

Deborah Boyle

The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish

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Reviewed by Colin Chamberlain, 2019

Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673) defends a bold version of materialism about the natural world. Setting aside God and immaterial spirits--which we can't conceive of anyway--Cavendish argues that nature as a whole is material through and through. Minerals, plants, animals, and human beings are simply dynamic configurations of matter, "corporeal figurative motions" or "composed figures" in Cavendish's terminology. An oak tree is simply matter moving in a certain pattern. Cavendish's account of what *matter* is like diverges from those of many of her contemporaries, however. Whereas early modern mechanists like René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes defend austere accounts of matter, according to which matter is a single kind of homogeneous, geometrical stuff, consisting of little more than size, shape, position, and motion, Cavendish disagrees. Deborah Boyle's excellent new book explores Cavendish's fascinating alternative.

For one thing, Cavendish distinguishes three kinds of matter, hierarchically arranged: rational, sensitive, and inanimate. She compares rational matter to the captain of a ship, sensitive matter to the sailors who carry out the captain's orders, and inanimate matter to the ship they sail. These three kinds of matter are ubiquitous and fully blended in nature, so that even the smallest particle will contain all three kinds. Boyle illustrates the idea of complete blending by imagining "a bowl of cake batter, in which the ingredients have been completely blended; just as a cup, a half-cup, a tablespoon, and teaspoon of the cake batter all contain a blend of all the ingredients, so, too, does the whole bowl of batter" (21). Another distinctive feature of Cavendish's account is that she takes all matter to be alive: sentient, perceptive, self-knowing, and self-moving. Hence the label "vital materialism" which is often used to describe Cavendish's system. Everything around us has a life of its own for Cavendish.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most important feature of Cavendish's materialism for Boyle's purposes, Cavendish's matter is imbued with *order*, or, in other words, with *normativity* or *a-way-things-should-be*. As Boyle writes, "Order is achieved when the parts of Nature behave in certain designated ways, as prescribed by Nature, for the parts of matter are parts of a whole, a system that is *supposed to operate according to certain principles*" (8; emphasis added). Normativity, for Cavendish, is built into the natures of material things. There is a way that oak trees should develop and grow, and oak trees typically strive to fulfill their nature. There is a way that rocks should pile and water should flow, independent of our parochial interests and concerns. There is a way that human beings should be. Nature as a whole is in order, or at peace, when all of its parts live up to their respective norms. Boyle's central thesis is that "an underlying concern with order" runs through Cavendish's writings: on natural philosophy, but also when Cavendish turns to ethics, politics, and medicine (8). A corollary is that there is "more unity in some aspects of Cavendish's thinking than has often been ascribed to her", though, interestingly, Boyle also argues that taking order as our guiding thread highlights certain "disanalogies between her natural philosophy and her moral, social, and political writing" (8).

Boyle's discussion proceeds as follows. In chapter 1, she lays the foundation for her reading

by making an initial case for the importance of order in Cavendish's thought, as well as by clearing some interpretive ground. Lisa Walters and David Cunning, as well as Boyle herself in earlier work, argue that the appearance that things should be a certain way is an illusion resulting from the projection of *our* local concerns. Boyle convincingly dismantles this competing interpretation. In chapter 2, Boyle examines Cavendish's early discussion of atomism in *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), and nicely brings out the many different forms of atomism swirling around in the period--including, for example, a "hylozoist" form of atomism, according to which the atoms are alive. Boyle recommends caution when interpreting these poems. We should not assume that Cavendish always speaks in her own voice, nor--pace Walters's flights of interpretive fancy--that Cavendish's poems about fairies are really about atoms. Cavendish's eventual rejection of atomism supports Boyle's overall thesis, since one of Cavendish's central objections is that atomism cannot account for the order in nature, for atoms would be too independent to cooperate in orderly and peaceful ways.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Cavendish's mature metaphysics, briefly sketched above. Of particular interest is Boyle's discussion of self-motion and occasional causation. Whereas mechanical explanations of change appeal to the transfer of motion--for example, when one billiard ball seemingly sets another in motion by colliding with it--Cavendish argues that every material thing is responsible for its own motion, and, hence, contains an internal principle of change. Each billiard ball is responsible for rolling itself across the table. What explains the fact that the billiard balls ricochet in such predictable ways, and seemingly in response to what other billiard balls are doing? Here Boyle argues that order plays a crucial role. Every natural entity belongs to a certain kind that specifies the way that entity should move, and Nature, for Cavendish, bends toward the right and the regular. One standard objection to final causation and teleological explanation in the nonhuman world is that these forms of explanation apply only to intelligent beings. A human being can represent a goal, or a conception of how things should be, and be guided by it; an oak tree or a feather supposedly cannot. This standard objection gets no traction in Cavendish's system, since all material things enjoy a degree of perception and self-knowledge. Every part of nature has some understanding of its surroundings, what kind of thing it is, and what it should be doing. Even a rock has a sense of decorum appropriate to its station by which it guides its own rock-like behavior.

Drawing on Karen Detlefsen's work on Cavendish, Boyle complicates the explanatory role of order by arguing that God dictates the norms to Nature as a whole. On Boyle's reading, God sets the rules--and in this sense *commands* Nature--but the individual parts of matter--oak trees, human beings, and so on--get to decide whether to follow God's rules. Sometimes Boyle suggests that Nature as a whole acts as a kind of middleman (or middlewoman) between God and the various parts of nature, who transmits God's orders to her parts (see, for example, 112 and 114). But I am not sure how seriously to take these sorts of passages, or what philosophical work they might be doing for Boyle or Cavendish. Boyle includes an interesting discussion of whether Cavendish's God is guided by a prior conception of the good in his suggestions.

Chapter 5 examines human nature. Whereas the nonhuman parts of nature play mostly by the rules, human beings are a different story. As Boyle writes, "Cavendish is much more pessimistic about the order and regularity in human societies than she is about order in Nature as a whole" (118). Boyle traces the source of this problem to a distinctively human desire for fame: that is, a desire for recognition in the eyes of others. Whereas all creatures desire to preserve themselves, human beings "have a further motivation, too, which is the preservation of a thought representing the self in the rational matter of others" (127). On

Boyle's reading, Cavendish draws the line between human beings and other animals not in terms of any special cognitive abilities unique to human beings--such as rationality, which after all is ubiquitous in matter--but in terms of a distinctive form of sociality. Chapter 6 examines Cavendish's political philosophy. Although nonhuman societies--like ant colonies or beehives--can get along just fine without formal political structures, human beings require "Politick," and, more specifically, an absolute monarch and a well-defined social hierarchy, to regulate the unruly consequences of the human desire for fame. Although Boyle's discussion of these issues is illuminating, we might want to hear more about *why* Cavendish thinks desire for fame is *the* destabilizing force in human life.

Chapter 7 argues that notwithstanding some gender bending in her plays, Cavendish accepts conservative views of gender, according to which men and women have different natures, and, hence, are subject to correspondingly different norms. Cavendish advocates for the education of women, but as a way of cultivating their distinctively feminine virtues. Interestingly, Boyle argues that a woman who received a man's education would become a kind of hybrid creature--a "hermaphrodite," in Cavendish's terminology, or a work of "art"--who would lack a determinate nature, and, hence, wouldn't be subject to any particular norms. Cavendish worries that lacking a nature would make it unclear how to act, because without a nature there is simply no fact of the matter about what one's good consists in. But there's something appealing about the idea that we can make ourselves into works of art and thereby set ourselves free from the dictates of nature. Chapter 8 argues that Cavendish recognizes limitations on the way human beings should use plants and animals, but that she is not the friend to the natural world that some commentators have wanted her to be. Finally, chapter 9 discusses Cavendish's view of health as a well-ordered human body, situating it in the medical and alchemical context of her period.

Boyle demonstrates that order plays a central role in Cavendish's thought. But what, exactly, does order consist in? Sometimes Boyle suggests that order is the state of things being as they should be. An oak tree, for example, is in order just in case the oak tree exists and moves as oak trees should. That's fine as far as it goes. Still, it would be nice to know more substantively *how things should be*, as Boyle herself points out (112). This issue about the *content* of the norms is distinct from issues about what ultimately *grounds* normativity for Cavendish--God's arbitrary decrees, for example, or some independent standard of goodness? Even if God arbitrarily decides on the norms or natural rules, we might still inquire into the content of these norms, or, in other words, about what kind of order God has decreed. Fortunately, Boyle's book suggests a more substantive conception of order, although she does not explain it as explicitly as we might like.

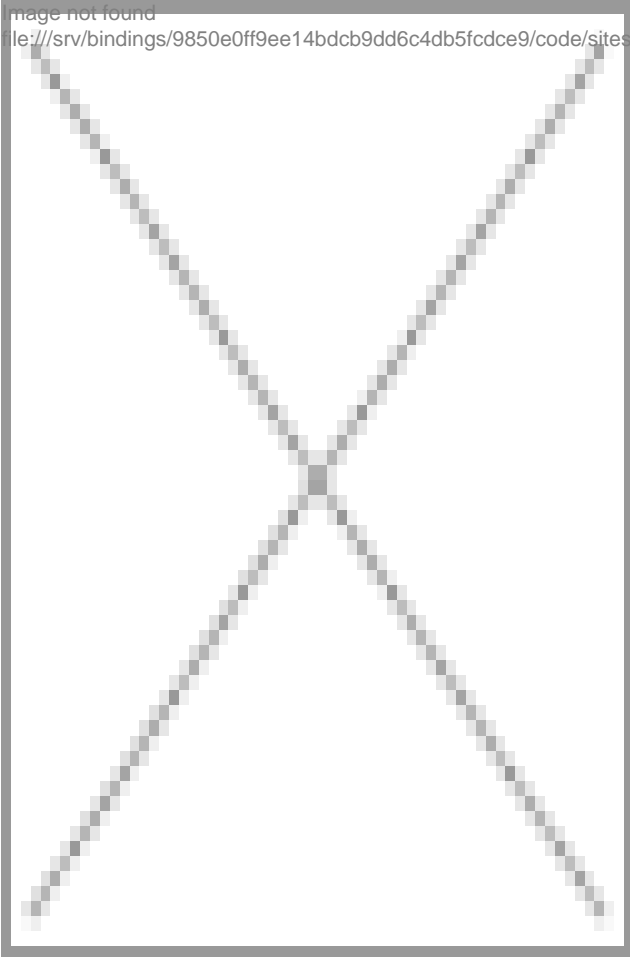
First, order requires *predictability*. Although Boyle argues that Cavendish uses "regular" as a normative term more or less synonymous with "orderly" (23), Boyle also suggests that order and regularity involve an element of predictability, implying that it's good for things to behave in predictable, law-like ways (147, 161, and 202). Relatedly, Boyle suggests that an orderly world is divided neatly into natural kinds, with similar kinds of things behaving in similar ways (202). Second, order requires *harmony* or *coordination* between the various parts of nature, so that each of the parts can do its proper work. This aspect of order emerges in the way Boyle contrasts order with war and discord, as well as her claim that in a perfectly orderly world, there wouldn't be any carnivores to interfere with the natural lifecycles of other animals (203). Third, Boyle's discussions of social rank in human society, relations between men and women, as well as the relationship between humans and animals, suggests that order requires *hierarchy*. Boyle argues, for example, that Cavendish endorses the conservative view

that women are naturally inferior to men, and should be subordinate to them. Similarly, Boyle argues that, for Cavendish, "the natural world exists for human use," which suggests that human beings enjoy some kind of superiority with respect to the nonhuman world, with the important qualification that the natural world is not *exclusively* for human use (198). This hierarchical vision of nature--in which every creature is assigned a certain role in life, and some roles are higher than others--might seem oppressive. Boyle tries to soften this impression by emphasizing that creatures are ultimately free to decide whether to play by the rules of their natural stations (162 and 169-70). But this freedom offers small comfort, since any deviation from a thing's nature is a flaw. As Boyle points out, "in matters concerning class and social rank, Cavendish was deeply conservative," which is what we might expect from a duchess of her day (164).

Cavendish's picture, then, is this: a well-ordered universe is *predictable, harmonious, and hierarchical*. It is composed of creatures divided neatly into natural kinds, and who behave in predictable ways characteristic of their kinds. Creatures allow one another to fully express their respective natures, without interference. Indeed, they work together to flourish. Finally, a well-ordered universe is a hierarchical universe: a great chain of being with some creatures on top, or, better, a great society of creatures with different ranks and correspondingly different tasks.

Despite Cavendish's overriding concern with order, her presentation of her views can be chaotic and difficult to follow. Reading Cavendish, I often wonder: why is she talking about *these* issues in *this* order? It is as if she had more ideas than she could handle, and couldn't quite figure out how to write them all down. Boyle's elegant and careful book, informed by a deep knowledge of the primary texts and a secondary literature spanning multiple disciplinary boundaries, goes a long way toward discerning the order in Cavendish's texts, and to illuminating the systematic philosophy they contain. This book should be required reading for everybody interested in Cavendish, and in the history of early modern philosophy more generally.

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