

“Canonizing Cavendish”

If you haven't heard anything about the philosophy of Margaret Cavendish yet, you will soon, and David Cunning's new book may well have a hand in it. Cavendish (1623-1673) is a giddyingly fascinating philosopher (and poet and novelist and playwright and biographer and dandizette) who is being canonized with lightning speed by scholars of early modern philosophy. Cunning's *Cavendish*, from Routledge's *Arguments of the Philosophers* series, is the very welcome culmination of a number of years of work by one of the first philosophers to take Cavendish seriously; it is only the second book focused squarely on her natural-philosophical arguments, after Lisa Sarasohn's 2010 *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*. Along with Sarasohn and a few other intrepid scholars - Eileen O'Neill, who produced the excellent first critical edition of a philosophical work of Cavendish's, deserves special mention here - Cunning has helped Cavendish to achieve one of her deepest desires: to have her ideas disseminated and engaged with by other philosophers.

Shy but eccentric, largely autodidactic and wildly creative, Cavendish developed her own unique philosophical system while engaging with the philosophies of Hobbes, Descartes, J.B. van Helmont and Bacon, among others. She published a huge amount of written work, under her own name, about chemistry, biology, politics, religion, the habits of insects, and much more. But most of her energy is devoted to natural philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology, the bulk of which is contained in her *Philosophical Letters* (1664), *Observations on Experimental Philosophy* (1666), and the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668) (taken in part on her 1655/1663 *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*). Among the most interesting doctrines found in those works are that nature is composed entirely of matter which is self-moving, sensitive and rational; a materialism that is impressively thoroughgoing; a complex and subtle explanatory

holism; and an account of perception by patterning, which, since matter is sensitive and rational, also serves as a model for causation between bodies.

If what you like from your historical philosophers is a grand system, a dazzling vision, a surprising way of seeing the world, coupled with some elegant and some extremely weird arguments, then Cavendish is happy to oblige. But Cavendish's unedited style can be difficult to navigate, and her arguments can be very spread out: for example, an argument that matter is self-moving shows up in a section entitled "Of the Beard of a Wild Oat." Cunning's book has a useful format, especially for those who are new to Cavendish and who would like to teach her work (great idea!): for a number of central topics, Cuning provides a variety of passages so you can get a quick sense of Cavendish's approach to them.

Cuning also does a lot of thoughtful and creative digesting and reconstructing. He has wagered that it will help make Cavendish accessible to new readers to put her into dialogue with more familiar characters from the history of philosophy. This includes not only people who clearly influenced her, like Descartes, Hobbes, and More, but also philosophers who did not, many of whom lived and wrote after Cavendish did. Beware that Cuning, trusting his readers' erudition, does not always flag whether Cavendish *could* have been influenced by a given figure. While this is all right for Bertrand Russell, it is maybe more dangerous for Hume and Berkeley, and I think it is worth emphasizing, for example, that she developed robust arguments against abstraction *before* Berkeley made "one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that have been made in late years in the republic of letters."ⁱ

As many further examples attest, Cuning approaches Cavendish with a stock of questions, concepts, approaches and distinctions gathered from his years of deep philosophical engagement with other early modern figures. This is especially useful for those who want to

seamlessly integrate Cavendish into their courses without changing their focus. At the same time, it can sometimes have the effect of obscuring what in my opinion are Cavendish's real views.

As an example, in Chapter 1, Cuning introduces what he describes as Cavendish's "theory of ideas", arguing that Cavendish explains all thought in terms of imagistic ideas. As Deborah Boyle has pointed outⁱⁱ, Cavendish almost never uses the word "idea" when she is describing her own views. Instead she really only uses it when refuting sensible species and Platonism. This gloss on Cavendish leads to what I think is an over-assimilation to Hume ("Cavendish subscribes to a version of the doctrine that we find later in Hume that all ideas are copies of impressions"(35), "Cavendish does not suppose that we encounter anything like necessities in our experience" (27)). In the rest of that chapter, Cuning emphasizes Cavendish's epistemic humility, citing passage like this: "Nature being so subtle and curious, as no particular can trace her ways" (31). Cuning beautifully explains this as an expression of her desire to "instill in us a respect and admiration for entities that might otherwise come to seem familiar, contemptuous, and mundane" (31). But while I agree that Cavendish wants to instill humility and wonder, she is also incurably curious, and herself given to quite wild and sometimes breathtakingly confident speculations about the causes and grounds of natural phenomena. And while Cuning is right that Cavendish is a "fallibilist" about knowledge, that does not mean that "our best explanations are not particularly explanatory" (21) or that "there is much that is brute" (15); I am also skeptical that her interest in natural philosophical speculation is quite as guided by practical concerns as Cuning suggests it is (32).

Later in Chapter 1, Cuning nicely highlights the ways in which Cavendish "trusts the senses" (37-41). Those passages, as Cuning notes, support the claim not only that the senses

are in general veridical but also that the *unaided* senses are veridical in contrast to assisted sense perception (38). The rest of the section elaborates how Cavendish might respond to external world skepticism, although Cunning does acknowledge that “she nowhere attempts to refute skepticism about waking sensory perceptions” (38). Cunning goes on to use Hume, Reid, Descartes and Spinoza to develop what he takes to be a Cavendishian response to the question of external world skepticism, in a discussion that is very useful, especially if you are exercised by external world skepticism.

In Chapter 2, “Thinking Matter”, Cunning describes the powers that matter has, motivating it as a solution to a familiar problem, that of mind-body interaction. Later on, this chapter contains one of my favorite sections, and one that hews closer to Cavendish’s own words and concerns. Drawing on his earlier work (2006’s “Cavendish on the intelligibility of the prospect of thinking matter”), Cunning provides a careful treatment of Cavendish’s motivation for believing that matter thinks, accompanied by a helpful comparison of Cavendish with Henry More, with whom Cavendish was in dialogue. Cunning contrasts in detail the approach of each to the inadequacies of inanimate matter, and to the relationship between natural order and intelligence. He argues, rightly I think, that Cavendish does think that intelligence is a precondition for order, but not the intelligence of something that transcends matter, so that “bodies bring about their own order” (72). There are still more questions to be answered about *how* they do this, but Cunning’s chapter provides a very insightful and comprehensive launchpad for future scholarship on this issue.

On pages 72-73, Cunning has a very nice discussion of Cavendish’s claim that, to explain natural phenomena, matter must have sense and reason. He writes there that Cavendish would agree with Leibniz’s later mill argument, that “there is no way to make sense of how unthinking

bodies could combine together and form a composite that thinks and perceives.” Her solution, Cunning suggests, is that mentality must be already among the immediate properties of matter. But I think this is a statement of a challenge for Cavendish, not a solution. For Cavendish has an analogous problem: how do “sense” and “reason”, understood as properties of matter, generate sense and reason, understood as macroscopic mentalistic phenomena? Cavendish appeals to “sensitive” and “rational” motions, and says that ideas are so many corporeal figurative motions. So sometimes she seems to think that mentality can be explained at least in part *structurally* in precisely the way that Leibniz is resisting.

After grappling admirably in Chapter 3 with how Cavendish squares her aspects of her theism with her natural philosophy and epistemology, which sometimes seem to leave little room for God, Cuning moves on in Chapter 4 - “The Eternal Plenum” - to discuss Cavendish’s matter theory. As the title suggests, Cuning sees Cavendish’s plenism as extremely significant. It is worth flagging for the newcomer that Cavendish herself does not seem to invest it with as much importance, and that Cuning uses the claim that nature is a plenum as more-or-less interchangeable with the claim that nature is deterministic. Now, I think there is a real question as to whether nature *is* deterministic for Cavendish - see, for example, Karen Detlefsen’s discussion of this.ⁱⁱⁱ But even if it is, as Colin Chamberlain has made clear in discussion^{iv}, it is not obvious that plenism, especially given Cavendish’s account of motion transfer, entails determinism, and Cavendish herself does not make any attempt to support deterministic claims by appealing to the jostlings of packed bodies. In a related point, made earlier in Chapter 2, Cuning takes pains to argue that “interaction is always by contact...there is no action at a distance” (58), providing a few suggestive passages. But despite these passages, and others where Cavendish discusses the necessity of a medium in vision, I think there is very little

evidence for Cunning's claim that interaction requires contact, and there is more to suggest that she does not - as Marcy Lascano and Jon Shaheen have also recently pointed out in conversation.

Despite the fact that I don't think that it is tightly related to the fact that Cavendish thinks that nature is a plenum, Cunning's discussion of the interdependence of the parts of nature is very valuable, as is the next section, on bodily individuation. In those sections, Cunning nicely brings out how central to Cavendish's philosophy is the delicate balance between, on the one hand, respect for the deep dependence that she thinks the parts of nature have on each other and on the whole, and, on the other, the intrinsic qualities that individual bodies have that seem to play important causal roles in the fundamental phenomena of nature. Given the importance of this theme to Spinoza's metaphysics of nature, Cunning's comparison of the two is apt, but I think that his claim that Cavendish thinks that individual bodies are those that "retain a quantity of motion" (157) or "fixed proportion of motion" (151) is undermotivated.

More generally, many of Cunning's claims raise the question: what *is* motion, for Cavendish - and, for that matter, what is matter? (Not to mention the even more difficult question: what is a 'corporeal figurative motion'?, which phrase Cavendish prefers to 'matter' or 'motion' alone.) Cunning acknowledges that "it is very important that we locate her definition of matter" (50), which he offers is "three-dimensional substance that exhibits qualities like size, shape, motion, resistance, life, animation and intelligence" (50). I think this is right as far as it goes, but it raises some further questions. First: more needs to be said about what 'motion', 'animation', 'intelligence' and 'resistance' are. Second: Cavendish's use of the word 'matter' is somewhat equivocal. Sometimes it refers to the totality of matter, in which inanimate and animate matter are completely blended. On this use, it is a name for the whole of nature. Other times 'matter' refers to the stuff that makes up nature. Used in the first way, it makes sense to

say that matter has motion, animation, or whatever. Used in the second way, though, it may not. Third: we know that all matter is extended, and that it has life and self-knowledge. And we know that animate matter has self-motion. But we still don't know what matter *is*, for Cavendish. That is, we do not know what its essential properties are, as opposed to what are, say, its universal accidents.

These are just a few questions about matter, but Cunniff and I agree that these are fair questions to put to Cavendish. But it turns out we do not agree whether similarly probing questions about motion are fair to put to Cavendish. Given the explanatory role that motion seems to play in her natural philosophy - it is the source of all change, variety and "natural effects" - it seems to me even more important to figure out what motion *is*, for Cavendish. It is clear from his book that Cunniff does not think that this is important, but in later discussions, Cunniff has argued further that Cavendish does not think that we can give an answer, or even that we should try. Drawing on his claims in Chapter 1 that Cavendish is clear that we should keep our pretensions to knowledge within certain limits, Cunniff argues that "she doesn't in fact define the very basic terms of her system" because "she thinks if we wait until there is a pristine and settled view on the nature of things like matter, motion, properties, etc., we will never be able to make headway on matters of great importance." In amusing support of this, Cunniff offers the following quote:

[T]here are none that are more intemperate, than Philosophers; first, in their vain Imaginations of Nature; next, in the difficult and nice Rules of Morality: So that this kind of Study kills all the Industrious Inventions that are beneficial and easie for the Life of Man, and makes one fit only to dye, and not to live. Yet this kind of Study is not wholly to be neglected, but used so much as to ballast a Man, though not to fix him; for, Natural

Philosophy is to be used as a Delight and Recreation in Mens Studies, as Poetry is, since they are both but Fictions, and not a fit Labour in Man's Life. Many Men make their Study their Grave, and bury themselves before they are dead.^v

Cavendish's epistemically moderate moments (which usually happen when she is criticizing *other* philosophers) are about as frequent as ones expressing her faith in her own natural sense and reason (more frequent when she herself is doing the speculating), and so it seems to me that choosing one or another general stance when dealing with a specific question is a matter of interpretive license. But in the case of motion, I think it is clear that Cavendish thinks there are many questions we can ask about its nature, even if it is not analyzable into more basic notions. For one, she provides a careful analysis of the notion of place, denying that motion is change of place and that it is a mode of body. She comments - subtly, critically, and at length - on the theories of motion of Descartes, Hobbes, and More. I actually think that motion *is* analyzable into more basic notions, for Cavendish, but even if I'm wrong, I think these are fair questions to put to her, and ones that she has the resources to address in an interesting way.

In Chapter 5, Cunning discusses the sense in which nature is one thinking being. This chapter includes a very nice section elucidating an important theme for Cavendish: the (value-laden) distinction between nature and artifice. Cunning dives back into the plenum in Chapter 6 to figure out how Cavendish squares what he sees as her plenum-related determinism with claims about free action; he argues in that chapter that she is a compatibilist about free will. This chapter is noteworthy for the welcome use it makes of Cavendish's plays and poems to speak to her natural philosophy. They play a central role in Chapter 7, too, where Cunning argues that Cavendish believes that when we find ourselves trapped on all sides by the plenum, we can beat a 'retreat' to our imaginations: "...a life that includes a rich does of fantasy has a better chance of

yielding pleasure than a life in which we rely for pleasure on the behavior of the bodies that surround us” (254). The discussion is filled with interesting material that a casual reader, focused only on Cavendish’s speculative philosophy, would miss. Finally, in Chapter 8, Cuning provides an introduction Cavendish’s social and political philosophy, also focusing on her poetic and literary works.

Cuning’s study is impressively broad, addressing Cavendish’s views on many philosophical questions and drawing on a wide range of materials. It is clearly structured in a way that makes it easy to read and to use. It places Cavendish in dialogue with questions and figures that are familiar from the broader philosophical tradition, so that it is very valuable for integrating Cavendish into, say, the debates over external-world skepticism or mind-body interaction. And it starts new discussions by treating Cavendish on some new topics. I think that when it comes to Cavendish’s metaphysics and natural philosophy, some of Cavendish’s more original contributions to the theory of matter and motion get lost in Cuning’s analysis. That is in part because of the lens of epistemic modesty through which he views her claims, treating them as bedrock for her in a way that I think they are not, and in part because of Cuning’s use of other philosophers to clarify Cavendish’s positions. But that I or others working on Cavendish disagree with Cuning about the meaning of some of those passages or about general interpretive points is to be expected. To have books advancing provocative theses about figures like Cavendish is what is needed, and Cuning has provided much fodder for future conversations and debates about the meaning of Cavendish’s philosophy.

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ⁱ Hume, David. *Treatise of Human Nature* Book I, Part 1, Section 7.

ⁱⁱ In a recent Author Meets Critics session, discussing Cunning's book, at the 2017 Pacific Division Meeting of the APA.

ⁱⁱⁱ Detlefsen, Karen. (2007). "Reason and Freedom: Margaret Cavendish on the Order and Disorder of Nature." *Archiv f. Gesch. d. Philosophy* 89, 157-191.

^{iv} At the recent Author Meets Critics session at the 2017 Pacific Division Meeting of the APA.

^v *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), p. 161. See also Cunning's informative article on Cavendish in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.