

Cavendish's Aesthetic Realism

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1. Introduction

Margaret Cavendish's philosophical reflections on beauty — on its nature and grounds — have so far received little to no attention. This is no doubt due in large part to the fact that Cavendish's writings on the topic constitute a relatively small proportion of her voluminous corpus.¹ That said, the topic was one of abiding interest for Cavendish, and there are passages concerning beauty — sometimes several, sometimes lengthy — in every one of her philosophical works. In this paper, I will show that, by reading Cavendish's remarks on beauty against the background of her more general theoretical commitments, it is possible to reconstruct a clear and consistent position: Cavendish is a *realist* about beauty. More generally, insofar as "beauty" is her catch-all term for aesthetic value,² Cavendish is an *aesthetic realist*.

But what does this amount to? Situating Cavendish's position within familiar meta-aesthetic taxonomies faces a challenge. It is commonplace in characterizing realism — aesthetic or otherwise — to appeal to the idea of *mind-independence* (see, for example, Evers 2019). But Cavendish's view cannot be that beauty is mind-independent. According to Cavendish, mentality is a ubiquitous and fundamental feature of reality. More fully: Cavendish maintains that everything in nature is material,³ and that all material things have both a "rational" part and a "sensory" part, which are inseparably united (GNP, 3; OEP, "An Argumental Discourse").⁴ The rational and sensory knowledge these parts

1. There are many references to beauty in Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* (1664), but the focus there is on the social significance of beauty, in particular of a woman's beauty, rather than on its constitution or reality.
2. Cavendish tends to reserve the term for the visual beauty of living creatures, including humans. As I indicate, however, Cavendish's passing remarks on music suggest that her view generalizes to non-visual cases and to artefacts, broadly construed.
3. For general discussion of Cavendish's materialism, see Broad 2002, chap. 2; Cunning 2019a; Duncan 2012 and 2022, chap. 4; James 1999; Sarahson 2010; Wilkins 2016.
4. I use the standard abbreviations when referring to Cavendish's texts. A key to these abbreviations can be found at the end of this paper.

possess is expressed in and explanatory of the figures and motions of material things. As Cavendish says:

All and every particular Creature [...] is made by corporeal self-motion, which I name sensitive and rational matter, which is life and knowledge, sense and reason. (PL, "A Preface to the Reader")

Knowledge lives in motion, as motion lives in matter. (PPO, 21)

Matter, Self-motion and Self-knowledg, are inseparable from each other, and make Nature, one Material, self-moving, and self-knowing Body. (OEP, 155)

All the Parts of Nature have Life and Knowledg. (GNP, 6)

Cavendish identifies minds (or souls) with parts of rational matter (see Broad 2002, 51). "Rational matter," she says, is "that which we call the soul, or minde" (PPO, 138). Conversely, "the mind [...] is the Rational Part of matter" (PL, 33; see also PF, 30; PPO, 12, 106). Since all material things have rational parts, it follows that all material things have minds, albeit minds that differ significantly from our own. This is a commitment Cavendish embraces:

There is not any Creature or part of nature without this Life and Soul [...] Not onely Animals, but also Vegetables, Minerals and Elements, and what more is in Nature, are endued with this Life and Soul, Sense and Reason. (PL, "Preface to the Reader"; see also OEP, 19; PF, 56; PPO, 21, 35–6)

To return to the issue at hand, since nothing is independent of the mind in Cavendish's work, it follows that beauty is not independent of the mind. However, as I will demonstrate, Cavendish's view is realist in the recognizable sense that, according to it, beauty is a real quality

of objects, one which is *response-independent*.⁵ Whether something is beautiful does not, for Cavendish, depend on whether in suitable circumstances an observer would feel admiration or delight toward the relevant object, for example, or make a positive aesthetic judgement concerning it. This is a negative characterization of Cavendish's view. To give a positive characterization, Cavendish takes an object's aesthetic value to depend on its figures, motions, and (in the case of visual beauty) colours.

Admittedly, there are passages which in isolation might seem to suggest the opposite – namely, that Cavendish takes beauty not to be an inherent property of objects but instead to be in some sense a projection of sentiment, or at least to stand in some constitutive relation to a person's affective responses. I will show that, when set alongside other passages and situated in relation to Cavendish's better understood views on non-aesthetic matters, the contentious passages in fact count for, rather than against, the attribution of aesthetic realism.

The paper proceeds as follows. In §2, I will discuss Cavendish's emphasis on the inter- and intra-personal diversity in aesthetic responses and ask whether it suggests that she thinks of beauty as in some way unreal. In §3, I will explore the passages in which Cavendish connects beauty with the power to please and ask whether they point towards some kind of response-dependence theory. In §4, I will turn to Cavendish's claim that there is nothing in which beauty consists and discuss how to reconcile that with the realist interpretation. In §5, I will close by raising, but not resolving, the intriguing question of whether Cavendish takes beauty to be inseparable from matter in the way that she takes figure and knowledge to be.

While all of the above themes are intertwined in Cavendish's writings, I will pull them apart for separate discussion so far as that is possible. By the end, I hope to have shown that Cavendish makes a distinctive contribution to aesthetics within the early modern period, defending a well-developed position that contrasts both with the

5. For characterizations of aesthetic realism which appeal to the notion of response-independence, see Hanson 2018; Zangwill 2003.

realist view of her contemporary, Henry More (1653),⁶ and with the non-realist views which soon after came to dominate philosophical reflection on beauty and on aesthetic value more generally.⁷

Before proceeding to the main discussion, I will make a final preliminary remark. In what follows, I will be deliberately loose in the characterizations I give of the non-realist positions I take Cavendish to oppose in her writings. This reflects the fact that Cavendish herself does not spell out what those positions amount to in any detail, and for the most part what she does have to say does not choose between a range of non-realist positions — error theoretic, subjectivist, dispositionalist, expressivist, etc. Since my primary concern here is to make the case for attributing a positive view to Cavendish, I do not think it is necessary to be any more committal about the alternatives to it.

2. Arguments from diversity

I will start with the most unequivocal expression of Cavendish's aesthetic realism. Consider this passage from *Worlds Olio* (1655):

Some may imagine or think Beauty was framed and composed in the Opinions of Men, rather than in the Lineaments, and Symmetries, and Motion of the Body, or the Colour of the Skin; for that which appeareth Beautifull to one Nation, doth not so to another; as witness the *Indians*, the *Ethiopians*, who think the blackest Skin, flattest Noses, and thickest Lips, the most Beautifull, which seem Deformed and Monstrous to the *Europeans*; so particular Persons, as in several Nations; for to one Person shall appear a Beauty, to enamour the Soul with Admiration, to

6. For general discussion of the proximity and distance of Cavendish's philosophical views to and from More's, see Broad 2002, chap. 2; Duncan 2012; Hutton 2003.
7. Influential proponents of non-realist (as characterized here) views of aesthetic value in British philosophy after Cavendish include Hutcheson (1726) and Hume (1757), in contrast to the realism of Shaftesbury (Cooper 1711). For overviews of debates in philosophical aesthetics in this period, see Dickie 1996; Guyer 2015; Kivy 2003; Shelley 2013.

another shall appear even to a Dislike; which shews, that were there a Body never so exactly proportion'd, or their Motions never so gracefull, or their Colour never so Orient, yet it will not please all. (WO, 91)⁸

Here Cavendish outlines a familiar enough line of thought. There is diversity — both across cultures and across individuals within cultures — in aesthetic judgement and in the corresponding affective responses, such as admiration and pleasure. The best explanation for this, the thought continues, is that beauty is in some way dependent on personal or collective "opinion."⁹

Among Cavendish's contemporaries, we find that René Descartes advances — or, at least, gestures at — a line of thought along these lines. In a letter to Marin Mersenne (dated 18th March 1630), Descartes writes:

In general, "beautiful" and "pleasant" signify simply a relation between our judgment and an object; and because the judgments of men differ so much from each other, neither beauty nor pleasantness can be said to have any definite measure. (1991, AT I.133)¹⁰

Descartes goes on to illustrate his point via an example of flowerbeds divided into shapes:

8. In both tone and content, this passage might seem to convey problematic (racist) attitudes. One complication is that the remarks purport to report certain aesthetic judgements, rather than express or endorse them. Nevertheless, they are presented as the judgements of a group (the Europeans) to which Cavendish belongs. A further complication is that, as we will see, Cavendish immediately goes on to suggest that the relevant (European) responses in fact involve a failure to track beauty. The question of to what extent Cavendish's views are socially progressive or conservative is a thorny one. For discussion, see Boyle 2018, chap. 7.
9. For some recent discussions of the bearing of disagreement in judgement on the prospects of aesthetic realism, see Baker and Robson 2017; Lopes 2018, chap. 9; McGonigal 2018; Schafer 2011; Sundell 2011.
10. For discussion of this exchange, see Buzon 2019, 66–7; Jorgensen 2012, 419–23.

[No] one design can be called absolutely more beautiful than another; to some people's fancy one with three shapes will be the most beautiful, to others it will be one with four or five and so on. (1991, AT I.133)

It is difficult to glean Descartes' alternative from these suggestive but brief remarks, but it is clear that he is opposing aesthetic realism — as characterized here — by appeal to considerations of diversity in aesthetic responses.

Both Descartes and Mersenne were members of the "Cavendish" circle of intellectuals (Hutton 1997, 422–3). So, there are grounds for thinking that Cavendish would have encountered this argument, or some version of it, in her interactions with the members of this group. Whatever its provenance, Cavendish replies to the line of thought as follows:

I will not say there is no such thing as Beauty, but no such Beauty as appears so to all Eyes, because there is not Variety enough in one Beauty to please the various Fancies of Mankind; for some fancy Black, some Brown, some Fair, some a Sad Countenance, some a Merry, some more Bashfull, some more Bold; For Stature, some Tall, some Low, some Fat, some Lean, some Dislike some Motions, some others; some grey Eyes, some black Eyes, some blew Eyes; and to make mixture of all these, it is impossible; and though there may be as great and as good a Harmonie in *Beauty* as in Musick, yet all Tunes please not all Ears, no more do all Beauties please all Eyes. (WO, 91)

The point here is that an alternative and straightforward explanation for the diversity in aesthetic responses is available — it is simply due to diversity in tastes or preferences. Beauty is a real feature of certain objects, but those who lack the relevant sensibilities will not judge it to be present or admire its presence.

In addition to criticizing an argument for a non-realist account of beauty, Cavendish in the above remarks also outlines, albeit briefly, her positive alternative. According to it, the beauty of a thing is determined by its material qualities, including its contours, proportions, and motions. I will unpack that alternative in more detail in the next section.

Many of the themes of the discussion from *Worlds Olio* crop up in "A Dialogue betwixt Wit, and Beauty" from Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* (1653):

Wit.
Mixt Rose, and Lilly, why are you so proud,
 Since *Faire* is not in all *Minds* best allow'd?
Some like the *Black, the Browne, as well as White,*
 In all *Complexions* some *Eyes* take delight:
 Nor doth one *Beauty* in the *World* still reigne.
 For *Beauty* is created in the *Braine*.

Here, Wit is rehearsing the previously discussed line of thought: The wide diversity in affective attitudes suggests that beauty is not a real quality but in some way a mental construct. Read in isolation, it is tempting to assume that Wit is here speaking on behalf of Cavendish. But the *Worlds Olio* passage, published only two years later, suggests that that assumption is mistaken. Cavendish does not endorse the reasoning. This in turn helps to make sense of how the poem continues:

But say there were a *Body* perfect made,
Complexion pure, by Natures pensill laid:
 A *Countenance* where all sweet *Spirits* meet,
 A *Haire* that's *thick, or long curl'd* to the *Feet*:
 Yet were it like a *Statue* made of stone,

The *Eye* would weary grow to look thereon.
 Had it not *Wit, the Mind* still to delight,
 It soon would weary be, as well as *Sight*.

Cavendish here invites us to consider a “perfect” body, and the perfections she illustrates are all respects in which that body is beautiful — its pure complexion, its sweet countenance, etc. Moreover, Cavendish explicitly presents such perfection as in contrast to what went before. This suggests that the bodies that we were previously invited to imagine were not perfect, which is to say that the relevant objects were in some respects beautiful, in other respects not.

To see the relevance of this, it is helpful to consider some remarks from *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), in which Cavendish also mentions beauty and in which she defends the claim that it is not possible for a person simultaneously to have conflicting feelings or “passions” toward a single thing:

A man may be in love with a woman, for her beauty, or wit, or behaviour, and yet have an aversion to her bad qualities; but a man cannot love the person of a woman, and hate it, at one and the same time. (PPO, 107)

The suggestion here is that seemingly conflicting affective responses to a single object must instead be responses to different qualities it possesses. This then points to an additional explanation that Cavendish gestures at in her poem for the diversity in aesthetic judgement and in the corresponding affects: Beauties in nature are not perfect — an object that is in one way aesthetically good will in another way be aesthetically bad or neutral.¹¹ So, differences in responses might reflect differences in the objects of those responses — they are attitudes toward different qualities and, as a result, not in genuine conflict.

That explanation would not carry across to the case of a “perfect” beauty — an object that is beautiful in every respect. But, here too, Cavendish thinks that we can explain diversity of response in a way consistent with a realist view of beauty. Admiration for beauty, or a positive affective response more generally, diminishes both with time and

11. Or, at least, it might appear to be. In §5, I ask whether, according to Cavendish, anything in nature is genuinely ugly.

with familiarity. As Cavendish puts the same point elsewhere, “Beautie wearies the Eye by Repetitions” (WO, 90).

In summary: Cavendish acknowledges that there are widespread differences both in what people judge to be beautiful and in their feelings toward objects, but she argues that this is consistent with the view that beauty is a real quality that an object has in virtue of its material characteristics.

Before moving on, it is interesting to compare Cavendish’s reply to the argument from diversity in aesthetic responses to a reply More offers to a strikingly similar line of thought. More is one of the authors Cavendish discusses with her (imagined) correspondent in the *Philosophical Letters* (1644), and, as we will see, Cavendish explicitly refers there to More’s views concerning beauty and its grounds.

Like Cavendish, More is a realist about aesthetic value. As he says in *An Antidote Against Atheisme*, which contains his most sustained reflections on the topic, “Beauty is not a meere *Phancy*” (1653, 60).¹² Or, in positive terms, “There is such a thing as *Beauty*” (1653, 62). In defence of this position, More considers the following argument for a version of non-realism:

This buisnesse of *Beauty* [...] is but a conceit, because some men acknowledge no such thing, and all things are alike handsome to them, who yet notwithstanding have the use of their Eyes as well as other folks. (1653, 62)

The idea here is that, since people disagree in their judgements concerning the beauty of some objects in a way that is not traceable to any differences in perception, beauty is not a real quality in that object — a quality which one party detects while the other fails to do so. Instead, beauty is a fiction or fabrication of some sort.

More’s response to this line of thought differs importantly from Cavendish’s. Like Cavendish, More takes it not to succeed as an argument against aesthetic realism. Unlike Cavendish, however, More takes it

12. As what follows shows, Guyer is mistaken when he writes, “None of the first-generation Cambridge Platonists wrote on matters of taste” (2015, 34).

to show that an object's beauty — specifically, the beauty of "plants" or "animalls" — is not due only to its material qualities. For More, as Cavendish puts it, "Beauty, Colour, Symmetry, and the like, in Plants, as well as in other Creatures, are no result from the meer motion of the matter" (PL, 160). Instead, More says, beauty is created by "some hidden Cause much a kin to [our] own nature, that is intellectuall" (1653, 61–2). As he later puts it, the "first and principall cause" of beauty in nature is "*an understanding Principle*" (1653, 63). This "understanding" gives coherent, intelligible form to matter — and, for More, that means a broadly geometric form — in a way that results in the existence of natural objects — specifically, plants and other living organisms — and that is in turn responsible for their beauty.

But what exactly is the "cause" or "principle" in question? More's immediate answer is that it is "the overpowering counsell of an Eternall Mind, that is, of a God" (1653, 64). Elsewhere, he is more circumspect: "It is a God, or at least a Spirituall substance actuating the Matter" (1653, 45, see also 85).¹³ The important point for present purposes is that More's aesthetic realism, again in contrast to that of Cavendish, is bound up with immaterialism.¹⁴ For More, the beauty of an object consists in its "*Symmetry and Comeliness of Proportion*" (1653, 63, see also 80), characteristics which, in his view, must be caused and maintained by the activity of an immaterial substance.

How is the diversity in aesthetic judgment supposed to support this view? According to More, the explanation for diversity is that, while "pulchritude is convey'd indeed by the outward Senses unto the Soul," it is "a more intellectuall faculty [...] which relishes it; as a *Geometricall Scheme* is let in by the Eyes, but the demonstration is discern'd

by Reason" (1653, 62). Since the beauty of nature is the manifestation of an intelligent (immaterial) principle, detecting its presence requires, in addition to perceiving the object's material characteristics, a kind of intellectual apprehension or grasp. As More puts it, beauty is "the proper Object of the Understanding and Reason," as opposed to the senses (1653, 63). As a result, to return to the line of thought under consideration, disagreement in aesthetic judgements and the corresponding affective responses need not be traceable to differences in sensory perception — it can result from differences in intellect or its exercise. More straightforwardly, as More memorably puts it, the diversity in aesthetic responses arises because "some mens Souls are so dull and stupid" (1653, 62).

In view of this, we can now see both important overlap and equally important divergence in the views of Cavendish and More on beauty. They agree with the non-realist that beauty is either causally or constitutively dependent on something that has knowledge, intellect, or reason. However, in shared opposition to the non-realist, Cavendish and More also agree that that something is not a finite human being — or, for that matter, a community of such beings — making judgements about or having feelings of beauty. For Cavendish, the knowledge is inherent in the material things that are the bearers of beauty — plants, animals, waterfalls, and the like — and manifest in their figures and motions. For More, in contrast, the knowledge belongs to God, or some other immaterial spirit, which acts on those material things.

My concern here is not to adjudicate this dispute between Cavendish and More; it is only to highlight the differences in their responses to arguments from disagreement and, in doing so, highlight the corresponding differences in their conceptions of beauty and its relation to an object's material qualities. Both Cavendish and More defend a form of realism about aesthetic value, but Cavendish offers an explanation for the diversity in aesthetic responses that is consistent with

13. In a subsequent work, *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659), the "actuating" substance is what More calls "The Spirit of Nature," which serves as a kind of spiritual intermediary between God and the material world. More carefully: God is the primary cause of material things while the Spirit of Nature is the secondary "emanative" cause of their movements. For discussion, see Boylan 1980; Greene 1962.

14. For a helpful overviews of the role of immaterial spirits in More's metaphysics, see Henry 2020; Reid 2012.

her thoroughgoing materialism, while More takes that diversity to count against materialist views.¹⁵

3. The power of beauty

In Cavendish's "Dialogue," discussed in the preceding section, Beauty's contribution to the exchange with Wit opens with the following lines:

When *I* appeare, *I* strike the *Optick Nerve*,
I wound the *Heart*, *I* make the *Passions* serve.

Here Beauty reminds Wit that it (Beauty) has the power to elicit or influence feeling. This is a point Cavendish repeats several times in several texts. For example, she writes:

Beauty [...] forcibly attract[s] the eye. (PPO, 66)

The context of this remark is one in which Cavendish draws an analogy between beauty's effect on observers and the way in which "the Load-stone attracts onely iron," a comparison she makes elsewhere (see also PL, III, xv):

As for the *Loadstone*, it is not more wonderful in attracting Iron, than Beauty, which admirably attracts the Optick Perception of Human Creatures. (GNP, 225)

Beauty, Wit, Honour, & Riches, are like Load-stones, to draw Love, Admiration, and Respect. (SL, 350)

This link between beauty and magnetism might be taken to suggest—in opposition to the realist reading—that Cavendish holds a response-dependence theory, according to which an object's beauty consists in its power or disposition to bring about affective responses in observers.¹⁶

15. Another difference is that Cavendish disagrees with More that beauty is a "Geometricall" matter. I return to this in §5.

16. One issue, which I set aside here, is how to understand such powers given Cavendish's theory of occasional causation. For discussion of that theory, see Detlefsen 2006; O'Neill 2001, xix–xxxv.

However, we should be careful not to make too much of the remarks on the (so to speak) magnetic power of beauty. We have already seen several passages in which Cavendish draws attention to the many cases in which a beautiful object does *not* elicit admiration and the like from different observers or from the same observer at different times. Of course, it is consistent with the view of beauty as a power to affect—at least, with all but the crudest versions of it—that that power will only manifest in suitable circumstances. Nevertheless, the point remains that Cavendish is as—or more—keen to emphasize a disconnect between beauty and affect as she is to emphasize a connection.

It is also important to note that the claim that the beautiful has the power to elicit admiration is not yet to say that being beautiful *consists* in the possession of such a power. The order of explanation might run in the other direction (see Gorodeisky 2021; Schellekens 2006; Wright 1992, 108ff). That is to say, beautiful objects might have the power to elicit admiration *in virtue of* their beauty. And, indeed, close attention to the texts suggests that this is precisely Cavendish's view. It is telling that Cavendish associates beauty, not with the loadstone's power of attraction—its magnetism—but with the loadstone itself: it is not the power, as one might put it, but the thing that has the power.

This point leads to another.¹⁷ In places, Cavendish suggests that, if something has causal powers, then it is material. Consider, for example:

Body cannot quit power, nor power the body, being all one thing. (PL, 98)

A disease is a real and corporeal being [...] for no immaterial quality will do any hurt. (PL, 350–1)

So, if beauty has causal powers—specifically, powers to occasion feeling—it is material. And if it is material, then, for Cavendish, it is surely real in the operative sense.

17. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing attention to passages in which Cavendish links causal efficacy and perceptibility with materiality.

Relatedly, Cavendish also suggests that, if something is perceivable, then it is material. Consider, for example:

For what objects soever, that are subject to our senses, cannot in any sense be denied to be corporeal. (PL, 12; see also OEP, 177)

Since beauty is perceivable, at least on those occasions on which it elicits responses from observers, it follows that beauty is material, hence, real in the operative sense.

To bolster these points, recall that, in the remark quoted above from *Sociable Letters* (1664), as well as in the PPO passage quoted in §2, Cavendish associates beauty with wit — that is, with intelligence.¹⁸ Both “draw” affective responses. It is evident that Cavendish does not take intelligence to be a response-dependent characteristic, whatever that might mean. As discussed above, Cavendish takes knowledge, hence, intelligence, to be inseparable from matter. Again:

The three chief degrees or parts of Matter, to wit, rational, sensitive and inanimate, which belong to the constitution of Nature, cannot be separated or divided from each other. (OEP, 230)

For Cavendish, then, beauty is not to be identified with its capacity to “draw Love, Admiration, and Respect,” any more than intelligence is to be identified with such a capacity.¹⁹

In addition to wit, Cavendish sets beauty alongside colour. For example, in her comment on More in the *Philosophical Letters*, quoted in §2, Cavendish groups together “Beauty, Colour, Symmetry, and the like” (PL, 160). She also associates beauty with colour in the passage from *Worlds Olio* quoted at the start of §2. These references to colour are very instructive, as I will now explain.

18. Cavendish is not there using “wit” to mean *wittiness* or *humour*.

19. Cavendish also associates beauty with riches in their power to elicit admiration. Riches are not obvious candidates for things that are response-dependent, to say the least.

The broadly dispositionalist, response-dependent view of beauty under consideration here is akin to a view of colour widespread in the early modern tradition, one with which Cavendish was familiar. According to it, and very roughly, an object’s colour is its power to cause suitable sensations in suitably situated observers.²⁰ It is now recognized that Cavendish rejects this view and, in doing so, defends a realist and response-independent theory of colour.²¹ In Cavendish’s words:

Colours are material. (OEP, 60)

Colour is as much a body, as Place and Magnitude. (OEP 62)

Matter, Colour, Figure, and Place, is but one thing, as one and the same Body. (GNP, 214)

Indeed, Cavendish goes as far as to defend the view that all material things are coloured. As she puts it:

As no particle of Matter can be lost in Nature, nor no particular motion, so neither can Colour. (OEP, 62)

However, as Keith Allen stresses (2019, 60), while Cavendish maintains that colours are inseparable from matter, she denies that they are explanatorily basic. Instead, Cavendish holds that colours are dependent on the configurations and movements of material things:

The sensitive motions make such a Figure, which is such a Colour, and such a Figure, which is such a Colour. (PL, 63)

Colours are made by the figurative corporal motions. (OEP, 85)

20. For discussions of early modern views of colour, and the so-called secondary qualities more generally, see Ayers 2011; Downing 2011; Hamou 2011.

21. For comprehensive discussions, see Allen 2019; Chamberlain 2019; West 2022.

In sum: Cavendish views colour as a real quality of things which they possess in virtue of their material qualities, not in virtue of any connection they have to colour perception.²²

To return, in light of this, to the issue at hand: Since Cavendish groups beauty together with colour, and since she is a colour realist, we should expect her to be an aesthetic realist. More specifically, we should expect Cavendish to hold that beauty is a real quality of objects, one that is explanatorily dependent, not on affective responses, but on figure and motion.²³ And, indeed, that expectation is met. In *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), Cavendish talks of “when the sensitive Motions alter in the Figure of the Body, and the Beauty decays” (PF, 34).²⁴ And I have already cited Cavendish’s claims that beauty “result[s] from the meer motion of the matter” (PL, 160) and is “framed and composed [...] in the Lineaments, and Symmetries, and Motion of the Body, or the Colour of the Skin” (WO, 91). In this last remark, Cavendish suggests that beauty is in part dependent, not only on motion and figure, but also on colour. So, just as colour is less fundamental than motion and figure, on Cavendish’s view, so beauty is less fundamental than colour.²⁵

Does Cavendish also think that beauty is like colour in being inseparable from matter? That is, does she hold that all material bodies are beautiful in the way that they are coloured? I will return to this in closing (§5). For now, I will return to the analogy between beautiful objects and magnets with which I began this section. While Cavendish takes both to have the power to occasion responses, she also contrasts the ways in which they do so. According to Cavendish, the loadstone

22. Chamberlain (2019) argues that, for Cavendish, colour is irreducible. I consider the question of whether Cavendish takes beauty to be irreducible in §4.

23. For an influential discussion of the dependence of the aesthetic on the non-aesthetic, see Sibley 1965.

24. Again: “When the sensitive motions alter in the figure of the body [...] the beauty decays” (PPO, 14).

25. As an anonymous referee pointed out, there are passages that suggest Cavendish also considers motion to be less fundamental than matter and figure (see GNP, 2–3; PPO, 30). For discussion of Cavendish on motion, see Peterman 2019b.

operates via “supremacy” while beauty engages via “sympathy” (PPO, 66). She explains the relevant notion of sympathy as follows:

When there is the like *motion* of *Rational Spirits* in *opposite figures*, then there is a like *understanding*, and *disposition*. Just as when there is the like *Motion* in the *sensitive spirits*; then there is the like constitution of body. So when there is the like quantity laid in the same *Symmetry*, then the *figures* agree in the same proportions, and *Lineaments of Figures*.

The reason, that the *rational spirits* in one *Figure*, are delighted with the outward form of another *Figure*, is, that the *motions* of those *sensitive Spirits*, which move in that *figure*, agree with the motion of the *rational spirits* in the other. This is love of beauty. (PPO, 14; also PF, 34).

In general, according to Cavendish, sympathy involves a correspondence in the movements and figures of two things. In the particular case in which this correspondence obtains between a rational part of matter and a sensitive part of matter, Cavendish claims, this constitutes a positive affective response — “delight” or “love” — the object of which is beauty.

This introduces two important ideas. First, as noted above, Cavendish takes beauty to have its basis in an object’s material qualities. Her remarks on sympathy reveal, more specifically, that Cavendish takes beauty to depend on the harmonious proportions of figures and movements (and colours) in the sensitive part of matter. As she puts it elsewhere:

When the *Figurative Motions* move (as I may say for expression sake) curiously, the *Body* is neatly shaped, and is, as we say, beautiful. (GNP, 43)

When the *Sensitive Corporeal Motions* move with curiosity, (as I may say) then there are perfect *Senses*, exact

Proportions, equal Temperaments; and that, Man calls
Beauty. (GNP, 85)²⁶

While they disagree as to what is responsible for beauty, as discussed above, on this point Cavendish agrees with More. He too associates beauty with “symmetry and gratefull porportion” (1653, 64).

Does this mean that Cavendish is an *aesthetic formalist*, in the sense that she thinks that the aesthetic value of an object depends only on its formal or structural features, as opposed to its representational or expressive features?²⁷ This is an interesting issue but not one that I will explore at any length, as it is tangential to the question of realism. Nevertheless, I will briefly warn against a formalist interpretation.

Returning again to the passage from *Worlds Olio* quoted at the start of §2, Cavendish suggests there that whether a person finds a face beautiful might depend on whether it conveys sadness or merriment, hence, on its expressive qualities. Moreover, as broached in the introduction, it is fundamental to Cavendish's metaphysics that figure and motion are in some sense inseparable from knowledge and thought. An idea, for Cavendish, just is “a natural Figure” (OEP, “To the Reader”). So, at the very least, it would be hasty to take Cavendish to be relating beauty to the figurative to the exclusion of the representational.

To return to the main thread, the second new idea to emerge from Cavendish's discussion of sympathy is the following: Cavendish takes aesthetic admiration to consist in a kind of higher-order proportionality — a rational response that is itself proportional to the sensuous proportionality.²⁸ In this way, beauty figures in Cavendish's account of

26. Compare also: “*Motions*, though their crosse, may well agree, / As oft in Musick make a Harmony” (PPO, 4; cp. PPO, 16; WO, 91).

27. In the history of aesthetics, Hanslick (1854) and Bell (1914) are frequently held up as clear proponents of aesthetic formalism. The view is also attributed to Kant (1793), though often more cautiously (see, for example, Mothersill 1984, 218–26; Wood 2005, 158–9). For a critical overview of formalism, see Carroll 2005.

28. Compare: “The notes in musick agree with the motions of passions, and the motions of several thoughts, as some notes sympathize with passions, and with the several thoughts” (PPO, 167).

what constitutes aesthetic admiration.²⁹ For Cavendish, then, beauty is prior in the order of explanation to affects, contrary to proponents of response-dependence theories.

Cavendish's claim that the response to beauty is a rational one might be taken to suggest that that response is cognitive, as opposed to affective. But Cavendish does not oppose reason and feeling in this way. The rational mind encompasses “passions,” such as “delight,” “desire,” and “love,” which Cavendish contrasts with sensory or bodily “appetites” (GNP, 63–4).³⁰

4. Beauty as one and as many

I will now consider another passage which might seem to count against attributing aesthetic realism to Cavendish. In the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), and in relation to Plato, Cavendish writes:³¹

As for his Ethicks, where he speaks of Beauty, Strength, Proportion, &c. I'lle onely say this, That of all these, there are different sorts; for there's the strength of the Mind, and the strength of the Body; and these are so various in their kinds and particulars, that they cannot be exactly defined; also Beauty, considering onely that which is of the body, there are so many several sorts, consisting in features, shapes and proportions of bodies, as it is impossible to describe properly what Beauty is, and wherein it really consists; for what appears beautiful to some, may seem ill-favoured to others; and what seems extraordinary fair or handsom to one, may have but an indifferent character of another; so that in my opinion, there's

29. For a recent development of this sort of idea, see Hills 2022.

30. This marks another respect in which Cavendish's aesthetic theory differs from Hume's (1757). For Hume, the faculty of taste is not a rational faculty.

31. I do not here consider whether Cavendish's remarks are faithful to Plato's texts.

no such thing as a Universal Beauty, which may gain a general applause of all, and be judged alike by every one that views it; nay, not by all immortal souls, neither in body, nor mind; for what one likes, another may dislike; what one loves, another may hate; what one counts good, another may proclaim bad; what one names just, another may call unjust. (OEP, "Observations upon the Opinions of Some Ancient Philosophers," 12–13)

In a note on this text, David Cunning (2019b) says the following:³²

This passage might recall the similar passages in Hobbes and Spinoza in which qualities like goodness and badness are not regarded as inherent properties of actions or objects or states of affairs; instead, goodness and badness are reducible (in a very complicated way) to the attitudes and preferences of nature's inhabitants.

By extension, one might think, the passage suggests that beauty is not an "inherent property" but is in some way "reducible" to the aesthetic judgements and affects of "nature's inhabitants." Whether or not Cuning intends his remark to generalize in this way, it is a generalization worth exploring.

I do not here take a stand on whether Cavendish is a moral realist of some sort. But I will argue that the passage does not count against my reading of Cavendish as an aesthetic realist. In principle, realism about the one domain does not dictate realism about the other, at least not without further ado.³³

The first thing to note about the discussion of Plato is that Cavendish explicitly states there that beauty consists in bodily features

and proportions. Surely, one might think, this is incompatible with the view that they consist in responses to those features.

By way of reply, a proponent of a non-realist reading might point out that Cavendish also says (in the same breath!) that it is impossible to say in what beauty consists. Of course, if this counts against the claim that Cavendish takes beauty to be grounded in an object's figurative qualities, it counts equally against the claim that she takes it to be grounded in a subject's aesthetic judgements or feelings.

The challenge is how to square Cavendish's seemingly contradictory remarks about the constitution (or otherwise) of beauty. The solution, I suggest, lies in Cavendish's claim that there are "many several sorts" of beauty (OEP, 12–13). According to Cavendish, while there is a general dependence of beauty in figure, proportion, etc., and while in a given case a person might be able to explain why an object is beautiful by reference to its configuration, beauty cannot be identified with that specific configuration, since other configurations might also be beautiful. Moreover, according to Cavendish, we (theorists) are not in a position to enumerate which specific configurations give rise to beauty or to state in general terms what those configurations that do give rise to beauty have in common.³⁴

In turn, Cavendish gives two explanations for this predicament. The first returns us to a familiar theme — the diversity in sensibilities. Given their variable preferences and tastes, as well as their variable sensory and rational capacities, different people³⁵ will recognize beauties that others do not recognize. By the same token, some people will judge certain things to be beautiful while others fail to do so, perhaps instead judging them not to be beautiful. So, when Cavendish says that there is no "Universal Beauty," she means none which will be universally acknowledged as such.

The second reason that we cannot fully specify the determinate grounds of beauty, according to Cavendish, is that nature is infinite in

32. More fully: Cuning's (2019b) note (n. 29) on the above passage from OEP directs us to another note (n. 5) on a passage from PPO, concerning which Cuning makes the quoted remark. It is clear that Cuning takes his remark to apply equally to the OEP passage.

33. On this issue, see Hanson 2018; Evers 2019.

34. This is related to the debate over the role of general principles in aesthetics (see Sibley 1983; also Bergqvist 2010; Kirwin 2011).

35. Or the same person at different times.

its (actual and possible) material configurations, hence, in its (actual and possible) beauties. As finite creatures, we cannot have complete knowledge of those configurations, hence, of those beauties. Cavendish expresses this point in relation to Plato's ethics when she writes:

No particular knows the just measures of nature. (OEP, "Observations," 13)

By extension, no particular knows the beautiful proportions of nature.

This point is a manifestation of a more general theme that figures prominently in Cavendish's philosophy — namely, the limits of human knowledge and understanding.³⁶ Consider these representative passages:

Nature hath infinite Varieties of Motions to form Matters with, that Man knows not, nor can guess at. (WO, 177)

How is it possible that one particular Creature can know all the obscure and hidden infinite varieties of Nature? [...] Nature being Material, and consequently dividable, her parts have but divided knowledges, and none can claim a Universal infinite knowledg. (OEP, "To the Reader")

And this is to be noted, That the variousness, or variety of Actions [in nature], causes varieties of Lives and Knowledges: For, as the Self-moving parts alter, or vary their Actions; so they alter and vary their Lives and Knowledges; but there cannot be an Infinite particular Knowledg, nor an Infinite particular Life; because Matter is divisible and compoundable. (GNP, 6–7)

I suggest, then, that Cavendish's comments on Plato are consistent with interpreting her as an aesthetic realist. Indeed, that interpretation makes it possible to reconcile what would otherwise appear to be contradictory claims Cavendish makes about beauty, and to do so in a

36. For discussion of this theme, see Boyle 2015; Cunning 2019a, chap. 1.

way that accords with Cavendish's repeated emphasis throughout her work on our epistemic limitations.

One might ask whether the passage on Plato suggests that Cavendish takes beauty to be, not just real, but irreducible, in the sense that there are no true, non-trivial principles identifying beauty with some property, or disjunction of properties, specified in non-aesthetic vocabulary (cp. Cohen 2009). This certainly accords with Cavendish's claim that "it is impossible to describe" in what beauty consists.

While the view that beauty is irreducible in the above sense is consistent with Cavendish's remarks on aesthetic value, and with her philosophical commitments more generally, the theme of epistemic finitude points towards a less committal position: If there are linking principles of the relevant sort, they are not available to or within the ken of "particulars" like us. On this view, as one might put it, it is impossible *for us* to describe in what beauty consists.

5. The order and beauty of nature

Cavendish is a realist about aesthetic value in the sense that she takes beauty to be a real, response-independent quality of objects. In this paper, I have motivated and defended this interpretation, in large part through consideration of passages that might seem to count against it. In doing so, I have teased out several additional elements to Cavendish's position, a position that remains remarkably stable throughout her philosophical writings:

- Beauty is explanatorily dependent on the proportionality of the motions, figures, and colours of material things, not on our affective responses to them.
- The nature of our affective responses — such as admiration and delight — are to be understood in terms of beauty, not vice versa.
- Beauty is multiply realizable and, likely due to the limitations of our cognitive and affective capacities,

we are not in a position to specify all the determinate material configurations that are beautiful or capture in general terms when some material configuration will be beautiful.

This constellation of views is distinct, I have argued, not only from the non-realist position of Descartes, one shared by later figures in the early modern tradition, but also from the realist position of More.

In closing, I will return to an issue raised but not addressed in §3. Does Cavendish take beauty to be inseparable from matter in the way that motion, knowledge, and colour are? I will approach this question in an indirect fashion. Recall that, like More, Cavendish associates beauty with proportionality and symmetry among the figures and motions of sensitive matter. However, unlike More, Cavendish does not believe that nature conforms to anything like a 'Geometrical Scheme'.³⁷ Cavendish dismisses such notions when she writes:

Motion hath not Spare time as to Move or to Work so Curiously, as to Shape and Form every Particular Part of every Particular Creature so Exactly, as to Form them Mathematically or Geometrically. (PPOII, 248)³⁸

How, then, does Cavendish understand proportionality or symmetry, if not in geometric terms? Addressing this question will not resolve the issue of the ubiquity of beauty for Cavendish, but it will reveal on what that issue turns.

One way to get a handle on proportionality is to think about cases in which it is (or appears to be) absent. Cavendish contrasts "beautiful Creatures in Nature" with both "ugly Creatures" and "Monsters".³⁹

That which is ugly is that which is deformed, and that is deformed that is misshapen, and that is misshapen that

37. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this observation.

38. For discussion of Cavendish's antipathy to mathematics, see Peterman 2019a.

39. Thanks to Deborah Boyle for the prompt to consider Cavendish's remarks on monstrosity.

is made crooked, or awry, or one part bigger or less than another. And those Creatures are to be called Monsters, that have more parts than they should have, or fewer, or when their parts do not sit in their proper place; as for example, if a Man should have two heads, or four Legs, or more Hands, or Feet, or Fingers, or Toes, or Eyes, or Noses, or Ears, or the like; or if the Eyes should be placed in the Breast, in the Neck, or Mouth. (WO, 137; see also GNP, 258)

The ugly, then, is a creature whose parts are not in proportion or harmonious. And this is also true of the monstrous. A monster's parts, according to Cavendish, do not move in ways that are in proportion to or harmonious with one another. As she explains elsewhere, "being Parts of Nature, they must associate; but, their Associations are after a confused and perturbed manner" (GNP, 282).

If beauty is a matter of proportion, then it is to be expected that ugliness and monstrosity are a matter of disproportion. However, in her discussion of the monstrous, Cavendish introduces a new idea, one which serves to shed light on what it is to be proportional or otherwise. "The conception and generation of a Monster," she writes, "proceeds from an irregular and unusual change of motions" (PL, 229). In a world that has no regularities:

Neither can there be orderly or distinct kinds and sorts; by reason that Order and Distinction, are Regularities. Wherefore, every particular Creature of that World, hath a monstrous and different Form. (GNP, 282)

An entity is monstrous, then, if its parts are not configured and do not move in accordance with natural regularities, hence, with the natural order. By implication, for Cavendish, an entity is beautiful only if its parts are configured and move in accordance with the natural order.

So, while Cavendish associates beauty with proportionality, she does not understand this in geometric terms. Rather, proportionality

is a matter of conforming to regularities in nature.⁴⁰ Likewise, for Cavendish, symmetry consists in a kind of natural equilibrium among the parts of nature. In this way, Cavendish thinks that there is what one might call a *measure* or *standard* of beauty, namely, the order of nature, departure from which results in ugliness or, worse, monstrosity.

This observation not only illuminates the relations among key notions in Cavendish's aesthetic theory, but also offers a way to frame the question of whether Cavendish thinks that beauty — like knowledge, figure, and colour — is inseparable from matter.

There is presently a dispute among scholars as to whether, for Cavendish, there is any genuine irregularity or disorder in nature, as opposed to the mere appearance of irregularity and disorder.⁴¹ There are several passages in which Cavendish seems to say that there is none. For example, Cavendish writes of nature's "orderly Government in all particular productions, changes and dissolutions, so that all Creatures in their particular kinds, do move and work as Nature pleases, orders and directs" (OEP, 108). Consider also:

There is not a Confusion in Nature, but an orderly Course therein. (PPO, 5)

It is also the case, however, that Cavendish frequently refers to disorders or irregularities in nature, and in a way that suggests they occur. In addition to the passages on monsters quoted above, consider, for example:

Irregular actions are as natural as Regular. (GNP, 106)

When the sensitive spirits are regular, the rational is regular, but not at all times, for some times the one is regular, the other is not. (PPO, 114–15)

40. When Cavendish talks of snow and ice as forming triangles and squares, she explains, "I do not mean an exact Mathematical Triangle or Square, but such a one as is proper for their figures" (OEP, 114).

41. For different perspectives on this issue, see Boyle 2018; Cunning 2019a; Dettlfsen 2007; Sarahson 2010.

Resolving this interpretive issue is well beyond the scope of this paper. Rather than attempt to do so, I will end with a conditional and cautious claim. If Cavendish believes that everything in nature is in order and thereby in proportion, then she also believes that everything in nature is beautiful.⁴²

Abbreviations

Unless stated otherwise, all references are to the versions of the texts hosted by Early English Books Online (accessed 18/06/2021): <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/>

GNP: *Ground of Natural Philosophy Divided into Thirteen Parts: with an Appendix Containing Five parts: Written by the Duchess of Newcastle.* London: Printed by A. Maxwell, 1668.

OEP: *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy to which is Added The Description of a New Blazing World: Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princesse, the Duchess of Newcastle.* London: Printed by A. Maxwell, 1666.

Poems and Fancies: *Poems, and Fancies Written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle.* London: Printed by T. R. for J. Martin, and J. Allestrye, 1653.

PF: *Philosophicall Fancies. Written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Newcastle.* London: Printed by Tho: Roycroft, for J. Martin, and J. Allestrye, at the Bell in St. Pauls Church-yard, 1653.

PL: *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, 1664.

42. For feedback on earlier versions of this material, I am grateful to Deborah Boyle, three anonymous referees, and audiences at the University of Southampton and the 79th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Montreal.

- PPO:** *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions Written by Her Excellency the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle*. London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye. 1655.
- PPOII:** *Philosophical and Physical Opinions Written by The Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*. London: Printed by William Wilson, 1663. Available at: <https://cavendish-ppo.ku.edu/texts/philosophical-and-physical-opinions/>
- SL CCXI:** *Sociable Letters Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*. London: Printed by William Wilson, 1664.
- WO:** *The Worlds Olio Written by the Right Honorable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle*. London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655.

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