

XV—‘I WISH MY SPEECH WERE LIKE A LOADSTONE’: CAVENDISH ON LOVE AND SELF-LOVE

JULIA BORCHERDING

This paper examines the surprisingly central role of sympathetic love within Margaret Cavendish’s philosophy. I show that such love fulfils a range of metaphysical functions, and highlight an important shift in Cavendish’s account vis-à-vis earlier conceptions: sympathetic love is no longer given an emanative or mechanistic explanation, but is naturalized as an active emotion. I further investigate to what extent Cavendish’s account reveals a rift between the realm of nature and the realm of human sociability, and whether this rift really prompts an inward turn as some interpreters have suggested.

I

Introduction. From a twenty-first-century perspective, love seems very much divorced from metaphysical concerns. Current philosophical investigations into love’s nature tend to conceive of love as an interpersonal and often subjective phenomenon—as a specific mental state, or an attitude a person takes to another which can be cast in terms of her appraisals, judgements, beliefs and desires.¹ For many early modern philosophers, by contrast, love still figured as much as a metaphysical concept as it did as an emotion. Coloured and shaped by both Stoic and Platonist notions of sympathy revived through Renaissance natural philosophy, it played a part in accounting for phenomena as varied as individuation, causation or the union between mind and body. The power of love, on such accounts, is far more than a mere metaphor: love can unify and move particles of matter as much as it can draw together individuals. At the same time, the period also experienced a transition from a broad, ‘cosmological’ or metaphysical conception of love to a more internalized

¹ For the former view, see, for example, Baier (1991) and Badhwar (2003); for the latter view, see Velleman (1999), Jollimore (2011) and Helm (2009), among others.

conception, which locates love first and foremost in the emotional, interpersonal realm.²

In this paper, I investigate how this transition takes shape in the philosophy of Margaret Cavendish. Looking at Cavendish's conception of sympathetic love, we find both a strong line of continuity as well as an intriguing shift.³ The idea of a universal sympathetic love, I show, still pervades her metaphysics (§II). Yet at the same time, Cavendish no longer conceives of such sympathetic love as a stable, 'cosmic' force. Rather, she understands it to be nothing but the free passions and desires of material beings (§III). This 'naturalization' of sympathetic love in turn has powerful effects. Its harmony is no longer a stable one, especially within the realm of human sociability, where excessive self-love often derails sympathetic relations. No longer a transcendently grounded cosmic force, sympathetic love in Cavendish thus emerges as a regulative ideal which may attain its full reality only in fiction (§IV). However, contrary to what some modern commentators have claimed, I suggest that this need not lead us to view Cavendish as advocating a retreat from human society. Rather, much of her work—both literary and philosophical—can be seen as inviting us to emulate nature's balance in cultivating virtuous self-love and sympathy toward others (§V).

II

Love's Ubiquity. On the cosmological conception of love the early modern period inherited from the Renaissance, love was seen as far more than a mere feeling. Instead, it was often couched in terms of a universal relationship of sympathy, understood as a 'mutual love' that weaves through and unites the parts of the universe.⁴ Love between individuals, in turn, was conceived of as an instance of such a sympathetic movement. Harking back to both the Stoics and early

² For the beginnings of this transition in the Renaissance, see [Ebbersmayer \(2002\)](#).

³ By 'sympathetic love', I here understand (following Cavendish) love that arises through and is ultimately constituted by the sympathetical motions of material parts, and which in sentient beings can manifest in the form of passions or appetites. The following sections will offer a more detailed discussion of the concepts and relations involved.

⁴ [Ficino \(1989\)](#), pp. 384–7, for instance, writes: '[T]hey say that the world is an animal . . . and that it everywhere links with itself in the mutual love of its members (*mutuoque membrorum quorum amore*) and so holds together'.

Platonism, Renaissance philosophers such as Ficino characterized love as the ‘firm foundation of the whole creation’ (Ficino 1944, p. 152). Since everything has a common point of origin or divine cause, they argued, everything must also have a ‘common love’ and ‘attraction’ based on its fundamental similarities (Ebbesmayer 2012, p. 138). Giuseppe Gerbino poignantly summarizes the common image of the world that underwrites this traditional view as one ‘in which love and sympathy are still understood as intimately related principles of an occult bond’. It evokes ‘a sympathetically coherent and unified cosmos, in which the affinity or force of attraction between the parts and the whole is experienced as love’ (Gerbino 2015, p. 104).

Renaissance notions of sympathetic love were soon challenged by some early modern mechanists, who condemned them as mere occult powers. But they were also incorporated by others, as is evidenced, for instance, by Kenelm Digby’s attempt to provide a mechanical explanation for the widely discussed practice of applying a healing salve (the ‘powder of sympathy’) to the object that caused the wound and was therefore thought to have a ‘sympathetical bond’ with it (Digby 1658; Moyer 2015).⁵ Many early modern natural philosophers and medical practitioners thus continued to view a wide array of phenomena as requiring explanation in terms of a ‘sympathy’ or ‘affinity’ between the parts of nature. All things are unified and animated, the Cambridge Platonist Henry More explained, by ‘that *Magick Sympathy* that is seated in the Unity of the Spirit of the World, and the continuity of the subtile Matter dispersed throughout’ (More 1712, p. 126). Similarly, the renowned medical scholar Joan Baptista van Helmont argued that God’s vitality permeates the created universe and endows all natural beings with activity and perception, which in turn results in a ‘common attraction’ among them (van Helmont 1621, §§142–3). And Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, according to which all substances mirror each other in perfect coordination, equally seemed to bear both the marks of universal sympathy and a divinely established order.⁶

Turning now to our protagonist in this paper, Margaret Cavendish’s thoroughgoing materialism certainly differs from the

⁵ As Mercer (2015, p. 110) points out, widespread disagreements regarding whether sympathetic powers could be explained on natural grounds or defied understanding persisted well into the seventeenth century.

⁶ For discussion of all modern authors mentioned, see Mercer (2015). For a comprehensive treatment of sympathy throughout the early modern period, see Lobis (2015).

picture of nature offered by the thinkers just mentioned, who all conceived of nature as in some way suffused by a divine principle. However, Cavendish throughout her work pursues not only a materialist, but also a vitalist account of nature, in which sympathetic love does continue to play a crucial role. ‘All things in the world’, she writes in her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, ‘have an Operative power; which Operation is made by Sympathetical motions [and] Antipathetical motions, in several Figures’ (*PPO*, p. 6; cf. *PPO*, p. 68).⁷ Like her Renaissance predecessors, for whom sympathetic resonance between the human soul and instruments like the aptly named *viola d’amore* served as one of the central images of universal sympathy, Cavendish highlights the effects of music on the passions of the listener as a central case of sympathetic love.⁸ ‘The notes in musick’, she explains, ‘sympathize with passions, and with the several thoughts’ and move the mind ‘to a tender pitty and compassion, and a charitable love, from whence proceeds a listning ear, a helping hand, a serious countenance, a sad eye’ (*PPO*, pp. 439–40). An important idea at play here, clearly echoing tradition, is that this sympathetic relation between mind and music is grounded in a fundamental similarity between them. Music has a sympathy to the mind’s ‘rational motions’ because ‘the rational spirits move in number and measure, as musical instruments do’ (*PPO*, pp. 167–8; cf. *PPO*, p. 139; *P*, p. 213; *WO*, p. 185). Due to this basic similarity, musical patterns and figures can move the mind to imitate the movements of the music, so that its passions become their expressions.

As for many thinkers before her, music for Cavendish is merely one manifestation of the dynamics of sympathy as it unfolds throughout the cosmos. And in Cavendish’s cosmos, sympathetic love turns out to be ubiquitous indeed. Perhaps most visibly, there is sympathy and affinity between minds. A good translation, Cavendish

⁷ Cavendish’s works are cited using the following abbreviations: *BW*: *The Blazing World* (in *Cavendish* 1666); *GNP*: *Ground of Natural Philosophy* (1668a); *NP*: *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* (1656); *ODS*: *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places* (1662a); *OEP*: *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666); *P*: *Playes* (1662b); *PF*: *Poems and Fancies* (1653b); *PHF*: *Philosophicall Fancies* (1653a); *PL*: *Philosophical Letters* (1664b); *PNB*: *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668b); *PPO*: *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655a); *SL*: *Sociable Letters* (1664a); *WO*: *The Worlds Olio* (1655b). Full publication details can be found in the references section.

⁸ On the *viola*, see *Gerbino* (2015). On the early interest in musical resonance as an instance of sympathy, see, for example, *Palisca* (2000) and *Tomlinson* (1993, pp. 101–44). Strikingly, a version of this account is still present in Descartes’s *Compendium musicae* (*Descartes* 1908, pp. 89–90).

explains, is a translation where there is sympathy ‘between the genius of the authors and the translators’ (*WO*, p. 12). When another person returns our deep affection, they give rise to ‘a Union, Likeness, or Conformableness, of . . . Actions, Appetites, and Passions . . . proceeding from an internal sympathetical love’ (*PL*, p. 292). If romantic, such ‘sympathetical conjunction’ between living beings may in turn result in the production of a new being ‘after their own likeness, either in nature or shape, or both’. And perhaps, Cavendish speculates, even ‘worlds may be match’d by a sympathetical conjunction to produce other worlds, as other creatures do’, for we do find ‘the planets by a sympathetical conjunction to produce other creatures, as the sun and the earth’ (*PPO*, pp. 97–8; cf. *PPO*, p. 37).

But not only does sympathetic love ground connections between individuals. It also has a deeper metaphysical dimension, for it helps account for the existence of an order in nature that transcends the mere pushing and colliding of inert matter. An argument Cavendish repeats in many of her writings is what we might call her ‘argument from order’. Even though nature is thoroughly material, it must be self-knowing, self-living and perceptive, otherwise it would run into confusion (see, for example, *GNP*, pp. 6–7). Nature, for Cavendish, is matter in motion, and these motions are of an intricacy, complexity, and infinite variety that neither the coarse motions of the mechanists’ ‘dead matter’ nor the Cambridge Platonists’ plastic natures can account for. While the former simply fail to render the complexity of natural processes intelligible, the latter posit mysterious immaterial entities where there is no need for them. In answer to More’s contention that ‘blind matter’ alone could not have hit upon the intricate order of nature without some further direction of an immaterial ‘spirit of nature’, she argues that it is indeed matter’s sympathies and antipathies itself that direct its motions:

I answer, The Wisdom of Nature or infinite Matter did order its own actions so, as to form those her Parts into such an exact and beautiful figure, as such a Tree, or such a Flower, or such a Fruit, and the like; and some of her Parts are pleased and delighted with other parts, but some of her parts are afraid or have an aversion to other parts; and hence is like and dislike, or sympathy and antipathy, hate and love, according as nature, which is infinite self-moving matter, pleases to move. (*PL*, p. 161; cf. *WO*, p. 175)⁹

⁹ For More’s argument, see [More \(1712, p. 212\)](#).

Throughout her works, Cavendish invokes sympathetic love to account for the ordered behaviour of matter. While antipathies lead to dissonances in natural movements and figures, mutual sympathy brings about orderly and coordinated motions of matter (*PPO*, p. 107).¹⁰ Sympathetic love regulates natural processes such as magnetic attraction or the cycle of water, which Cavendish conceives of as motions generated by the attraction of the sun (*PF*, p. 24). Diseases are said to be caused by the sympathetic imitation of parts of the bodies matter with the pathogen (*GNP*, p. 133). Within individuals, she identifies a ‘sympathetical agreement’ between rational passions and sensitive appetites, which ‘so resemble each other, as they would puzzle the most wise Philosopher to distinguish them’ (*GNP*, p. 63).

Further, sympathy functions as a principle of individuation and ‘conjunction’, both among individuals and their parts. As Susan James points out, Cavendish holds that mechanist ‘dead matter’ theory is incapable of explaining individuation. Matter devoid of internal activity and intentional states that is moved by external imposition only, Cavendish argues, could never form truly unified individuals (James 1999, p. 223; see, for example, *PL*, p. 60). Her vitalist materialism therefore paints a very different picture. Matter, she contends, is individuated into unified beings by a mutual desire or love that is constituted by and results in further internal motions of the material parts involved. When one material being or part of matter performs and imitates another’s patterns of motion, a sympathetic ‘conjunction’ is created between the two. In this way, parts of nature which sympathize in their motions join together ‘as one body’ (*PF*, p. 9). Just as regular human societies are bound by love, therefore, so are the parts of a human being, or indeed any individual creature:

In every Regular Human Society, there is a Passionate Love amongst the Associated Parts, like fellow-Students of one Colledg, or fellow-Servants in one House, or Brethren in one Family, or Subjects in one Nation, or Communicants in one Church: So the Self-moving Parts of a Human Creature, being associated, love one another, and therefore do endeavour to keep their Society from dissolving. (*GNP*, p. 75)

¹⁰ All principal kinds of natural motion (contraction, attraction, retention, dilation, expulsion) are by nature either sympathetical or antipathetical, and also ‘sympathize with each other’ (*PPO*, p. 33; cf. *PPO*, p. 161). Moreover, there is sympathy both in matter’s interior and its exterior motions (*PPO*, p. 40).

Any part of matter has both an innate love for itself and a passionate love for other parts, and it is this passionate love that ‘sympathetically unites’ parts of matter into one creature (*GNP*, p. 68). Creatures, Cavendish explains, are ‘associations’ of material parts that join by ‘consent’, and whose mutual ‘love’ preserves their association (*GNP*, p. 17; cf. *GNP*, pp. 27, 32). The result of such association is an inseparable ‘commixture’ of rational, sensitive and inanimate matter, which in turn enters into ‘agreeable combinations and connexions . . . in all productions’ (*OEP*, p. 159).

This continued sympathetic cooperation of associated parts of matter within a unified organism accounts both for its development and its conception, during which corporeal motions ‘attract and invite by sympathy’ other parts to help form it (*OEP*, p. 56; cf. *PPO*, p. 75; *PL*, p. 167). Sympathetic love also explains an individual’s persistence over time: as long as an individual’s ‘society’ moves ‘so Sympathetically, as to commit few or no Disorders, or Irregularities’, its unity continues. Yet once its motions become irregular, be it due to internal disharmonies or external intrusions, decay sets in (*GNP*, p. 86; cf. *GNP*, p. 80). Within a given creature, the motions of animated—sensitive and rational—matter have a particularly ‘strong sympathy’, ‘conjunction’, or ‘affection’, since they are fundamentally alike and like ‘Fellow-labourers . . . assist one another’ (*GNP*, pp. 21, 64; *PP*, p. 14). Their sympathetic love explains the close union between our minds and bodies and also their interaction. Mind and body affect each other by aligning and imitating their motions, so that when sensitive and rational matter ‘move sympathetically, then the Body is healthful and strong and the Mind in peace and . . . understands well’ (*GNP*, p. 84). And while the rational motions usually direct the sensitive ones, they also sometimes move with the sensitive ones out of ‘love’ for them, just as a parent may sometimes go along with the wishes of their child out of affection (*PF*, pp. 36–7). The sympathetic connection between rational and sensitive matter even entails that we could infer someone’s mental states from their physical ones if we only had sufficient knowledge:

Besides, who knowes but that the very thoughts of men may be known by the temper of their body? for could men come but to learn the several motions of the body, which ingenious observations may come to do, they may easily come to learn the motions of the minde, and so come to know the thoughts, which thoughts are the several figures

therein, which figures most commonly move sympathetically, with the motions of the body. (*PPO*, p. 171)

All passions and desires are equally individuated via sympathies and antipathies among the motions of rational and sensitive matter (*GNP*, pp. 70–1). Rational passions can occasion sensitive appetites by compelling the sensitive matter to imitate its motions, and appetites can occasion passions. Their moving in tandem, in turn, can elicit a whole range of complex emotions: sensitive pain can elicit rational grief, sensitive pleasure rational delight (*GNP*, pp. 63–4). In her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, Cavendish supplies an image to describe the sympathetic workings of the mind by asking us to think of the mind's spirits as 'little spherical Bodies of Quicksilver several ways placing themselves in several figures, sometimes moving in measure, and in order, and sometimes out of order'. She writes:

Imagine this Quick-silver to be the minde, and their several postures made by motion, the passions and affections . . . Love is when they move in equal number, and even measure. . . . But all their motion which they make, is according to those Figures with which they sympathize and agree: besides, their motion and figures are like the sound of Musick; though the notes differ, the cords agree to make a harmony. (*PPO*, pp. 15–16)

But not only does Cavendish appeal to sympathy to explain the association and interaction of parts within and between creatures. She also evokes it as an ordering principle that accounts for the individuation and persistence of species and kinds. 'Like a sheperd', sympathy shapes and controls the motions of material parts so that the order of species, elements and kinds is maintained. Even when a natural being of a certain kind dissolves, is newly created, or otherwise assumes a new figure, sympathy guarantees that these transformations always proceed in accordance with principles 'fixed' by sympathetic relations (*PF*, p. 12; *GNP*, pp. 31–3). In the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish writes:

The reason that most Creatures are in Species, according to their sort, and kind, is not only, that Nature's Wisdom orders and regulates her Corporeal Figurative Motions, into kinds and sorts of Societies and Conjunctions; but, those Societies cause a perceptive Acquaintance, and a united Love, and good liking of the Compositions, or Productions: and not only a love to their Figurative Compositions, but to all that are of the same sort, or kind. (*GNP*, p. 32)

Sympathetic love, in short, still plays a key role in grounding the order of Cavendish's 'well-ordered universe' (Boyle 2017). Her conception of such love, moreover, still resembles received views. These reverberate both in her central examples—the sympathetic effects of music, the attraction of a magnet—and in her frequent appeals to similarity along many dimensions—degrees of matter, shapes, motions—as establishing or strengthening sympathetic relations.¹¹ Sympathy's ubiquity, finally, not only highlights Cavendish's closeness to tradition, but also brings out a key tenet of her vitalist materialism: that even though our capacities may differ, we humans are fundamentally but another part of nature, made of the same matter and subject to the same forces (see, for example, *GNP*, p. 18). As human societies and individuals are bound by sympathetic love, so are the parts of any material being. Equally, the disharmonies that occur within a body or mind are often no different from conflicts and disharmonies within society at large: all are grounded in the antipathies of their individual parts, be they parts of bodily matter, conflicting beliefs, or distinct human beings (*OEP*, pp. 41–2; *GNP*, pp. 61, 157–8).

III

Love's Freedom. While Cavendish's conception of sympathetic love is thus still deeply connected to tradition, her particular brand of vitalism also influences and changes this conception in at least two important ways: first, sympathetic love becomes fully naturalized; second, it is no longer conceived of as a stable force, but as the voluntary self-motion of individual parts of matter. In this section, I will trace both of these developments throughout Cavendish's works.

Cavendish's naturalization of sympathetic love is certainly well-contextualized as part of a wider effort in seventeenth-century natural philosophy to show that phenomena of 'natural magic' can in fact be fitted within a secularized framework, and need not imply any occult forces.¹² Yet while her position aligns well with this broader movement, it is also a radical one. For it reduces all

¹¹ She does, however, no longer regard this condition as a necessary one; cf. *PL*, pp. 289–90. For further discussion of the importance of similarity in traditional conceptions of sympathy, see the introduction to Schliesser (2015).

¹² For further discussion, see Shanahan (2014).

sympathetic relations to mere passions and appetites, which are in turn understood to be self-directed and purely material motions.¹³ Some, Cavendish explains in Letter 15 of the *Philosophical Letters*, may ascribe sympathies and antipathies to ‘the influence of the stars’, others ‘to an unknown Spirit’, and yet others to ‘the Instinct of Nature’, or to ‘hidden properties’ or powers. But in fact ‘they are nothing else but plain ordinary Passions and Appetites’ (*PL*, p. 289). These passions and appetites, in turn, are—like everything else in Cavendish’s cosmos—no more than motions of matter. Sympathy, Cavendish contends, is no more than ‘dilating’, ‘agreeable’ motions of matter ‘in one part or Creature’ (*PPO*, p. 107; *PL*, p. 289; cf. *PPO*, p. 92). When these sympathetic motions agree with those of another creature or part, they result in love, the ‘sympathetic motion’ or ‘dance’ of spirits that binds the parts of nature together (*PPO*, p. 14; cf. *PPO*, pp. 107, 34).¹⁴ Antipathy, in turn, is grounded in ‘contracting’ motions which are ‘disagreeable, and produce contrary effects, as dislike, hate and aversion to some part or Creature’ (*PPO*, p. 107; *PL*, p. 289).

Sympathetic relations, Cavendish agrees with her predecessors, are as manifold as they are ubiquitous, because ‘there are many Desires, Passions, and Appetites, which draw or intice . . . to something or other’. Yet sympathy is in fact ‘nothing else but natural Passions and Appetites, as Love, Desire, Fancy’ (*PL*, p. 292). Love is at times also more narrowly defined as proceeding from rational matter only: ‘There are Sympathies of Sensitive Spirits, and Rational Spirits; the one proceeds from the Body, the other from the Mind, or Soul; the one is Fondness, the other is Love’ (*WO*, p. 150; cf. *GNP*, pp. 71–2). The main difference between love and fondness is their scope: while fondness is finite, lasting ‘no longer than the senses are filled’, love ‘dwels in the Soul, and is never satisfied; but the more it receives, the more it desires; so that this Sympathy is the Infinite of Loves Eternity’ (*WO*, p. 150). But even the effects of the strongest love, which brings about a ‘Union, Likeness, or Conformableness’ in

¹³ As Goldberg (2017) points out, the omnipresent spectre of atheism especially in mid-century English philosophy plausibly caused many thinkers to shy away from embracing such thoroughgoing materialism, and to postulate self-moving immaterial principles instead.

¹⁴ Perhaps sympathetic love in Cavendish is thus best conceived of as the conjunction of two kinds of motions: ‘dilating’, appetitive motions, by means of which material parts ‘reach out’ to other material parts, and ‘imitative’ motions, by means of which the figures of the different parts align.

the 'Actions, Appetites, and Passions', are at bottom merely further motions like the ones that constitute it in the first place:

For this kind of Sympathy works no other effects, but *a conforming of the actions of one party, to the actions of the other, as by way of Imitation, proceeding from an internal sympathetical love* and desire to please; for Sympathy doth not produce an effect really different from it self . . . (*PL*, p. 292; emphasis added)

This conclusion is reiterated at length in the *Philosophical Letters*. Sympathetic relations, Cavendish insists, are both caused and constituted by natural passions and appetites. These natural passions, in turn, are the causes and constituents of *all* sympathetic phenomena. The loadstone draws iron and the needle turns towards the North due to 'love and desire for association', just as the flower turns towards the sun 'from which it receives benefit'. 'Any thing', Cavendish concludes, 'that has freedom and liberty of motion, will turn towards those Places or Creatures whence it expects relief' (*PL*, p. 295).

This last passage in turn illustrates a second crucial change in Cavendish's conception of sympathetic love. Sympathetic motions, she asserts, are associative or imitative motions that are initiated through the often voluntary self-motions of the material parts involved. For Cavendish, therefore, sympathy is no longer a cosmic force or hidden power that things are simply endowed with. Rather, it is something that is up to the individual parts of nature. It is no longer a mere 'fact' of nature, but something enacted and chosen by individuals.

In order to see this, we first need to delve a little deeper into some of the philosophical commitments that underwrite Cavendish's conception. As we already saw above, she opposes mechanist or atomist accounts of matter that reduce it to 'a dull, dead and senseless heap' of dust 'blown about with winde'. For such a heap

could never produce such infinite effects; such rare compositions, such various figures, such several kindes, such constant continuance of each kinde, such exact rules, such undissolvable Laws, such fixt decrees, such order, such method, such life, such sense, such faculties, such reason, such knowledge, such power. (*PPO*, 'A Condemning Treatise')

Matter—all matter—requires knowledge and a capacity for intentional action in order to be able in the complex, coordinated manner

that we observe in so many natural processes (cf. *GNP*, pp. 6–7). As our investigation into sympathy’s metaphysical roles has further revealed, the ordered self-motion of matter not only entails that matter must be ‘ubiquitously rational’, as commentators have often pointed out (see, for example, [Detlefsen 2007](#), p. 180); it must also be ubiquitously sensing and feeling. Parts of matter must not only be capable of perceiving the motions of other parts. They must also form a desire to imitate or otherwise harmonize with these motions, and have the ability to then move themselves accordingly. According to Cavendish, nature is thus full of life and teeming with a multitude of dynamic figures brought about by the self-directed motions which are ‘the very nature’ of matter and the immediate cause of all natural effects (*PPO*, ‘A Condemning Treatise’).

In addition, Cavendish rejects any explanation of causal interaction via a transfer of motion as she believes that any such account fails to recognize the essential materiality of motion. Matter just is self-motion, and thus motion can neither be transferred upon impact (as Descartes had proposed), nor can it be a mere ‘accident’ of a body (as Hobbes would have it) (*OEP*, pp. 47–8; *GNP*, p. 2; *PL*, pp. 22, 532–3; see [James 1999](#), pp. 223–5).¹⁵ Accordingly, rather than directly transferring motion to each other, two parts of matter causally interact if one compels the other to move in accordance with the figures of its own motions, thus giving it ‘occasion’ to move in a certain way.¹⁶ When sensitive matter, for instance, reacts to another body’s matter, it is not simply pushed around by it. Instead, it imitates its pattern of motion, moving itself in a similar way. Cavendish often uses the metaphor of a dance to describe this: when two people dance, one leads while the other freely imitates their pattern of movement, and this is exactly what sensitive matter does when it is affected by other matter in causation or perception (*PPO*, pp. 12–13; cf. *PHF*, pp. 30–1; *PF*, p. 138).¹⁷ Cavendish’s tenet that matter is intrinsically self-moving and the occasionalist account of causation that follows in its wake thus imply a fundamental freedom of nature: ‘If man (who is but a single part of nature) hath given him by God

¹⁵ Against Descartes, see *PL*, p. 98 and *OEP*, pp. 49–50; against Hobbes, see *PPO*, p. 31 and *PL*, pp. 54–5.

¹⁶ Unlike other prominent occasionalists of her time, Cavendish does not postulate God as the sole cause of causal change while denying causal power to agents in the created world.

¹⁷ This metaphor fades in Cavendish’s later, less poetic works, but it never disappears entirely.

the power and a free will of moving himself, why should not God give it to Nature?’ (*PL*, p. 95; cf. *PL*, pp. 11, 96, 214, 225; *OEP*, pp. 58, 109; *SL*, p. 273).

Cavendish’s model still allows for a degree of compulsion: parts of nature may forcefully compel other parts of nature to act in certain ways, for instance ‘by forcing these over-powered parts to alter their own natural motions into the motions of the victorious Party’ (*PL*, pp. 356–7; cf. *GNP*, p. 105). However, oftentimes material parts direct one another harmoniously, ‘by consent’, so that the parts harmoniously conjoin and meet in their figures. Some, Cavendish writes, grow ‘by consent of parts’ into the ‘Wheele of Fire’ that is the sun, others fly upwards, but then ‘by one consent’ fall back down as rain, and yet others unite ‘by consent’ into the harmonious dance that constitutes the health and life of an organism (*PF*, pp. 14, 17, 22; [Robinson 2010](#), pp. 202–3). The first, forced movement of parts, Cavendish explains, is action ‘by compulsion’, while the second, harmonious movement is action ‘by sympathy’ (*PPO*, p. 68).

Sympathetic interaction, therefore, always involves a voluntary harmonization of agent and patient. Commenting on the relationship between the rational and sensitive parts of a creature, Cavendish explains that ‘the Command of the rational, and the Obedience of the Sensitive, is rather an Agreement than a constraint’ (*GNP*, p. 63). Similarly, all creatures ‘are produced, or composed by the agreement and consent of particular Parts’ (*GNP*, p. 31). Given the presence of rational matter in even the most minute parts of nature, certain effects depend on the ‘consensual’ sympathetic reaction of those internal, self-moving parts of an object to the parts of matter that outwardly affect it. Only if such sympathy is present do its parts ‘agree’ to imitate the motions of the object externally affecting it.¹⁸ When a body for instance becomes aware of another in perception, it may perceive it as agreeable, and consequently love and desire it, or perceive it as disagreeable, and withdraw:

Whensoever I say, that outward objects work or cause such or such effects in the body sentient; I do not mean, that the object is the only immediate cause of the changes of those parts in the sentient body; but that it is only an external or occasional cause, and that the effects in the sentient proceed from its own inherent natural motions; which

¹⁸ For similar readings, see [O’Neill \(2001, p. xxxii\)](#), [James \(1999, pp. 237–8\)](#) and [Robinson \(2010, pp. 74–80\)](#).

upon the perception of the exterior object, cause such effects in the sentient, as are either agreeable to the motions of the object, and that by way of imitation, which is called Sympathy; or disagreeable, which is call'd Antipathy. (*OEP*, 'Further Observations', p. 59; cf. *PL*, pp. 156, 295; [Detlefsen 2007](#), p. 168)

In all cases, the causal interactions that underwrite sympathetic relations are free motions brought about by internal desires, not passive transformations imposed from the outside. For Cavendish, sympathetic love is not passive, but active: it entails the will to be moved, and therefore at the same time necessarily brings with it the freedom *not* to be moved in such fashion. It is not a mechanical relation, but involves freedom and choice on the part of the attracted material parts, which move themselves according to their needs and desires.¹⁹

IV

The Dangers of Self-Love. The previous section has shown that for Cavendish, sympathetic love is a voluntary and entirely naturalized phenomenon: it involves nothing but the passions and appetites of material parts, which lead them to adjust their self-motions to the motions of other parts if they so desire. This conception moves her beyond the unexplained or even occult forces sympathy's opponents saw as operative in traditional conceptions. But it also reveals a more destabilized and divided cosmos, where the loving relations that bind nature's parts suddenly seem more fragile and frayed, especially within the realm of human sociability.

We already saw that Cavendish, like Hobbes, sees a tight relationship between the workings of the natural and the moral world. Both contain both unity and division, and, Cavendish explains, necessarily so. For 'if there were not contrary, or rather, I may say, different effects proceeding from the onely cause, which is the onely matter, there could not possibly be any, or at least, so much variety in Nature, as humane sense and reason perceives there is' (*PL*, p. 446). The result of division is variety, and none would exist without it.

Cavendish's thesis of the freedom of sympathy goes a long way towards explaining this variety: There is 'discord and division' as well

¹⁹ See also *PPO*, p. 14, where Cavendish characterizes mutual love as a 'quick, equal, and free' sympathetic motion.

as ‘concord and composition’ among the parts of nature, brought about by the free motions of material beings which sometimes behave in a regular, sympathetic, and sometimes in an irregular, antipathetic manner (*OEP*, p. 16). Their sensitive and rational motions, for instance,

do oftentimes cross and oppose each other; for, although several parts are united in one body, yet they are not always bound to agree to one action; nor can it be otherwise; for, were there no disagreement between them, there would be no irregularities, and consequently no pain or sickness, nor no dissolution of any natural figure. (*OEP*, p. 145)

In addition, the epistemic limitations of created beings may lead to errors in judgement, which in turn may lead them to move disharmoniously. As commentators such as Karen Detlefsen (2007) and Deborah Boyle (2017) have argued, Cavendish views nature as a whole as operating as an ordered system which follows certain principles and prescribes certain ‘norms’ of behaviour (Detlefsen 2007, p. 175) that account for both its stability and its complexity. Nature thus possesses, as Cavendish puts it, an overarching ‘wisdom’, through which ‘like a Monarchess’ she ‘orders and regulates her Corporeal Figurative Motions’ (*GNP*, p. 32). Yet while nature herself ‘is infinitely naturally wise’, her individual parts or particular creatures ‘may commit errors and mistakes . . . being but a part, and not a whole’ (*PL*, pp. 509–10; cf. *OEP*, p. 144). Among the infinite parts of nature there is thus ‘Antipathy as much as Sympathy’.

At the same time, however, there is also a constant rebalancing between ‘assistance’ and ‘resistance’, which leads to ‘a conformity in the whole nature of Infinite Matter’ (*PL*, p. 446). ‘Nature’s fundamental actions’, Cavendish argues, ‘are so poysed, that Irregular actions are as natural as Regular’ (*GNP*, p. 106). Indeed, she marvels, ‘it seems to be Natures great Art to make all things subject to War, and yet live in Peace, as not to make an utter Destruction’ (*WO*, p. 163).²⁰ Moreover, what may appear as an instance of disturbance may actually be an instance of harmony. A contagious disease such as the plague, for instance, while believed by ‘some

²⁰ There is interpretative debate around whether Cavendish allows for true disorders in nature (see, for example, Boyle 2017; Detlefsen 2007, p. 175), or whether these are merely apparent (see, for example, Cuning 2016, pp. 210–420). As will emerge below, the interpretation defended here entails that there are indeed true disorders, but that these are artificial, not natural.

experimental philosophers' to be 'a body of little Flyes like Atomes, which go out of one body into another', is indeed caused, Cavendish argues, by a sympathetic imitation of material parts, 'so that the motions of some parts which are sound, do imitate the motions of those that are infected, and that by this means, the Plague becomes contagious and spreading' (*OEP*, p. 54). Given our epistemic limitations, while some motions of nature—importantly, what we call 'Sickness, Pain, and Death'—may seem like true imbalances to us, these are in fact nothing but manifestations of the infinite variety of balanced natural motions (*PL*, pp. 331–2; cf. *PPO*, pp. 129–30; *PL*, pp. 538–9).

Yet while nature fundamentally retains its balance of sympathy and antipathy, the same does not appear to hold true of the world of human sociability.²¹ 'Though Man did fall', Cavendish poignantly states in the *Philosophical Letters*, 'nature never did' (*PL*, p. 278). While the unified and vitally connected universe presented by Cavendish's natural philosophy seems to contrast starkly with a Hobbesian mechanist picture of randomly colliding atoms, her depiction of human society carries strong Hobbesian undertones:

[O]f the society of men and women comes many great inconveniencies, as defamations of womens honours, and begets great jealousies, from fathers, brothers, and husbands, those jealousies beget quarrels, murders, and at the best discontent. (*WO*, p. 32; cf. *Lobis* 2015, pp. 71–3)

Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* provide a particularly lively picture of Cavendish's bleak image of human sociability. They depict a world of 'Cholerick Ladies' who sympathize neither with other women 'nor with each other', a discordant consort of scholars 'whose discourse was their music', but who soon 'became so Violent and Loud' that they would 'have Fought, if they had had any other Wounding Weapons than their Tongues', a 'malignant contagion of gossiping' that is more dangerous and widespread than 'all Malignant Diseases', and women who are so self-loving that in order to live peacefully, most need to be 'strangers to [their] own Sex' (*SL*, pp. 65–66, 154–5, 179–81, 331).²² Friendships are tainted by jealousy, men contrive how to advance in 'Title, Fortune, and Power', while women plot and scheme in their support, always 'ready to side into

²¹ For this point, see also *Lobis* 2015, p. 73.

²² For further scenes of academic struggle, see *SL*, p. 84 and *BW*, p. 28.

Factions' (*SL*, pp. 42–3, 199–200, 12). A play within Cavendish's play *Convent of Pleasure* also exposes the harsh realities of marriage, with negligent husbands lying 'drinking all day in an alehouse' and gambling away their estates, while their wives are home caring for too many children and suffering in labour (*PNB*, pp. 111–17).

Not only social rivalries, but also depictions of outright war and the equally destructive incursions of mankind into nature are a frequent theme in Cavendish's writings—the former undoubtedly shaped by her own devastating experiences of the English Civil Wars. The poem 'The Earth's Complaint' describes the motions of the planets around the sun as a 'sweet music' and 'kind love', only to then turn to humanity's torment and exploitation of earth: 'O Nature! Nature! Hearken to my cry; I'm wounded sore, but yet I cannot die./My children, which from my womb did bear/Do dig my sides, and all my bowels tear' (*PF*, p. 106). She also cautions that such disorders may be far more easily created than repaired. It takes, she emphasizes, far, far longer for a society to unite than to divide, and 'the ruins of War are not so suddenly repaired, as made' (*PL*, p. 408). While sympathies and antipathies in the natural world thus still keep their balance, in the social world, the latter seem to easily outnumber the former, to grave consequence: 'Nature being poised, there must of necessity be Irregularities, as well as Regularities . . . but when there is a general Irregularity, then the Society falls to ruine' (*GNP*, p. 60).

A substantial divide therefore emerges. While there is disorder in the natural world, since all its parts are free to sympathize or antipathize, nature nonetheless remains fundamentally balanced. The same, however, does not hold true of the realm of human sociability. What explains this divergence?

The answer, perhaps surprisingly, brings us back to love, or, more precisely, to self-love. In the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish distinguishes between 'passionate love' and 'self-love'. Passionate love is love between the parts within a creature or between creatures, while self-love is the love each creature—and, in turn, each of its parts—has for itself (*GNP*, p. 68). In its basic and natural form, self-love is nothing other than an innate desire to preserve itself, which is both 'just' and 'natural' (*SL*, p. 56). It is the most fundamental kind of love, and the ground from which all our other passions arise:

Self-love is the ground from which springs all Indeavours and Industry, Noble Qualities, Honourable Actions, Friendships, Charity, and Piety,

and is the cause of all Passions, Affections, Vices and Virtues; for we do nothing, or think not of any thing, but hath a reference to our selves in one kind or other. (*WO*, p. 145)

All we do, Cavendish asserts, is motivated at bottom by self-love. In its pure and natural form, self-love is central to the balancing the passions that constitute all sympathetic and antipathetic relations in nature. Self-love motivates material beings to enter into sympathetic or antipathetic relations with other parts (*PL*, p. 35). All motions of sympathy and antipathy, Cavendish argues, ‘proceed from self-preservation’, and ‘all things turn with self-ends; for certainly every thing hath self-love, even hard stones’ (*PPO*, p. 68). Moreover, the harmonious motions of love ‘lead by Reason’ which ‘lies as much in the heart, as the head’ (*PPO*, p. 106; cf. *PPO*, pp. 108–9) are both the foundation of ‘nature’s house’, as well as the source of the moral virtues (*WO*, p. 145; *PF*, p. 133). Here, she again evokes the metaphor of music: the virtuous can ‘tune’ their passions ‘like musical instruments’, such that every note causes delight in the hearer and ‘the mind dances in measure, the Saraband of Tranquility’ (*PF*, p. 51).

But human self-love can also be corrupted, thus giving rise to violent, limitless and destructive passions and appetites (*WO*, p. 142). ‘Like the Sun Beams, in one Point, as with a Glass, wherewith it sets all one fire’, Cavendish writes,

so Self-Love infires the Mind, which makes it Subtil and Active, and sometimes Raging, Violent and Mad; and as it is the First that seiseth on us, so it is the Last that parts from us; and though Reason should be the Judge of the Mind, yet Self-Love is the Tyrant which makes the State of the Mind unhappy; for it is so partially Covetous, that it desires more than all, and is contented with nothing, which makes it many times grow Furious, even to the ruin of its own Monarchy. (*WO*, p. 145)

In the hands of humans, self-love therefore becomes a sharp and double-edged sword. It is indeed ‘the nearest perfection of love’ because it is the source of all our other passions, and can ultimately lead to true, selfless love of another (*WO*, pp. 145–6). Yet when driven to excess, it can also become the source of numerous destructive passions and desires. At the same time, however, Cavendish emphasizes that these destructive effects of excessive self-love are ‘artificial’ and only occur in the human realm. Hate, Cavendish argues, is one of the most violent products of such excessive self-love. It

promotes vainglory, and divides where balanced love strives towards unity (*PF*, p. 83). However, it is not an intrinsic part of nature, whose ‘chief law’ is love. Rather, it is ‘an accident from love’ (*PF*, p. 73). Indeed, the ‘untruthful’ love that gives rise to hate, Cavendish argues, is itself ‘artificial’, not natural. The same, Cavendish emphasizes, is true of all other excessive passions and desires: moderated passions are ‘natural’, whereas violent, limitless passions and appetites are ‘artificial’ and often shaped and manufactured by social influences and constraints (*WO*, p. 144). Similarly, she draws a contrast between natural disorders and the artificial wars caused by us. ‘All Natural War’, she explains, ‘is caused either by a Sympathetical ... or an Antepathetical motion’. These motions proceed merely from ‘Self-preservation’, since matter’s motions sculpt it into shapes and figures, and these strive ‘to maintain what they have created’ (*PPO*, p. 6; cf. *PPO*, p. 41). The human war experienced by Cavendish, by contrast, is described as an ‘unnatural war’ that ‘came like a whirlwind which fell’d down ... Houses, where some in the Wars were crusht to death, as my youngest brother Sir Charls Lucas, and my Brother Sir Thomas Lucas’ (*NP*, p. 375).

A further manifestation of human self-love to which Cavendish ascribes a particularly destructive force is the excessive human desire for recognition and fame.²³ Our desire for fame, she argues, is a desire for self-preservation that extends beyond death. We do not know whether we truly have immortal souls, but we do know that our natural mind and body are subject to decay. Yet ‘to die for fame, is to live longer in the memory of other men th[a]n he knows he shall live in the life of his own body’ (*WO*, p. 37; cf. *ODS*, pp. 20–1). Cavendish, it is worth noting, does not seem to regard our desire for fame as intrinsically vicious. Not only does she often express and comment on her own desire for fame, she also seems to have thought this desire to be a basic feature of human psychology, and one that can also motivate to virtuous action that gains us the recognition of our peers (*WO*, pp. 1–5).²⁴ However, more often than not, excessive self-love transforms this desire into an unnatural striving to be recognized at any cost, and to excessive ambition which then leads to war and strife (*WO*, pp. 1, 51). It renders us selfishly concerned with our

²³ For a detailed discussion of the human desire for fame and its connection to self-love, see Boyle (2017, pp. 118–41).

²⁴ In *WO*, pp. 1–5, Cavendish also draws a distinction a desire for ‘noble fame’ and a desire for ‘bastard fame’.

own fame and gains rather than with the welfare of the associations of which we are a part. Moreover, it leads us to view ourselves and our imagined immortality as rising above nature, our pride leads us to think of ourselves as ‘petty gods’ entitled to use the rest of creation for our own ends (*WO*, p. 143; *OEP*, Further Observations’, p. 24). While self-love is therefore both natural and necessary to produce the passions that move all parts of nature, in the human realm it can lead to excessive passions with the power to disrupt the world’s natural balance of sympathies and antipathies.

But why, we might now want to ask of Cavendish, is this just true of us? Does she not claim that we are, like everything else, merely part of nature? Cavendish’s answer here is not as clear-cut as we might wish it to be, but her texts certainly hint at a number of possible, and perhaps complementary answers.

A first possible explanation might appeal to the theological explanation hinted at in the poignant passage from the *Philosophical Letters* quoted earlier, where Cavendish alludes to the Fall and its consequences. The role of religious doctrine in Cavendish’s philosophy is, of course, a difficult one to determine. While recent commentators (Hernandez 2018 and Nelson 2016, among others) have forcefully—and to my mind convincingly—criticized a thoroughgoing atheist reading of Cavendish, Cavendish is unquestionably adamant to exclude theological matters from the realm of natural philosophy, arguing that just as philosophical explanations do not have a place in theology, theological explanations should not enter philosophical ones (*PL*, p. 323). Nevertheless, they occasionally do enter, if mostly indirectly, as in the discussion of van Helmont’s views of which the quote in question is a part. There, Cavendish criticizes van Helmont’s view that Nature, created for Man, ‘was defiled by [Man’s sin]’ by drawing a sharp distinction between the original sin of man and its impact on humanity, on the one hand, and ‘Infinite Nature’, on the other, which could neither be ‘heightened nor diminished’ by such sin (*PL*, pp. 279–80), suggesting that there may indeed be a significant gap there.

Besides the obvious implication regarding humanity’s (but not nature’s) fallen state, however, this response also seems to indicate a deeper contrast: between the realm of infinite nature, which ‘knows no contraries in it self, but lives in Peace’ even though its ‘several actions are opposing and crossing each other’, and the realm of human agency, where moral transgressions can occur through our

particular, freely performed actions (*PL*, p. 280). In those actions, Cavendish emphasizes, we can—as beings endowed both with a free will and a capacity to guide it by the reflective power of our reason—indeed go wrong and cause evil, ‘either because we are ignorant of the ends which we ought to pursue or because we know what ends we ought to pursue but we wilfully deviate from them’. Moreover, these actions can be construed as ‘unnatural’ in so far as they—either knowingly or due to ignorance—contravene the natural order of things nature’s wisdom has established.²⁵ Against the oppression of women, Cavendish argues that

it is not only uncivil and ignoble, but unnatural, for men to speak against women and their liberties, for women were made by Nature for men, to be loved, accompanied, assisted, and protected; and if men are bound to love them by Nature, should they restrain them by force: Should they make them slaves, which Nature made to be their dearest associates, their beautifullest objects and sweetest delights? (*ODS*, p. 223)

In the same way, we might understand our excessive self-love and its destructive consequences as culpable deviations from natural norms. As we have seen, our desire for fame is a natural propensity. It is also, as Cavendish points out, a specifically human one:

Next, the being born to the glory of God, Man is born to produce a Fame by some particular acts to prove himself a man . . . the difference betwixt man and beast, to speak naturally, and onely according to her works without any Divine influence, is, that dead men live in living men, where beasts die without Record of beasts . . . for the rational soul in man is a work of nature, as well as the body, and therefore ought to be taught by nature to be as industrious to get a Fame to live to after Ages, as the body to get food for present life, for as natures principles are created to produce some effects, so the Soul to produce Fame. (*WO*, p. 2; cf. *ODS*, pp. 150–1)

Animals, Cavendish readily points out, also can develop pride or ambition: horses or dogs can strive to outrun each other, and a peacock can take pride in his feathers (*WO*, p. 141; Boyle 2017, p. 196). However, they—lacking the requisite form of rationality—do

²⁵ This suggestion is inspired by Detlefsen’s (2007) appeal to ‘norms’ of nature in Cavendish. Further support may come from the ‘strikingly traditional’ (Hernandez 2018, p. 132) free will defence of the problem of evil Cavendish offers in the *Sociable Letters* (*SL*, p. 355).

not also strive for fame that outlasts their life; nor can they develop distorted self-images that lead them to believe that they are placed above creation. We, on the other hand, can indeed transgress in these ways.

Moreover, Cavendish frequently emphasizes that the many artificial social conventions and expectations that pervade human society can exacerbate or corrupt what may be otherwise be natural and beneficial tendencies.²⁶ Human self-love, Cavendish argues, is rendered unstable and inconstant through ‘vain Opinions’, ‘false Imaginations’, and ‘unsound Understandings’ that our overly ambitious nature, further corrupted by the artificial conventions and pressures of human society, bring about. Guided by excessive self-love, we thus ‘ride in the Waies of Partiality, on the Horse of Flattery, to the Judge of Falshood’ (WO, pp. 145, 104). The false hubris of humans regarding the rest of nature in particular is a frequent theme in Cavendish’s writings. She extensively criticizes the ‘presumptuous self-love’ of the experimental philosophers, which leads them to think that they can create new kinds and elements that transcend nature’s order. Man’s self-love, she argues, has ‘filled him with that Credulity of a Powerful Art, that he thinks not only to learn Nature’s Ways, but to know her Means and Abilities, and become Lord of Nature, to rule her, and bring her under his subjection’ (WO, pp. 340–1; cf. James 2018). Cavendish’s poetry also often draws out men’s ‘foolish ambition’, which is often contrasted with the actual skill and wisdom of other animals:

O man! O man! What high ambition grows
 Within his brain! And yet, how low he goes!
 To be contended only with a sound
 Where neither life nor body can be found. (PF, p. 98)²⁷

Cavendish’s suggestion thus seems to be that excessive human self-love is often sparked by an exaggerated awareness of our ‘higher capacities’, only to be set ablaze by the artificial conventions and self-images we develop to set ourselves apart from nature.

Finally, Cavendish’s discussion of self-love and its corruptibility also clearly resonates with the debates surrounding the concept that

²⁶ Though she sometimes also emphasizes the improving effects customs, and especially education, can have on humanity (see, for example, *SL*, p. 284).

²⁷ Among other texts, see also the highly ironic ‘A Moral Discourse of Man and Beast’ (PF, pp. 98–104), and the subsequent series of poems on different animals.

arose after the publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Many of his contemporaries saw Hobbes as breaking with the Aristotelian conception of self-love (*philautia*) that we also find in Cavendish, according to which self-love can lead both to virtue and vice.²⁸ According to the Aristotelian conception, self-love is of two varieties: (i) the self-love of the vicious, who desire for themselves 'the greatest share when it comes to money and honours and bodily pleasures', and (ii) the self-love of the virtuous person, who serves 'the supreme element in himself and complies with it in everything' (Nicomachean Ethics 1168b; Maurer 2006, p. 82). Much like Cavendish, Aristotle argues that no conflict arises between other-regarding virtues and the self-love of the second kind, because this self-love has the rational part of the soul as its object. Only vicious self-love is truly self-centred, because it bars us from taking into account the interests of others. Hobbes, by contrast, was seen as having divorced self-love from virtue by claiming that rational individuals in the state of nature only pursue passions that are self-directed, thus rendering vicious self-love the only natural kind. Cavendish's position seems to offer an intriguing counterpoint to this Hobbesian view. On the one hand, she does seem to follow Hobbes in taking a very bleak view of human self-love as often excessive and vicious. Yet on the other hand, her position ultimately emerges as an intriguing inversion of Hobbes's own, since while for Hobbes the world of human sociability is the only way to master our self-love, for Cavendish it amplifies or sometimes even brings about its destabilizing effects.

V

Conclusion: But a Fiction of the Mind? 'I wish my Speech were like a Loadstone', the character of Virtue pronounces in one of Cavendish's plays, 'to draw the iron hearts of men to pity and compassion, to charity and devotion' (*P*, p. 224; Lobis 2015, p. 73). While the sympathetic force of a magnet attracts reliably in the natural world, which is free from excessive self-love, the previous sections have revealed an important disanalogy between the natural and the social world as Cavendish conceives of them. The natural realm,

²⁸ See Maurer (2006, p. 83), who also refers to discussions of *amour-propre* and *intérêt* among French moralists such as La Rochefoucauld, Nicole and Abbadie. For Aristotle's conception of self-love, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1168b–69a.

despite the freedom of its parts and the irregularities that follow in its wake, retains its fundamental balance and the stable sympathetic relations which ground its order. The world of human sociability, however, is marked by excessive self-love and the disorders it gives rise to. Within the human realm, sympathetic love thus seems to become a regulative ideal rather than a cosmic fact—an ideal which is in fact rarely attained.

In Cavendish's writing, this ideal emerges in its most tangible form under the heading of 'Platonic love', through which, as she poetically describes it, the souls of lovers mix as painters create shadows in mixing colours (*PF*, p. 56). The resulting 'unity of minds' is a frequent motif in her plays, fictions and letters—which are meant to create such unity with a fictional correspondent—but also in the idealized depictions of her own marriage.²⁹ Platonic love also crosses gendered lines: in Cavendish's utopia *The Blazing World*, the encounter between Empress and Duchess produces 'such an intimate friendship between them, that they became Platonick Lovers, although they were both Females' (*BW*, p. 93). 'The Emperess's Soul', Cavendish describes their encounter, 'embraced and kiss'd the Duchess's soul with an immaterial kiss, and shed immaterial tears, that she was forced to part from her, finding her not a flattering Parasite, but a true friend' (*BW*, p. 123). This supposed immaterial nature of Platonic love seems to elevate it above selfish bodily desire. Yet it also—given Cavendish's very thorough materialism—seems to remove it from physical, material reality, rendering it a mere 'Fiction of the mind', exemplified perhaps by nature in its harmonies, yet unattained, and maybe forever unattainable by humanity (*BW*, b*r). Indeed, in the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish seems to draw precisely this conclusion. 'One whole Mind', she writes there, 'cannot perceive another whole Mind; By which Observation we may perceive, there are no Platonick Lovers in Nature' (*GNP*, pp. 21–2; this and the previous quote cited in Lobis 2015, 101).

Prima facie, this conclusion seems to sit well with a popular reading of Cavendish, according to which her negative view of human sociability prompts her to turn inward almost solipsistically:

Cavendish took refuge in a concept of sympathy between souls as a way of solving the problem of sympathy in society ... ultimately Cavendish's development of a moral idea of sympathy ends up not in

²⁹ On the latter, see Billing (2011).

altruism—or ‘benevolence’, a keyword of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century moral philosophy—but in egoism, one might even say autism. (Lobis 2015, p. 74)

While this reading perhaps does not paint the most flattering picture of Cavendish, there is certainly some textual evidence to recommend it. She often juxtaposes her descriptions of the wars and strifes of ‘the Publick World’ and of mankind as ‘Ill-natur’d and Cruel’ with praises of a retired life that is neither ‘Vext with Cares nor worldly Desires’, where the ‘Mind lives in Peace’ and its thoughts engage in conversations driven by ‘Sympathetical Endeavours’ (*SL*, pp. 61–2, 56–7; *GNP*, pp. 160, 75). She bluntly declares that ‘certainly a solitary life is the happiest’, and in her fictions, her female protagonists often strive for ‘a Retired Life . . . free from the Intanglements, confused Clamours, and rumbling Noise of the World’ (*WO*, p. 27; *SL*, p. 55). Moreover, in her writings, imaginary worlds abound—indeed, their construction itself is a frequent theme—and in them, characters often share the relations of perfect love and sympathy that she finds so lacking in the real world. However, in doing so, some of her interpreters argue, she herself lets these relations collapse into an excessive form of self-love, or, as Catherine Gallagher puts it, into ‘total self-referentiality’ (Gallagher 1988, p. 30).

But while there is certainly a part of Cavendish that looks inward, perhaps yearning for love and sympathy lost, there also seems to be another. And this part, it seems, wants to pull the world towards her and desires to move it with her imagination, desiring her speech to have the power to attract and to move other minds to imitate its figures, just as the loadstone attracts the compass’s needle and leads it to face north. Cavendish’s imaginary worlds, for one, do seem to be more than mere escapes into fantasy. They are also places where women can showcase their true talents in ways which the reality of Cavendish’s society precludes, and thereby demand their acknowledgment. In *The Blazing World*, for instance, the empress encounters numerous ‘men of science’ who are all eager to engage in a sustained dialogue about their studies, and who all profit from her expertise. (The real Cavendish, of course, often had the opposite experience.) Similarly, in Cavendish’s play *Bell in Campo*, a group of women follow their men onto the battlefield. However, instead of staying out of the way as they had been told to do, they end up forming an army of

their own, which—cleverly led by a female strategist—rescues their faltering husbands from defeat.

But perhaps it is Cavendish's own and often-evoked desire for literary fame that serves as the clearest sign of her outward-looking side. Not as an illustration of excessive self-love, which she herself so decries, but as evidence of a desire to be heard and to enter into the sympathetic discourses that would mitigate its effects—as a writer and as a woman who not only imagines better worlds, but would like others to share in them and, ultimately, help make them a reality.³⁰

*Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue
Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK*

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