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Cavendish on God

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Abstract: Understanding the freedom in Cavendish's natural philosophy is essential to understanding Cavendish's work as a whole. In this paper, I will examine three different ways in which freedom can be understood and argue that Cavendish is best understood as a libertarian. From this conclusion, I will argue that consequently, the God in Cavendish's model must be deistic as opposed to providential. Finally, I will summarize and commentate on an article written by Karen Detlefsen.

Introduction

A vitalist philosopher in the 17th century, Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673) may have faced pressure to include a providential God in her natural philosophy. However, the remarks that Cavendish makes about God that might be interpreted as providential, seem to be colloquial expressions or afterthoughts rather than representative of her philosophical view. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the best way to understand the God presented in Cavendish's metaphysical model is as deistic. To go about this task, first I will establish that Cavendish is a libertarian. Next, I will argue that a providential God is incompatible with libertarianism. Finally, I will show that both of these factors require that Cavendish's metaphysics has a deistic God.

Cavendish is a Libertarian

Freedom is an important element for Cavendish's theory of causation. It may be easier to understand Cavendish's metaphysics by contrasting her view, vitalism, with another dominant view at the time, mechanism. Mechanist philosophers that were writing around the same time as Cavendish include René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes. Mechanism describes causation through force. For example, the mechanist view would argue that the force of a hockey stick hitting a puck causes the puck to fly in the opposite direction. However, Cavendish does not think nature to be so brutal and forceful. Rather, every animal, vegetable, and mineral is alive and has perception, self-knowledge, self-motion, and knowledge of God. Considering the same example, the motion of the hockey stick gives the *occasion* for the puck to move itself rather than the puck

being *forced* to move. In Cavendish's view, the hockey puck perceives the motion of the hockey stick and has the *freedom to choose* whether or not to move.

Given this view of causation, it is necessary to understand the kind of freedom in which Cavendish has afforded to nature. There are three different ways to understand freedom: determinism, compatibilism, and libertarianism. Determinism is the view that all actions have been pre-determined by an external force; there is no free-will. One who believes in determinism might say that though it may seem as though they are making thousands of decisions every day, it had already been determined which choice they were going to make; it would have been impossible for them to make a different choice.

Cavendish cannot be a determinist as she states, "*Nature hath a natural Free-will and power of self-moving, and is not necessitated*" (Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 225). If she had been a determinist then it would be that the puck was determined to move when struck by the hockey stick thereby making it irrelevant if the puck had perception, self-motion, and self-knowledge. Therefore, determinism is incompatible with Cavendish's view as free-will is a requirement for her model of causation.

Compatibilism is the view that free-will and determinism are not necessarily opposed and can work together. Compatibilism is composed of three parts: determinism, negative liberty, and coercive power. Negative liberty says that agents are free when there is nothing preventing them from acting on their will. For example, when someone is hungry they will desire food. Negative liberty says that so long as you are not prevented from getting food, then you are free. Coercive power is "*the power to 'make things happen', to unilaterally determine that things shall occur in a certain way*" (Peterson, Hasker, & Reichenbach, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 653) This means that an external force can determine how things will occur and force it's will

upon other beings. For instance, when playing a video game, the player has coercive power. She can decide what her character does and when it does it; the character is subject to her will. In sum, compatibilism says that though your will has been determined by external forces, so long as you are able to comply with that will you are free.

Some philosophers argue that Cavendish holds a compatibilist view of freedom. There are some passages where Cavendish seems to demonstrate determinism. For instance, “...*nature the servant of God, do order all things and actions of nature, the one by his immutable will, and all powerful-command*” (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 209). As this passage states that nature must obey God and that God’s will is immutable, it may be interpreted to demonstrate determinism.

Proponents of this view might cite passages such as, “...*the rational are more free and at liberty than the sensitive, which are more encumbered with working on, and with the inanimate parts of matter;*” (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 152) to argue that she understands freedom in terms of negative liberty. This is because Cavendish seems to be measuring freedom in terms of how much a thing is hindered to perform its will. Cavendish expresses this sentiment several times throughout her text, that the rational part of matter is “*more free*” than the sensitive. However, the best way to understand Cavendish’s view of freedom is as a libertarian, not compatibilist.

Libertarianism argues that free-will is incompatible with determinism. A key element in libertarianism is positive liberty. Positive liberty means that one has control over their own existence and can act on their own will. For instance, a person may decide whether or not they will get out of bed that morning. Their decision comes solely from themselves and they have the ability to change their decision at any moment; there is no external force necessitating their

decisions and movements. Overall, libertarianism means that agents have free-will; they can make their own choices.

There are several passages throughout Cavendish's text that support that Cavendish views freedom in terms of positive liberty. For example, Cavendish states, "...*natural self-motions are free and voluntary*" and "*Nature, which being self-moving, can do no otherwise, but take delight in acting, for her Actions are free and easie, and not forced or constrained*" (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 127 & Cavendish & Cuning, *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, 128). Both the former and latter quotes demonstrate that Cavendish is describing motion in the positive sense, that matter moves freely.

Some quotes may be interpreted as showing coercive power such as, "...*the actions alter as nature pleases, or is decreed by God to work*" (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 171). One arguing that Cavendish is a compatibilist might interpret this passage to mean that Nature *must* obey God and, therefore, is an indication of determinism. However, when looking at Cavendish's explanation for "disorder" and "irregularities," it becomes clear this is not the case.

Cavendish states, "*Nature hath made every thing Good...yet she hath given her Works power of misplacing themselves, which produceth Evil Effects: for, that which corrupts Nature, is the disordered mixture*" (Cavendish & Cuning, *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, 36) This passage shows that Nature's parts have the ability to make their own decisions. Though Nature has made "*every thing Good*", parts can choose not to obey her, thus creating disorder. Therefore, Cavendish's view of nature is that it has persuasive power. Persuasive power is defined as, "*power that is exercised by 'persuading' other beings to act according to one's desires, but without the ability to compel them to do so*" (Peterson, Hasker, & Reichenbach,

Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings, 656). Persuasive power can be likened to a child-parent relationship. A parent can instruct their child to pick up his clothes, but it is ultimately up to the child whether or not he will perform the task. This is the best way to understand Cavendish—Nature, as a mother who is wise and good, and nature's parts as her children, who have the ability to choose whether or not to be obedient.

Though libertarianism does not necessitate an external power, it is not opposed to persuasive power. This is because persuasive power allows for positive liberty as the agent still has ultimate control over what decision they make. Therefore, because Cavendish's view of freedom comprises of positive liberty and persuasive power, the best way to understand Cavendish is as a libertarian.

Providentialism says it is possible for God to cause things to happen

There are two different ways to understand Cavendish's view of God: providential and deistic. On the one hand, the God that Cavendish describes might be providential. The providential God is one that is hands-on. Not only does the providential God create the world, but He imposes his will on it. The providential God listens to prayers, performs miracles, and he has a plan for every creature on earth. On the other hand, the God Cavendish describes might be deistic. This God only created the world. Then, He removed Himself from all human affairs, allowing the world to function on its own.

Providentialism is incompatible with Cavendish's libertarianism and her view of causation

Providentialism is incompatible with libertarianism. If it were the case that God was able to interfere with nature and force His will upon creatures, then there would be an absence of choice. If there is no choice, then there is no positive liberty. As positive liberty is a key element

of libertarianism, it cannot be the case that both libertarianism and a providential God exist in the same universe.

Similarly, Providentialism is incompatible with Cavendish's view of causation. As discussed previously, Cavendish believes that when one object bumps into another, the latter object perceives the former and is given the occasion to choose whether or not to move. If it were the case that Cavendish's metaphysics had a providential God, then the object would not be able to choose whether or not it moves. This is because the providential God might either have already determined the path of every movement or intervene at any moment and make the choice for the object. Therefore, a providential God does not fit in with Cavendish's view of causation.

Further, if it were the case that the God in Cavendish's metaphysics was providential, then it would pose another problem for Cavendish's work—force. Cavendish's metaphysics focuses on the idea that there is a minimal amount of force in nature. Even in cases where there seems to be a clear display of force, Cavendish insists that this isn't the case. For instance, when describing the difficulty of starting a fire in the cold, Cavendish argues:

“Not that the cold corporeal motions do destroy fire by their actual power over it; but, that fire destroys itself by an imitation of the motions of cold: So that cold is only an occasional cause of the fire's destruction, or at least, of the alteration of its motions, and the diminution of its strength” (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 121).

This passage describes that the fire destroys itself rather than the cold forcing the fire to perish. If it were the case that the God in Cavendish's natural philosophy was providential and used coercive power, then parts of nature would be forced to perform actions. This would go against

Cavendish's arguments that there is no force. Therefore, there cannot be a providential God that forces change in Nature in Cavendish's metaphysics.

Lastly, if it were the case that the God in Cavendish's natural philosophy was providential, then it would pose the question of how an immaterial body can create effects in the material world. This is called the mind-body problem. Cavendish describes God as an "*...infinite, incomprehensible, supernatural, and immaterial essence, void of all parts*" as opposed to nature which Cavendish states is material (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 38). If it is the case that God is providential and immaterial, then Cavendish must offer an explanation as to how this immaterial being can create effects in the material world.

Therefore, Cavendish can't believe in a Providential God and remain consistent

If God is Providential, then He can interfere with the material world and make changes at his will. However, as I argued earlier, Cavendish is a libertarian and the God in her metaphysics uses persuasive power. This means that all creatures have positive freedom; they can make their own choices. Therefore, the God in Cavendish's metaphysics cannot be providential and remain consistent. Consequently, the best way to understand Cavendish's model of natural philosophy is to understand her God as deistic.

One passage that supports the view that the God in Cavendish's metaphysics is deistic is the following:

"God is the first author of motion...but I cannot believe that God should be the prime actual movement of all natural creatures, and put all things into local motion, like as one wheel in a clock turns all the rest (Cavendish, Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, 212).

This passage makes an important assertion. First, that God created motion. There is an important distinction to be made between God being the first mover and God creating motion. The key difference is that if God is the first mover, it would follow that all motions that have occurred after God's first movement have happened because of Him. If this were the case, then it would suggest determinism. However, understanding God as the creator of motion takes on an entirely different meaning; God has created the phenomena of "motion" and put it in nature. This understanding does not suggest determinism and in line with Cavendish's libertarianism.

Another important passage states, "...yet [Nature] *hath so much liberty, that in her particulars she works as she pleaseth, and as God has given her power; but she being wise, acts according to her infinite natural wisdom, which is the cause of her orderly government*" (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 109). This reading demonstrates Cavendish's view that God has created Nature to have self-government. This means that Nature is not required to obey God's commands, but rather is wise enough to create the order and harmony of nature in which we see around us. Some examples of the order in nature are phenomena such as rain coming down from the sky allowing for grass to grow, food coming from seeds to satisfy hunger, the circle of life, etc.

On the other hand, there are some passages that may be interpreted as the God in Cavendish's metaphysics being providential which would pose a problem for my view. Cavendish sometimes speaks in a way that suggests a providential God. For instance, "*I hope God of his mercy will preserve state, church, and schools, from ruin and destruction*" and "*...but if God favour her*" (Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 8 & 12). Some might argue that this shows Cavendish really believes in a Providential God, and, therefore, the God in her metaphysics must be providential. However, I would argue that in these quotes

Cavendish is merely speaking colloquially and that they do not truly represent her metaphysical views.

Detlefsen's View on Cavendish and God

Karen Detlefsen wrote an article entitled, "*Margaret Cavendish on the Relation Between God and World*" in 2009. In this article, Detlefsen explores the role of teleology in Cavendish's work, and, along the way, draws conclusions about the role God plays in Cavendish's writings. Teleology is defined as, "*a doctrine explaining phenomena by final causes*" meaning that one can discover the purpose of a thing based on its outcome (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Ultimately, Detlefsen looks at both natural, Aristotelian teleology and unnatural, Platonic teleology. Natural teleology argues that one's purpose is intrinsic and is followed unconsciously. On the other hand, unnatural teleology argues that purpose is external; one's purpose is to achieve a goal made by an external agent (i.e. God).

Through proving her conclusion, Detlefsen's conversation turns to God's role in Cavendish's work. As Cavendish describes that there can be disorder, Detlefsen is tasked with finding how it is that Cavendish distinguishes between those behaviors that are "normal" and those that are "perverted" meaning distorted or corrupted. As Detlefsen concludes that "*God is the ultimate source of nature's norms*", Detlefsen must then explain how it is that God communicates these norms to His creation (Detlefsen, 14). Much like my own assertion, Detlefsen argues that God might communicate these norms by way of "*rationaly suggesting this order to material nature*" and hence all "*interaction is through rational suggestion*" (Detlefsen, 14). Though she does not use the same term, this is another way of describing persuasive power. From this assertion, Detlefsen draws her ultimate conclusion that Cavendish "*has a blended form*

of teleology” as Cavendish describes parts of nature as having “*natures proper to them*” as well as a reliance on God to create order in the world through rational suggestion (Detlefsen, 15 & 9).

Conclusion

As Cavendish describes parts of nature as having positive liberty, it is fair to conclude that she is a libertarian. Further, throughout Cavendish’s work, there is evidence that the God she describes uses persuasive power to suggest that parts of nature ought to act in an orderly manner. If it were the case that the God in Cavendish’s model was providential, this would pose problems for her work. For instance, it would force Cavendish to answer to the mind-body problem as well as create an inconsistency with her view on force. From these conclusions, I have argued that the best way to understand the God represented in Cavendish’s metaphysical model is as deistic.

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