

## CAVENDISH'S ORDERLY PHILOSOPHY

Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780190234805, 288pp.

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Seventeenth-century philosopher Margaret Cavendish managed to treat various interesting topics in her books, poems, plays and letters. In *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, Deborah Boyle deals with the majority of these topics. According to Boyle, Cavendish's philosophy can be best understood by focusing on her underlying concern with order in nature. Order is, so claims Cavendish, the 'One Law' of nature. This means that in an orderly universe parts of nature behave in designated ways that are prescribed by nature. According to Boyle, multiple facets of Cavendish's philosophy – like gender roles, treatment of animals, sickness and health – can be united by a common concern with order and regularity in nature.

Boyle's book is composed of nine chapters. Order and regularity in nature are generally discussed in the first chapter. Nature acts orderly, says Cavendish, because its parts act as they *ought* to. Concerning the fact that there are *irregularities* in nature as well, we must assume, claims Boyle, that some parts *choose* not to act as they are supposed to. This leads to an account of freedom: there is order and disorder in nature because parts can somehow *choose* how to act.

This differs from the seventeenth-century views on atomism. That is why in chapter two Boyle focuses on whether Cavendish endorsed seventeenth-century atomism as a scientific theory. Cavendish did not consider atomism capable of providing an explanation for the order in nature: atoms are free, move themselves and are completely independent of each other. When there is no unifying principle that orders the behaviour of single parts, irregularities will occur. Moreover, there is no reason at all for atoms to behave regularly. According to Cavendish, there must be some unifying principle to order the behaviour of single parts of nature. Her parts of nature can, unlike atoms, never be fully independent of each other. What defines this unifying principle of nature? Surprisingly, Boyle claims that 'it would be unwise to conclude from them [Cavendish's poems] that Cavendish really thought there was some kind of personified force, Nature, behind the order of the universe.' What is remarkable though, is that later in the book, Boyle continues to talk about the 'norms of nature'. If we follow Boyle, how can a powerless nature implement norms that are needed for an orderly nature?

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In the subsequent chapter, the third, Boyle presents Cavendish's response to atomism: vitalist materialism. In order to give an explanation for self-moving parts of nature that act according to principles that are set up by nature, Cavendish divides matter into three degrees: sensitive, rational and inanimate. Parts are always a commixture of these three degrees of matter. You can separate parts – or compositions – by their local motion. What is important here is that matter is all there is, immaterial substances thus does not exist. Since all parts of matter are subject to the principles set up by nature (and commonly choose to act in accordance with these principles) nature as a whole acts orderly. Since parts are free, they are not necessitated to follow these principles.

How can nature be understood as a whole and as a collection of particular finite creatures at the same time? In the fourth chapter, Boyle examines Cavendish's account of individual creatures. Just like parts in nature, individuals act through occasional causation: one object (or individual) is the occasional cause of the change in another object, when the second object produces the appropriate change in itself. Individual parts of nature have 'proper' motions: when they move as they are supposed to, these motions are regular and orderly. As said before, parts are not *necessitated* to move according to their proper nature. It is possible for parts, or individual creatures, to move in a different way, thereby causing irregularities. *Why* parts would choose to act irregular stays unclear. Boyle points on Cavendish's value of variety: some parts of nature adopted another goal than order: namely, variety. Why they would value variety more than harmony stays in the dark.

How do human beings differ from other parts of the natural world? According to Cavendish, humans possess a desire for fame that is not present in other creatures. This view is examined by Boyle in chapter five. Due to this desire for fame, human beings are much more likely to not behave as they ought; and thus contribute to an irregular nature. Boyle claims that Cavendish does not give a hard claim for *why* nature acts orderly, but that she does suggest that parts of nature 'want to preserve the creatures of which they are parts'. Parts of a creature feel love for each other, which means that a creature as a whole has 'self-love'.

Just like other parts of nature, humans must follow their appropriate roles as established by nature to provide for order and peace. According to Cavendish, to prevent chaos and disorder, humans need a government. In chapter six Boyle discusses Cavendish's political philosophy, arguing that Cavendish endorse absolute sovereignty and hierarchical classes. Boyle states that because of humans' unique desire for public recognition, we can no longer draw an analogy between human society and nature as a whole. This being said, Boyle does still interpret Cavendish's political philosophy based on order and regularity – originating from Cavendish's natural philosophy. Boyle claims that the roles people need to play are determined by nature: 'these norms are not just social norms for Cavendish; they are natural norms, laid down in order to ensure order in society'. By this claim she explicitly seems to compare human society with Cavendish's natural philosophy.

In the subsequent chapter, chapter seven, Boyle focuses more on the roles of humans, especially those of women. Boyle argues that Cavendish was no feminist or proto-feminist; her views on gender were quite conservative indeed. Women are

inferior to men and should conform to traditional feminine virtues. Social change would undermine the importance of regularity and order.

Cavendish's views on the relationship between humans and the natural environment are central in chapter eight. Boyle argues that Cavendish's views on the interaction between humans and the environment are – just like her other topics – grounded in her concern with order; when it is the appropriate thing to do (meaning that it confirms humans in their self-preservation), humans can make use of animals or the environment.

Just like human nature and society, Cavendish's medical thinking is grounded in her ideas of peace and order. This is the central theme in chapter nine. According to Boyle, Cavendish claims that a healthy body is a well-ordered one, in which all parts move as they are supposed to. When parts move irregular, and thereby acting disorderly, diseases are caused.

Boyle managed to give a complete and interesting overview of all relevant topics in Cavendish's philosophy. In linking all topics to each other by grounding them in order and regularity, Boyle made Cavendish's philosophy a coherent whole. What stays unclear is what it is that *defines* how parts ought to move. As mentioned by Boyle, Cavendish defines war as the result of disorderly and irregular behaviour. But what if parts – or individuals – are *supposed* to act in this way? Cavendish makes normative claims based on the regular/irregular behaviour of parts in nature. Where these 'norms' or 'principles' come from remains unclear.

Boyle states that Cavendish does not describe Nature as containing some kind of absolute sovereign (like in human societies) that is distinct from the parts of nature, which those parts must obey. According to Boyle, parts organize themselves into regular associations; thereby differ from human associations. But in fact, Boyle does accept Cavendish's view on the 'norms of nature' or the 'principles set up by nature' that parts must obey in order to actualize an orderly and regular world. You might wonder whether this is so different from obeying a sovereign. *Why* some parts move irregular is a question that Boyle mentions in her conclusion, arguing that this is a question that cannot be answered since Cavendish makes no claims about the reason for irregular behaviour. Due to the importance of this specific topic, it would be worthwhile to go deeper into this question in a subsequent work.