

Margaret Cavendish

Essential Writings



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XXX

I am reading now the works of that Famous and most Renowned *Author, DesCartes*, out of which I intend to pick out onely those discourses which I like best, and not to examine his opinions, as they go along from the beginning to the end of his books; And in order to this, I have chosen in the first place, his discourse of motion, and do not assent to his opinion, when he defines *Motion to be onely a Mode of a thing, and not the thing or body it self*;²¹ for, in my opinion, there can be no abstraction made of motion from body, neither really, nor in the manner of our conception, for how can I conceive that which is not, nor cannot be in nature, that is, to conceive motion without body? Wherefore Motion is but one thing with body, without any separation or abstraction soever. Neither doth it agree with my reason, that *one body can give or transfer motion into an-other body; and as much motion it gives or transfers into that body, as much loses it: As for example, in two hard bodies thrown against one another, where one, that is thrown with greater force, takes the other along with it, and loses as much motion as it gives it*.²² For how can motion, being no substance, but onely a mode, quit one body, and pass into another? One body may either occasion, or imitate anothers motion, but it can neither give nor take away what belongs to its own or another bodies substance, no more then matter can quit its nature from being

²⁰ See also *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, chapter XXII.

²¹ This is from *Principles of Philosophy* II.27, CSM 1:234.

²² This is from *Principles of Philosophy* II.40, CSM 1:242.

matter; and therefore my opinion is, that if motion doth go out of one body into another, then substance goes too; for motion, and substance or body, as aforementioned, are all one thing, and then all bodies that receive motion from other bodies, must needs increase in their substance and quantity, and those bodies which impart or transfer motion, must decrease as much as they increase: Truly, *Madam*, that neither Motion nor Figure should subsist by themselves, and yet be transferrable into other bodies, is very strange, and as much as to prove them to be nothing, and yet to say they are something. The like may be said of all others, which they call accidents, as skill, learning, knowledge, &c. saying, they are no bodies, because they have no extension, but inherent in bodies or substances as in their subjects; for although the body may subsist without them, yet they being always with the body, body and they are all one thing: And so is power and body, for body cannot quit power, nor power the body, being all one thing. But to return to Motion, my opinion is, That all matter is partly animate, and partly inanimate, and all matter is moving and moved, and that there is no part of Nature that hath not life and knowledg, for there is no Part that has not a comixture of animate and inanimate matter; and though the inanimate matter has no motion, nor life and knowledg of it self, as the animate has, nevertheless being both so closely joyned and commixed as in one body, the inanimate moves as well as the animate, although not in the same manner; for the animate moves of it self, and the inanimate moves by the help of the animate, and thus the animate is moving and the inanimate moved; not that the animate matter transfers, infuses, or communicates its own motion to the inanimate; for this is impossible, by reason it cannot part with its own nature, nor alter the nature of inanimate matter, but each retains its own nature; for the inanimate matter remains inanimate, that is, without self-motion, and the animate loses nothing of its self-motion, which otherwise it would, if it should impart or transferr its motion into the inanimate matter; but onely as I said heretofore, the inanimate works or moves with the animate, because of their close union and commixture; for the animate forces or causes the inanimate matter to work with her; and thus one is moving, the other moved, and consequently there is life and knowledg in all parts of nature, by reason in all parts of nature there is a commixture of animate and inanimate matter: and this Life and Knowledg is sense and reason, or sensitive and rational corporeal motions, which are all one thing with animate matter without any distinction or abstraction, and can no more quit matter, then matter can quit motion.²³

²³ The language here in letter XXX calls to mind the similar view in Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* I.62 (CSM 1:214), that there are features of substances that are distinct in thought—or rationally distinct—but that are not distinct in reality. See also *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, section XXXV.

XXXI

I believe not that there is any more place then body; as for example, Water being mix'd with Earth, the water doth not take the Earths place, but as their parts intermix, so do their places, and as their parts change, so do their places, so that there is no more place, then there is water and earth; the same may be said of Air and Water, or Air and Earth, or did they all mix together; for as their bodies join, so do their places, and as they are separated from each other, so are their places. Say a man travels a hundred miles, and so a hundred thousand paces; but yet this man has not been in a hundred thousand places, for he never had any other place but his own, he hath joined and separated himselfe from a hundred thousand, nay millions of parts, but he has left no places behind him. You will say, if he travel the same way back again, then he is said to travel thorow the same places. I answer, It may be the vulgar way of expression, or the common phrase; but to speak properly, after a Philosophical way, and according to the truth in nature, he cannot be said to go back again thorow the same places he went, because he left none behind him. . . . 'Tis true, a man may return to the same adjoining bodies, where he was before, but then he brings his place with him again, and as his body, so his place returns also, and if a mans arm be cut off, you may say, there was an arm heretofore, but you cannot say properly, this is the place where the arm was.

XXXII

In my last, I hope, I have sufficiently declared my opinion, That to one body belongs but one place, and that no body can leave a place behind it, but where-soever is body, there is place also. Now give me leave to examine this question: when a bodies figure is printed on snow, or any other fluid or soft matter, as air, water, and the like; whether it be the body, that prints its own figure upon the snow, or whether it be the snow, that patterns the figure of the body? My answer is, That it is not the body, which prints its figure upon the snow, but the snow that patterns out the figure of the body; for if a seal be printed upon wax, 'tis true, it is the figure of the seal, which is printed on the wax, but yet the seal doth not give the wax the print of its own figure, but it is the wax that takes the print or pattern from the seal, and patterns or copies it out in its own substance, just as the sensitive motions in the eye do pattern out the figure of an object, as I have declared heretofore.

XXXV

That the Mind, according to your Authors opinion, is a substance really distinct from the body, and may be actually separated from it and subsist without

it.²⁴ . . . Neither can I apprehend, that the Mind's or Soul's seat should be in the *Glandula* or kernel²⁵ of the Brain, and there sit like a Spider in a Cobweb, to whom the least motion of the Cobweb gives intelligence of a Flye, which he is ready to assault, and that the Brain should get intelligence by the animal spirits as his servants, which run to and fro like Ants to inform it; or that the Mind should, according to others opinions, be a light, and imbroidered all with Ideas, like a Heraulds Coat; and that the sensitive organs should have no knowledg in themselves, but serve onely like peepingholes for the mind, or barn-dores to receive bundles of pressures, like sheaves of Corn; For there being a thorow mixture of animate, rational and sensitive, and inanimate matter, we cannot assign a certain seat or place to the rational, another to the sensitive, and another to the inanimate, but they are diffused and intermixt throughout all the body; And this is the reason, that sense and knowledg cannot be bound onely to the head or brain: But although they are mixt together, nevertheless they do not lose their interior natures by this mixture, nor their purity and subtility, nor their proper motions or actions, but each moves according to its nature and substance, without confusion; The actions of the rational part in Man, which is the Mind or Soul, are called Thoughts, or thoughtful perceptions, which are numerous, and so are the sensitive perceptions; for though Man, or any other animal hath but five exterior sensitive organs, yet there be numerous perceptions made in these sensitive organs, and in all the body; nay, every several Pore of the flesh is a sensitive organ, as well as the Eye, or the Ear.

XXXVI

That all other animals, besides man, want reason, your *Author* endeavours to prove in his *discourse of method*, where his chief argument is, That other animals cannot express their mind, thoughts or conceptions, either by speech or any other signs, as man can do: For, sayes he, *it is not for want of the organs belonging to the framing of words, as we may observe in Parrats and Pies, which are apt enough to express words they are taught, but understand nothing of them.*²⁶ My answer is, That one man expressing his mind by speech or words to an other, doth not declare by it his excellency and supremacy above all other Creatures, but for the most part more folly, for a talking man is not so wise as a contemplating man.

²⁴ This is from *Principles of Philosophy* I.60, CSM 1:213, but see also the Sixth Meditation, CSM 2:54–55.

²⁵ Descartes famously held that the mind is connected to the brain at the pineal gland (*The World, or Treatise on Light*, CSM 1:100–107).

²⁶ This is from *Discourse on the Method*, CSM 1:140–141.

But by reason other Creatures cannot speak or discourse with each other as men, or make certain signs, whereby to express themselves as dumb and deaf men do, should we conclude, they have neither knowledge, sense, reason, or intelligence? Certainly, this is a very weak argument; for one part of a mans body, as one hand, is not less sensible then the other, nor the heel less sensible then the heart, nor the legg less sensible then the head, but each part hath its sense and reason, and so consequently its sensitive and rational knowledge.²⁷

²⁷ See also *Worlds Olio*, "Epistle."

²⁸ This is in Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism*, I.x, 31–32.