

MARGARET CAVENDISH,
DUCHESS OF NEWCASTLE

Observations upon Experimental Philosophy

EDITED BY

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To the Reader

Courteous Reader,

I do ingenuously confess, that both for want of learning and reading philosophical authors, I have not expressed myself in my philosophical works, especially in my *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, so clearly and plainly as I might have done, had I had the assistance of art, and the practice of reading other authors: But though my conceptions seem not so perspicuous in the mentioned book of philosophical opinions; yet my *Philosophical Letters*, and these present *Observations*, will, I hope, render it more intelligible: which I have writ, not out of an ambitious humour, to fill the world with useless books, but to explain and illustrate my own opinions. For, what benefit would it be to me, if I should put forth a work, which by reason of its obscure and hard notions, could not be understood? especially it being well known, that natural philosophy is the hardest of all human learning, by reason it consists only in contemplation; and to make the philosophical conceptions of one's mind known to others, is more difficult than to make them believe, that if A. B. be equal to C. D. then E. F. is equal to A. B. because it is equal to C. D. But that I am not versed in learning, nobody, I hope, will blame me for it, since it is sufficiently known, that our sex being not suffered to be instructed in schools and universities, cannot be bred up to it. I will not say, but many of our sex may have as much wit, and be capable of learning as well as men; but since they want instructions, it is not possible they should attain to it: for learning is artificial, but wit is natural. Wherefore, when I began to read the philosophical works of other authors, I was so troubled with their hard words and expressions at first, that had they not been explained to me, and had I not found out some of

them by the context and connexion of the sense, I should have been far enough to seek; for their hard words did more obstruct, than instruct me. The truth is, if anyone intends to write philosophy, either in English, or any other language, he ought to consider the propriety of the language, as much as the subject he writes of; or else to what purpose would it be to write? If you do write philosophy in English, and use all the hardest words and expressions which none but scholars are able to understand, you had better to write it in Latin; but if you will write for those that do not understand Latin, your reason will tell you, that you must explain those hard words, and English them in the easiest manner you can; What are words but marks of things? and what are philosophical terms, but to express the conceptions of one's mind in that science? And truly I do not think that there is any language so poor, which cannot do that; wherefore those that fill their writings with hard words, put the horses behind the coach, and instead of making hard things easy, make easy things hard, which especially in our English writers is a great fault; neither do I see any reason for it, but that they think to make themselves more famous by those that admire all what they do not understand, though it be nonsense; but I am not of their mind, and therefore although I do understand some of their hard expressions now, yet I shun them as much in my writings as is possible for me to do, and all this, that they may be the better understood by all, learned as well as unlearned; by those that are professed philosophers as well as by those that are none: And though I could employ some time in studying all the hardest phrases and words in other authors, and write as learnedly perhaps as they; yet will I not deceive the world, nor trouble my conscience by being a mountebank in learning, but will rather prove naturally wise than artificially foolish; for at best I should but obscure my opinions, and render them more intricate instead of clearing and explaining them; but if my readers should spy any errors slipt into my writings for want of art and learning, I hope they'll be so just as not to censure me too severely for them, but express their wisdom in preferring the kernel before the shells.

It is not possible that a young student, when first he comes to the university, should hope to be master of arts in one month, or one year; and so do I likewise not persuade myself, that my philosophy being new, and but lately brought forth, will at first sight prove master of understanding, nay, it may be, not in this age; but if God favour her, she may attain to it in after-times: And if she be slighted now and buried in

silence, she may perhaps rise more gloriously hereafter; for her ground being sense and reason, she may meet with an age where she will be more regarded, than she is in this.

But, Courteous Reader, all what I request of you at present, is, that if you have a mind to understand my philosophical conceptions truly, you would be pleased to read them not by parcels, here a little, and there a little, (for I have found it by myself, that when I read not a book thoroughly from beginning to end, I cannot well understand the author's design, but may easily mistake his meaning; I mean, such books as treat of philosophy, history, etc. where all parts depend upon each other.) But if you'll give an impartial judgment of my philosophy, read it all, or else spare your censures; especially do I recommend to you my *Philosophical Opinions*, which contain the grounds and principles of my philosophy, but since they were published before I was versed in the reading of other authors, I desire you to join my *Philosophical Letters*, and these *Observations* to them, which will serve as commentaries to explain what may seem obscure in the mentioned *Opinions*; but before all, read this following "Argumental Discourse," wherein are contained the principles and grounds of natural philosophy, especially concerning the constitutive parts of nature, and their properties and actions; as also be pleased to peruse the later discourse of the first part of this book, which treats of perception;¹⁰ for perception being the chief and general action of nature, has occasioned me to be more prolix in explaining it, than any other subject; you'll find that I go much by the way of argumentation, and framing objections and answers; for I would fain hinder and obstruct as many objections as could be made against the grounds of my opinions; but it being impossible to resolve all (for, as nature and her parts and actions are infinite, so may also endless objections be raised) I have endeavoured only to set down such as I thought might be most material; but this I find, that there is no objection but one may find an answer to it; and as soon as I have made an answer to one objection, another offers itself again, which shows not only that nature's actions are infinite, but that they are poised and balanced, so that they cannot run into extremes.

However I do not applaud myself so much, as to think that my works can be without errors, for nature is not a deity, but her parts are often irregular: and how is it possible that one particular creature can know all

¹⁰ Probably a reference to chs. 35–37; but see ch. 1 as well.

the obscure and hidden infinite varieties of nature? if the truth of nature were so easily known, we had no need to take so much pains in searching after it; but nature being material, and consequently divisible, her parts have but divided knowledges, and none can claim an universal infinite knowledge. Nevertheless, although I may err in my arguments, or for want of artificial terms; yet I believe the ground of my opinion is true, because it is sense and reason.

I found after the perusal of this present book, that several places therein might have been more perspicuously delivered, and better cleared; but since it is impossible that all things can be so exact, that they should not be subject to faults and imperfections; (for as the greatest beauties are not without moles, so the best books are seldom without errors;) I entreat the ingenuous reader to interpret them to the best sense; for they are not so material, but that either by the context or connexion of the whole discourse, or by comparing one place with another, the true meaning thereof may easily be understood; and to this end I have set down this following explanation of such places, as in the perusal I have observed, whereby the rest may also easily be mended.

When I say, that “discourse shall sooner find out nature’s corporeal figurative motions, than art shall inform the senses”;^a by discourse, I do not mean speech, but an arguing of the mind, or a rational enquiry into the causes of natural effects; for discourse is as much as reasoning with ourselves; which may very well be done without speech or language, as being only an effect or action of reason.

When I say, that “art may make pewter, brass, etc.”^b I do not mean as if these figures were artificial, and not natural; but my meaning is, that if art imitates nature in producing of artificial figures, they are most commonly such as are of mixt natures, which I call hermaphroditical.

When I say, that “respiration is a reception and emission of parts through the pores or passages proper to each particular figure, so that when some parts issue, others enter”;^c I do not mean at one and the same time, or always through the same passages; for, as there is variety of natural creatures and figures, and of their perceptions; so of the manner of their perceptions, and of their passages and pores; all which no particular creature is able exactly to know, or determine: And therefore when I add in the following chapter, that “nature has more ways of

^a Part 1, c. 2, pag. 6. [1, ch. 2, p. 49.]

^b C. 3, pag. 8. [1, ch. 3, p. 50.]

^c C. 4, pag. 15. [1, ch. 4, p. 54.]

composing and dividing of parts, than by the way of drawing in, and sending forth by pores"; I mean, that not all parts of nature have the like respirations: The truth is, it is enough to know in general, that there is respiration in all parts of nature, as a general or universal action; and that this respiration is nothing else but a composition and division of parts; but how particular respirations are performed, none but infinite nature is capable to know.

When I say that "there is a difference between respiration and perception; and that perception is an action of figuring or patterning; but respiration an action of reception and emission of parts":^d first, I do not mean, that all perception is made by patterning or imitation; but I speak only of the perception of the exterior senses in animals, at least in man, which I observe to be made by patterning or imitation; for, as no creature can know the infinite perceptions in nature, so he cannot describe what they are, or how they are made. Next, I do not mean, that respiration is not a perceptive action; for if perception be a general and universal action in nature, as well as respiration, both depending upon the composition and division of parts; it is impossible but that all actions of nature must be perceptive, by reason perception is an exterior knowledge of foreign parts and actions; and there can be no commerce or intercourse, nor no variety of figures and actions; no productions, dissolutions, changes, and the like, without perception; for how shall parts work and act, without having some knowledge or perception of each other? Besides, wheresoever is self-motion, there must of necessity be also perception; for self-motion is the cause of all exterior perception. But my meaning is, that the animal, at least human respiration, which is a receiving of foreign parts, and discharging or venting of its own, in an animal or human figure or creature, is not the action of animal perception, properly so called; that is, the perception of its exterior senses, as seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling; which action of perception is properly made by way of patterning and imitation, by the innate, figurative motions of those animal creatures, and not by receiving either the figures of the exterior objects into the sensitive organs, or by sending forth some invisible rays from the organ to the object; nor by pressure and reaction. Nevertheless, as I said, every action of nature is a knowing and perceptive action; and so is respiration, which of necessity presupposes a knowledge of exterior

^d C. 5, pag. 16. [I, ch. 5, p. 55.]

parts; especially those that are concerned in the same action, and can no ways be performed without perception of each other.

When I say, that “if all men’s opinions and fancies were rational, there would not be such variety in nature as we perceive there”;^e by rational I mean regular, according to the vulgar way of expression by which a rational opinion is called, that which is grounded upon regular sense and reason; and thus, rational is opposed to irregular: Nevertheless, irregular fancies and opinions are made by the rational parts of matter, as well as those that are regular; and therefore in a philosophical and strict sense, one may call irregular opinions as well rational, as those that are regular; but according to the vulgar way of expression, as I said, it is sooner understood of *regular*, than of *irregular* opinions, fancies or conceptions.

When I say, that “none of nature’s parts can be called inanimate, or soulless”;^f I do not mean the constitutive parts of nature, which are, as it were, the ingredients whereof nature consists, and is made up; whereof there is an inanimate part or degree of matter, as well as animate; but I mean the parts or effects of this composed body of nature, of which I say, that none can be called inanimate; for, though some philosophers think that nothing is animate, or has life in nature, but animals and vegetables; yet it is probable, that since nature consists of a commixture of animate and inanimate matter, and is self-moving, there can be no part or particle of this composed body of nature, were it an atom, that may be called inanimate, by reason there is none that has not its share of animate, as well as inanimate matter, and the commixture of these degrees being so close, it is impossible one should be without the other.

When enumerating the requisites of the perception of sight in animals, I say, that “if one of them be wanting, there is either no perception at all, or it is an imperfect perception”;^g I mean, there is either no animal perception of seeing, or else it is an irregular perception.

When I say, that “as the sensitive perception knows some of the other parts of nature by their effects; so the rational perceives some effects of the omnipotent power of God”;^h my meaning is not, as if the sensitive part of matter has no knowledge at all of God; for since all parts of Nature, even the inanimate, have an innate and fixt self-knowledge, it is probable that they may also have an interior self-knowledge of the existency of the eternal and omnipotent God, as the author of nature: But

^e chap. 15, pag. 44. [I, ch. 15, p. 71.]

^f C. 18, pa. 47. [I, ch. 16, p. 72.]

^g Cap. 20, pag. 63. [I, ch. 20, p. 82.]

^h Cap. 21, pag. 77. [I, ch. 21, p. 90.]

because the rational part is the subtlest, purest, finest, and highest degree of matter; it is most conformable to truth, that it has also the highest and greatest knowledge of God, as far as a natural part can have; for God being immaterial, it cannot properly be said, that sense can have a perception of him, by reason he is not subject to the sensitive perception of any creature, or part of nature; and therefore all the knowledge which natural creatures can have of God, must be inherent in every part of nature; and the perceptions which we have of the effects of nature, may lead us to some conceptions of that supernatural, infinite, and incomprehensible deity, not what it is in its essence or nature, but that it is existent, and that nature has a dependence upon it, as an eternal servant has upon an eternal master.

But some might say, How is it possible that a corporeal finite part, can have a conception of an incorporeal infinite being; by reason that which comprehends, must needs be bigger than that which is comprehended? Besides, no part of nature can conceive beyond itself, that is, beyond what is natural or material; and this proves, that at least the rational part, or the mind, must be immaterial to conceive a deity? To which I answer, that no part of nature can or does conceive the essence of God, or what God is in himself; but it conceives only, that there is such a divine being which is supernatural: And therefore it cannot be said, that a natural figure can comprehend God; for it is not the comprehending of the substance of God, or its patterning out, (since God having no body, is without all figure) that makes the knowledge of God ; but I do believe, that the knowledge of the existency of God, as I mentioned before, is innate, and inherent in nature and all her parts, as much as self-knowledge is.

Speaking of the difference between oil and other liquors;ⁱ for the better understanding of that place, I thought fit to insert this note: *Flame* is fluid, but not liquid, nor wet: *Oil* is fluid and liquid, but not wet; but *water* is both fluid, liquid and wet. *Oil* will turn into flame, and increase it; but *water* is so quite opposite to flame, that if a sufficient quantity be poured upon it, it will totally extinguish it.

When I say, that “sense and reason shall be the ground of my philosophy, and not particular natural effects”;^j my meaning is, that I do not intend to make particular creatures or figures, the principle of all the

ⁱ Cap. 24, pag. 84. [I, ch. 24, p. 95.]

^j Cap. 25, pag. 94. [I, ch. 25, p. 100.]

infinite effects of nature, as some other philosophers do; for there is no such thing as a prime or principal figure of nature, all being but effects of one cause. But my ground is sense and reason, that is, I make self-moving matter, which is sensitive and rational, the only cause and principle of all natural effects.

When it is said, that “ice, snow, hail, etc. return into their former figure of water, whensoever they dissolve”;^k I mean, when they dissolve their exterior figures, that is, change their actions.

When I say that the “exterior object is the agent; and the sentient body, the patient”;^l I do not mean, that the object does chiefly work upon the sentient, or is the immediate cause of the perception in the sentient body, and that the sentient suffers the agent to act upon it; but I retain only those words, because they are used in schools: But as for their actions, I am quite of a contrary opinion, to wit, that the sentient body is the principal agent, and the external body the patient; for the motions of the sentient in the act of perception, do figure out or imitate the motions of the object, so that the object is but as a copy that is figured out, or imitated by the sentient, which is the chief agent in all transforming and perceptive actions that are made by way of patterning or imitation.

When I say, that “one finite part can undergo infinite changes and alterations”;^m I do not mean one single part, whereof there is no such thing in nature; but I mean, one part may be infinitely divided and composed with other parts; for as there are infinite changes, compositions, and divisions in nature, so there must be of parts; there being no variety but of parts; and though parts be finite, yet the changes may be infinite; for the finiteness of parts is but concerning the bulk or quantity of their figures; and they are called finite, by reason they have limited and circumscribed figures; nevertheless, as for duration, their parts being the same with the body of nature, are as eternal, and infinite as nature herself, and thus are subject to infinite and eternal changes.

When I say “a world of gold is as active interiorly, as a world of air is exteriorly”;ⁿ I mean, it is as much subject to changes and alterations, as air; for, gold though its motions are not perceptible by our exterior senses, yet it has no less motion than the activest body of nature; only its motions are of another kind than the motions of air, or of some other bodies; for, retentive motions are as much motions, as dispersing, or

^k Cap. 27, pag. 110. [I, ch. 27, p. 110.]

^m Cap. 31, pag. 139. [I, ch. 31, p. 126.]

^l Cap. 29, pag. 129. [I, ch. 29, p. 121.]

ⁿ Ibid., p. 140. [I, ch. 31, p. 128.]

some other sorts of motions, although not so visible to our perception as these; and therefore we cannot say, that gold is more at rest than other creatures of nature; for there is no such thing as rest in nature; although there be degrees of motion.

When I say, that “the parts of nature do not drive or press upon each other, but that all natural actions are free and easy, and not constrained”;^o my meaning is not, as if there was no pressing or driving of parts at all in nature, but only that they are not the universal or principal actions of nature’s body, as it is the opinion of some philosophers, who think there is no other motion in nature, but by pressure of parts upon parts:¹¹ Nevertheless, there is pressure and reaction in nature, because there are infinite sorts of motions.

Also, when I say in the same place, that “nature’s actions are voluntary”; I do not mean, that all actions are made by rote, and none by imitation; but, by voluntary actions I understand self actions; that is, such actions whose principle of motion is within themselves, and doth not proceed from such an exterior agent, as doth the motion of the inanimate part of matter; which, having no motion of itself, is moved by the animate parts, yet so, that it receives no motion from them, but moves by the motion of the animate parts, and not by an infused motion into them; for the animate parts in carrying the inanimate along with them, lose nothing of their own motion, nor impart no motion to the inanimate; no more than a man who carries a stick in his hand, imparts motion to the stick, and loses so much as he imparts; but they bear the inanimate parts along with them, by virtue of their own self-motion, and remain self-moving parts, as well as the inanimate remain without motion.

Again, when I make a distinguishment between voluntary actions, and exterior perceptions;^p my meaning is not, as if voluntary actions were not made by perceptive parts; for whatsoever is self-moving and active, is perceptive; and therefore since the voluntary actions of sense and reason are made by self-moving parts, they must of necessity be perceptive actions: but I speak of perceptions properly so called, which are occasioned by foreign parts; and to those I oppose voluntary actions, which

^o Cap. 31, pag. 138. [1, ch. 31, p. 127.] ^p Cap. 37, pag. 212. [1, ch. 37, p. 170.]

¹¹ A reference to the view of the mechanical philosophers, who held that all natural change is explainable in terms of the impact of corporeal particles upon one another; see the Introduction for a discussion of Cavendish’s criticisms of mechanism.

are not occasioned, but made by rote;¹² as for example, the perception of sight in animals, when outward objects present themselves to the optic sense to be perceived, the perception of the sentient is an occasioned perception; but whensoever, either in dreams, or in distempers, the sensitive motions of the same organ, make such or such figures, without any presentation of exterior objects, then that action cannot properly be called an exterior perception; but it is a voluntary action of the sensitive motions in the organ of sight, not made after an outward pattern, but by rote, and of their own accord.

When I say that “ignorance is caused by division, and knowledge by composition of parts”;^q I do not mean an interior, innate self-knowledge, which is and remains in every part and particle of nature, both in composition and division; for wheresoever is matter, there is life and self-knowledge; nor can a part lose self-knowledge, any more than it can lose life, although it may change from having such or such a particular life and knowledge; for to change and lose, are different things; but I mean an exterior, perceptive knowledge of foreign parts, caused by self-motion; of which I say that, as a union or combination of parts, makes knowledge, so a division or separation of parts, makes ignorance.

When I say “there’s difference of sense and reason in the parts of one composed figure”^{13, r} I mean not, as if there were different degrees of sense, and different degrees of reason in their own substance or matter; for sense is but sense, and reason is but reason; but my meaning is, that there are different, sensitive and rational motions, which move differently in the different parts of one composed creature.

These are (Courteous Reader) the scruples which I thought might puzzle your understanding in this present work, which I have cleared in the best manner I could: and if you should meet with any other of the like nature, my request is, you would be pleased to consider well the grounds of my philosophy; and, as I desired of you before, read all before you pass your judgments and censures; for then, I hope, you’ll find but few obstructions, since one place will give you an explanation of the other. In doing thus, you’ll neither wrong yourself, nor injure the authoress, who should be much satisfied, if she could benefit your knowledge in the least;

^q Cap. 9, pag. 289. [II, ch. 9, p. 214.] ^r Cap. 15, pag. 303. [II, ch. 15, p. 223.]

¹² The distinction is between mental representations “occasioned” or triggered by an external object, and those that arise from within the agent out of the storehouse of memory; see the Glossary entry on “by rote.”

¹³ Quotation marks have been added by the editor for consistency.

if not, she has done her endeavour, and takes as much pleasure and delight in writing and divulging the conceptions of her mind, as perhaps some malicious persons will do in censuring them to the worst.

[But, I have heard, some men are pleased to say, that “in my philosophy there is neither ground or foundation, nor method.”

Whereto I answer, that if this philosophy of mine were both groundless, and immethodical, I could not with reason expect my readers should either consider the connexion and mutual dependence of my several opinions; or defer their making a judgment of their probability, until they had read them all. But, truly, neither my sensitive, nor my rational faculties could enable me to perceive a more substantial ground, or firmer foundation, than that of “material nature”: nor to follow a better method, than that of “sense” and “reason.” Again, many, who have been conversant with the writings of the old philosophers, pretend therefore to understand all the moderns. But these men may be deceived. For, although the ancient philosophers might indeed be as subtle, and quick-sighted as the modern, and perchance more: yet the difference betwixt their several conceptions being so great, may easily cause trouble and difficulty in the reader’s understanding, and consequently lead them into an erroneous censure, while they examine the truth of these, by the correspondency or agreeableness they hold with those. Like as young students are more troubled to read and understand an old author, than their seniors are, who have formerly, by long study and frequent reading, made themselves familiar with his style and notions: and old scholars, on the other side, may be but young students in new authors. My philosophy, therefore, being new; I do not wonder, if they, who made this objection, do not yet understand it: and, I hope, if they please, but to study seriously the sense and reason thereof; that cloud of obscurity will soon vanish, and the light of knowledge appear in the room of it.

There remains yet one obstruction more to be removed. Perhaps the wise among my readers cannot, and the superstitious will not, allow “nature” to be infinite or eternal. If so, I am not unwilling, that both sorts should waive that opinion, and enjoy their own: nor is it necessary for me to be rigorous in asserting it. For, it is no absurdity to conceive that God might endow nature with “self-motion”; though not only the world, but even the chaos itself be supposed to have been made six thousand or more years ago. And as for “mechanical motion”; that seems but a mechanic opinion: nor have those, who make God the “First Mechanical

Mover,” any other but an irreverent concept of the “divine nature.” As for others, who hold the “immaterial soul” to move the body; if their tenet be admitted, then it will follow, that the souls of beasts also are immaterial: because they appear to do such actions, and have such passions, as men. Furthermore, I observe this by the by, that such who are accounted wise and subtle philosophers, usually endeavour to prove intricate and confused opinions, by sophistical and irrational arguments, more becoming raw schoolboys, than men of ripe judgment. Besides, there are [those]¹⁴ who suppose a “general soul,” or “universal spirit” in the world, that moves all bodies, or all material nature. If so, then I cannot conceive, but this “universal soul” must move the body of man also: and so man must have two distinct “immaterial souls” in one body, that general one diffused through the world, and his own particular soul; which in my judgment is very absurd. In fine, as for their various arguments concerning the “will,” “understanding,” “memory,” etc. they are sufficient to obstruct the will, amuse the understanding, and confound the memory of those who read them. But, surely the decrees of God are wise, good, and just; and nature’s actions are poised, equal, and fit, and also rational and sensible, and consequently methodical. And if men allow nature to have sensitive and rational self-motions (as I cannot see why even the most serious should not) it would be an occasion of allaying at least, if not composing all the eager and inveterate disputes between the Academians, Epicureans, and Sceptics, and other the like sects, which have rendered philosophy perplex and confused. But this is not easily brought to pass; for, nature being a perpetual motion, and as full of division as composition, will not perhaps admit of such a general conformity of men’s judgments.]¹⁵

¹⁴ Added by the editor.

¹⁵ Lacking in 1666.