‘The Unorthodox Margaret Cavendish’

Tom Stoneham and Peter West[1]

Abstract:

We argue that, while Cavendish did express orthodox piety, she is likely to have been read by her contemporaries as heterodox and deistic at best, atheistic at worst. Furthermore, they would have been right: it is seemingly impossible to reconcile her metaphysical and epistemological views with particular providence, miracles, the incarnation and revelation. We proceed by outlining her general metaphysical position (section 1) before looking in some detail at her discussion of immaterial beings (section 2). We then consider the implications of these views for certain orthodox Christian doctrines (section 3).

Introduction

Margaret Lucas Cavendish (1623-1673) was a natural philosopher, poet, playwright, and novelist. Her work was well-known in literary circles (the diarist Samuel Pepys records that there was considerable commotion whenever she visited London) and she was well-connected amongst philosophers and scientists via her husband, William Cavendish, the Duke of Newcastle. In the late 1640s, when the Cavendishes were in exile on the continent,[2] William organised meetings of the ‘Cavendish circle’ which, at various times, included Descartes, Gassendi, Hobbes, and Digby. Prior to her marriage to William, Cavendish was encouraged in her intellectual pursuits by William’s brother Charles and her own brother Sir John Lucas, who would go on to be an Original Fellow of the Royal Society (Whitaker 2002: 11–12). Later in her own life (in May 1667), Cavendish would be the first woman invited to attend a meeting of the Royal Society.

[1] This aerticle was published as chapter 32 of *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy* published in 2023.

[2] Before her marriage, Cavendish was a maid of honour to the exiled Queen Henrietta Maria. William was Captain-General of the Royalist army in the north of England and fled after losing the battle of Marston Moor in 1644.

A central theme consistent throughout Cavendish's writings is the idea that all of nature, whether human, animal, mineral, or vegetable, possesses life, sense, reason, and knowledge. For that reason, she is often characterised as a 'vitalist' and, in light of recent developments in the philosophy of mind, sometimes hailed as an early panpsychist. Another theme that is consistent throughout her corpus is a commitment to materialism. Like Hobbes, the most prominent materialist in Britain in the seventeenth-century, Cavendish believed that there are no immaterial (or spiritual) substances in nature. Where there is nature, she maintains, there is material substance – and material substance *alone*. As she puts it in her *Philosophical Letters* (1664), "nature is material, or corporeal; and whatsoever is not composed of matter or body, belongs not to nature". When it comes to nature, her commitment to materialism is thus unambiguous.

While her commitment to vitalism and materialism is consistent throughout her work, some significant aspects of her account of nature developed with time. Most notably, in her early writings, such as *Poems and Fancies* (1653), Cavendish accepts a version of 'atomism'; the notion that parts of nature could, in principle, be broken down into indivisible atoms, a view associated in the 17th century with Epicurus and Lucretius. She would later explicitly reject this view (in 'A Condemning Treatise of Atomes', in *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655), extending that rejection to corpuscular theory in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1668) where she critiques the empirical atomism of her contemporaries. The *Observations* also includes Cavendish's most prolonged critical discussion of the experimental method, as endorsed by the Royal Society, and her reflections on the potential benefits and drawbacks of the burgeoning fields of microscopy and telescopy. Her final publication, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668) is a re-working of the ideas she first explicated and defended in *Philosophicall Fancies* (1653) and revised in the two editions of *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655, 1663). It is her most systematic and in-depth defence of her account of nature.

Before outlining the structure of this chapter, it is worth noting two methodological commitments that shape our reading of Cavendish's philosophy. First, we are working on the assumption that there is such a thing as Cavendish's 'settled' or 'mature' position on various issues (for discussion, see Detlefsen 2006: 205; Peterman 2019: 472; and for a more tentative approach, see Detlefsen 2022). Her

rejection of atomism is the most obvious and uncontroversial example of this. Moreover, we take it that, if one wishes to identify Cavendish's settled opinion on a specific issue, one should refer to the *Observations* or the *Grounds* – especially the latter which, as we noted, went through significant revisions. Second, we take Cavendish at her word when she states that there is no significant difference between her philosophy and her fiction. Cavendish published her novella *The Blazing World* alongside the *Observations* and explains that in doing so she "joined them as two worlds at the end of their poles" (BW, 'To The Reader'). Cavendish believes that fiction and philosophy are both "actions of the rational parts of matter". For that reason, we also work on the assumption that what is articulated as truth in her fiction, such as *The Blazing World*, is intended to be consistent with her philosophy.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In section one, we provide an outline of Cavendish's metaphysics and introduce some competing interpretations of her account of how nature is ordered. In section two, we focus on the place of immaterial entities in Cavendish's system of nature. First, we outline her metaphysical and epistemological claims about God and, second, the development of her account of finite immaterial spirits. Finally, in section three, we emphasise the religious unorthodoxy of Cavendish's metaphysics and demonstrate that some of her views are inconsistent with some important tenets of Christian doctrine.

1. Cavendish's Metaphysics

While Cavendish did engage in social, political and ethical debates (for discussion, see, e.g., James 2003 and Walters 2014), she reserved the word 'philosophy' for what we tend to call 'metaphysics': the project of giving an account of the fundamental character of everything that exists and how the less fundamental phenomena, the quotidian things we know about, care about and interact with, relate to that fundamental character. She pursued this project in seven books throughout her 15 years of publishing. Five of those books constitute an almost obsessive re-working and refining of her ideas: *Poems and Fancies* (1653a), *Philosophical Fancies* (1653b), *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* 2nd edition (1663), and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668). These five books follow the synthetic method of presenting philosophy, with its echoes of Euclid, which was very

common in the early modern period: They begin by spelling out the fundamental first principles and then proceed to show what can be constructed from these. For Cavendish the first principles are Matter and Motion[3] and from these she constructs the whole of Nature, the natural world. Cavendish's other two books on natural philosophy, *Philosophical Letters* (1664) and *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) constitute her direct engagements with other thinkers (particularly More and van Helmont in the former and Hooke and Boyle in the latter).

Like Hobbes' Epicurean materialism (for Hobbes' influence on Cavendish, see see O'Neill 2001: xiii; Hutton 1997), in Cavendish's system there is a complete rejection of both Cartesian immaterial substances and the neo-Platonist animating world soul. But unlike the Epicureans (and Hobbes), Cavendish thinks that matter is *self*-moving, in fact she thinks it is a consequence of a thorough-going materialism that all motion is self-motion. As such she rejects the near-universal opinion that motion can be transferred from one material body to another by contact (and thereby avoids the problem of needing an unmoved mover to initiate the sequence of transfers of motion by contact, which was a traditional argument for the divine). Her reason for this is clearest in her objection to Descartes (1664, I.xxx: 97-99): motion is either a mode or a substance; modes cannot transfer from one substance to another because they are essentially modes of a specific substance; but if motion is a substance, then when it transfers the moved bodies should 'increase in their substance and quantity' (98) in proportion to how much they are moved. Thus, if you transfer motion from the bat to the baseball, the ball should grow and the bat shrink; but that is not what we observe. Consequently, no motion is transferred; rather (Cavendish argues) the ball is occasioned to move itself by the motion of the bat (for further discussion of Cavendish's theory of occasional causation, see James 1999: 231-39; Detlefsen 2006: 425-26 & 2007; Boyle 2018: 97-100).

To be capable of self-motion, matter must be to some degree animate, because self-motion requires knowledge, and self-motion in response to the motion of another object requires perception of that object. However, there are two kinds of animate matter: the rational and the sensitive. The rational matter she identifies with the mind or 'corporeal soul' and it engages in pure thought. The sensitive matter is less 'agile' and its actions are more mundane. "Perception is a sort of knowledge" (GNP, I.ix: .8)

[3] In 1653a she also has Life and Form, but these are dropped as unnecessary when she introduces the idea that some matter is animate (initially this was expressed as very thin matter being material spirits) and the related rejection of atomism.

and both rational and sensitive matter have perceptions, though the former has more complete or "united" perceptions and also "conceptions" (GNP, II.vii: 23). The perceptions of sensitive matter can either be occasioned by other objects or internally generated 'by rote', i.e. imaginings derived from previous perceptions. She neither accepts nor rejects an empiricist principle which would restrict the perceptions of rational matter in the same manner, though she does think that matter can only 'figure' or 'pattern' (OEP: 15), i.e. represent, the material (see below).[4]

As well as these two kinds of animate matter, there also has to be inanimate matter which is not self-moving. This is not because she thinks there are particular parts of matter which are incapable of moving, but rather because different objects move more or less freely, and this is explained in part by their having more or less inanimate matter. Thus, the baseball will move away from the bat very quickly whereas the brick will move away from the bat slowly, if at all, because the brick has a greater proportion of inanimate matter. We have a lot more inanimate matter than a brick, but we also have a lot more sensitive matter, so we can self-move in response to things about us much more effectively.

Different objects, or 'particular parts' as she calls them, have these kinds of matter in different proportions. The greater the amount of rational matter, the more complex the movements that particular part can perform and thus the more intelligent its behaviour. Humans have a much greater quantity of rational matter than the baseball, which is why we can duck out the way of the oncoming bat and the baseball cannot.

Every portion of matter must contain some of each *kind* of matter – this is known as the doctrine of "commixture" or complete blending. This is neither molecular mixture, which implies separability, nor co-extension, which wouldn't allow variation in internal motions (pace O'Neill 2001, xxiii). Without some rational matter, the particular part would not know how to move (all parts can move); without some sensitive matter its motions would not be responsive to other parts of matter (all parts can be moved); and without inanimate matter, all motions would be instantaneous and as easy as a change of thought (1666a: 25-6).[5]

---

[4] Cavendish formulated these views almost four decades before Locke's *Essay* but was familiar with Hobbes' philosophy of mind and would have been aware of the Peripatetic principle: nothing in the mind not first in the sense (1651, 1.1).

[5] While the necessity of rational matter is conceptual for Cavendish, since without motion there would be no change, which is the result of internal or external 'figurative' motions, the necessity of sensitive and inanimate matter is empirical: slow movement requires inanimate matter, which requires the sensitive to move it according to the dictates of the rational. Consequently, she

Cavendish is fond of the analogy between the kinds (which she sometimes calls 'degrees' and 'parts', in contrast to '*particular* parts' which are individual objects) of matter which form the natural world and the different roles required to build a house: the rational matter is the architect, the sensitive matter the labourer, and the inanimate matter the stones and bricks. She likes to describe the human mind as being composed entirely of rational matter, and our fictions and fancies like architect's drawings never handed to the labourer to build. However, that does not make the mind a special substance, like a Cartesian soul, for the different kinds of matter are inseparable: any and every part of nature contains all three kinds of matter. Rather, when we talk about someone's mind, we are talking about their rational matter, which is present in all their body parts to greater or lesser degrees. This inseparability means that the mind controls the motions of the whole person, not 'like a spider in a Cobweb' (PL: I.xxxv, 111) but by instructing the sensitive parts in how they should move the inanimate parts, both as an exercise of its free will and in response to the perceptions of other objects that the sensitive matter has.

This metaphysics proves to be very powerful, allowing Cavendish to explain vast ranges of natural phenomena, such as biological reproduction, disease, freezing, burning, colours, metals, liquids and the motion of the planets. A key feature of these explanations is Cavendish's frequent appeals to properties of Nature as a whole, not just its infinite scope and variety; for she maintains that it contains regularities and irregularities which are held in 'poise and balance' (e.g., OEP: 98 – also throughout the epistle 'To the Reader'). This raises an important interpretive question about how the behaviours of particular parts of nature are related to these properties of nature as a whole. Cavendish owes us an explanation of why there is order rather than chaos in nature, given each particular part moves itself freely according to its knowledge and perception. This is particularly pressing because it was largely the inability of atomism, in her view, to provide an explanation of order which led her to reject it.

Two answers to this interpretive question have emerged and have been developed by David Cunning and Deborah Boyle, respectively:

1. Nature (as a whole) forms a unity or plenum with infinite knowledge providing order across its infinite extent. Just as the rational parts of the particular parts of nature (i.e., individual objects) provide the instructions for how the sensitive

speculates in the Appendix to the *Grounds* whether there could be a world of only rational matter (193). The idea that nothing acts as fast as the mind is in Lucretius (1992, Bk 3, line 180).

parts should move, so does the rational part of infinite Nature provide instructions for how all the infinite variety of particular parts should move themselves. (Cunning: 2006)

The problem with this is that if nature has order because the parts of nature follow the directions of an infinite whole which they comprise, then there is not enough space for the observed irregularities in Nature or for the freewill of the rational parts of particular objects to move themselves as they choose. In fact, proponents of this view argue that Cavendish does not really accept irregularity or disorder in nature, regarding the appearance of irregularity as an effect of our limited or partial perspective (e.g. Cunning 2006: 171). Yet, that Cavendish says there have to be irregularities in nature is undeniable. In the Appendix to GNP, for instance, she explicitly considers whether a world with no irregularities is possible and concludes it is only if nature also includes a world entirely irregular, because 'all Nature's Actions [are] poised with Opposites, or Contraries' (Appendix II.ii).[6]

For Cavendish, one source of irregularity is 'disobedience', which is possible because particular parts have freewill. Freewill rests in the rational parts, the sensitive parts merely take instructions on how to move and fulfil those instructions (they may sometimes fulfil them badly or ineffectually, creating irregularities like the palsy in humans, but they do not thereby exercise freedom). So, if there is no disorder, there is no freewill. But if there is freewill, then order comes from the particular parts' obedience, and it is the ground of that obedience which would explain the order. To give a societal analogy: in a society of free subjects, there is only order if the law is obeyed, and the law is obeyed either through love of the law-maker or fear of retribution. So order is explained by the free subjects' feelings of love or fear: even an all-powerful, absolute monarch needs to be loved or feared by his subjects.[7] As Cavendish puts it, "Nature's Parts move themselves and are not moved by any Agent" (GNP VIII.i: 106).

This motivates an alternative reading:

2. Nature (as a whole) forms a unity which is itself a sovereign law-maker, dictating how the particular parts ought to move. Each particular part then freely obeys (or disobeys) these laws. (Boyle, 2018)

[6] Given Cavendish is asking about possibilities here, she seems committed to denying the modal principle of recombination (e.g. Efird & Stoneham, 2008).

[7] "for Fear, though it makes people obey, yet does it not last so long, nor is it so sure a means to keep them to their duties, as Love." (BW, 63) Here Cavendish explicitly rejects the Machiavellian view that fear is more effective than love for ruling a state.

Such a view is distinct from the conception of laws of nature which was emerging through the 17th century (which Cavendish was sceptical of), whereby laws are generalizations describing immutable patterns in nature (see also Detlefsen 2018). On this reading of Cavendish, the laws of nature are essentially normative, they are prescriptions for the behaviours of the parts of nature. Which gives us two distinct sources of irregularity: particular parts may disobey the laws of Nature, and even when they obey, their sensitive parts may fail to achieve what they were directed to do, giving us the resources to explain the irregularities in Nature; from war to disease.

However, it is worth also considering why Cavendish maintains that not only is there regularity and irregularity in Nature, but also there is 'poise and balance' between them. She writes:

> Although nature be infinite, yet all her actions seem to be poised or balanced by opposition; for example, as nature has dividing, so composing actions; also, as nature has regular, so irregular actions; as nature has dilating, so contracting actions. (1668, I: xiv)

This poise and balance, which is also sometimes described as 'not running into extremes', is often used to explain phenomena in the Natural world.

> if there were not Density, as well as Rarity; and Levity, as well as Gravity; Nature would run into Extreams' (GNP XII.i)

What would be wrong with the 'extreme' of everything being dense, or heavy or hot or fast or…? Cavendish's answer is that:

> several sorts, kinds, and differences of particulars causes order, by reason it causes distinctions: for if all creatures were alike, it would cause a confusion (GNP II.x)

So not only would an absence of any regularity lead to disorder, but a lack of variety lead to 'confusion'. Order requires contrasts: different sorts or kinds having different roles. As is so often the case with Cavendish, she is here modelling features of nature on her views of a well-ordered society: there need to be different classes of people with distinct functions for society to display order rather than chaos. If all subjects were aristocrats, or all were peasants, there would be confusion. But while this variety may be brought about in society by a good and wise sovereign, in nature it is brought about by the infinite knowledge of Nature as a whole. Nature's infinite knowledge includes recognising the need for variety and contrasting kinds of particular part, and the

balance between regularity and irregularity.[8] Given our aims in the rest of this chapter, it is worth noting at this point that Cavendish places the responsibility for ordering parts of nature with Nature itself, rather than God. As we will see, God is, for Cavendish, a creator and 'author' of nature, but it is nature (rather than God) that acts to organise itself in certain ways. This raises significant questions about how immanent God is in Cavendish's system – which we address in what follows.

A final point worth noting is that Cavendish seems to think that the mix of obedience and disobedience is a contingent fact about the world we inhabit. As particular parts are constituted, they will be inconsistent in their obedience to the laws of Nature, but, as we saw above, there could be entirely regular (obedient) or irregular (disobedient) worlds (GNP, Appendix, II.ii: 254), the former being 'blessed' and the latter 'cursed', echoing the language of heaven and hell.

2. Immaterials

2.1 God and nature

As we've seen, like Hobbes, Cavendish maintains that there are no immaterial substances in nature. Thus, in the *Observations* she writes:

> Nature is purely corporeal or material, and there is nothing that belongs to, or is a part of nature, which is not corporeal; so that natural and material, or corporeal, are one and the same (OEP: 137)

For Cavendish, whatever can be said to exist in nature is material, or corporeal, to the extent that the very terms 'natural', 'material', and 'corporeal' are virtually interchangeable.

This commitment to the view that all of nature is material raises some important questions about the status of God in Cavendish's natural philosophy. Eileen O'Neill claims that Cavendish "is at pains to make the thoroughgoing materialism of her natural philosophy consistent with certain Christian doctrines" (2001: xxiii). Thus, Cavendish maintains that God is a "supernatural, infinite, and incomprehensible deity" (OEP: 17) and describes him as an "incorporeal being, void of all parts and divisions"

[8] The explanation of poise and balance in terms of nature not running in to extremes has an interesting consequence: it blocks a cosmological argument from the existence of both order and disorder to the Manichean heresy of two equipotent gods, one good, one evil.

(OEP: 40). Beyond that, however, Cavendish doesn't seem especially concerned with striving for orthodoxy. As we will find, O'Neill's remark only seems accurate insofar as Cavendish's philosophy is consistent with *certain* doctrines, none of which are distinctively Christian.[9] There are two specific issues relating to the role of God in Cavendish's metaphysics we will focus on. First, her account of an immaterial God's relationship with material nature. Second, what exactly she means when she says that God is "incomprehensible".

For Cavendish, God is supernatural; he is literally beyond or outside nature. Cavendish argues that this follows from his lacking corporeality. As she puts it in the *Observations,* "if incorporeal, he [God] must be supernatural; for there is nothing between body, and no body; corporeal and incorporeal; natural, and supernatural" (OEP: 266) (for her contemporaries, this would have been potentially heretical, for it seems to leave no space for the orthodox account of the Incarnation, with Christ being fully divine and fully human). How, then, are we to understand God's relationship with nature? Cavendish views God as the creator of nature. However, she does not construe him as an immanent deity, present throughout his creation. Instead, she sees the relation between God and nature as one of a master (and creator) and servant. Consider the following passages from the *Observations*:

> God the author of nature, and nature the servant of God, do order all things and actions of nature, the one by his immutable will, and all-powerful command; the other by executing this will and command: The one by an incomprehensible, divine and supernatural power; the other in a natural manner and way: for God's will is obeyed by nature's self-motion; which self-motion God can as easily give and impart to corporeal nature, as to an immaterial spirit (OEP: 209; see also OEP: 212)

For Cavendish, God is not an immediate *cause* but rather an *occasion* for changes within nature; God issues commands which nature, God's servant, then *executes*. As Detlefsen puts it: "God's creative power is a form of emanation" (2009, 431). This requires nature to have knowledge and perception, marking a significant difference with the traditional 'watchmaker' analogy of God's relation to nature. The motions of the various parts of nature, as Cavendish sees it, are caused by the principle of *self-*

[9] As we shall see, Cavendish does not commit herself to more, and arguably less, than is contained in Herbert's five Common Notions (1645), which were taken to be definitional of deism; see, e.g., Blount (1693). Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) can be read as an attempt to add some distinctively Christian doctrine to the equally minimal commitments of the *Essay*. Cavendish never addresses the parallel task.

motion which God has bestowed upon nature as a whole. As Cavendish puts it in the *Observations*, if God is responsible for nature's motion, "then it must either be done by an all-powerful command, or by an immediate action of God: The latter which is not probable, to wit, that God should be immediate motion of all things himself; for God is an immovable and immutable essence" (OEP: 209). In other words, we should not understand God as the *cause* of motion in nature; none of God's actions cause parts of nature to move. In fact, nothing (efficiently) causes anything else to move, for all motion is self-motion. Instead, we ought to think of God's command as that which *occasions* nature's own self-motion. Since all action is the result of self-motion, anything that happens in nature is the result of nature itself – neither God nor any other immaterial, supernatural entity can act *in* nature. (It is worth noting that this seems to leave no metaphysical space for miracles, including those performed by Christ and reported in the New Testament.)

Cavendish also claims that God is "incomprehensible" to all creatures in nature, including humans. What Cavendish means by this is that we cannot *conceive* of God and his attributes (OEP: 38). At various places in her writing, Cavendish reveals a commitment to the idea that anything that does not exist *in nature* cannot be conceived (e.g., OEP: 86; PL: 262, 321). This is because, she argues, anything that is not a part of nature, and thus is not corporeal, cannot be *patterned or figured*, i.e., represented, by the mind (we say more about Cavendish's notions of 'patterning' and 'figuring' below). There is something about material (or corporeal) things – something that is lacking from immaterial things – that makes them the kinds of things that can be patterned or figured by the mind. As she puts it in the *Grounds,*

> no Part of Nature can perceive [i.e., pattern or figure] an Immaterial, because it is impossible to have a perception of that, which is not to be perceived, as not being an Object fit and proper for Corporeal Perception. (GNP Appendix 1.3)

In the case of God, this means that no finite creatures (including ourselves) can "possibly pattern or figure him; he being a supernatural, immaterial, and infinite being" (OEP, 88). Thus, not only is God metaphysically (i.e., causally) distant from his creation, he is beyond the comprehension of things in nature (including ourselves) too.

Cavendish's view is that for something to be an object of knowledge then, whether through perception or conception, it must be possible for the matter of the mind to pattern or figure that object. In turn, this requires that the object in question

have its own pattern or figure. Cavendish's view, however, is that only corporeal things have patterns or figures. God, who is incorporeal and supernatural, does not have a pattern or figure meaning that he is not the kind of thing that can be an object of knowledge. He is not, as Cavendish phrases it, "an Object fit and proper for Corporeal perception". The claim that God is beyond knowledge would seem to apply equally to natural knowledge and knowledge by revelation, and explains her commitment to the view that, at most, we can conceive of the *existence* of God, but not his nature or attributes, as endorsed in the following passages:

> no part of nature can or does conceive the essence of God, or what is in himself; but it conceives only, that there is such a divine being which is supernatural; And therefore it cannot be said, that a natural being can comprehend God; for it is not the comprehending of the substance of God, or its patterning out, (since God having no body, is without all figure) that makes the knowledge of God (OEP: 17)
>
> it is impossible for man to make a figure, or picture of that which is not a part of nature; for pictures are as much a part of nature, as any other parts… Where the notions of God can be no otherwise but of His existence; to wit, that we know there is something above nature, who is the author, and God of nature (OEP: 88-89)

For Cavendish, our knowledge of God is restricted to knowledge of his *existence* (see Detlefsen 2009: 423-43 for furth discussion). It does not consist in knowledge of his nature, attributes, substance, or essence. In that sense, our knowledge of God is limited. This limited knowledge is 'notional'; that is, it involves knowing the truth of a claim without being able to conceive – a term which Cavendish uses interchangeably with 'imagine' (see, e.g., OEP: 86; Boyle 2015: 444; Adams 2016: 5; Chamberlain 2019: 306-7) – the entity or entities that the claim is about.[10] Our inadequate knowledge of God is thus a result of the fact that "our very thoughts and conceptions of Immaterial are Material" (PL: 187; see Detlefsen 2009: 434).

One might reasonably ask how we can even conceive of the *existence* of God, if conception requires figuring the motions of that which is being conceived? Cavendish's answer is that "knowledge of the existency of God… is innate, and

[10] Cavendish includes a chapter on 'notions' in *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (PPO, 89). There she explains that is an "Obscurity of perfect Figures […] made not by the Rational Animate motions from outward Objects or Senses, but […] out of their voluntary and intire Motions, without the help of the Sensitive Prints" (PPO,89). To have a notion, for Cavendish, is to think of something without picturing it.

inherent in nature and all her parts, as much as self-knowledge is" (OEP: 17). Cavendish's view is that, like an artist who leaves her signature in her art, God, the creator of nature and all its parts, leaves a 'signature' of himself in each and every part of nature (Boyle 2015: 108). That 'signature' takes the form of an innate knowledge of his existence. Part of what it is to know one*self*, Cavendish claims, is to know of God's existence. As she puts it in the *Observations,* each part of nature "has conceptions of the existence of God, to wit, that there is a God above nature, on which nature depends; and from immutable and eternal decree, it has its eternal being, as God's eternal servant" (OEP: 38; see also PL: 187). Again, it is unclear how much space this leaves for knowledge by revelation and interpretation of scripture, especially since the veracity of sources of revelation is established by the accompaniment of miracles (from the burning bush to Christ's miracles). As we saw previously, there does not seem to be room for miracles in Cavendish's account of the operations of nature. We return to these issues in section three.

2.2 Finite immaterial spirits

While Cavendish's account of God is orthodox to the extent it deflects the charge of atheism and allows her to distinguish natural philosophy from divinity by their subject matters and epistemologies, her views on the existence of finite immaterial spirits are more overtly *un*orthodox. As Emma Wilkins explains, for many seventeenth-century thinkers, "belief in spirits was an essential part of being a good Christian" and "spirit-doubters and spirit-deniers… were attacked as dangerous atheists who threatened both religion and society as a whole" (2016: 858). As we will see, by these lights (by the end of her life at least), Cavendish had departed quite radically from Christian orthodoxy. In what remains of this section, we outline the development of Cavendish's account of finite immaterial spirits before returning to the question of her (un)orthodoxy in the next section.

Cavendish's commitment to the view that God is an immaterial substance existing outside of nature is consistent throughout her philosophical corpus. However, the status of *finite* immaterial spirits is more ambiguous. In her works from the early 1660s (*Philosophical Letters* and *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*), Cavendish seems open to the idea that while no *part* of nature could be immaterial, immaterial spirits could exist *within* nature in some sense. However, by the time of her final

publications, the *Observations* and the *Grounds,* there is no space in Cavendish's system for finite immaterial spirits at all; whether within or outside of nature.

Cavendish's views on finite spirits in the early 1660s were heavily influenced by the publication of a new edition of Henry More's collected works in 1662 (Wilkins 2016: 864). More argues for the existence of finite immaterial spirits in nature and characterises a *disbelief* in spirits as a dangerous prelude to atheism (Wilkins 2016: 859). Thus, much of what Cavendish says about spirits in the *Philosophical Letters* comes in a chapter where she directly responds to More. There, she makes the following somewhat ambiguous statement:

> no Immaterial Spirit belongs to Nature, so as to be a part thereof; for Nature is Material, or Corporeal; and whatsoever is not composed of matter or body, belongs not to Nature; nevertheless, Immaterial Spirits may be in Nature, although not parts of Nature. (PL: 187)

In line with her thorough-going materialism about nature, Cavendish is clear in stating that an immaterial spirit could not possibly be a *part* of nature. Yet, in the same sentence, she concedes that immaterial spirits could be *in* nature, even if they are not part of it. It isn't clear what Cavendish means by "in Nature" and how something's being *in* nature differs from its being *a part of* nature (for discussion, see Duncan 2012).

One place we might turn for some insight into this issue is Cavendish's fantasy novella *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World*. *The Blazing World* was published alongside the *Observations* in 1666 and plays out over the backdrop of a world that conforms to the metaphysics endorsed in her natural philosophy. The denizens of the Blazing World are Cavendishian materialists and we are informed that this is a world in which Cavendish's metaphysical claims, such as the claim that the colours of objects are as material as 'primary qualities' like size and shape, are known to be true. In that sense, *The Blazing World* can be thought of as a thought experiment in Cavendishian metaphysics where we gain an insight into what things would be like if her natural philosophy were both accepted and true (see Thomas 2020, ch.6 for discussion).What is significant for our present purposes is that in *The Blazing World* Cavendish seems to allow for the existence of finite immaterial spirits.

The protagonist of the story, known as The Empress, consults what appear to be finite immaterial spirits. We are informed that such spirits cannot possibly interact

with the physical world unless they "put on a hand or arm, or else the whole body of Man". In other words, finite immaterial spirits, since they are not themselves *parts* of nature, can only act on parts of nature, i.e. move, by adorning what Cavendish (rather hauntingly) calls "gauntlets of flesh". Given the master-servant model of the relation between God and nature discussed in section 1, we can assume that spirits move by giving orders to material objects, which may obey those orders freely. Thus, the presence of spirits does not introduce new possibilities of motion, but at best changes which self-motions some particular parts of matter perform.[11] Returning to the status of immaterial spirits in the *Philosophical Letters,* perhaps this is what Cavendish means when she says that they are *in* nature but not part of it.

In the *Observations,* which was published alongside the *Blazing World,* Cavendish's account of finite immaterial spirits is more categorical. In this work, she is no longer responding immediately to the views of More, but rather to the experimental philosophy of Hooke and Boyle, and there is very little discussion of finite spirits. Similarly, in the *Grounds*, her position on immaterial spirits is clear:

> I cannot conceive how an Immaterial can be in Nature: for, first, An Immaterial cannot, in my opinion, be naturally created; nor can I conceive how an Immaterial can produce particular Immaterial Souls, Spirits, or the like. Wherefore, an immaterial, in my opinion, must be some uncreated Being; which can be no other than GOD alone. (GNP: 239)

While, as we saw previously, she remains committed to the existence of *an* immaterial spirit outside of nature – namely, God – she now explicitly denies the existence of finite, created immaterials. Such an immaterial spirit cannot be "naturally created" natural processes cannot create supernatural things, nor created supernaturally by another immaterial being, supernatural things do not engage in reproduction/ generation of themselves. Her reason for the latter claim is not obvious, but may be implied in her careful studies of material reproduction (see GNP, Part 4). This means that for an immaterial spirit to exist would be for it to exist *un*created. But that would make every immaterial spirit a god; since only God can exist uncreated.[12]

---

[11] Rather surprisingly, this has potential to give a coherent theory of demonic possession and withcraft. We do not know whether recognising this in part motivated her later total rejection of finite immaterials.

[12] There is some consistency with her views on spirits in her earlier writings here. In the *Philosophical Letters*, she accuses More of a kind of paganism since his view involves "immaterial substances" existing "in Nature" (PL, 145). Here, in the *Grounds,* Cavendish similarly implies that to be committed to the existence of finite immaterial spirits is to be committed to the existence of multiple deities within nature; which, again, sounds like a kind of paganism.

Again, Cavendish's view is that there is something about nature – and, in turn, materiality (or corporeality) – that rules out the possibility of immaterial spirits existing within it. It Is not just that (as it happens) they don't. It is that they *couldn't possibly*. God could not possibly exist in nature because he is incorporeal and thus indivisible, while all parts of nature are divisible. Finite immaterial spirits similarly could not possibly exist in nature because, according to Cavendish, they could not possibly "be naturally created" (GNP: 239). By the time of the *Observations* and the *Grounds,* Cavendish seems to have decided that, unlike God, finite immaterial spirits could not possibly exist even *outside* of nature, since that would require them to exist uncreated. Thus, Cavendish's mature view is that there are no finite immaterial spirits *at all*: there is nature, which is material, and God, who is immaterial (and supernatural).

3. Cavendish's (Un)Orthodoxy

The metaphysical status of God in Cavendish's system – as a creator and 'master' who is situated *beyond* nature – raises important questions about the extent to which her views on God, and religion more generally, can truly be said to be orthodox. As we saw, O'Neill claims that Cavendish "is at pains" to show that her materialism is consistent with Christian orthodoxy (2001: xxiii). Yet, the preceding discussion revealed that some of Cavendish's views or their consequences were *not* orthodox – and certainly would not have been perceived as such by her contemporaries. In light of these views, at least one commentator has suggested that Cavendish is in fact best described as a "skeptical Deist" (Mendelsohn 2014: 41). As Mendelsohn puts it, Cavendish simply "hedged her bets (much like Pascal) by proclaiming her allegiance to Anglican Orthodoxy". This paints a rather different picture to the one offered by O'Neill. In this final section, we outline Cavendish's explicit claims about the relationship between her philosophy and orthodox religion before demonstrating that Cavendish's metaphysics is inconsistent with some important tenets of Christian orthodoxy.

Debates about human knowledge of the divine – and the possibility of our knowing *anything* about the infinitude of God's nature – were rife in the second half of the seventeenth century and continued to play out well into the eighteenth. 'Divines' (thinkers engaged in scriptural analysis) were involved in heated debates over whether

claims about God's nature should be understood metaphorically, analogically, or literally (for an outline of one such debate, between William King, Anthony Collins, Peter Browne, and George Berkeley, see Fasko and West 2021). However, prolonged discussions about the nature of God are conspicuously absent in Cavendish's own philosophy. She is clear in stating that God is supernatural and thus absent from nature despite having created it, but beyond that she reveals very little about how she construes God's nature. To some extent, this is explained by her claim in the *Observations* that God is "incomprehensible" (OEP: 17). As we established in section two, Cavendish maintains that beyond the claim that God exists we can know nothing about the divine. God and his attributes, Cavendish maintains, are inconceivable. She is keen, in other words, to encourage epistemic humility concerning the nature of God.

In fact, Cavendish deliberately side-steps such theological debates by drawing a distinction between those issues that are the purview of natural philosophers (such as herself) and those which should be left to theologians, divines, and members of the church. In doing so, she further emphasises the limits of her own knowledge of God while also leaving it to theologians to settle matters of scriptural interpretation. For example, in the *Philosophical Letters,* Cavendish raises the question of how the "Divine Soul" (something she would later come to reject) and the body are related. To which she responds:

> all which I leave to the Church: for I should be loth to affirm any thing contrary to their Doctrine, or the Information of the holy Scripture, as grounding my belief onely upon the sacred Word of God, and its true Interpretation made by the Orthodox Church (PL: 210)

She adds to this: "I avoid, as much as ever I can, not to mix Divinity with Natural Philosophy" (PL: 210). The phrasing of this claim is a little jarring, but the message is clear: matters pertaining to the divine lie in a different domain of inquiry to the natural philosophy Cavendish herself engages in. Elsewhere in the *Philosophical Letters* she expands on this claim and draws a distinction between what we can know of God *naturally* and what is *revealed.* The former extends only to our knowledge, via "sense and reason", of "the Existence of an Infinite, Eternal, Immortal, and Incomprehensible Deity" (PL: 318). In other words, the study of nature will only inform us of the *existence* of God (something which, Cavendish claims, is known innately by all parts of nature).

Revelation alone, then, would seem to be the only way we can gain knowledge about the nature and worship of God. Yet, it remains unclear what revelation might involve given Cavendish's commitment to the incomprehensibility of the deity. As we saw previously, Cavendish maintains that we cannot conceive of God's nature or attributes. Consequently, there seems to be little space for anything to be *revealed* to us. Our knowledge of the divine thus seems to be limited to our innate knowledge of God's existence. We know *that* God exists but know little else (if anything at all) about what that actually means (Detlefsen 2009: 433-34).[13]

In the *Philosophical Letters,* Cavendish does not tell us much about what the second kind of knowledge – knowledge via revelation – involves. However, she picks up on this distinction once again in the *Observations.* There, she explains that while the study of nature can inform us "that there is a being above nature, which is God the Author and Master of nature, whom all creatures know and adore" (OEP: 217), the *manner* in which we ought to "adore God" is beyond the scope of such inquiry. Our coming to know *religious* truths (rather than simply the truth of God's existence), she explains

> requires his particular grace, and divine instructions, in a supernatural manner or way, which none but the chosen creatures of God do know, at least believe; nor none but the sacred church ought to explain and interpret (OEP: 217)

It is possible to read this comment ironically; the irony being that the 'divines' profess expertise in that which is, by its very nature, incomprehensible. But even a straight reading of this remark indicates that, once again, Cavendish is drawing a line between the kinds of truths we can arrive at via natural philosophy and those which can only be arrived at by "Divinity". She is also explicitly situating herself outside the group of experts who are qualified to interpret the supernatural word of God presented to us in scripture.

The distinction Cavendish draws between natural philosophy and divinity does not, in itself, constitute evidence of her having held deistic beliefs. Taking Cavendish at her word, this is meant to be a sign of epistemic humility, rather than an explicit unorthodox commitment. However, it is also likely that Cavendish's treatment of religious issues, especially those concerning the role of God in her system of nature,

[13] On a more critical note, one might question whether Cavendish's commitment to the incomprehensibility of God is consistent with her claim that we innately know that God exists. Is it plausible to suggest that we know God exists but know *nothing* about him? Cavendish claims that all parts of nature "know there is something above nature, who is the author, and God of nature" (OEP, 88-89) but doesn't that provide us with some kind of insight into his nature (as an author and creator)?

would have been met with criticism by philosophical defenders of orthodox Christianity such as Henry More or George Berkeley. There is, in other words, a fine line between epistemic humility and what some of her contemporaries would have considered scepticism and atheism (Locke's correspondence with Stillingfleet is a case in point). For instance, despite (as we've seen) having attested that matters of scriptural interpretation are best left to the divines, the Appendixes to the *Grounds* contain several attempts to show that Cavendish's materialist system is consistent with the word of God. For instance, she discusses the implications of her view for the possibility of resurrection (GNP, Appendix II, VI) and the question of "Whether there shall be a material heaven or hell" (GNP, Appendix II, IX).

It seems likely that Cavendish's aim here is to demonstrate that a commitment to materialism *need not* come hand-in-hand with unorthodox beliefs. Both Spinoza and Hobbes, after all, had developed broadly materialist systems of nature – and were accused of harbouring atheist sentiments in light of it. Conservative, orthodox thinkers, like More or Berkeley, certainly felt that there was a connection between materialism and atheism. For instance, Berkeley writes (albeit, well *after* Cavendish's lifetime): "Pantheism, Materialism, Fatalism, are nothing but Atheism a little disguised" (1998*:* §6). It is reasonable to assume, then, that Cavendish may have seen the need to put such concerns to bed by addressing them head-on and showing that a commitment to materialism need not undermine the teachings of the church. Yet, it is highly doubtful that this endeavour would have been successful. First off, a conservative reader would most likely find it suspect that Cavendish only saw fit to consider such issues in an *Appendix* to her work. Indeed, her having done so might well be read as evidence that the discussions therein are somewhat *ad hoc* considerations.[14] What's more, the discussions in those Appendixes do not show Cavendish conforming to orthodox beliefs. For example, concerning heaven and hell, she writes:

> They shall be Material, by reason all those Creatures that did rise, were Material; and being Material, could not be sensible either of Immaterial Blessings, or Punishments: neither could an Immaterial World, be fit or proper Residence for Material Bodies, were those Bodies of the Purest Substance. (GNP, Appendix II, IX)

[14] What we know of Cavendish's writing and publication process supports this claim. Cavendish wrote and submitted sections of her writing to her publishers piecemeal (Whitaker 2002: 176-78). As such, the structure of her texts tends to reflect the order in which they were written. It is therefore likely that the Appendixes to the *Grounds* were written after the rest of the text.

Having thus stated that heaven and hell are both material worlds inhabited by material bodies, she then even raises the question – which she leaves unanswered – of "whether this Material Heaven and Hell, shall be like other Material Worlds". No doubt these claims would have set off alarm bells in the minds of conservative readers for, while Cavendish *is* happy to grant God himself the status of an immaterial, she appears to have reduced heaven and hell (along with their rewards and punishments) to material worlds, possibly even of the very same nature as the one we currently inhabit. In other words, there is nothing particularly special about them and nothing, in the literal sense of the term, supernatural. Cavendish's heaven would certainly fall short of communion with God or beatific vision.

To return to the question of whether Cavendish could plausibly be described as a deist: on the balance of evidence, it is reasonable to (at the very least) conclude that she would have been *perceived* as one. There are clear signs that Cavendish did not wish to be accused of unorthodoxy. She is clear in stating that she does not see it as her place to engage in theological discussion or scriptural interpretation; hence, she says very little about the nature of God. Yet, what she *does* say about the place of God, as *removed* from nature and beyond the reach of our comprehension, along with the pieces of scriptural interpretation she does offer, such as her claims about the materiality of heaven and hell, place her well outside orthodox views.

Conclusion

By paying particular attention to the role of God in Cavendish's metaphysics and her commitment to the incomprehensibility of the divine, we have demonstrated that in the context of seventeenth century thought Cavendish ought to be regarded a religiously unorthodox figure. Although there are important differences between her own metaphysics and that of Hobbes', in light of her commitment to materialism she would no doubt have been perceived by many as sympathetic to the Hobbesian outlook on nature. This would not have been helped by the fact that in her own system God is removed from nature and relegated to a creator and governor who cannot actually *act within* nature itself. Furthermore, her attempts to emphasise the consistency of her own materialist system with various points of scripture, led to heterodoxy at best.

There is no consensus, currently, as to whether Cavendish ought to be construed as a deist. We've seen that O'Neill (2001) opposes this reading, while (e.g.) Mendelsohn (year) supports it. Our own view is that, *regardless of her intentions*, Cavendish develops a system of nature that simply cannot be rendered consistent with some of the central tenets of Anglican Christian orthodoxy. Cavendish is clear in stating that *all* action in nature is the result of the principle of self-motion that each part of nature possesses. Thus, there is no room for outside influence; while God *created* nature, he cannot exert any influence on that creation subsequently. There is no space for miracles or particular providence in Cavendish's system.

Similar problems arise when it comes to making space for the Incarnation. Christ incarnate is both fully divine and fully human, i.e. a particular part of material nature – but for Cavendish this is an outright inconsistency. The divine is supernatural (literally beyond nature); and she is clear in stating that the natural and supernatural are heterogenous and cannot interact with one another. Finally, it is hard to make sense of the possibility of divine revelation, given Cavendish's claim that God's nature and attributes are completely incomprehensible because they cannot be patterned or figured by any part of nature. Since all human knowledge requires patterning, it is unclear what kind of knowledge divine revelation could possibly provide us with.

It is unwise to speculate too deeply on beliefs and opinions that aren't committed to the written page; thus, it will inevitably remain unclear how strong was Cavendish's devotion to Christian orthodoxy. However, what *is* clear, is that Cavendish's philosophical commitments would undoubtedly have put her in danger of being read as an unorthodox, and possibly deistic, thinker. Alongside her status as a woman writer in a male-dominated landscape (as well as her status as a senior member of a well-regarded family) this perhaps explains why Cavendish's writing elicited virtually no engagement during her own lifetime (Cunning 2022).

Bibliography:

Cavendish, Margaret. *Poems and Fancies*. London: Martin & Allestrye, 1653.

Cavendish, Margaret. *Philosophicall Fancies.* London: Martin & Allestrye, 1653.

Cavendish, Margaret. *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*. Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, 1668. Accessed May 1, 2020. http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/58404.

Cavendish, Margaret. *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. Edited by Eileen O'Neill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Cavendish, Margaret. *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*. London: William Wilson, 1663.

Cavendish, Margaret. *Philosophical Letters*. London, 1664.

Adams, Marcus. "Visual Perception as Patterning: Cavendish Against Hobbes on Sensation". *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2016): 193–214.

Berkeley, George. 'The Theory of Vision, or Visual Language, Shewing the Immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity, Vindicated and Explained' in *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision* Michael Ayers (ed.) London: J. M. Dent (1998), 277-304.

Blount, Charles. *The Oracles of Reason.* London, 1693.

Boyle, Deborah. "Margaret Cavendish on Perception, Self-Knowledge, and Probable Opinion". *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 7 (2015): 438–50.

Boyle, Deborah. The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Chamberlain, Colin. "Color in a Material World: Margaret Cavendish Against the Early Modern Mechanists". *Philosophical Review* 128, no. 3 (2019): 293–336.

Cunning, David. "Cavendish on the Intelligibility and Prospect of Thinking Matter". *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2006): 117–36. Detlefsen 2006

Cunning, David. 'Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters,* and the Plenum' in *Margaret Cavendish: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, eds. Lisa Walters and Brandie Siegfried. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2022).

Detlefsen, Karen. 'Cavendish's Philosophical Genres in Philosophical and Physical Opinions and the Question of Hierarchy' in *Margaret Cavendish: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, eds. Lisa Walters and Brandie Siegfried. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2022).

Detlefsen, Karen. 'Margaret Cavendish on Laws and Order' in *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics,* Emily Thomas (ed.) (2018), 72-92.

Fasko, Manuel and West, Peter. 'Molyneux's Question: The Irish Debates' in *Molyneux's Question and the History of Philosophy.* Gabriele Ferretti and Brian Glenney (eds.) London: Routledge (2021).

Herbert of Cherbury. *De Veritate, Prout distinguitur a Revelatione, a Verisimili, a Possibili, & a Falso*. 4th edition. London, 1645.

Hobbes, T., 1651, *Leviathan*, in E. Curley (ed.), *Leviathan, with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.

Hutton, Sarah. 'In dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish's natural philosophy' *Women's Writing* 4:3 (1997), 421-32.

James, Susan. "The Philosophical Innovations of Margaret Cavendish". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999): 219–44.

James, Susan. 'Introduction' in *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings* Susan James (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2003), ix-xxx.

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. Rouse and M. Smith, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1992).

Mendelsohn, Sara. 'The God of Nature and the Nature of God' *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish* Brandie R. Siegfried, Lisa T. Sarasohn (eds.). London: Routledge (2014).

O'Neill, Eileen. "Introduction". In Observations upon Experimental Philosophy, edited by Eileen O'Neill, x–xxxvi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Peterman, Alison. 'Margaret Cavendish on Motion and Mereology' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57:3 (2019), 471-499.

Shaheen, Jonathan L. "Parts of Nature and Division in Margaret Cavendish's Materialism". *Synthese* 196 (2019): 3551–75.

Walters, Lisa. *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2014).

Whitaker,Katie. *Mad Madge: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Royalist, Writer and Romantic.* London: Vintage (2002).

Wilkins, Emma. "'Exploding' Immaterial Substances: Margaret Cavendish's Vitalist Materialist Critique of Spirits". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 5 (2016): 858–77.