

**It's Alive: Cavendish on Matter, Soul, and Order**  
**Marleen Rozemond**  
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This is part of a longer paper on Cavendish and Conway with Alison Simmons. Both Cavendish and Conway are vitalist monists, as is widely acknowledged. Both reject dualism.

Our paper argues, among other things, that they are too similar to be distinguished as a materialist vs a spiritualist, as they often are. They attribute pretty much the same properties to their "stuff": extension, divisibility, impenetrability, self-motion, sentience, and knowledge.

But their argumentative approaches are very different (focus on natural philosophy vs moral order), which makes the similarity the more interesting!

Crucial motives for dualism at the time:

- Need for material entities to explain natural phenomena.
- Theological demand for human exceptionalism: immortality of the human soul and *only* the human soul (vs animals).

Cavendish's response:

- Immaterial entities are not necessary (indeed problematic) to explain natural phenomena.
- She blends humans into the rest of nature: anti-exceptionalism.

**(I) Background: Henry More's dualism**

-- Descartes: explain everything in terms of matter -- except for human thought.  
-- Henry More (and others): that's much too optimistic! There are not only human immaterial souls, but animal souls and, most importantly for today, an immaterial "Spirit of Nature" that explains natural phenomena other than thought.

More was a crucial target for Cavendish. For him all substances are extended and active, but they differ with respect to:

- Divisibility
- Penetrability
- Their type of activity

**(1)** So that two Substances, Matter and Spirit, stand opposite one to another, specifically distinct, by their immediate, essential and inseparable attributes, the one being really discernible and impenetrable, the other penetrable, and indiscernible, sufficiently thus to be discriminated before we consider any Principle of Activity in either (More, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, p. 196, quoted in Reid, p.188).

**Activity:** bodies can communicate motion, but not initiate it; only spiritual substances are self-moving:

(2) The precise notion of substance is the same in both [matter and spirit], in which, I conceive, is compris'd Extension and Activity, *either connate or communicated*. For matter itself once moved can move other matter. (More, *Immortality of the Soul* (IS) Bk. I.ch. 3.2 italics ours)

Sometimes More writes that bodies are passive, but the lack of self-motion is what he has in mind.

More often casts this contrast in terms of *life* (and sometimes also perception): spirit is "immaterial substance intrinsically endowed with life and the faculty of moving" (*Enchiridion metaphysicum* I.xxviii.3).

For More, mechanistic explanation has severe limits within the physical world. It can't explain a wide variety of specific natural phenomena other than thought; most importantly today, it can't explain *the order* we find in the world.

This requires appeal to God's laws. But these laws need something to execute them, and this entity must be immaterial. So he thinks we also need a "Spirit of Nature", or "Hylarchic Principle".

In (IS) More describes the Spirit of Nature as follows:

(3) A substance incorporeal but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, **and exercising a plastical power therein**, according to the sundry predispositions and occasions in the parts it works upon, raising such Phaenomena in the world, by directing the parts of the Matter and their Motion, as cannot be resolved into mere Mechanical powers. (More, IS, bk. 3, ch. 12.1, emphasis added.)

More's point is that the Spirit of Nature, other than matter, *is active*. It is an internal active principle installed by God, like a computer program:

(4) But now I perceive all things, which are made in the free course of Nature, are not only approv'd of by Divine Wisdom, but that their Laws were implanted in the spirit of Nature, by the help of God. (*Antidote against Atheism*, bk 2. ch. 2.1, sch., 153)

You might think the model is one of obedience (to God's laws), which would require mental states. But this is not More's idea. The crucial idea is activity. More definitely denies rationality and freedom for the Spirit of Nature, he is sometimes hesitant about sense perception:

(5) That the Spirit of Nature hath Life, and that both Plastical and Omniform, I dare more confidently aver: but as to Sense and Animadversion, I hold it a more rash business to determine any thing either negatively or affirmatively. But that it is devoid of Reason and Freewill is with me an establish'd Point. (IS p. 215, bk.3, ch. 12.1 note. See also *Antidote against Atheism*, Bk. II.i sch., p. 153)

Sometimes outright denies it, as in **quote (3)** above: “A substance incorporeal but without Sense and Animadversion” (IS, bk. 3, ch. 12.1)

In sum, a crucial role for the Spirit of Nature is to explain the efficacy of the laws of nature. This is an important issue in this period, with its new focus on natural laws.

Consider Descartes: laws of motion describe divine conservation of motion.

Malebranche: the laws describe God’s direct activity in the world.

## **(II) Cavendish: The order of nature does not require immaterial entities**

- (1) They do not help explain anything, given her objections to natural immaterial created entities. See the next section.
- (2) They are superfluous: matter can do the job. She offers a vitalist conception of matter. This is in part motivated by her criticism of mechanical interaction, targeting Hobbes, and it leads her to argue for **matter itself being active in the sense of self-active**.
  - This criticism assumes a model of literal transmission of motion, and relies on the “accidents don’t migrate” principle.
  - She also argues that motion cannot be separated from its body and be “given to” another body; it would require that some of its matter travel with the motion (PL, I.xxx, 97-98).
  - Instead she favours “occasional causation” and this is where she invokes self-activity: a body starts to move itself *on the occasion* of a prompt, when triggered by another body, in virtue of its own self-activity.
- (3) But she agrees with More that a purely mechanistic world would be chaotic.

She accepts the idea that order comes from God: but then how are divine commands, laws executed?

For More: The imposition of the laws requires an immaterial entity, because matter is passive, it can’t do it.

Cavendish: matter can do the job, and her model is *obedience!*

(6) ... but [More] that thinks it absurd to say, the World is composed of meer self-moving Matter, may consider, that it is more absurd to believe Immaterial substances or spirits in Nature, as also a spirit of Nature, which is the Vicarious power of God upon Matter; For why should it not be as probable, that God did give Matter a self-moving power to her self, as to have made another Creature to govern her? For Nature is not a Babe, or Child, to need such a Spiritual Nurse, to teach her to go, or to move; neither is she so young a Lady as to have need of a Governess, for surely she can govern her self; she needs not a Guardian for fear she should run away with a younger Brother, or one that cannot make her a Jointure. (PL I.vi, 149)

Here she sounds as if maybe nature itself can be the origin of order, but that is not the view. She cites the Genesis story of God issuing a variety of commands, which generate order in what was a “rude and indigested Heap, or Chaos, without form, void and dark”:

(7) Thus all was made by God’s command, and who executed his Command but the Material servant of God, Nature? which ordered her self-moving matter into such several Figures as God commanded, and God approved of them. (ibid., 16, see also PL II.iii, 142.)

So Cavendish denies the need for an immaterial intermediary, indeed this wouldn’t help given the problems with the action of an immaterial entity on the material world. (She also thinks it would create chaos.)

Instead Nature as a whole orders its parts around.

So the model seems to include:

- (a) The self-activity of matter
- (b) A model of obedience, which implies a grasp of the laws at hand, and so mentality.

The importance of mentality comes out also in her criticism of Pythagoras:

(8) ... self-moving matter, which is the only principle of nature, is infinite, and there are no more principles but this one. It is true, regular compositions and divisions **are made by consent of parts**, and presuppose number and harmony; but number and harmony cannot be the cause of any orderly productions, **without sense and reason**; for how should parts agree in their actions, if they did not know each other; or if they had no sense of reason? (*Observations*, 257-8, emphasis added)

Very striking model!

### III Cavendish against Human Exceptionalism:

#### Against human immaterial souls in nature:

She argues that the notion of immaterial entities is seriously problematic. She argues for instance:

- (a) We ourselves are material beings and so cannot understand immaterial beings;
- (b) “Spirits can have no description because they have no dimension” (“To all the Writing Ladies”, quoted in Cuning p. 62);
- (c) She describes them as “non-beings”, “nothing”, or “non-matter; (PL 239, III.ii, OEP 137, GNP 1, 237).
- (d) She also argues against mind-body interaction.

(e) In addition, she holds that all of nature worships God, and that “there is an innate Notion of God, in all the Parts of Nature; but not a Perfect knowledge”.

This seems to make the immaterial soul partly superfluous for religious purposes.

Yet: she at least sometimes allows that immaterial souls exist: in the PL she writes this is the only difference between humans and other creatures (PL I.x, 41). Some interpreters: she only allows them so as not to get in trouble.

Emma Wilkins: she abandons them only later. In the *Ground*:

(10) I cannot conceive how an Immaterial can be in Nature: for, first, An Immaterial cannot, in my opinion, be naturally created; nor can I conceive how an Immaterial can produce particular Immaterial Souls, Spirits, or the like. Wherefore, an Immaterial, in my opinion, must be some uncreated Being; which can be no other than GOD alone... if there were any other Immaterial Beings, besides the Omnipotent God, those would be so near the Divine Essence of God as to be petty Gods; and numerous petty gods would, almost, make the Power of an Infinite God. But, God is Omnipotent, and only God (*Ground of Natural Philosophy*, Appendix I.ch. 2)

So: if there were immaterial souls, this would violate monotheism!

Cavendish seems to hold consistently that they have no role in nature; she deems them supernatural.

**She also argues against human exceptionalism within the material, natural world.** In PL against Hobbes:

- Rationality does not presuppose language.
- And there is no ground for denying rationality to other creatures; maybe they have a different rationality, but not an inferior one.
- Just because we can't communicate with them, does not mean other creatures are not rational.

(11) ... [A]ccording to my Reason I cannot perceive, but that all Creatures may do as much; but by reason they do it not after the same manner or way as man, Man denies they can do it at all; what is very hard; for what man knows whether Fish do not know more of the nature of Water, and ebbing and flowing, and the saltness of the Sea, or whether Birds do not know more of the nature and degrees of Air, or the cause of Tempests? For though they have not the Speech of man, yet thence doth not follow, that they have no Intelligence at all. (PL I.x, 40)

**God: She does not extend her criticism of immaterial entities to God:**

She writes: "there is an innate Notion of God, in all the Parts of Nature".

She offers a long list of features that distinguish God from creatures: God is eternal, immaterial, immutable, indivisible, perfect etc. (*Grounds*, Appendix I.3-4)

And God is infinite in a different sense from the natural world.

### Conclusion

I drew attention to her argument that the order of nature does not require immaterial entities: While the order does derive ultimately from God, she argued that the execution of the divine plan does not require immaterial entities. Matter, endowed with self-activity and mental states can execute divine commands.

It then looks like humans really are not dramatically different from the rest of nature: everything is alive, senses and reasons. And indeed, she strongly opposed human exceptionalism.

### Some Sources:

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| Margaret Cavendish, | <i>Philosophical Letters...</i> (PL)<br><i>Ground of Natural Philosophy</i> (Ground)<br><i>Observations upon Experimental Philosophy</i> |
| Henry More,         | <i>Immortality of the Soul</i> (IS)<br><i>Antidote against Atheism</i>   |
| Jasper Reid,        | <i>The Metaphysics of Henry More</i>   |
| Emma Wilkins        | "'Exploding' Immaterial Substances: Margaret Cavendish's vitalist-materialist critique of spirits", <i>BJHP</i> 2016                     |