explain, including magnetism. More cites such phenomena as evidence for the existence of the spirit of nature, but Cavendish disagrees.
[4] Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London: 1659), 55–63.
[5] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.32, 227.

human supernatural soul, angels, and God?[6] In answering these questions, I generally focus on Cavendish's works of natural philosophy from the 1660s: the second edition of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), the *Philosophical Letters* (1664), the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) and the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668). I also think about how Cavendish's views on these issues relate to Hobbes's, asking to what extent she deviates from Hobbes's approach.[7]

1. The natural/supernatural distinction

Hobbes is a key figure in the background of Cavendish's work. They knew each other, even though it is unclear how much they ever discussed philosophy.[8] And they shared some philosophical commitments—most obviously, they were both materialists, albeit in rather different ways.

Defining philosophy in the first chapter of *De Corpore*, Hobbes tells us that 'it excludes *Theology*, I meane the doctrine of God', and that it 'excludes the doctrine of

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[6] One might think miracles would also be a suitable topic here, but Cavendish's works of natural philosophy seem to contain only passing remarks on the topic. In the *Philosophical Letters* she says that 'God is not pleased to work Miracles ordinarily' (3.28, 354). In the *Observations*, she seems just be using 'miracle' to mean 'very remarkable occurrence', when she says that 'it is a miracle to see two men just alike one another in all things'. *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (London, 1666), page 92 of the 'Further Observations'.

[7] On Cavendish and Hobbes more generally, see Stewart Duncan, *Materialism from Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 74–89.

[8] Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, first edition (London, 1655), 'An Epilog to my Philosophical Opinions'; *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe* (London, 1667), 143–5. The second of those passages reports a conversation between Hobbes and William Cavendish about witches.

Angels, and all such things as are thought to be neither Bodies, nor properties of Bodies'.[9] Philosophy, which studies divisible bodies, is one thing, and the study of God and angels is something else. That distinction is not phrased in terms of the supernatural—Hobbes describes himself as distinguishing philosophy from other subjects, not the natural from the supernatural.[10] But we see Cavendish doing something similar when she herself distinguishes the natural from the supernatural.

In the Epistle to the Reader of the second edition of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, Cavendish distinguishes the 'Pure Natural Philosophy' she will pursue from 'Theology'. These enquiries, she tells us, have different sources: 'Philosophy is Built all upon Human Sense, Reason, and Observation, whereas Theology is only Built upon an Implicit Faith'. That is, the distinction is here explained epistemically. But Cavendish also explains it metaphysically: the natural is the material, and the supernatural is the immaterial. We see this in, for example, the *Philosophical Letters*. There, Cavendish tells us that the supernatural must be immaterial: 'if the motion be Incorporeal, then it must needs be a supernatural Spirit, for there is not any thing else Immaterial but they, and then it will be either an Angel or a Devil, or the Immortal Soul of man'.[11] 'Supernatural' and 'divine' are often used interchangeably, as

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[9] *De Corpore* 1.8, quoting the translation of Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy, the First Section, Concerning Body* (London, 1656), 7–8.
[10] Elsewhere Hobbes defines the neighboring notion of superstition: '*Fear* of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publicly allowed, RELIGION, not allowed, SUPERSTITION. And when the power imagined is truly such as we imagine, TRUE RELIGION'. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 6.36. I give references to *Leviathan* by chapter and paragraph number.
[11] Cavendish, *Letters*, 1.23, 78.

when Cavendish says 'If he mean the natural mind and soul of Man, not the supernatural or divine, I am far from his opinion'.[12] So the picture that starts to emerge in the natural philosophical texts of 1663 and 1664 is that there is a natural realm, where things are material, and can be known by sense, reason, or observation, and there is a supernatural realm of immaterial beings, our beliefs about which are and ought to be based on faith, not sense, reason, or observation.[13]

That account is confirmed by the *Observations*. There Cavendish says there are supernatural beings: God and the human supernatural soul, at least. The supernatural is again the immaterial, and is again known in a different way from the natural: we should not mix faith and reason together, and 'as Pure natural Philosophers do not meddle with Divinity, or things Supernatural, so Divines ought not to intrench upon Natural Philosophy'.[14] We also find some developments of those views. Thus Cavendish says that 'what is supernatural, is not capable of natural affections, nor subject to a natural capacity any ways'; that 'what is supernatural, is unalterable'; and that supernatural beings are 'spiritual and consequently individable, as having no parts'.[15] Perhaps that final claim is supposed to be a consequence of supernatural beings being immaterial. But it also brings us back to Hobbes. Philosophy is about bodies, which are

[12] Cavendish, *Letters*, 1.35, 111.
[13] Though there is clearly a role in Cavendish's system for knowledge (or at least belief) that comes from faith or revelation, Cavendish seems not to give us an account of that source. See Peter West and Tom Stoneham, 'The Unorthodox Margaret Cavendish', in Karen Detlefsen and Lisa Shapiro (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy* (New York: Routledge), 435–49.
[14] Cavendish, *Observations*, page 77 of the 'Further Observations'.
[15] Cavendish, *Observations*, quoting page 11 of 'Observations upon the Opinions of Some Ancient Philosophers', then pages 171 and 243 of the main text.

divisible. Beyond that lies theology, which cannot be known or explained in the same way.

2. Fairies

Fairies are not a common topic of philosophical discussion, but Hobbes and Cavendish both talk about them.[16] Hobbes says that fairies—like the demons of 'heathen poets', 'dead men's ghosts … and other manner of old wives' tales'—are 'but idols or phantasms of the brain, without any real nature of their own distinct from human fancy'.[17] This is of a piece with his explanation of various religious experiences as being dreams, not accurate representations of encounters with substantial messengers from God.[18] Later in *Leviathan*, a long passage compares the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church to the 'kingdom of fairies (that is to the old wives' fable in England, concerning ghosts and spirits and the feats they play in the night)'.[19] Hobbes thinks that there are not really any fairies, and that comparing things to fairies can be a way of mocking them.

Thinking about Cavendish on fairies leads us away from the natural philosophical books of the 1660s and back towards her first book, 1653's *Poems, and Fancies*. Not only is this a much earlier text, we're also explicitly on the fancy side of the

[16] Perhaps there is a broader cultural explanation for this. See Ronald Hutton, 'The Making of the Early Modern British Fairy Tradition', *The Historical Journal* 57 (2014), 1135–56, especially 1147–8.
[17] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 44.3.
[18] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 2.8.
[19] Quoting Hobbes, *Leviathan* 47.21 from the longer discussion of *Leviathan* 46.21–33.

divide in Cavendish's works between fancy and natural philosophy. Still, there are several poems in that book about fairies, and some interpreters have even taken them to be a contribution to her natural philosophy. Lisa Sarasohn, for instance, connects belief in fairies to belief in atoms.[20] Whatever we say about that, we might wonder whether Cavendish thought there really were fairies, and whether she thought they were immaterial.

On the first issue, I agree with Deborah Boyle that 'there is in fact little evidence that Cavendish meant her poems on fairies to be taken literally'.[21] But the second issue is more relevant here, and Cavendish thought that fairies, if they were to exist, would not be immaterial or supernatural. We see this in Cavendish's defence of writing about fairies in *Poems, and Fancies*. Her argument departs from an imagined critic's other beliefs—Cavendish expresses surprise that anyone should believe in spirits that have 'no dimension' or in witches but 'laugh at the report of *Fairies,* as impossible'. Moreover, she says, fairies are 'onely small bodies, not subject to our sense, although it be to our

[20] Lisa Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) claims that when Cavendish talked about atoms in her 1653 books, they 'were essentially the same as fairies' (192; cf. 48–55). On atomism and fairies see Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 40–61. Cavendish was plausibly playing with atomist ideas while writing poetry, rather than presenting an atomist natural philosophy. There is no commitment to atomism in the companion 1653 volume, the *Philosophical Fancies*. The only mention of atoms (2–3) is not an endorsement of atomism, and the comment that we 'cannot say smallest' suggests a denial of it. By the first edition of the *Opinions* in 1655 we find a 'Condemning Treatise of Atomes'.

[21] Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe*, 54.

reason'.[22] Whether or not Cavendish actually believed there were any fairies, she thought that if they were to exist, they would be material—tiny parts of nature, not supernatural beings.

A decade later, in the *Philosophical Letters*, Cavendish talked briefly about fairies again.[23] She said their existence was possible—a claim that fits well with her usual attitude that there may be all sorts of things in the world that differ from our common conceptions of it. And still she held that if there were fairies, they would be natural and material:

> As for Faires, I will not say, but there may be such Creatures in Nature, and have airy bodies, and be of a humane shape, and have humane actions, as I have described in my Book of Poems; for there are many things in Nature, whereof Man hath no knowledg at all, and it would be a great folly for any one to deny what he doth not see, or to ascribe all the unusual effects in Nature to Immaterial Spirits.[24]

Cavendish's consistent view is that there might perhaps be things worth calling fairies—tiny, airy, human-like beings—but if there are such things, they are material and thus not supernatural. Though the acknowledgment of the possibility of material fairies departs from Hobbes's more straightforward dismissal of fairies as phantasms, the two

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[22] Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies* (London, 1653). The page numbering is confusing, but this text follows 'To all Writing Ladies', which follows the poems on page 160.
[23] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.32, 227–8; 4.24, 501.
[24] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.32, 227–8. See also, later in the *Philosophical Letters*: 'in my book of Poems, especially that part that treats of little, minute Creatures, which I there do name, for want of other expressions, Fairies' (4.24, 501).

philosophers share a commitment to a rejection of fairies as beings that are supernatural, immaterial, or magical.

3. Ghosts

Hobbes connects talk of fairies to talk of ghosts. Fairies are classified with 'dead men's ghosts … and other manner of old wives' tales' as 'but idols or phantasms of the brain'.[25] In chapter 2 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes accounts for ghosts and visions as dreams, particularly of those with 'fearful thoughts', those 'whose conscience is much troubled', and those who have not noticed they have fallen asleep.[26] People believe in ghosts, and there are good naturalistic explanations of the phenomena that lead them to believe in ghosts, but there are no mind-independent ghosts, just thoughts that are confused for independent things.

Again, Cavendish takes a similar approach to Hobbes. If we look at the works of natural philosophy of the 1660s, it seems the only ghost who appears is the Holy Ghost, who is mentioned in the *Philosophical Letters*, but not in the *Observations* or the *Grounds*.[27] Looking at earlier texts, there are a few mentions of ghosts in the *Poems, and Fancies*, and none in the *Philosophical Fancies*. This lack of texts tells us, at least, that Cavendish did not think ghosts had a role to play in her natural philosophy.

We do find a mention of ghosts in the first edition of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*. But in that passage Cavendish emphasizes that she is not writing

[25] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 44.3.
[26] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 2.7–8.
[27] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.3, 141; 3.21, 322; 4.21, 493.

about ghosts, and that her talk about animate matter (sometimes under the names of rational and sensitive spirits) should not be taken for talk of 'hobgoblins, ghosts, or visions, such as nurses fright their children with, or superstitions, or as the wiser sort doth to make credulous fools beleeve to keep them in awe, knowing they are apt to disorders'.[28] There is no belief in ghosts or the supernatural here. And the view that belief in such things arises from fear (perhaps encouraged by others for their own ends) is very much a Hobbesian one.

4. Witches

Seventeenth-century England was a place where people thought about witches. There were witch trials, disagreements about standards of evidence, and debates about whether anyone had a genuine power of witchcraft.[29]

In chapter 2 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes considers witchcraft as well as fairies and ghosts:

> From this ignorance of how to distinguish dreams and other strong fancies from vision and sense did arise the greatest part of the religion of the gentiles in time past, that worshipped satyrs, fawns, nymphs, and the like; and now-a-days the opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts, and goblins, and of the power of witches. For as for witches, I think not that their witchcraft is any real power, but

[28] Cavendish, *Opinions*, first edition, 138.
[29] See Malcom Gaskill, 'Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England', *Past & Present* 198 (2008), 33–70, for background on witch trials in England, and Hutton ('Making', 1149) connecting fairies to witches.

> yet that they are justly punished, for the false belief they have that they can do such mischief, joined with their purpose to do it if they can, their trade being nearer to a new religion than to a craft or science.[30]

Fundamentally then, there are no witches. There are people who falsely believe they have the power of witchcraft. And there are people who, prompted by fear and dreams, falsely believe that others have the power of witchcraft. But there is no one who has the actual power of witchcraft.

Or maybe there was once one person who did. For in part 3 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes notes an apparent biblical witch: 'for God sometimes speaketh by prophets whose persons he hath not accepted … as he foretold Saul of his death by the Witch of Endor'.[31] But though she is here called a witch, Hobbes does not attribute any supernatural power to her. Indeed he says that all this case involves is an 'imposture', not the power of witchcraft.[32] The biblical text might seem to suggest there was a witch—the KJV text describes her as 'a woman that hath a familiar spirit'—but Hobbes no more thought there had been a genuine witch interacting with Saul than he thought there were genuine witches in seventeenth-century England.

We see this approach to biblical witchcraft and enchantment again the next chapter, where we are told that—at least if, as Hobbes thinks, enchantment is not 'as many think it, a working of strange effects by spells and words', but is rather 'imposture and delusion' brought about by natural means—then biblical 'texts that seem to

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[30] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 2.8.
[31] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 36.20. The reference is to 1 Samuel 28:7–19.
[32] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 36.8.

countenance the power of magic, witchcraft, and enchantment must needs have another sense than at first sight they seem to bear'.[33]

Cavendish takes a similar general approach to Hobbes—denying in general that there is genuine witchcraft, and giving special attention to the case of the witch of Endor. Thus, in the *Philosophical Letters*, commenting on Henry More and referring to book 3 of More's *Antidote against Atheism*:

> IF you desire my opinion concerning Witches, whereof your Learned *Author* hath many Discourses and Stories: I will tell you really, that in my sense and reason, I do not believe any, except it be the witch of *Endor,* which the Scripture makes mention of; for though I believe that there is a Devil, as the Word of God and the Church inform me, yet I am not of the opinion, that God should suffer him to have such a familiar conjunction, and make such contracts with Man, as to impower him to do mischief and hurt to others, or to foretell things to come, and the like; for I believe that all things Immaterial, as Spirits, Angels, Devils, and the divine Soul of Man, are no parts of Nature, but Supernatural, Nature knowing of no Creature that belongs to her, but what is material; and since incorporeal Creatures are no parts of Nature, they neither have natural actions, nor are they concerned as co-partners or co-agents in the actions of Nature and natural Creatures; but as their substances, so their actions are supernatural, and beyond our conceivement.[34]

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[33] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 37.10.
[34] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.32.

There are, Cavendish says here, no witches except the witch of Endor—unlike Hobbes, she reads 1 Samuel 28 as telling us there really was one witch. The witch of Endor is admitted for the general reason that any supernatural being is, on the basis of religious sources of belief.

That case aside, however, Cavendish agrees with Hobbes that there are no witches in the world. The reason she gives, however, is not Hobbes's. Here Cavendish argues that the supernatural is the immaterial. And not only is it not part of nature, but supernatural beings are not 'co-partners or co-agents' in natural actions. A genuine witch, Cavendish seems to presume, would be in whole or in part a supernatural being, or at least have one as a partner. But the actions of supernatural beings are no part of the natural world, and indeed cannot be conceived by us. Meanwhile, whatever alleged witches are said to do, it is conceivable by us, and thus not really supernatural.

In general, Cavendish hardly mentions witches in her works of natural philosophy. As with ghosts, there is no reason for her to do so. She does not believe there are any such things in the natural world. And to the limited extent she grants that faith might tell us about such supernatural beings, that is really not a matter for natural philosophy to discuss.[35] Though she departs from Hobbes in the details, her general approach remains very similar to his.

[35] See also Cavendish's comment in the *Grounds* that 'I cannot chuse but wonder, that wise men should believe (as some do) the Change or Transformation of Witches, into many sorts of Creatures', which reinforces the sense of her general disbelief in tales of witches. Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (London, 1668), 176.

5. The human supernatural soul

Cavendish talks sometimes of a divine or supernatural soul of man, a human soul that is immaterial, supernatural, and known by faith. To believe in a supernatural soul of that sort is to make an exception to materialism.

Here we see a clear difference between Cavendish and Hobbes. Though Hobbes did, in some of his earlier work, suggest that there was a part of human beings that had an unknown nature, that suggestion disappeared over time, and Hobbes never said that human beings had an immaterial part.[36] Indeed, Hobbes argues in part III of *Leviathan* that his materialist approach is not undermined by biblical evidence. One might imagine an objector to Hobbes granting that materialism looks plausible if one examines only natural evidence, but thinking it is nevertheless undermined by religion. To such an objector, Hobbes responds by arguing that the Bible does not require us to believe in immaterial souls.[37] To put this in something more like Cavendish's terms, faith does not require belief in a supernatural soul of human beings.

In the *Philosophical Letters* and in other texts of the mid-1660s, Cavendish disagrees. She says there that humans have two souls: both their natural, material souls, and other souls, which she called supernatural and divine. Thus, for example:

> And all this I understand of the Natural Soul of Man; not of the Divine Soul, and her powers and faculties, for I leave that to Divines to inform us of; onely this I say, that men not conceiving the distinction between this natural and divine

[36] Duncan, *Materialism*, 9–46.
[37] This seems to be an underlying goal of chapter 34 of *Leviathan*.

> Soul, make such a confusion betwixt those two Souls and their actions, which causes so many disputes and opinions.[38]

Key features of the divine soul are that it is supernatural; it is incorporeal; it is known by faith; it, like other incorporeal things, is inconceivable by corporeal beings; and it is said to be in nature but not part of nature.[39] The only parts of nature are corporeal parts, and this soul cannot be one of those, because it is incorporeal. It has, nevertheless, some special relation to a part of nature, namely the body of which it is the associated soul.

The view that there is such a soul is most prominent in the *Philosophical Letters* and *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. Early on, in the *Philosophical Fancies*, there is no mention of a divine or supernatural soul. The mind, as it is discussed there, is material.[40] The same view, indeed the same passage about the mind, appears in the first edition of the *Opinions*.[41] In the epistle to the reader of the 1663 second edition of the *Opinions*, however, Cavendish explicitly mentions a divine soul, only to say she will not talk about it: 'I meddle not with the Particular Divine Souls of Men'. So by 1663 she seems to have been acknowledging that there was such a thing, which she would then discuss in the 1664 *Letters* and 1666 *Observations*. Later however, Cavendish argues against the divine soul view in the 1668 *Grounds of Natural*

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[38] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.20, 192.
[39] There are references throughout the *Philosophical Letters*, but see in particular 2.29–33, 216–31.
[40] Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Fancies* (London, 1653), 93.
[41] Cavendish, *Opinions*, first edition, 173.

Philosophy.[42] Thus the divine souls of humans appear and disappear from Cavendish's texts over time. It looks indeed as if she changed her mind about this issue, albeit not for obvious reasons.

Despite describing the divine soul in the *Philosophical Letters*, Cavendish is reluctant to say much about it, as being outside the proper realm of natural philosophy. She hopes thereby to avoid the problems that others encounter because they mix up divine and natural souls.[43] Still there are important questions here, and Cavendish does talk briefly how the two souls of a human are related. Thus she says:

> there may be supernatural spiritual beings or substances in Nature, without any hinderance to Matter or corporeal Nature. The same I may say of the natural material, and the divine and supernatural Soul; for though the divine Soul is in a natural body, and both their powers and actions be different, yet they cause no ruine or disturbance to each other, but do in many cases agree with each other, without incroachment upon each others powers or actions; for God, as he is the God of all things, so the God of Order. Wherefore it is not probable, that created Immaterial or Incorporeal beings should order Corporeal Nature, no more then Corporeal Nature orders Immaterial or Incorporeal Creatures.[44]

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[42] Cavendish, *Grounds,* 239. Eileen O'Neill notes this in her edition of the *Observations*. Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Eileen O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 287.

[43] The main alleged problems are in natural philosophy, but there may be problems on the religious side too: 'I fear the opinion of Immaterial substances in Nature will at last bring in again the Heathen Religion, and make us believe a god Pan, Bacchus, Ceres, Venus, and the like, so as we may become worshippers of Groves and shadows, Beans and Onions, as our Forefathers' (Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.4, 145).

[44] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.31, 225.

One way to account for the relationship between the two souls would be to deny the causal efficacy of the supernatural soul in the natural world. But this is not what Cavendish does. Though the two do not disturb one another, this non-interference is a matter of 'agreeing'. That suggests that the divine soul could have effects in the natural world—despite Cavendish's later statement that 'neither doth this supernatural Gift disturb Nature or natural Matter'.[45] Indeed, Cavendish says that the two souls 'in many cases' agree, implying that they do not always do so. What happens when the two souls do not agree seems to be a mystery. Perhaps indeed it ought to be one, given Cavendish's view that the natural philosopher should not stray into the realm of the church, or mix the supernatural world into the natural one in her explanations. Still, this view about the supernatural soul is one place where a finite supernatural being appears in Cavendish's natural philosophy, at least for a few years in the 1660s. And it is one place where, at least for those few years, her account of the supernatural clearly moves away from Hobbes's.

6. Angels

The main discussion of angels in *Leviathan* is in chapter 34, 'Of the Signification of Spirit, Angel, and Inspiration in the Books of Holy Scripture'.[46] An angel, says Hobbes, is a '*messenger of God*'.[47] To be a messenger is to play a certain role, and different kinds of things can potentially play that role. Hobbes understands many biblical discussions of

[45] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.31, 226.
[46] Angels specifically appear at Hobbes, *Leviathan* 34.16–24.
[47] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 34.16.

angels to be about 'some image raised (supernaturally) in the fancy, to signify the presence of God in the execution of some supernatural work'.[48] Some New Testament texts, however, lead Hobbes to acknowledge the existence of 'angels substantial and permanent'.[49] He does not, however, think here any texts showing angels to be incorporeal.[50] Thus again, as when discussing spirits, Hobbes thinks he has successfully deflected a possible religious objection to his materialism.

Turning to Cavendish we find, at least in the *Philosophical Letters*, a non-Hobbesian view—that there are immaterial angels. Thus Cavendish says that an incorporeal motion 'must needs be a supernatural Spirit, for there is not any thing else Immaterial but they, and then it will be either an Angel or a Devil, or the Immortal Soul of man' and later that 'all things Immaterial, as Spirits, Angels, Devils, and the divine Soul of Man, are no parts of Nature, but Supernatural'.[51] These passages place the belief in immaterial angels side by side with the belief in a human supernatural soul. As we saw above, that second belief appears and disappears over time in Cavendish's works. Did her belief in immaterial angels change in a similar way?

It is hard to tell what Cavendish thought about angels before the *Philosophical Letters*. In the 1650s, the 1653 *Philosophical Fancies* and the 1655 first edition of the

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[48] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 34.19.
[49] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 36.24.
[50] 'To believe they be in no place (that is to say, nowhere, that is to say, nothing), as they (though indirectly) say that will have them incorporeal, cannot by Scripture be evinced' (Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 34.24). Hobbes does say there are immaterial angels in his earlier objections to Descartes's *Meditations* (Duncan, *Materialism*, 15–16).
[51] Quoting first Cavendish, *Letters*, 1.23, 78, then 2.32, 227. There are other mentions of angels in the discussion of J.B. van Helmont, and a passing reference in 4.26, but nothing that suggests a different view.

Opinions are silent about angels, but Cavendish does say in passing in the 1655 *World's Olio* that 'we imagine the nature of Angels to be … Incorruptible'.[52] In the 1662 *Orations of Divers Sorts*, Cavendish is confident that there are good and bad angels, but not that we know what they are like.[53] This suggests a move, between 1662 and 1664, from the view that angels have unknown natures, to the view that we know they are immaterial.

The picture is a little clearer after the *Philosophical Letters*. A discussion in the 1668 *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* suggests that Cavendish moved away from the view that angels are immaterial, and towards a more Hobbesian view that accepts angels exist, but inclines towards taking them to be material. Cavendish says there that 'whether Angels, and Devils, are Material, that is not declared: for, though they are named Spirits, yet we know not whether those Spirits be Immaterial. But, considering that Hell and Heaven is described to be Material, it is probable, Spirits are also Material'.[54] This backs away from the commitment to immaterial angels. Indeed it inclines towards thinking they are material, in a broadly Hobbesian way. As with the human divine soul, so too with angels—a focused exception made to materialism earlier in the 1660s seems to have been abandoned by the time of the *Grounds*. Thus, the general picture of Cavendish's view of the supernatural remains in place. She was by and large inclined to agree with Hobbes on this issue, but for a time in the 1660s she was more inclined than Hobbes to accept, on the basis of faith, the existence of some

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[52] Margaret Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (London, 1655), 74.
[53] Margaret Cavendish, *Orations of Divers Sorts* (London, 1662). See 'An Oration concerning the Joys of Heaven, and Torments of Hell' (185–91) and the subsequent 'Oration to a Congregation' (191–3).
[54] Cavendish, *Grounds*, 247–8.

immaterial, supernatural beings. That did not last though, and she returned to a more clearly Hobbesian position by the time of the *Grounds* in 1668.

7. God

The interpretation of Hobbes's views about God has been a persistently contentious matter. Hobbes clearly did repeatedly say, at least until the time of the 1651 English *Leviathan*, that we can only think of God relationally, as the cause of things. Other language we use about God is not really describing God, but doing something else. In *Leviathan*, for example, Hobbes says that

> He that will attribute to God nothing but what is warranted by natural reason must either use such negative attributes (as *infinite, eternal, incomprehensible*) or superlatives (as *most high, most great*, and the like) or indefinite (as *good, just, holy, creator*) and in such sense as if he meant not to declare what he is (for that were to circumscribe him within the limits of our fancy,) but how much we admire him, and how ready we would be to obey him.[55]

When we go beyond our basic relational grasp of God, what we have are acts of praise, not descriptions. God is, in this picture, largely incomprehensible to us.

Cavendish seems inclined to say that we can know similarly little about God. Early in her discussion of Henry More in the *Philosophical Letters*, she says that 'I dare

[55] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 31.28. In later texts Hobbes says that God is a corporeal spirit. On the evolution of Hobbes's views see Duncan, *Materialism,* 36–46. For a recent alternative approach, see Thomas Holden, *Hobbes's Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023).

not think, that naturally we can have an Idea of the essence of God, so as to know what God is in his very nature and essence; for how can there be a finite Idea of an Infinite God?'; that 'it is impossible to have an Idea of God'; and that 'Gods Infinite attributes are not conceivable, and cannot be comprehended by a finite knowledg and understanding, as a finite part of nature'.[56] Cavendish says here that we know God exists, but we cannot know God's essence, and we cannot conceive of God's attributes. The details may not be Hobbesian, but the central view is. That view is found in other works too. In the *Observations*, Cavendish says that although we can know of God's existence, we cannot have an idea of him, basing this on the Hobbesian view that an idea is a 'picture of some object'.[57]

Sometimes in the *Observations* Cavendish talks of God as omnipotent as well as incomprehensible, suggesting a claim to knowing at least one attribute possessed by God. That might look like merely a minor slip or deviation from Cavendish's considered view. But there is another set of passages in which she talks about God, and in which she seems to claim much more about God than her Hobbesian view that we cannot conceive of God allows. These are passages in which Cavendish contrasts God with nature.

One such passage appears in the first appendix to the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*. The short chapter 4 of that appendix runs as follows.

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[56] Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.2, 139; 2.3, 140; 2.3, 141. See also 2.30, 221; 3.20, 318, and 3.21, 322.
[57] Cavendish, *Observations*, page 74 of the main text.

> GOD is an Eternal Creator; Nature, his Eternal Creature. GOD, an Eternal Master: Nature, GOD's Eternal Servant. GOD is an Infinite and Eternal Immaterial Being: Nature, an Infinite Corporeal Being. GOD is Immovable, and Immutable: Nature, Moving, and Mutable. GOD is Eternal, Indivisible, and of an Incompoundable Being: Nature, Eternally Divisible and Compoundable. GOD, Eternally Perfect: Nature, Eternally Imperfect. GOD, Eternally Inalterable: Nature Eternally Alterable. GOD, without Error: Nature, full of Irregularities. GOD knows exactly, or perfectly, Nature: Nature doth not perfectly know GOD. GOD is Infinitely and Eternally worshipped: Nature is the Eternal and Infinite Worshipper.[58]

There are a whole series of claims about features of God here: God is eternal, creator, master of nature, immaterial, immovable, immutable, indivisible, perfect, and inalterable. This does not fit well at all with the view that we cannot conceive of God's attributes, even if we say that this knowledge about divine attributes comes from faith rather than reason. (Certainly some of this appendix is supposed to be concerned with things known by faith—chapter eight is about the ten commandments.) After all, to believe or know that God has an attribute, we seem to have to be able to conceive of him having that attribute. Things would be a little different if the language was not supposed to be descriptive, but there is no sign of such a view here. Still, one might say that this is just a single passage in the appendices of the *Grounds*, and Cavendish's more Hobbesian view is the one she more consistently held.

[58] Cavendish, *Grounds*, 241.

The only problem with that, is that there is a similar passage—contrasting God with nature by making claims about God's attributes—early in the *Philosophical Letters*, the same work in which she makes clear statements of her Hobbesian view about the inconceivability of God. In *Philosophical Letters* 1.2 and 1.3, Cavendish is largely concerned to talk about the infinite matter she believes in. But she does that in part by contrasting nature with God, and so says a good deal about God along the way. In so doing, she seems to make a series of positive claims about what God is like. She says for example that 'God is a Spirit, and not a bodily substance', that God is an 'Immaterial Spiritual being', and that God has 'a Supernatural and Incomprehensible Infinite Wisdom and Power … Infinite Justice and … Infinite Mercy'.[59] The language of incomprehensibility remains here. But Cavendish also seems to think she can, at least to some limited extent, describe features of an incorporeal God. This does not fit neatly with her tendency to say elsewhere that we cannot conceive of God's attributes.[60]

As with the later discussion in the appendix to the *Grounds*, even if these beliefs about God have supernatural origins, we still need a way to think the thoughts (if the descriptions are indeed descriptions). And it is not clear what that is supposed to be, given what Cavendish consistently says about the inability of material, natural beings to conceive of God.[61] The point of these passages contrasting nature and God is to make it

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[59] Cavendish, *Letters*, 1.2, 8–9.
[60] On the related issue of Cavendish's commitment to creation, see Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 80–86, and Marcy Lascano, *The Metaphysics of Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023, 2–6.
[61] By the time of the *Grounds* we are said to have a notion of God (*Grounds,* 241), 'notion' being a term Cavendish may have taken from More. Earlier we were supposed

clear that nature is not God, and that the two have different features. But that is hard to do, if you cannot say what features God has.

8. Conclusion

Thinking about Cavendish's views about what exists in the world, we might conclude that she tended to believe extravagantly. Though she did eventually offer arguments for her views about thinking matter, etc., she seems to have been willing to believe in the existence of unusual things, far beyond what was demanded by everyday experience, religious orthodoxy, or current natural philosophy.[62] Moreover, Cavendish sometimes seems to suggest that things exist, just on the basis of it being possible that they exist, for all we know.[63] Those two inclinations suggest a sort of ontological extravagance in Cavendish's work, which is quite unlike Hobbes's tendency towards ontological minimalism.

Given that extravagance, one might suspect that Cavendish's works would be full of fairies and witches and ghosts and the like. But they are not. Cavendish's core

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to have only a notion of the existence of God (Cavendish, *Letters*, 2.18, 187), but not an 'exact notion of God' (3.21, 322).

[62] This apparent tendency seems even stronger when one looks at details. Consider for instance Cavendish's willingness to contemplate the existence of '*Restoring-Beds*' in nature, which bring things back to life (*Grounds*, 295).

[63] She seems notably not to do this with fairies. But consider for instance the claim that 'though other Creatures have not the speech, nor Mathematical rules and demonstrations, with other Arts and Sciences, as Men; yet may their perceptions and observations be as wise as Men's, and they may have as much intelligence and commerce betwixt each other, after their own manner and way, as men have after theirs' (Cavendish, *Letters*, 1.36, 114). We are only told what may be the case, but we are told it to encourage us towards believing it.

view about the supernatural involves a broadly Hobbesian rejection of such things, albeit not for Hobbes's exact reasons. She did deviate from this in the 1660s, in a period in which she was inclined to accept the existence of immaterial human souls and immaterial angels. But that was a temporary disagreement with the Hobbesian approach, one that was soon reversed. Cavendish believed in all sorts of remarkable things. But about supernatural beings, God aside, she was fairly consistently sceptical.[64]

[64] I thank the members of the Chicago Modern Philosophy Roundtable for a very helpful discussion of this material.

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