

ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET CAVENDISH

ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET CAVENDISH: A TWO GOD
APPROACH TO CAVENDISH'S NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

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A Thesis Submitted to the school of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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McMaster University MASTER OF ARTS (2025) Hamilton, Ontario (Philosophy)

TITLE: Are you 'There God? It's Me, Margaret Cavendish: A Two God Approach to Cavendish's
Natural Philosophy

Troisi, B.A. (McMaster University) SUPERVISOR: Dr. Allauren Forbes

NUMBER OF PAGES:

Lay Abstract

In this thesis, I aim to better understand how the 17th Century philosopher Margaret Cavendish makes sense of God within her materialist philosophy. Cavendish believed that everything in the universe, even the mind and soul, is made of matter. At the same time, she often refers to God, which raises questions about how divine concepts fit into her system. I argue that Cavendish is working with two different ideas of God: a metaphysical God who helps explain the structure of nature without interfering in it, and a biblical God who belongs to faith and religion. This distinction allows her to keep philosophy and theology separate while still making space for both. By offering this interpretation, I hope to shed light on how Cavendish balanced science, metaphysics, and belief in a time when these areas were often in tension.

Abstract

This thesis examines how Margaret Cavendish, a 17th-century English philosopher, incorporates the concept of God into her materialist metaphysics without conflicting with her commitment to natural philosophy. Cavendish famously holds that all things are made of matter, including thought, soul, and perception. This raises a tension in that if nature is entirely self-sufficient and self-moving, what role does God play in her philosophical system?

I argue that Cavendish operates with two distinct concepts of God, a metaphysical God and a biblical God, and that distinguishing between them helps resolve apparent contradictions in her work. The metaphysical God serves a foundational role in explaining the existence and unity of nature but does not intervene in its workings. The biblical God on the other hand, belongs to theology and personal faith and is kept separate from the concerns of philosophy. This dual concept allows Cavendish to acknowledge religious belief while maintaining the autonomy of her natural philosophy. By adopting this two God interpretive model, I demonstrate how Cavendish's references to divine unknowability, non-intervention, and the Trinity can be understood without threatening the coherence of her metaphysical views. I also engage with prominent scholars in the field to show how my interpretation differs from existing readings, particularly those that treat Cavendish's invocation of God as either merely rhetorical or deeply inconsistent.

This thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on early modern women philosophers by offering a new perspective on how Cavendish navigated the relationship between science, metaphysics, and religion. It also sheds light on how Cavendish navigated the limits of reason and faith, and how she made room for religious belief within a consistently materialist system.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Allauren Forbes, for her insight, guidance and unwavering commitment throughout this project. Her encouragement not only pushed me to grow as a writer but also as a thinker and person. I am especially grateful to her for introducing me to this area of philosophy and for designing the class on Margaret Cavendish, which sparked the earliest version of this project.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Alice Pinheiro Walla, for her thoughtful comments, questions, and suggestions. Her interest in my topic and her generous feedback helped shape this thesis in meaningful ways.

To my parents, Eddie and Lisa Troisi, thank you for your constant emotional support, love, and wise words during the difficult moments of this journey. Your belief in me has kept me going.

To my partner, Bruce Mittelstaedt, thank you for being by my side every step of the way. Your patience, care, and steady presence helped me through the toughest parts of this process.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Karen Detlefsen. Although we have never met, her work on early modern women philosophers was the initial spark that inspired this thesis. Her scholarship helped me discover this topic that not only challenged me intellectually but also felt deeply meaningful.

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Declaration of Academic Achievement

I declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. The research, analysis, and writing were conducted independently, with guidance and feedback provided by Dr. Allauren Forbes and Dr. Alice Pinheiro Walla. This thesis has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any previous degree or professional qualification. All sources used have been acknowledged through clear and accurate referencing.

Introduction

Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673) has started to receive growing attention in recent years for her contributions to early modern philosophy. She is often recognized for her commitment to materialism, her criticisms of the new experimental science of her time, and the way she blends philosophy with literature. But her work is also difficult to categorize. She does not shy away from making bold metaphysical claims, but at the same time, she includes references to God that do not always seem to fit with the rest of her system. On the one hand, she is a strict materialist who describes nature as something that is made up entirely of self-moving matter. On the other hand, she talks about God as the creator, moral guide, or unknowable power. This creates a tension in her writing because it raises the question of how someone who rejects theological reasoning in natural philosophy can still rely on divine concepts. It also raises the question of what kind of God Cavendish is actually talking about.

This thesis argues that the best way to understand this tension is to recognize that Cavendish is not working with one single idea of God. Instead, she is referencing two different concepts: a metaphysical God and a biblical God. The metaphysical God is the concept that she uses in her natural philosophy because it is the rational, non-intervening cause of motion and order in the universe. To contrast, the biblical God shows up in places where Cavendish is reflecting on morality, personal faith, or traditional Christian beliefs. These are not just two different descriptions of the same thing, they are doing different work in her writing. When we read her through this two God lens, her system starts to make a lot more sense. The moments that seem inconsistent or confusing turn out to be part of a broader pattern in how she separates philosophy and theology.

This reading is building on the work that has already been done on Cavendish regarding this topic, but it also pushes it in a new direction. Scholars like Sara Mendelson, Lisa T. Sarasohn, and

Karen Detlefsen have all explored Cavendish's use of God, each in different ways. Mendelson focuses on how Cavendish is trying to fit within the social religious culture of her time, Sarasohn seems to argue for Cavendish leaning on faith when reason falls short, and Detlefsen argues that God has a more subtle, suggestive role in her metaphysics. All of these interpretations help bring attention to the God problem in her work, and each one offers important insights. The issue is that they also tend to treat her references to God as if they are all referring to the same thing, even when the tone, context, and purpose clearly shift. What is missing in these readings is an interpretation that allows for a real distinction that takes seriously the possibility that Cavendish is using the same word, "God," to mean different things depending on what kind of work she is doing in a given moment.

This is where the two conceptions of God solution comes in. My argument is that Cavendish separates her philosophical commitments from her religious beliefs, and she uses different conceptions of God to keep those domains apart. She never explicitly lays this out, but when the context and function of her references are tracked, a clear pattern begins to be seen. The metaphysical God is rational, abstract, and non-intervening. It is consistent with her belief that matter is self-moving, and nature is holistic. The biblical God is connected to faith, moral judgment, and the kind of religious reflection that does not belong to natural philosophy. While her work still has complex ideas to it, the two conceptions of God solution can give a consistent and clearer way to understand her references to God. It shows that the tensions in her writing are not contradictions but instead come from the different roles that faith and philosophy have in her work. The goal of this thesis is to show that this interpretive solution helps make sense of important tensions in Cavendish's work and gives a more accurate and generous reading of her philosophy. To do this, I focus on her major philosophical texts while paying attention to how she uses divine language across

different contexts. I look at how her references to God function, what kind of language she uses, and the context of the surrounding discussion. From there, I argue that a consistent and deliberate pattern can be seen that supports the two conceptions of God solution.

The thesis comprises of three chapters. Chapter one sets the stage by exploring Cavendish's metaphysics and how she invokes God within her natural philosophy. I share possible reasons that this might be the case, but note how there seems to be a problem with her invocation of God. Then, I discuss the biblical conception of God, especially from the Book of Genesis, to illustrate how different this is from what Cavendish is doing. Her religious background would have had her know of this version of God that is personal, moral, and deeply involved in creation. Despite this, that is not the God that is found in her natural philosophy. To help show how different Cavendish's position is, I also compare her to Descartes, who was her contemporary and occasional guest. While both invoke God, Descartes treats God as a reliable source of truth and the one who keeps both knowledge and the order of nature. Cavendish, on the other hand, argues for the self-sufficiency of nature. By the end of this chapter, the tensions between her philosophical and religious references to God is clear and so is the need for an interpretive solution that can explain how both can appear in her work.

Chapter two focuses on some of the existing interpretations of Cavendish's use of God. I analyze the work of Mendelson, Sarasohn, and Detlefsen in detail, showing how each one tries to make sense of the God problem in their own way. While Mendelson tries to connect Cavendish's religious references to the broader cultural patterns of the time, Sarasohn argues that Cavendish is a kind of fideist who believes that some truths can only be reached through faith; in contrast, Detlefsen claims that Cavendish's God is hands off and is more suggestive. While all three scholars attempt to address and resolve the tension between Cavendish's religious and philosophical voices,

their solutions remain incomplete. I argue that they either ignore the differences in how Cavendish refers to God or they treat those differences as evidence that her work is inconsistent. By the end of the second chapter, it is clear that overcoming this tension is a better option because leaving it unresolved makes Cavendish's philosophy look inconsistent. What I am offering is a solution that distinguishes between her different references to God and shows how this distinction accounts for the patterns that are seen across her work.

Chapter three introduces and defends the two conceptions of God solution. I explain what each version of God does in Cavendish's system and why it is possible to separate them without causing problems regarding her commitment to metaphysical holism. A common objection is that her philosophy does not allow any division, since she is committed to a holistic metaphysics in which all of nature is continuous and inseparable. From this view, separating God into two concepts can seem to go against her views. However, I argue that Cavendish's holism is about everything being connected in nature and not about avoiding conceptual divisions. This is to say that she can still use different ideas to explain different aspects of her thought without causing problems for her holistic philosophy. In this chapter, I will also show how the two conceptions of God solution fits into her metaphysics more broadly. I show how it helps make sense of some important ideas in her work, including God's unknowability, her separation between theology and philosophy, and the way she understands divine non-intervention. Finally, I offer a method to determine which of Cavendish's conceptions of God she is invoking at any given moment in her work. By seeing what the reference of God is doing, the kind of language she is using, and the context the reference appears in, a pattern is able to be seen in her work. This chapter shows how the two conceptions of God solution makes Cavendish's work easier to follow and helps explain the tension between philosophy and theology.

In the end, what this thesis is offering is a new way to approach Cavendish's writing. An approach that makes space for her philosophy and her religious commitments to exist without assuming that they are saying the same thing. The two conceptions of God solution shows how Cavendish can have reason and faith together without intersecting them into one domain. Her metaphysics remains committed to materialist holism, even as her personal religious beliefs continue to be seen throughout her writing. This is not to say that this solution makes her work perfectly neat or coherent, but I believe it shows that the tension between her philosophy and religion is not a flaw but instead a feature of her work. It is part of what makes her writing complex but also worth exploring. By proposing this solution, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of Cavendish's philosophy and to broader discussions about how early modern philosophers dealt with the boundaries between science, metaphysics, and religion.

Chapter One: The Problem of God in Cavendish's Natural Philosophy

I.I Introduction

In this chapter, I will lay out the background of a problem Cavendish leaves unresolved by including God in a system that is committed to materialist metaphysics, while also rejecting the idea that theology and philosophy can truly work together. To explore this tension, I start by looking at Cavendish's treatment of God in her metaphysics as well as her religious beliefs.

To do this, I will look at Cavendish's understanding of God's role in natural philosophy.¹ I approach this by dividing her ideas into two parts: Cavendish as a metaphysician and Cavendish as a religious woman. I make this distinction in this chapter for two reasons. The first reason is that by recognizing Cavendish as both a metaphysician and a religious woman, we can see how these aspects of her thought both intersect and diverge in her work. As a metaphysician, Cavendish explores the nature of reality and causality through reason-based examination, which develops into materialism as her philosophical commitment. At the same time, as a religious woman, she acknowledges the existence of a divine being, drawing on faith based theological truths that are influenced by her cultural and religious contexts. Not only do these aspects show the contradictions that will be discussed further, but they help open the door to the solution I argue for, that Cavendish is discussing two concepts of God in her metaphysics. The second reason for making this distinction is that by separately focusing on Cavendish's metaphysics and her religious commitments, I can capture the full scope of her work and gain a deeper understanding of how she invokes God. This is to say that I will be focusing on her metaphysics first by examining her natural philosophy and

¹ For clarity, natural philosophy and metaphysics will be used interchangeably due to the idea that metaphysics is the modern iteration of natural philosophy.

God's role and then be able to shift to general religious commitments that Cavendish would hold as a 17th century Anglican.

In discussing Cavendish's religious commitments, I will use the next part of this chapter to analyze the behaviour presented by God in the Book of Genesis where God was first mentioned in the Old Testament. As well, I will discuss how God was preached in the Christian faith and how it, with the Book of Genesis introduction, is an explanation of who God is as an ultimate being. By discussing this in this chapter, I show the stereotypical understanding of the Christian iteration of God, which would have been a similar understanding of God in Cavendish's times as an Anglican. This is important for my argument as it shows the disparities between God as the Bible sees him and God as the way Cavendish invokes him in her work. As well by sharing some of the stories in the Book of Genesis and how the Christian faith preaches God, I can show more explicitly where Cavendish diverges from religion and a theological God, focusing on a more metaphysical God to explain her philosophy. From there, I will use this chapter to discuss the use of God and theology in Early Modern Philosophy. This will include Descartes, a peer of Cavendish, and his philosophy on God and the incorporation into his metaphysics. By conveying the difference between Descartes and Cavendish's metaphysics and their use of God, the uniqueness of Cavendish's invocation of God will become apparent and will help demonstrate contradictions apparent in her work.

This is important because Cavendish believes that theology and philosophy are separate disciplines and should stay that way. However, after examining her metaphysics, the role of God in the Book of Genesis, and comparing her to Descartes' philosophy, it becomes clear that there is a significant problem in her work. While she claims to keep theology and philosophy apart, she consistently invokes God throughout her writings in ways that blur this separation. This raises the question of how she succeeds in keeping a division in theory while allowing theological language and

ideas to show up in her philosophical system. The tension created by this contradiction is what I call the Cavendish's theological problem in her philosophy. As such, at the end of the chapter, I will outline this problem and begin to introduce my proposed solution. This solution involves understanding that Cavendish operates with two conceptions of God: a metaphysical God through reason and a biblical God through faith. Understanding this distinction will help resolve the contradictions and clarify how theology and philosophy are separated in her work.

I.II Cavendish: Philosophy vs. Theology

In this section, I will explore Cavendish's views on God, namely what kind of God Cavendish believed in and how her commitments align with or challenge theological ideas of the Early Modern Period.² This is to say that Cavendish is never saying in her work that she does not believe there is a God, but instead she seems to be working through God's role in metaphysics. To start this section, I will first cover Cavendish's understanding of theology and metaphysics, why they should be separate, and possible reasons as to why she does this. I will then discuss the problem that arises in that she still discusses God despite rejecting the intersection between theology and philosophy, and possible reasons as to why she does this. I find it important to first examine the possible reasons why Cavendish might intersect theology and philosophy, as well as why these attempts fail, before discussing her metaphysics. In doing so, it provides context for understanding Cavendish as a writer, offering insight into both her social influences and her intellectual commitments. By addressing these issues upfront, I aim to provide a clearer starting point for the discussion of her metaphysics. With this in mind, I will then discuss Cavendish's metaphysics regarding creation and God, as well as discussing some reasons as to why her metaphysics may be as such.

² Sara Mendelson, "The God of Nature and the Nature of God," essay, in *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 28.

Cavendish is explicit in saying that her metaphysical work should not intersect with theology when she writes, “I shall meerly go upon the bare Ground of Natural Philosophy, and not mix Divinity with it, as many Philosopher use to do...I think it not onely an absurdity, but an injury to the holy Profession of Divinity to draw her to the Proofs of Natural Philosophy; wherefore I shall strictly follow the Guidance of Natural Reason.”³ This quote makes it clear that Cavendish sees natural philosophy and divinity as two distinct areas of inquiry. She criticizes other philosophers for treating theology as something to support metaphysical claims and instead insists that natural philosophy should rely on reason instead of faith. For Cavendish, mixing the two is not just a mistake, it is irrational and disrespectful to the disciplines. She makes it clear that theology has its own role and should not be used to help with philosophical inquiry.

I argue that Cavendish’s separation of theology and philosophy is for two reasons. The first reason is that Cavendish sees philosophy, more specifically metaphysics, as a reason-based form of inquiry, while theology, although it can make use of reason, ultimately depends on faith and cannot be settled by rational argument alone. Here I am treating theology not as identical with religion, but as a specific discourse about God that, for Cavendish, relies on faith instead of the kind of rational inquiry that is central to philosophy. For Cavendish, philosophy is about making conclusions through observation and rational thought, while theology depends on truths that come from faith. Because these two domains are working with different kinds of knowledge, Cavendish holds that it is not advisable to combine them. In her view, faith-based claims cannot be used to explain natural phenomena or vice versa. The methods and goals of each are too different. As such, she argues that

³ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections upon Some Opinions in Natural Philosophy, Maintained by Several Famous and Learned Authors of This Age*, 1664, 3.

natural philosophy needs to be discussed through reason, and theological claims to be discussed separately with faith.

The second reason Cavendish insists upon this separation is that God is ultimately unknowable. She believes in God and talks about God throughout her work, but she also believes that humans cannot know anything about God's nature. This is seen when she writes,

[T]he notions of God can be no otherwise but of His existence; to wit, that we know there is something above nature, who is the author, and God of nature; for though nature had an infinite natural knowledge of the infinite God; yet, being dividable as well as composable, her parts cannot have such an infinite knowledge or perception; and being composable as much as dividable, no part can be so ignorant of God, as not to know there is a God.⁴

Cavendish believes that God's existence can be known, but God's nature cannot be understood. Nature as a whole is infinite and might have complete knowledge of God, but individual parts of Nature, like humans, have limited understanding. Therefore, trying to describe philosophy is futile. As well, since God is unknowable from a metaphysical perspective, Cavendish does not see the point in using theology to explain natural philosophy. Trying to describe what God is like goes beyond what humans can understand. Any attempts just end up guessing or making claims that cannot be supported. For Cavendish, this kind of speculation does not help because it causes confusion and takes away what theology is for. This is to say that Cavendish understands the limits of human knowledge and believes that theology should respect that, when it comes to philosophical inquiry. Because of these limits, Cavendish believes that theology must avoid making claims about God's nature in philosophical contexts, keeping the two domains separate to keep clarity and respect for what can be known.

⁴ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle ; Edited by Eileen O'Neill, ed. Eileen O'Neill (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89.

The issue arises when considering the extensive amount of writing Cavendish produces about God. It could have been the case that Cavendish was merely discussing the idea that God cannot be known more than his existence, and while that is the case in some of her work, a large portion of her work looks at God and his role in creation as well as his power. A possible answer as to why Cavendish was prolific in her writing on God is because she had to. What I mean by this is that Cavendish was living and writing in a time where many theological questions were being asked and discussed between other philosophers of her time. While she could have ignored those questions due to her beliefs on the intersection between the two, it is possible she took the philosophical opportunity to discuss the same as her male counterparts and possibly articulate a better concept of God and his roles. Essentially, it is possible Cavendish took the opportunity to answer theological questions regarding God's role due to the philosophical discourse on the topic from her contemporaries.

However, if Cavendish engaged with theological questions merely to participate in the prevalent discourse of her time, she risked relying on God in her philosophy in a way that would introduce inconsistencies, much like Descartes and other philosophers who made God central to their systems.⁵ A complete reliance on God would go against her epistemic uncertainty regarding our knowledge of him. As I mentioned previously, Cavendish maintained that we cannot know anything about God other than that he exists. If she was actively trying to answer theological questions about God's roles and powers, she would have undermined this commitment, since such questions inherently require assumptions about God's nature. Since she believes that theology and philosophy should remain separate, it is unlikely that she would allow contradictions in her work simply to

⁵ I use Descartes here as a comparison because he was a peer of Cavendish and is a well-known philosopher of that time, who intersected God into his work.

conform to contemporary discussions. It would seem then that Cavendish's engagement with theological discussion must go beyond mere participation in contemporary discourse. If she truly believed in the separation of theology and philosophy, yet still wrote prolifically on God, her discussion must serve a deeper philosophical purpose.

Another possible answer to this is to think of Cavendish taking off and putting back on a metaphysical hat. When she is wearing the metaphysical hat, she can work through her thoughts on any topic, specifically theology, without any consequence in the world around her. With the hat on, she can engage in abstract thought, testing concepts and working through complex ideas in a way that can make her writing seem inconsistent or exploratory. This aligns with the way she seems to move back and forth on certain topics, which suggests that she is actively reasoning through instead of presenting a fine theory. However, when she takes off the metaphysical hat, she is Margaret Cavendish, the Anglican woman, who has religious concepts of God. This distinction can help explain why Cavendish does not fit into the labels of skeptic or atheist, a point I will explore in greater depth later.

Sometimes, Cavendish's writings show differing positions on certain topics, which suggests that she is working through the concepts as she writes. When she has the metaphysical hat off, she is Margaret Cavendish, the Anglican with religious concepts of God. This can be helpful as a response to people who believe that Cavendish is a skeptic or atheist, in that engaging with theology does not mean she rejects religious belief but instead it is a philosophical exercise that allows her to explore ideas without fully committing to them.

While this possible answer gives an interpretation of her shifting discussions regarding God, it does not fix the difficulty of determining when Cavendish is speaking as a metaphysician versus when she is speaking on her Anglican religious beliefs. Since there is a sense of fluidity in this

approach, it becomes challenging to see when she is merely discussing theories versus when she is making claims. This ambiguity complicates being able to categorize her views and further suggest that her relationship with theology and philosophy is more complex than merely separating the two. As such, to move forward, there needs to be an examination of her metaphysical system. In understanding her metaphysical views, as well as where God contributes, Cavendish's tensions are revealed regarding her rejection of the two disciplines.

In discussing metaphysics, Cavendish argues that matter is not passive but instead matter is inherently self-moving, perspective, and rational. Mechanical philosophers of the time, such as Descartes and Boyle, argued for this passivity, believing that matter is incapable of motion or thought on its own and that instead an external force, such as God, was initiating movement in matter and controlled the order of matter. This dualistic, external force theory is something that Cavendish rejects and instead brings forth a monistic metaphysical theory in which all matter contains within itself the principles of motion, perception and reason.⁶

Because Cavendish believes that Nature is independent and self-governing, everything in Nature, such as rocks, animals, humans, etc., is made of matter that has the ability to move and change itself. This means that when things happen in Nature, like growth, movement, or change, Cavendish believes that matter itself is using its abilities to cause these things to happen. Cavendish first explains three types (or degrees) of matter: 1) rational matter which is capable of thought and reason, 2) sensitive matter which is capable of sensing and responding, and 3) inanimate matter which is 'regular' matter that seems lifeless but is still able to move. These three types of matter can mix together and be present in objects at varying degrees.⁷ Since all matter consists of these three

⁶ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 16.

⁷ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 138.

types, they are able to interact with each other and move internal in Nature. The key idea that makes this happen for Cavendish is that all matter is perceptive. This means that everything in Nature can sense and respond to its surroundings. This perception is not limited to living beings with sensory organs but also includes inanimate objects, which react and adapt to their surroundings in accordance with their inherent properties.

An example to explain motion and perception in both animate and inanimate objects for Cavendish would be a person falling into snow. The animate object (the person) falls into the inanimate object (the snow). The inanimate object (the snow) is moved. The perception of the inanimate object (the snow) is to pattern out the animate object's (the person) figure as a response to its environment.⁸ With this example it can be seen that motion is present in both the animate and the inanimate object. For the animate object (the person), motion is seen in the falling into the snow, and for the inanimate object the motion comes from the animate objects motion. Because the animate object fell onto the inanimate object the inanimate object was moved as to pattern out the figure and respond to what is happening to it.⁹ The inanimate object's response is not due to an external force directing its behaviour but instead it responds using its own natural perceptive properties, responding automatically to the motion of the animate object. This is important for Cavendish's view because it signifies that Nature and its organization does not need to be directed from the outside. Instead, all motion and order arise internally from the self-moving, perceptive nature of matter itself.

However, the issue appears in that despite Nature's self-sufficiency, Cavendish incorporates God into Nature's existence and creation. She acknowledges a divine being as the ultimate source of

⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 104.

⁹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 99.

Nature's existence, despite insisting that Nature operates independently once it has been created.

This tension is clear in her claim: "Nature is neither absolutely necessitated, nor has an absolute free will: for, she is so much so necessitated, that she depends upon the all-powerful God, and cannot work beyond herself, or beyond her own nature."¹⁰ Essentially, Cavendish is saying that God is the one who created the world, the one who created Nature. Upon completion of his creation however, God stepped back and gave Nature the ability to control her parts independently of him.¹¹

This step back from God differs from the mainstream early modern view, in which God was generally understood to continuously sustain and govern all aspects of creation. Philosophers such as Descartes believed that God did more than just create the world. As well, religious beliefs rejected the idea that God would step back after creation. Instead, they thought that God remained involved in the world, sustaining it and intervening in human affairs. By rejecting this in favour of Nature taking on this role, Cavendish goes against the religious beliefs of her time. To show this, the next section will delve into the Book of Genesis, where the creation story took place and divine control was most prevalent. I focus on this book in particular because it has a foundational role in Christian worldbuilding, by which I mean the way the creation narrative constructs and organizes a Christian cosmos. The Book of Genesis sets up the structure, order, and logic of the world according to Christian theology. In that sense, it functions similarly to metaphysics, which also tries to explain the basic structure and principles of reality. Since Cavendish is building her own metaphysical system, it makes sense to look at the religious worldbuilding she would have been familiar with. As such, with

¹⁰ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 109.

¹¹ Cavendish's account of God 'stepping back' after creation invites a comparison to the Kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum*, where God withdraws to make space for creation. She does not explicitly refer to this doctrine, but the parallel is suggestive. God's withdrawal lets Nature act independently while remaining under divine providence. Mendelson notes Cavendish's indirect engagement with cabbalistic traditions, especially her reference to the 'Jews Cabbala.' See Mendelson, Sara Mendelson, "Margaret Cavendish and the Jews," *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*, April 22, 2016, 187–200, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315585208-17>.

the Book of Genesis summarized, I intend to show the disconnect between the religious understandings that Cavendish would have had, and her metaphysics and how God's role is presented in them.

I.III God From the Book of Genesis

To start is to summarize the first part of the Book of Genesis, which will help make sense of how God is fundamentally understood and how it relates to the Christian teachings which would be like what Cavendish would have been exposed to as an Anglican. From the very first line, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth,"¹² God can be understood as the ultimate creator. God, whom at this point is an unknown entity, starts the seven-day process of making the world as we know it. He created the Earth, with all the land, animals and plants that we now know of. He then creates two human people, Adam and Eve, who, as mentioned in the Bible, were created in his own image.¹³ It is important to note that Adam and Eve were created without the idea of self-consciousness. What I mean is that God created the two with the intention that they would never feel a negative emotion. Adam and Eve were told when they were first created that they were not to eat the forbidden fruit that was in the Garden of Eden. Unfortunately, a serpent, representing the devil, convinces Eve, who convinces Adam to eat the fruit regardless of the warnings. By eating the fruit and betraying God, Adam and Eve became self-knowing, in that they now were able to feel negative emotions. This is seen when as soon as they ate the fruit, they both were aware that they were naked when God came to them, and they were embarrassed about it. God was angry with the betrayal and condemned Adam, Eve, and subsequently humanity to punishment.¹⁴

¹² Genesis 1:1 (NIV)

¹³ Genesis 1:27 (NIV)

¹⁴ Genesis 3:7-14 (NIV)

He first starts with Eve where he says, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth childbirth, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”¹⁵ Eve’s punishment was the horrible pains of childbirth, and that she was to do what her husband says, since she was not able to make a good decision for herself. “Unto Adam he said, because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all days of thy life.”¹⁶ Adam is punished with the need to eat in order to survive, as well as having to work for said food. The punishment God has given the two is that they are to live in suffering. While this punishment can be seen as insignificant for us now, this was not the intended route and as such is a punishment that we now carry every day. God also gave them the highest pain and suffering, that being mortality and the act of dying. “Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”¹⁷

The story of Adam and Eve shows a God that is deeply involved with his creation, as he directly interacts with Adam and Eve through conversation and guidance. This narrative brings about a clear hierarchy between God and his creation, one that is rooted in moral authority. When his creation disobeys, God uses his power to judge and punish them, which reinforces his role as a creator and a moral lawgiver. In contrast, Cavendish’s understanding of God in her metaphysics focuses on an ontological existence rather than a moral governance. She does not argue for the same hierarchical relationship between God and Nature as is seen in the Book of Genesis. While she

¹⁵ Genesis 3:16 (NIV)

¹⁶ Genesis 3:17 (NIV)

¹⁷ Genesis 3:23-24 (NIV)

accepts God to be all-powerful and the creator of the world, she argues that his role stops at creation, with Nature functioning independently after. This is important, especially since the Genesis account is often the first portrayal of God encountered by people who read the Bible. With Cavendish being an Anglican and her separation from this understanding of God, the tension between her metaphysics and traditional theological understandings that she tends to use in her work is apparent.

The next event in the Book of Genesis that experiences God's fundamental attributes is the story of Adam and Eve's sons: Abel and Cain. In this story, it shows how Abel and Cain were born and eventually began working on Earth to live. They both came to God with their earnings as blessings for him and since God favoured Abel, he celebrated him for his blessings, whereas for Cain, God scolded him for his blessings. Cain then became jealous of Abel and killed him. When God found out he told Cain that he would not be able to grow crops anymore and he would have to be a suffering wanderer for the rest of his life. Cain questioned what would happen if he was murdered in this time, and God answered that whoever killed Cain will receive The Mark of Cain and will suffer seven times the suffering that Cain suffers.¹⁸

The story of Cain and Abel shows a God that is not only deeply involved in human affairs, but also serves as a moral judge. God evaluates the offerings of Cain and Abel, confronts Cain about his anger and after Cain murders his brother, punishes him for his sin. This emphasizes a God who enforces moral accountability, intervenes in the world directly, and holds moral order through acts of justice and mercy. In contrast, Cavendish's idea of God in her metaphysics removes God from any moral engagement. While she acknowledges God as the omnipotent creator, she argues that his

¹⁸ Genesis 4 (NIV)

role ends at creation, and as mentioned prior, Nature governs itself. Cavendish's God does not judge, punish, or protect individuals since these actions would mean ongoing divine interference, which contradicts her view that Nature is autonomous. This distinction between a moral, interventionist God and an ontological, non-interventionist God illustrates the tension between traditional theology and Cavendish's metaphysics with theological tones, where divine justice is replaced by natural order.

The final chapter of the Book of Genesis to be discussed is Noah's ark.¹⁹ After generations of procreation and evolution, there became a time where God believed that there was a lot of evilness taking place between humans. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart."²⁰ Because of this God decided to wipe out the population with a flood and start over. He got Noah to build an ark to hold his family and a few of each animal while the flood was taking place. Once the flood was over after 40 days, Noah and his sons were told by God to procreate so the world could start over with new people and without the looming evil that was present before.²¹

The story of Noah's ark shows a God identical to the other two stories where he is deeply invested in both the moral state of humanity and the workings of the natural world. Since God is disturbed by the human wickedness, God brings about a global flood to cleanse the earth. In doing so, God is directly intervening in nature as a form of divine punishment. This understanding of God as a moral judge who manipulates natural forces to fulfill divine justice stands in contrast to

¹⁹ Genesis 5 (NIV)

²⁰ Genesis 6:5-6 (NIV)

²¹ Genesis 9 (NIV)

Cavendish's conception of God in her metaphysics. With the mentioned understanding that God's role ends at creation, Cavendish would notably reject that God who can manipulate nature for punishment's sake. In her metaphysical system, events like floods would not occur as a divine punishment but through natural causes alone.

By examining these three foundational stories from the Book of Genesis, a preliminary understanding of God's character begins to show. This understanding shapes how the world is structured, governed, and understood within the Christian tradition, making God's character important to religious worldbuilding. In these stories, God often appears harsh or even wrathful, particularly in the way he punishes his creation. However, I argue that God's actions are motivated by a desire to correct the moral failures of humanity and restore order to a world that has moved away from his original intent. These stories show a God who is deeply involved in human affairs, often stepping in to address the problems caused by human disobedience. Given that these events occur at the dawn of humanity, it is plausible that God's intense involvement reflects an effort to guide humanity back on course after the disruption caused by Adam and Eve's original transgression. In this sense, God can be understood as a concerned parent, giving consequences not out of malice, but out of a desire to teach and repair. The Book of Genesis presents a God who, having created the world, is actively working through its early challenges. He is essentially a divine presence intimately engaged with nature and human morality.

While this portrayal of God may seem different to the views of later Christian theology, it is important to understand how God is depicted at the beginning of the biblical narrative, especially since this is when he is most active in creation. This context is important given that Cavendish, a member of the Anglican tradition, would have been well-acquainted with these early Genesis accounts. These stories probably shaped her initial understanding of God, and any departure from

them in her metaphysical writings would have been both deliberate and significant. By recognizing how God is characterized in the Book of Genesis, this can allow the evaluation of Cavendish's own interpretation of the divine to be nuanced. In her metaphysics, she presents God as non-interventionist, where he creates the world but does not engage with it afterwards. The contrast between the active, morally engaged God of the Book of Genesis and Cavendish's distant, ontological creator emphasizes this tension in her work; one that complicates her relationship to traditional theology and raises questions about how she reconciles divine omnipotence with Nature's autonomy.

I.IV God as the Ultimate Being

Having explored how the Book of Genesis presents an active, morally engaged God, and how Cavendish's metaphysical understanding of God contrasts with this, it is now important to consider a central doctrine of Christian theology: the trinity of God as the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This concept is foundational within Anglicanism and more broadly speaking Christian belief, shaping how God's nature, actions, and relationship to the world are understood. In this section, I will first outline the traditional roles and theological significance of each person of the trinity, and then examine how Cavendish's writings reflect conflicting and inconsistent views on this doctrine. These conflicts introduce further tension between her metaphysics and her religious context, especially as her emphasis on a non-interventionist, singular creator clashes with the relational, redemptive, and immanent aspects of the Christian triune God. In essence, Cavendish's struggle to reconcile her metaphysics with the trinity shows deeper challenges in maintaining both philosophical consistency and theological fidelity within her work.

First, God is given the title 'the father' since it reflects his role as the creator of the world and of humanity. This title also shows a more personal and relational layer to God in that it brings

about the loving and protective parent of his children. In the same way that a father looks after, teaches and disciplines his children, God does this in scripture when he guides and nurtures humanity. For example, no matter what I do in life, I know that my own father will continue to love me because I am his child. This idea of unconditional love and care mirrors God's fatherly presence, even after Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, and how he continues to watch over them and remains engaged with humanity. When he punishes them, it is not an act of cruelty but one of correction and instruction to teach them the right and wrong of their consequences. The fatherly characteristics of protection, guidance, discipline are notably seen from God in the Book of Genesis, especially when he is interacting with his creation.²²

Secondly, God is given the title 'the Son' which refers to Jesus Christ, who is both a divine being and fully human. Jesus can be understood as the incarnate form of God, who was sent to Earth with the purpose of redeeming humanity from sin and fixing the broken relationship between God and his creation. This act of divine incarnation is seen to be an expression of God's love as the Father since it is a love so unconditional that he was willing to sacrifice his only Son for the sake of humanity, which is seen here: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."²³ Later on in the Bible once Jesus is born and an adult, God tells Jesus that he is to be sacrificed for our sins, and Jesus accepts. Once Jesus dies and is resurrected back to God, we are forgiven of all our sins and can be brought back to God after our mortal death.²⁴ Essentially, Jesus' sacrifice reverses the banishment of humanity, via Adam and Eve's betrayal, meaning that we are forgiven for what humanity has done wrong and are

²² Genesis 1 (NIV)

²³ John 3:16 (NIV)

²⁴ Matthew 6:27 (NIV)

able to be with God in the end. In short, God the Son embodies divine love and redemption, which reconnects the fallen humanity with the Father's eternal home. This sacrificial relationship shows the Christian view of God's involvement in human life, not only as a creator or the Father but also as a saviour.

Lastly, God is given the title of the Holy Spirit, who in the Christian faith represents God's active presence inside of and around us, guiding believers through life. While God is not a physical being, the Holy Spirit functions as God's force or presence which helps to shape and influence events in our lives and steer us toward religious righteousness. Christians often view the Holy Spirit as a gift from God which was given to us to help keep us on the path God intends for the world, as seen in the following scripture: "Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who live in us."²⁵ One of the most prominent ways that Christians feel this divine presence is through prayer. By praying, believers connect with the Holy Spirit within them, sharing their struggles and blessings with God and trusting that he hears them. As another verse says, "[T]he prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."²⁶ The Holy Spirit is also meant to guide our thoughts and intentions in prayer by reminding us of what we may have forgotten, helping us recognize Jesus' presence, and prompting us to confess our sins. This is seen in the verse, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."²⁷

²⁵ 2 Timothy 1:14 (NIV)

²⁶ James 5:15-16 (NIV)

²⁷ Romans 8:26 (NIV)

Essentially, the Holy Spirit is an extension of God's love and power, offering comfort, guidance, and connection, helping believers live faithfully and communicate with God. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians are not left alone but are always accompanied and empowered on their spiritual journey.

These three titles of God are essential in revealing his nature within the Christian faith. Through the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, God is not only transcendent but also deeply integrated into every facet of our lives. He understands our innermost thoughts, knows what the future holds, and guides us on our paths to Heaven. By understanding the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we recognize that God is an ever-present force within the Christian faith, providing profound insight into his nature. This triune nature of God offers a profound insight into his character and relationship with humanity. This understanding is reflected in the study of the Bible and the efforts of Christians to fully comprehend God and his works.

For Cavendish, while she was familiar with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity, she often showed doubt and confusion about how it could make sense, especially in her own metaphysics. In her dialogues *Philosophical Letters*, she asks the following question about the trinity: "I desired, if she could not make me understand the mystery, she would inform me, how three made one in Divinity, Nature and Man."²⁸ This quote shows how Cavendish is questioning the idea of how three separate beings, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, can still be one God. The response she gives in the dialogue comes from Christian teaching: "That was easie to do; for in Divinity there are three persons in one Essence, as God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, whose Essence being individable, they make but one God."²⁹ This seems to be the explanation to the mystery that is posed, however Cavendish does not seem to be fond of it. It is seen later in the dialogue that a

²⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 493.

²⁹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 494.

logician comes after the woman gives this answer and the woman flees with the excuse that the logician will just hurt her head with his truths.³⁰ It could be understood that Cavendish brings this logician into the story so as to share that in her philosophy, which she claims is based on reason, the trinity is not a valid argument.

This exchange in her dialogue illustrates an important conflict regarding Cavendish's thinking. While she respects religious tradition as an Anglican, Cavendish's metaphysical views focus on a sort of simplicity, unity and Nature's ability to govern itself without divine interference. The idea of three persons in one God does not fit well with her belief in one, all-powerful God creating the world and then steps back allowing Nature to manage itself. In her view, God does not act as the Holy Spirit to guide people, and he does not take on a human form as the Son. Instead, God is merely the Father of creation who then becomes distant and does not intervene in Nature's work. By raising questions regarding the trinity, Cavendish is including the tension between her religious background and her philosophical ideas. It seems she wants her beliefs to be logical and consistent, and the mystery of the trinity does not follow this. This creates an issue in her work, as she seems to be working for a balance between Christian teachings and her natural philosophy.

To better understand the tension in Cavendish's view of God, it is helpful to compare her ideas with René Descartes, a well-known philosopher from the same time period. Descartes, who was Catholic, made a clear effort to include theology in his philosophy, using Christian beliefs to support his arguments. For example, he described God as perfect and all-powerful, and believed that God guaranteed the truth of human reason.³¹ It is important to note that the two had different

³⁰ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 495.

³¹ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 24.

religious practices, with Cavendish being Anglican and Descartes being Catholic, however while Catholicism and Anglicanism are different in practices and traditions, they do share many of the same core beliefs about God and creation. Many philosophers in the 17th century, like Descartes, worked to connect their philosophical ideas with these shared Christian teachings, however Cavendish took a different approach. Looking at how Descartes uses theology in his philosophy helps show why Cavendish's approach is unusual. It also helps explain why her ideas create a problem in her work, one that was not common among other thinkers of the time.

I.V Theological Philosophy in the Early Modern Period

To do this, it is worth exploring part of Descartes' metaphysics, more specifically his skepticism regarding sense perceptions and how he concludes that at the very least, his mind exists due to it being a thinking thing, and God exists because Descartes' mind has an idea of God's existence. I also will dissect four of Descartes's arguments for existence; in doing so, it will become clear the difference in trajectory of his metaphysics from Cavendish. From there, comparing Descartes and Cavendish, using the evidence I previously presented regarding Descartes, I argue that the difference between the two is the implementation of theology that Cavendish incorporates in her work is significantly higher than Descartes, as after Descartes prefaces his existence for God argument, he moves to discussing more about metaphysics without the inclusion of theology, more specifically the substance dualist theory. Evidentially, due to the amount of theology Cavendish presents and maintains throughout her metaphysics, she is faced with contradictions and concerns on the validity of her rejection of theology being incorporated into metaphysics. This is where I argue that Cavendish's Theological problem presents itself.

In Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*³² he establishes that the issue he is concerned with is the fact that the senses are not accurate in depicting the truth of something. For example, you are walking down a road that is dimly lit. In the distance you see what you think is a person. Upon walking closer, you realize that it is not a person standing there but instead a rock that is vaguely shaped as a person. In this example, the senses are misguided. The senses perceived that the rock was a person, but it was an inaccurate depiction. Descartes questions then how we can rely on the senses when they perceive things wrong at times. How can we believe that anything that we are perceiving is real, since the senses are not reliable? With this, Descartes ends the first meditation with this issue that there is no certainty that anything we perceive is real.

Descartes' first task is to find something that does exist, that is real, and he focuses primarily on understanding what he is, and whether any part of him exists with this skepticism in mind. He concludes after some deliberation that his mind, at the very least, exists because he is thinking thing. "To speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really exist but what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks."³³ This means that while there is no certainty that Descartes' body exists, since his senses could be misguiding him into him believing his body exists, at the very least since he knows his mind can think of its existence then it must exist. It is also the case that his mind can think of what created it, which would be God. His brief argument for this is as follows:

It is perfectly evident that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect; and thus since I am a thinking thing, and possess an idea of God within me, whatever in the

³² René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*.

³³ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 22.

end be the cause assigned to my existence, it must be allowed that it is likewise a thinking thing and that it possesses in itself the idea of all the perfections which I attribute to God.³⁴

Essentially, Descartes argues that since he has the idea of God inside his mind, and since something that created Descartes' mind must be a thinking thing and have all perfections, it must be God since those characteristics are attributed to God. It seems that when Descartes discusses perfections he is talking about omnipotence, omnibenevolence, omniscient, etc., which is due to idea that whatever created Descartes has everything he lacks and would not make mistakes. These perfect attributes, all powerful, all knowing, etc., are attributes that for religious contexts are attributed only to God, which seems to be where Descartes is going in his argument.

Subsequently, he produces four propositions that argue for the existence of God. In stating each proposition, I will briefly discuss the explanation for each that Descartes provides. My intent is that by explaining these four propositions, it will be clear the difference between Descartes and Cavendish, however, I will make apparent the difference that then causes problems for Cavendish.

1. The existence of God can be known merely by considering his nature

Descartes is explaining that the nature of a thing refers to what is essential to it, meaning what must be true for it to be the kind of thing it is. For example, when discussing an apple, we might say that it is a fruit. Being a fruit is part of what makes an apple an apple; it is a feature that belongs to the apple by its nature. Descartes uses this same kind of reasoning for God. He argues that God's nature is to be an infinite being, and that this includes that he necessarily exists. This means that existence is not something God happens to have, instead it is something that belongs to him by his nature. Descartes supports this by saying that "existence is contained in the idea or concept of every

³⁴ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 34.

single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing.”³⁵ In other words, our ideas of things always include existence in some form, but only for God is that existence not contingent.

Descartes then contrasts God with finite beings, like humans. A finite thing, such as Descartes’ own mind, has a dependent or contingent existence in that it exists, but only because something else caused it. God, in contrast, does not depend on anything else to exist. Because he is infinite, his existence is necessary and self-sufficient. Therefore, for Descartes, to understand God as an infinite being is also to understand that God necessarily exists.³⁶

2. *The existence of God can be demonstrated a posteriori merely from the fact that we have an idea of God within us*

For this proposition, it is worth defining a posteriori and objective reality for this argument. An a posteriori proposition “is knowable on the basis of existence.”³⁷ Descartes is suggesting that we know God because it is a knowledge we have inherent to our existence. An objective reality of an idea is the reality of the thing that the idea represents, not the idea itself. For example, when thinking of a tree, the idea of the tree in your mind is not the same as the real, physical tree outside. The objective reality of the idea of the tree is the real tree that your idea represents.³⁸ Using these two definitions, Descartes is claiming that any of our ideas that we have, and its objective reality, has to have a cause that is formally in us or known to us. But while we have the idea of God, the objective reality of God is not formally in us. This seems to be most likely due to the idea that we are finite beings, and God is an infinite being, making it hard to comprehend the reality of God. As such,

³⁵ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 83.

³⁶ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 83.

³⁷ Jason S Baehr, “A Priori and A Posteriori,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed February 14, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/apriori/#:~:text=A%20priori%20and%20a%20posteriori%20refer%20primarily%20to,on%20the%20basis%20of%20experience>.

³⁸ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 81.

Descartes argues that only God can have the objective reality of the idea of himself in him formally.

Therefore, the idea of God, which is in us, has God as its cause meaning he exists.

3. *God's existence can also be demonstrated from the fact that we, who possess the idea of God, exist*

To explain this proposition, Descartes constructs premises that follow to a conclusion, presented below:

P1: If I had the power of preserving myself, then I would have the power to give me the perfections I lack. But I do not have that power to give myself those perfections, so I do not have the power to preserve myself.

P2: I could not exist unless I was preserved by either myself or something that has that power. But I do not have that power, and I do exist so something must have the power to preserve me.

P3: Whatever preserves me has to have the same things that is in me. I have the perception of the perfections I lack and the idea of God. Therefore, whatever preserves me must have those same perceptions.

C: This being cannot have perfections that he lacks. But he does have the perceptions of the perfections that I lack and that is something that is only capable in God. Therefore, he has the perfections in himself and hence he is God.³⁹

Briefly, this argument states that Descartes understands that he does not have the power to keep himself alive, nor can he make himself perfect. Because of this, there must be something that is perfect, since Descartes has the idea of perfection, that is keeping him alive. God is the only thing that is deemed perfect; hence it must be God that is preserving him.

4. *There is a real distinction between the mind and the body*

This is where Descartes shifts from proving the existence of God to introducing his next major argument: the mind-body distinction. For Descartes, God plays an important role in ensuring that our perceptions are reliable. Since God is perfect and not deceptive, he guarantees that our clear and distinct perceptions are true. One perception, according to Descartes, is that the mind and body are

³⁹ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 118.

separate substances. While the reasoning for this distinction is beyond the scope of this discussion, Descartes argues that because we can clearly conceive of the mind existing without the body, they must be ontologically distinct. He acknowledges the transition in his argument, stating, “the preceding arguments have dealt solely with God, and hence there was nothing else I could use to make the separation.”⁴⁰ This suggests that his proof of God’s existence is being used as the foundation for his next philosophical claim: that the mind is an immaterial, thinking substance, separate from the extended, physical body. In this way, Descartes not only establishes the existence of God but also uses God as a bridge to justify his dualist view of human nature.

Descartes uses God to support his larger philosophical system. His belief in a perfect and non-deceptive God helps him explain how we can trust our perceptions and why the mind and body are separate. This shows that theology played an important role in shaping metaphysical ideas at the time. The contrast between Descartes’ and Cavendish’s conceptions of God illustrates why her metaphysics stands out so distinctly and why it creates a problem in her work. Descartes integrates God into his philosophy as a necessary guarantor of truth, ensuring that human reason and perception are reliable. His God is both active and central, serving as the foundation for his epistemology and his mind-body distinction. I argue that Cavendish believes in a non-interventionist God who creates the world but does not engage with it, making no guarantees about human reason or perception. This difference emphasizes a tension in her work. Whereas her contemporaries invoked God to reinforce their philosophical systems, Cavendish’s inactive God leaves certain gaps in her metaphysics. However, what may have seemed like a weakness in her own time can, from a modern perspective, be seen as a strength, since her account does not depend on divine guarantees

⁴⁰ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 120.

and in this respect appears more convincing than Descartes'. Without a divine figure that ensures order and truth, Cavendish must rely on her concept of self-moving matter to explain nature's operations. While this sets her apart from thinkers like Descartes, it also brings about an inherent difficulty; how can she believe in God regarding her metaphysics while also removing his traditional role of actively maintaining and overseeing creation? This tension, which I refer to as 'Cavendish's Theological Problem,' is what makes her philosophy so unique but also so difficult to reconcile with the broader religious and philosophical discourse of her time.

I.VI Cavendish's Theological Problem

Having examined the relevant literature as well as important philosophical and theological concepts that are needed to understand Cavendish's metaphysics, I can now present my argument regarding the tension in her work. Unlike other philosophers of her time such as Descartes, who incorporated a single, active God into his system, Cavendish's writings suggest two distinct versions of God: the Biblical God, which is rooted in Christian tradition, and the Metaphysical God, a distant creator removed from the workings of nature. The biblical God appears in her work regarding faith, devotion, and worship, while the metaphysical God is an abstract principle that is the creator of motion and order for Nature. These two versions reflect the different functions God takes on in her work, depending on whether she is speaking as a religious believer or as a natural philosopher. I argue that this distinction eliminates the apparent conflict between her natural philosophy and her rejection of theology as a philosophical tool. Cavendish's evolving thoughts and the religious environment of her time shaped this dual idea of God, making her work particularly complex.

In the next chapter, I will examine how Sara Mendelson, Lisa T. Sarasohn, and Karen Detlefsen have interpreted this contradiction, each offering different perspectives on how Cavendish attempts to balance theology and metaphysics. I will assess the strengths of their interpretations,

considering how well they address the tension in her work, while also illustrating their limitations. Ultimately, I argue that none fully resolves the problem in a way that accounts for all of Cavendish's commitments. Mendelson does not address the internal contradictions between her metaphysics and her stated separation of theology and philosophy, Sarasohn leaves unresolved how God fits into Cavendish's materialism, and Detlefsen identifies the central problem but does not offer a well-constructed solution. My contribution is to develop a two conception of God solution that distinguishes Cavendish's metaphysical God from her biblical God, which provides a more comprehensive account of her commitments and a consistent resolution of the tension.

Chapter Two: Strengths and Limits in Current Scholarship on Cavendish

II.I Introduction

As seen in the last chapter, Margaret Cavendish's natural philosophy is defined by a compelling tension regarding her rejection of the intersection of theology and philosophy, despite frequently putting forward God being part of her metaphysical system. I examined this tension by analyzing biblical narratives that Cavendish would be aware of, such as the creation story, the tale of Cain and Abel, and the account of Noah's ark, to show that the God Cavendish invokes in her work often separates from the biblical God that is presented in Genesis. This could suggest that Cavendish may be working with more than one conception of God in her writing. To contextualize this further, I compared her approach to Descartes, whose philosophical system uses a more traditional conception of God to secure metaphysical certainty. Having this comparison shows how distinct Cavendish's position is against her early modern peers and emphasizes the ambiguity in her treatment of theology. This tension puts Cavendish in a philosophical bind, where her written philosophical commitments regarding the separation of theology and philosophy clash with the practical demands of her metaphysical concepts.

Karen Detlefsen identifies this ambiguity, arguing that while Cavendish argues for the independence of natural philosophy, she continues to rely on theological ideas, especially in her teleological explanations of causation and motion. While Detlefsen's account shows the tension, my previous chapter suggested that the problem may stem less from inconsistency and more from conceptual plurality, where Cavendish may be operating with two different notions of God, which would help account for the apparent contradiction. This chapter will critically examine three major scholarly perspectives on this issue. I will begin with Sara Mendelson, who situates Cavendish within the broader cultural and religious context of seventeenth century England to suggest that her

invocation of God may be more strategic or metaphysically motivated than theological. I then turn to Lisa T. Sarasohn, whose focus on Cavendish's fideism and use of negative theology emphasizes her Christian commitment as central to understanding her view of God's role in nature. Finally, I will revisit Detlefsen's account, which shows the inconsistency between Cavendish's philosophical claims and metaphysical content, while proposing that God's role is to be merely suggestive. While each of these scholars offers valuable insights, I will argue that their approaches are incomplete and that they do not fully explain how Cavendish might consistently use multiple conceptions of God to navigate the commitments of theology and natural philosophy.

While all three works give valuable insights regarding interpreting Cavendish's work, I argue that none sufficiently resolves the tension between the philosophical commitments that are stated by Cavendish and her metaphysical reliance on God. For Mendelson, her contextual approach does not fully address the internal philosophical contradictions that are present in Cavendish's system. This is to say, Mendelson does not address how Cavendish could have a metaphysics that heavily relies on God to explain natural phenomena while also claiming that theology and philosophy should remain separate disciplines. In this context, theology refers not only to the study of religious texts, but more broadly to the system of thought in divine revelation, religious doctrine, and interpretations within religious traditions.⁴¹ It encompasses questions about the nature of God, divine intervention, salvation and moral law, which often comes from sacred texts, church authority and theological reasoning. This suggests that Cavendish's insistence on keeping theology and philosophy separate is due to her view that theological claims are based on faith or revealed knowledge, whereas philosophy relies on reason, and speculation. Concerning Sarasohn, her focus on fideism and

⁴¹ "Theology Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster, accessed June 11, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theology>.

negative theology sheds light on Cavendish's conception of God but leaves questions unanswered regarding the coherence of her metaphysical system. For example, she acknowledges Cavendish's materialist commitments but does not explore in depth how her mention of God fits or fails to fit with her materialist metaphysics. While Detlefsen's analysis compellingly illustrates the central contradiction in Cavendish's work, which I have named Cavendish's Theological Problem, it does stop short of providing an answer to the tension itself. She does not fully investigate what kind of God Cavendish is incorporating in her work or the theological foundations that are associated with this incorporation. By evaluating these perspectives through a critical lens, I will demonstrate their limitations and establish the need for a more comprehensive interpretation.

This discussion will pave the way for the argument I will develop in the next chapter, where I propose an alternative reading of Cavendish. My claim is not that the tension disappears, but that it can be made intelligible through a two conception of God solution that distinguishes between her metaphysical and biblical conceptions of God. I suggest that Cavendish employs two conceptions of God confined to separate realms, one to philosophy and one to religion. This interpretation will reconcile the tension between her metaphysical commitments and her theological invocations. Thus, this chapter seeks to highlight the complexity of Cavendish's thought while stressing that existing interpretations are inadequate in relieving the tension that arises from the contradiction in Cavendish's natural philosophy.

II.II Sara Mendelson: External Factors

In Sara Mendelson's work, she offers a historically grounded account of why Cavendish invokes God in her philosophical writings, which helps to illuminate the tensions surrounding Cavendish's metaphysical commitments. Mendelson focuses on the external factors that help shape Cavendish's metaphysical theories, namely, her personal environment (her brother-in-law and

husband), and her academic environment (her contemporaries such as Descartes or Hobbes). Mendelson argues that Cavendish refers to God not solely for metaphysical reasons but also as a strategic response to the social and intellectual pressures of her time. Openly rejecting God or religion could have exposed Cavendish to charges of atheism or heresy, which would take away the legitimacy she would be seeking, especially as a woman entering a male-dominated field. Thus, Mendelson's analysis is particularly helpful for understanding the sociopolitical function of God in Cavendish's work and for assessing whether the tensions are better understood as rhetorical rather than strictly metaphysical.

Specifically, Mendelson argues that Cavendish incorporates God as a transcendent being, to which his only responsibility was the creation of the natural world.⁴² This is seen in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, and in Mendelson's work, where Cavendish shows her view that God is the creator of nature, but that after creation is complete, the natural world operates independently through its own principles:

For God the Author of Nature, and Nature the servant of God, do order all things and actions of Nature, the one by his Immutable Will, and All-powerful Command, the other by executing this Will and Command; the one by an Incomprehensible, Divine and Supernatural Power, the other in a natural manner and way; for God's Will is obey'd by Natures self-motion.⁴³

According to Mendelson's view, we can see that Cavendish invokes God in a way that reflects both the religious expectations of her time and her commitment to a self-sufficient natural world. God is seen as a transcendent being that created the natural world and is only acknowledged for this initial act. From there, Cavendish makes it clear that Nature operates independently, guided by its own self-moving and self-organizing principles. This is to say that each part of nature (humans, plants,

⁴² Sara Mendelson, "The God of Nature and the Nature of God," 29.

⁴³ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 25.

animals, etc.) has an innate awareness of God's existence, but that does not mean God continues to intervene in Nature's functions. In this way, Cavendish would satisfy the Christian belief regarding a divine creator, which would have been important for maintaining credibility among her contemporaries, while also keeping her materialist beliefs. Mendelson's point is that Cavendish includes God in her metaphysics not as a theological necessity, but as a strategic response to her environment, which allows her to reference divinity without compromising her view that Nature is entirely self-driven.

In addition, Mendelson argues that Cavendish incorporates God into her work as a strategic move by her writing in general. What I mean is that in Cavendish's work, there are different genres of writing, ie., poetry, dialogue, letters, etc., that incorporate theories and ideas that do not seem to follow Cavendish's personal theories. Mendelson argues that Cavendish seems to be incorporating theories into her fictional writing to experiment with the theories without commitment.⁴⁴ Cavendish herself argues that using fiction is an excellent way to experiment with theories that the writer is not committed to: "By cultivating the art of fancy or fiction, a man may frame ideas 'in his own mind, without regard whether the things he fancies be really existent without his own mind or not.' While 'reason searches the depth of nature and enquires after the true cause of natural effects, fancy creates of its own accord whatever it pleases and delights in its own work.'"⁴⁵

Furthering this argument, Cavendish herself uses this method in other areas of philosophy. At the time of her writing, Cavendish was very skeptical of the experimentation of nature that the men around her were partaking in, i.e. using microscopes. Cavendish's work *Observations upon*

⁴⁴ Sara Mendelson, "The God of Nature and the Nature of God," 34.

⁴⁵ Cavendish, M. 2003. 'A New World called the Blazing World', in *Political Writings*, ed. James, Susan, Cambridge University Press, 5.

Experimental Philosophy was written for the purpose of explaining that “the experimental science cannot equal nature, so that practitioners who try to exercise their creativity through these arts are bound to be frustrated. However, as the *Blazing World* goes on to illustrate, nature has given us the imaginative means to create new things and, by doing so, to satisfy the erotic desires that underlie our efforts to surpass the natural world.”⁴⁶ This is to say, since Cavendish has used and condones this method, it is plausible to assume that this is what she is doing when incorporating God in her work. In short, Mendelson argues that Cavendish strategically places God in her work so as to adhere to the social pressures of her time. This is seen in her incorporation of God as merely the creator of the natural world while also committing to her personal philosophies. This is seen in her writing in that she uses a mixture of philosophical writing and fictional writing to incorporate her thoughts and work through her ideas.

By arguing that Cavendish is incorporating God strategically, Mendelson is acknowledging that Cavendish may have invoked God not because it was an essential attribute to her metaphysics but because it was necessary for her philosophical ideas to be taken seriously. As I mentioned previously, with Cavendish being a female writer in philosophy, it made it difficult to be taken seriously, especially from her male peers. Cavendish herself brings up the disparity in her gender regarding her philosophical contributions, as seen here: “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.”⁴⁷ Essentially, Mendelson’s contextual approach shows the challenges Cavendish faced as a woman philosopher. By invoking

⁴⁶ Susan James, “‘Hermaphroditical Mixtures,’” *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics* 2 (2018): 31–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316827192.005>, 33.

⁴⁷ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 11.

God, it might have helped Cavendish navigate the additional scrutiny and skepticism directed at women in intellectual circles.

Another advantage of Mendelson's interpretation is that it helps explain some of the inconsistencies in Cavendish's references to God, especially the way God appears prominently in some passages but non-existent in others. By understanding these references as responses to cultural and intellectual pressures instead of merely metaphysical commitments, Mendelson offers a way to reconcile those shifts. Her approach shows how Cavendish skillfully balances religious language with a philosophy that supposedly resists divine intervention. In this way, Mendelson presents Cavendish as a philosopher and as a strategic thinker navigating a difficult intellectual environment.

While Mendelson's interpretation offers valuable insight as to why Cavendish may have invoked God in her philosophical work, her account leaves significant conceptual problems unaddressed. By illustrating the external pressures that may have shaped Cavendish's metaphysical references to God, Mendelson avoids the internal inconsistencies those references create in Cavendish's natural philosophy. Cavendish is committed to a materialist view, one that rejects the involvement of immaterial entities in the workings of Nature and separates theology from natural philosophy.⁴⁸ Despite this, she still invokes God as the creator of Nature, a move that seems to conflict with her metaphysics. Mendelson's reading frames this as a strategic move but it does not engage with the tension this creates within Cavendish's philosophy itself. The main issue is that Cavendish's materialism depends on the idea that nature is entirely self-moving and self-organizing. Introducing God as the origin of motion risks reintroducing a mechanistic, first mover view, where God creates Nature and then steps back, which takes away the self-sufficiency Cavendish attributes

⁴⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 71.

to matter.⁴⁹ Mendelson does not acknowledge this metaphysical tension and instead treats God's role as an external rhetorical strategy rather than a philosophical commitment that needs to be reconciled with the rest of Cavendish's views. Thus, Mendelson's account leaves unresolved the question of how Cavendish can consistently maintain both her materialism and her invocation of a divine creator.

Another problem that complicates matters is the inconsistency in Cavendish's own descriptions of God. At times, she presents God as a distant, deistic creator who remains entirely separate from the natural world: "As for God, he being immovable, and beyond all natural motion, cannot inherent in themselves; by which it is evident, that there can be no other principle in nature, but this self-moving matter."⁵⁰ This aligns with her commitment to a self-contained material world. Yet in other areas, Cavendish appears to attribute a more active, teleological role to God: "I believe also that God is the God and Author of Nature, and has made Nature and natural Matter in a way and manner proper to his Omnipotency and Incomprehensible by us."⁵¹ If God is merely a deistic creator, then Cavendish's materialist system remains intact. But if God is actively involved in keeping harmony and order in Nature, as some of her statements suggest,⁵² then her system becomes internally conflicted. This not only clashes with her commitment to material self-motion, but also with her insistence that theology and philosophy should remain distinct disciplines. While Mendelson offers a valuable perspective on the social and historical reasons behind Cavendish's inclusion of God, her account ultimately fails to address, and actually intensifies core tensions within Cavendish's metaphysics. By focusing primarily on the external, contextual factors

⁴⁹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 212.

⁵⁰ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 230.

⁵¹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 16.

⁵² Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 16.

that may have influenced Cavendish's writings, Mendelson ignores the internal philosophical coherence of Cavendish's system. Although examining the cultural and intellectual pressures of the seventeenth century may help explain why Cavendish felt it necessary to invoke God, it does not explain how this invocation can be reconciled with her explicit and repeated insistence on keeping theology separate from natural philosophy. Mendelson's failure to confront this methodological contradiction weakens her interpretation. By neglecting the philosophical consequences of having a socially motivated concept of God into a system that insists on metaphysical holism and not having theological reasoning, Mendelson leaves Cavendish's metaphysics in a state of unresolved tension. As a result, her account ultimately falls short of offering a coherent or convincing explanation of Cavendish's philosophy.

II.III Lisa T. Sarasohn: Fideism/Negative Theology

Lisa T. Sarasohn's interpretation of Cavendish addresses a central tension in Cavendish's metaphysical writings: how can Cavendish know of the existence of God and attribute certain roles to him while also claiming that God is unknowable? Sarasohn approaches this problem by analyzing Cavendish through fideism and negative theology, which together, she argues, help to reconcile Cavendish's religious references with her commitment to separate theology from philosophy. For explanatory purposes, fideism is "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth,"⁵³ and negative theology "refers to theologies which regard negative statements as primary in expressing our knowledge of God."⁵⁴ Essentially, fideism is the belief that faith is the

⁵³ Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 87.

⁵⁴ David Braine, "Negative Theology," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1998 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-k053-1>

appropriate means of accessing religious or metaphysical truths instead of reason, especially regarding the knowledge of God and his attributes. Negative theology is the approach that believes we can only speak about God by saying what God is not. Sarasohn uses both of these concepts in Cavendish's work in order to explain how Cavendish can reference God while maintaining a methodological separation between philosophy and theology. This is to say that Cavendish does not seek to understand or explain the nature of God through philosophical inquiry but instead she defers such questions to the realm of faith, which she explicitly identifies as the responsibility of the Church rather than the philosopher, as seen here: "All which I leave to the Church: for I should be loth to affirm any thing contrary to their Doctrine, or the Information of the holy Scripture."⁵⁵ Thus, philosophy for Cavendish is the study of Nature and the operations within it. Because God is not part of Nature, he lies beyond the scope of philosophical reasoning.

This approach allows Cavendish to invoke God as the original creator or organizing principles of Nature without violating her philosophical commitments. God's existence is acknowledged, but his nature is left unexplored. According to Sarasohn, Cavendish holds that it is not the purpose of philosophy to investigate God's attributes, and any knowledge of God must come through faith.⁵⁶ In this way, Sarasohn presents a compelling solution to the tension between Cavendish's invocation of God and her metaphysics. As for the role of negative theology, Sarasohn illustrates that Cavendish seems to believe faith is the only means by which one could come to know more about God. Sarasohn states that "her rejection of the notion that man could in some sense know the essence of God, her religious fideism, and her theory of vitalistic materialism all

⁵⁵ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 210.

⁵⁶ Lisa T Sarasohn, "Fideism, Negative Theology, and Christianity in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish," essay, in *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 95.

contributed towards the firm belief that when it comes to faith, it is better to trust those who specialize in the divine, rather than one's own erratic and erroneous, and possibly sinful, ruminations on the relationship of God and Nature."⁵⁷ Since faith lies outside of philosophy, and since Cavendish rejects the use of theology within her philosophy, she avoids making positive claims about God's attributes. Instead, she emphasizes what God is not and what he does not do. This is consistent with the method of negative theology, where the divine is discussed through negation.⁵⁸

In Cavendish's metaphysics, it is Nature, not God, that governs the operations of the world. Nature is a self-governing, self-sustaining entity that orders and maintains all of her parts, including, humans, animals and matter. Cavendish attributes functions such as motion, perception, and agency to Nature, which relieves God of any direct involvement in the operations of the world.⁵⁹ Unlike many other early modern thinkers who attribute divine intervention to God, Cavendish assigns these roles to Nature. The only attribute not given to Nature is omnipotence because "although nature has infinite power, yet she is not omnipotent, but her power is a natural infinite power, whereas omnipotency is an attribute only belonging to God; neither hath she a divine, but a natural infinite knowledge; by which it is evident, that I do not ascribe divine attributes to nature, which were to make her a God."⁶⁰ More specifically, God as a transcendent being is omnipotent due to not being part of time in the same way as Nature, since Nature is the one in charge of the natural world. In short, Sarasohn's solution regarding Cavendish engaging in fideism and negative theology offers a plausible interpretation of her metaphysics. Cavendish's refusal to explore or define God's attributes, her insistence on the unknowability of God, and her consistent focus on Nature as the subject of

⁵⁷ Lisa T Sarasohn, "Fideism, Negative Theology, and Christianity in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish," 106.

⁵⁸ Lisa T Sarasohn, "Fideism, Negative Theology, and Christianity in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish," 95.

⁵⁹ Lisa T Sarasohn, "Fideism, Negative Theology, and Christianity in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish," 95.

⁶⁰ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 200.

philosophical inquiry all support Sarasohn's claim. Through this lens, Cavendish's work can be seen as maintaining the boundary between what philosophy can and cannot know, by accepting God's existence but leaving everything else about him to faith.⁶¹

An advantage to Sarasohn's argument is that by establishing Cavendish's God as unknowable and beyond human comprehension, Sarasohn illustrates how Cavendish maintained a theological position while avoiding direct integration of theology into her metaphysics. This is to say, since Cavendish argues that we know nothing of God other than that he exists, she is able to bring him into her metaphysics without fully committing to the attributes that others of her time grant God. Cavendish is also able to leave the attributes normally said about God, to Nature, which gives into her materialist views that everything is self-moving. Sarasohn then is able to argue that Cavendish merely makes note of God in her work, possibly as a strategic move similar to Mendelson, while also maintaining her belief that theology and philosophy do not intersect. Essentially, by arguing that Cavendish is adhering to fideism and negative theology, Sarasohn can hold that Cavendish is sticking to her rejection of the intersection.

Another advantage to Sarasohn's interpretation is that it helps clarify how Cavendish avoids the implication of materialist determinism⁶², which is a view that would otherwise conflict with aspects of her metaphysics. To understand why this matters, it is first important to unpack what materialist determinism entails. Materialism is the theory that "all that can truly be said to exist is matter; that fundamentally, everything is material, and all phenomena are the result of material

⁶¹ Lisa T Sarasohn, "Fideism, Negative Theology, and Christianity in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish," 96.

⁶² It is important to note that there is no true definition for materialist determinism as it stands, or at least that I could find. I take this to mean that not a lot of research has been done on what this could have done for some philosopher's systems. For Cavendish, materialist determinism was something she rejected as it meant that Nature was not self-moving.

interactions.”⁶³ In Cavendish’s case, she is undeniably a materialist, asserting that the entire natural world, including the mind and soul, is made of matter, because “for all that is not material is nothing in nature, or no part of nature.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, determinism is “the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature.”⁶⁵ When combined, materialist determinism implies that all events are governed by rigid, mechanical laws, leaving no room for agency, or purpose. By incorporating God into her metaphysics, Cavendish can fall to material determinism, since biblically, God knows everything that is to happen to everyone.

This is the kind of system Cavendish wants to resist. She repeatedly emphasizes that Nature is not mechanistic or inert, but rather active, self-moving, and has so much creativity and variation. Her natural philosophy argues that matter has the capacity for perception, knowledge and self-motion, which are all attributes that suggest spontaneity and agency. For Cavendish, Nature is not merely reacting to antecedent causes but instead it is expressing intention and purpose. As well, materialist determinism usually excludes teleology. In a purely deterministic view, events occur simply because they are the necessary result of prior events, however, Cavendish’s metaphysics incorporates a deep teleological understanding of Nature. She describes the natural world as operating in harmony and order, implying that its processes are purposeful rather than random, as iterated here: “it is probable, and can, to the perception of regular sense and reason, be no otherwise, but that self-moving matter, or corporeal figurative self-motion, does act and govern wisely, orderly and easily, poising or balancing extremes with proper and fit oppositions.”⁶⁶ For Cavendish, nature is a rational and intentional system.

⁶³ Materialism, Accessed February 15, 2025. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Materialism>.

⁶⁴ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 73.

⁶⁵ Carl Hoefer, “Causal Determinism,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, September 21, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/determinism-causal/>.

⁶⁶ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 35.

Sarasohn's interpretation helps to make sense of how Cavendish can hold onto her materialism without collapsing into determinism. At the same time, it illustrates the determinist position that Cavendish resists, making clearer what Cavendish's materialism is not, as well as what it is. By introducing God as a transcendent creator and teleological principles, Cavendish is able to keep the idea of Nature's freedom and purposefulness. God is the original cause, but after creation Nature becomes autonomous, and able to act and move independently. This move allows Cavendish to maintain that everything is made of matter, while also affirming that matter is self-moving, intentional and not determined. Because Cavendish avoids making positive claims about God's nature, her metaphysics does not intertwine with theological doctrines that would traditionally justify divine determinism. God's role in her philosophy is strictly foundational and teleological: he creates the world and instills it with order and purpose, but he does not interfere in natural processes. Through this interpretation, Sarasohn shows that Cavendish can defend a version of materialism that is free from determinism. Cavendish's God is not in charge of every natural event but instead merely an initial cause and organizing principles, whose attributes are left undefined due to her fideist and negative theological commitments. In this way, Sarasohn's solution resolves the tension between Cavendish's materialist metaphysics and her rejection of deterministic necessity, preserving both the autonomy of Nature and the coherence of Cavendish's philosophical system.

While Sarasohn provides a compelling account of Cavendish engaging with fideism and negative theology regarding her metaphysics, her interpretation does not fully address the philosophical inconsistencies that arise from Cavendish's rejection of theological reasoning while simultaneously relying on God when explaining motion and causation. The first problem with Sarasohn's account is that it leaves open the question as to whether God is purely rhetorical or substantive. To explain, Sarasohn interprets Cavendish's God as an unknowable and transcendent

being who is introduced primarily for teleological purposes. This use of the concept of God seems to be more rhetorical in that Cavendish is using the concept as an answer to a problem, the problem being materialist determinism, without fully committing to the theological implications that come with invoking God. In the time of Cavendish's writing, as mentioned previously, it was a strategic move to adhere to the theological language so as not to provoke backlash on her work as a female writer. So, by invoking God rhetorically to answer a problem in her argument, Cavendish would be able to adhere to the intellectual climate of her time and still share her materialist thoughts.

However, if God is only rhetorical, Sarasohn's solution loses some force in that a merely symbolic God cannot carry the weight needed to resolve the problems of determinism or establish teleology in Cavendish's system. Cavendish seems to need a first cause or organizing principle to explain Nature's freedom and purpose. God plays an essential role in her metaphysics as the creator of Nature. It is questionable as to why Cavendish would employ God with such an important role in her metaphysics if she rejected the intersection of theology and philosophy, especially regarding her materialist views that Nature is self-moving. Since it is unclear as to whether Cavendish is invoking God as a rhetorical strategy or as a metaphysical necessity, it is hard to find strength in Sarasohn's argument that Cavendish is engaging in negative theology or fideism. If Cavendish was invoking God rhetorically, then it would seem that she is keeping with the negative theology and fideist view that we can know nothing of God other than that he exists and that it is not under philosophy's scope to understand God since faith is how we can get to an understanding. This would also cause problems in that by having God as rhetorical, it is hard to give weight to how she uses God.

However, since Cavendish employs God as a major attribute in her metaphysics, it seems there is more of a substantive role taking place, and as such, opens the issue that Cavendish is not adhering to negative theology or fideism.

II.IV Karen Detlefsen: God's Suggestive Function

Unlike Mendelson and Sarasohn, who emphasize external influences and theological traditions, Karen Detlefsen directly addresses the philosophical tension between Cavendish's materialism and her reliance on God. Detlefsen presents the problem in Cavendish's work by first explaining the teleological commitments Cavendish has and where God seems to fit in. To start, Detlefsen shares two related ways that Cavendish has a teleological understanding of nature, which are as follows:

1. Nature as an infinite whole strives for overall harmony and peace
2. In our world there are normal kinds of species or individuals, which have natures proper to them⁶⁷

The first point is to say that Cavendish believes that Nature aims at peace and harmony. With Nature as an infinite being, she is in charge of all her parts and as such would want to have a sense of harmony between them all, so as to run things smoothly as the servant of God. This is because "God the author of nature, and nature the servant of God, do order all things and actions of nature, the one by his immutable will, and all powerful command; the other by executing this will and command,"⁶⁸ meaning that Nature is meant to follow God and what he commands. It would then be the case that the degree to which her parts are able to subscribe to this goal of peace and harmony means that they are acting in accordance with this goal, and on the contrary if they are not subscribing to peace and harmony then they are failing to help achieve this goal.⁶⁹ This point is important because it shows that Cavendish believes that there is an overall goal in Nature which all her parts should be contributing to.

⁶⁷ Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," *Philosophy Compass* 4, no. 3 (May 2009): 427.

⁶⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 209.

⁶⁹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 209.

The second point says that there are normal kinds regarding Nature's parts and those kinds have fundamental functions⁷⁰ that are proper to them. To break this down, what this means is that each normal kind in Nature has fundamental functions that are essential to its being. For example, a heart being the kind, has the fundamental function to pump blood through the body it is in.

Detlefsen goes on to explain that these kinds have orderly and disorderly behaviours, which means that the heart in the example can make the rational decision to stop pumping blood to the rest of the body, which would be disorderly in behaviour.⁷¹ As such, Detlefsen joins these two points in saying that "[i]nsofar as a natural individual behaves in a fashion normal for its natural kind, that individual helps to contribute to the overall end of peace and harmony of infinite nature as a whole."⁷²

From these commitments, Detlefsen asks the following question: "What is the source of the standards or norms against which natural individuals and their behaviours are measured such that one can distinguish privative behaviour from prescriptively normal behaviour?"⁷³ This question is important for Detlefsen because there needs to be an answer as to who or what makes the standard for what is an orderly or disorderly behaviour when it comes to a normal kind, which either contributes to or hinders the end goal of peace and harmony. Detlefsen explains that there are two possible answers: the source is either within or outside of nature.

By considering the first, that the source is inside nature, Detlefsen argues that this cannot be the case because the sources would either be Nature's parts or Nature herself. It cannot be Nature's parts because they are finite beings, and according to Cavendish, finite things cannot know outside

⁷⁰ While Cavendish calls these 'natures', she also uses the terms Nature as an entity, and nature as the basic definition of the word. As such, it would get confusing to have three different definitions of the word, so instead I will use the word function when Cavendish means a kind's nature.

⁷¹ Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," 427.

⁷² Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," 428.

⁷³ Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," 429.

their selves, as is seen here: “so every part and particle has a particular and finite self-motion and self-knowledge, by which it knows itself, and its own actions, and perceives also other parts and actions.”⁷⁴ While finite beings can perceive other parts and actions, that does not mean that they know other parts and actions. As such finite beings, Nature’s parts, cannot be the source of these standards for normal kinds, since they cannot know more than themselves and their actions.

Detlefsen argues that it cannot be Nature herself because according to Cavendish, Nature is not perfect and makes mistakes, just like her parts. Since Nature makes mistakes, it seems unlikely that she would be able to make the ultimate standards that her parts follow regarding the functions of their kinds. Moreover, Cavendish believes that God created Nature.⁷⁵ If Nature was created by God, then it seems unlikely that Nature would be the ultimate source of the standards given to normal kinds. It may be that Nature is simply echoing established standards, but Detlefsen appears to argue that this repetition comes solely from Nature itself, rather than introducing anything new. As such, the final option for the ultimate source of these standards is outside of nature, therefore it must be God.

For Detlefsen, this is where she believes the tension starts, and this is where she looks to find a solution. For Detlefsen, the tension is that since God and Nature’s characteristics are clearly different from one another while both being infinite, there seems to be an issue on how Nature would have been created from God, and how God would have the power and ability to create these standards. This is due to two reasons for Detlefsen. First, it seems impossible that God created matter ex nihilo when it is the case that Cavendish believes Nature to be eternal. Second, it seems impossible for God to be able to move Nature, since “if all motion in nature did proceed from

⁷⁴ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 138.

⁷⁵ Karen Detlefsen, “*Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World*,” 430.

pressure of parts upon parts, then those parts which press others, must have motion inherent in themselves...God, he being immovable, and beyond all natural motion, cannot actually move matter.”⁷⁶ This is to say that God cannot move Nature because God is not movable himself. It would seem problematic then for Cavendish to insist that God created and moved Nature despite these reasons saying otherwise in her work. However, Detlefsen believes there is a solution to understanding Cavendish’s work and easing this tension, which is that she believes that God is using a form of power called emanation.⁷⁷

This power of emanation, according to Detlefsen, comes from the idea of God’s will. He has the power to order using his will, which seems from both Detlefsen and Cavendish, to be an abstract concept since there is little to no explanation of what this will is. As such, Detlefsen explains that this will or emanation that God possesses can be used to give rational suggestions or orders to Nature who then, because she has infinite wisdom and is rational, can understand and implement them to her parts.⁷⁸ Detlefsen elaborates on this, explaining that “God brings order out of an original natural chaos through rational communication with the whole of nature, and in doing so, is the ultimate source of nature’s overall harmony as well as the normative standards through which creatures come to have ends and purposes proper to the kinds of things they are.”⁷⁹ Essentially, God creates harmony and order in Nature by communicating rationally with it, establishing both the structure of the natural world and the standards that define each creature’s purpose and function.

⁷⁶ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 230.

⁷⁷ Karen Detlefsen, “Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World,” 430.

⁷⁸ Karen Detlefsen, “Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World,” 431.

⁷⁹ Karen Detlefsen, “Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World,” 431.

Based on the understanding that God establishes the functional standards for each kind, Detlefsen summarizes that since we are finite beings we cannot know of God or anything that he might say or do and as such how can we know whether our functions that we perform are deviating from or contributing to Nature's end goal.⁸⁰ Even with Nature as possibly the buffer between God and parts of Nature such as humans, it is still unclear how we can know of God's standards since Nature also makes mistakes and might get the standards wrong. She concludes that it is merely that we are ignorant to what our proper functions are, and the standards are not made clear to us since we do not know of God or his will. Detlefsen acknowledges that Cavendish varies in her claims about how much we can know about God. This inconsistency creates tension within Cavendish's philosophical commitments and ultimately leaves Detlefsen's interpretation unresolved, since it does not offer a clear solution to the theological problem, namely the tension between Cavendish's reliance on God in her metaphysics and her insistence on separation theology from philosophy.⁸¹

One advantage of Detlefsen's view is that it creates philosophical depth that is not present in Mendelson and Sarasohn's takes on Cavendish's divine intervention. Detlefsen seems to recognize that Cavendish is making a legitimate philosophical claim regarding the relationship between God and Nature. In Detlefsen's account, there is a deep analysis of Cavendish's teleological commitments regarding the ends of Nature, her parts and how God would play a role in that. She works out these commitments and shows how it can be concluded that God is the ultimate source of standards. In doing so, Detlefsen is also looking at the normative implications that stem from Cavendish's teleological theory and what this means for Nature, her parts and God. By working through each layer of philosophy that Cavendish discusses, such as normativity, teleology, and materialism,

⁸⁰ Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," 432.

⁸¹ Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," 434.

Detlefsen is able to give a robust account of the workings of Cavendish's philosophy while also expressing the contradictions and implications that arise in Cavendish's work.

Detlefsen can also give a definitive answer as to why, philosophically speaking, Cavendish would invoke God into her metaphysics, despite the repeated rejection of theology. This is something that Mendelson and Sarasohn do not overcome, due to their shared commitment to the interpretative claim that Cavendish is invoking God for social and rhetoric reasons. Mendelson's and Sarasohn's interpretations offer valuable insights, but they remain somewhat limited in their engagement with the deeper philosophical implications of Cavendish's invocation of God. As a result, their responses do not fully account for the complexity of Cavendish's metaphysical commitments, especially when compared to Detlefsen's more philosophically grounded approach. In short, by addressing Cavendish's deeper philosophical commitments, Detlefsen not only clarifies the role of God in Cavendish's metaphysics but also illustrates the complexities of Cavendish's work that Mendelson and Sarasohn overlook, which makes her analysis a more comprehensive and philosophically compelling account of Cavendish's thought.

Another advantage to Detlefsen's analysis regarding Cavendish invocation of God in her metaphysics is that it shows that Cavendish is not as much of an outlier as some would believe. In Cavendish's time, philosophers were concerned with the relationship between God, nature, and rational order. Many argued that God played an important role in explaining how the material world operated. For example, Descartes argued that God ensures that the laws of nature are consistent, and that motion is preserved,⁸² while Spinoza argued that God is identical with nature, which means

⁸² René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*.

that the structure of reality is rational and necessary.⁸³ While Cavendish rejects her contemporaries' views, Detlefsen's argument shows that Cavendish is working through the same core questions about order, normativity and divine influence, the difference being that Cavendish is doing this work through a materialist perspective. Instead of seeing Cavendish as someone who is inconsistently invoking God, Detlefsen presents Cavendish as offering an alternative answer to the problem of natural order. Instead of making God the direct cause of motion like Descartes or identifying God with nature as Spinoza, Cavendish keeps a distinction between God and Nature while still making God necessary for explaining nature order.

While I have emphasized that Detlefsen provides the most compelling interpretation of Cavendish's use of God, her account is not without its challenges. One challenge to Detlefsen's view is the lack of textual evidence for her claim that God communicates through emanation. Although Detlefsen argues that the idea of emanation is the most comprehensible way to understand how God communicates with Nature and her parts, and Cavendish sometimes describes God's will as a kind of power that compels or directs Nature, she ultimately does not provide a fully structured account of emanation in her philosophical work. At most, there are scattered suggestions that point in this direction, but no clear indication that Cavendish consistently endorsed the emanation view. It should be recalled that this power to compel or direct refers to God's ability to initiate order in Nature by guiding its actions through divine will, rather than through physical intervention. When Cavendish speaks about God, it is often done very broadly and in contradictory ways. She states that God is the ultimate creator of Nature at times, and yet in other instances, insists that Nature operates independently once she has been created. The independence that is clear in Nature makes it

⁸³ Steven Nadler, "Baruch Spinoza," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, November 8, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/>.

difficult to justify the claim that God continues to shape and order Nature through emanation. If Cavendish believed that God's influence continued as emanation, it would be expected that her work would offer clear statements that share these beliefs, which does not take place. Instead, Cavendish suggests that Nature is self-governing, with order and motion being inherent properties of Nature, instead of coming from divine intervention. As well, in her work when Cavendish does mention God's relation to Nature, it is often done in passing instead of an elaborated metaphysical principle. This shows a reluctance to commit to a theory such as emanation, most likely due to Cavendish's materialist claim that Nature is self-governing. As such, it seems doubtful to subscribe the theory of emanation onto Cavendish's work since there seems to be a contradiction to her materialist commitments and the relationship between God and Nature.

Another critique is that part of Detlefsen's theory relies on the idea that God could not have created Nature, which can be seen here: "While matter has existed forever, before this world was created, matter was chaos, and God brought order to it."⁸⁴ This is to say, for Detlefsen's argument to work God could not have created Nature, since they are both infinite. However, Cavendish does not fully commit to this view. In the Philosophical Letter that Detlefsen references, Cavendish says the following:

Yet this doth not hinder, that God should not make Infinite and Eternal Matter, for that is as easie to him, as to make a Finite Creature, Infinite Matter being quite of another Nature then God is, to wit, Corporeal, when God is Incorporeal, the difference whereof I have declared in my former letter. But as for Nature, that it cannot be Eternal without beginning, because God is the Creator and Cause of it, and that the Creator must be before the Creature, as the Cause before the Effect, so, that it is impossible for Nature to be without beginning.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish on the Relation between God and World," 431.

⁸⁵ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 14.

It could be the case that this emanation that Detlefsen defends is still present despite the idea that God did in fact create Nature, but it causes problems for Cavendish's materialist commitments that Nature is self-moving.

If Detlefsen's view is right that God and Nature both exist eternally, with God bringing order to the chaos of Nature, then it could be said that there is still self-moving for Nature. The emanation that God uses would merely be suggestions that Nature then implements to meet her goal of peace and harmony. However, this raises the question of whether God is genuinely necessary in Cavendish's metaphysics, given that his role appears limited to merely suggesting order to Nature, who may misinterpret or ignore these suggestions, resulting in disorder. If Nature is wise, as Cavendish suggests, would she not be able to produce ways to order her parts herself? On the other hand, if Detlefsen is wrong and God did create Nature, then as it has been mentioned previously, it is difficult to see how Nature is self-moving if God created her. It seems then that this possible misinterpretation of Cavendish's work causes a dilemma regarding Nature's self-motion and whether God is a necessary feature in Cavendish's work. In short, while Detlefsen's interpretation attempts to reconcile Cavendish's metaphysical commitments, it essentially deepens the tension between Nature's self-motion and God's role, leaving unanswered the question of whether God is necessary in Cavendish's system or if his presence merely complicates her materialist philosophy further.

II.V Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the ways in which Mendelson, Sarasohn, and Detlefsen have interpreted Cavendish's use of God in her philosophy, with each offering theories that are valuable to discussion but essentially leave key questions and tensions unresolved. Mendelson's account was helpful in contextualizing Cavendish's engagement with religious discussion as a strategic move, but it does not fully explain the philosophical function of God in her

system. Sarasohn's argument for Cavendish committing to fideism and negative theology provided an interesting perspective, yet it struggles to accommodate Cavendish's repeated references to God's role in natural processes. Detlefsen, while presenting the most philosophically robust argument, does not completely resolve the dilemma of how God, as an incorporeal being, can influence Cavendish's materialist system while downplaying Nature's self-sufficiency.

Despite their contributions, all three authors leave critical questions unanswered regarding how Cavendish's metaphysical commitments can coexist with her theological claims. If Cavendish insists on a fully materialist world governed by Nature's internal principles, why invoke God at all? And if God plays a necessary role, does this contradict her rejection of theological influence on metaphysics? These lingering tensions need further inspection. Thus, in the following chapter, I will present my own interpretation, one that looks to provide a more cohesive resolution to Cavendish's God Problem, and one that does not reduce her theological claims to merely rhetorical nor forces a reconciliation between materialism and divine influence that is unsatisfactory.

Chapter Three: The Two Conceptions of God Solution

III.I Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined three scholar's attempts to address the Theological Problem in Margaret Cavendish's philosophy: Sara Mendelson's account of Cavendish's social strategy, Lisa Sarasohn's fideist reading of her methodological divide between faith and reason, and Karen Detlefsen's interpretation of God as a suggestive, instead of intervening, presence in Nature. These approaches, while insightful, either raised more problems in Cavendish's work or they oversimplified the complexity of Cavendish's commitments to both metaphysics and theology. As a result, they struggle to explain how Cavendish can believe the unknowability of God in some contexts while attributing moral and personal qualities to God in others, or how she can criticize the intersection of philosophy and theology, while still invoking God in her metaphysical writing.

This chapter offers an alternative interpretation that I call the two conceptions of God solution. I argue that Cavendish is not working with one single conception of God across all her writing but instead uses two functionally different ways of talking about God depending on the context. In her metaphysics, God is invoked as a metaphysical first cause who is abstract, immaterial, non-intervening, and unknowable. This version of God is used to explain the existence of Nature and is outside the limits of reason. In contrast, in her more reflective work, Cavendish invokes a biblical God who is personal, active, and known through revelation and devotion. This God listens, judges, forgives and intervenes. It is important to understand that these are not two separate beings, but instead two conceptual roles that the same God plays in Cavendish's work. This distinction helps make better sense of the different ways Cavendish refers to God across different genres and purposes

This chapter builds on the two conceptions of God solution by showing how it helps Cavendish's goal of keeping her philosophy consistent and unified. To this, the chapter is divided into three parts. First, I will explain how the two conceptions of God solution works by looking at the different roles God has in her writing. The metaphysical God is a first cause in her philosophy, while the biblical God is in more personal and religious contexts. I argue that this difference in function can help make her system clearer. Second, I look at how the two conceptions of God solution helps Cavendish stay consistent across her philosophy and why that consistency matters for her. Third, I explain how to tell which version of God she is using by paying attention to genre, tone, and content. Altogether, these three parts show how the two conceptions of God solution fits within Cavendish's system and helps to better understand how her ideas hold together.

III.II The Functional Distinction

The two conceptions of God solution starts with the idea that Cavendish uses the concept of God in two different ways depending on the kind of writing she is doing. In her philosophical work, God functions as a distant, abstract cause. In her more reflective and personal work, such as her poems and letters, God is invoked as a moral and emotional being who is involved in human life. This does not mean that Cavendish believes in two separate Gods. Instead, she uses two different concepts of God for different purposes. The difference is seen in the different functions God plays throughout her work.

In her philosophical works, Cavendish describes God as an abstract, immaterial cause who exists outside of nature. One example is when she writes, "As for God, he being indivisible, and immaterial, can neither be patterned in part, nor in whole, by any part of nature which is material,

may, not by infinite nature herself.”⁸⁶ This shows that God is completely different from the material world. Nothing in Nature, not even Nature herself, can represent him. She is not just saying that God is separate from Nature, but that he is unknowable to Nature. This is an important attribute of the metaphysical God. He exists but cannot be understood or known through reason. This idea is seen again when Cavendish explains how God causes Nature, when she says, “I do not say, that nature has her self-moving power of herself, or by chance, but that it comes from God the Author of Nature; by reason nature is naturally infinite, which is infinite in quantity and parts; but God is spiritual, supernatural, and incomprehensible infinite.”⁸⁷ She is saying that God gave Nature its motion, but that God is not part of Nature. His infinity is not material like Nature’s. This supports the idea that God created Nature but does not intervene in how it works.

This idea is also seen when Cavendish describes how motion works in Nature. She writes “For Nature knows of no rest, there being no such thing as rest in Nature, but she is in a perpetual motion, I mean self-motion, given her from God: Neither do I think it Atheistical to maintain this opinion of self-motion, as long as I do not deny the Omnipotency of God.”⁸⁸ God gave Nature the ability to move on her own, and then after that, He no longer steps in. That fits Cavendish’s view of a material world that explains itself. God is important at the start but is not involved in daily operations. She also says that even though Nature knows there is a God, He cannot be truly understood. She says, “To wit, that we know there is something above nature, who is the author, and God of nature; for though nature has an infinite natural knowledge of the infinite God, yet being dividable as well as composable, her parts cannot have such an infinite knowledge or

⁸⁶ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 89.

⁸⁷ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 220.

⁸⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 164.

perception.”⁸⁹ Essentially, humans are only a part of Nature, and because of that, God cannot be fully known. He is indivisible and infinite, and humans are not. This is to say that He is real, but beyond what can be explained.

Altogether, these examples show that the metaphysical God in Cavendish’s philosophy has a specific and limited role. He causes Nature but does not act within Nature after that point. He is unknowable, beyond reason, and completely separate from the material world. Cavendish has this conception of God to explain where Nature comes from, but once Nature is created, it explains itself through its own principles. This allows her to have a metaphysical system that is consistent with her materialism. She does not rely on theological claims to make sense of how the world works. Instead, the metaphysical God works as a starting point, meaning that He is needed for creation, but not for the ongoing system.

Cavendish also talks about God in a different way in her other writings. In some of her letters, reflections and poems, God is personal, emotional and involved in everyday life. This God is not the abstract and distant God from her philosophy. He is a God who hears prayers, gives comfort, and judges. This version of God is based on faith and devotion as he is the biblical God. An example of this is seen when Cavendish writes, “As for Divinity, I pray devoutly and believe without disputing; but as for the Natural Philosophy, I reason freely, and argue without believing, or adhering to any one’s particular opinion, which I think is the best and safest way to choose for.”⁹⁰ Cavendish is illustrating that when she talks about religion, she is not trying to reason through it or figure it out like she does with philosophy. Instead, she prays and believes. This would point to the biblical God as he is the one to go to in faith and devotion. It does not make sense to pray to the

⁸⁹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 86.

⁹⁰ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 211.

metaphysical God because he is just the source of Nature. As such, when she says she prays, she must be talking about the biblical God

Cavendish also warns people against mixing the two when she says, “ I avoid, as much as ever I can not to mix Divinity with Natural Philosophy; for I consider that such a mixture would breed more confusion in the Church...whereas yet Faith and Reason are two contrary things cannot consist together; according to the Proverb, where Reason ends, Faith begins.”⁹¹ This shows that Cavendish sees faith and reason as different things. Faith belongs to religion and the biblical God. The metaphysical God, however, is part of her reasoning about Nature. Cavendish wants to keep the two separate, which mean that the God of faith is separate from the God of philosophy. This can also be seen in her poetry, where her language is more emotional and worshipful, as seen here:

Could we the several Motions of Life know,
The Subtle windings, the waies they go:
We should adore God more, not dispute,
How they are done, but that great God can doe't.
But we with Ignorance about do run,
To know the Ends, and how they first begun.
Spending that Life, which Natures God did give
Us to adore him, and his wonder with,
With fruitlesse, vaine, impossible pursuies,
In Schooles, Lectures, and quarrelling Disputes.
But never give him thanks that did us make,
Proudly, as petty Gods, ourselves do take.⁹²

In this poem, Cavendish shows the biblical God as a personal and powerful creator who deserves our worship. She wants people to trust and adore God instead of trying to understand every point of how life works. For her, this biblical God is caring and involved in human life. This portrayal is very

⁹¹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 221.

⁹² Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Women Writers Project, 2001), 19.

different from the distant and unknowable metaphysical God presented in her philosophy. Through this poem, Cavendish clearly shows her devotion to a God that is important in faith.

All of this evidence shows that Cavendish sometimes writes about a God who is not the same as the metaphysical principle in her philosophy. In her reflective writing, she talks about praying to God, hang faith in Him, and worshipping Him. This kind of talk does not fit with the idea of God who is only supposed to set Nature in motion and then step back from involvement. Instead, this points to a God who is personal and engaged in human life. This matches the biblical God of Christian belief, who is powerful and caring, instead of distant and unknowable. By recognizing these references as the biblical God, it can be better understood how Cavendish keeps her faith without contradicting her philosophical views. In the next section, I will show how keeping these two Gods separate helps Cavendish stay consistent in her writing, and why this consistency in her work is important for Cavendish.

III.III The Two Conceptions of God Solution and Consistency

Having now laid out how the two conceptions of God solution illustrates the different roles that God has in Cavendish's works, the next task is to show what this interpretative tool does for the coherence of her philosophy. This section will focus on two important questions: first, how does the two conceptions of God solution help keep consistency in Cavendish's work about God, and second, why does that consistency matter for Cavendish in the first place. To start, I will focus on the first question. An overarching tension in Cavendish's writing is that she makes a separation between theology and philosophy, and yet at the same time, still discusses theological topics such as the doctrine of the Trinity within her philosophical works. This is to say that she argues that faith and reason should be kept separate, but at the same time, she talks about religious ideas where she says they should not be discussed. However, when her invocations of God are understood as

operating in two different domains, a metaphysical God that comes from her metaphysics and a biblical God that comes from faith and devotion, the tension becomes easier to explain. The two conceptions of God solution shows how Cavendish can use theological language in her philosophical writing without causing issues in the boundary she made between the two domains.

Second, I will discuss how the two conceptions of God solution helps make sense of Cavendish's claim that God is ultimately unknowable. At first, this seems like a problem, since she still describes God in clear ways. She gives particular attributes to God, such as wisdom, power, and justice and sometimes suggests things about God's actions or nature. This seems to contradict, since God is supposed to be outside of human understanding, and yet Cavendish still is able to make claims about God. The two conceptions of God solution helps to make sense of this by distinguishing between the unknowability of the metaphysical God and the attributes that can be said about the biblical God. In this way, Cavendish is able to keep her epistemic humility within philosophy, while still being able to speak about God in the domain of religion.

Finally, this section will consider how Cavendish can reject that God intervenes in natural affairs while believing in a religion that emphasizes divine action. This seems to show another contradiction in that her religion believes in divine intervention, but her philosophy believes that nature works on its own. The two conceptions of God solution helps make sense of this tension by arguing that rejecting divine intervention is in line with Cavendish's metaphysical God. The metaphysical God does not interfere with nature because nature is self-moving and self-ordering. But this does not take away from Cavendish having religious beliefs about the biblical God's involvement in the world.

After working through these tensions, I will turn to the second question on why consistency matters to Cavendish at all. For Cavendish, consistency is not just something she wants but

something she needs in her work. She cares about building a system where everything works together without any contradictions. Cavendish's focus on consistency is partly because she is a woman writing in a male-dominant world. She knows she has to be clear and consistent to be taken seriously. The two conceptions of God solution helps her do this. It gives her a way to deal with the tensions in her writing and helps build a system that is clear and fits together well.

In her work, Cavendish consistently argues that theology and philosophy are to be separated throughout her work. At the same time however, she discusses theological ideas, such as the Trinity doctrine, in her philosophical writings. This causes a tension between her commitment to keeping these domains separate and her engagement with theological concepts within philosophy. The two conceptions of God solution helps to resolve this tension by showing that Cavendish is operating with two distinct concepts of God, both of which are in their own domains. The first is the metaphysical God who functions as a first cause that governs nature. This God is understood through reason as the first cause that exists outside of nature but grounds its order and existence. The second is the biblical God who is discussed through belief and devotion instead of through philosophical argument. By distinguishing between these two conceptions, Cavendish is able to talk about theology and philosophy at the same time without letting two domains intersect. When she talks about the metaphysical God, she is staying within the limits of her metaphysics, using reason and observation. When she talks about the biblical God, she changes her voice to use faith, reflection, and devotion. Because these references are doing two different things, they do not conflict with each other. This keeps her work consistent because her theological claims follow from faith, while her philosophical claims follow from reason.

Cavendish explicitly shows her commitment to keeping theology and philosophy separate when she writes,

Not onely that I am no professed Divine, and think it unfit to take any thing upon me that belongs not to me, but also that I am unwilling to mingle Divinity and Natural Philosophy together, to the disadvantage and prejudice of either; for it each one did contain himself within the circle of his own Profession, and no body did pretend to be a Divine Philosopher, many absurdities, confusions, contentions and the like would be avoided, which now disturb both Church and Schools, and will time cause their utter ruine and destruction; For what is Supernatural, cannot naturally be know bay natural Creature; neither can any supernatural Creature, but the Infinite and Eternal God, know thorowly everything that is in Nature.⁹³

This passage reinforces Cavendish's view that theology and philosophy should be separate, not just because they deal with different things, but because mixing them causes confusion and problems.

When she says that crossing these boundaries leads to 'absurdities, confusions, and contentions,' she is pointing out how easily things fall apart when people try to combine things that should not intersect, especially regarding philosophers and theologians. The two conceptions of God solution makes sense of how she can write about both domains while keeping them apart. It shows how she can include theological topics like the Trinity in her philosophical work without causing problems with her rejection of intersecting.

The Trinity is a good example of this division because I argue that Cavendish is not trying to discuss it in terms of philosophical inquiry but instead in the domain of religious belief. This can be seen when she writes,

She would but inform me, how three made one in Divinity, Nature, and Man. She said, That was easie to do; for in Divinity there are three Persons in one Essence, as God the Father, the Son, and the holy Ghost, whose Essence being individable, they make but one God...And as she was thus discoursing, in come a Sophisterian, whom when she spied, away she went as fast as she could; but I followed her close, and got hold of her, then asked her, why she ran away? She answer'd, if she stayed the Logician would dissolve her into nothing.⁹⁴

⁹³ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 217.

⁹⁴ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 494.

In this passage, Cavendish believes that the Trinity is a mystery that goes beyond what human reason can understand. At first, it might look like Cavendish is doubting the truth of the Trinity by admitting that a Logician could easily disprove the idea. But I argue that the two conceptions of God solution provides a coherent explanation of this difficulty. The lady defending the trinity is not using a metaphysical argument. Instead, I argue that she is speaking from a theological viewpoint. The Logician, on the other hand, is a metaphor or a representation for philosophical reason. What Cavendish is illustrating through this story is that theological and philosophical discourses have different limits. The Trinity cannot be discussed in depth through natural philosophy because philosophy would just disprove the Trinity based on the limits of reasoning. Therefore, the Trinity is not about the metaphysical God. But with theology, the Trinity is a doctrine that can be discussed in depth and attributed to the biblical God. As such, this distinction allows Cavendish to engage with religious ideas like the Trinity without forcing them into her philosophy.

This separation between theology and philosophy matters for Cavendish because it saves the internal order and coherence of her system. By internal order, I mean that her philosophical claims follow the structure of her metaphysics without being damaged by theological ideas. She often expresses the importance of philosophy being clear and rejects the idea of intersecting domains of knowledge that should stay separate. For Cavendish, allowing theology to seep into natural philosophy or vice versa, makes contradictions, and confusion possible in her work. Keeping theology and philosophy separate is important for Cavendish because it helps her stay consistent. The two conceptions of God solution makes this easier by showing when she is speaking from a religious point of view and when she is using reason. This helps explain how ideas like the Trinity can appear in her work without going against her philosophical system. The biblical God belongs to

faith, while the metaphysical God stays within reason. By keeping these separate, she does not have to fit religious ideas into a system where they do not belong.

The two conceptions of God solution also helps keep consistency in Cavendish's philosophy regarding her repeated claims that God is ultimately unknowable. Cavendish's metaphysics has the metaphysical God as the foundational first principles of nature, an entity that goes beyond human perception and rational understanding. This unknowability is an important part to her system, because it shows clear limits on what humans can know. Without this epistemic limit, Cavendish's metaphysics can have internal contradictions or become speculative theology, which is something she tries to avoid. This is because trying to explain what God is really like goes beyond what people can know and does not fit with Cavendish's idea that everything is made of matter. The two conceptions of God solution can help make sense of this by seeing that Cavendish is referring to God in two different ways. One that is an unknowable metaphysical principle, and the other as the personal God. In Cavendish's work the metaphysical God is defined by its unknowability. It is eternal, infinite, and fundamentally not possible for natural reason. Natural philosophy can only suggest that this God exists by looking at how things in nature work and concluding that there must be a first cause or ultimate source. As such, this epistemic boundary reflects Cavendish's commitment to epistemic humility, which is an important theme in her philosophy, which argues that the limits of human reason are respected.

In contrast, the biblical God belongs to a different domain, a theological discussion that is based on faith and devotion instead of philosophical inquiry. In this domain, God's attributes are discussed in human-like qualities, and morals. These ideas are part of religious belief and worship, and not about studying nature or philosophy. The two conceptions of God solution keeps these

different ways of talking about God separate, so that way Cavendish's philosophy is clear and does not have conflicting ideas. To show this, Cavendish writes,

[i]t 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 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, now what it is in its essence or nature, but that it is existent, and that nature has a dependence upon it, as an external servant has upon an eternal master.⁹⁵

This passage shows that Cavendish believes that humans cannot fully understand what God is like through our senses or reason. It is only known that nature depends on God, not what God is in himself. This idea is important because it allows her to keep her view that the metaphysical God is unknowable. The two conceptions of God solution helps make this clear by showing that it is the metaphysical God that is unknowable, so that way religious claims do not interfere with her philosophy.

Without the distinction of the metaphysical God and the biblical God, Cavendish's theological references, like the ones about God's will, justice, or actions in the world, could end up conflicting with her view that God is unknowable. The two conceptions of God solution helps avoid this problem because it allows her to talk about the biblical God in religious terms and attributes while still being able to keep the metaphysical God unknowable to human understanding. An emphasis on the limits of what can be known about God is seen when Cavendish writes,

An immaterial cannot, in my opinion, be naturally created; nor can I conceive how an immaterial can produce particular immaterial souls, spirits, and the like. Wherefore, an immaterial, in my opinion, must be some uncreated being; which can be no other than God alone. Wherefore, created spirits, and spiritual souls, are some other thing than immaterial.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 17.

⁹⁶ Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (S.I.: Alpha Edition, 2022), 239.

This passage shows that Cavendish does not believe that natural philosophy can explain immaterial things. She accepts that there is one uncreated immaterial being, God, but she argues that immaterial things cannot be caused by nature. This shows she believes that human reason and experience have limits, especially when it has to do with divine matters. Because God exists outside of nature and cannot be traced back to material causes, Cavendish sees philosophical attempts to explain God as ultimately misguided or incomplete. At the same time, the two conceptions of God solution lets Cavendish keep her religious beliefs without mixing them into her metaphysics. The metaphysical God stays outside of what reason can explain, while the biblical God shows up in religious contexts like prayer and scripture. By keeping these roles separate, Cavendish is able to keep her faith while also keeping her metaphysics consistent.

In short, being able to maintain that the metaphysical is unknowable helps Cavendish separate between what belongs to natural philosophy and what belongs to faith. The two conceptions of God solution supports this boundary because it allows her to describe God's existence without making claims that she would consider beyond the scope of reason. This consistency matters because it keeps her system grounded in reason and experience, while still being able to have religious belief. Without this kind of boundary, there would be confusion between the roles of theology and philosophy, which is something Cavendish works hard to avoid.

The two conceptions of God solution also helps make sense of Cavendish's rejection of divine intervention in her natural philosophy. In her view, Nature is self-moving and self-governing. It operates entirely through its own internal principles, meaning it does not need any interference from an outside force.⁹⁷ If God was allowed to intervene in natural affairs, it would introduce

⁹⁷ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 126.

something that is beyond matter into a world that Cavendish argues is made up only of matter and motion. This would go against what is at the core of her materialist philosophy. For Cavendish, everything that exists and everything that happens must be explained through matter and motion alone. This is to say that there is no room for spiritual forces or outside causes to have a role in how nature operates. This is seen clearly when Cavendish writes, “I am of the opinion, that Nature is self-moving, consequently a self-living and self-knowing infinite body, divisible into infinite part.”⁹⁸ This passage shows that Nature as a complete and autonomous system. Calling Nature self-moving means that all motion originates within Nature itself, without any need for an external cause like God. By describing Nature as self-knowing, Cavendish is emphasizing that nature contains within itself everything it needs to function in that it is alive, intelligent, and capable on its own. If God were to intervene in Nature, it would imply that Nature is incomplete or needs to be dependent on something that is beyond itself, which Cavendish clearly denies. This quote illustrates her view that divine intervention has no place in natural philosophy because Nature already has the power to govern itself.

This is where, I argue, the two conceptions of God solution becomes helpful. It makes sense of how Cavendish is able to reject divine intervention in her philosophy without having to give up her religious beliefs. When she is rejecting intervention, she is talking about a specific version of God, that being a metaphysical God. This God is the first cause of nature, the one who sets everything in motion. However, once Nature begins to move, this God steps back. He does not interfere or make changes because Nature is already able to take care of everything on its own. This metaphysical God is impersonal, and not someone with emotions or plans. He does not answer

⁹⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 125.

prayers or intervene in human affairs. This is not because this God is mean or distant, but because there is no reason to. Nature is already wise, self-knowing, and self-directed. An all-knowing God would not need to fix something that is not broken. So, in Cavendish's philosophy, this version of God has no place in the activity of the world.

In other parts of her writing, especially in her poetry, letters, and religious reflections, Cavendish talks about God in a different way. She describes a God that is personal and morally engaged. This would be the biblical God, who hears prayers, offers comfort, rewards and punishes. This the God of faith and devotion, and he has a different role than the metaphysical God of her philosophy. It can be seen clearly in a passage where Cavendish writes, "Though Nature's Parts have Free will...if it please the All-powerful God to permit the Parts of Nature to act as they please...upon condition, if they act so, they shall have such Rewards or Punishments, any otherwise than the Parts of Nature do cause by their own actions."⁹⁹ In this passage, Cavendish is showing that even when moral consequences happen, such as reward and punishment, they are not directly caused by stepping in. Instead, they come from the natural actions of Nature's parts. God permits this system but does not interfere with events. The moral order exists, but this is through nature, not through divine intervention.

The story of Cain and Abel, which I discussed in Chapter one, offers a helpful way to understand how the two conceptions of God solution functions in Cavendish's thought. In the biblical story, God intervenes when he punishes Cain for murdering his brother, which is a clear example of divine judgment.¹⁰⁰ This kind of action fits with the biblical God, because he is more personal and morally involved. However, this is not the divine intervention in her natural

⁹⁹ Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (S.I.: Alpha Edition, 2022), 243.

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 4 (NIV)

philosophy. There, she only discusses a metaphysical God, who does not intervene in the world and instead allows Nature to govern itself. By keeping these two conceptions of God separate, Cavendish avoids contradiction and is able to keep the consistency of her materialist system. This distinction is also useful when Cavendish talks about divine reward and punishment. Instead of forcing these ideas into her natural philosophy, she associates them with a different context where the biblical God operates on a theological level, instead of a physical one. The metaphysical God, by contrast, does not interfere with the world and lets Nature run on its own. Since Cavendish talks about each God in different domains, her ideas do not clash. The two conceptions of God solution helps show that she is not being inconsistent, she is just using different ways of thinking depending on what she is talking about.

This consistency matters for Cavendish because her whole philosophy depends on Nature functioning independently. Allowing there to be divine intervention would then cause confusion, which would weaken the idea of self-sufficiency of nature, and blur the boundary that she believes is between theology and philosophy. The two conceptions of God solution helps Cavendish avoid this problem. It also shows that she is not just mixing ideas without thinking about it, she is separating the different ways of understanding God, depending on whether she is speaking as a philosopher or as a person of faith. Keeping that separation distinct helps her protect both parts of her thinking so they do not clash. This helps her keep her overall philosophy clearer and more consistent.

Having now shown how the two conceptions of God solution helps maintain consistency throughout Cavendish's philosophical and theological claims, it is important to consider why that consistency matters in the first place. The two God distinction is not just a useful interpretative tool, it also supports Cavendish's desire to have a coherent, self-contained philosophical system. In this

section, I begin by showing that consistency is part of how Cavendish builds her metaphysical system. Her system is holistic, meaning that everything is connected and unified, and she rejects ideas that divide the world into separate parts or relies on outside causes. This however raises the objection that if Cavendish is so committed to holism, then dividing God into two concepts might seem to go against that. I will take up this objection and show why the two conceptions of God solution can still work within her system. Then, I argue that her concern with consistency holds more weight because she was a woman writing in a male-dominated world, where any sign of contradiction could be used against her more easily.

As mentioned previously, Cavendish's metaphysics are based on the idea that nature is one continuous, material whole. Everything in nature is made of matter, and this matter moves itself, knows itself, and is organized by itself. By denying ideas such as mind body dualism, she is showing her commitment to monism and the unity of Nature. While she recognizes their different operations, she insists they cannot be separated without breaking this unity. For Cavendish, consistency is essential because without it, her whole philosophy would collapse. Every idea must fit with her view that nature is unified and self-explanatory.

However, this focus on unity leads to an important objection against the two conceptions of God solution. Since Cavendish's system is built on the idea that everything is connected, accepting a distinction that God is separated into two concepts, a metaphysical God and a biblical God, seems to introduce a division that contradicts her approach. This objection is supported by her clear statement that the parts of nature are never truly separate, when she writes, "[N]ature is but one only infinite body, which being self-moving, is divisible and compoundable, and consists of infinite parts of several degrees; which are so intermixt, that in general they cannot be separated from each other,

or from the body of nature, and subsist single, and by themselves.”¹⁰¹ This shows that Cavendish believes nature is one connected whole, with parts that cannot exist alone or apart. In other words, even the most distinct elements of nature remain fundamentally tied to the larger system. The problem is that dividing God into two concepts might seem to go against Cavendish’s commitment to unity. She rejects the idea that reality is made up of separate parts, so separating the philosophical God from the biblical God could make her system look inconsistent. It might seem to conflict with her goal of keeping everything connected and part of one whole.

I argue that this does not cause an issue for the two conceptions God solution because Cavendish often makes conceptual distinctions within her system without claiming that these distinctions mean separate realities. An example is how she talks about three types of matter: rational, sensitive, and inanimate. Cavendish writes, “In short, rational, sensitive or inanimate matter are divisible in their particulars; that is, such a particular part of inanimate matter is not bound to such a particular part of sensitive or rational matter, etc. but they are indivisible in general, that is, from each other; for wheresoever is body, this is also a commixture of these degrees of matter.”¹⁰² This means that even though Cavendish talks about different types of matter, they are not truly separate substances, they are mixed together and part of the same body. She also says, “I conceive nature to be an infinite body, bulk or magnitude, which by its own self-motion, is divided into infinite parts; not single or indivisible parts, but parts of one continued body, only discernible from each other by their proper figures.”¹⁰³ This quote shows that even though nature’s parts may be different from one another, they are still joined within a single system. The two conceptions of God

¹⁰¹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 190.

¹⁰² Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 181.

¹⁰³ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 125.

solution works the same way. It does not say there are two different gods in reality, or that Cavendish divides her world into separate theological and philosophical parts. Instead, it helps show that she uses the idea of God in different ways depending on the situation. When she writes philosophy, God is a metaphysical idea that fits with her materialism. When she writes for reflection and devotion, she talks about the biblical God. These are different ways of talking about God, not two different gods. They are about different purposes and language, not about two separate realities.

Cavendish's holistic system tries to keep all parts of nature unified, but this does not mean she avoids making distinctions altogether. Just as she distinguishes between types of matter without dividing them into separate substances, she can also distinguish between different ways of thinking about God without splitting reality itself. The two conceptions of God solution follows this same logic in that it illustrates different uses and function of the concepts of God depending on context. As long as these distinctions remain conceptual and do not imply actual metaphysical division, they fit within Cavendish's materialist system. In fact, ignoring this distinction creates more problems. Without the two conceptions of God solution, Cavendish's references to God can seem consistent or confused. It becomes difficult to explain why she attributes qualities to God while also denying divine intervention in the natural world. But understanding that Cavendish operates with two conceptions of God makes her work more coherent and interesting. It shows she is not trying to force faith and reason into the same system but instead, respects the limits and roles of each. In this way, the two conceptions of God solution not only fits with Cavendish's holism but actually strengthens it. It keeps the integrity of her metaphysics, while also allowing her religious commitments to coexist without conflict. Rather than forcing her to choose between being a materialist or a Christian, the two conceptions of God solution allows her to be both.

Consistency is also very important in Cavendish's work because of her position as a woman writing in a time when philosophy was dominated by men. In the seventeenth century, women were often excluded from formal education and dismissed as irrational or overly emotional. Philosophy was seen as a male activity, and women were not expected, or even allowed, to participate in it seriously. Because of this, Cavendish had to work even harder to make sure her ideas were taken seriously. The best way to do that was by presenting her work as careful, structured, and internally consistent. Cavendish was aware of this when she writes, "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 put 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."¹⁰⁴ Here, she acknowledges that women were not allowed to pursue education, due to societal norms and expectations. Even though she tries to be modest, this quote shows that Cavendish is pushing back against the idea that women are less intelligent than men. She also shows how carefully she had to position herself in her writing. In another passage she writes, "And if I should express more Vanity than Wit, more Ignorance than Knowledge, more Folly than Discretion, it being according to the Nature of our Sex, I hoped that my Masculine Readers would civilly excuse me, and my Female Readers could not justly condemn me."¹⁰⁵ She plays into the expectations of her time by apologizing for her boldness. Cavendish is being strategic because she is protecting herself from criticism while still saying what she wants to say. This is to say that she is defending herself and bringing attention to the standard women were held to. The quotes help to show why Cavendish had to be careful about how she presented her philosophy. If her ideas seemed inconsistent or unclear, readers might not just critique her work but

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 2.

also confirm what they believe about women not being able to be philosophers. For Cavendish, consistency was not just about having a clear system. It was about making sure her ideas could not be easily ignored. She knew she did not have the same freedom as her male contemporaries to explore contradictory ideas or to write in a disorganized way.

I argue that the two conceptions of God solution is helpful here because it shows that Cavendish's writing is not confused or self-contradictory, instead she is using different ways of talking about God depending on whether she is writing as a philosopher or as a religious believer. Consistency also mattered to Cavendish because she was publishing her own work. She was in charge of printing her books as well as revising and republishing them, adding new ideas or fixing older texts. This shows that she cared about how her work was being read and understood. She knew that readers might question her because of her gender, so she had to make her arguments as clear and well organized as possible.¹⁰⁶

In short, Cavendish had to earn a place in philosophy, and a consistent system helped her do that. By showing care in her ideas being coherent, she showed that her work deserved to be part of the conversation. The two conceptions of God solution helps explain how she could hold both religious and philosophical ideas. It shows that Cavendish was trying to make everything fit together perfectly. The next section will take this interpretation further by examining how we can tell which version of God Cavendish is invoking at any moment of her work. By looking at the function, language, and context of her references to God, a pattern can be seen that shows when she is speaking as a philosopher and when she is speaking as a believer.

¹⁰⁶ Look here for confirmation of this claim regarding Cavendish's writing as a woman: Sandy Feinstein, "Experience, Authority, and the Alchemy of Language: Margaret Cavendish and Marie Meurdrac Respond to the Art," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15, no. 2 (March 1, 2021): 133–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/emw.2021.0028>, Denise Tillery, "'English Them in the Easiest Manner You Can': Margaret Cavendish on the Discourse and Practice of Natural Philosophy," *Rhetoric Review* 26, no. 3 (June 15, 2007): 268–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350190701419822>.

III.IV Distinguishing the Biblical and Metaphysical God in Cavendish's Writing

Having established that the two conceptions of God solution is compatible with Cavendish's metaphysical holism and her methodological separation of philosophy and theology, the next task is to examine how this distinction is done in practice. If Cavendish is actually invoking two conceptions of God, a metaphysical God that fits in her metaphysical system and a biblical God that fits with her religious beliefs, then it should be able to be identified when she is referencing each one. This section argues that the key to making that distinction comes from the function, language and context of her references to God. By looking at how these features interact across her work, a pattern begins to emerge. One that helps to clarify not only when each conception is being used, but also how Cavendish is able to balance both commitments as a philosopher and a Christian.

The most reliable way to distinguish between the metaphysical God and the biblical God in Cavendish's writing is to examine the function that God serves in a given passage. This refers not only to what God is said to do, but also what explanatory role God plays in the surrounding argument. The metaphysical God for Cavendish usually functions as an origin point, a being that establishes the order of nature without interfering in its operations. This version of God provides explanatory coherence rather than active governance. In these moments, God serves as a metaphysical necessity rather than a divine personality. He has to be present to explain why there is something rather than nothing, or why nature possesses internal consistency and purpose. It is important to note that this metaphysical God is not supposed to intervene, judge or answer prayers. He is more like the unmoved mover of Aristotelian tradition or the rational first cause in early modern philosophy as he is necessary for the structure of the world but is not present within it in an active way. For example, when Cavendish says that nature is the servant of God, this is not supposed to imply that nature takes commands or is guided by God all the time. This is seen when Cavendish writes "God the author of nature, and nature

the servant of God, do order all things and actions of nature, the one by his immutable will, and all powerful-command; the other by executing this will and command: The one by an incomprehensible, divine and supernatural power; the other in a natural manner and way.”¹⁰⁷ Instead, it is meant to suggest a more formal relationship between the two, where God is the source or author of nature, and nature, once created, operates through its own principles. This understanding of God fits with Cavendish’s materialist system. This is because since she believes that nature is made of self-moving, self-knowing matter, she denies the idea that nature needs an external agent to keep it functioning. The metaphysical God allows Cavendish to have a role for the divine in a way that does not take away the autonomy of her system. The function of this God is to explain nature’s existence and nothing beyond that.

On the other hand, the biblical God has a different function in Cavendish’s work. This is the God that is associated with religious tradition. Cavendish turns to this God when she is reflecting on moral life, spiritual concerns and religious expectations. When she talks about divine mercy, judgment, providence or salvation, she is invoking a God who acts in the world and relates to human beings, as iterated here: “Which Omnipotent God, I pray of his Infinite Mercy to give me Faith to believe in him, and not let presumption prevail with me so, as to liken vain and idle conceptions to that Incomprehensible deity. These, Madam, are my humble Prayers to God.”¹⁰⁸ This God answers prayers, rewards virtue and punishes sin. He is not abstract or metaphysical but instead is embedded in the Christian worldview. This version of God is present most often in letters, where Cavendish is writing in a more personal or social tone. These are the places where she expresses humility, speaks about divine justice or brings up Christian beliefs.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 209.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 233.

As for things supernatural, man cannot act freely, by reason they are beyond his sphere of conception and understanding, so as he is forced to set aside Reason, and onely to work by Faith. And thus, Madam, you see the cause why I cannot give you a full description of the Divine Soul of Man...which I call the rational soul; not that I dare say, the supernatural soul is without natural reason, but natural reason is not the divine soul; neither can natural reason, without faith, advance the divine soul to Heaven.¹⁰⁹

During these moments, God is not invoked to explain how nature was created and how it works, but instead to express religious faith and the limits of her metaphysics and where faith steps in. The biblical God is in charge of the ethical and emotional life, not the physical world.

Essentially, the two conceptions of God solution is helpful in function, not ontologically. Cavendish never claims to believe in two separate deities, but she clearly uses the concepts of God in different ways, depending on what she is trying to do in a specific work. The metaphysical God explains the structure of nature, and the biblical God supports moral and spiritual reflection. These roles do not contradict each other, because they belong to different kinds of discourse. In her philosophical writing, she needs a non-interventionist God to keep the autonomy of nature. In her religious or personal writing, she turns to a more traditional God to meet the expectations of her audience and to give voice to her own belief, as seen below:

Eternal God, Infinite Deity,
Thy Servant, Nature, humbly prays to Thee
That thou wilt please to favour her and give
Her parts, which are her creatures, leave to live,
That in their shapes and forms, what e're they be
And all their actions they may worship thee:
For 'tis not onely Man that doth implore
But all her parts, Great God do thee adore;
A finite Worship cannot be to thee
Thou art above all finites in degree:
Then let they Servant Nature mediate
Between thy Justice, Mercy, and our state,
That thou may'st bless al Parts, and ever be

¹⁰⁹ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 222.

Our Gracious God to all Eternity.”¹¹⁰

Recognizing this functional distinction helps clarify what might at first seem like an inconsistency. Her references to God can seem to change unpredictably, but once it is clear what God is doing, whether he is grounding natural order or offering moral guidance, a clear pattern is apparent. Cavendish adapts the concepts of God to answer different needs, and she does this deliberately. The metaphysical God gives her system coherence. The biblical God gives her voice in moral and religious matters. Each serves its own purpose and understanding that is important for reading her work in its own terms.

The kind of language Cavendish uses when she refers to God is another important clue for understanding which conception she has in mind for her works. While she does not outwardly differentiate between the two conceptions of God, her word choices and tone can often signal which one she is invoking. The metaphysical God and the biblical God are each associated with a different linguistic style, and tracking this can help clarify moments that otherwise seem ambiguous.

When Cavendish is talking about the metaphysical God, her language tends to be abstract, restrained and philosophical. In these moments, God is described in a way that emphasizes structural roles and conceptual necessity. He is seen as a kind of foundational presence. There is no emotional content or relational language attached to this version of God. Instead, the tone is more analytical and formal, as seen when Cavendish writes, “No Part in Nature can perceive an Immaterial, because it is impossible to have a perception of that, which is not to be perceived, as not being an Object fit and proper for Corporeal Perception. In truth, an Immaterial is not Object, because no Body.”¹¹¹ Cavendish does not describe this God as thinking, feeling, or acting. He is also not understood as making decisions or interacting with the world. Instead, he is a being that is outside of nature and is

¹¹⁰ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 543.

¹¹¹ Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (S.l.: Alpha Edition, 2022), 240.

used to show a kind of explanatory boundary that allows her system to function without committing to supernatural interference. This kind of language reflects Cavendish's broad view philosophical commitments because it shows she is trying to create a self-sufficient account of nature based on rational, self-moving matter. Having a God who intervenes or is emotional to human affairs would cause problems regarding this account. As such, when she needs to reference divinity in order to account for the origin or coherence of the universe, she does so by using minimalist and impersonal language that follows that of early modern philosophical norms. The metaphysical God is talked about in terms that keep him at a distance because while he is necessary for Cavendish's system, he is not a part of it.

To contrast, the biblical God is described using language that is more emotional, narrative, and morally influenced. In these passages, Cavendish turns to terminology that comes from Christian theology and devotional practice. She describes God in terms of mercy, justice, punishment, grace and judgement which are concepts that show God not as a philosophical necessity, but as a moral authority. As she writes, "a Supernatural and Incomprehensible infinite wisdom and power; which in no ways do hinder each other, but may very well subsist together. Neither doth Gods infinite justice and his infinite mercy hinder each other; for Gods attributes, though they be all several infinities, yet they make but one infinitie,"¹¹² showing how she imagines these moral attributes as coexisting within a single divine being. There are even instances where Cavendish mentions the soul, sin, or salvation, often in ways that reflect personal belief and spiritual reflection. These references focus less on how nature operates and more on human behaviour, divine accountability, and religious obligation. The tone in these moments is clearly different because instead of the analytical voice that is found in her

¹¹² Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (S.l.: Alpha Edition, 2022), 240.

philosophical works, Cavendish writes with a sense of humility and reverence. She focuses less on explaining things logically and more on expressing religious belief, exploring moral questions, and considering the state or well-being of the soul. In some cases, this change in tone also illustrates a turning point where she seems to recognize the limits of what can be addressed through philosophy alone. When certain topics start to overlap with religious doctrine or fall within the domain of the Church, she turns to the biblical God instead. As she puts it, “I would not meddle with writing any thing of the Divine Soul of Man, by reason it belongs to Faith and Religion, and not to Natural Philosophy.”¹¹³ In doing so, she uses devotional language not only to express belief but also to signal where philosophical speculation must stop. This conception of God is not meant to explain natural phenomena, but to establish a boundary between reason and theology, and to provide spiritual and moral orientation in areas where rational explanation cannot.

These invocations of the biblical God are more likely to be seen in genres that allow for personal voice or religious performance, such as letters, prefaces, or reflections directed at readers. In these spaces, Cavendish is responding to different expectations, that being social, cultural and religious, and the God she invokes matches those conditions. He is not an abstract necessity, but instead a divine being who is actively engaged in the world and in the lives of human beings. He offers moral guidance, delivers judgement, and is the object of worship and trust.

It is significant that Cavendish shifts her vocabulary and tone to match the setting she is working within. When she is doing philosophy, her language aligns with metaphysical abstract thought. When she is speaking in a religious or social context, her language becomes more devotional and emotionally aware. This contrast is not accidental as it reflects her awareness that different kinds of

¹¹³ Margaret Cavendish Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters, or: Modest Reflections*, 220.

writing require different conceptions of God. Even when she uses the same word ‘God’, the surrounding language signals which role that concept is meant to play. This difference in rhetorical style helps readers interpret Cavendish’s texts more accurately. It also supports the two conceptions of God solution in that it shows that she does not intersect religious belief and philosophical reasoning into a single mode of discourse. Instead, she changes her voice depending on the context, maintaining consistency within each type of writing while still holding both conceptions of God in her worldview. Paying attention to her language reveals how she balances her roles as both a philosopher and a Christian, and how she uses divine language differently depending on what kind of work that language is meant to do.

III.V Conclusion

This chapter has outlined and defended a two conceptions of God solution that helps make sense of the different ways Cavendish talks about God in her work. What might at first seem inconsistent or contradictory can become much more coherent when it is recognized that Cavendish is working with two distinct conceptions of God. One that plays a role in her philosophical system, and one that reflects her religious beliefs. Instead of intersecting these references into a single unified view, the two conceptions of God solution explores the differences in how, where, and why Cavendish invokes God. The first part of this chapter focused on how the two conceptions of God solution actually works by looking at the different functions God serves in her writing. The metaphysical God acts as a kind of necessary first cause, explaining the structure and coherence of nature without interfering in its operations. This God is foundational but distant and is used to support the internal logic of Cavendish’s materialism. On the other hand, the biblical God shows up in more personal or reflective moments. This is the God of judgment, grace and devotion, and can provide moral guidance or spiritual comfort instead of philosophical explanation. Paying attention to what role God is playing

in a given passage helps clarify which version Cavendish is working with, and it shows that this distinction is not random, but instead intentional and consistent.

The second section explained why this distinction is possible within Cavendish's overall system. She draws a strong line between theology and philosophy, and she makes it clear that they serve different purposes. Philosophy is grounded in reason and observation, while theology deals with matters of faith and things that lie beyond what human beings can fully understand. Cavendish's epistemic humility, especially her view that some things are simply unknowable, gives her room to hold both positions at once. She can be fully omitted to her materialist view of nature while still expressing deep religious belief. This division helps explain how she brings together two systems that might otherwise seem incompatible.

Finally, the last part of the chapter looked at how we can tell which version of God Cavendish is invoking at any given time. The key is to look at the tone, language, and context of her writing. The metaphysical God tends to appear in more technical and philosophical texts and is described in abstract, impersonal terms. The biblical God shows up in letters, dedications, and other more personal genres, and is described using emotional, moral, or theological language. These patterns are consistent across her work and show the Cavendish is aware of her audience and the expectations tied to different forms of writing. She shifts her language and focus depending on what she's trying to do. Altogether, the chapter shows that the two conceptions of God solution offers a useful and grounded way of understanding how Cavendish navigates the demands of both her philosophical commitments and her religious identity. By paying attention to function, context, and tone, we can read her references to God more clearly and make better sense of how these different aspects of her thought work together.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that the best way to make sense of Margaret Cavendish's writing about God is by understanding that she is working with two different concepts of God, a metaphysical and a biblical God. These two conceptions show up in different parts of her writing have different purposes. The metaphysical God is the one who starts creates and gives motion to Nature and fits in her metaphysics. The biblical God is the one that is connected to her religious beliefs, in that he is the one she worships, prays to, and talks about in religious terms. Making this distinction helps to solve what I have called the 'God Problem' in Cavendish's work, which is the tension between her metaphysical system and her religious language. The two conceptions of God solution makes it so both domains of Cavendish's thinking can be taken seriously without assuming that she was being inconsistent.

In Chapter 1, I laid out the background needed to understand this problem. I started by explaining her metaphysical system, where all of Nature is made up of self-moving, self-knowing matter. In this system, God is only there to give motion to Nature at the beginning, and after the, he does not do anything else. Then I looked at how this understanding of God compares to the Christian Bible God, who in the Book of Genesis, is seen as all-powerful, personal, and involved in the world. In Christianity, God answers prayers, judges human actions, and stays active in the world he created. However, this is not the kind of God that is seen in Cavendish's philosophy. This shows a clear tension in that Cavendish sometimes talks about God in a way that aligns with Christianity, but at other times she talks about God as more of a distant being. To help show why this is a problem, I also compared to a contemporary of hers, Descartes. Unlike Cavendish, Descartes makes God an important part of his system. Cavendish does not do that, but she still discusses God often, which then causes confusion.

All of this brings forth the main issue that the rest of the thesis addresses. Cavendish's references to God do not always seem to mean the same things, that creates a tension that needs to be explained.

In Chapter 2, I evaluated how other scholars have tried to solve this tension. I focused on the work of Sara Mendelson, Lisa T. Sarasohn, and Karen Detlefsen, where each of them gives a different explanation for how God fits into Cavendish's work. Mendelson argues that Cavendish use of God reflects the social pressures of the time to incorporate philosophy and theological into her work. Sarasohn illustrates Cavendish's use of negative theology and her beliefs that God is unknowable, which she argues is a kind of fideism. Detlefsen, on the other hand, believes that God is more of a suggestive principle in Cavendish's philosophy, giving Nature the space to be self-moving while still incorporating God in her work. Each of these readings have strengths, and they all give insights to the problem. Mendelson brings up the importance of the social atmosphere at the time of Cavendish's writing. Sarasohn illustrates the limits that can come from reason and faith. And Detlefsen solution focuses on the metaphysical aspect of the tension. However, all three solutions fall short. Mendelson does not explain how Cavendish's religious language can fit in her philosophy. Sarasohn's focus on unknowability does not account for the theological claims that Cavendish makes. And Detlefsen does not account for the Christian elements of Cavendish's reference to God. None of these scholars offer a full solution to the God problem because instead they explain one part of it while leaving other parts unsolved.

This is where Chapter 3 comes in. In this chapter, I introduce the solution that Cavendish is working with two different conceptions of God. First, I explained the two conceptions of God solution itself. The metaphysical God is the one that shows up in Cavendish's metaphysical writing. This God gives motion to Nature but does not intervene after that and cannot be known or understood by humans. This God helps to explain how her material world works without causing

problems regarding her commitment to self-moving matter. The biblical God on the other hand, is the one that shows up when Cavendish is talking about faith, worship and divine judgment. This God aligns with Christian theology and with Cavendish's own religious beliefs. Cavendish does explicitly say that she is using two different concepts of God, but this distinction helps to make sense of the different roles God has in her writing. Second, I showed how the solution helps to keep her work consistent. Without this solution, her claims regarding God seem to conflict since sometimes she says God does not intervene in Nature, and other times she talks this is not the case. She also says that God is unknowable, and yet still makes claims about God's nature. These contradictions are hard to fix if it is assumed that she is talking about only one conception of God. However, by recognizing that she is sometimes referring to a metaphysical God and other times to a biblical God, her claims can be understood as part of a larger system instead of as inconsistencies. This consistency also matters to Cavendish regarding her work. This is because she tries to build a complete and unified system. Her focus on holism shows that she wants her ideas to fit together without contradiction. As well, being a woman writing philosophy in a male dominated time, being clear and consistent helped her show that her work was worth taking seriously. Lastly, I explained that the way to tell which God Cavendish is invoking depends on the function God is serving in the specific context and the kind of language she is using. When God has the function of explaining motion, order, or the structure of Nature, and the language is more abstract, Cavendish is invoking the metaphysical God. When God is connected to worship, judgment, or faith, and the language is more personal, she is invoking the biblical God. Essentially, the tone, language, and surrounding context help to see which God she has in mind when she writes. It is important to understand that this is not always perfectly clear, but paying attention to these patterns makes her writing much easier to understand.

This all matters because it helps people be able to read Cavendish more accurately. It shows that she is not just mixing theology and philosophy without thinking, she is making a distinction between two different ways of understanding God. Sometimes she is writing as a philosopher, and sometimes she is writing as a religious believer. These two voices are both part of her intellectual identity, and the two conceptions of God solution shows how they can exist side by side. It also helps to avoid forcing Cavendish into categories that she does not fit, such as seeing her as a strict philosopher or a religious thinker, but not both. This solution understands the complexity of her writing and shows how she has multiple perspectives at once.

On a broader scale, this solution adds something important to both philosophy of religion and feminist philosophy. As a woman writing at a time when women were excluded from education and philosophical debate, Cavendish shows that it is possible to take part in serious philosophical work without letting go of religious belief. She does not try to force religion to fit into her philosophy, and she does not just abandon it either. Instead, she makes room for both of them. This approach matters not just for understanding her work, but also for showing how a woman in her time was able to carve out a space for belief and philosophy to work together.

To conclude, the two conceptions of God solution offers a way to read Cavendish that does justice to the different things she is trying to do. It explains the tensions in her writing without treating them as mistakes that she made. It shows how she is able to balance her philosophical system with her religious beliefs. This solution also gives a better understanding of Cavendish as a woman thinker who has been overlooked or misunderstood. Cavendish does not always spell everything out to her readers, but that does not mean that her work is inconsistent or unclear. With the right interpretation, it becomes easier to see how she separates different ideas and is still able to have a consistent system. The two conceptions of God solution helps to make sense of this by

showing how her religious and philosophical views can work alongside each other without any issues. Ultimately, it brings together the different parts of her writing and shows how they fit into the larger picture she is creating.

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