

## Margaret Cavendish, Environmental Ethics, and Panpsychism

Stewart Duncan

23 February 2018

Margaret Cavendish (1623-73) held a number of surprising philosophical views. These included a materialist panpsychism, and some views in what we might call environmental ethics. Panpsychism, though certainly not unheard of, is still often a surprising view. Views in environmental ethics – even just views that involve a measure of environmental concern – are unusual to find in early modern European philosophy. Cavendish held both of these surprising views. This paper examines them, and asks about their possible relationship.

Section 1 briefly introduces Cavendish's panpsychism. Section 2 looks at her environmental ethics, as found in her first book, the 1653 *Poems, and Fancies*. With this material in place, I then ask in section 3 what the two views have to do with one another. One might suspect that panpsychism provides some reasons for environmental concern. I argue, however, that Cavendish did not derive her environmental ethics from her panpsychism. If there is a connection, it is a developmental one, leading from the ethics to the panpsychism. Section 4 then considers various objections to that reading. The investigation of these issues also provides an occasion for thinking more generally about how Cavendish's views fit together, and whether she developed a systematic philosophy in the manner of several of her contemporaries.

### 1. Cavendish's panpsychism

Margaret Cavendish was a panpsychist. She thought – that is, it was a feature of her mature system, her view of the 1660s – that there is sensitive and rational matter. The sensitivity and rationality of this matter is a fundamental, irreducible feature of it. Such matter is spread throughout the world –

one should not think that, for example, the sensitive matter is in the eyes and the rational matter is in the brain. Rather, both can be found everywhere, albeit mixed together with inanimate matter.

Thus, Cavendish said that:

these sensitive and rational parts of matter are the purest and subtilest parts of Nature, as the active parts, the knowing, understanding and prudent parts, the designing, architectonical and working parts, nay, the Life and Soul of Nature, and that there is not any Creature or part of nature without this Life and Soul; and that not onely Animals, but also Vegetables, Minerals and Elements, and what more is in Nature, are endued with this Life and Soul, Sense and Reason (PL “A Preface to the Reader”).

Cavendish’s system thus involved the presence of thought in surprising places. Moreover, she thought that many different sorts of natural beings have knowledge and perception. Granted, Cavendish did say that the different sorts of beings have different sorts of knowledge and perception: “the air has an elemental, and the glass a mineral, but not an animal perception”.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the knowledge and perception of minerals is indeed a sort of knowledge and perception, even if it is different from our knowledge and perception.

## 2. *Poems, and Fancies*

The source for Cavendish’s views in what we might call environmental ethics is her first book, the *Poems, and Fancies*, which was published in 1653.

I will not attempt a general account of the *Poems, and Fancies*, or even of its ethics, or its nature poetry. Instead, I draw attention to four particular themes. The first theme is that *man treats nature poorly*. The second is the *ethics of our treatment of animals*. The third theme is what I will call a *non-*

---

<sup>1</sup> PL 1.24. See also PL 2.13 on animal, mineral, and vegetable knowledge, and PL 4.30 for a defense of the view that many non-human creatures are wise. For the abbreviations I use in giving references to Cavendish’s works, see the bibliography.

*literal panpsychism*. The fourth theme is really a way of arguing: what I will call here *speculation and the 'who knows?' argument*.<sup>2</sup>

There are certainly interpretive complications here. Caution is needed in any attempt to extract ethical views from the poetry. However, poetry often was used to convey philosophical views in the period. Moreover, if one is interested in environmental ethics, this is the obvious place to start in Cavendish's texts. Beyond that, some of Cavendish's poems really do seem to have relevant messages as their point, and this is often not a matter of complex or subtle interpretation – we find some rather blunt relevant statements.

### 2.1. Man treats nature poorly

I begin with “A Dialogue between an Oake, and a Man cutting him downe” (P&F 66-70). The poem is what its title says it is. Thus, the oak begins:

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

(P&F 66)

In the body of the poem, the man offers various justifications to the oak, which the oak is disinclined to accept. One might, cautiously, see Cavendish as expressing some concern about

---

<sup>2</sup> Boyle (2018, 189-214) looks at Cavendish's views on the relationship between humans and the environment, drawing on a wide range of texts. She helpfully emphasizes that we should not see too much in Cavendish's expressions of such views: she did not object to eating animals, and did not object in principle to experimenting on animals, or to hunting them, even though she objected to some ways those things could be done.

humans' use of trees in particular, and natural resources more generally. This is interesting in its own right.<sup>3</sup> However, the poem ends with, and thus emphasizes, the misery of man, not the misery of the tree:

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

(P&F 70)

We have here a sort of encounter between human and nature.<sup>4</sup> Of course the encounter in Cavendish's poem is not a literal encounter – Cavendish did not think one could actually converse with trees. And the point that if a tree could speak, this is what it would say, is a point that one can make whatever one thinks about the panpsychism issue.

More such discussions can be seen in another dialogue, “A Dialogue betwixt Man, and Nature” (PF 58-9).<sup>5</sup>

Nature

---

<sup>3</sup> One might see a connection here to some of the claims of Merchant (1980) and take Cavendish to be a critic of the exploitation of nature. Cavendish does appear in Merchant (1980, 270-2), but not in this role. See also Merchant's comments on “The disruption of the forest ecosystem by the rise of early modern industry, coupled with the careless use and mismanagement of resources” (Merchant 1980, 67).

<sup>4</sup> On encounter in the context of panpsychism and environmental ethics, compare Mathews (2003, 77).

<sup>5</sup> These dialogues have an interesting similarity to some sections of Cavendish's later works of natural philosophy, where different voices express different points of view. Consider, for example, “An Argumental Discourse” between “former thoughts” and “latter thoughts” in the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (Cavendish 2001, 23-42).

Why doth *Man-kind* complaine, and make such Moane?

May not *I* work my *will* with what's my owne?

But *Men* among themselves contract, and make

A *Bargaine* for my *Tree*; that *Tree* will take:

Most cruelly do chop in peeces small,

And formes it as he please, then builds withall.

Although that *Tree* by me was made to stand,

Just as it growes, not to be cut by *Man*.

Man

*O Nature*, *Trees* are dull, and have no *Sense*,

And therefore feel not paine, nor take offence.

Nature<sup>6</sup>

But *Beasts* have *life* and *Sense*, and *passion* strong,

Yet *cruell man* doth kill, and doth them wrong.

To take that *life*, I *gave*, before the time

I did ordaine, the *injury is mine*.

Man

What *Ill* man doth, *Nature* did make him do,

For he by *Nature* is prompt thereunto.

(P&F 58-9)

Ethically, we have a distinction here between trees and beasts. But we also have some reflection on the ethics of doing what is natural. Cavendish in effect – in a manner familiar from other discussions of this issue – distinguishes different senses in which something might be natural. In the first sense,

---

<sup>6</sup> These four lines are wrongly attributed to Man in the 1653 edition – at least, the word ‘Nature’ is missing – but this was corrected in later editions.

there is a distinction between what is natural and what is done by humans, but in the second sense there is not, as humans are recognized as part of nature. That these different approaches are possible is clear enough – whether Cavendish wants to be on one side of the issue, and if so which one, is less so.

## 2.2. The ethics of our treatment of animals

Cavendish worries about our general treatment of nature. Within that, she worries in particular that we treat animals poorly. This theme is nicely illustrated by Cavendish’s two poems about hunting: “The Hunting of the Hare”, and “The Hunting of the Stag”, which we find next to each other in *Poems, and Fancies*.<sup>7</sup>

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

As if that *God* made *Creatures* for *Mans* meat,  
To give them *Life*, and *Sense*, for *Man* to eat;  
Or else for *Sport*, or *Recreations* sake,  
Destroy those *Lifes* that *God* saw good to make:  
Making their *Stomacks*, *Graves*, which full they fill  
With *Murther'd* *Bodios*, that in sport they kill.  
Yet *Man* doth think himselfe so gentle, mild,  
When *he* of *Creatures* is most cruell wild.  
And is so *Proud*, thinks onely he shall live,

---

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed examination of the two poems about hunting, see Suzuki (2015, 229-32).

That *God* a *God-like Nature* did him give.  
And that all *Creatures* for his sake alone,  
Was made for him, to *Tyrannize* upon.

(P&F 112-3)

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

This critique of human arrogance was a frequent theme ... Her two poems "The Hunting of the Hare and "The Hunting of the Stag" abandoned the human perspective to tell their stories from the point of view of the quarry – an unconventional move that turned these works into passionate denunciations of human cruelty and pride (Whitaker 2002, 141).<sup>8</sup>

Cavendish was perhaps not entirely opposed to hunting and hunters.<sup>9</sup> But the judgment that humans have an over-confident opinion of their relative place in the world certainly recurs in her later works of natural philosophy. Consider, for example, Cavendish's objections to Descartes's argument in his *Discourse* against animal minds. Concluding her discussion, Cavendish says that other animals:

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

Consider also the argument of *Philosophical Letters* 4.30, where Cavendish defends her view that

---

<sup>8</sup> An earlier critic remarked that in "The Hunting of the Hare", the hare's "ultimate end is lamented in the most astonishingly humanitarian way" (Perry 1968, 179), and also that "A Dialogue of Birds" (discussed below) "deserves to be known for its sympathetic description of nature. The different birds lament how badly man treats them but explain that Nature should receive no blame" (Perry 1968, 176). More generally, Perry (1968, 197-84) offers a useful introduction to and survey of *Poems, and Fancies*.

<sup>9</sup> Note a comment in the *Sociable Letters* – "[N]or do I wonder that the Lord N. W. practices Riding, Fencing, Vaulting, Shooting, Hunting, Fortifying, Navigating, and the like, because he is an Heroick Man, fitter to Conquer a Nation, than to Dance a Galliard or Courant" (SL 33) – and see the discussion of Boyle (2018, 208-9).

“every Creature hath life and knowledg, sense and reason”. She argues that “humane sense and reason may perceive, that wood, stone, or metal, acts as wisely as an animal”, and indeed that:

Infinite examples may be given, and yet man says, all Vegetables and Minerals are insensible and irrational ... Man doth not consider the various, intricate and obscure ways of Nature, unknown to any particular Creature; for what our senses are not capable to know, our reason is apt to deny. Truly, in my opinion, Man is more irrational then any of those Creatures, when he believes that all knowledg is not onely confined to one sort of Creatures, but to one part of one particular Creature, as the head, or brain of man (PL 4.30).

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

### 2.3. Non-literal panpsychism

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



on. I do not say that there is literal panpsychism in *Poems, and Fancies*, but I do want to think about how the non-literal panpsychism there relates to the literal panpsychism of her later works of natural philosophy.

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

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

(P&F 70)

Again there are ethical reflections within, even if one cannot really tie them to panpsychism. A sparrow, for example, brings up again the notion that men treat nature poorly:

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

(P&F 71)

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

O *Nature*, *Nature*, hearken to my *Cry*,  
Each *Minute* wounded am, but cannot dye.

My *Children* which I from my *Womb* did beare,  
Do dig my *Sides*, and all my *Bowels* teare:  
Do plow deep *Furroughs* in my very *Face*,  
From *Torment*, I have neither time, nor place.

(P&F 106)

As with poems mentioned above that consider humans' use of trees, we see here Cavendish questioning the use of nature as a resource.<sup>10</sup>

I do not suggest that this dialogue is anything but metaphorical. But we might think about how this is a precursor of the mineral knowledge that turns up later on in Cavendish's natural philosophy. In the *Philosophical Letters*, both glass (PL 1.24) and a bell (PL 2.13) are said to have this sort of knowledge or perception. It is contrasted with human knowledge, but also with elemental, animal, and vegetable knowledge or perception. Moreover, given Cavendish's views about sensitive and rational matter, there is good systematic reason for thinking that metal objects (or rocks and ores, or things made from them) must have a sort of knowledge. There is that same good systematic reason for taking the Earth as a whole to have some such sort of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Somehow Cavendish got from non-literal panpsychism ('if the Earth – or the hares or the birds or nature as a whole – could speak, these are the views it would express') to literal panpsychism (there being thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge actually possessed by the hares, birds, pieces of metal and glass, the Earth, and the world as a whole). Thus, despite the shift, the earlier work is a notable precursor of the later work here.

---

<sup>10</sup> There's another possible connection to Merchant (1980) here, about (reaction against) seeing the earth as simply a resource.

<sup>11</sup> There is a puzzling question about individuation, and about which parts of nature count as individual thinking things, which cannot be answered in passing here.

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

My final theme again touches on the development of Cavendish’s view beyond the *Poems, and Fancies*.

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

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

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

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

WHO knowes; but *Beasts*, as they do lye,  
In *Meadowes* low, or else on *Mountaines* high?  
But that they do contemplate on the *Sun*,  
And how his *daily, yearly Circles* run.  
Whether the *Sun* about the *Earth* doth rove,  
Or else the *Earth* upon its owne *Poles* move.  
And in the *Night*, when *twinkling Stars* we see,  
Like *Man*, imagines them all *Suns* to bee.  
And may like *Man, Stars, Planets* number well,

And could they speak, they might their *Motions* tell.

And how the *Planets* in each *Orbe* do move:

'Gainst their *Astrology* no *Man* can prove.

For they may know the *Stars*, and their *Aspects*,

What *Influence* they cast, and their *Effects*.

(P&F 105)

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

These poems might seem just to ask a question – ‘what might these other creatures know?’ Merely asking the question does not commit one to saying the other creatures do know anything. Writing a series of poems about it, on the other hand, does perhaps suggest that you think there is something to the suggestion. Moreover, Cavendish uses the same (“it might be this way”) argument to support some of her natural philosophical views later on. Consider two passages from the *Philosophical Letters*.<sup>12</sup>

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

[T]hough other Creatures have not the speech, nor Mathematical rules and demonstrations, with other Arts and Sciences, as Men; **yet may** their perceptions and observations be as wise as Men’s, **and they may** have as much intelligence and commerce betwixt each other, after

---

<sup>12</sup> Text in bold is emphasized by me.

their own manner and way, as men have after theirs (PL 1.36).<sup>13</sup>

Those passages, if taken in isolation and given a minimal reading, might not seem remarkable – Cavendish is just speculating about a way things might be. But it seems to me that she intends a little more than that: a picture is suggested, and she wants us to adopt it.

Sometimes, to be fair, Cavendish accompanies such suggestions with some supporting reasons. Consider, for example, discussions of animal minds, such as PL 1.36. But Cavendish's supporting reasons there are at best deductions from her systematic view, rather than anything anyone else is likely to accept. What does that add up to, for the reader? Nothing much more, it can seem, than Cavendish saying that her view might be correct. Indeed it might be – but it would be nice to get more than that.<sup>14</sup> Anyway, whatever one thinks about the virtues and drawbacks of this sort of argument, my more basic point is that here again one sees connections between the fanciful claims of Cavendish's first book and the apparently more systematic and considered approach of her later works of natural philosophy.

### 3. Connections between the views

Cavendish, as we have just seen, proposes views in moral philosophy, indeed in what we might call environmental ethics. How, if at all, do those relate to her panpsychism?

One possibility is that there is a deductive connection. That is, perhaps the ethical views are deduced from (or at least supported by) the panpsychism. The basic reason for suspecting this is that panpsychism discovers the existence of many more thinking, sensing, reasoning beings than are otherwise thought to exist. It is common to think that such beings have a different, higher moral status than inanimate beings. Thus it is plausible that discovering lots of them will have some ethical

---

<sup>13</sup> One might also look at PL 3.15 on magnetism: “one man may have a sympathetical affection to another man, when as this man hath an antipathetical aversion to him; and **the same may be, for ought we know**, betwixt Iron and the Loadstone, as also betwixt the Needle and the North”.

<sup>14</sup> On Cavendish's attitude to reasons, argument, and evidence, see Wilson (2007).

consequences. To see such a connection in Cavendish's work would also be a step towards seeing it as systematic, in the way that the work many prominent early modern philosophers was. In this picture the ethics would be part, maybe even the ultimate or highest part, of a systematic enquiry.<sup>15</sup>

Chronology, however, counts against thinking there was such a deductive connection between Cavendish's views. The mature panpsychist system was not obviously in place until her works of the 1660s, starting with 1663's second edition of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*. The environmental ethical views are expressed in her first work, the 1653 *Poems, and Fancies*, and not in later works.<sup>16</sup> The absence of an apparent deduction here is consonant with Eileen O'Neill's related observation, that "in her publications, Cavendish did not explicitly discuss the political consequences of views in natural philosophy" (OEP, xx).

Cavendish's panpsychism and her environmental ethical views are related, despite there being no deductive connection between them. There is, I suggest, a developmental connection between the two views – the panpsychist views of Cavendish's later work developed out of the ethical views of her earlier work. Moreover, the systematic philosopher is not the best model for Cavendish. A better model for understanding her approach is a more contemporary one: a scientist (or natural philosopher) who has ethical opinions, but does not derive them from her scientific inquiry.

Cavendish's philosophical system can appear as an imaginative and creative accomplishment,

---

<sup>15</sup> Within today's analytic philosophy, panpsychism is usually treated as a bit of technical philosophy of mind, and its ethical consequences, if any, are not usually discussed. Perhaps this absence of discussion is justified by the thought is that the mental states attributed to all of matter are so limited that they do not bring any new ethical state with them. For example, the micropsychic sorts of experiences Strawson (2006) discusses differ from our own experiences, even though they are supposed to be experiences. The mental states Cavendish discovers throughout the world seem more likely to be of ethical significance. Her panpsychism claims to discover the existence of thinking things, in more or less the usual sense, and such a discovery of new thinking beings at least might have ethical consequences.

<sup>16</sup> Even the works of the 1650s that seem to be in natural philosophy, the *Philosophical Fancies* and the first edition of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, postdate (albeit only slightly in one case) the poems, and do not contain the environmental ethics.

but one presented without great regard for reasons and evidence. But where, one might ask, where did this system come from? To a fair extent, I suggest, it came from the fanciful poems of *Poems, and Fancies*. The metaphorical encounters – the non-literal panpsychism – harden into a more literal panpsychism, but to a considerable extent without supporting argument. That is, the poetical fancies turn into the natural philosophical system, but without natural philosophical argument.

#### 4. Objections

##### 4.1 Was Cavendish really a moral philosopher?

I have been asking how Cavendish's moral philosophy, in particular her environmental ethics, relates to her panpsychism. Cavendish seems however to say that she does not and will not engage in moral and political philosophy. Given this, how much sense does it make to ask about the relationship between her natural philosophy and her moral philosophy?

Consider letter 13 of part 1 of Cavendish's 1664 *Philosophical Letters*, which is part of her discussion of the work of Thomas Hobbes. Up to this point, Cavendish has been discussing passages from the early chapters of *Leviathan*, but here she tells us she will go no further in discussing that book.

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

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

Cavendish also seems reluctant to call herself a moral philosopher. Consider another passage from her discussion of Hobbes: “I perceiue your *Autor* is much for necessitation, and against free-will, which I leave to Moral Philosophers and Divines” (PL 1.29).<sup>17</sup> Earlier, there is a short essay, “To Morall Philosophers” in the *Poems, and Fancies* (P&F 51-2), which one might perhaps take as expressing the same view, as it is addressed to them, rather than from one of them.

There is moral reflection in Cavendish’s works though. I considered several examples from the *Poems, and Fancies* above, but those are not the only relevant passages in the book. One section of it is headed “Moral Discourses” (P&F 92-109). Elsewhere we find a series of poems in which Cavendish uses geometry, and in particular the squaring of the circle, as a metaphor for the relations between virtues (P&F 47-50).<sup>18</sup>

*Poems, and Fancies* is moreover not the only book in which Cavendish makes moral remarks, and those are not the only topics on which she makes them. To take a different example, we find Cavendish commenting in several places on the ethics of love and relationships. We find for instance her opposition to Platonic love – “for this opinion is dangerous, especially for married Women, by reason the conversation of the Souls may be a great temptation, and a means to bring Platonick Lovers to a neerer acquaintance, not allowable by the Laws of Marriage, although by the sympathy of the Souls” (PL 2.29) – and her related harsh views about the appropriate punishment of adulterous women, who “are Matrimonial Traitors ... [who] ought to suffer Death, and their

---

<sup>17</sup> There are five other mentions of moral philosophy in PL, including notably two passages that identity moral philosophy with natural theology (PL 4.15, 4.22).

<sup>18</sup> Here see also Sokol (2003).



Executioner ought to be their Husband” (SL 26).<sup>19</sup>

Beyond the various particular remarks, we should note Cavendish’s fondness for publishing pairs of works: one in natural philosophy, the other containing (possibly related, and more morally inclined) reflections. Most famously perhaps, the *Observations* was paired with the *Blazing World*. But the *Philosophical Letters* also forms a pair with the *Sociable Letters*, and if the *Philosophical Fancies* had been published together with the *Poems, and Fancies*, as Cavendish apparently originally planned, those two works would have fit this model as well. For all this fondness for pairing works though, in none of these cases does Cavendish present the reflective work as the systematic development of the natural philosophical one.

Cavendish’s work undeniably contains moral reflection and moral assertions. She did not think that these reflections contributed to a scientific inquiry, something like Hobbes’s civil science. It is not even clear that she thought this reflection ought to be called moral philosophy. It is nevertheless present, and we can sensibly ask what, if anything, it had to do with her panpsychism.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.2 Did Cavendish not have arguments for those later views?

Cavendish does offer some arguments for her panpsychism. One might suggest that these arguments both motivated and justified the view, leaving nothing for my developmental story to explain.

One prominent argument of Cavendish’s rests on the need to explain the regular workings of nature.<sup>21</sup> So, in the 1668 *Ground of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish says:

IF Nature were not Self-knowing, Self-living, and also Perceptive, she would run into

---

<sup>19</sup> She was at the same time not one to praise marriage, saying it “most commonly knocks all quick Spirits on the Head, and buries all Wit and Mirth, giving Life only to Care and Trouble” (*World's Olio* 78).

<sup>20</sup> Cavendish’s unwillingness to consider her moral views part of moral philosophy, strictly speaking, lends some support to the thought that she does not see it as part of an overall moral system.

<sup>21</sup> The arguments of PL 4.30, which I quoted above, are related to this.

Confusion: for, there could be neither Order, nor Method, in Ignorant motion; neither would there be distinct kinds or sorts of Creatures, nor such exact and methodical Varieties as there are: for, it is impossible to make orderly and methodical Distinctions, or distinct Orders, by Chances: Wherefore, Nature being so exact (as she is) must needs be Self-knowing and Perceptive: And though all her Parts, even the Inanimate Parts, are Self-knowing, and Self-living; yet, only her Self-moving Parts have an active Life, and a perceptive Knowledg (*Ground* 7).

To consider the extent to which an argument of this sort drives Cavendish's mature view, I look at when this argument appears in her work.<sup>22</sup>

Consider first the relevant works of the 1650s, the *Philosophical Fancies* of 1653 and the first edition of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* from 1655. Cavendish gives an explanation for the orderly progress of nature in those texts. It is this: "The Reason, that there is not a *Confusion* in *Nature*, but an orderly Course therein, is, the *Eternal matter* is alwayes *one*, and the *same*: for though there are *Infinite degrees*, yet the *Nature* of that *Matter* never alters" (PPO1 5; PF 10). That is, Cavendish argues that the nature is orderly or regular because the nature of matter never changes. Later she would argue, differently, that nature is orderly or regular because of what the nature of matter is. These are not the same argument.

The regularity argument for Cavendish's panpsychism seems first to appear in her discussions of atomism. As Sarasohn (2010, 103) notes, Cavendish uses regularity to argue against atomism in the first edition of the *Opinions*: an atomic system would be a disordered one. A revised version of that argument appears in the 1663 second edition of the *Opinions*, where Cavendish adds that atomists could avoid the noted problem if the atoms were each animated individual substances

---

<sup>22</sup> This is not the only way to understand Cavendish's reasoning, though it is a prominent one. Detlefsen (2007) argues that freedom, rather than order, is the fundamental thing that Cavendish seeks to explain with her panpsychism, the explanation of order then being a derivative one.

which coordinated their actions, though that view would encounter other difficulties.<sup>23</sup> The thought that inanimate atoms could not explain the regularity of nature recurs in the *Observations* in 1666 (OEP 258). More generally, and outside a discussion of atomism, Cavendish argues in the *Observations* that her animate matter view explains how “the infinite parts of nature should move so variously, nay, so orderly and methodically as they do” (OEP 139), and had argued similarly in the *Philosophical Letters*.<sup>24</sup> As we have seen, she would go on to state the argument at greater length in the *Ground*.

The regularity argument for Cavendish’s view clearly was present in the texts of the 1660s, but plays a relatively small role in them. This small role in those texts suggests that the argument was not, in Cavendish’s mind, the central justification for the view. That, plus the fact that the argument assumes a greater role as time goes on, suggests that thinking about how to explain regularity was also not a main part of Cavendish’s motivation for her view.

Cavendish aimed, in the 1660s, to develop something that looks like a serious system of natural philosophy. My question is how that relates to some of the early poems. And my suggestion is that Cavendish’s environmental ethic – her concern for nature and its non-human creatures, and what they would say if only they could talk – became more literal, and transformed in to her panpsychism.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.3 The role of Cavendish’s atomism

I have suggested that one important root of Cavendish’s panpsychist system lies in poems of the

---

<sup>23</sup> Cavendish thinks the atoms would be unlikely to agree in the necessary ways, so, the only view that can really avoid the problem of disorder is her own monistic panpsychism.

<sup>24</sup> PL 4.15, 4.30.

<sup>25</sup> Semler (2012) makes a related suggestion, using the notions of ‘poetic selection’ and ‘philosophical revisitation’. His thesis, about engagement with Descartes and Hobbes, is different from mine. But the notion that something like this process went on – initial selection of views for non-philosophical reasons, and the later incorporation of those views within Cavendish’s philosophy – is shared.

*Poems, and Fancies* that express concern for non-human parts of nature and ask what they think.

A further objection may occur to the reader here. Perhaps the origin of Cavendish's mature natural philosophy can indeed be found in her first book, the *Poems, and Fancies*. But is the best candidate for that origin not the early natural philosophy, rather than the early ethics? More specifically, we find in *Poems, and Fancies* a series of atomist poems. Is this not Cavendish's first natural philosophy, which she then developed into her later (non-atomist) system?

That suggestion hinges on a view that is common in the secondary literature: that Cavendish was an atomist when she wrote *Poems, and Fancies*, but then moved away from that view.<sup>26</sup> To the extent that there is debate about such issues, it is largely about when she gave up her atomism.<sup>27</sup>

The evidence for that view is that there are atomist poems in Cavendish's first book, the 1653 *Poems, and Fancies*, but there is no atomism in her later works. The existence of the atomist poems is incontestable.<sup>28</sup> I question, however whether they show that Cavendish in fact believed, or wished to assert as part of her philosophy, that atoms existed. Perhaps, instead, we should take these too as fancies, and Cavendish to be playing with atomist ideas in the course of writing poetry, rather than presenting an atomist natural philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

One way to approach the issue is to think about the alleged move away from atomism. When is this supposed to have happened? It can have happened no later than 1655, when Cavendish published the first edition of her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, with its "Condemning Treatise of Atomes". That itself is no problem for the common view – it just points to an early transition.

---

<sup>26</sup> It is common but not universal. I agree with Boyle (2018, 57) when she says that "we should not take Cavendish to be presenting atomism as a true account of nature any more than she was presenting her fairy stories as true".

<sup>27</sup> Detlefsen (2006) is a good guide to this apparent disappearance of the atomism, and a good argument against the view that it was never given up.

<sup>28</sup> There is a broader question about how Cavendish's use of atomism fits in the history of seventeenth-century English poetry. See Clucas (1991) and Dodds (2013, 78-90).

<sup>29</sup> O'Neill does not go as far as I do, but does comment on Cavendish's attitude to atomism in 1653 (Cavendish 2001, xv-xvi), and argue that Cavendish's "commitment to an animistic materialism [as opposed to atomism] dates from far earlier than 1661" (Cavendish 2001, xx).

Complications start to arise when we think about the second book Cavendish published in 1653, the *Philosophical Fancies*. We might think of this as the first version of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*. Indeed, it was incorporated into that book. The material does not seem to advocate atomism when it appears in the 1655 text. Why would we take it to advocate atomism in the 1653 text?

It is true that the *Philosophical Fancies* does not contain the “Condemning Treatise of Atomes”, so it lacks an explicit rejection of atomism. But it does not contain explicit advocacy of atomism either. Indeed, the only mention of atoms appears to be this: “So Matter that is thinnest or thickest, softest or hardest, yet it is but one Matter; for if it were divided by degrees, untill it came to an Atome, that Atome would still be the same Matter, as well as the greatest bulk. But we cannot say smallest, or biggest, thickest or thinnest, softest or hardest in Infinite” (2-3). That is hardly an endorsement of atomism, and the claim that we “cannot say smallest” looks like a denial of it, for it suggests we cannot say there is a smallest material thing. In sum, atomism is not the view of the *Philosophical Fancies*. So if Cavendish did move away from atomism, this move happened between her 1653 books.

Consider Cavendish’s own retrospective take on this issue, in the *Observations*. There she tells us that “the opinion of atoms, is fitter for a poetical fancy, than for serious philosophy; and this is the reason that I have waived it in my philosophical works” (*Observations* 129). One can say all sorts of things in a work of fancy without asserting them to be true, or part of one’s philosophical system. Saying Cavendish was not taking the atomism together literally and seriously is thus to take her own word. Indeed, and not just at her retrospective word, but also at her word in *Poems, and Fancies*. Consider what she says “To Naturall Philosophers”: “I cannot say, I have not heard of *Atomes*, and *Figures*, and *Motion*, and *Matter*; but not throughly *reason'd* on: but if I do erre, it is no great matter; for my *Discourse* of them is not to be accounted *Authentick* [...] And the Reason why I write it in *Verse*,

is, because I thought *Errors* might better passe there, then in *Prose*; since *Poets* write most *Fiction*, and *Fiction* is not given for *Truth*, but *Pastime*...”.<sup>30</sup> Cavendish was not, I argue, philosophically attached to atomism, even when she wrote the *Poems, and Fancies*. There she is certainly playing with atomist ideas, as she is playing with others, but she does not assert them.

This talk of fancies also helps explain how Cavendish seemingly held both the atomist and the non-atomist views in 1653. If there were such a transition in Cavendish’s thought as is often claimed, it would have had to have happened in 1653, between *Poems, and Fancies* and *Philosophical Fancies*. Cavendish had intended to publish those together. That pair of volumes would have been problematically inconsistent if it had been asserting two philosophical views: that there are atoms, and that there are not atoms. If we are dealing with atomist fancies, rather than assertions, the situation is rather different.

Though Cavendish thought and write about atomism, she did not assert or believe it – she regarded it as fancy.<sup>31</sup> Thus there is in an important sense no such thing as Cavendish’s early atomism, and no puzzle about when and how she gave it up. Atomism was not the early natural philosophy out of which Cavendish developed her later view, because it was not the early natural philosophy.<sup>32</sup> Now, this does not prevent someone from regarding it as a source for the later view, in something like the way I’m regarding the environmental ethical views. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the atomism was, primarily, something with which Cavendish played fancifully and poetically. It was not an early system of natural philosophy that she abandoned for a later one.

---

<sup>30</sup> See also Clucas (1994, 261).

<sup>31</sup> Walter Charleton, in a letter to Cavendish (*Letters and Poems*, 142-9), argues that her theories are worth hearing because they are delightful, and there’s pleasure in the delightful products of fancy. That is, he is defending Cavendish by moving her work away from the sphere of things about which we ask whether they are true (never mind the sphere of things we actually think are true). On Charleton on Cavendish, see Sarasohn (2010, 48-9), Semler (2011), and Semler (2013).

<sup>32</sup> If something is to have the title of ‘Cavendish’s early natural philosophy’, that should be the views of PF and PPO1.

## 5. Conclusion

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

I have suggested, in particular in relation to the third and fourth themes, some connections between the views of the *Poems, and Fancies* and the later works of natural philosophy. My speculative suggestion is that the metaphorical encounters – the non-literal panpsychism – harden into a more literal panpsychism, but to a considerable extent without supporting argument. An initial inclination to consider what the rest of the world might be thinking helped Cavendish along the way to the view that it really was. These are causal connections, not systematic or deductive ones.

Even if one rejects that speculation about development, a more basic point about connections between Cavendish's views is illustrated here. Cavendish did have views about moral matters, and we might call this her moral philosophy. Her views in environmental ethics in the *Poems, and Fancies* provide a striking example of this moral philosophy. She was however reluctant to call such thoughts moral philosophy herself. That is because they were not part of her systematic enquiry into the world, which she referred to as 'natural philosophy', not simply as 'philosophy'.

Cavendish's contemporaries Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza all thought of philosophy as a systematic enterprise aimed at understanding the world, one that ought to proceed from or through natural philosophy to its ultimate and highest goal, the true moral science. That was not how Cavendish approached philosophy. The better model for her approach is a more current one, that of a scientist (or natural philosopher) who has ethical opinions. Such opinions may relate in one way or another to their philosophical or scientific work, without the scientist having anything like an early

modern philosophical system.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> I thank audiences at Duke University and the University of North Carolina - Asheville for very helpful discussions, and Adela Deanova for her commentary on my paper at Duke. Thanks also to Noah Delwiche and Antonia LoLordo for their comments.



## Bibliography

- Boyle, Deborah. 2018. *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1653a. *Poems, and Fancies*. London. [P&F]
- 1653b. *Philosophical Fancies*. London. [PF]
- 1655a. *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*. First edition. London. [PPO1]
- 1655b. *The World's Olio*. London. [*World's Olio*]
- 1663. *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*. Second edition. London. [PPO2]
- 1664. *Philosophical Letters*. London. [PL]
- 1668. *Ground of Natural Philosophy*. London. [*Ground*]
- 1676. *Letters and Poems in Honour of the Incomparable Princess, Margaret, Dutchess of Newcastle*. London. [*Letters and Poems*]
- 2001. *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. Edited by Eileen O'Neill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [OEP]
- 2004. *Sociable Letters*. Edited by James Fitzmaurice. Peterborough, ON: Broadview. [SL]
- Clucas, Stephen. 1991. "Poetic Atomism in Seventeenth-Century England: Henry More, Thomas Traherne and 'Scientific Imagination'". *Renaissance Studies* 5: 327-40.
- 1994. "The Atomism of the Cavendish Circle: A Reappraisal". *The Seventeenth Century* 9: 247–273.
- Detlefsen, Karen. 2006. "Atomism, Monism, and Causation in the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish." *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 3: 199–240.
- 2007. "Reason and Freedom: Margaret Cavendish on the Order and Disorder of Nature." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 89: 157–91.
- Dodds, Lara. 2013. *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*. Pittsburgh: Dusquene University Press.

- Mathews, Freya. 2003. *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Merchant, Carolyn. 1980. *The Death of Nature*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Perry, Henry Ten Eyck. 1968. *The First Duchess of Newcastle and Her Husband as Figures in Literary History*. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation. A reprint of the 1918 edition (Boston: Ginn and Company).
- Sarasohn, Lisa. 2010. *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Semler, L. E. 2011. "The Magnetic Attraction of Margaret Cavendish and Walter Charleton." In Paul Salzman and Jo Wallwork (ed.), *Early Modern Englishwomen Testing Ideas* (Farnham: Routledge) 55-72.
- 2012. "Margaret Cavendish's Early Engagement with Descartes and Hobbes: Philosophical Revisitation and Poetic Selection". *Intellectual History Review* 22: 327-353.
- 2013. "Stories of Selves and Infidels: Walter Charleton's Letter to Margaret Cavendish (1655)". In Jan Shaw, Phillipa Kelly, and L.E. Semler (ed.), *Storytelling: Critical and Creative Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) 191-210.
- Sokol, B.J. "Margaret Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* and Thomas Harriot's *Treatise on Infinity*." In Stephen Clucas (ed.), *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle* (Aldershot: Ashgate) 156–170.
- Strawson, Galen. 2006. "Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism". In Anthony Freeman (ed.), *Consciousness and its Place in Nature: Does Physicalism Entail Panpsychism?* (Exeter: Imprint Academic) 3-31.
- Suzuki, Mihoko. 2015. "Animals and the Political in Lucy Hutchinson and Margaret Cavendish". *The Seventeenth Century* 30: 229-247.
- Whitaker, Katie. 2002. *Mad Madge*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wilson, Catherine. 2007. "Two Opponents of Material Atomism: Cavendish and Leibniz". In P.

Phemister and S. Brown (ed.), *Leibniz and the English-Speaking World* (Springer), 35–50.