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## 'Two Opposite Things Placed Near Each Other, are the Better Discerned': Philosophical Readings of Cavendish's Literary Output

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# ARTICLE

# 'TWO OPPOSITE THINGS PLACED NEAR EACH OTHER, ARE THE BETTER DISCERNED': PHILOSOPHICAL READINGS OF CAVENDISH'S LITERARY OUTPUT[1]

## CARLOS SANTANA

Seventeenth-century philosopher Margaret Cavendish wrote not only several philosophical treatises, but also many fictional works. I argue for taking the latter as serious objects of study for historians of philosophy, and sketch a method for doing so. Cavendish's fiction is full of conflicting viewpoints, and many authors have argued that this demonstrates that she did not intend her literary works to serve serious philosophical purpose. But if we consider philosophers more central to the canon, such as Plato or Kierkegaard, who sometimes used literary forms to do serious philosophy, we see that these arguments are unfounded. Like those philosophers, Cavendish had several philosophical motivations for pursuing value-theoretic issues through the flexible formats of literary genres. This suggests that Cavendish's literary corpus may be fruitful and largely unexplored ground for the history of philosophy.

**KEYWORDS:** Margaret Cavendish; fiction; metaphilosophy

This is an essay on reading philosophy written in non-standard genres, with Margaret Cavendish's writings as a case study. Moreover, it is an essay on how a philosopher should read Margaret Cavendish's works not written as philosophical treatises. Cavendish expounded her natural philosophy, metaphysics, and epistemology in the standard philosophical formats, but most of her thinking about normative issues is found in fictional writings of various genres. Reconstructing a philosopher's position from a treatise can be difficult; excavating her doctrine from within the dialogues of

dramatic personae, fictional orators, and the protagonists of novellas is an even more formidable task. But it is necessary, if we are to understand Cavendish's value theory, so the goal of my inquiry is to better understand how to read philosophy out of fiction.

My approach is to examine various tensions in Cavendish's narrative works. In a philosophical treatise, we would call ideas in tension 'inconsistencies', and treat them as either a paradox to be resolved or a cause for rejecting the theory. But I will argue that we should not necessarily do the same with philosophical fiction. Cavendish's imaginative writings are filled with tensions. Some of these tensions are cross-textual. When we consider her body of work as a whole, she often seems torn between conflicting normative endorsements: in some places she argues that it is not a woman's place to rule, but politically empowered female characters in other texts are hyper-competent leaders; each of Cavendish's heroes and heroines champions the value of peace, but warriors and their martial accomplishments are celebrated throughout her narratives. The Cavendish corpus is also filled with *forensic* tensions, those in which fictional personae engage each other in debates within a single text, presenting arguments for both sides of normative issues. Cavendish herself, however, rarely intrudes to decide the issue. My claim is that the ability to create unresolved tensions of both intertextual and forensic varieties largely explains Cavendish's use of fictional genres[2] to explore normative issues.

Several lines of evidence support the claim that Cavendish put unresolved tensions to philosophical use. In the first place, there are good reasons to be sceptical of the most plausible alternative explanations. These explanations of Cavendish's literary use of philosophical tension are inadequate, largely because they contradict Cavendish's recorded reflections on methodology and writing style. Second, a fair reading of Cavendish's fictions must employ the same standards we use to read the philosophical fictions of more celebrated thinkers. In particular, the early works of both Plato and Søren Kierkegaard exhibit philosophical tensions structurally analogous to those in Cavendish. Since we treat these tensions as essential to their philosophical technique, we should attempt to understand such tensions as of similar philosophical worth for Cavendish. Finally, we can gain insight by examining one specific tension in her work: her strong endorsement of ideological unity juxtaposed with her frequent use of debate to explore philosophical issues. The existence of this tension suggests that for Cavendish, the value of understanding the full complexity of normative issues is worth the loss of harmony engendered by debate. The intersection of these lines of evidence indicates that Cavendish uses fiction to explore topics in normative

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[2]Much of Cavendish's poetry falls outside the scope of the present discussion, since it deals in a non-fictive way with natural philosophy. Other poems, particularly her war poems, are somewhat fictional and so fall within the bounds of what follows.

philosophy because it allows for productive but inconclusive philosophical exploration more effectively than the treatise form.

## TENSION, INCONSISTENCY, AND DISAGREEMENT: CAVENDISH, FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS

It might be tempting to respond to the problem of tensions in Cavendish by explaining it away. Cavendish, one might argue, wrote fiction for solely non-philosophical reasons, so we need not worry about why her fictions contain philosophical tensions. This suggestion seems plausible at first glance if we attend only to normative issues, since even non-philosophical fiction is peppered with expressions of value. The suggestion becomes untenable, however, when we note the frequency with which Cavendish's fictions contain natural philosophy and metaphysics. Letter 157 from the *Sociable Letters*, for instance, is straightforwardly about metaphysics, and the novel *Blazing World* was published as an accompaniment to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, with which it shares a number of themes regarding natural philosophy.[3] Examples like these abound, so Cavendish clearly intends her fictions to be philosophical.

A more tenable attempt to explain away the problem would be to doubt my assertion that there are significant *unresolved* philosophical tensions in her fiction. Likewise, we might doubt that these tensions constitute an interesting explanandum. Sceptics of both sorts deserve a response.

That there are forensic tensions in Cavendish is hard to deny, but the sceptic might suggest that these tensions are eventually resolved, with Cavendish ultimately favouring one side. Several examples show that this is not always the case. Many of Cavendish's *Orations of Divers Sorts*[4] are explicitly positioned as responses to each other, and each of her plays features frequent debates between characters. Consider Oration 118: 'An Oration against Excess and Vanity' and 119: 'An Oration Contradicting the Former'. The first speaker rails against citizens who 'drink to be drunk, eat to be sick, live to be idle, spend to be poor, and talk to be fools' (238). In response, the second defends the pursuit of pleasure, lest 'nature and the God of nature should make senses and appetites in vain' (239). That there is tension here is obvious; that it goes unresolved only slightly less so. Both orators make compelling arguments, and no *deus ex machina* resolves the debate. The content of neither speech gives hints as to which side Cavendish favours or which arguments she stands behind. This pattern of debate is repeated again and again in the orations, and only in a couple of cases do we get anything like a resolution. Those exceptions are illuminating, and I will analyse one below, but for now it suffices to

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[3]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this argument.

[4]I retain the original orthography in all citations to Cavendish.

establish that the *Orations* frequently exemplify unresolved forensic tensions.

So too do many scenes from Cavendish's twenty plays. Take the particularly sharp example of *Loves Adventures,* which contains several scenes in which characters argue about the prudence of getting married when one is already well-off and content. The play begins with an extended argument between Lord Singularity and his father Lord Fatherly[5] about the latter's attempt to arrange a marriage for his son. Of particular concern to Singularity is how marriage creates opportunities for jealousy and infidelity which do not exist otherwise, leading to unnecessary risk of emotional harm and loss of status. His shocked father points out that 'if all Men should be of your mind, there would be no Marring [*sic*] nor giving in Marriage; but all must be in common' (24). Singularity's response? 'That were best Sir.' Later in *Loves Adventures* Cavendish shows us the female perspective on the same question. Against the entreaties of her maidservant Reformer to accept courtship, the Lady Bashfull replies that she will not marry, because

> I am now Mistriss of my self, and fortunes, and have a free liberty; and who that is free, if they be wise, will make themselves slaves, subjecting themselves to anothers humour, unless they were fools, or mad, and knew not how to chose the best and happiest life.
>
> (50)

Like Singularity, Bashfull argues that marriage is a harm, but from her perspective its chief disvalue is loss of personal freedom. The action of the play consists of attempts by suitors and advisers to convince Singularity and Bashfull to marry despite their concerns.

In the end both give in and marry, but this resolution does not compellingly resolve either debate about the value of marriage. Singularity consents to marry the Lady Orphant, but only because she is of such a virtuous character that he would have no cause for concern about fidelity. Orphant, out of love for Singularity, takes a dangerous journey to seek his hand despite never having met him, risks torture and execution out of loyalty to him, and charges into battle to rescue him at serious risk to her own life. Only such immoderate proofs of her faithfulness are enough to persuade Lord Singularity that he will not regret marrying her. In a similar vein, Bashfull finally agrees to marry one Sir Serious Dumb, but only after he demonstrates extreme self-abasement and passivity. Winning her over involves Serious Dumb taking a twelve-year vow of silence, following Lady Bashfull around mutely and waiting on her while she refuses to talk to him, and even handing over his sword to her in the very instant a rival is assaulting him. In neither case does Cavendish resolve the tensions between the value of marriage and the value of remaining single. Instead, the concerns

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[5]Cavendish's dramatic personae are almost always named after a salient character trait.

of the protagonists become moot because they find, respectively, a woman with saintlike devotion and a heroically passive man. But as Donne famously observed, outside of fiction one is much more likely to catch a falling star or hear mermaids singing than to find a mate of such divine quality. So if *Loves Adventures* gives any answer to the questions it raises about the value of marriage, the answer is this: marriage is worth it – if you can marry a demigod. But that provides no resolution whatsoever to the debates about whether the benefits of marriage are worth the loss of autonomy and the risk of emotional injury. Moreover, in each act the play revisits a third pairing, the married couple of Sir Peaceable Studious and Lady Ignorant. These two bicker about the very issues of fidelity and gender roles which preoccupy the protagonists, validating to some extent the criticisms of marriage that had emerged in their debates and serving as a counterpoint to the happy weddings in the last act. *Loves Adventures* is thus a particularly good example of unresolved forensic tension. We could give similar analyses of debates in the other plays, many of which also deal with the norms and value judgements governing gender relations.

So scepticism about unresolved forensic tension in Cavendish's fiction is unwarranted. But it might be tempting in the case of global tensions in Cavendish's normative views to write them off as changes in opinion over time, or as not really in conflict. We should resist both temptations.

It would be easy to dismiss cross-textual tension by assuming that with each work Cavendish abandons her previous commitments and substantially revises her philosophy. Cavendish herself precludes such an assumption, however, since she pleads with us to consider her work taken as a whole. In the preface to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* she requests that

> if you have a mind to understand my philosophical conceptions truly, you would be pleased to read them not by parcels, here a little, and there a little … But if you'll give an impartial judgment of my philosophy, read it all, or else spare your censures.
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> (13)

True, Cavendish makes this request in the context of her philosophical treatises, but insofar as we take her exposition of value theory in her narrative works to be philosophical, the same constraint applies. Avoiding the issue of unresolved tensions by considering each work in isolation would therefore run contrary to Cavendish's admonishment.

A sophisticated thinker's philosophical positions naturally evolve over time. We should therefore expect Cavendish to change her mind about some things. Cavendish's intertextual tensions cannot be attributed merely to the maturation of her thought, however, because they are systematic and persistent. By systematic I mean that each side of a global tension comes from multiple texts, and also that these global tensions often mirror tensions within a single text. By persistent I mean that the tensions can be

found across the various stages of Cavendish's working life; it is not the case that we can identify for a particular tension a point in time where Cavendish switches views. We find the conflicting values scattered throughout the time-line of her work.

For example,[6] take the tension between Cavendish's valuing both peace and the martial virtues. Deborah Boyle documents how 'the textual evidence seems to show that for Cavendish, the goal of human society is the promotion of peace and stability' ('Fame, Virtue, and Government', 258). In support of this claim, she cites the *Worlds Olio*, published 1655, *Orations*, 1662, *Sociable Letters*, 1664, *Observations* and *Blazing World*, both 1666, and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, 1668. Cavendish thus consistently holds peace to be the fundamental social value. She also questions the honour to be gained from battle, since, as Joanne Wright documents, throughout her work 'she persistently draws our attention to the brutality as well as the futility of conflict as she undermines the much celebrated and time-worn notion of the honourable military death' ('Questioning Gender, War, and 'the Old Lie'', 254).

But she just as persistently praises war and warriors. Each of the main characters in the 1662 play *Loves Adventures* gets a chance to demonstrate their martial prowess: Lord Singularity is a general who repeatedly routs the Turkish army, Sir Serious Dumb wins, unarmed, a fight against an armed man, Lady Bashfull disarms a knight with one swipe of a sword, and even the young Lady Orphant, disguised as a boy, 'flew about like lightning' on the battlefield 'and made such a massacre of the Turks, as they lay thick upon the ground, as if they had been mushrooms' (76). Cavendish makes it clear that even her female heroines both excel at war and revel in it. This is true in the novella *Blazing World* as well. The protagonist, Empress of the Blazing World, sends her armies to destroy the foes of England on the advice of a fictional Margaret Cavendish. In one of the most detailed descriptions in the text,

> the Empress appeared upon the face of the waters, dressed in her imperial robes, which were all of diamonds and carbuncles; in one hand she held a buckler, made of one entire carbuncle, and in the other hand a spear of one entire diamond.
>
> (97)

That the most striking image of the Empress in the entire book is as a warlord belies the value Cavendish places on peace, even elsewhere in the same work. Finally, this admiration for the warrior persists throughout Cavendish's life; one of her final works was the 1667 biography of her husband,

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[6]An example more frequently discussed in the secondary literature is Cavendish's inner conflict regarding gender relations and the status of women. I use a simpler example for ease of exposition.

the Duke of Newcastle, in which she extols his martial accomplishments and virtues. The contrast between Cavendish's love of peace and her love of war runs throughout her corpus, and demonstrates that her value theory exhibits unresolved global tensions.

We have seen how Cavendish's literary output is full of unresolved tensions of both the forensic and the cross-textual sort. It remains to demonstrate that these tensions constitute an interesting explanandum. Some commentators seem resigned to accepting that Cavendish's value theory is generally inconsistent, and that the tensions we have identified not only serve no purpose but also make it impossible to recover much of a moral philosophy from her fictional works. Hilda Smith, for instance, declares of Cavendish's writings that 'there seems little hope – or, probably, point – in attempting to define a consistent core of political values' ('General War Amongst the Men', 153). And John Shanahan suggests that since '[f]or every seeming positive statement of a position there seems to be a qualifier or contradiction in another passage or text', Cavendish's 'works taken as a whole do show some common features, but they are commonalities of form, rather than of content' ('From Drama to Science', 367). In other words, these writers view conflicting values in Cavendish as *inconsistencies* which hamstring her value theory. Inconsistencies in this sense require no explanation, since presumably a philosopher would not introduce them intentionally. Instead they are to be explained *away*.

There must, of course be inconsistencies in Cavendish, as there are in every philosophical corpus of any breadth. But I have been using the word 'tension' instead of 'inconsistency' advisedly, because in philosophical literature it can be worthwhile to introduce competing ideologies without resolving their differences. *Pace* Smith and Shanahan, I think that Cavendish deliberately introduces tension because she sees it as valuable to philosophical inquiry. Before justifying that explanation, however, it will be useful to see why other proposed explanations of the tensions in Cavendish fall short.

## IMAGINATIVE PHILOSOPHY: HOW THE LITERATURE DEALS WITH TENSIONS IN CAVENDISH

We have seen the first common explanation of tensions in Cavendish. Smith and Shanahan argue that her inconsistencies show that Cavendish is not aiming at a philosophical doctrine, so we should treat her fictional writings as literature simpliciter, not as philosophical literature. Call this position, that apparent inconsistencies in Cavendish show that she is not aiming for a truth-apt philosophical value theory, *non-doctrinalism*. Non-doctrinalism, however, being uncharitable, should be the explanation of last resort. Only if all other explanations fail should we dismiss Cavendish's fiction from the body of philosophy.

Boyle provides a slightly different stance towards Cavendish's inconsistencies. She is an non-doctrinalist in that she believes that unresolved issues in tension cannot be understood as part of Cavendish's normative philosophy. But she recognizes that although tension is everywhere in the texts, Cavendish is unequivocal about a few things. Consequently, she suggests that we can identify pieces of a value theory from the *Orations* using the following principle: 'a view seems likely to be genuine if it is also expressed in other texts besides *Orations*, or if it appears in multiple speeches within that book, particularly in speeches that otherwise disagree with each other' ('Fame, Virtue, and Government', 254). Boyle's principle is sensible, and allows her to draw out at least one core value in Cavendish's system, the worth of honour and fame. As such, Boyle's position is an effective remedy to the non-doctrinalists's refusal to see any doctrine in Cavendish at all. Boyle is nevertheless equally dismissive when it comes to unresolved tensions, so her method of reading Cavendish is incomplete.

What happens when critics take the tensions in Cavendish as a serious *explanandum*? Typically they argue that because philosophical methodology was different in the seventeenth century, residual inconsistencies were acceptable to Cavendish. Because we know that seventeenth-century philosophy really is distant from contemporary practice, this seems plausible. Unfortunately, upon specification it collapses into non-doctrinalism.

One suggestion for the relevant difference between Cavendish and modern philosophy is epistemological. Shanahan argues that Cavendish subscribed to an archaic epistemology, 'a "Tudor" model of knowledge as a (pre-factual) display of multiple and incompatible, perhaps even incommensurable, hypotheses' ('From Drama to Science', 367). Similarly, Stephen Clucas suggests that for Cavendish, philosophy is only a 'pretext for an interminable series of descriptive acts' ('Variation, Irregularity and Probabilism', 206). On this account, Cavendish was more interested in listing possibilities than seeking the truth, so looking for her ethical commitments would be fruitless. In other words, this account is non-doctrinalism based on the premise that Cavendish did not have a modern epistemology.

A similar suggestion for how seventeenth-century philosophy relevantly differed focuses on methodology. Despite dealing with philosophical issues, Richard Nate argues, Cavendish treated even many of her philosophical treatises as fictional play ('Plain and Vulgarly Express'd', 409). He cites in support the *Worlds Olio*, where Cavendish argues that natural philosophy should be 'used as a Delight and Recreation in Men's Studies, as Poetry is, since they are both but Fictions, and not a Labour in Man's Life' (415). Nate recognizes that Cavendish later abandoned this claim, but the fact that she ever held that philosophy is fiction lends some weight to the idea that she was not pursuing a system of coherent truths. But the quote supports non-doctrinalism only if we take it at face value. Cavendish knew that, because of her gender, her works were unlikely to be received favourably. Nearly all her works have a preface written to the reader which argues

defensively for why they should not hastily dismiss the work. Even her plays include interludes in which she defends her literary decisions. We should view the preface to the *Worlds Olio* in light of this context, and also recognize that it is one of Cavendish's earliest works. She was therefore justifiably anxious to forestall criticism, and asking her audience not to take the work too seriously should be seen as a political move rather than an expression of her true view on philosophical methodology.

In fact, her other writings suggest that her true views on epistemology and philosophical methodology were not nearly as pre- or post-modern as critics would have us believe. Kourken Michaelian ('Margaret Cavendish's Epistemology') shows that Cavendish had an elaborate epistemology treating both self-knowledge and knowledge of the external world. Crucially, in Cavendish's epistemology knowledge is truth-apt knowledge *of* something. This means that Cavendish did not subscribe to a 'Tudor' model of knowledge, so Cavendish's own epistemology undermines one of the legs upon which non-doctrinalism stands.

Against the claim that Cavendish saw philosophy as fictive play, widespread textual evidence shows that she understood philosophy to be the pursuit of truth. In the preface to *Orations*, she condemns writers who put 'sophistry before truth; in philosophy, old authors before new truths and opinions before reason' (117). Likewise, in *Observations* she argues for rationalism on the grounds that it is more conducive to finding the truth than empiricism (14). Furthermore, in *Blazing World* the Empress calls before her the parrot-men, who are rhetoricians. They ply their art before her, only to be excoriated by the heroine, since their playful argument has the result of 'obscuring truth instead of clearing it' (48). The frequency of Cavendish's claims that the goal of philosophy should be the truth severely undermines non-doctrinalism. A critic who would maintain that Cavendish did not view her philosophical writings as the pursuit of truth-apt knowledge has the daunting task of explaining away this textual evidence.

This last discussion anticipates one final explanation we could give of the tensions in Cavendish's work: that Cavendish uses forensic tension for rhetorical purposes. After all, writers of the era such as Galileo, Berkeley, and Malebranche use (resolved) forensic tension in philosophical dialogues for the rhetorical advantages of the dialogue format. It would be reasonable to suggest that Cavendish uses (unresolved) forensic tension for similar rhetorical ends. In a narrow sense of 'rhetoric', however, such a position is untenable. The same episode with the parrot-men features the Empress inveighing against rhetorical flourishes because 'art does not make reason, but reason makes art' (48). Bashfull expresses a similar opinion in *Loves Adventures*, arguing that 'Rhetorick is rather for sound than sense, for words than reason' (73). Passages such as these suggest a systematic opposition to the use of particular formal elements for merely rhetorical aims. In fact, Nate ('Plain and Vulgarly Express'd') argues that Cavendish was influenced by the Royal Society's condemnations of Classical rhetoric, leading to a

consistent opposition to rhetoric (narrowly construed) on her own part. This is not to say that Cavendish did not sometimes employ rhetorical, even Classical, conventions herself. As James ('Introduction', xxiii) observes, Cavendish 'in fact reveals a considerable familiarity with artificial eloquence, and especially with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*'. Cavendish's opposition to rhetoric should thus be understood as enmity towards employing devices *merely* because they are persuasive. Tensions in her work may have rhetorical ends, but they must also be motivated by 'reason', to use Cavendish's term. For that reason we should be cautious about trying to explain Cavendish's use of unresolved tension simply by appeal to rhetorical ends. Tensions in her work, I show below, are more sophisticated than the rhetorical disagreements found in the fictional works of some of her contemporaries.

Of the alternative explanations we have visited these last few pages, one – rhetoric – is insufficient. The others – epistemology, methodology, and Boyle's minimalism – are all variants of non-doctrinalism, the position that the unresolved tensions in Cavendish serve no real philosophical purpose. Cavendish's own reflections about writing style and philosophical methodology show why these explanations are unsatisfactory, but disproving the opposition provides only circumstantial evidence for my own claim. In the next section I provide positive argument for my explanation of tensions in Cavendish.

## DIALOGUE AND DIALECTIC: UNRESOLVED PHILOSOPHICAL TENSION ELSEWHERE IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

I have argued that charity requires that we treat non-doctrinalism as an explanation of last resort. What, then, does charity require us to take as our null hypothesis? Whatever our explanations are for the unresolved tensions in writings by philosophers with first-class seats in the philosophical canon.

Many examples of forensic tension in the history of philosophy are unsuitable comparanda, since the tension is weak and decisively resolved. Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*, for instance, features a lengthy debate between an idealist, Philonous, and a materialist, Hylas. They argue over a number of metaphysical claims, but by the end, Hylas has been converted, saying 'I agree to all you have now said, and must own that nothing can incline me to embrace your opinion more than the advantages I see it is attended with.' Similarly, in Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, Aristes, the character hostile to Malebranche's own position, eventually concedes 'I have done all I can to combat your reasons. But I surrender. I have nothing to reply to you' (115). In both cases the forensic tension is resolved unequivocally, making it obvious why it was introduced in the first place. Tension in this standard sort of philosophical dialogue serves two purposes;

it allows the reader to follow a stepwise progression from common principles to the author's full theory, and it responds to anticipated objections.

The use of forensic tension in Cavendish is disanalogous because forensic tensions in Cavendish are *real* in a literary sense. A reader reading Malebranche or Berkeley knows precisely which view is the approved view from the beginning. If she knows a little Greek, the characters' names will give it away; if not the antagonist is always a bit bumbling and the protagonist is patient and wise. The tension in these dialogues is merely diegetic. But in Cavendish the tension protrudes beyond the fictional world into the reader's own engagement with the philosophical issues at hand. When one orator in the *Orations* argues that a wise man should be censured for turning down the office of magistrate and thus failing to serve his society (161), we find his argument compelling. But when the accused responds that the proper execution of the office relies more on the virtues of the populace than the virtues of the judge himself, we see the justice of his argument as well. Neither orator says 'I surrender.' Both are anonymous, so their names do not reveal Cavendish's attitudes towards them. Instead we are left to consider the arguments for both sides without any nudging from the author, which creates real tension of a sort lacking in the standard philosophical dialogues.

Additionally, it cannot be the case that the juxtaposition of contrary arguments serves the same purpose for Cavendish as for her contemporaries, because she has no explicit thesis. The arguments form no stepwise progression, because there is no endpoint. Neither can they serve as an anticipatory response to objections, since there is no apparent position to object to. Consequently, forensic tension must perform a different function for Cavendish than for Berkeley and Malebranche, so their dialogues are not appropriate models for how to read Cavendish's philosophical literature.

Instead, we can take Plato's early dialogues such as more relevant comparanda. These dialogues are sometimes called 'aporetic' because the debate does not get fully resolved by the end of the dialogue. Both this aporetic character, and the literary flavour of Plato's writing, make his early dialogues better candidates for comparison to Cavendish's philosophical literature. Given our present methodology, then, one answer to the question 'How should a philosopher read the unresolved forensic tensions in Cavendish?' is 'However it is we read the unresolved forensic tensions in early Plato.'

So how *do* we read early Plato? This is actually a permanently open question in Plato scholarship, but as Gerald Press observes, 'during most of its history, interpretation of Plato has oscillated between two poles' ('State of the Question in the Study of Plato', 508). Those two poles are the two alternatives presented by Christopher Rowe: 'is [Plato] a philosopher who wishes for nothing so much as to *make his readers think for themselves* … Or is he, on the contrary, someone who writes in order to impart *doctrines*?' (*Art of Philosophical Writing*, 2). Adherents to the first style of reading deny that Plato's position can be read straightforwardly from a

mouthpiece (Socrates) from among the characters in the dialogues. 'Who speaks for Plato?' argues Debra Nails in support of this tradition, 'The dialogues do, irreducibly. The dialogue form provides a means of encouraging readers and listeners to reason dialectically to defensible positions of their own' ('Mouthpiece Schmouthpiece', 16). Nails's claim is not that there is no substantive positive content in Plato's dialogues, only that the substantive content is insufficient to fully resolve the problem under discussion. The second pole, that Plato 'writes in order to impart *doctrines*', treats Plato's dialogues as treatises with characters as mouthpieces, analogous to the dialogues of Berkeley and Malebranche (albeit written with much greater literary skill). This second pole has been the dominant position for many academic traditions, including analytic philosophy.

The truth about Plato probably lies somewhere in between the two poles. The best argument for the first pole is simply that the scope of the questions raised through debate in the Socratic dialogues far outstrips the amount of consensus reached. The primary argument for the second pole is similarly simple. We should read Plato as espousing doctrines *because we can*. On many issues the character Socrates *does* argue for a particular position, and we can assign these positions to the author without running into major inconsistencies.

Since there are good arguments for both styles of reading Plato, which do we use in reading Cavendish? A mix of both. I have given reasons why we should not read Cavendish as writing treatises in forensic formats, but this applies only to unresolved tension. On those few issues where a consistent position is clear in Cavendish, we can follow Boyle's method and straightforwardly read off Cavendish's opinions. This is an exact analogue to the second pole in Plato scholarship. But for unresolved forensic tensions the appropriate method of reading is the one employed by the first pole, which takes the unresolved tensions in Plato seriously. In her literature, who speaks for Cavendish? Her texts do, irreducibly. The use of forensic literary forms such as oratory and drama allows her to engage with and make progress on thorny issues of value theory while leaving it to her readers to reason dialectically to defensible positions of their own.

Plato provides a good model for how to read local tensions in Cavendish, but a more apt model for how to read Cavendish's global tensions is Søren Kierkegaard, who intentionally created intertextual conflicts in his early works. Most of Kierkegaard's early books were published under different pseudonyms which were more than just alternative names; they were alternative personas, each of whom had his own temperament, fictional background, philosophical commitments, and even writing style.[7] Conflicting

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[7]Computational analysis of Kierkegaard's corpus shows significant statistical variation ('wordprint') between the writings of the various pseudonymous personas (Brainerd, 'Two Models for the Type-Token Relation').

values and hard-to-reconcile doctrines crop up in Kierkegaard's writing by design.

Consider as a case study the particularly messy *Either/Or* which presents the writings of two individuals with very different philosophical views. The first writer, A, puts forward an 'aesthetic' point of view, emphasizing the value of immediate experience. His writings range from allegorical treatises, to musical criticism, to a collection of aphorisms, and, famously, a 'Seducer's Diary'. The second writer, Judge Wilhelm, writes several letters to A admonishing him to reorient his life from the aesthetic to the 'ethical', which involves adherence to static, eternal, impersonal values. The text disingenuously presents itself as an opportunity for the reader to be convinced of *Either* the aesthetic point of view *Or* the ethical.

The correct answer comes out in Kierkegaard's later works, and that answer is 'both/and' and 'neither'. The highest form of living for Kierkegaard is the 'religious' which is conceptually distinct from both the aesthetic and ethical, but shares much in common with each. Despite the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical, both are necessary for achieving the religious. Furthermore, not only is neither the aesthetic nor the ethical strictly bad, but it is actually impossible for humans to fully escape from either mode of life. For Kierkegaard these are values which come into conflict as conceptually distinct forms of human life, but they are real values. His resolution of tension between values in part just reaffirms the existence of the tension itself. So how do we as philosophers typically read Kierkegaard given this tension?

First of all, no one even thinks about treating the tension in Kierkegaard as theoretical inconsistency. Shanahan's description of Cavendish, '[f]or every seeming positive statement of a position there seems to be a qualifier or contradiction in another passage or text', is even more true of Kierkegaard than it is of Cavendish. But no historian of philosophy makes the further (non-doctrinalist) claim that we therefore find no positive doctrine in early Kierkegaard. A just reader of Cavendish would therefore be reluctant to jump to non-doctrinalism upon seeing so much tension in values. Such a jump might eventually be justified – Cavendish was less meticulous and clever than Kierkegaard in presenting values in tension – but only after a good faith attempt to read more into the global tensions in Cavendish.

One attempt might parallel the way in which we normally justify the unresolved tension in Kierkegaard. Why does Kierkegaard leave values in tension? Because, one popular answer goes, he faithfully describes the human condition. As a matter of (pick your poison) existential/psychological/moral/theological fact, human beings are the kind of creatures whose fate it is to be torn between the aesthetic and the ethical. Being so torn is what defines us as humans and allows us to ascend to the religious.

A parallel reading of our sample intertextual tension in Cavendish might look something like this: Why does Cavendish value both peace and war so highly? Because she is not engaging in abstract ideal political theorizing,

but creating a realistic political theory faithful to her experience living during a civil war. As a matter of social fact, the establishment and maintenance of peace and stability requires both wars and the existence of warriors prepared in martial skills and virtues. We are still left with a real tension of values, because there really is something odd about celebrating violence while simultaneously advocating peace. But this is an unresolved and possibly unresolvable tension characterizing actual human existence, and Cavendish is faithful to this reality by exploring but not resolving the tension in her philosophical literature.[8] This reading of Cavendish imitates closely the way we read Kierkegaard, demonstrating how he, like Plato, can be used as a model for how to read Cavendish.

A quick recap of the argument so far: We first established why it would be improper to take a dismissive stance towards the philosophical content of Cavendish's literary output. But that conclusion was contingent on the existence of a plausible method for reading her literary works philosophically. This section outlined two methods for doing just that by considering how we read her fellow literary philosophers Plato and Kierkegaard. But up to this point we have justified reading Cavendish along the same lines as those thinkers merely by appeal to charity. In the next section, we strengthen that justification with an analysis of Cavendish showing that, like Plato and Kierkegaard, she had theoretical reasons for presenting her readers with unresolved tensions.

## AGREEING TO DISAGREE: PHILOSOPHICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR LEAVING VALUE-THEORETIC TENSIONS UNRESOLVED

One reason why readers of Plato and Kierkegaard are friendly to treating the unresolved tensions in their works as philosophically valuable is that both writers had theoretical reasons for putting forward values in tension. In the case of early Plato, Socratic scepticism justifies ending in aporia and Platonic epistemology favours the indirect transmission of philosophical truth. Kierkegaard was similarly motivated, both because he saw himself as a modern counterpart to Socrates (Kimball, 'What Did Kierkegaard Want?'; Sarf, 'Reflections on Kierkegaard's Socrates'), and because contradiction itself plays an important role in his theory. Do we have reason to think that Cavendish too saw philosophical value in presenting unresolved philosophical tensions? If so, what were her theoretical motivations?

[8]We might give similar readings to other global tensions in Cavendish, such as the tension between her desire to raise the status of women and her worry that women might not be suitable leaders. One author, noticing that Cavendish struggles to reconcile the value of a stable society with the value of an intellectually diverse one, analyses *Blazing World* along lines which might fall under this sort of reading (Hintz, 'But One Opinion').

A fact suggesting an affirmative answer to the first question materializes when we notice that the very idea of using unresolved forensic tension is in global tension with one of Cavendish's clearest ethical stances. The ruin caused by the English Civil War seems to have convinced Cavendish that widespread agreement and ideological unity was necessary to maintain the social order. This position emerges in her literature through the frequent disapproval of anything which leads to disagreement. Cavendish frowns on disagreement within societies, criticizing, for example, religious differences which might undermine ideological unity (*Orations* 117). In *Blazing World*, the character Margaret Cavendish goes so far as to advise the Empress to enforce 'but one sovereign, one religion, one law, and one language, so that all the world might be as one united family' (87). Episodes in *Blazing World* also demonstrate that Cavendish disapproves of disagreements among groups engaged in a joint task. For instance, the Empress learns that allowing a council to debate a political issue leads to 'many cross and different opinions', and briefly considers hanging the councillors in response (95). Along similar lines, the Empress notices that the use of telescopes 'caused more differences and divisions amongst [natural philosophers] than ever they had before', so she orders the telescopes to be destroyed (26). Not even disagreement within a single mind escapes the Empress's wrath: when an orating parrot-man stumbles in his speech because 'his arguments and divisions being so many, that they caused a great confusion in his brain', this internal division causes 'the greatest disgrace both to himself, and the whole society' (46). These passages make it clear that Cavendish finds ideological disagreement to be disgraceful and even dangerous.

So why, if she valued unity so highly, would Cavendish choose to fill her plays and *Orations* with unresolved arguments? That she would make frequent use of disagreement despite disvaluing it suggests that Cavendish found unresolved tension useful enough to make up for its disvalue. We thus have reason to think she had theoretical reasons for using unresolved tensions philosophically. Although Cavendish never explicitly described those reasons, we can find in her philosophy some plausible candidates.

One plausible candidate, at least for some tensions, is adherence to an Aristotelian doctrine of the mean. Cavendish's fictional alter-ego in *Blazing World* remarks that she 'perceive[s] that the greatest happiness in all worlds consists in moderation' (77), a doctrine similar to Aristotle's view in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that virtue lies in the mean (Book II, 1106a14-1108b10). It may be that Cavendish presents values in conflict as an exercise in outlining the extremes in order to find the mean. In support of this hypothesis is one of the few cases of resolved forensic tension in the *Orations*. Oration 39: 'An Oration for Liberty of Conscience' argues that allowing people to worship freely will remove an incentive to rebellion, while Oration 40: 'An Oration against Liberty of Conscience' counters that allowing for freedom of conscience will undermine the rule of law. In contrast with most of the debates in the *Orations*, this one receives something

resembling a settlement. Oration 41: 'An Oration proposing a Mean betwixt the two former Opinions' creates a balanced position addressing the concerns raised in both previous speeches. If we take this exceptional case where the tension is resolved as a pattern to understand the more common unresolved case, it could be that Cavendish sometimes presents the extreme positions in debate so that we can reason towards 'a mean betwixt them'.

A second candidate motivation appears in Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters*:

> I considered with my self, that it would be a great advantage for my Book called *Philosophical Opinions*, as to make it more perspicuous and intelligible by the opposition of other Opinions, since two opposite things placed near each other, are the better discerned.
>
> (Quoted in Nate, 'Plain and Vulgarly Express'd', 410)

Cavendish claims in this letter that juxtaposing two opposite views allows us to more fully comprehend both. This could explain the tensions in her work in two ways. One possibility is that she sympathizes with only one view, and expects that this preferred view will become more clear and compelling by being placed in proximity with a well-argued version of its opposite. Her refusal to resolve the tension would then stem from the recognition that as soon as the author endorses a particular view, the two views are no longer on level ground and the clarifying effect of juxtaposition is diminished. Another possibility is that Cavendish considers both positions viable, but recognizes a natural tension between them. In that case, presenting them together allows us to better understand both the nature of each view and the nature of the tension between them – and this is philosophical progress even if it does not lead to resolution. Either way, this principle of juxtaposition provides a good candidate motivation for Cavendish's use of unresolved tension.

I see at least one more viable candidate. In the preface to the *Observations*, Cavendish makes the following remark:

> I find, that there is no objection but one may find an answer to it; and as soon as I have made an answer to one objection, another offers itself again, which shows not only that nature's actions are infinite, but that they are poised and balanced.
>
> (13)

Indeed, the idea that nature varies infinitely is found in many of her philosophical works.[9] This hints at the possibility that Cavendish views conflicting ideas not as tensions, but as balanced pieces of understanding nature's

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[9] See, for instance, section four of *Philosophical Letters*.

infinite complexity.[10] In that case, we could read Cavendish's presentation of ideas in tension as an imitation of the counterpoise of opposing elements in nature.

Which of these candidates actually motivated Cavendish? Perhaps some mix of the three. To illustrate, consider again the tension between Cavendish's commitment to ideological unity and her tendency to present multiple sides of an issue. Several authors have commented on this particular tension, giving us a foundation to build on. Neil Ankers ('Paradigms and Politics', 251) describes the tension well: 'Paradoxically, Cavendish argues for the right to remain the author of her own self-fashioning, not submitting to any conformist system, while equally wanting to promote unity and order for society.' Cavendish, Ankers argues, models her solution to this paradox on the natural world, which although well-ordered, allows for 'non-competitive freedom of action' for its individual parts ('Paradigms and Politics', 251). In support of this claim he cites a passage from her *Philosophical Letters:* 'Nature delights in variety; Nevertheless she is more wise than any Particular Creature or part can conceive' (*Philosophical Letters*, 152). The authoritarian utopia of *Blazing World*, if we read it in line with Ankers, is put forward only as one particular instance of world-creation, and Cavendish engages in and invites us to engage in further acts of world-building (*Blazing World,* 109). The enforced unity of the first world is not a unique model for political structures, but merely one of many comparanda to be used in attempting to create a peaceful society. By creating a multiplicity of imaginary worlds, we, as Cavendish wishes, 'embrace the truth of nature's self-generating order and "infinite varieties"' ('Paradigms and Politics', 252). This interpretation imputes to Cavendish elements of both the second and third candidate motivations: she presents ideas in tension both because reality is infinitely complex and because doing so helps us see more clearly the best political solutions.

Lara Dodds (*Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 150) makes the observation that *Blazing World* is a 'text divided against itself' and she, like Ankers, also tends towards not taking the Empress' rule in *Blazing World* as a model to be imitated. She points to the multiplicity of worlds evoked in *Blazing World:* not only does the Empress rule the Blazing World, but she helps conquer a fictional version of Earth, and also creates imaginary worlds. This multiplicity, Dodds contends, undermines the idea that we are meant to simply take the Empress' rule as an example of ideal government. Moreover, Dodds identifies 'a certain tension between the two parts of *The Blazing World*' (*Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 149) and speculates that this structure juxtaposes utopia with dystopia.[11] The tension

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[10]Oddvar Holmesland ('Natural Art and the Body Politic') conjectures that this metaphysical commitment might explain what he sees as 'paradoxes' in *Blazing World*.

[11]In her next section (*Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 150), Dodds correctly acknowledges that Cavendish probably did not intend for the second part of *Blazing World*

between individual freedom and authoritarian enforcement of unity, according to this reading, exists to allow Cavendish a 'space for female autonomy, the occasion for wit and play, and an opportunity to explore the consequences of power' (Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish, 150). In the end, Dodds sees the result of the tension as a move towards a synthesis.

Anna Battigelli (*Exiles of the Mind*) analyses the tension as resulting from the gap Cavendish perceives between ideal political arrangements and the realities of human nature. She argues that 'the point of *Orations* is that conflict is inevitable' and that *Orations* is 'a cautionary warning about the disputatious nature of the human mind' (*Exiles of the Mind*, 79). According to Battigelli this theme recurs in *Blazing World,* where 'Cavendish illustrates the idea that though making the sovereign the political arbiter of truth looked efficient in theory, it was hardly likely to work in practice' (*Exiles of the Mind*, 81). As with Ankers, this combines both the second and third candidate motivations, since it appeals both to the variegated nature of reality and the epistemic value of comparing reality to an unachievable ideal.

Building on these authors[12] we can draw together an analysis of why Cavendish argues for ideological uniformity while simultaneously putting forward contradictory values. Her motivation likely draws somewhat on all three possible explanations – the cognitive value of juxtaposed difference, the infinite variety of reality itself, and the search for a moderate position. Ankers and Battigelli convincingly argue that Cavendish believes that a difference in ideology is inevitable given the nature of reality and the human mind. And Dodds is probably correct that *Blazing World* is not meant as a flawless pattern for real-world governance, so its enforced uniformity is meant to serve as an ideal comparandum which can serve to clarify the nature of the failings of real-world society. Cavendish's position on the conflict between social order and individual diversity thus ends up as an open-ended synthesis of the two positions – perhaps some sort of limited tolerance such as that espoused by the orator in Oration 41, who argues for liberty of conscience and private practice so long as the public order is maintained (*Orations*, 167–8). Given that she never outright endorses that exact position, we can surmise that Cavendish felt no pat solution was possible. Any position, even a moderate one, cannot fully resolve the conflict between unity and diversity, and this is just a fact we have to accept and confront. It seems to me that this is precisely what Cavendish herself does in filling her texts with calls for enforcement of unity while simultaneously speaking in multiple conflicting voices. More could be said on this point, but this brief analysis serves as an existence proof of the possibility of reading philosophy out of

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to be dystopic. For one thing, it is Cavendish's fictional surrogate who advises the Empress to engage in the conquest. Additionally, the conquest represents 'fantastic wish fulfillment' for an author whose family had lost wealth and power (*Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 150–1).

[12]Comments from an anonymous reviewer also influenced this section.

a conflict in Cavendish's thought. Cavendish's insistence on presenting diverse opinions might seem to undermine her commitment to ideological unity, but this tension actually represents a sophisticated attempt to present and address an irreducible value conflict in human social life.

## CONCLUSION

We have now established intersecting lines of evidence that Cavendish presents her readers with ideas in tension by design. Cavendish's own philosophical doctrines, we saw, suggest several motivations for doing so. Additionally, we noticed that applying the same methodology to reading Cavendish as we do to reading other literary philosophers yields promising results. Finally, the common alternative explanations in the secondary literature are all unsatisfactory, since they force upon Cavendish an unjustifiably narrow conception of proper philosophical writing.

This evidence allows us to conclude that there is room for interesting work exploring the value theory in Cavendish's literary works. Even the token analyses presented in this paper suggest that there is reason to take Cavendish's fiction as serious philosophy. In particular, the present stance could be a fruitful method of approaching the most notorious of tensions in Cavendish: her conflicting thoughts about the place of women. Using the present methodology, rather than considering this tension about gender to be a reflection of an inconsistent doctrine, we might be able to identify in this tension Cavendish's accurate assessment of the dilemmas a woman in her situation was forced to deal with.

Finally, this reading of Cavendish can serve as an exemplar for how to approach other works of philosophical literature, especially those currently neglected by philosophers. The work of excavating Cavendish's value theory from the rich soils of her literature is a worthwhile task; there are other writers whose work deserves our attention no less, and the methodology we have used with Cavendish gives us a starting point in searching for what is philosophically valuable in those works as well.

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