

Margaret Cavendish, Environmental Ethics, and Panpsychism  
Draft for the “New Narratives in Philosophy” conference  
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## 1. Introduction

My topic is the ethics and politics of panpsychism. What, I want to ask, does panpsychism have to do with moral philosophy? In particular, I want to ask what – if anything – panpsychism has to do with environmental ethics. By and large I will focus on the views of Margaret Cavendish here, but with the hope – perhaps a rather optimistic one – that this might also help me think about the issue more generally.

Suppose we take panpsychism to be the view “that mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe” (Seager and Allen-Hermanson 2015). Such a view seems strange to many, but there have nevertheless been a number of panpsychists (Skrbina 2005). Indeed, Cavendish seems to be one of them. For she thinks – that is, it is a feature of her mature system – that there is, throughout the world, sensitive and rational matter. The sensitivity and rationality of this matter is a fundamental, irreducible feature of it. And such matter is spread throughout the world – one should not think that, for example, the sensitive matter is in the eyes and the rational matter is in the brain. Rather, both can be found everywhere, albeit mixed together with inanimate matter. Thus Cavendish says that:

these sensitive and rational parts of matter are the purest and subtlest parts of nature, as the active parts, the knowing, understanding and prudent parts, the designing, architectonical and working parts, nay, the life and soul of nature, and that there is not any creature or part of nature without this life and soul; and that not only animals, but also vegetables, minerals and elements, and what more is in nature, are endued with this life and soul, sense and reason (*Philosophical Letters* [PL], “A preface to the reader”).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, there are panpsychists in contemporary philosophy of mind. Perhaps not a great many of them, but there does seem to be interest in the position. Consider for example the argument of Galen Strawson that:

Real physicalists must accept that at least some ultimates are intrinsically experience-involving. They must at least embrace *micropsychism* ... Micropsychism is not yet panpsychism, for as things stand realistic physicalists can conjecture that only some types of ultimates are intrinsically experiential. But they must allow that panpsychism may be true ... I think that the idea that some but not all physical ultimates are experiential would look like

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<sup>1</sup> Some passages quoted from PL are lightly modernized. These derive from my work towards a possible modern edition of that book.

the idea that some but not all physical ultimates are spatio-temporal (Strawson 2006, 25).

Why, however, care about the ethics of panpsychism? Within contemporary analytic philosophy, at least, panpsychism seems usually to be treated as a bit of technical philosophy of mind. Its ethical consequences, if any, usually don't come up in those discussions. Meanwhile environmental ethics is discussed in other, separate areas, and the two don't really meet.

Perhaps the thought, among the philosophers of mind at any rate, is that the mental states attributed to all of matter are so limited that they don't bring any new ethical state with them that we wouldn't have attributed to matter in the first place. For example, the micropsychic sorts of experiences Strawson talks about seem quite different from our own experiences, even though they are both supposed to count as experiences. Thus it seems perhaps plausible to say that micropsychic features are not of ethical significance.

Moreover, in general we don't suspect that technical bits of philosophy of mind will have ethical consequences. Indeed if they seemed to, that might seem like a problem with them as bits of technical philosophy of mind. So why think this is any different?<sup>2</sup>

Well for one thing, panpsychism does claim to discover the existence of thinking things, and the discovery of new thinking beings at least might have ethical consequences. For sure these are not obvious. By and large, panpsychists don't claim to have discovered that rocks can feel pain, for instance. But it still would not be so surprising if our conception of our ethical relation to a thing changed upon the discovery it was thinking.

Turning to Cavendish, we find that she has a lot to say, in her system, about the presence of thought in surprising places. Moreover, those discoveries involve both sensation and reasoning, with the presence throughout the world of sensitive and rational matter. Granted, she does say that different sorts of creatures have different sorts of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> But the mental states she claims to discover in the world are not the minimal states we might find in current views – the knowledge and perception of minerals is indeed a sort of knowledge and perception, even if it is different from our knowledge and perception. So it does seem plausible to think that Cavendish's version of panpsychism could have ethical consequences.

I have, as I mentioned, a particular interest in thinking about environmental ethics here. And

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, if one wants to look at attempts to connect environmental ethics and panpsychism, perhaps one ought to read environmental ethicists rather than philosophers of mind. See Mathews (1999; 2003). Beyond that, one might ask to what extent attempts to think of the whole world as one living being, which are supposed to have ethical consequences – versions of the Gaia hypothesis, for instance – amount to a sort of panpsychism. Or one might look at some of the ways in which people have wanted an environmental ethic inspired by Spinoza.

<sup>3</sup> See for example PL 1.24: “the air has an elemental, and the glass a mineral, but not an animal perception”, or PL 2.13 on animal, mineral, and vegetable knowledge.

Cavendish is interesting in that regard too. At least in some early poems, she notable pays attention to questions about our ethical relation to other creatures, and to nature.<sup>4</sup> All in all then, Cavendish's work is interesting in regard to both its panpsychism, and its positioning in environmental ethics. Given that, and given the particular form of her panpsychism, it would be sensible to think about how these different aspects relate to one another. That is what I aim to do, or at least make a start on, in this paper. Here I will focus on some early poems, from Cavendish's 1653 *Poems, and Fancies*. But I will also look at how some of the views expressed there relate to her later work.

## 2. Cavendish as moral philosopher?

Before getting to details though, I need to consider an objection to the project, or at least to including Cavendish in it. For she seems to say that, although she engages in natural philosophy, she does not and will not engage in moral and political philosophy.

Consider for example letter 13 of part 1 of Cavendish's 1664 *Philosophical Letters*. This is in the middle of a section (PL 1.4-29) in which she discusses the work of Thomas Hobbes. Up to this point, she has been discussing passages from the early chapters of *Leviathan*. But here she tells us she will not go any further in discussing Hobbes's book:

Having obeyed your commands in giving you my opinion of the first part of the book of that famous and learned author you sent me, I would go on; but seeing he treats in his following parts of the politics, I was forced to stay my pen, because of these following reasons. First, that a woman is not employed in state affairs, unless an absolute queen. Next, that to study the politics, is but loss of time, unless a man were sure to be a favourite to an absolute prince. Thirdly, that it is but a deceiving profession, and requires more craft than wisdom. All which considered, I did not read that part of your author (PL 1.13).

Thus Cavendish is clear that – at least while writing philosophy – she will avoid politics and state affairs. Note that the objection is not that the *Philosophical Letters* is a project in natural philosophy, and the politics of *Leviathan* talks about something other than natural philosophy. Rather it is, more generally, that the discussion of politics is something that Cavendish ought not to, and will not, engage in.

An earlier version of that view appeared back in 1653, in the *Poems, and Fancies* [P&F]. In the “Epistle to Mistris Toppe” Cavendish justifies her writing of the book. In doing so, she lists several things she could do which would be worse, including “to busie my selfe out of the Sphear of our Sex, as in Politicks of State”.

One might well say though, that what Cavendish says in these passages is that she should not be

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<sup>4</sup> See section 3 below.

meddling in affairs of state, or offering advice to monarchs about such matters. They don't say that she ought not to engage in any moral philosophy at all. So does she do that?

Well, Cavendish also seems reluctant to call herself a moral philosopher. Consider another passage from her discussion of Hobbes: "I perceive your *Author* is much for necessitation, and against free-will, which I leave to Moral Philosophers and Divines" (PL 1.29).<sup>5</sup> Earlier, there is a short essay, "To Morall Philosophers" in the *Poems, and Fancies* (P&F 51-2),<sup>6</sup> which one might perhaps take as expressing the same view, as it is addressed to them, rather than from one of them.<sup>7</sup>

There is moral reflection in other works though, and that of various sorts. It covers all sorts of topics. Cavendish does not think that by so reflecting she is participating in a scientific inquiry, something like Hobbes's civil science. It's not even clear that she thinks this reflection ought to be called moral philosophy. But it is undeniably present. So, it seems, we can at least ask what (if anything) it has to do with her panpsychism.

Still, these passages might motivate the view that there is no connection between Cavendish's natural philosophy and her ethical thought. They suggest the model of a natural philosopher who has ethical opinions, but doesn't connect them to her scientific inquiry. That is in contrast to the model of someone – such as many prominent early modern philosophers – for whom ethics was part, maybe even the ultimate or highest part, of a systematic enquiry. Perhaps there will turn out to be such a disconnect between Cavendish's natural philosophy and her ethical reflections. But to find out whether it is, we need to look and see what's going on.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Some early poems

I turn now to a more direct look at some of Cavendish's works. I'm going to focus largely on her first book, the 1653 *Poems, and Fancies*. These poems – some of them, at any rate – seem notably relevant if one is looking for some sort of environmental ethic in Cavendish.

There are certainly interpretive complications here. Caution is certainly needed in any attempt to extract ethical views from the poetry. In addition, there are significant questions about how the views in this work relate to those in later works.

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<sup>5</sup> There are five other mentions of moral philosophy in PL. Perhaps most worthy of discussion are two passages in part 4 that identify moral philosophy with natural theology (PL 4.15, 4.22).

<sup>6</sup> This follows after a series of poems in which Cavendish uses geometry, and in particular the squaring of the circle, as a metaphor for the relations between virtues.

<sup>7</sup> Though that said, one section of *Poems, and Fancies* is headed "Moral Discourses".

<sup>8</sup> Whether philosophical views are systematically connected in such ways is not always obvious. Consider the view that Locke's *Essay* is a systematic work, aiming ultimately towards discussion of ethical and religious knowledge. I'm inclined to think this is true, but it's not obviously so, and one could easily hold it to be a less well connected series of reflections.

However, there are also reasons for taking on this project. First, at least if one is interested in environmental ethics, it is really the obvious place to start in the texts. Secondly, the use of poetry to convey philosophical views clearly did happen in the period, in various ways. Thirdly, some of the poems really do seem to have relevant messages as their point. And this is often not a matter of complex or subtle interpretation – we are dealing with fairly blunt statements, at least at times.

I will not attempt any sort of general account of the *Poems, and Fancies*, or even of its ethics, or of its nature poetry. Instead, I want to draw attention to four particular themes. The first theme is that *man treats nature poorly*. The second is the *ethics of our treatment of animals*. The third theme is what I will call a *non-literal panpsychism*. The fourth theme is really a way of arguing: what I will call here *speculation and the ‘who knows?’ argument*.

### 3.1. Man treats nature poorly

I begin in a fairly obvious place, with “A Dialogue between an Oake, and a Man cutting him downe” (P&F 66-70).<sup>9</sup>

The poem is what its title says it is. Thus the oak begins:

WHY cut you off my *Bowes*, both large, and long,  
That keepe you from the *heat*, and *scorching Sun*;  
And did refresh your *fainting Limbs* from sweat?  
From *thundring Raines* I keepe you free, from *Wet*;  
When on my *Barke* your weary head would lay,  
Where *quiet sleepe* did take all *Cares* away.

(P&F 66)

In the body of the poem, the man offers various justifications to the oak, which the oak is disinclined to accept. So one might, cautiously, see Cavendish as expressing some concern about humans’ use of trees in particular, and natural resources more generally. And this is interesting in its own right.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Also in *Paper Bodies* (258-63).

<sup>10</sup> More broadly, one might see a connection here to some of the claims of Merchant in *The Death of Nature* (Merchant 1980), and see Cavendish as a critic of the exploitation of nature, as well as (being later) a critic of mechanist philosophy. Cavendish does appear in Merchant 1980 (270-2), but briefly, and not in her role as this sort of critic. See also Merchant’s comments on “The disruption of the forest ecosystem by the rise of early modern industry, coupled with the careless use and mismanagement of resources” (Merchant 1980, 67).

However, the poem ends with, and thus emphasizes, the misery of man, not the misery of the tree. For example – this is not the whole of the conclusion –

Alas, *poore Oake*, thou understandst, nor can  
Imagine halfe the misery of *Man*.  
All other *Creatures* onely in *Sense* joyne,  
But *Man* hath something more, which is *divine*.  
*He* hath a *Mind*, doth to the *Heavens* aspire,  
A *Curiosity* for to inquire:<sup>11</sup>  
[...]

(P&F 70)

We have here a sort of encounter between human and nature.<sup>12</sup> Of course the encounter in Cavendish's poem is not a literal encounter – Cavendish was not actually in the business of thinking one could speak to trees. And of course the point that if a tree could speak, this is what it would say, is a point that one can make whatever one thinks about the panpsychism issue.

Anyway, more such discussions can be seen in another dialogue, “A Dialogue betwixt Man, and Nature” (PF 58-9).<sup>13</sup>

Nature

Why doth *Man-kind* complaine, and make such Moane?  
May not *I* work my *will* with what's my owne?  
But *Men* among themselves contract, and make  
A *Bargaine* for my *Tree*; that *Tree* will take:  
Most cruelly do chop in peeces small,  
And formes it as he please, then builds withall.

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<sup>11</sup> This distinction between humans and other creatures might seem inconsistent with Cavendish's later panpsychism. But perhaps not – she did allow that there were different types of perception and knowledge, and also (at times) that humans had a divine, supernatural, incorporeal soul, as well as their corporeal one.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mathews on encounter here: “Our modern goal, of encountering the world, has taken the place of an earlier goal, namely of encountering it ... To encounter an other is to approach it as another subject with whom it is possible to have a relationship (in something like the interpersonal sense rather than in a purely formal sense) and from whom it is possible to elicit a response” (Mathews 2003, 77). But what exactly is the weight of ‘encounter’ here? I can encounter an environment and engage with it, without actually thinking that it is thinking. I can encounter and engage with another thinking being with whom I can communicate. But Mathews wants some sense of encounter with a thinking thing with which it's not at all clear I can communicate.

<sup>13</sup> These dialogues have an interesting similarity to some sections of Cavendish's later works of natural philosophy, where different voices express different points of view. Consider, for example, “An Argumental Discourse” between “former thoughts” and “latter thoughts” in the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (Cavendish 2001, 23-42).

Although that *Tree* by me was made to stand,  
Just as it growes, not to be cut by *Man*.

Man

*O Nature*, *Trees* are dull, and have no *Sense*,  
And therefore feel not paine, nor take offence.  
But *Beasts* have *life* and *Sense*, and *passion* strong,  
Yet *cruell man* doth kill, and doth them wrong.  
To take that *life*, I *gave*, before the time  
I did ordaine, the *injury* is *mine*.  
What *Ill* man doth, *Nature* did make him do,  
For he by *Nature* is prompt thereunto.

(P&F 58-9)

Ethically, we have a distinction here between trees and beasts. But we also have some reflection on the ethics of doing what is natural. Cavendish in effect – in a manner familiar from other discussions of this sort of issue, such as those of Butler and Hume – distinguishes different senses in which something might be natural.<sup>14</sup> In the first sense here, there is a distinction between what is natural and what is done by humans, but in the second sense there is not, as humans are recognized as part of nature. That these different approaches are possible is clear enough – whether Cavendish wants to be on one side of the issue, and if so which one, is less so.

### 3.2. The ethics of our treatment of animals

I turn now to a slightly different theme – really a part, albeit an important part, of the previous one. Within nature, we treat animals poorly. This theme is nicely illustrated by Cavendish’s two poems about hunting: “The Hunting of the Hare”, and “The Hunting of the Stag”, which we find next to each other in *Poems, and Fancies*.<sup>15</sup>

Both poems are largely devoted to the description of hunts. “The Hunting of the Stag” is more straightforwardly just that. There is some praise of the courage of the stag. But there’s not there, what there is at the end of “The Hunting of the Hare”, a rather blunt statement of a general view about what’s going on. That is:

As if that *God* made *Creatures* for *Mans* meat,  
To give them *Life*, and *Sense*, for *Man* to eat;  
Or else for *Sport*, or *Recreations* sake,  
Destroy those *Lifes* that *God* saw good to make:

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<sup>14</sup> Discussions of appropriate senses of ‘natural’ continue in current environmental ethics.

<sup>15</sup> “The Hunting of the Hare” is also available in *Paper Bodies* (255-8).

Making their *Stomacks, Graves*, which full they fill  
 With *Murther'd Bodios*, that in sport they kill.  
 Yet *Man* doth think himselfe so gentle, mild,  
 When *he* of *Creatures* is most cruell wild.  
 And is so *Proud*, thinks onely he shall live,  
 That *God* a *God-like Nature* did him give.  
 And that all *Creatures* for his sake alone,  
 Was made for him, to *Tyramize* upon.

(P&F 112-3)

Man, proud and arrogant, thinks that nature's creatures exist for him to do with as he pleases. But this, Cavendish thinks, is an over-reaching mistake. Here we might consider a comment of Katie Whitaker, biographer of Cavendish:

This critique of human arrogance was a frequent theme ... Her two poems "The Hunting of the Hare" and "The Hunting of the Stag" abandoned the human perspective to tell their stories from the point of view of the quarry – an unconventional move that turned these works into passionate denunciations of human cruelty and pride (Whitaker 2002, 141).<sup>16</sup>

The judgment that humans have an over-confident opinion of their relative place in the world recurs, indeed, in Cavendish's later works of natural philosophy.

Consider, for example, Cavendish's objections to Descartes's argument in his *Discourse* against animal minds. Concluding her discussion, Cavendish says that other animals:

may have as much intelligence and commerce betwixt each other, after their own manner and way, as men have after theirs: To which I leave them, and Man to his conceited prerogative and excellence, resting (PL 1.36).

Consider also the argument of *Philosophical Letters* 4.30, where Cavendish defends her view that "every Creature hath life and knowledg, sense and reason". She argues that "humane sense and reason may perceive, that wood, stone, or metal, acts as wisely as an animal", and indeed that:

Infinite examples may be given, and yet man says, all Vegetables and Minerals are insensible and irrational ... Man doth not consider the various, intricate and obscure ways of Nature, unknown to any particular Creature; for what our senses are not capable to know, our reason

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<sup>16</sup> An earlier critic remarked that in "The Hunting of the Hare", the hare's "ultimate end is lamented in the most astonishingly humanitarian way" (Perry 1968, 179), and also that "A Dialogue of Birds" (discussed below) "deserves to be known for its sympathetic description of nature. The different birds lament how badly man treats them but explain that Nature should receive no blame" (Perry 1968, 176). Perry (1968, 197-84) offers a useful introduction to and survey of *Poems, and Fancies*.



is apt to deny. Truly, in my opinion, Man is more irrational then any of those Creatures, when he believes that all knowledg is not onely confined to one sort of Creatures, but to one part of one particular Creature, as the head, or brain of man

That is, Cavendish thinks there is plenty of evidence for there being sense and reason in vegetables and minerals, albeit perhaps not evidence we can get from our senses. To deny this, she thinks, is irrational. Indeed she concludes this letter by arguing that “to say, that no Creature adores and worships God, but Man; which, in my judgment, argues a great pride, self-conceit, and presumption”. Human error here – really, the error of not accepting Cavendish’s view – is not just a mistake of reasoning, but also a sign of a problem of character more generally. If humans were just not so arrogant, says Cavendish, they would see that she is right that there is sense and knowledge throughout the universe.

### 3.3. Non-literal panpsychism

The two themes above are fairly straightforward. That is, I take it that it’s reasonably clear both what the identified theme is, and that it is indeed present in *Poems, and Fancies*. The third theme is less straightforward. I call this third theme ‘non-literal panpsychism’. The problem is in the title – surely non-literal panpsychism is not panpsychism at all. Moreover, a poet treating non-thinking or non-communicating things as if they were thinking or communicating is surely not – at least not usually – trying to convince us that those creatures really could think or communicate – whatever else they might be trying to convince us of.

I want to suggest that in Cavendish’s case, however, there is a little more going on. Not that I want to say there is literal panpsychism in *Poems, and Fancies*. But I do want to think about how the non-literal panpsychism there relates to the apparently completely literal panpsychism of her later works of natural philosophy.

Consider “A Dialogue of Birds”, in which the birds talk about their lives, and what they seek and intend.

Thus beginning:

AS I abroad in *Feilds*, and *Woods* did walke,  
I heard the *Birds* of severall things did talke:  
And on the *Boughes* would *Gossip*, *prate*, and *chat*,  
And every one discourse of *this*, and *that*.

(P&F 70)

Again there are ethical reflections within, even if one cannot really tie them to panpsychism. A

sparrow, for example, brings up again the notion that men treat nature poorly:

The *Sparrow* said, were our *Condition* such,  
But *Men* do strive with *Nets* us for to catch:  
With *Guns*, and *Bowes* they shoot us from the *Trees*,  
And by small *shot*, we oft our *Lifes* do leese,  
Because we pick a *Cherry* here, and there,  
When, *God* he knowes, we eate them in great feare.  
But *Men* will eat, untill their *Belly* burst,  
And *surfets* take: if we eat, we are *curst*.

(P&F 71)

Consider also “Earths Complaint”, which begins, it seems, with the earth complaining about mining.

O *Nature*, *Nature*, hearken to my *Cry*,  
Each *Minute* wounded am, but cannot dye.  
My *Children* which *I* from my *Womb* did beare,  
Do dig my *Sides*, and all my *Bowels* teare:  
Do plow deep *Furroughs* in my very *Face*,  
From *Torment*, *I* have neither time, nor place.

(P&F 106)

As with a couple of poems above that consider humans’ use of trees, we see here Cavendish questioning the use of nature as a resource.<sup>17</sup>

Again there is no suggestion that the dialogue is anything but metaphorical. But we might think about how this is a precursor of the mineral knowledge that turns up later on in Cavendish’s natural philosophy. In the *Philosophical Letters*, both glass (PL 1.24) and a bell (PL 2.13) are said to have this sort of knowledge or perception. It is contrasted with human knowledge, but also with elemental, animal, and vegetable knowledge or perception. Moreover, given Cavendish’s views about sensitive and rational matter, there is good systematic reason for thinking that metal objects (or rocks and ores, or things made from them) must have a sort of knowledge. And there is that same good systematic reason for taking the Earth as a whole to have some such sort of knowledge. Somehow Cavendish got from non-literal panpsychism (“if the Earth – or the hares or the birds or nature as a whole – could speak, these are the views it would express”) to literal panpsychism (there being thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge actually possessed by the hares, birds, pieces of metal and glass, the Earth, and the world as a whole).

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<sup>17</sup> There’s another possible connection to Merchant (1980) here, about (reaction against) seeing the earth as simply a resource.

### 3.4. Speculation and the ‘who knows?’ argument

My final theme – really, an observation about Cavendish’s fondness for a certain way of arguing – again touches on the development of her view beyond the *Poems, and Fancies*.

I begin here with another comment from Whitaker’s biography of Cavendish. Commenting on the nature poetry, including the two hunting poems, “A Dialogue of Birds” and “A Dialogue between an Oake, and a Man cutting him downe”, she says:

Margaret was setting herself against the entire Judeo-Christian tradition of man's superiority over the natural world and his God-given right to use it as he wills. For all we know, she argued in yet more poems, beasts, birds, and fishes might have as much intelligence as us, or even more (Whitaker 2002, 142).

It’s this last move that I want to notice and think about: the argument from ‘for all we know’ or even ‘it might be the case that’ to some apparent confidence that that actually is the case.

Consider three of Cavendish’s “Discourses” in *Poems, and Fancies*: “A Discourse of Beasts” and the following poems “Of Fishes” and “Of Birds”. All three poems wonders whether various nonhuman animals have knowledge that we don’t know about. “A Discourse of Beasts” wonders what they think about the stars:

WHO knowes; but *Beasts*, as they do lye,  
In *Meadowes* low, or else on *Mountaines* high?  
But that they do contemplate on the *Sun*,  
And how his *daily, yearly Circles* run.  
Whether the *Sun* about the *Earth* doth rove,  
Or else the *Earth* upon its owne *Poles* move.  
And in the *Night*, when *twinkling Stars* we see,  
Like *Man*, imagines them all *Suns* to bee.  
And may like *Man*, *Stars*, *Planets* number well,  
And could they speak, they might their *Motions* tell.  
And how the *Planets* in each *Orbe* do move:  
'Gainst their *Astrology* no *Man* can prove.  
For they may know the *Stars*, and their *Aspects*,  
What *Influence* they cast, and their *Effects*.

(P&F 105)

The following discourses ask similar questions. “Of Fishes” wonders if fish understand things about the sea that we don’t. Cavendish asks, for example, whether fish can give reasons for the tides. And the third poems here, “Of Birds”, wonders whether they know about the source of winds, or

understand what thunder is.

Of course, these might seem just to ask the question – ‘what might these other creatures know?’ And merely asking the question does not necessarily commit one to saying they do know anything. Writing a series of poems about it, on the other hand, does perhaps suggest that you think there is something to the suggestion.<sup>18</sup> And Cavendish uses the same (‘it might be this way’) argument to support some of her natural philosophical views later on.<sup>19</sup>

To see this sort of ‘who knows’ argument in a later text, consider a couple of passages from the *Philosophical Letters* on the minds of animals.<sup>20</sup>

But Man may have one way of Knowledge in Philosophy and other Arts; and other Creatures another way, and yet other Creatures manner or way **may be** as Intelligible and Instructive to each other as Man's, I mean, in those things which are Natural (PL 1.10).

[T]hough 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 (PL 1.36).<sup>21</sup>

Those passages might not seem remarkable in any way – Cavendish is just speculating about a way things might be. But it seems to me that she intends a little more than that: a picture is suggested, and she wants us to adopt it. Sometimes, to be fair, there are supporting reasons. But when we look at the animal minds passages (as in PL 1.36) the supporting reasons seem at best to be deductions from Cavendish's systematic view, rather than anything anyone else is likely to accept. And what does that add up to, for the reader? Nothing much more, it can seem, than Cavendish saying that her view might be correct. Which indeed it might be, no doubt. But it would be nice to get a little more than that.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever one thinks about the virtues and drawbacks of this sort of argument though, my more basic point is that here again one sees connections between the ‘unphilosophical’ world of the *Poems, and Fancies* and the apparently more systematic and considered approach of Cavendish's later works of natural philosophy. It's these sort of developmental connections that I'd like to reflect on a little

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<sup>18</sup> Later in *Poems, and Fancies* the ‘who knows?’ argument is used to consider fairies and animal spirits.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the continuity of argument style, might one – and this is very speculative – say something about how the fairies become the rational matter?

<sup>20</sup> Text in bold is emphasized by me.

<sup>21</sup> One might also look at PL 3.15 on magnetism: “one man may have a sympathetical affection to another man, when as this man hath an antipathetical aversion to him; and **the same may be, for ought we know**, betwixt Iron and the Loadstone, as also betwixt the Needle and the North”.

<sup>22</sup> On Cavendish's attitude to reasons, argument, and evidence, see Wilson 2007.

more in the next section.

#### 4. A developmental view?

There is, then, a sort of environmental ethic in some of the poems in *Poems, and Fancies*. There's also what I have been calling a non-literal panpsychism – a view about what nature and her parts would think and say, if they could think and talk. And we have seen a couple of possible connections between *Poems, and Fancies* and Cavendish's later philosophical work. In this section I want to develop one suggestion about such a connection further.

My very speculative suggestion is that the metaphorical encounters – the non-literal panpsychism – harden into a more literal panpsychism, but to a considerable extent without supporting argument. That is, the poetical fancies turn into the natural philosophical system, but without natural philosophical argument.

Cavendish's system can seem – quite aside from questions about its development – like an imaginative and creative accomplishment, but one presented without great regard for reasons and evidence. But one might ask, where did it come from? To some fair extent, I suggest, it came from the fanciful poems of *Poems, and Fancies*. Now I am talking in part about motivation and inspiration, which are not the same as justification. But I am also suggesting, I admit, that in Cavendish's work there often just is motivation and inspiration, without a lot of justification.

It would no doubt be too much just to say that Cavendish's environmental ethic – her concern for nature and its non-human creatures, and what they would say if only they could talk – turned in to her panpsychism. But as a simplified slogan, that does capture what I am suggesting went on.

Of course Cavendish does offer some arguments for her later views. One prominent one rests on the need to explain the regular workings of nature.<sup>23</sup> So, in chapter 8 of part I of the 1668 *Ground*, she says:

IF Nature were not Self-knowing, Self-living, and also Perceptive, she would run into Confusion: for, there could be neither Order, nor Method, in Ignorant motion; neither would there be distinct kinds or sorts of Creatures, nor such exact and methodical Varieties as there are: for, it is impossible to make orderly and methodical Distinctions, or distinct Orders, by Chances: Wherefore, Nature being so exact (as she is) must needs be Self-knowing and Perceptive: And though all her Parts, even the Inanimate Parts, are Self-knowing, and Self-living; yet, onely her Self-moving Parts have an active Life, and a perceptive Knowledg (7).

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<sup>23</sup> The arguments of PL 4.30, which I quoted above, are related to this.

The presence of those arguments might seem to be a big difference, and count against what I am suggesting. But, I ask, is an argument of this sort really what drives the mature view? Or is it, perhaps, something that tends to take on greater prominence in attempts to offer rational reconstructions of her system than it has in the presentation of the system itself?

I won't discuss them at length here, but the *Philosophical Fancies* do become relevant in this sort of developmental story. They were written only just after the same time as the *Poems, and Fancies*, yet contain recognizable aspects of her later system.<sup>24</sup> Yet at the same time Cavendish herself refers to the contents of that book as “fancies”. One does wonder just how seriously and literally even Cavendish herself took the content of the *Philosophical Fancies* at the time (and thus how they came to be, in the course of a series of rewritings, her natural philosophical theory).<sup>25</sup>

This view of Cavendish's development, that it involves a sort of hardening of the fantastical into the literal, might seem familiar. For it has something in common with what Virginia Woolf said about Cavendish, in her essay in *The Common Reader* on “The Duchess of Newcastle”. Woolf too sees a sort of hardening of things from early to late, but not quite in the same way:

It was from the plain of complete ignorance, the untilled field of her own consciousness, that she proposed to erect a philosophic system that was to oust all others. The results were not altogether happy. Under the pressure of such vast structures, her natural gift, the fresh and delicate fancy which had led her in her first volume to write charmingly of Queen Mab and fairyland, was crushed out of existence.

That's not to say that all the later volumes are completely lifeless: “There they stand, in the British Museum, volume after volume, swarming with a diffused, uneasy, contorted vitality”. But Woolf did think that Cavendish's attempts to construct something that looked like a system of natural philosophy, rather than a flight of fancy, took something away from her writing.<sup>26</sup>

Cavendish certainly did have the project of developing something that looks more like a serious system of natural philosophy. Indeed that project continued all the way, in revision after revision, to the 1668 *Ground*. My question is how that relates to some of the early poems. And my suggestion is – to use my over-simplified slogan again – that Cavendish's environmental ethic – her concern for nature and its non-human creatures, and what they would say if only they could talk – turned in to her panpsychism.

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<sup>24</sup> See Sarasohn 2010, 57-63

<sup>25</sup> A related question: what exactly should we think is Cavendish's attitude towards the views in her atomist poems?

<sup>26</sup> Moreover, “her philosophies are futile” – but there is “something noble and Quixotic and high-spirited, as well as crack-brained and bird-witted, about her”. I am somewhat sympathetic to Woolf's take on things, though I don't need to endorse it here. Woolf's view is discussed, less sympathetically, by Sarasohn (2010, 39) and Whitaker (2002, Epilogue).

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, I'd like to recall again the four themes I highlighted from Cavendish's *Poems, and Fancies*: that *man treats nature poorly*; the *ethics of our treatment of animals*; *non-literal panpsychism*; and finally *speculation and the 'who knows?' argument*.

But what does that have to do with panpsychism? Well, I have suggested, in particular in relation to the third and fourth themes, some connections between the views of the *Poems, and Fancies* and the later works of natural philosophy. My very speculative suggestion is that the metaphorical encounters – the non-literal panpsychism – harden into a more literal panpsychism, but to a considerable extent without supporting argument. The simplified version of the speculation would be to say that to say that Cavendish's environmental ethic – her concern for nature and its non-human creatures, and what they would say if only they could talk – turned in to her panpsychism.<sup>27</sup>

Details aside, I hope to have managed to suggest to you that there is something of interest to the historian of Cavendish's natural philosophy in *Poems, and Fancies*, beyond attempts to understand what her natural philosophy at that point was. And even if I am entirely wrong in my speculation, I do think a good question would remain, of how exactly Cavendish got from 'fancies' to a system of natural philosophy.

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<sup>27</sup> If this is the way the two relate for Cavendish, thinking about Cavendish will likely turn out not to be especially helpful for thinking about the issue more generally.

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