Review of The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish

DAVID CUNNING (UNIVERSITY OF IOWA)

Abstract:

Keywords: Margaret Cavendish, history of science, libertarian freedom, occasionalism, gender
The Well-Ordered Universe by Deborah Boyle is a critical element in the now constantly expanding discussion of the philosophical views and arguments of Margaret Cavendish. The book begins with a defense of the thesis that for Cavendish nature does not always exhibit order, but that it seeks to exhibit order and is largely successful. According to Boyle, Cavendish holds that the bodies of nature—including the bodies composing (fully material) human beings—tend to cooperate with each other to secure balance and regularity, but that there also exist true disorders, in large part because of the way that creatures misuse their libertarian freedom. The book then proceeds with a helpful discussion of a number of issues related to the theme of order vs. disorder: Cavendish’s early flirtation with, and rejection of, the doctrine of atomism, in part because the doctrine cannot account for the order that is found in nature; the vitalist materialism that Cavendish develops in place of atomism; the sympathy, self-love, and self-knowledge that, according to Cavendish, lead most (and especially non-human) creatures to cooperate and achieve harmony and balance; the human desire for fame and its role in fostering disorder; and the societal balance that is achieved when gender (and class and other) norms are not upset. The book concludes with two additional chapters on order: a chapter on the best order-securing relationship between humans and non-human animals, and a chapter on health and order in the human body.

One of the strengths of the book is the way that it represents Cavendish as a systematic thinker who is careful to make sure that each of her views and arguments is sensitive to other views and arguments that she lays out, most specifically on issues of order and balance. The book has many strengths, but there are also a number of potential objections to Boyle’s argumentation.

One is that although there are numerous texts in which Cavendish posits disorder and irregularity, there is a large number (but not as large a number) of texts in which Cavendish says that there are no irregularities in nature and that when she uses the term “irregularity”, it is to pick out things that are unusual or that run counter to our hopes and expectations. She certainly identifies things as irregular, for example:

Nature poying her Actions by Opposites, there must needs be Irregularities, as well as Regularities; which is the cause that seldom any Creature is so exact, but there is some Exception. (Ground of Natural Philosophy, [London, 1668], 84).

However, she also makes clear that there is a constant regularity and harmony among the parts of Nature and that she identifies things as “irregular” just so long as they are not usual or customary. She writes:

there cannot be confusion amongst those parts of Nature, but there must be a constant union and harmony betwixt them; for cross and opposite actions make no confusion, but onely a variety; and such actions which are different, cross and opposite, not moving always after their usual and accustomed way, I name Irregular, for want of a better expression; but properly there is no such thing as

...Nevertheless, all these motions, whether regular or irregular, are natural; for regularity and irregularity hath but a respect to particulars, and to our conceptions, because those motions which move not after the ordinary, common or usual way or manner, we call Irregular. (Ibid., 359-60).

Boyle acknowledges the existence of these and other passages in which Cavendish says that there are no irregularities in nature, and she is right that there is a much larger number of passages in which Cavendish identifies things as irregularities. Boyle argues that although there are problematic passages for her “True Disorders” interpretation, on balance the textual evidence supports that interpretation (29). We might disagree with her, however, about whether or not the passages in question are in fact competing. It would be one thing if in X number of passages Cavendish posited the existence of irregularities, and if in a much smaller number of passages she denied the existence of irregularities. In that case, we might argue that her considered view is the one that she states most often and that her expression of the contrary view is just an unfortunate hiccup. But Cavendish in fact proceeds quite differently. In the smaller number of passages, she is not just stating that there are no irregularities, she is also telling us how she is using the term “irregularity” when she posits an irregularity: she is using it to describe things that are unusual or that run counter to our hopes and expectations. Indeed, she supposes that this is how we all tend to use the term:

These motions and actions of Nature, since they are so infinitely various, when men chance to observe some of their variety, they call them by some proper name, to make a distinction, especially those motions which belong to the figure of their own kind; ...when they will express the motions proper for the Consistence, Continuance and Perfection of their Figure, they call them Health; but when they will express the motions contrary to these, they call them Sickness, Pain, Death, and the like: and hence comes also the difference between regular and irregular motions; for all those motions that belong to the particular nature and consistence of any figure, they call regular, and those which are contrary to them, they call irregular. (*Philosophical Letters*, 332).

Here Cavendish is calling to mind a very familiar phenomenon. We might come to learn that we have a disease, for example, and then identify the disease as a departure from what ought to happen, or as an irregularity or mutation, but that does not mean that the occurrence of the disease was a matter of bodies failing to behave in a fully lawlike manner. A similar phenomenon occurs at the political level, no doubt, when there are causes that bring down a government or that threaten the social order. These are “irregularities,” and there are causes that bring them about just as there are causes that might be put in their way.

Boyle does refer to additional textual and systematic evidence in support of the view that there are irregularities in nature. For example, she cites Cavendish’s occasionalist view of causation according to which motion is never transferred from one body to another, but instead bodies act by means of their own internal motion and in most cases act freely (36-37, 97-104). Boyle then supposes that the freedom in question must be of
the libertarian variety; otherwise the “patient” body would not be freely responding to the occasioning of the “agent” body, but instead it would be forced. If Boyle is right, Cavendish holds that many of the bodies in nature are in possession of libertarian freedom, and if so, it is obvious why nature would contain numerous irregularities: even if a body is prompted to behave in an orderly manner, it still possesses the ability to ignore its orders, and irregularities would be quite common. A worry for Boyle, however, is that nothing that Cavendish says in the explication of her occasionalist view of causation suggests that the freedom that creatures possess when they act in the light of occasional causes is of the libertarian sort. Consider a standard passage in which Cavendish describes what on her view happens when, for example, a hand moves a bowl:

motion cannot be transferred without matter, as being both inseparably united, and but one thing; I cannot think it probable, that any of the animate or self-moving matter in the hand, quits the hand, and enters into the bowl; nor that the animate matter, which is in the bowl, leaves the bowl, and enters into the hand, because that self-moving substance is not readily prepared for so sudden a Translation or Transmigration. (Philosophical Letters, 445).

That is the reason, which denies that there can be a translation of motion out of the moving body into the moved; for questionless, the one would grow less, and the other bigger, that by loosing so much substance, this by receiving. (Ibid., 447).

According to Cavendish, and this does not seem to be an unreasonable view on the surface, any given motion is always the motion of a body, and consequently is inseparable from that body. Motion does not hop from one body to the next, and in cases where a second body acquires new motion from a first body, the second body also acquires some of that body’s substance. The second body acquires motion that is new to it, but only because it acquires the bit of substance from which that motion is inseparable.

If Cavendish is correct, bodies that appear to acquire motion from other bodies, but that do not grow bigger, do not in fact acquire any new motion, even if they move differently than they did before. They move by way of motions that they had all along, but that are now differently directed. Cavendish writes, for example, that:

though a particular motion doth not move in that same manner as it did before, nevertheless it is still there, and not onely there, but still moving; onely it is not moving after the same manner as it did move heretofore, but has changed from such a kind of motion to another kind of motion.... (Philosophical Letters, 436).

To return to her example, a bowl might head in a new direction as a result of the push of a hand, but the bowl does not thereby increase its mass, and so it does not receive any new motion. Instead, its existing motions are redirected. In some instances, the redirection of motion in a body is not especially welcome:

that creature which hath the advantage of strength, subtily, or policy, shape, or figure, and the like, may oppose and over-power another which is inferior to it, in all this; yet this hinderance and opposition doth not take away self-motion. (Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, 96).
But in other instances, the redirection of motion is welcome: for example, an officer escorts to the police station a criminal who has turned himself in, or a pair of dancers are the source of their own motion but seamlessly follow each other’s lead. Cavendish does subscribe to a version of an occasionalist view of causation, but it would appear to be neutral on the question of what kind of freedom bodies possess. In conjunction with other claims that Cavendish advances, however, the libertarian interpretation is difficult to uphold:

As for Chance, it is the visible Effects of some hidden Cause; ...for, the conjunction of sufficient Causes, doth produce such or such Effects; which Effects could not be produced, if any of those Causes were wanting.... (Ground of Natural Philosophy, 16).

Cavendish appears to hold that the existence of a given set of occasional causes guarantees the coming to be of their effect, even if bodies only redirect the motion of other bodies and never add to it. When the redirection of the motion of a body is welcome and is not resisted, its behavior is free.

A final worry for Boyle’s libertarian interpretation of Cavendish is that there does not appear to be room in her ontology for the new and spontaneous motions that are part and parcel of activity that is free in a libertarian sense. For Cavendish, what exists at any given moment is a configuration of bodies—indeed, a configuration that composes the plenum that is the entire universe—and there also exist the motions that are inseparable from those bodies. Any motion that is posited, ranging from the extremely active to the relatively inactive, is the actually-existing motion of an actually existing body. But in that case, it is not clear how any new motion could ever arise. No new matter can ever arise, and so the matter that exists at any moment is matter that has existed always (Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, 53, 55, and 431). Any new motion that comes into existence would have to be the motion of an existing body—a body from which that motion is inseparable—and so it would not be new motion after all. There are changes in the direction of motion, Cavendish allows, but it is hard to see how there could be any new spontaneous motion that would allow for libertarian freedom to give rise to real irregularities. Boyle does cite a passage in which Cavendish makes a distinction between behavior that is free and behavior that is necessitated: “Nature hath a natural Free-will and power of self-moving, and is not necessitated” (Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, 225, quoted in Boyle, 36). But a compatibilist philosopher like Hobbes would be happy to describe behavior as necessitated when it is not in line with or runs counter to our volitions. Boyle also cites numerous passages in which Cavendish speaks to the order that Nature seeks to bring about, for example: “Nature hath but One Law, which is a Wise Law, viz., to keep Infinite matter in order...” (Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, 146, quoted in Boyle, 17-18); “Nature being a wise and provident Lady, governs her parts very wisely, and methodically, and orderly” (Cavendish, Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, [London, 1666], 101, quoted in Boyle, 20). But these texts might also be read as stating that nature in fact exhibits order, and without any exceptions or irregularities. In addition, Boyle cites passages in which Cavendish refers to behavior that is proper to a creature, for example: “each part must have such proper and natural motions and actions as Nature has designed for it” (Ibid., 32, quoted in Boyle, 22) and “Every Creature, if regularly made, hath particular motions proper to its figure” (Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, 184, quoted in
Boyle, 90). Boyle argues that in these passages Cavendish is pointing to the existence of norms that Nature directs its creatures follow, norms that creatures would not be able to choose to obey (or disobey) if they did not have libertarian free will. However, there are similar texts in which Cavendish speaks of behavior that is proper to a creature, and she is simply referring to behavior that is requisite for a creature to be a normal and healthy version of its kind (Philosophical Letters, 184). For example, we might say that something is not a proper horse if it has all number of abnormalities, but we would not thereby be attributing libertarian freedom to the horse, at least not automatically. There is also the perennial worry that libertarian freedom, if it is a matter of volitions being uncaused, would not appear to give us any special control over our adherence to rules and norms, but would appear to make an agent into more of a loose cannon.

None of the above objections is meant to suggest that Boyle is mistaken in her interpretation of Cavendish on irregularity and libertarian freedom, but instead the concern is that a lot more argumentation is needed to ground that interpretation. Whether or not these objections are conclusive, however, there is also much in The Well-Ordered Universe that is extremely compelling and near unassailable.

In chapter three, Boyle engages a terrific discussion of Cavendish’s early atomism and of the reasons why Cavendish likely abandoned the view and moved in the direction of vitalist materialism instead. In the second half of chapter three, and also in chapter four, Boyle offers a very compelling discussion of Cavendish on the relationship between God and Nature. Famously, in a large number of passages Cavendish says that we can have no idea of God, as an idea is always a material image and no material image can represent God (for example, Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, 74). Cavendish appears to hold that our idea of God, and our idea of the existence of God, is only an idea of the existence of “Something above Nature, who is the author, and God of Nature” (Ibid., 75, quoted in Boyle, 107). There are numerous texts, however, in which Cavendish proceeds as though she (and we) do have an idea of God, and an idea that has enough content to allow us to derive conclusions about God’s nature and God’s creation. In some of these texts, Cavendish is just responding to or rebutting opponents who rest a lot of argumentative weight on the content of the idea of God, but there are plenty of passages in which Cavendish appears to present her own free-standing arguments that appeal to specific content in the idea of God. Boyle (104-11) offers a very helpful discussion in which she speculates on the view of mental representation that Cavendish might be reaching to develop in those texts.

Chapters five and six contain a very thorough and thoughtful discussion of Cavendish’s view on the contrast between irregularity and regularity as it applies to societies of creatures. (Note, I still disagree with Boyle about whether or not for Cavendish there are true irregularities, or whether she just uses the term “irregularity” to pick out processes that are unusual or that are destructive to an individual or species.) Boyle argues that, according to Cavendish, non-human creatures tend to work in unison via principles of sympathy and cooperation to create societies that promote the security and well-being of the individual no more or less than the security and well-being of the group (89-95). In human societies, however, things are different. A variable that is not present in non-human animals is a very strong desire for fame, a desire to live in the minds of others while we are living and well after we have died. This desire can take a form that is virtuous, but often it does not, and it can lead to consequences that are destructive to individual and society both (125-41). Here Boyle offers an illuminating account of the role that
Cavendish takes the desire for fame to play in human interactions. A question still remains, however, about whether or not the resultant disorder that it brings about is a true irregularity. A question also remains about whether or not the desire for fame has the impact that it does as a result of the exercise of libertarian freedom, or if the desire is just a variable that is absent in some contexts and not others.

Cavendish is indeed mindful of the many forces that can lead an organized body to deteriorate, in part from her own observations of the natural world and also in part from her experience as a witness to the English Civil War and the events that brought it on. Her politics were conservative on a number of fronts, but especially in terms of class hierarchy, social status, and gender (159-65). Cavendish definitely speaks out against behaviors that are threatening to order, but Boyle goes a bit further and argues that for Cavendish there is a tight connection between behavior that promotes order and behavior that is natural and normal. The idea appears to be this: if Nature seeks balance and order, then it is going to mold creatures in ways that increase the prospect for order; and conversely, any of our traits or dispositions that help to reinforce order must be traits that Nature has wisely selected for. Boyle argues in particular that Cavendish holds that there are virtues that Nature has fashioned women to cultivate and that are in line with the order and balance that It seeks more generally (168-74). Nature creates women so as to develop these virtues—even though women can use their libertarian freedom to live against the grain (170)—and men are created with natural capacities and proclivities as well. In support of her interpretation, Boyle cites a number of texts in which Cavendish speaks to the importance of women adhering to traditional feminine virtues, and she also cites the passage in the preface to Worlds Olio (A4r—A5r) where Cavendish speaks with extreme disparagement of the capacities of women (175-76). Boyle is right about the language in the Worlds Olio passage, but it is important to note that much of what Cavendish says in that passage is so over the top that it is hard to believe that she is not speaking in jest. After providing a very long list of respects in which women are wholly and immeasurably inferior, she concludes with the summation that

if it be as philosophers hold, that the Moon hath no strength nor Light but what it borrows from the Sun, so Women have no strength nor light of Understanding, but what is given them from Men; this is the Reason why we are not Mathematicians, Arithmeticians, Logicians, Geometricians, Cosmographers, and the like; This is the reason we are not Witty Poets, Eloquent Orators, Subtil Schoolmen, Subtracting Chimists, Rare Musicians, Curious Limners; This is the reason we are not Navigators, Architectures, Exact Surveyors, Inventive Artizans; This is the reason we are not Skilfull Soldiers, Politick Statists, Dispatchfull Secretaries, or Conquering Caesars; but our Governments would be weak, had we not Masculine spirits and Counsellors to advise us. (Cavendish, Worlds Olio, [London, 1655], A4r—A5r).

As such a performative individual and artist, it is difficult to believe that Cavendish is not here making light of the view that women are inherently inferior to men, especially given the other texts in which she gives a quite different explanation for why women are not mathematicians, etc. For example, in the letter “to the two universities”—the opening to Philosophical and Physical Opinions (published in 1655, the very same year as the above text from Worlds Olio)—Cavendish states with zero ambiguity that the reason for the
difference in achievement between women and men is that men have been bad actors: they have put into place structures that make it impossible for women to be received or taken seriously in intellectual, military, and governmental affairs, and so they are not. She writes:

I Here present the sum of my works, not that I think wise School-men, and industrious, laborious students should value my book for any worth, but to receive it without a scorn, for the encouragement of our sex, lest in time we should grow irrational as idiots, by the... despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate, thinking it impossible we should have either learning or understanding, wit or judgement, as if we had not rational souls as well as men, and we out of a custom of dejectednesse think so too, which makes us quit all industry towards profitable knowledge being employed onely in looe and pettie imployments, which takes away not onely our abilities towards arts, but higher capacities in speculations, so as we are become like worms that onely live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding our selves sometimes out, by the help of some refreshing rain of good educations which seldom is given us; for we are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not sufferd to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune, and the various humors, ordained and created by nature;... we are shut out of all power, and Authority by reason we are never imploired either in civil nor marshall affaires, our counsels are despised, and laught at, the best of our actions are troden down with scorn, by the over-weaning conceit men have of themselves and through a despisement of us. (Cavendish, Philosophical and Physical Opinions, [London, 1655], n.p.).

She expresses a similar sentiment in Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, “To the Reader.” She says:

As for Learning, that I am not versed in it, no body, I hope, will blame me for that, since it is sufficiently known, that our Sex is not bread up to it, as being not suffer’d to be instructed in Schools and Universities; I will not say, but many of our Sex may have as much wit, and be capable of Learning as well as Men; but since they want Instructions, it is not possible they should attain to it; for Learning it Artificial, but Wit is Natural. (Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, n.p.).

Cavendish says in another text ("To All Writing Ladies," in Poems and Fancies, [London, 1653]) that “there will be many Heroick Women in some Ages,” including rulers, military leaders, poets, and lecturers of philosophy, even if there are facts on the ground that keep their tenure from lasting too long (unnumbered). She is no doubt asking us to consider the hypothesis that the skills and abilities of women and men are due in large part to the receptivity of the plenum of bodies that surround us. Cavendish follows up on the hypothesis in her fiction: she creates alternative worlds in which women are able to be military generals, scientists, philosophers, etc., in large part because the social-political climate in those worlds is not the prohibitive climate of seventeenth-century earth. Boyle concedes that women succeed at achieving impressive things in the worlds that Cavendish constructs, but she argues that because things sometimes fall apart in those worlds and the women inhabitants do not achieve utopia, Cavendish is not using the worlds to exhibit that women are inherently as capable as men (172-74). A response to Boyle however is
that the reason that things fall apart in the worlds in question is that, once again, men are bad actors: for example, the men play loud trumpets to interfere with the women’s education in Female Academy, and in Bell in Campo, an army of fierce women soldiers rescues the army of men from certain death in battle, and in return the men reward the women with full control over all affairs of the home. Women indeed do not achieve utopia in Cavendish’s stories or plays, but that is not a sign that Cavendish takes women to be inherently inferior, as the men of real-world earth do not achieve perfection either. Boyle is right that Cavendish does not encourage an overthrow of social structures or gender roles, but that is presumably because of the social instability that would ensue, and because (at the time) the undertaking would so likely be futile. But Cavendish does speak of future generations that are differently responsive to women and men, and in which her own efforts as an intellectual might be recognized (for example in the second paragraph of “To The Reader,” in Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, n.p.). If so, she does not suppose that women are inherently inferior to men, but just that sudden and revolutionary behavior is not the right vehicle for realizing models of reality that are more desirable.