

ESEMP: Why and How Do We Study Early Modern Philosophy Today?

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*Material Objects and Properties in Margaret Cavendish's Ontology:
Individuation and Mereology*

Given that Cavendish holds that everything that exists in the world is material, properties of objects, if they exist, must also be material. In her view, material objects are, in fact, colored, which makes colors mind-independent properties present in the world. Thus, objects bear these properties independently of our experiencing them. This position presents Cavendish with the challenge of accounting for colors in a way that aligns with her materialist metaphysics.

In the context of the 17th century metaphysics, this is both a difficult and a daring task. The reason for this is that, in this period, the mechanist view of color was dominant and held by the majority of Cavendish's contemporaries. Since mechanists think of colors as mind-dependent properties, no room is left for them in the corporeal world. Thus, if Cavendish intends to maintain that colors are part of the world, she must explain how exactly they are present in objects.

How do colors, then, relate to their bearers? This is a question that Alison Peterman poses in her recent paper, where she discusses whether we should interpret Cavendish as endorsing the view of properties as real accidents, that is, properties of objects that are themselves entities capable of existing independently and separately from their bearers. Peterman argues against this interpretation and concludes that colors are best understood not as full-fledged matter, but as matter identical to the matter of the objects that bear them.

While I agree with Peterman's conclusion that Cavendish does not take colors to be real accidents, in this presentation I aim to emphasize the role that Cavendish's explanation of how material objects individuate plays in understanding her stance on the relation between objects and properties. I argue that this aspect of her metaphysics provides motivation for interpreting Cavendish as thinking that colors, although not separable from objects in a literal sense, should nonetheless be regarded as real, individuated and distinct matter, as well as constitutive parts of objects. The reason

for this is that Cavendish considers the ways in which parts of matter arrange into particular figures or configurations to be the sole principle of individuation for material entities—their figures make them distinct from all other parts of matter. Thus, the upshot of this interpretation is that it offers a different perspective on what, in a general sense, should be regarded as a real entity in Cavendish's ontology.

I give two arguments in favor of my interpretation. In the first, I argue that Cavendish's account of changes in an object's color reveals her understanding of colors as individuated configurations of matter, capable of change without necessarily causing any change in the object's other properties. In the second argument, I reflect on Cavendish's theory of perception and the distinction between divided and composed perceptions. Cavendish explains that a perception of an object as one entity composed of many parts is a result of many distinct perceptions uniting into one composed perception of an object. I argue that she understands the relation between properties and an object analogously, that is, as a mereological relation between parts and a whole. In both arguments, I highlight the role of the relation of composition.

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