

## CHAPTER 6

## Margaret Cavendish on Human Beings

*Marcy P. Lascano and Eric Schliesser*

Margaret Cavendish is a vitalist, materialist, and monist. She holds that human beings and other natural kinds are parts of the one material entity she calls “nature.” While she thinks that human beings may not be superior to other animals in many ways, she does think that human beings have a type of knowledge and perception that is unique to their kind, that they strive for the continuance of their being, and that they join together into societies in order to achieve a more peaceful existence. In what follows, we will give a brief overview of Cavendish’s metaphysics of nature, and then turn to her metaphysics of human beings. We will consider the formation of human beings, how their perception and knowledge differ from other non-human animals, how human beings are individuated, and in what sense they can be immortal. Finally, we will turn to her social and political views of human beings. In the end, we will argue, contra

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current scholarship,<sup>1</sup> that Cavendish’s views about the social nature of the human beings mirror her views about the metaphysical structure of nature. In particular, we show that Cavendish embraces *both* natural and social hierarchy as well as a form of sexual equality that we dub “Platonic feminism.”

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### THE METAPHYSICS OF NATURE

Cavendish holds that everything in nature is material and there is nothing outside of nature. Cavendish’s ontology has two levels: The constituent (or essential) parts of matter (the whole of which she refers to as “nature”), and the composed parts of nature, which are the individuals within this whole. It is helpful to think of her two levels of ontology as similar to our current conceptions of the physical world, which has a subatomic level, with material entities that are invisible to our perception (which is analogous to Cavendish’s constituent matter) and are the building blocks of the level of the macroscopic objects of our everyday experiences. These macro-level objects are the objects Cavendish would call the composed parts of nature.

Constituent matter is infinite, and in it we can discern three “degrees,” “sorts,” “types,” or “kinds” of matter: rational animate matter, sensitive animate matter, and inanimate matter.<sup>2</sup> Cavendish is pretty clear that while these degrees of matter can be divided into animate and inanimate matter, we should not think of them as two (or three) distinct and separate things. She insists that there is only one matter. In what respect are they degrees? It makes a lot of intuitive sense to think of degrees of

<sup>1</sup> See, especially, Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). We engage at length with Boyle’s work because she has offered the first sustained philosophical interpretation of Cavendish’s views of social and political matters in light of her metaphysics.

<sup>2</sup> Cavendish also sometimes says “parts,” but because that word has contemporary meanings that Cavendish would reject, we avoid using it here.

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density. We might, for instance, think of inanimate matter as the most dense, heavy, and material, and rational matter as the subtlest, lightest sort of matter possible. On this account, there would be a continuum of density within matter. And Cavendish does sometimes talk this way. For instance, in *Philosophical Letters* (PL), she writes: “the truth is, the purity of reason is not so perspicuous and plain to sense, as sense is to reason, the sensitive matter being a grosser substance than the rational.”<sup>3</sup> However, in *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish clarifies her position.<sup>4</sup> She writes: “but, pray mistake me not, when I say, the Inanimate Parts are grosser; as if I meant, they were like some densed Creature; for, those are but Effects, and not Causes: but, I mean gross, dull, heavy Parts, as, that they are not Self-moving; nor do I mean by Purity, Rarity; but Agility: for, Rare or Dense Parts, are Effects, and not Causes: And therefore, if any should ask, Whether the Rational and Sensitive Parts were Rare, or Dense; I answer, They may be Rare or Dense, according as they contract, or dilate their Parts (GNP 5). Here, Cavendish makes clear that the sense in which rational, sensitive, and inanimate matter are degrees is in the sense not of degrees of density (familiar, say, from Descartes’s natural philosophy) but in degrees of motion. According to Cavendish, density and rarity are *effects* of motion. So any bits of matter can be dense or rare depending on their current motions. However, when we think of the essence or nature of the constituent degrees of matter, we see that rational matter is the most agile—she sometimes says “freer”—and the inanimate matter does not move itself at all but is merely moved by the sensitive matter. So the continuum of matter is from the fastest moving and most free (unencumbered) to the merely moved and least free degree.

<sup>3</sup> Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters: or, Modest Reflections Upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy, maintained By several Famous and Learned Authors of this Age . . .* (London, 1664), 449. Cited as PL followed by page number.

<sup>4</sup> Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy: Divided into Thirteen Parts: With an Appendix containing Five Parts* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1996). Cited as GNP followed by page number.

The animate degrees of matter—rational and sensitive—are self-moving. However, inanimate matter is merely moved by sensitive matter. This slows sensitive matter down a bit. Cavendish calls the inanimate matter a “burden” that reduces the agility of sensitive matter. She provides an analogy for how the sensitive moves the inanimate—it does so as a horse moves a rider, or a hand moves a stick. In these cases, we are to imagine that the rider and the stick are not moving themselves but are carried along by the movement of the horse and hand, respectively. The three degrees, due to their respective types of motion, have different functions within the hierarchically organized whole of matter. She writes: “for as in the exstruction of a house there is first required an architect or surveyor, who orders and designs the building, and puts the labourers to work; next the labourers or workmen themselves; and lastly the materials of which the house is built: so the rational part, said they, in the framing of natural effects, is, as it were, the surveyor or architect; the sensitive, the labouring or working part; and the inanimate, the materials: and all these degrees are necessarily required in every composed action of nature.”<sup>5</sup> The rational degree of matter functions as the architect or designing parts directing the sensitive degree of matter, which works along with the inanimate matter to compose the actions of a being. Cavendish claims that these degrees of matter are in “complete mixture.” What does Cavendish tell us about complete mixture? One thing she says is this: “for there is such a commixture of animate and inanimate matter, that no particle in Nature can be conceived or imagined, which is not composed of animate matter as well as of inanimate” (OEP 158). Cavendish holds (like Descartes) that matter is infinitely divisible, so there is actually no smallest particle of matter, but she notes that this commixture implies that every degree of matter is contained in every bit of matter, even in,

<sup>5</sup> Cavendish, “Argumental Discourse,” in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1668), ed. E. O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 24. Cited as OEP followed by page number. See also OEP 156–57, 181, PL 423–25, 530–31, and GNP 50–52.

were it possible, the smallest atom.<sup>6</sup> She writes: “since Nature consists of a commixture of animate and inanimate matter, and is self-moving, there can be no part or particle of this composed body of Nature, were it an Atome, that may be call’d Inanimate, by reason there is none that has not its share of animate, as well as inanimate matter, and the commixture of these degrees being so close, it is impossible one should be without the other” (OEP 16). Cavendish also tells us that “Infinite Matter in itself and its own essence is simple and homogeneous” (OEP 199). So the doctrine is that the three degrees are blended in such a way that all three degrees are found in any given portion of matter, and in such a way that any proportionality between the degrees is maintained throughout. We may think of this complete blending as similar to a homogeneous mixture that we find in chemistry. In such mixtures, two or more substances are combined so that the same proportions of the components are maintained throughout any given sample and are such that each substance retains its own chemical identity. Chemical bonds between the components are neither broken nor formed, although new physical properties may result from the mixture. Likewise, Cavendish maintains that although all three degrees are completely blended, each maintains its own degree of motion and freedom.

Cavendish explicitly says that there is infinite animate matter and infinite inanimate matter. But she does not say anywhere (that we have found) that there is more of one degree than another, even though the analogies she uses to discuss the three degrees would certainly lead one to believe that she thinks that there is more sensitive than rational matter and perhaps more inanimate matter than animate matter. Consider her frequently repeated claim that the three degrees of matter are analogous to an architect or designer, workmen, and the materials for building a house. The rational is the designer, the sensitive is the

<sup>6</sup> See Jonathan Shaheen, “Part of Nature and Division in Margaret Cavendish’s Materialism,” *Synthese* 196 (2019): 3551–75, for an argument that Descartes and Cavendish have different views about the nature of matter.

builders, and the inanimate is the materials on which they work.<sup>7</sup> It seems, at least, from experience, that we understand that in this hierarchical order there are more builders than designers, and more materials than builders. If this is how Cavendish understands the proportionality of degrees of matter, then we have reason to think that although there is infinite animate matter and infinite inanimate matter, there is “more” inanimate matter than animate matter, and more sensitive matter than rational matter. We can understand this sense of “more” in the same way we can say that there are infinite real numbers and infinite rational numbers, yet there are more real than rational numbers—infinitely many more.

As we have said, Cavendish holds that rational and sensitive matter are self-moving (animate), and then there is inanimate matter. That some matter is self-moving seems to be a brute fact for Cavendish. There is no deeper explanation for why some matter is self-moving other than that self-motion is the best possible explanation for the variety and change we observe in the world. However, Cavendish does spend a fair amount of time explaining why some matter is not self-moving. Recall that Cavendish holds that the degrees of matter are degrees of motion. When she provides justification for the existence of motionless matter, she argues that it is necessary to balance matter. Without inanimate matter, the sensitive matter might move as quickly as the rational matter, and all things would happen “in an instant.” Cavendish holds that rational and sensitive matter just are reason and sense, both of which she thinks are immediate in our experience. If our thoughts and perceptions were not slowed by inanimate matter, all motion in the world would happen instantaneously. “This triumvirate of the degrees of matter . . . is so necessary to balance and poise nature’s actions, that otherwise the creatures which nature produces, would all be produced alike, and in an instant” (OEP 25–26). Thoughts and

<sup>7</sup> For the architect analogy, see PL 151–52; OEP 99; and GNP 61.

perceptions happen quickly; however, things in the world seem to have a sort of permanence, as well as a growth and decay cycle that cannot fully be accounted for by the swift motions of sense and reason. In order for the world to exhibit the sort of permanence and steady, or relatively steady, figures that it does, Cavendish holds that there must be some matter that does not move by itself but is only moved by other matter, which in turn slows down that matter that must carry this burden with it.

Through the complete mixture of the three degrees of matter we get bodies that are self-moving, self-knowing, and perceptive. Since every part of nature is essentially minded, Cavendish is committed to panpsychism: universal mindedness. Why does she hold that every part of nature is sensitive and rational? She maintains that without sense there can be no motion and without reason there can be no orderly motion. Since we know by experience that there is such orderly motion in the world, we have reason to believe that every part of nature is minded. She writes: “that every part has not only sensitive, but also rational matter, is evident, not only by the bare motion in every part of nature, which cannot be without sense, for wheresoever is motion there’s sense; but also by the regular, harmonious, and well-ordered actions of nature, which clearly demonstrates, that there must needs be reason as well as sense, in every part and particle of nature; for there can be no order, method, or harmony, especially such as appears in the actions of nature, without there to be reason to cause that order and harmony” (OEP 207). The orderly self-motion of nature shows that nature is sensitive and rational in all her parts. For it is impossible that the infinite degrees of nature would move in a harmonious way without “knowing how, wither, or why to move” (OEP 207).<sup>8</sup>

The underlying intuition can be explained by way of the Cartesian physics she rejects. In Descartes’s physics every body preserves its state

<sup>8</sup> This is the same language Hobbes uses when he speaks of the voluntary actions of human beings.

unless deflected from it by another body. But the state that is preserved is rectilinear. One may well wonder how an inert body “knows” to preserve the state of a straight line, not to mention what such directionality amounts to in a plenum without any fixed points. Descartes does not explain, and it is hard to see how he can explain, such questions.<sup>9</sup> So, in light of lack of explanatory resources in a mechanical philosophy, it is quite natural to think that observed order must be, in part, a consequence of the constituent-level entities having knowledge of their own current motions as well as the motions of the parts adjoining them. (This is a form of innate self-knowledge for Cavendish.) This allows bits of matter to adjust to other bits of matter in virtue of being sensitive to each other’s presence and, thereby, indirectly to the whole universe’s order.<sup>10</sup>

While Cavendish holds that nature produces generally harmonious effects due to the cooperation of the rational and sensitive parts, she also thinks that self-motion and the infinite divisibility of matter are causes of variety and irregularity in the world. “For though the several changes of motion, and different shapes or figures of several creatures, strive to make disturbance and discord, yet the matter being one in it self, makes peace and concord”.<sup>11</sup> Disorder, according to Cavendish, is as natural as order. It is necessary for variety in the world. Thus, because nature is self-moving, it is capable of division and disruption, which causes variety, but because nature is also rational, there is a large degree of regularity in the whole of nature. Cavendish can hereby dispense with laws of nature and, thereby, with a God that commands or

<sup>9</sup> A related problem shows up in Descartes’s collision laws, where some quantity is preserved through the collision, and somehow the second body “knows” to adjust accordingly. Spinoza seems to have discerned similar problems in Descartes, see Schliesser, Eric. “Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science: Mathematics, Motion, and Being,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 184.

<sup>10</sup> The underlying insight here is close to Boyle’s version, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 93. However, we reject the strong normativity that Boyle claims for rules of nature.

<sup>11</sup> *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1655), significantly altered 2nd ed. (London, 1663), 11.

is the source of them. Cavendish often describes nature as balanced and poised. This balance between composition and division maintains nature as one continuous matter.

The self-motions of nature include composing and dividing, contracting and dilating, respiration and emission, perception, and so on. While Cavendish says there are infinite motions at the composed level, she seems to mean infinitely many particular motions rather than types of motions. In fact, it seems that there are really only four primary types of motion for Cavendish (the rest being modifications of these): the most basic and often mentioned is composition, but division, contraction, and dilation also play significant roles in her later philosophical writings. She writes: “and the chief actions of nature, are composition and division, which produce all the variety of nature” (OEP ~~XXXV.13,~~ 140). According to Cavendish, every act of composition is also an act of division, that is, every time a part divides from one part, it joins to another. (There is no vacuum.)<sup>12</sup> Composition and division are how individuals are composed.

### *Human Beings and Other Individuals*

When parts compose and move as one, we get a particular individual, like a human being or plant. She writes:

but, what we call finite parts, are nothing else but several corporeal figurative motions, which make all the difference that is between the figures or parts of nature, both in their kinds, sorts, and particulars. And thus finite and particular parts are all one, called thus, by reason they have limited and circumscribed figures, by which they are discerned from each other; but not single figures, for they are all joined in one body, and are parts, of the one infinite whole, which is

<sup>12</sup> “Thus it remains firm, that self-motion is the only cause of the various parts and changes of figures; and that when parts move or separate themselves from parts, they move and join to other parts, at the same point of time” (OEP 127).

nature; and these figures being all one and the same with their parts of matter, change according as their parts change, that is, by composition and division. (OEP 31)

That is to say, for Cavendish, the existence of finite entities as finite is, in a certain sense, an epistemic consequence of their limitation and the existence of cognizing beings (which are finite, and so on). Cavendish here echoes Platonist doctrines that finite beings are really only one entity because they are emanated from a single source. For Cavendish, boundaries serve an epistemic role in the perceptions of limited beings like us. While there are determinate figures in motions that we acknowledge as natural kinds, these individuals are also, and more fundamentally, parts of the whole of nature.

We can see now that human beings result from the movements of matter determining certain circumscribed figures and motions—those of a human being. For Cavendish, human beings are one of the many natural kinds we find in nature.

Cavendish believes that the matter of human beings is held together by sympathetic motions and love. All of nature generally exhibits sympathetic motions both within one composed body and between composed bodies. She writes: “an influence is this; when as the corporeal figurative motions, in different kinds, and sorts of creatures, or in one and the same sorts, or kinds, move sympathetically: And though there be antipathetical motions, as well as sympathetical; yet, all the infinite parts of matter, are agreeable in their nature, as being all material, and self-moving; and by reason there is no vacuum, there must of necessity be an influence amongst all the parts of nature” (GNP 15–16). She argues that the parts of nature, being one whole, naturally have a sympathetic unity. She writes: “Nature may use more or less force as she pleases: Also she can and doth often use opposite actions, and often sympathetical and agreeable actions, as she pleases; for Nature having a free power to move, may move as she will; but being wise, she moves as she thinks best, either in her separating or uniting motions,

for continuance, as well as for variety” (PL 214). Every part of nature has not only self-motion and self-knowledge but also self-love, which results from this motion and knowledge. Passionate love, which Cavendish glosses as *desire* or *sympathetical motion*, is something that occurs between parts and is the bond that holds them together. Her account of sympathetic motions is in keeping with traditional accounts of sympathy, which claim that such sympathy only holds among entities that share a (fundamental) likeness.<sup>13</sup>

Parts of individuals, which Cavendish calls a “society,” like human beings, have passionate love for one another as a result of their unity. “Passionate Love belongs to several Parts; so that the several parts of one society, as one creature, have both passionate love, and self-love, as being sympathetically united in one society: Also, not only the parts of one and the same society, may have passionate love to each other; but, between several societies; and not only several societies of one sort, but of different sorts” (GNP 68). The composition and structure of a human being enables powers and abilities that are different from those of minerals, plants, or other animals. According to Cavendish, different types of interior motions, which are the motions that determine the figure (structure), nature, and powers, or faculties, of an entity, cause different exterior motions, which are those motions that are the perceptible features of an entity. Each type of figure and structure also causes the particular sort of perceptive capacities and knowledge that is associated with that natural kind. She writes:

this knowledge differs according to the nature of each figure or creature; for I do not mean that this sense and knowledge I speak of, is only an animal sense and knowledge, as some have misinterpreted; for animal sense and knowledge is but particular, and belongs only to that sort of creatures which are animals; but I mean such sense and

<sup>13</sup> See the discussion of the so-called likeness principle in Eric Schliesser, “Introduction: On Sympathy,” in *Sympathy: A History*, ed. E. Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–14.

knowledge as is proper to the nature of each figure: so that animal creatures have animal sense and knowledge; vegetables, a vegetative sense and knowledge; minerals, a mineral sense and knowledge; and so for the rest of all kinds and sorts of creatures. (OEP 207)

There are two types of knowledge, according to Cavendish.<sup>14</sup> First, as already mentioned, every bit of matter in nature has self-knowledge, which is an immediate knowledge of the motions, shape, organization, and perceptive capacities it currently has. She writes: “as infinite nature has an infinite self-motion and self-knowledge; so every part and particle has a particular and finite self-motion and self-knowledge, by which it knows itself, and its own actions, and perceives also other parts and actions” (OEP 138). Cavendish calls self-knowledge the foundation of all other knowledge since the type of perception a thing has depends upon its current motion, shape, organization, and capacities. Given that any bit of matter could be associated with any number of kinds of beings, every bit of matter must know what its current figure and motion is. For instance, matter that, due to sympathetic motions, is shaped human eye-wise, will have the capacity to perceive objects at a distance. Likewise, a worm’s perceptive abilities differ from a human being’s perceptive abilities. But since any given bit of matter is capable of belonging at some point to a worm and at some other time to a human, it must know what it is now. She writes: “and as the figures and parts alter by their compositions and divisions, so do both interior and exterior particular knowledges: for a tree, although it has sensitive and rational knowledge and perception, yet it has not an animal knowledge and perception; and if it should be divided into numerous parts, and these again be composed with other parts, each would have such knowledge and perception, as the nature of their figure required”

<sup>14</sup> We should note that by “knowledge” Cavendish does not mean Cartesian certainty; rather she holds that knowledge of the external world comes in degrees of certainty, with the highest certainty being obtained by self-knowledge and through “regular” perception, which in the case of human beings, is accurate patterning.

(OEP 170–71). The other type of knowledge that human beings have is knowledge of exterior objects. This knowledge is gained through the sensitive and rational parts “patterning” themselves in accordance with external objects. Patterning is a type of occasional causation where the exterior sensory organs of a creature map the exterior motions of an object.<sup>15</sup> In patterning, information is transferred from the creature’s sensory organs to the interior of the creature (brain and heart), and this causes the creature to move in accordance with its own interior nature in response to the exterior movements of the object.<sup>16</sup> Cavendish tells us that we cannot be certain that the perception of nonhuman animals works in the same way as that of human animals. However, she believes that it is likely that other animals perceive via patterning.

### *Freedom and the Afterlife*

As we have said, according to Cavendish, human beings are composed by motions and held in union by sympathetic motions and agreements. One question that arises from the notion of parts being in agreement is whether composed parts, like human beings, are free with respect to their movements and actions. Here, there is a fair amount of scholarly debate. David Cunning writes: “Cavendish supposes that the bodies of nature tend to be free, but her understanding of freedom is wholly

<sup>15</sup> Occasional causation occurs when a body or object, rather than efficiently causing an effect in a second body or object, merely acts as an occasion for the second body or object to affect a change in itself in accordance with the occasional cause.

<sup>16</sup> We can use an example to demonstrate how perception works in human beings. Imagine we are looking at a cat. Cavendish claims that a human being cannot know the interior motions of the cat but can know *that* the cat has its own interior motions, which are the reason why it has the shape and capacities it has. However, all we can perceive of the cat are its exterior motions. This includes its shape, size, color, outward motion, texture, etc. As humans, we have interior motions that determine the shapes of our eyes and our ability to see as we do (as well as the capacities of our other senses). When we perceive the exterior motions of the cat, we pattern these motions through our perceptive senses, and this information is carried into our brains. The cat does not emit particles or come into contact with us in any way during the perception of sight. The cat is an occasional cause of the self-motion of our perceptive organs. In cases of occasional causation, there is no need for contact between the occasional cause (the cat) and the efficient cause (our sensory organs). In fact, it often does not involve contact at all.

compatibilist,”<sup>17</sup> that is, she holds that human freedom is compatible with deterministic laws of nature. Cunning argues that the possible motions within nature are fixed, and so all the bodies in nature have no alternative to the motions they in fact have. He notes that for Cavendish “what it is for a body to be free is for it to move in accord with its interests and goals without interference.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Cunning argues that Cavendish’s account of freedom is very much like that of Thomas Hobbes—it is freedom of action. Karen Detlefsen has argued that Cavendish’s account of occasional causation requires a libertarian account of freedom, where human beings are able to do other than they in fact do, since the perceiver is the “principal agent” and must be free to initiate the patterns of external objects or not.<sup>19</sup> Deborah Boyle has recently argued that “treating freedom as a fundamental feature of both the natural order and human relationships can distort, and perhaps overly idealize, Cavendish’s views.”<sup>20</sup> Boyle correctly notes that Cavendish very rarely mentions freedom and nowhere provides a detailed account of human freedom, saying that she will leave such matters up to “Divines to decide it” (PL 225). However, Boyle goes on to argue for a libertarian account of freedom based on both textual evidence and claims that Cavendish’s natural philosophy requires such an account of freedom in order to make sense of irregularities in nature.<sup>21</sup>

In brief, we are inclined to the compatibilist reading of freedom in Cavendish’s natural philosophy, and we maintain that all that is required for the consistency of Cavendish’s views concerning causation and social structure is her account of voluntary action, which she frequently repeats. She writes, for example: “by voluntary actions I understand self actions; that is such actions whose principle of motion is

<sup>17</sup> David Cunning, *Cavendish* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 212.

<sup>18</sup> Cunning, *Cavendish*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> Karen Detlefsen, “Atomism, Monism, and Causation in the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 3 (2006): 199–240.

<sup>20</sup> Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, chap. 4.

within themselves, and doth not proceed from such an exterior agent, as doth the motion of the inanimate part of matter” (“Argumental Discourse,” in OEP, 19). Both at the constituent level and the composed level, there is self-moving matter. Since all the parts at the composed level of bodies are completely blended and every part contains self-moving matter, it is fair to say that human beings have self-action and so voluntary action. This is not to say, however, that it is possible for human beings to act whatever way they please, for it seems clear that the motions of nature are constrained to a large degree.<sup>22</sup> As Cavendish writes, “though every self-moving Part, or Corporeal Motion, have *free-will* to move after what manner they please; yet, by reason there can be no single Parts, several Parts unite in one Action, and so there must be united Actions: for, though every particular Part may divide from particular Parts; yet those that divide from some, are *necessitated* to join with other Parts, at the same point of time of division . . . so that Division, and Composition or Joining, is as one and the same act” (GNP 6, emphasis added).<sup>23</sup>

Cavendish’s discussion of the possibility of resurrection also contains her most straightforward account of individuation and identity over time. This discussion occurs in two sections of the Appendix to

22 “For, it is well to be observed, that there is a stint or proportion in all nature’s corporeal figurative motions, to wit, in her particulars, as we may plainly see in every particular sort or species of creatures, and their constant and orderly productions; for though particular creatures may change into an infinite variety of figures, by the infinite variety of nature’s corporeal figurative motions; yet each kind or sort is stinted so much, as it cannot run into extremes, nor make a confusion, although it make a distinguishment between every particular creature, even in one and the same sort. *And hence we may conclude, that nature is neither absolutely necessitated, nor has an absolute free will:* for, she is so much necessitated, that she depends upon the all powerful God, and cannot work beyond herself, or beyond her own nature; and yet hath so much liberty, that in her particulars she works as she pleaseth, and as God has given her power; but she being wise, acts according to her infinite natural wisdom, which is the cause of her orderly government in all particular productions, changes and dissolutions; so that all creatures in their particular kinds, do move and work as nature pleases, orders and directs,” OEP 108–9, emphasis added.

23 Boyle claims that Cavendish uses the term “free-will” to indicate libertarian freedom as opposed to her use of the term “free” where she may mean mere self-motion. See Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, chap. 4. For criticism, see Marcy Lascano, “*The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*,” by Deborah Boyle,” *Mind* 128 (2019), 260–68.

the *Grounds*. Here, she considers the question “*Whether all the particular parts of every human creature, at the time of the Resurrection, be, to meet and joyn, as being of one and the same society?*” (GNP 259). She answers with a yes. She first considers whether human beings would be resurrected with the body of their “most perfect age.” However, she sees problems with this account. She writes: “if a dead child did rise a man, as at his most perfect age, it could not be said, he rises according to a natural man, having more parts than by nature he ever had; and an old man, fewer parts than naturally he hath had: So, what by adding and diminishing the parts of particular men, it would not cause only injustice; but not any particular human creature, would be the same as he was” (GNP 259–60). Her view is that in order for an individual to be resurrected as the same individual, every bit of matter connected with that individual from its origin to its dissolution must be included. She writes: “if it was not so, then every particular human society would be imperfect at the time of their resurrection: for, if they should only rise with some of their parts, as (for example) when they were in the strength of their age, then all those parts that had been either before, or after that time, would be unjustly dealt with” (GNP 259). Likewise, in a discussion of whether a human being, having been dissolved, could unite again and be the same individual, she writes: “if all the parts of one society, as for example, a man, from the first time of his production, to the time of his dissolution, should, after division, come to meet and unite; that man, or any other creature, would be a monstrous creature, as having more parts than was agreeable to the nature of his kind. The Major Part’s opinion was, that though the society, viz. the man, would be a society of greater magnitude; yet not any ways different from the nature of his kind” (GNP 258).<sup>24</sup> What we see from this discussion is that although for our everyday purposes it is fine to say that a society is the same society at two different times even though it has

<sup>24</sup> In this passage, Cavendish is depicting an argument between the minor and major parts of her mind. We take the “major part” to be the view she favors.

changed some of its matter, strictly and philosophically speaking, we are seeing two parts of the whole society. All the matter, from the time of production until the time of dissolution of an individual's figure, are needed to constitute the whole of an individual human being.<sup>25</sup>

Cavendish does not seem to think that there is an ultimate end of natural beings: (nature's only end is to "keep the peace.") She does allow that it is possible that human beings are connected with a supernatural soul that could somehow continue their existence, albeit in a way completely different from their natural existence. So, although she thinks it unlikely that human beings will be resurrected (as she thinks it is unlikely that the same matter should reform in exactly the same way), she wants to show that her philosophical system does not rule out the possibility of such an afterlife. And indeed she does believe that human beings desire an afterlife. The love and sympathy that holds the parts of human beings together causes "a Rational Fear of disuniting, or dissolving" (GNP 130). So human beings desire to maintain their society as long as possible, yet they realize that they cannot remain in this mode of existence forever. Human beings also realize that no afterlife that resembles their current life is possible, so we seek, as Boyle has emphasized, some sort of fame by which we will be remembered by other human beings and thereby live on in memory.<sup>26</sup>

In every Regular Human Society, there is a Passionate Love amongst the Associated Parts, like fellow-Students of one College, or fellow-Servants in one House, or Brethren in one Family, or Subjects in one Nation, or Communicants in one Church: So the Self-moving Parts of a Human Creature, being associated, love one another, and therefore do endeavour to keep their Society from dissolving. But perceiving, by the example of the lives of the same sort of Creatures,

<sup>25</sup> Cavendish's views on identity over time prefigure a four-dimensionalist theory of personal identity.

<sup>26</sup> Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 117–34.

that the property of their Nature is such, that they must dissolve in a short time, this causes these Human sorts of Creatures, (being very ingenuous) to endeavour an after-life: but, perceiving again, that their after-life cannot be the same as the present life is, they endeavour (since they cannot keep their own Society from dissolving) that their Society may remain in remembrance amongst the particular and general Societies of the same sort of Creatures, which we name *Mankind*: And this Design causes all the Sensitive and Rational Parts, in one Society, to be industrious, to leave some Mark for a lasting Remembrance, amongst their fellow-Creatures: which general remembrance, Man calls *Fame*. (GNP 75–6)

This desire for the continuation of both the individual society and the society of humankind causes individuals to be industrious, to leave behind worthwhile works, and to build lasting social structures. Cavendish calls this longing to be remembered by other human beings a desire for fame that it is unique to human beings, who are uniquely aware of their own finite existence.<sup>27</sup>

### *Cavendish's "Political" Metaphysics*

In the previous sections we have offered an analysis of Cavendish's metaphysics of nature and metaphysics of human nature. We have noted—without trying to call intrusive attention to—the political metaphors and tropes she uses to describe her own metaphysics. But this metaphysics has certain characteristics that have significant political resonances and consequences. Here we make explicit some of the most salient political features of her metaphysics. Each individual is a society composed of, and produced by, the joint action of its hierarchically organized subordinate parts. We treat these organized human societies as political by definition in virtue of their involving hierarchy and

<sup>27</sup> Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 131.

subordination. That is, political structure is, as it were, woven into the very structure of Cavendish's metaphysics.<sup>28</sup> There is no place in nature that is free from politics. The claim that Cavendish's metaphysics can be understood in political terms is justified by the following three arguments.

First, human beings contain a hierarchical order. As noted, Cavendish often refers to individuals, including human beings, as a "society" because they are composed of a number of structural elements that are moving together by agreement. By the sixteenth century "society" (from the Latin *socius* or fellow) had taken on the meaning of a friendly association and was used to describe a small band of friends as well as larger social structures. In Cavendish, the structure of each society is functionally and hierarchically organized, like a corporate or political entity (recall the architect analogy) that is entered into voluntarily because it is the product of a mutual agreement among the constituents.

To be sure, Cavendish rejects the social contract (familiar to her from reading Hobbes) as either a legitimating device or an account of the origin of political order.<sup>29</sup> For Cavendish states are usually founded through force.<sup>30</sup> But she does think that even after conquest, political unity is constituted by the consent of all.<sup>31</sup>

There is a hierarchy among the constituent degrees of matter—rational animate, sensitive animate, and inanimate matter—that runs from the most free to least free. This hierarchy is also one of control: rational animate matter is the locus of decision and order. The sensitive

<sup>28</sup> We are not the first to recognize this. See Neil Ankers, "Paradigms and Politics: Hobbes and Cavendish Contrasted," in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), and Lisa Sarashon, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> See Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 149–50.

<sup>30</sup> Hobbes also discusses monarchy by acquisition in *Leviathan* II.xx.

<sup>31</sup> See "A Soldier's Oration concerning the Form of Government" (1662), in *Orations on a Disordered or yet Unsettled Government*, in Margaret Cavendish, *Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 276. Hereafter cited as PW.

animate matter carries out the designs of the rational matter, and the inanimate matter is forced to comply. Of course, this way of putting it is a bit simplistic because this structure is, fractal-like, repeated both at the constituent level and in all the parts of the composed level. Each ordered individual is a regular society that is composed of parts that are also hierarchically structured. But, as we will show, the normativity of it is relative to the members of a particular society. But there is an important constraint on Cavendish's hierarchical understanding of individuals.

While Cavendish is quite clear that there are natural hierarchies, she thinks that all the elements of an individual/society participate voluntarily in the unity. That is, the hierarchical, internal organization of each individual is akin to, at least, a tacit agreement that supports an elective monarchy. This language of monarchy may make it seem that force is the animating principle within an ordered whole (society/individual). But that's not Cavendish's view. And while there is no denying that force may play some role in the background to maintain the hierarchy, the hierarchy flourishes because it is guided by reason from above, which leads by "gentle persuasions" (discussed later) and is animated by voluntary cooperation informed by duty from below.<sup>32</sup>

Second, Cavendish's approach conforms to the traditional understanding of sympathy: mutual sympathy is only possible among likes within a unity. So, because there is mutual sympathy, there is a fundamental unity within society.<sup>33</sup>

In a society, all the composing individuals sympathize with each other. The effects of sympathy are pleasing and create harmony. Or we may say that a society characterized by mutual sympathy is a

<sup>32</sup> "As for example, in the Politick body of a Commonwealth, one Traytor is apt to cause all the Kingdom to take armes; and although every member knows not particularly of the Traytor, and of the circumstances of his crime, yet every member, if regular, knows its particular duty, which causes a general agreement to assist each other; and as it is with a Common-wealth, so it is also with an animal body; for if there be factions amongst the parts of an animal body, then straight there arises a Civil War" (OEP 1666, 62).

<sup>33</sup> See Schliesser, "Introduction," 7.

harmonious unity. Thus, this unity and sympathy is expressed as mutual love. Boyle has argued that “self-love of the whole creature . . . results from the passionate love between the parts . . . self-love accounts for the unity over time of the ‘societies.’”<sup>34</sup> We think, by contrast, that for Cavendish a *unity* makes possible the (sympathetic) passionate love between the parts, which is a kind of cohesive mechanism to *maintain* the unity.

Finally, Individuals strive to maintain themselves as a real unity or as a remembered unity. We call this Cavendish’s “*conatus* principle.”<sup>35</sup> While all dependent things come to an end, as long as they are a particular ordered whole they try to maintain themselves as a unity. But because at least some individuals within the natural order come to know that all things will come to an end, they try to create conditions of posthumous fame such that their unity is remembered. Boyle has argued that for Cavendish this desire for recognition is unique to humans and founded on well-grounded doubt about the existence of an afterlife.<sup>36</sup> This striving creates an incentive to do the kind of deeds worth being remembered for. Thus, because real unities strive to be remembered as good unities by other (unknown) unities they engage in works. The very same striving can also be a source of disorder when it devolves, as Boyle notes, into pursuit of public recognition.

<sup>34</sup> Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 93; see also 127. It is not entirely clear that Boyle is right to claim that in Cavendish self-love is constructed out of passionate love between the parts. See GNP 68: “Of the Differences between Self-Love, and Passionate Love. Self-love, is like Self-knowledg, which is an innate Nature; and therefore is not that Love Man names Passionate Love: for, Passionate Love belongs to several Parts; so that the several parts of one Society, as one Creature, have both Passionate Love, and Self-love, as being sympathetically united in one Society: Also, not only the Parts of one and the same Society, may have Passionate Love to each other; but, between several Societies; and not only several Societies of one Sort, but of different Sorts.”

<sup>35</sup> The Latin *conatus* translates as “striving.”

<sup>36</sup> Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 132; Boyle quotes Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye (1655), 145. This claim is central to Boyle’s *denial* that there is a systematic unity between Cavendish’s political and metaphysical views. We think it is notable that Boyle ignores the possibility that for Cavendish there may be angels who wish to have such proper recognition; that is, to be famous for their goodness. Admittedly Cavendish does not think we can know anything about immaterial substances as they are not part of nature. But the gap in our possible knowledge does not strike us as sufficient to claim that Cavendish’s thought is not systematic.

CAVENDISH'S SOCIAL-POLITICAL ACCOUNT  
OF HUMAN BEINGS

Boyle argues that “Cavendish has a grim view of human behavior.”<sup>37</sup> She claims that humans use their libertarian free will to do what is in their own interest and to subvert the “norms” of society. She argues that self-love and the desire for fame can be directed either to virtuous actions or to evil ones (infamy). Boyle argues that Cavendish does not deny that a monarch is needed to curb the generally bad nature of human beings. Boyle thinks that Cavendish holds that humans are less inclined to social behavior than other animals because of their desire for fame, and she sees this as a real distinction between Cavendish’s natural and political philosophies.

While we agree with Boyle that Cavendish recognizes that human beings’ desire for fame may lead them to ignoble acts that contribute to the destruction of human political societies through rebellion and war, we do not believe that this indicates that she thinks that human nature is more deficient than the natures of other creatures. In what follows we will stress two points. First, that according to Cavendish human social and political societies, as parts of nature, have a natural growth and decay cycle. Second, that while Boyle claims that Cavendish denies that an effective sovereign can rule by force, and so must be virtuous and lead merely by example, Boyle leaves out the possibility that a sovereign might lead by gentle persuasion, which, as an example of a more managerial style of leadership, leaves open the possibility for the rule of women.

Cavendish asserts that human social and political arrangements are, like all macro-level things, parts of Nature. As an individual human being grows to maturity and then declines and dies, so too do human societies. No human society lasts forever. It is true that Cavendish stresses the merits of peace and stability in human

<sup>37</sup> *Well-Ordered Universe*, 142.

relations, but Nature is not merely peaceful and ordered, it is also balanced and varied. These values require trade-offs, and the destruction of once stable and peaceful individuals and societies is balanced by their eventual destruction and replacement by new individuals and societies. This is how variety is achieved. So, while individuals and groups of human beings will endeavor to remain in their societies as long as they can, all societies must eventually dissolve and give way to new ones. Even though this is true, it is still important for us to make clear how it is that a sovereign can best keep the peace as long as she may.

Boyle claims that according to Cavendish sovereigns cannot use force or persuasion in order to maintain power;<sup>38</sup> a sovereign can only get people to obey by being a good example of a virtuous leader. The claim that a leader should be virtuous is confirmed by Cavendish's *Blazing World* (PW 89), where the Duchess tells the Empress that it will be to her eternal honor to reestablish the laws previously held in the kingdom because they were more conducive to peace and harmony.<sup>39</sup> The Duchess encourages the Empress to bring about unity in the kingdom, "that is, to have but one Sovereign, one Religion, one Law, and one Language, so that all the World might be but as one united Family, without divisions" (PW 87). But Cavendish also seems to argue for gentle persuasions: "for she [the Empress] knew well, that belief was a thing not to be forced or pressed upon the people, but to be instilled into their minds by gentle persuasions; and after this manner she encouraged them also in all other duties and employments: 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" (*Blazing World*, PW 51).

<sup>38</sup> *Well-Ordered Universe*, 153.

<sup>39</sup> *Blazing World*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89. Cited as PW followed by page number.

*Platonic Feminism*

Cavendish has a hierarchical conception of human nature, unlike some modern feminists.<sup>40</sup> But we think Cavendish is what we might call a *platonian* feminist: somebody who rejects natural equality but, while accepting natural hierarchies (including, alas, racial ones), asserts that the best women are just as capable of ruling as the best men if they are properly educated or cultivated. A *platonian* feminist thinks that qualified women should be given the same privileges as qualified men.<sup>41</sup>

We think that Cavendish provides her views on the art of gentle persuasion in *Sociable Letters*, especially Letters 61 and 150, as an instance of estate management (or household economy), which since Aristotle has been thought intrinsic to political theory. For example, she writes that

a Good Master is to know How to Command, When to Command, and What to Command; also When to Bestow, What to Bestow, & How much to Bestow on a Good Servant; also to fit Servants to Employments, and Employments to Servants; also to know How and When to Restrain them, and when to give them Liberty; also to observe, which of his Servants be fit to be Ruled with Austerity or Severity, and which with Clemency, and to Reward and Punish them Properly, Timely and Justly; Likewise when to make them

<sup>40</sup> *Well-Ordered Universe*, 166–67.

<sup>41</sup> We understand feminism as opposition to sexist oppression. In a justifiably famous essay, Julia Annas shows how Plato is no feminist from the vantage point of contemporary feminism (by which Annas explicitly means a liberal, rights-oriented feminism); “Plato’s Republic and Feminism,” *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 307–21. The problem is—and here we echo Eileen O’Neill—that egalitarian commitments have also effaced appreciation and knowledge of women, often aristocratic women, who argued for women’s political potential or contribution on, say, meritocratic grounds. Eileen O’Neill, “Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History,” in *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, ed. Janet Kourany, 17–62 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). As Serene Khader has argued forcefully, in contexts of sexist oppression, women’s constrained choices may end up promoting what seem illiberal strategies. See Khader, Serene J. *Decolonizing universalism: A transnational feminist ethic*. *Studies in Feminist Philosophy*, 2018.

Work, and when to let them Play or Sport; as also when to Keep them at a Distance, and when to Associate Himself with them.<sup>42</sup>

Cavendish calls explicit attention to the political analogy when she compares these to the rule over “Subjects to their Natural Prince.” This presupposes contextual judgments about people’s individual characters and needs as well as knowledge about how they are to negotiate their (hierarchically organized) social roles. It also presupposes knowledge of how we respond to (nonviolent) incentives (see SL 150).

In fact, we would argue that Boyle underestimates Cavendish’s commitment to the idea that women can be good rational masters, too, alongside their husbands, or independent from them.<sup>43</sup> This is manifested by the practical knowledge, and the “reason,” of the “Governess” of her estate, who reveals a subtle understanding of economics, including the roles of opportunity costs and human capital in the organization of labor (SL 150). Moreover, she advocates for education of the female servants not primarily on economic grounds but to “Inrich their Understandings, and Increase their Knowledges, and Quicken their Wit, all which may make their Life Happy” and, in part, “to Manage a Plentiful Fortune Wisely” (SL 150). As our term “*platonian feminism*” suggests, Cavendish did not invent this position; she shares such a feminism with Marie De Gournay and her exact contemporary Anna Maria Van Schurman (although there is no evidence of mutual influence).

One may object that we have offered slender evidence of Cavendish’s *platonian feminism* so far. But we think it is woven into her representation of nature. For example, she writes: “for though Nature is old, yet she is not a Witch, but a grave, wise, methodical Matron, ordering

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *CCXI Sociable Letters*, London: William Wilson, 1664. Cited as SL followed by page number.

<sup>43</sup> Boyle writes that “while Cavendish is aware of the feminist (or proto-feminist) position that women are ‘equal by nature,’ she does not herself accept that view” (*Well-Ordered Universe*, 76).

her Infinite family, which are her several parts, with ease and facility, without needless troubles and difficulties; for these are onely made through the ignorance of her several parts or particular Creatures, not understanding their Mistress, Nature, and her actions and government, for which they cannot be blamed; for how should a part understand the Infinite body, when it doth not understand it self; but Nature understands her parts better, then they do her” (PL 302–3). Here nature is represented as the wise and methodical female ruler of an estate who understands the proper arrangement of things.<sup>44</sup> This is so even if her subjects fail to understand her as well as she does them, and this corresponds to the hierarchical nature of the rule over subjects by the rational ruler. Reasoned leadership here is gendered female.

In fact, and to close on a note of speculation, if one accepts the possibility that women were, by Cavendish’s lights, actively engaged in estate management, there is a clear hint that she thinks women ought to play a larger role in political life. As she writes, “a private Family is more regular and better ordered then a great State or Commonwealth” (PL 534).

### CONCLUSION

In this essay we have treated Cavendish as a metaphysician of nature, of which human beings are a part. Hers is a distinctive metaphysics of human nature. Humans are functionally and hierarchically organized kinds that are, themselves, composed of many societies and can enter into societies (that are functionally and hierarchically organized). We have argued that this metaphysics grounds her social and political philosophy, but we have also shown that social tropes and metaphors

<sup>44</sup> A witch, by contrast, seems to promote disorder. We note that Cavendish is fully aware of the implication that any powerful woman would be thought a witch—someone who performs her deeds by charms and malevolent magic. For her denial of the existence of witches, see PL 227–29 and 298–303.

provide key organizing principles in her metaphysics, such that there is a nontrivial sense in which politics pervades her philosophy of nature. This is due to the fact that both kinds of societies are material parts of nature with similar structures. In addition, we have called attention to the fact that, according to Cavendish, the qualities that make one a good estate manager would also serve to make one capable of rational rulership, which opens the door to viewing women as capable of such rule.