Hypatia (2024), **39**, e31, 1–6
doi:10.1017/hyp.2024.55

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BOOK REVIEW

The Metaphysics of Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway: Monism, Vitalism, and Self-Motion

Marcy P. Lascano. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023 (ISBN: 978-0-19-765163-6)

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(Received 12 February 2024; accepted 27 February 2024)

The landscape of historical research on early modern philosophy has changed dramatically since the publication of Eileen O'Neill's landmark essay, "Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History" (O'Neill 1997). In the past thirty years, increasing quantities of scholarly attention have shifted toward retrieving and reassessing the contributions of marginalized voices throughout the history of philosophy. Few interventions are as impactful within this growing field as Marcy Lascano's recent monograph comparing the metaphysical systems of Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) and Anne Conway (1631–1679). Lascano identifies three core metaphysical themes that are shared between both figures: monism, vitalism, and self-motion. In addition to these core themes, she presents a few more points of comparison—such as their shared dissatisfactions with mechanical philosophy—as well as some points of disconnect—such as the differing roles of God and teleology in their frameworks. Readers will find a clear overview of both authors' metaphysical frameworks presented within a helpful model for comparative interpretation in ameliorative historical research.

To begin, I would like to explain some of the signal contributions this monograph makes to historical research on early modern philosophy. Lascano is among the first to develop a sustained comparison between the metaphysical views of two early modern women philosophers. Most comparative interpretations involving women philosophers draw connections to canonical figures, which is important for situating them among their contemporaries and drawing attention to blind spots in existing historical narratives. Lascano reshapes the expectations of comparative historical interpretation by exploring women philosophers on both sides of the comparison. Moreover, the perspective afforded by her comparative interpretation sheds new light on the metaphysical commitments of both authors. Their respective commitments to monism provide a helpful illustration. While recent research investigates the varieties of monism expressed in Conway's writings, this topic remains relatively underdeveloped in the Cavendish literature.[1] By investigating their views together, Lascano develops a more detailed account of Cavendish's commitment to monism. She also makes it possible to ask further questions about how specific varieties of monism might manifest differently within

their frameworks. Lascano's comparative interpretation thus provides a promising model for historical research investigating the contributions of women philosophers.

I would also like to underscore two principles orienting Lascano's interpretation of Cavendish and Conway. First, Lascano describes her interpretive methodology as a form of historically sensitive reconstruction (xix).[2] Her interpretation is historically sensitive insofar as she draws upon a broad array of historical research to contextualize the views of both thinkers, and it is reconstructive insofar as she sometimes fills gaps in terminology and argumentation to understand their views systematically. Lascano emphasizes the limitations of purely contextual historical interpretation. She writes, "Both Cavendish's and Conway's views were certainly influenced by the well-known difficulties associated with dualism, such as issues about mind-body interaction. But their systems do more than attempt to solve problems in Cartesian metaphysics." (xvi) While it is important to understand how Cavendish and Conway were responsive to their contemporaries, the value of their writings is irreducible to these relationships. By employing historically sensitive reconstruction, Lascano successfully balances contextual interpretation with analytical detail. Second, while Lascano's central aim is comparative, she also frequently identifies distinctions between the metaphysical systems of Cavendish and Conway. Her goal is to underscore the fact that despite similarities both authors develop unique depictions of the world (xvi). As we will see, this goal is reinforced by the structure of each chapter as she interprets each author independently in their respective sections.

Let us now turn to the chapter outline. Chapter 1 titled "Matter and Spirit" discusses Cavendish's and Conway's most basic ontological commitments. In the Cavendish section, Lascano begins by describing Cavendish's commitment to materialism. Everything in nature is matter in motion, and every part of nature is composed of a complete blending of inanimate, sensitive, and rational matter (11). As a result of this complete blending, Cavendish holds that matter is inherently alive, sensitive, and knowing (16–7). The section concludes by outlining some debates in the secondary literature concerning the role of normativity and disorder in her metaphysics (18–9).[3] In the Conway section, Lascano starts by describing Conway's understanding of God, through which we come to understand the created world. Spirit, life, and love are among the most important attributes of God, and they are present throughout nature because of his emanation (21–2). Conway holds that God alone is pure spirit, whereas matter is spirit that is denser and more impenetrable (24-5). Importantly, this means that matter and spirit are not diametrically opposed but are merely distinguishable by degree. The section concludes by noting Conway's commitment to the infinite divisibility of matter and spirit, which suggests that the appearance of the term 'monad' in her writings should not be taken as evidence of spiritual atomism.[4]

Chapter 2 titled "Wholes and Parts" explains how Cavendish and Conway conceptualize the relationship between the unity of the world and the multiplicity of individuals. The main contention is that both philosophers are committed to varieties of substance and priority monism. Substance monism holds that there is one kind of substance in the world, whereas priority monism holds that the world is a causally-integrated whole composed of parts that ontologically depend upon that whole (32). In the Cavendish section, Lascano first argues that substance monism follows from Cavendish's materialism (34–5). This is taken to hold despite Cavendish's view that certain immaterial entities (such as God) exist outside of nature, which Lascano labels her property dualism (34). She then argues that priority monism follows from Cavendish's view that parts of nature exhibit self-motion as particular expressions

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.55 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of nature's self-motion (33). The section concludes by arguing that Cavendish is committed to biological holism, which understands the natural world to be causally-integrated like a living organism (37). In the Conway section, Lascano argues that substance monism follows from Conway's commitment that everything is spirit (42). This is taken to hold even though she identifies three distinct species of substance: God, middle nature (Christ), and creation (41). Lascano concludes the section by arguing that priority monism follows from Conway's view that all creatures are members of one body united by universal sympathy (43).

Chapter 3 titled "Life and Self-Motion" discusses how Cavendish and Conway understand parts of nature to be alive and self-moving in non-mechanical ways. In the Cavendish section, Lascano first explains Cavendish's identification of matter and motion. Cavendish rejects the view that motion is a mode or property that can be transferred between bodies (47–8). Changes in motion are instead brought about by each thing's own power of self-motion (49–50). She concludes the section by reviewing the relationship between motions and natural kinds, the limits of self-motion, and the possibility of irregular motions (55–60). In the Conway section, Lascano first specifies that God causes the *power of* motion in creatures (63). Motion cannot be directly caused by God without taking mutability to be one of his communicable attributes. She then draws attention to Conway's crucial distinction between local motions and vital motions. Local motions are defined as changes of place, whereas vital motions are described as more perfect and divine modes of operation rooted in the life of a creature (64). Conway identifies motion as a mode of body that is special insofar as it can be intimately present (or co-located) in two different bodies simultaneously (65). This co-location of motion explains how local motions appear to be transferred between bodies. Lascano concludes the section by observing that only vital motions are willed and originate from the life and essence of self-moving creatures (67–70).

Chapter 4 titled "Individuals and Identity" discusses how Cavendish and Conway understand the generation, individuation, and persistence of individuals through time. In the Cavendish section, Lascano begins by identifying Cavendish's distinction between the exterior and interior motions of creatures. Interior motions determine a creature's nature and characteristic activities, whereas exterior motions are produced by their perceivable features such as shape, size, and color (75–7). Lascano argues that translation—the transfer of matter and motion from one creature to another in exceptional circumstances (e.g., gestation)—plays an essential role in the generation of creatures (78–9). The unity of these creatures is sustained by self-love until death (80–1). The section concludes by drawing attention to Cavendish's theory of resurrection and by questioning what constitutes the unity of minds (82–7). In the Conway section, Lascano first notes Conway's view that a creature is individuated by its central spirit, which is a bundle of spirits that does not dissolve as long as the creature lives (87–8). The bundle of spirits changes as one loves things of greater and lesser perfection, and after death it transmigrates to a creature of similar moral status (94–5). Conway also appeals to this bundle of spirits to explain individuation and personal identity (97–9). The section concludes by reminding us that, as with Cavendish, Conway's account of individuation is distinct from her account of mental unity (100–1).

Chapter 5 titled "Causation and Perception" compares distinctions that both authors draw in their theories of causation to explain perception. In the Cavendish section, Lascano attends to Cavendish's distinction between substance-transfer causation and occasional causation. Since matter and motion are identical, transfer of motion from

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one body to another requires a simultaneous transfer of matter or substance (105). Occasional causation occurs more regularly than substance-transfer causation. Occasional causation takes place when one body influences another body to bring about changes in its motions through its own power of self-motion (105). To explain this occasional influence, Lascano provides a detailed analysis of how bodies pattern, copy, or imitate the motions of other bodies (107–10). The patterning of occasional causation facilitates perception by generating a sensory copy in the perceiving subject from an object's motions (111–6). Lascano concludes by emphasizing that occasional causation determines the direction of causation within a perceiver, which leads her to interpret Cavendish more deterministically than other interpreters (120). In the Conway section, Lascano attends to Conway's distinction between mechanical and vital causation. Mechanical causation works through the resistance caused by interactions between spirits with different degrees of density, such as the soul and the body (121). Vital causation works through subtle mediating emanations that exchange spirit between individuals (124). These emanations are responsible for perceptive knowledge of other spirits (127–8). Recalling that an individual's moral status is affected by their vital actions, Lascano concludes the section by noting that the experience of suffering is a symptom of moral and physical refinement (128).

Chapter 6 titled "Liberty and Necessity" discusses how Cavendish and Conway understand freedom and determinism. In the Cavendish section, Lascano first outlines the debate on freedom in the secondary literature. Some authors hold that Cavendish is committed to a libertarian conception of freedom, whereas others hold that she is a compatibilist (133–6).[5] According to Lascano, Cavendish holds that all parts of nature are able to act freely by producing actions that originate from their own powers of self-motion without external compulsion (137–40). In addition, she argues that Cavendish thinks fundamental motions and principles determine the natural kinds and general motions of parts of nature (141–2). Taken together, these commitments lead Lascano to side with the compatibilist interpretation. In the Conway section, Lascano observes that she posits a compatibilist account of freedom for God and a libertarian account of freedom for creatures (143). While God is supremely free, he is also necessitated by his goodness and wisdom to act justly (144). Creatures, on the other hand, exhibit indifference of will since they are mutable and led by the influence of other spirits (146–7). The remainder of the section raises questions for Conway's conception of freedom. Why would God choose to create if his creation must be mutable and subject to corruption? (149) And why do creatures choose evil if God imparts them with a desire for goodness? (151–3)

Chapter 7 titled "Natural Philosophy and Theodicy" concludes the comparative interpretation by discussing the different ends for which Cavendish and Conway developed their metaphysical systems. In the Cavendish section, Lascano explains the relationship between Cavendish's metaphysics and the natural philosophy of her contemporaries. Lascano first explains Cavendish's criticisms of mechanical theories of motion and perception as found in the writings of René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes (156–9). She then outlines how Cavendish agrees and disagrees with some of the scientific principles outlined by Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle (161–4). Cavendish's sharper disagreements with experimental philosophy are explored through her criticisms of Robert Hooke on the use of microscopy (165–9). Lascano concludes the section by discussing how Cavendish criticizes the gendered norms orienting early modern scientific institutions (169–72). In the Conway section, Lascano explains how Conway's metaphysics fulfill a theodical purpose. She first argues that Conway's

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metaphysics of goodness also provides moral guidance for increasing one's goodness, wisdom, and power (172–4). She then describes Conway's account of divine reward and punishment, which stresses the fairness of God's punishments for sin (176–7). Lascano concludes the section by discussing how every creature experiences the restoration of goodness. As creatures reach higher degrees of moral perfection, they come closer to achieving union with God (178). Conway understands this union as eternal salvation, which is experienced as a state of perfect tranquility in the afterlife.

In the above chapter outline, I hope to have identified some of the main points of interest for prospective readers. Additionally, I tried to mirror the structure of Lascano's comparative interpretation in my description of each chapter. Lascano grapples with a host of interpretive questions specific to each author in relatively independent sections. This gives her room to develop rigorously textual interpretations of both thinkers, but it also brings about two potential shortcomings. First, the amount of space dedicated to each author is sometimes uneven. And second, moments of synthesis are sometimes left as an exercise for the reader. These are small challenges to face in such an ambitious comparative interpretation, and I am confident that Lascano's monograph will be formative for research on Cavendish, Conway, and comparative historical interpretation for years to come.

Notes

1 For recent discussions of Anne Conway's monism, see Gordon-Roth (2018), Thomas (2020), and Grey (2023). Prior to this book, the most detailed investigation of Cavendish's monism was Detlefsen (2006), which emphasizes the distinction between token and type monism.

2 The language of historically sensitive reconstruction is derived from O'Neill (2019). We should be careful to distinguish historically sensitive reconstruction from rational reconstruction—also called appropriationism or presentism—which interprets the history of philosophy solely through the lens of contemporary issues. See Mercer (2019).

3 In the normativity debate, Lascano situates her interpretation against Detlefsen (2006, 2007) and Boyle (2017), who commit Cavendish to a teleological conception of nature.

4 Reid (2020) argues that the language of monads was placed in Conway's text posthumously by editors.

5 Detlefsen (2007) and Boyle (2017) commit Cavendish to a libertarian theory of freedom, whereas Cunning (2016) commits her to compatibilism.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.55 Published online by Cambridge University Press