Comments on Peter West’s ‘Cavendish and Berkeley on Conceivability and Possibility’

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1. Overview

Cavendish (1623-1673) and Berkeley (1685-1753) both attack the distinction between primary and secondary qualities on conceptual grounds. Whereas early modern philosophers like Galileo and Descartes argue that we can conceive of a material object with only primary qualities—and, hence, devoid of any secondary qualities like color, smell, taste, and so on—Cavendish and Berkeley disagree. Cavendish and Berkeley maintain that it is impossible to conceive of a body without both primary and secondary qualities—or, in Cavendish’s case, without color—from which they infer that it is impossible for bodies to exist without both.

West’s question: why do Cavendish and Berkeley accept the principle that inconceivability implies impossibility? What justification of this principle do they offer?

West argues that both Cavendish and Berkeley accept this principle on the basis of the following argument:

(1) If something can exist, then it is perceivable.

(2) If something is perceivable, then it is conceivable.

Therefore,

(3) If something can exist, then it is conceivable.

Therefore,

(4) If something is inconceivable, then it cannot exist.
Premise (1) says that something can exist only if it can be perceived or experienced by someone or something. Premise (2) says that something can be perceived or experienced only if it can be thought about or conceived. Put these together and you get the conclusion that something can exist only if it can be thought or conceived, or, equivalently, that if something cannot be conceived then it cannot exist. As West puts it, ‘for both thinkers, there is an important connection between what we can conceive and what we can perceive, and, in turn, between what we can perceive and what could possibly exist’ (p. 4).

Now, we might have worries about premise (2). The richness of perceptual experience might seem to outstrip our conceptual abilities. Maybe I can see more shades of blue, for example, than I can really think about. I am going to set these worries aside, however, because premise (1) is where the action is.

In sum: I am on board with West’s explanation of why Berkeley accepts this premise; I am not so sure about the story he tells about Cavendish.

2. Berkeley on Existence and Perception

Why does Berkeley accept premise (1) in the reconstruction above? That is, why does Berkeley hold that possible existence implies perceivability? Because, West argues, ‘Berkeley equates the existence of a thing in nature with its being perceived. This is not surprising since Berkeley famously maintains that the very esse of a sensible thing is its percipi. . . this means that for it to be possible for a thing to exist it must be possible, in principle, for that thing to be perceived’ (p. 23).

To be clear, this short argument does not establish the general principle that if something can exist, then it can be perceived. Rather, it establishes the more restricted principle that if some sensible thing can exist, then it can be perceived. Examples of sensible things include cherries, apples, mountains, rivers, houses, etc. which, for Berkeley, are ultimately just collections of sensible qualities/ideas. Crucially, this short
argument does not establish that spirits like you and me can exist only if we are perceived, because our esse does not consist in being perceived.

Hence, if we substitute this restricted principle back into the main argument, we get the claim that if a sensible thing cannot be conceived, then it cannot exist. That is somewhat weaker than the principle West attributes to Berkeley in some passages. But it’s probably good enough for Berkeley’s purposes, and, more specifically, for his argument against the separability of primary and secondary qualities.

Let’s take a look at Cavendish next.

3. Cavendish on Existence and Perception

West claims that Cavendish never explicitly says that if something can exist, then it can be perceived. But, he suggests, she commits herself to this principle by accepting the premises of the following argument (p. 28):

(1) Every part of nature is surrounded by other parts. In other words, every part of nature has neighboring or adjoining parts. (Plenism)

(2) Every part of nature perceives things external to itself.

Therefore

(3) Every part of nature is perceived by the parts surrounding it, i.e. the neighboring or adjoining parts.

Therefore,
(4) Every part of nature is perceived.¹

As formulated, this argument isn’t quite valid. Premises (1) and (2)—that every part has neighbors and that every part perceives other things—do not imply (3) that every part perceives its neighbors, which is the conclusion West needs. Maybe, for some strange reason, there is a world with a golden apple hanging on a tree at the center of the universe. Every other part of nature perceives the golden apple; the apple perceives only the tree it’s hanging on. In this scenario, premises (1) and (2) would be true, but (3) would be false. But it’s fairly clear that West means to attribute something like the following argument to Cavendish:

(1) Every part of nature is surrounded by other parts. In other words, every part has neighboring or adjoining parts.

(2’) Every part of nature perceives its neighbors.

Therefore,

(3) Every part of nature is perceived by the parts surrounding it.

Therefore,

(4) Every part of nature is perceived.

Again, I think it’s worth pointing out that this argument does not establish the general principle that if something can exist, then it can be perceived. It establishes that if something is a part of nature, then it is in fact perceived. Supernatural immaterials fall outside the scope of this principle (and maybe this is another similarity to Berkeley?). Also, this argument does not obviously establish the modal claim that if something can exist as a part of nature, then it can be perceived. For one thing, in the Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Cavendish allows for the possibility of a world without motion, which, I take it, would

¹ I have streamlined this reconstruction slightly by combining West’s claims (ii) and (iii) into my premise (2).
be a world composed entirely of inanimate matter and hence devoid of perception: ‘there might be Matter, and Figure, without Motion, as an infinite, and eternal dull lump’ (PPO-1655 ch. 60, p. 30).

Let’s set those quibbles aside, however. I want to ask whether Cavendish accepts (2’): the claim that every part of nature perceives its neighbors. The textual evidence is somewhat mixed. In the Observations, for example, Cavendish writes:

Thus, although there is difference between the particular actions, knowledges, and perceptions of every part, which causes an ignorance betwixt them; yet, by reason there is knowledge and perception in every part, by which each part doth not only know itself, and its own actions; but has also a general perception of some actions of its neighbouring parts: it causes a general intelligence and information betwixt the particular parts of a composed figure. . . (OEP 152)

This passage is compatible with West’s reading. But notice that it says that every part perceives some of the actions of its neighbors. It doesn’t say that every part perceives all of its neighbors, which is what (I think) West’s argument requires.

More problematic for West’s reading are passages where Cavendish seemingly denies that every part of nature perceives its neighbors:

if the parts be not the same, the perceptions must needs be different; nay, there may infinite several perceptions be made by one and the same parts, if matter be eternal, and perpetually moving. And hence it follows, that some parts may make perceptions of distant parts, and not of neighbouring parts; and others again, may make perceptions of neighbouring or adjoining parts, and not of those that are distant: As for example, in the animal perception, taste and touch are only perceptions of adjoining objects, wheras sight and hearing do perceive at a distance; for if
an object be immediately joined to the optic sense, it quite blinds it. (OEP 184; see also OEP 144, 160, 167-8)

Here Cavendish says that sometimes parts perceive their neighbors. But sometimes they don’t. And so that looks bad for the argument that West attributes to her, since there could be a part of matter whose neighbors perceive only distant parts and, hence, this part of nature would ‘slip through the net’ (p. 28). Somewhat gruesomely, we might imagine a part of nature surrounded by eyeballs on every side, for example, given Cavendish’s claim that eyes perceive only at a distance. Thus, Cavendish’s commitment to the plenum—and, more specifically, her view that every part of nature is surrounded by other parts—does not yield the conclusion that every part of nature is perceived by other parts. (Cards on the table: I don’t see Cavendish’s commitment to a material plenum doing as much work in her system as some other commentators, such as David Cunning and apparently West.)

Still, we might wonder whether there is some other route to West’s conclusion. In other words, is there anything else about being a part of nature which implies that every part of nature is perceived?

In the spirit of friendly amendment, I would like to suggest two possibilities, which pick up on different aspects of Cavendish’s conception of nature:

(1) *Causal Interaction:* What does Cavendish mean by nature? We can’t identify nature with everything that exists, since she allows that there can be supernatural or non-natural immaterials. Also, I don’t think we should *define* nature as the sum of all material things, because that would trivialize her claims that everything in nature is material. My working hypothesis is that Cavendish conceives of nature, at a first pass, as the causal system of which we are a part. On this conception of nature, to be a part of nature is to participate in a causal system and, more specifically, to be capable of causally interacting with other parts of this system. My suggestion, then, is that this kind of causal interaction
presupposes mutual perception. The argument would then go something like this: part of
nature \rightarrow \text{capable of causal interaction with other parts of nature} \rightarrow \text{mutual perception}. If you add in
Cavendishian considerations about the orderliness of nature, that might be an even more powerful
argument.

(2) Composition: Alison Peterman's recent work on mereology in Cavendish suggests that part-whole
relations do an enormous amount of work for her. Maybe there’s an argument to be made from
mereological considerations to the claim that if something exists in nature, then it is perceived. Maybe
something along the following lines: If something is a part of nature, then it forms a whole with some
other parts of nature. And, for Cavendish, if something is part of a whole, then it is perceived by at
least some other part of that whole, though perhaps not by every other part. (i.e. if x is a part of some
whole y, then there exists some z distinct from x, such that z is also part of y and z perceives x.)

To sum up, I am sympathetic to West’s suggestion that if something is part of nature, then it is perceived.
I’m not sure the plenum gets you that conclusion. But maybe there are other options.

4. Lingering Questions

Stepping back from the details of Cavendish’s metaphysics, I am left wondering about how West’s
reconstruction explains Cavendish’s commitment to the claim that inconceivability implies impossibility.
Recall that we started going down this path because we wanted to explain why Cavendish and Berkeley
hold that the impossibility of conceiving/imaging a colorless body implies that there couldn’t be such a
thing.

On West’s reconstruction of Cavendish, if something is a part of nature, then it is perceived. But that
seems to fall short of establishing that if there can be a colorless part of nature, then it is possible to
perceive a part of nature as colorless and, hence, conceivable that such a colorless part exists. To get this further conclusion, it seems like West might need to establish that if there were to exist a colorless part of nature, then this part would be perceived as colorless, which is impossible (?). (One possible response here: Cavendish and Berkeley don’t recognize a sharp distinction between a thing and its qualities. Which is right. But that makes me think that something interesting is going on here.)

Zooming out even more, I wonder if West can say more about how his investigation illuminates the difference between Cavendish’s materialism and Berkeley’s immaterialism. Sure, they describe their views differently. But that could just be different public relations strategies. What is the substantive difference between their views? As West points out, although they both connect existence in nature with perception, they differ in how strongly they forge this connection (p. 27). For Berkeley, the existence of sensible things just is their being perceived. For Cavendish, the existence of natural things implies their perceivability. This might suggest that, for Cavendish, the connection between natural things and perception—or, more generally, awareness—is contingent or accidental.

Actually, I’m not so sure about that. In addition to (arguably) committing herself to the view that every part of nature is perceived, Cavendish holds that every part of nature has self-knowledge. As Cavendish writes, ‘wheresoever is matter, there is life and self-knowledge; nor can a part lose self-knowledge, any more than it can lose life’ (OEP 20). Although being perceived might be accidental to the parts of nature, this self-knowledge sure sounds like it is essential to material things, in which case matter for Cavendish would involve an essential element of awareness—but self-awareness, rather than perception or awareness by another.

West has done a nice job of showing that Cavendish’s parts of nature bear a surprising resemblance to Berkeley’s sensible things. But maybe the connections go deeper yet. Maybe Cavendish’s parts of nature also resemble Berkeley’s spirits. Maybe Cavendish’s parts of nature are self-aware in something like the
way Berkeley’s spirits are conscious of themselves. Thus, we might think of Cavendish’s parts of nature as combining or fusing Berkeley’s categories of spirits and idea—and that her materialism transcends his dualism of active spirit and passive idea.