

Margaret Cavendish Philosophising on Reason and Emotion 'Goeth not so much by Rule, & Method, as by Choice'*

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I want to talk with you about the position of Margaret Cavendish on reason and emotion in practical philosophy. In her seventeenth century public voice she disagrees with the extreme rationalism of Descartes. Presciently, her voice seems to foreshadow a voice like that of Robert Solomon¹ who says that the passions give meaning to life, provide the ground for the drama of reason and emotion in reflection, and are the evaluations or judgments we have about our living.

Background

First, I want to provide a reminiscence of Margaret Cavendish who lived from 1623-1673. From childhood, Margaret Cavendish had been writing about her own thinking and experience. This preoccupation continued when she was a maid in Queen Henrietta Maria's court in Oxford and later in the exiled court in France. She married William Cavendish, marquess of Newcastle, who was a widow and thirty years her senior. As Royalists the couple stayed in exile until the Restoration in 1660. Both William Cavendish and his brother Charles were leading figures in intellectual circles and entertained well-known figures like Hobbes, Descartes, and Gassendi. The more Margaret Cavendish was exposed to ideas and to the thinking of the people in her husband's circle, the more her writing represented her ongoing response to science, philosophy of nature, politics, and moral philosophy. With the support of her husband and her brother-in-law, she wrote in her own name and published twenty-three volumes.

I met Cavendish in the library through editors and biographers. My first introduction was through Margaret Atherton. Atherton is the editor of a volume of writings from early modern women philosophers and includes a selection of letters² Cavendish had written to an imaginary correspondent. The letters are brief essays on topics like motion, place, substance, gender roles, and kinds of afterlife. I then borrowed a reproduction of one of Cavendish's first published volumes, *Poems and Fancies 1653*. The topics of the poems include science, passions, the structure and nature of man, and fame, honour and

reputation. In addition she published a utopian fantasy,³ essays on philosophy and nature, and many plays.⁴ The plays were not intended to be performed; they simply dramatised Cavendish's thought issues. In *Lady Contemplation*,⁵ the main character struggles with the pain of giving up the life of theory to participate in society by considering vignettes of what it would be like to live in society as John Argument, Virtue, Conversation, Experienced Traveller, Nurse Careful or Title (and many others). Douglas Grant, in 1957, published a biography⁶ of Cavendish and described her as an English writer underestimated in literary history due to her fantastical reputation. His admiring biography is repeatedly cited by more recent biographers for its thoroughness and its portrayal of Margaret Cavendish visiting the Royal Society where Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke did experiments for her. Two recent biographies represent Cavendish in more feminist terms, one more political⁷ and one more an intellectual biography.⁸

Apologia

As Douglas Grant says in his preface, it is very hard to state a position of Cavendish's and not make extensive citations from Cavendish. She wrote so fully about her ideas and with such a distinct rhythm that the point is often most made by her turns and contrasts. So, for example, she herself describes the dilemma when I, this writer, address the topic of reason and emotion in practical philosophy. How does one write a linear description without killing the dialectic? How do I keep the subject quick? She says 'thought' as reason alone makes the line ('still to life') while emotions and imagination make the 'colours' and the 'shadows' in the thought. This kind of juxtaposition is consistent with Solomon's view 'that reason and passion together are the means of 'constituting', not merely understanding, the world.'⁹ The problem of the literal line and the topical line converge. So I will try to be prudent in my citations but as Solomon says 'the business of philosophy is not to transcend the human, but to illuminate it.'¹⁰ As practical

3 Lilley, Kate (Ed.) *Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle: The Description of a New World Called the Blazing World*. New York University Press: Washington Square, New York, 1992.

4 See also *Paper Bodies*, op.cit.

5 Cavendish, Margaret, 'Lady Contemplation', *Playes*, London: 1662. (Microfilm)

6 Grant, Douglas, *Margaret the First*. Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1957.

7 Jones, Kathleen, *A Glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673*. Bloomsbury: London, 1988.

8 Battigelli, Anna, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*. The University of Kentucky Press: Lexington, 1998.

9 Solomon, op.cit, p. 8.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

* 'To All Noble, and Worthy Ladies,' in Cavendish, Margaret, *Poems and Fancies 1653*, Scolar Press: Yorkshire, England, 1972, A3. This is one of several prefatory letters to this volume. All ensuing citations from this collection will be cited in the body of the essay as PF and page number.

1 Solomon, Robert C., *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*. Hackett: Indianapolis, 1993. I am indebted to Marjan Simenc, a practical philosopher, for introducing me to Solomon.

2 See Atherton, Margaret (Ed.), *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*. (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1994) and Bowerbank, Sylvia and Mendelson, Sara (Eds.), *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*. (Broadview Literary Texts: Orchard Park, N.Y., 2000)

philosophers we need to see how she does it, not just know what she says. That said, in the rest of this essay I will describe Margaret Cavendish's view of reason and emotion as the components of human psychological nature; her representation of the influence of emotions; and her demonstration of reflective counselling. The impetus for her discourse is the contrast with Descartes.

Drama is more practical than abstraction

Cavendish disdains domination of the passions as an end. She espouses a model which integrates the material of human function. She elevates the process of thinking to reasoning with logic and emotions to achieve alternative self-understandings or reactions. So while Descartes¹¹ says 'that there is no soul so weak that it cannot, when well-guided, acquire an absolute power over its passions', Cavendish takes the position that interpretation of human conduct requires the person and the practical philosopher to stay with experience, in the reality of what is going on, including emotions. She does not give answers to ways to live but rather demonstrates how she makes the questions and how she volleys the inquiry. Her position may be characterised as a dynamic systems approach rather than a systematic theory of propositions and proofs. It ends up that though she is self-effacing when she says she 'goeth not so much by rule, & method, as by Choice', her philosophising does demonstrate how decision is continuous with the theatrical movement of reason and passion in life.

Cavendish's introductory comments and poems to her theatre of the countervailing strains of practical human questions suggest how the pat moral philosophies miss the need for humility in the face of imperfect knowledge and the reality of change, desire, and motion in the life of men. For example, before she actually addresses the rectitude of the finished moral philosopher, she describes how she thinks applying mathematical approaches to the emotions would look. One poem, 'The Trasection', humorously describes the logician or geometer ordering the mental life of the man of action seeking virtue. The lines of Prudence, Experience, and Judgment are drawn in conjunction with lines of Temperance, Industry, and Tranquillity so 'then all these lines measur'd with the Rule of Reason, and you'l finde it equall to the line of Wisedome; joyne these lines together, Truth makes the Angle.' (PF, 50) Cavendish then sums up with her 'To Morall Philosophers' in which she writes: 'Morall Philosophy is a severe Schoole...as Arithmetick can multiply Numbers above all use, so Passions may be divided beyond all practice...' (PF, 51)

Together with the long poem *Animal Parliament*, Margaret Cavendish sets the stage for her own alternative understanding of the place of reason and emotions in the mental life and the practices of daily life. She rejects the abstraction of the rationalist position on reason and emotions because to use Solomon's imagery it 'leap(s) from life to a view of life'¹² and becomes absurd. Cavendish dramatises the absurdity in 'The Animal Parliament' when 'the Soul called a Parliament in his Animal Kingdom...(where he sat) in a Kernel of the

Braine' (PF, 201) and treats the passions like impulses to be quelled by muscular power.

In her own practical philosophy, Cavendish makes the mental drama, the interactive narratives of everyday life, the *modus operandi* for containing issues and playing them out. Here reasoning is the reflective process; logic is objectivity; and the passions are the inflection and attitude. Thought is like reflective conversations that make man to himself different from beast. This method sets the stage for her inquiry with regard to reason and emotions since she does not think they are mutually exclusive. Her theatrical dialectic sustains her foundation assumption of motion and it holds the voices of the components of mental life and its extension, behaviour. Her place in the rationalist tradition is marked by the vitality of a 'Selfe' reasoning in contrast to the compression of self to fit reason (as logic) alone. The dramatic forms enable the revelation of what the rationalism of her contemporaries understates and points to a practical philosophy that 'rings true' for what reflection shows us about passions.

Cavendish undermines dichotomies by maintaining the dialectic drama of alternatives. The stream of thought, or the written piece, is the third member even in her poems titled 'between' discourses. Choosing takes the form of value choices, not choice between reason and emotion. The reflective dramas are thought experiments in which the players are logical reason, curiosity, emotions, desire, and the senses. She brings these figures into address with the world of nature and society to realise the dilemmas. The dramatic voices, even in the Cavendish letters, remind this particular reader of how it is to counsel with someone, including myself, about a decision or the meaning in her life. The reasoning is drawn in the written part, actualised in reading or reflection. The passions, the emotions, or the moods (using Solomon's array) give the meaning or evaluations and so show choices.

The mind is dynamic and passionate

Cavendish specifically describes the life of the mind to have thoughts with shifting salience for logic, passions, desire and sense data. She identifies flux as the basic characteristic of thought, and motion and change as universal in human life and nature. Mental life is driven at different times legitimately by different components of the mind system.

Her claim that 'Desire, and curiosity make a Man to be above other creatures: for by defining Knowledge, Man is as much above a Beast, as want of perfect Knowledge makes him less than God...' (PF, 52) seems to be a simple request for humility. In fact, this sentence begins the dialectic of emotion or evaluation and reason as the distinguishing feature of man. The mind of man is always in process, never at closure in knowing or deciding. At the most concrete level, this reality challenges the body's yen for homeostasis. The following citation reminds me of the complaints of my back when I just must type another page or my heart when I anticipate greeting a favourite friend or my tired eyes and brain when I just have to understand one more line, one more way of looking at this.

'What Bodies else but Mans, did Nature make,/To joyne

¹¹ Descartes, René, *The Passions of the Soul* (Trans. Stephen H. Voss). Hackett: Indianapolis, 1989, p. 47.

¹² Solomon, *op. cit.* 36.

with such a Mind, no rest can take;/ .../ As Minds dejected fall, or swell with pride:/In waves of Passion roule to billowes high,/Alwaies in Motion, never quiet lye./ Where Thoughts like Fishes swim the Mind about...’ (PF, 60)

Moreover, the mind of man is never free of reason’s drive vitalised by emotions. The pursuit of knowledge may seem like a methodical logical task but it is not free of emotion. How nice it would be, our client might say, if she could be confident and not get stage fright as she aspires for credentials. How strange it is to never have the complete understanding of such a simple verb like ‘to be’.

‘Reason doth stretch Mans mind upon the Rack,/With Hopes, with Joyes, pull’d up, with Feare pull’d back./ Desire whips him forward, makes him run,/Despaire doth wound, and pulls him back agen./For Nature, thou mad’st Man betweixt Extreames,/Wants perfect Knowledge, yet therof he dreames.’ (PF, 59)

This dynamic does not stand still for the geometry of the good life. Reason begins as the gerund, reasoning, and ends as noun only when removed from the context of mental life.

‘A Braine that’s washed with Reasons cleare,/From grosse Opinions, Dullness lying there;/ And judgment hard, and sound is grated in,/Whereto is squeezed Wit, and Fancies thin...Then poure it forth into a Dish of Touch,/The Meat is good, although it is not much.’ (PF, 131)

Ultimately understanding is made more distinct, not less useful, by the emotions. Cavendish maintains her concern that reason by itself loses the gestalt of the thinking life. This is like Solomon’s point that ‘objective reason’ is often ‘profoundly inept at dealing with life...(because) it leaves behind all questions of value and meaning.’¹³

Emotions are like the rudder for reason.

Cavendish makes the case often for showing that it is inappropriate to romanticise man as the zenith of nature because of his intellect. Rather she shows that emotion is the directional drive of reason and partners reason for progressive development or for destructive ploys.

When contrasting man with other animals, she points out that being the top of the heap means that man may incorporate inclinations of animals below: ‘Man is a Creature like himselfe alone,/ In him all qualities do joyne as one.’

As a result, it is possible for man’s passionate pursuit of intellectual supremacy to make him vulnerable to the bestial use of knowledge. For example, man may ‘(w)ith greedy Covetousness, like to Wolves, and Beares,/ Devour(s)Right, and Truth in peeces teare(s).’ (PF, 98)

Alternatively and more genially, in the same poem/essay Cavendish implicates emotion as temperament to demonstrate how the emotions enable man to emulate what seems desirable in nature. ‘To every Creature man resemble much./Some, like a soaring Eagle, mount up

high:/ Wings of Ambition beare them to the skie...Others, as chearfull Larkes, sing as they flye.’ (PF, 101)

Yet, when finally man is distinguished from beast, the proper or species-specific actions of man in contrast to beasts are ones that do include emotion, the use for good and for naught. ‘Thus Men, Birds, Beasts, in Humours much agree, /.../Tis proper for a lively Horse to neigh/ .../For men to frowne, to weep, to laugh, to Speake/.../ Onely for men to promise, Swear, and flatter...’ (PF, 102)

Because man has intellect, can speak, and because he has reason and desire, he in the best of worlds can use understanding for practical good. His dynamic mind system can imagine his world inside and out. He can grow himself with his malleable material. In the following citation Cavendish transforms the domination of the mathematical moral philosopher into a masterful perspective of the practical philosopher who knows her raw material and works with it on behalf of what is feasible for her.

‘And from Mens braines such fine Inventions flow,/As in his Head all other heads do grow. (...Man can destroy and build...) This makes Man seem of all the World a King./Because hee power hath of everything./He’l teach Birds words, in measure best to go,/Make Passions in the Mind, to ebb, and flow./And though he cannot flye as Birds, with wings,/Yet he can take the height, and breadth of things.’ (PF, 102)

The emotions determine how man is civilised

Once it is established that emotions live in the mind as states that colour the desire and curiosity associated with reason, Cavendish describes how emotion can enhance and emotion can undermine the thrust of reasoning in a person’s intersubjective reality. For example, the person who is in, or acts like he is in, slavery will lose some of the rhythm of reason and will not have the positive emotional valence of the ‘heroic vision’: ‘Those that in Slavery live, so dull will grow,/ Dejected Spirits make the Body slow./ Others as Swine lye groveling in the Mire,/ Have no Heroick Thoughts to rise up higher...’ (PF, 99)

On the other hand, the magnificence of the thinking life becomes a practical resource for the good society when combined with emotion. For the inner life of the socialised person, emotion gives her energy and nobility to overcome the pain of life.

‘What Beast can plead, to save another’s Life,/Or by his Eloquence can end Strife?/.../What Creature like to Man can Reasons show,/Which makes him know, that he thereby doth know?/And who, but Man, makes use of every thing,/As Goodness out of Poyson Hee can bring?/ Thus Man is filled a with Strong Desire,/And by his Rhet’rick sets the Soule on Fire.’ (PF, 103)

In a more complex way, Cavendish shows how a person can use reason to both manage her passions and still use the emotional states to establish the satisfying conditions for an interpersonal life. Sometimes this may be like a role-playing but it can serve to temper the issue raised by

¹³ *Ibid*, 63-64.

reason. Cavendish here shows that familiarity with emotional states and their impact is a talent of the thinking person.

'What Creature else, but man, can Speak true sense?/At distance give, and take Intelligence?/What Creature else, by Reason can abate/All Passions, raise doubts, hopes, Love, and Hate?/And can so many Countenances shew?/They are the ground by which Affections grow./They're severall Dresses, which the Mind puts on./Some serve as Veiles, which over it is throwne...' (PF, 93)

The 'Soule on fire' in the person who can speak sense is pivotal for the society that preserves human dignity. Cavendish quietly points out in the voice of the 'Mind' to the 'Body' bothered by the experience of passions that emotions create the dynamics for a safe and procreative society:

'Care keeps you from all hurt, or falling low,/Sorrow, and Griefe are Debts to Friends we owe./Feare makes man just, to give each one his owne,/Shame makes Civility, without there's none./Hate makes good Lawes, that all may live in Peace,/Love brings Society, and gets Increase.' (PF, 61)

Cavendish does recognise that by keeping reason and emotions in the material of the practical philosopher, the experience of acting is more difficult. The combination of reason as process with the valuing by emotion becomes desire, which wants to be sated. Yet, 'there is no humour, or Passion so troublesome as Desire, because it yields no sound satisfaction;... Yet Desire, and curiosity make a Man to be above other Creatures; for by desiring Knowledge, Man is as much above a Beast, as want of perfect knowledge makes him less than god;...' (PF, 51-52)

The emotions counsel reflection

Near the beginning of the section on moral philosophy in *Poems and Fancies 1653*, Cavendish demonstrates her method of dealing with states of being or emotions (values) by pitting the states in 'dialogues between'. Some pairs are melancholy/mirth; joy/discretion; wit/beauty; love/hate; learning/ignorance and riches/poverty. Although she does build the dramas on behalf of what are likely to be her bents, she makes arguments that implicate the way of life associated with each state. They are comparable to active imagination ('fancies') on behalf of the conduct of life. Thus, the dialogues provide models of how one might process with reason or curiosity the possible issues associated with each emotional state. Solomon also notes the drama associated with the interconnections of the emotions. He takes the position that the emotions are rational and that reflection tracks the rationality.¹⁴ His prose sentences are the labels for the dramatic dialogues of Cavendish.

The writing and the reading of the poems are the analogues for reasoning. That is, if reasoning is the posture of distance that permits one to examine and reflect, then the dramas are representative of the dialectics of reasoning. They mimic the interior wonderings. Sometimes the cases are built as hypothetical deductive

scenarios and sometimes they are inquiries into meanings or feasibility. All of the scripts present issues that the practical philosopher may meet in consultations with organisations, children and peers. Cavendish validates the importance of the struggle with these 'little' everyday choices. I will give sets of excerpts from the dialogues to show the method.

✂ 'A Dialogue between Melancholy, and Mirth': This dialogue inquires into what pleasure is; the place of 'enduring' as a value and the various ways of characterising melancholy. Interestingly Cavendish suggests that the tolerance for emotions, *per se*, may be a criterion for choosing a mood state.

Mirth says of Melancholy: 'Her Eares are stopt with thoughts,.../.../But in her Mind, luxuriously shee lives,/Imagination severall pleasures gives./Then leave her to her selfe, alone to dwell,/Let you and I in Mirth and pleasure swell:/.../Until our Braines on Vaporious Waves do roule...' (PF, 78)

Melancholy says of herself: 'True, I am dull, yet by me you shall know/More of your selfe, so wiser you shall grow./I search the depth, and bottome of Man-kind/...I walk with Reasons Staff to find Truth out,/.../Nor yet with unresolving doubts do reele./I shake not with the Terrours of vaine feares,/.../(Mirth) can no affections hold./... Though at first shee makes a pretty shew./...her house is built upon the golden sandes;/Yet no Foundation hath, whereon it stands.' (PF, 79) Melancholy continues, 'And though my Face b'ill favoured at first sight,/After Acquaintance it shall give delight./For I am like a shade, who sits in me,/.../I keep off blustering Stormes, from doing hurt..' (PF, 80)

As counsellors and as social beings, we hear this dilemma in our children and our own social life. Shall I be popular, fun, and without anxiety or shall I listen to hard questions? Shall I screen out conflict and wear a happy face so that I will not be confused? What will I be if I am by myself?

✂ In 'A Dialogue betwixt Joy, and Discretion', Cavendish directly questions the feasibility of emotional suppression. In addition she seems to ask what the function and merit of discretion is.

Discretion says to Joy: 'Your Thoughts in multitudes the Braine do throng,/ That Reason is cast downe, and trod upon.' (PF, 80)

Joy says to Discretion: 'Great dangers, feares, alas, you do not know./But feare being past,/.../Spirits find Liberty, strait run about:/...they suddenly burst out.../ But deare Discretion with me do not scold,/Whilst you do feele great feares, your tongue pray hold./For Joy cannot containe it selfe in rest:/ It never leaves till some way is exprest.' (PF, 80-81)

This dialogue reminds me that 'living with abandon' may lead me to be spontaneously honest. Am I willing to risk it? Then I see that people who have met death often lose fear. How about my fearfulness? Am I comfortable with

¹⁴ *Ibid.* for example, 126, 143, and 188.

intense emotions rather than steady objectivity? Is there a loss when the rule of logic is less prominent?

✂ In 'A Dialogue betwixt Wit, and Beauty' Cavendish again raises the issue of the last and value of a phenomenon to others.

Beauty says 'When I appeare, I strike the Optick Nerve/ I wound the heart, I make the Passions serve./My Company is Heaven, my absence Hell.' (PF, 81)

Wit's rebuttal supports the generative value of dynamic thought in contrast to the constancy of the beautiful thing. 'The Eye would weary grow.../Had it not Wit, the Mind still to delight,/.../For Wit is fresh, and new, doth sport, and play,/.../Withall the passions Wit can well agree; Wit tempers them, and makes them pleas'd to bee./Wit's ingenious, doth new Inventions find,/To ease the Body, recreate the Mind.' (PF, 81)

How is my self-esteem, my dignity, best served? What passion drives my strategy and my choice of object? Who is to be pleased by the way I live?

Cavendish illuminates and quickens practical philosophy, I say

Cavendish takes the position that the life of the mind is active and includes both flux and multiplicity. She shows how she thinks the emotions direct the resources of thought, including reasoning and knowledge. Her writing demonstrates how the philosopher in practice can imagine practical implications of various reactions and how to calibrate the impact for self and others. Her approach is experimental and not prescriptive beyond the thought exercise itself. She uses abstract theories to prod her thinking but does not accept them just because they are symmetrical or delineated like a proof. In fact for her, a theory that requires a static interpretation of how to act is inconsistent with her view that life is always changing and individuals are different in situations and in temperaments. So though she and Solomon seem to mirror the meaning-in-life aspect of passions and reflection, Cavendish is unlikely to have been attracted to Solomon's catalogue of emotions and his matrix for describing them. She might wonder if, in spite of himself, he had joined Descartes in the theatre of objective rationality outside of lived experience.

Cavendish identifies emotions as facts of life, as sources of meaning, as impetuses for civilisation, and as protection of life from desiccation by objective reason. She takes reasoning as the purveyor of the process of reflection; as the monitor of action; and as the guide to widening understanding. When describing reason cleared of all the human jostling and intellectual imperfections, she says, 'The Meat is good, although it is not much.' (PF, 131) However, when the practical philosopher recognises the intermingling of emotion and reason, she discovers her curiosity and her desire as values. Judgement emerges as the philosopher talks with the emotions about the ends they achieve; reasoning provides the distance that allows the person to evaluate and choose her way. The minds of men and women remain dynamic changing systems dancing with the continuous need for decision and action to maintain

natural and social life. Margaret Cavendish shows how the reflecting mind can figure her way through the emotional tensions by using inquiry and questions, the stuff of reasoning. Choice emerges from the process rather than from some linear rules of thought or methods for conduct.

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