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Cavendish’s Philosophy of the Passions: Theory and Practice

Jacqueline Broad and Maks Sipowicz

In “An Epilogue to my Philosophical Opinions” of her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), Margaret Cavendish (1623–73) denies any intimate acquaintance with the works of French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). A few sentences later, in the same essay, she then admits that she has read “half his book of passion.”¹ Here it is likely that Cavendish refers to the 1650 English translation of Descartes’ *Passions de l’âme* [*Passions of the Soul*] (1649), a work that addresses questions to do with the physiology and moral philosophy of “the passions” (what we now call the emotions). Liam Semler has demonstrated that in her early works—specifically her *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), *Philosophicall Fancies* (1653), and *Worlds Olio* (1655)—Cavendish engages with key ideas in Descartes’ *Passions*.² In her poems “The Animall Parliament,” “The Reason why the Thoughts are onely in the Head,” and “The Motion of the Blood,” and in various small prose pieces, Cavendish evinces a familiarity with Descartes’ six primitive passions (love, hate, wonder, joy, desire, and

¹ Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Written by her Excellency, the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), sig. [B3v].

² Liam Semler, “Margaret Cavendish’s Early Engagement with Descartes and Hobbes: Philosophical Revisitation and Poetic Selection,” *Intellectual History Review*, 22, no. 3 (2012), 327–53.

sadness) and his related theories of the “animal spirits” and the pineal gland.³ But no-one has yet attempted a systematic account of Cavendish’s own theory of the passions in her later works of natural philosophy (1663–8). This gap in the literature is surprising given that there has been a recent groundswell of scholarly interest in early modern theories of the passions. Several scholars have approached these early modern theories as reflective of significant changes in philosophy of the mind from Descartes through to David Hume (1711–76).⁴ Cavendish’s philosophy contributes to our understanding of those changes: specifically, it problematizes the view that there was a long linear progression in thinking about the passions as passive reactions to external things, toward a conception of them as actions of the mind itself in the eighteenth century.

The over-arching purpose of our chapter is to give a systematic account of Cavendish’s philosophy of the passions by bringing together several pertinent observations and commentaries throughout her mature works. Our primary sources will be the revised 1663 edition of *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* and her 1668 work *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*,⁵ but we will also refer to her other philosophical works, the *Philosophical Letters* (1664) and the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666),⁶ where relevant. To support our account, we will be drawing on Eileen O’Neill’s interpretation of Cavendish’s

³ Semler, “Cavendish’s Early Engagement,” 336–8. See also Brandie R. Siegfried, “Introduction” to Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, edited by Siegfried (Tempe, Arizona: MRTS and Iter Publishing, 2018), 37, 42–5.

⁴ For an overview, see Amy M. Schmitter, “Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Emotions,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/emotions-17th18th/>.

⁵ Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions. Written By the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*, second edition (London: William Wilson, 1663), especially parts II and VI; and Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy: Divided into Thirteen Parts: With an Appendix containing Five Parts*, with an introduction by Colette V. Michael, facsimile reprint of 1668 edition (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1996). These works are hereafter cited in-text as PPO and GNP respectively.

⁶ Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters: Or, Modest Reflections Upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy, Maintained By several Famous and Learned Authors of this Age, Expressed by way of Letters: By the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, The Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London: privately published, 1664), and Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Eileen O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). These works are hereafter cited in-text as PL and OEP respectively.

theory of causation in light of various Stoic influences on her thought. O'Neill claims that Cavendish's materialist philosophy of nature "has a number of affinities with the ancient Stoic system,"⁷ and that Cavendish "attempts to construct a Neo-Stoical natural philosophy,"⁸ one that seemingly draws on Chrysippus's analogies and arguments.⁹ We contend that reading Cavendish through this Stoic lens can help to highlight what is most distinctive and unique about her theory of the emotions, especially compared to the popular Cartesian theory of her time.

In what follows, in part one, we begin by providing a general account of Cavendish's philosophy of the passions with reference to her theories of occasional and principal causation. We explain how Cavendish's philosophy is crucially different to Descartes' account of the passions, and unique and forward-thinking for her time. In part two, we argue that to provide a complete account of Cavendish's theory of the passions—including both its descriptive and prescriptive aspects—her philosophical writings must be considered alongside her dramatic works. To support this claim, we turn to the practical lessons of Cavendish's *Playes* of 1662, especially "The Unnatural Tragedy." We maintain that the dramatic genre enables Cavendish both *to depict* the unnatural passions onstage and *to effect a cure* through the audience's sympathies and antipathies. Her plays not only provide models of good and bad behavior, they enable the audience to feel appropriate emotional responses to those models.

Part 1: Theory

⁷ Eileen O'Neill, "Introduction" to Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, edited by O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xi.

⁸ Eileen O'Neill, "Margaret Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes, and Early Modern Occasional Causes," *Revue Philosophique*, 3 (2013), 325.

⁹ Eileen O'Neill, "Cavendish, Margaret Lucas (1623–73)," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig, 10 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), vol. I, 261.

To understand Cavendish's theory of the passions, it is useful to situate it within her materialist monism as a whole. In her metaphysics, the entire natural universe is composed of one substance—physical matter. She rejects any appeal to incorporeal or spiritual substances to explain the life and motion of natural things.¹⁰ Instead she posits the existence of a single substance which has three degrees of existence, distinguished by their purity, agility, and freedom. These are known as “rational,” “sensitive,” and “inanimate” matter. On this view, all matter is partly rational, partly sensitive, and partly inanimate and every natural creature contains a thorough “commixture” of these different degrees of matter (PL, 99; OEP, 16). The inanimate or “more Gross and Senseless Matter” (PPO, sig. b2v) is incapable of either self-motion or perception. By contrast, the rational and sensitive degrees are self-moving and perceptive; they are purer than the inanimate degree of matter. The sensitive can be distinguished from the rational in terms of its function: it executes whatever the rational part designs, and it alone influences the inanimate part of nature, enabling it to move. The rational parts remain “purer, and so more agil[e] and free” than the other degrees of matter (GNP, 4). In figurative terms, “the Rational Parts are the Designing Parts; and the Sensitive, the Labouring Parts; and the Inanimate [...] not being Self-moving, are the Burdensome Parts” (GNP, 21).

O'Neill draws parallels between this theory and the philosophy of the Old Stoa (the early Stoics), namely Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus.¹¹ Like Cavendish, the Stoics are also materialists: they shun any appeal to immaterial principles to explain the functioning and organization of the natural world. For them, the core explanatory principles are “that which

¹⁰ Cavendish says that “there is nothing in Nature but what is material [...] he that thinks it absurd to say, the World is composed of meer self-moving Matter, may consider, that it is more absurd to believe Immaterial substances or spirits in Nature, as also a spirit of Nature, which is the Vicarious power of God upon Matter; For why should it not be as probable, that God did give Matter a self-moving power to her self, as to have made another Creature to govern her? For Nature is not a Babe, or Child, to need such a Spiritual Nurse, to teach her to go, or to move” (PL, 149).

¹¹ O'Neill, “Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes,” 317–19.

acts,” referred to as reason or *pneuma*, and “that which is acted upon,” referred to as matter or “unqualified substance”;¹² both principles are bodily or corporeal in nature (LS 45A–C). Reason and matter are related through “blending” or complete interpenetration: the two principles are mutually unified and “mutually co-extended through and through [but] such that they each preserve their own nature” (LS 48C6). Reason pervades the material universe, animating it and causing it to be intelligent, cohesive, and unified. The blending of reason and matter is likened to that between fire and iron: even though fire (or heat) is a constituent of red-hot iron, and the fire and iron are entirely coextensive with one another, each still preserves its own nature (LS 48C11–12).

On O’Neill’s interpretation, Cavendish’s sensitive and rational degrees of matter—those constituent parts that give rise to the life, motion, and perception of material things—correspond to the Stoics’ active principle (reason), and her inanimate or “dull” matter corresponds to unqualified substance (matter).¹³ In itself, inanimate matter does not have the capacity for self-motion; it has life and motion only insofar as it is united with the animate degrees of matter (i.e. sensitive and rational matter). The animate and inanimate are joined together in the same way as the Stoics’ reason and matter: every single part of nature, according to Cavendish, is composed of a commixture of animate and inanimate matter. But while the degrees of matter are thoroughly blended, they also retain their distinctive character: “the inanimate remains as simple in its own nature, as the animate doth in its nature, although they are mixt” (PL, 444).¹⁴ Together, the rational and sensitive parts of matter bind the corporeal substance into a unified, single body. This binding occurs through *sympathy* between the various parts of nature. It follows that, since matter is unified by

¹² Diogenes Laertius 7.134, in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), vol. I, 44B. This work is hereafter cited in-text as LS followed by chapter number and paragraph letter.

¹³ O’Neill, “Introduction,” xxi–xxii, xxiv.

¹⁴ O’Neill, “Introduction,” xxii–xxiii. O’Neill points out that this theory of blending is a later development in Cavendish’s philosophical works; it is not present in her earliest writings (xxiii).

sympathy with itself, then according to Cavendish, even the most basic constitutive parts of nature have some mental properties. “Every creature being composed of this commixture of animate and inanimate matter,” she says, “has also selfe-motion, that is life and knowledg, sense and reason” (PL 99–100).¹⁵

Where do the passions fit into this picture? In Cavendish’s theory, passions are produced by the actions of the rational parts of matter. They are typically thoughts or perceptions about a certain object, in response to certain sensitive motions or “communications” from the body (PPO, 50). To use a pertinent example from the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, let us suppose that “a man seeth a fair and handsome Woman” and falls in love with her (PPO, 54). The passion he feels is love, a “prime passion” or one of the “Chief Passions,” according to Cavendish (PPO, 54, 260). But how is this passion produced? On her account, the causal process occurs in at least four stages. In the first stage, sensory perceptions arise within the man’s mind from the sensitive matter patterning or picturing the exterior form of the woman.¹⁶ In this scenario, “the Sensitive print of the Woman is made in the Eye, or Optick Nerve [of the man], the Thought or Figure of the Womans person is made by the Rational matter in the Head” (PPO, 54). The sensitive motions of matter in the sense organs “pattern out” the figure of their object. That is to say, these sensitive motions adapt to the objects presented to the senses. On Cavendish’s view, when a sense organ is presented with an external body, the sensitive motions in that sense organ copy out the image of the external body. As she writes in the *Philosophical Letters*: “to pattern out, is nothing else but to imitate, and to make a figure in its own substance or parts of Matter like another figure” (PL, 420).

¹⁵ On Cavendish’s panpsychism, see O’Neill, “Cavendish, Margaret Lucas (1623–73),” 261; O’Neill, “Introduction,” xxv; O’Neill, “Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes,” 315.

¹⁶ The word “patterning” is introduced in Cavendish’s later works from 1664 onwards, while the terms “printing” or “picturing out” are used in PPO. On this topic, see Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 101–2; and David Cunning, *Cavendish* (London: Routledge, 2016), 42.

In the second stage, through their sympathetic influence on the rational parts of matter, these sense perceptions then trigger or activate the passion of love in the man. Crucially, according to Cavendish, the sensory perceptions are the *occasional* rather than the true and principal causes of the passion. As occasional causes, sensory perceptions are not necessary conditions for the passion to occur, they have no intrinsic connection to the passion, and they have only an indirect (rather than direct) influence on the production of the passion.¹⁷ It follows that a passion could occur, even if there were no object presented to the senses. Cavendish points out that “the Passions in Dreams are as real, as in waking actions,” even though those passions are not triggered or activated by sense perceptions of external things (GNP, 94).

According to O’Neill, Cavendish’s theory of causation is modelled on the ancient Stoic theory of perfect and antecedent causes (*prokatartika*).¹⁸ In the Stoic schema, perfect causes are those that are self-sustaining, such as the cylindrical shape that enables a cylinder to roll down a hill (LS 62C). Antecedent causes are those that occasion an action, such as the initial push that causes a cylinder to roll. An antecedent cause, in other words, is a trigger for the perfect cause to bring about the effect of the action by its own nature and force (in the case of a cylinder, the object’s shape).¹⁹ O’Neill identifies parallels between these Stoic views and those of Cavendish, highlighting Cavendish’s example of a hand tossing a ball into the air (OEP, 140). When the hand throws the ball, according to Cavendish, it is not the transfer of motion from the hand to the ball that causes the ball to move. Rather, on Cavendish’s blended conception of matter, the rational and sensitive matter in the ball has a sympathetic affinity with the matter in the hand. The hand merely triggers or activates the

¹⁷ See O’Neill “Introduction,” xxx.

¹⁸ O’Neill, “Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes,” 318–21 (esp. 319). *Prokatartika* can also be translated as “preliminary” or “proximate” causes. According to Long and Sedley, proximate (*proximis*) is likely Cicero’s rendition of *prokatartika* (LS, p. 342; LS 62C). To be consistent with O’Neill’s usage, here we follow the translation “antecedent.”

¹⁹ O’Neill, “Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes,” 319.

matter in the ball voluntarily to change its disposition and begin its own motion, “it does not move by the hand’s motion, but by its own” (OEP, 140).²⁰ And so we might say that the hand is the antecedent cause, while the ball’s nature is the perfect cause of its motion.

Similarly, in our case of the man in love, while his sensory impression of the woman is the antecedent cause of his passion, it is not the perfect cause. The man’s own nature and force is the perfect cause of his feelings of love; he himself is responsible for the passion.

And so, this brings us to the third and most crucial stage: the motions that occur in the rational matter (“the mind”) of the man himself. At this stage, the mind actively “figures” the passion in response to the occasional triggering cause. For Cavendish, passions are always “interior rational motions” (PPO, 44); they are made by “the rational corporeal motions in their own degree of matter, to wit, the rational” (PL, 170), they are “voluntary actions of figuring” (OEP, 170), and one “Of the Several Varieties of Actions of Human Creatures” (GNP, 59). This is how the passion of love could occur even if there were no real-life woman to excite the man’s attention; the rational matter might voluntarily “figure” the passion in the mind anyway. Cavendish says that

besides those exterior perceptions of objects, there are some other interior actions both of sense and reason, which are made without the presentation of exterior objects, voluntarily, or by rote; and therefore are not actions of patterning, but voluntary actions of figuring: As for example, Imaginations, Fancies, Conceptions, Passions, and the like; are made by the rational, corporeal, figurative motions, without taking any copies of forreign objects (OEP, 170).

For the man in love, the rational parts of the agent himself are responsible for the production of the passion; they are the agent’s voluntary assent to the impressions presented to him. The sight of the woman occasions the rational and sensitive matter in the man to shift his

²⁰ See also O’Neill, “Cavendish, Stoic Antecedent Causes,” 323.

disposition, resulting in the passion. In the Stoic philosophy, each passion is identified with a pair of false and erroneous judgements: first, a mistaken evaluation about what is good or how something is to be preferred; and second, a mistaken belief about what is an appropriate reaction (see LS 65). While Cavendish does not identify passions with mistaken judgements, she does allow that because each passion is a movement of the rational matter, it is entirely free and voluntary: it is entirely in the power of the agent.

Finally, in the fourth stage of the passion, Cavendish claims that the rational knowing parts of matter exert an influence on the sensitive parts of the body: for example, by desiring to enjoy the woman “as to Procreate by her” (PPO, 54). The body is led to form certain appetites toward the woman “in the parts proper for it” (PPO, 54) and to engage in certain actions. Sensitive motions might lead a man in love to engage in “Flattering, Professing, Protesting in words, the Countenance smiling, the Eyes glancing; also, the Body bows, the Leggs scrape, the Mouth kisses” (GNP, 79). In some passages, Cavendish also defines passions in terms of the contraction and dilation of parts that arise from sympathy and antipathy: “If those Rational Motions move after a dilating manner, it is *Joy*. If after a contracting manner, it is *Grief*. When those Parts move partly after a contracting and partly after an attracting manner, it is *Covetousness*” (GNP, 72). According to Cavendish, the causal process of a man falling in love is just a microcosm of what is going on at a larger scale throughout nature; all natural change is brought about through the sympathetic influence of parts on parts. Sympathy is a kind of attraction or love, parts moving toward other parts; antipathy is an aversion or hate, parts moving away from other parts: “Sympathy is nothing else but natural Passions and Appetites, as Love, Desire, Fancy, Hunger, Thirst, &c. and its effects are Concord, Unity, Nourishment, and the like: But Antipathy is Dislike, Hate, Fear, Anger, Revenge, Aversion, Jealousie, &c. and its effects are Discord, Division, and the like” (PL, 293).

The Stoics likewise conceive of the passions in terms of physiological reactions in the body, such as “swellings” and “contractions,” or “shrinkings” and “stretchings.” Andronicus says that

Distress is an irrational contraction or a fresh opinion that something bad is present, at which people think it right to be contracted [i.e. depressed]. Fear is an irrational shrinking [aversion], or avoidance of an expected danger. Appetite is an irrational stretching [desire], or pursuit of an expected good. Pleasure is an irrational swelling or a fresh opinion that something good is present, at which people think it right to be swollen [i.e. elated]. (LS 65B1–4)

Thomas Stanley gives an account of these Stoic views in his *History of Philosophy* (1655–1660), a primary source for Cavendish’s *Observations*.²¹ In the eighth part of the second volume (1656), Stanley says that the Stoic idea of grief is “a fresh opinion of present ill, wherein it seemeth fit that the mind be contracted and dejected, or a contraction of the soul caused by the opinion of present ill.”²² Cavendish may be deliberately echoing this claim when she defines grief as rational matter moving in a “contracting manner” (GNP, 72). Like Chrysippus (LS 65H), she also asserts that the human passions take place principally in the heart (PPO, 259–60; PL, 211–12), though she allows that technically the passions can take place in any part of the body.²³

O’Neill’s Stoic reading of Cavendish’s philosophy helps us to identify several crucial differences between Cavendish’s theory of the passions and that of Descartes. In the *Passions*

²¹ See O’Neill, “Introduction,” xxxi.

²² Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy. The Eighth Part, Containing the Stoick Philosophers* (London: Humphrey Moseley and Thomas Dring, 1656), 70.

²³ In her *Observations*, Cavendish says: “for although I say in my *Philosophical Opinions*, that all Thoughts, Fancies, Imaginations, Conceptions, &c. are made in the head, and all Passions in the heart; yet I do not mean that all rational figurative actions are onely confined to the head, and to the heart, and are in no other parts of the body of an Animal, or Man; for surely, I believe there is sense and reason, or sensitive and rational knowledge, not onely in all Creatures, but in every part of every particular Creature” (OEP, 151; see also GNP, 65–6). This theory of widespread passions is a logical consequence of her panpsychism—the passions can be in any part of nature, because every part of nature (however minute) consists of a commixture of rational, sensitive, and inanimate matter.

of the Soul, Descartes provides at least two definitions of a passion. In the most general sense, a passion is any thought in the soul (the immaterial thinking mind) that is caused by impressions in the brain, without the concurrence of the will.²⁴ In a restricted sense, the passions are emotions of the soul, such as love, hate, fear, and the like (CSM I: 337). These emotions are *passive* perceptions in the immaterial soul that arise *involuntarily* in the soul as a result of its close connection with the human body. More specifically, they are perceptions that correspond to certain actions in the body, such as disturbances and commotions in the blood and “animal spirits.” The animal spirits are rarefied blood particles (wholly material entities) responsible for conveying bodily impressions to the brain. Descartes says “although the soul is joined to the whole body, nevertheless there is a certain part of the body where it exercises its functions more particularly than all the others”; this is the pineal gland in the innermost part of the brain (CSM I: 340).

In her writings, Cavendish explicitly rejects the idea that the soul presides in “a Little Kernel of the Brain [the pineal gland],” saying that “neither can an Exterior motion on that Kernel, Inform the Soul of all the Actions of the Body, or Outward Objects, no more than when one Man Knocks at another Man’s Door, the Master of the House knows why the other Knocks” (PPO, sig. c[4v]; see also PL, 111–12). She highlights the difficulty of explaining the transmission of information through purely material entities that do not possess mental properties themselves. Instead, on her account, “all Perception is made by corporeal, figuring self-motions” (PL, 117), and it is “the Rational Animate matter [i.e. the mind] that makes Passions” (PPO, 262). While Cavendish does not identify passions with mistaken judgements (as the Stoics do), her passions are nevertheless voluntary actions of the rational part of matter: they are cognitive and therefore within our control. In her view, though the passions

²⁴ René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. I, article 27, pp. 338–9. This volume is hereafter cited in-text as CSM I followed by page number.

often arise through the sympathy of parts with parts, the agent herself is responsible for her passions.

To summarize, one major difference between the Cartesian and Cavendishian account of the passions is that Cavendishian passions are *active*—they result from the mind’s own activity and are not mere passive receptivities to bodily influences. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty has observed that in eighteenth-century philosophy, instead of being “reactions to invasions from something external to the self, passions become the very activities of the mind, its own motions”; they become proper motives and initiators of action.²⁵ Between Descartes and Hume, she says, the passions transform from being a kind of passive reaction to bodily influences (something the mind “suffers under”), to active powers or forces of the mind itself. In Hume’s philosophy, the passions are no longer things to be suppressed or controlled by reason for the sake of virtue; they become proper moral guides in themselves. According to Hume, the calm passions (sentiments that are social in origin) are what make virtue and morality possible. These consist in “benevolence, resentment, the love of life, kindness to children,” as well as a general appetite to good and aversion to evil.²⁶ Such sentiments are acquired through sympathetic communication with others. For Hume, the propensity we have to sympathize with others, to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, is vital to the formation of our passions and the key to becoming morally good.²⁷

Our account of Cavendish’s philosophy of the passions reveals that some fundamental aspects of Hume’s viewpoint were already present in her work of the mid-seventeenth century. In the next part, we demonstrate that in her dramatic works Cavendish develops her normative views on the passions based on her own theory of sympathetic communication.

²⁵ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments,” *Philosophy*, 57 (1982), 159–72 (159).

²⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 2.3.3.

²⁷ On this topic, see Jacqueline Taylor, *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter 2.

Part 2: The Practice

Unlike the Stoics, Cavendish never explicitly suggests that we must extinguish the passions in order to lead a good and happy life. For the Stoics, the extirpation of the passions is an important part of their philosophical “therapy.”²⁸ In their writings, they diagnose a sickness or ailment in the lives of human beings (the source of all unhappiness and wrong-doing), and they offer a treatment or a cure for this sickness, toward the goal of good health. The “ailment,” of course, is the passions (LS 65L1).²⁹ The key to our cure is to have a radical emotional detachment from all external circumstances over which we have no control. To effect this, they say, we must no longer regard external things (or “indifferents” [LS 58A4]) as having any intrinsic worth or unconditional value. Yet by their very nature, the passions are corrupt opinions about what is good and how to respond appropriately to them. The passions are thus irrational and contrary to nature, and ought to be purged or eradicated in order to obtain happiness. The key to our wellbeing lies in the use of reason: in our refusal to assent to impressions that are contrary to our nature (see LS 65J).

One key difference between Cavendish and the Stoics is that in her philosophical writings, she rarely gives voice to any explicit normative views about the passions. To find Cavendish’s moral arguments concerning the passions, we must turn to her dramatic works instead. In what follows, we focus on “The Unnatural Tragedy” in her *Playes* of 1662,³⁰ but similar lessons might be drawn from other plays such as “Love’s Adventures.” In these works, Cavendish uses the dramatic form to convey her moral message through plot and

²⁸ On this topic, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially chapters 10–12.

²⁹ Galen quotes Chrysippus as saying “The passions are called ailments not just in virtue of their judging each of these things to be good, but also with regards to their running towards them in excess of what is natural” (LS 65L1).

³⁰ Margaret Cavendish, *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London: A. Warren, 1662). Hereafter the “Unnatural Tragedy” will be cited in-text as UT followed by page number.

character, but also by eliciting sympathetic emotional responses from her audience. As we will see, the upshot is an ethical approach to the passions that falls somewhere in between the Stoic and Cartesian theories, partly anticipating Hume's view that sympathy can provide the conditions for morality.

In "The Unnatural Tragedy," Cavendish presents two separate and unrelated narratives concerning unhappy love relationships. The first tells the tale of the wicked Monsieur Frere, who returns home from a long absence only to fall in love with his newly-married sister, Madam Soeur, whom he has not seen since childhood. Hopelessly consumed by "Loves raging fire" (UT, 345), he starts to spend more and more time in his sister's company, until finally he cannot help himself: he tells her "I have been in love with you, and must enjoy you" (UT, 361). When she refuses him and threatens to tell her father and husband, the tale ends with Frere raping and murdering Soeur, and then committing suicide. The second story concerns Monsieur Malateste, who treats his virtuous wife Madam Bonit with cruelty and disrespect by openly carrying on an affair with her maid-servant Nan. When Bonit dies, Malateste then quickly marries a second time, only to suffer a similar cruelty and disrespect from his new wife, who has "a strong spirit, as not to be controll'd," and a "high and turbulent nature" (UT, 354). Through his second wife's neglect, Malateste falls deadly ill of a consumption.

The moral lessons of an "Unnatural Tragedy" are made apparent through Cavendish's dramatic use of plot, character, and dialogue. In this play, we not only see the horrendous consequences of irregular and perverted passions, we also hear other characters' negative opinions concerning this behavior and are presented with contrasting models in the form of Frere and Bonit.³¹ When we are first introduced to Frere, he declares to a friend that he is

³¹ On Cavendish's normative models of good and bad behavior in this play, see Alexandra G. Bennett, "'Yes, and': Margaret Cavendish, the Passions, and Hermaphrodite Agency," in *Early Modern Englishwomen Testing Ideas*, edited by Jo Wallwork and Paul Salzman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 75–87 (78).

“very discreet.” His friend replies “Yes, to hide thy faults, to dissemble thy passions, and to compass thy desires; but not to abate any of them” (UT, 326). Frere’s father Monsieur Pere also observes of his son that “he is a foolish man, and one that hath had his liberty so much” (UT, 344), and Monsieur Sensible concludes Frere to be a “wilde debauch’d young man” (UT, 350). By contrast, Bonit is a model of patience, kindness, thrift, and obedience. When her maid-servant Joan marvels that Bonit does not make her husband’s life a misery by taking revenge on him, she asks Joan “to have more Charity to judge for the best, and have less passion for me” (UT, 340). Later in the play, even Malateste regrets his maltreatment of his “virtuous and kind” first wife, lamenting that he had mistook “her patience for simplicity, her kindness for wantonness, her thrift for covetousness, her obedience for flattery” (UT, 363). His final wish is to be buried alongside her, so that his “dust shall be mixed with her pure ashes” (UT, 363). Here Cavendish demonstrates the rewards of a virtuous disposition of character: an enduring reputation for goodness and (at long last!) a husband’s respect and admiration.

By contrast, Monsieur Frere demonstrates the ill consequences of indulging in unnatural and perverse passions: that is, “Discord, Division, and the like” (PL, 293). When Frere is attempting to persuade his sister to commit incest, he says “Sister, follow not those foolish binding Laws which frozen men have made, but follow Natures Law, whose Freedome gives Liberty to all” (UT, 349). While it is true that there is a law of nature, according to Cavendish, human beings are nevertheless at liberty to follow or not to follow the norms and conventions of nature; but if they choose not to follow the natural standard, then disorder and chaos inevitably ensue.³² In her *Grounds*, Cavendish describes the effects of strong passions, observing that a strong “sympathetical Agreement between the Appetites,

³² For further details, see Karen Detlefsen, “Atomism, Monism, and Causation in the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, 3 (2006), 199–240; and Karen Detlefsen, “Reason and Freedom: Margaret Cavendish on the Order and Disorder of Nature,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 89, no. 2 (2007), 157–91.

and the Passions [...] doth often occasion disturbances to the whole life of Man; with endless Desires, unsatiabie Appetites, violent Passions, unquiet Humors, Grief, Pain, Sadness, Sickness, and the like” (GNP, 63–4). By contrast, she says, “when the Sensitive and Rational Corporeal Motions are regular, and move sympathetically, then the Body is Healthful and strong, the Mind in peace and quiet” (GNP, 84). Because the passions are voluntary actions in the mind, we are capable of resisting them; we do not have to give in to unnatural and perverted passions. An important part of Cavendish’s remedy to the disorder of the passions is to emphasize that every part of nature has self-motion and “natural Free-will” (GNP, 102; see also PPO, 410). In *Poems, and Fancies*, she suggests that “The Heart like to a Harp compare I may, The Passions, strings on which the Mind doth play; A Harmony, when they just time do keep, With notes of peace they bring the soule to sleep” (*Poems, and Fancies*, 137). The comparison of the heart to a harp suggests that it can be tuned and trained, so that the movements of the matter associated with the passions are not so strong as to disturb the mind and body.

Finally, Cavendish’s play also provides a performative argument to demonstrate that the passions should be in sympathy with nature, rather than contrary or antipathetic. A performative argument is one in which the arguer’s conclusion emerges by means of a “thought-act” in the mind, an act which instantaneously establishes the truth of the conclusion.³³ In the “Epilogue” to “The Unnatural Tragedy,” William Cavendish writes that the “poetress” will have achieved her goal:

If subtile Ayr, the Conduit to each ear,
Hearts passion mov’d, to draw a sadder tear
From your squee’s’d brains, on your pale cheeks to lie,

³³ On performative argument in Descartes’ *Meditations* (1641), see Jaakko Hintikka, “*Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?*” *The Philosophical Review*, 71, no. 1 (1962), 3–32.

Distill'd from every Fountain of each eye (UT, 366)

By eliciting particular passions, such as sadness, Cavendish gives each audience member a practical demonstration of their feelings about unnatural and perverted passions. In the case of “The Unnatural Tragedy,” we feel antipathy toward the unbridled lusts of Frere, whose actions result in rape and murder; we feel sympathy for Bonit, who virtuously bears with her husband’s maltreatment. We are inclined to condemn the unnatural passions of Frere because they cause chaos and disorder, they disrupt the law of peace and order in nature; while we are attracted to the peace-loving Bonit, whose virtue demands respect and admiration. In this way, the dramatic genre enables Cavendish to both *depict the disease* on stage and *effect the cure*, all through the audience’s sympathies and antipathies. The play offers a performative argument in the sense that as soon as we feel antipathy within ourselves toward unnatural passions, it becomes true that unnatural passions incite antipathy. Likewise, when we experience an attraction toward kindness and patience, it immediately becomes true that these virtues incite our sympathy. In her dramatic works, Cavendish’s words do not just espouse her normative theory, they *enact* it. She demonstrates how our sympathies and antipathies (as antecedent causes) can trigger and activate our passions (in our minds as perfect causes), leading us to approve benevolence and despise selfishness, thereby promoting the value of peace, harmony, and order in the natural world.

Concluding remarks

Cavendish’s Stoic-inspired philosophy of the passions provides a unique alternative to the popular Cartesian theory of her time, and also anticipates Hume’s eighteenth-century notion of the passions as actions of the mind itself, shaped and formed by sympathy. While there is no concrete evidence that Hume was familiar with Cavendish’s philosophical writings, he does refer to one of her non-philosophical works—*The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and*

Puissant Prince William Cavendish (1667)—in volume five of his *History of England*;³⁴ and there are interesting similarities between Hume’s ideas concerning sympathetically engendered moral emotions and Cavendish’s notion of sympathy as an “attractive motion” or an “influence” (PPO, 101, 70) that enables passions to arise in different parts of nature. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Hume knew of her philosophy.³⁵ Regardless, Cavendish still stands as a significant innovator among theorists of the passions in the mid-seventeenth century. Her ideas challenge traditional narratives about the progression of philosophical ideas in the early modern period—from mere passive reactions to external influences, to the initiators of action themselves—thus demonstrating that the true story is more complicated and less linear than previously thought. Cavendish is also innovative for extending her ideas beyond the genre of the philosophical treatise to the dramatic format, to provide a performative demonstration of how sociable emotions might be communicated through sympathy.³⁶

³⁴ See David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Cæsar to the Revolution in 1688*, new edition, corrected, 6 vols. (London: A. Millar, 1762), vol. V, 369. Hume refers to Cavendish’s account of William’s advice to Charles I, that “His Highness not [...] attempt any thing as yet upon the Enemy; for he had intelligence that there was some discontent between them, and that they were resolved to divide themselves, and so to raise the Siege without fighting” (Margaret Cavendish, *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendish* [London: A. Maxwell, 1667], 46–7). Hume glosses Cavendish’s remark, noting that “The marquess endeavoured to persuade him [the King], that, having so successfully effected his purpose, he ought to be content with the present advantages, and leave the enemy, now much diminished by their losses, and discouraged by their ill success, to dissolve by those mutual dissensions, which had taken place among them” (*History of England*, vol. V, 369). The reference is to “Life of the D. of Newcastle, p. 40”, with 40 instead of 46 possibly being a typesetting error.

³⁵ David Cuning also highlights the fact that Cavendish anticipates a number of Humean positions concerning causation and consciousness (see Cuning, *Cavendish*, 15, 22–3, 28–9, 85, and 194).

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