

Margaret Cavendish on Perception and Causation

Keywords: Margaret Cavendish – Causation – Materialism

Margaret Cavendish proposes an occasionalist theory of causation that is distinct from both the occasionalism and the mechanistic theories of her contemporaries. She claims that one object cannot transfer motion to another, at least not without also transferring matter, because motion is inseparable from matter. When one billiard ball strikes a second billiard ball, the latter, too, begins making its way across the table – Cavendish has to provide us with an explanation for this phenomenon without claiming that the first ball transfers motion to the second. She does so by arguing that the second billiard ball *perceives* the motion of the first and then moves itself in the appropriate way. The first ball thus acts not as an efficient but as an occasional cause. (Inter-object efficient causation can only occur in conjunction with a transfer of matter, which may happen at times but is not the norm.)

Cavendish's theory demands a lot of merely physical objects such as billiard balls: they ostensibly need to have at least some perceptive abilities and they need to be capable of moving themselves in a very specific way as a reaction to what they perceive. The question this paper seeks to answer is whether they could choose to remain stationery or move in a completely unexpected way, or whether they are forced to react to specific occasions in specific ways. In other words, can such objects freely decide to move in a certain way after being presented with a certain occasional cause?

Some commentators read Cavendish as a *libertarian* (see Detlefsen 2007 and Boyle 2018), while others argue for a *compatibilist* reading (see Cunning 2019). According to proponents of libertarian readings, objects can, in principle, *decide* whether and in what way they move or change in response to an occasional cause. Proponents of compatibilist readings deny this – according to them, Cavendish is best understood as claiming that objects are bound to move in the expected way when they are presented with an occasional cause. Neither of the standard versions of such readings, I will argue, can satisfably account for the claims that Cavendish makes.

Standard libertarian readings are too simplistic to capture all of the relevant nuances, which makes them vulnerable to criticism. They fail, for example, to explain what Cavendish means when she writes about objects being ‘overpowered’ by occasional causes. Compatibilist readings *can* account for these passages, but they have difficulty explaining why Cavendish is so adamant that all parts of nature are able to perceive the world around them.

One attempt to strengthen compatibilist readings is Chamberlain’s (2024). He argues that for Cavendish, occasions are nothing but enabling conditions – they are necessary for the self-motion of an object to occur, but they do not cause that motion. While this approach can accommodate more of Cavendish’s claims, I will argue that it still doesn’t do due justice to her theory. This is because it attempts to explain away some of the quirks of her position. I aim to take seriously her claims that all material objects are perceptive, and can, at least sometimes, decide if and how to move or change. Taking her seriously, I will argue, leads to accepting a modified libertarian reading. The reading that I defend can account for the passages of Cavendish’s work which standard libertarian readings cannot explain, such as descriptions of occasional causes being overpowering.

My argument is in part methodological. While some readings of Cavendish aim to make her theory as palatable as possible to a present-day audience, this is not my (primary) goal. I hold that in the case of compatibilist readings of Cavendish’s theory of causation, palatability comes at the cost of inaccuracy. These readings go beyond what charity requires and instead misrepresent her theory. I argue that, when engaging with authors whose claims are unconventional – by our standards or by the standards of their time – it is important to strike a balance between finding a plausible reading and staying true to the text.