

Two women philosophers in the seventeenth century: **Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway**

GENT 9/409: FOUNDATIONS OF THE MODERN WORLD (1600-1690)

DR. STEPHANIE SPOTO

MONTEREY PENINSULA COLLEGE

Margaret Cavendish & Anne Conway

- Margaret Cavendish remembered primarily for her innovative work *The Blazing World* (1666) → pioneer text of science fiction
 - Wrote on political and scientific subjects → championing a progressive natural philosophy and materialism
 - Published the same year as *The Blazing World*, her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* demonstrates engagement in progress in scientific innovations
- Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway are often compared: only six years separating their deaths, brought up in similar circumstances
 - Alice Theobald says: “make for an apt pair in considering not just some of the varying views in natural philosophy circulating in Restoration England but also their remarkable contribution of female voices to an otherwise male-dominated public and intellectual arena.”



Margaret Cavendish

Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1623 –1673)



- English aristocrat, poet, philosopher, scifi writer, scientist, and playwright
- Youngest sister of Sir John Lucas and Sir Charles Lucas, both prominent royalists
- She became attendant to Queen Henrietta Maria, traveled with her to France in exile, lived in the court of Louis XIV
- Married William Cavendish, first Duke of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1645
- Published under her own name → at the time, most women published anonymously
- Writing addressed many topics including power, scientific method, gender, and philosophy → published extensively in philosophy and early modern science
- Published over a dozen original works, but if we include all her revisions, the number goes up to 21

Margaret Cavendish Natural Philosopher

- Cavendish was praised and criticized as a groundbreaking woman author and thinker
- Rejected Aristotelianism and mechanical philosophy popular among her contemporaries
 - Preferring a **vitalist model**: “living organisms are fundamentally different from non-living entities because they contain some non-physical element or are governed by different principles than are inanimate things. In its simplest form, **vitalism** holds that living entities contain some fluid, or a distinctive ‘spirit’.”
- First woman to attend a meeting of the Royal Society of London in 1667
- Engaged in intellectual debate with, and sometimes criticized, the philosophy of philosophers Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, and Robert Boyle.
- She was critical of animal testing and engaged in animal advocacy



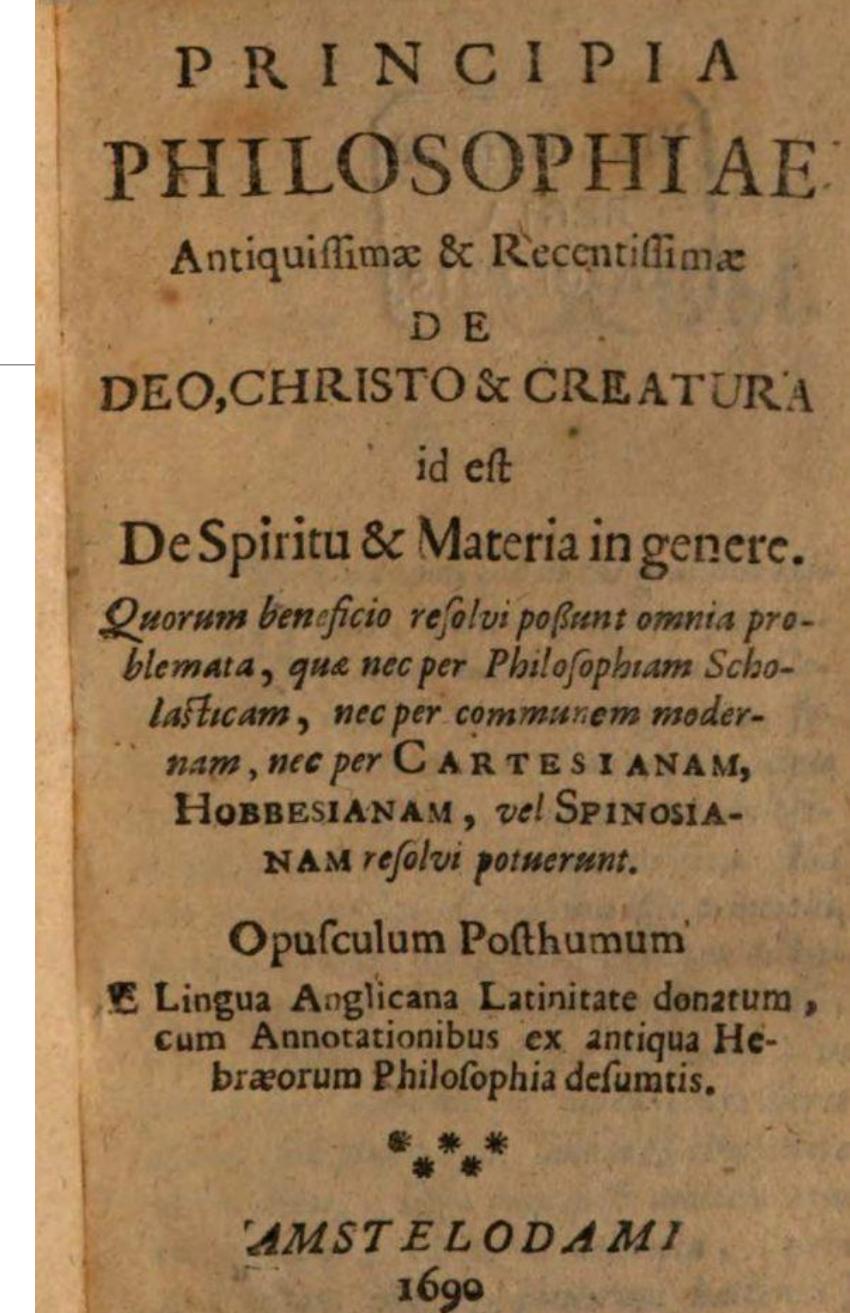
Viscountess Anne Conway (1631-1679)



- English philosopher → engaged in the tradition of the Cambridge Platonists
 - **Cambridge Platonists:** Group of English philosophers at Cambridge in the seventeenth century, including Henry More.
 - Upheld the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus, but were also interested in modern philosophical advancements.
 - Critical of scholasticism as a dominant form of institutional philosophy and instead were interested in advancements in science
 - First philosophers to write primarily and consistently in English
- Her work was influential on Gottfried Leibniz, important philosopher in logic and mathematics
- Her philosophy is an original form of rationalism, with women-centered concerns and patterns that make it unique among its contemporaries
 - **Rationalism:** theory that beliefs should be based off of reason rather than religious conviction

Anne Conway: Influence and Philosophical Engagement

- Common among contemporary women thinkers, Conway never wrote for credited publication
- Engaged in longstanding written correspondence with Henry More, one of the time period's most important thinkers.
 - He introduced her to many of the members of the Cambridge Platonists
- Her 1690 posthumous publication *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* shows the influence of the Cambridge Platonists on her ideas of matter and spirit
 - These ideas would go on to influence Leibniz's idea of the monad: the idea of an elementary particle



Anne Conway: God and the Natural World

- Though Conway is often framed as a mere container to promote the ideas of her male contemporaries, many see her posthumous philosophical work as an active response to the intellectual thought of her day.
- Presents her own unique assessment of Platonism, informed by Kabbalism
- Conway is pious → asserts that 'Creatures have their Being and Existence simply and alone' from God.
- Founded her inquiries in natural philosophy on a religious foundation → blends theology into her study of the natural world
- Conway: 'the Justice of God marvellously appears' in the works of nature, rightly bestowing upon infidels their 'due and proper Punishment'.

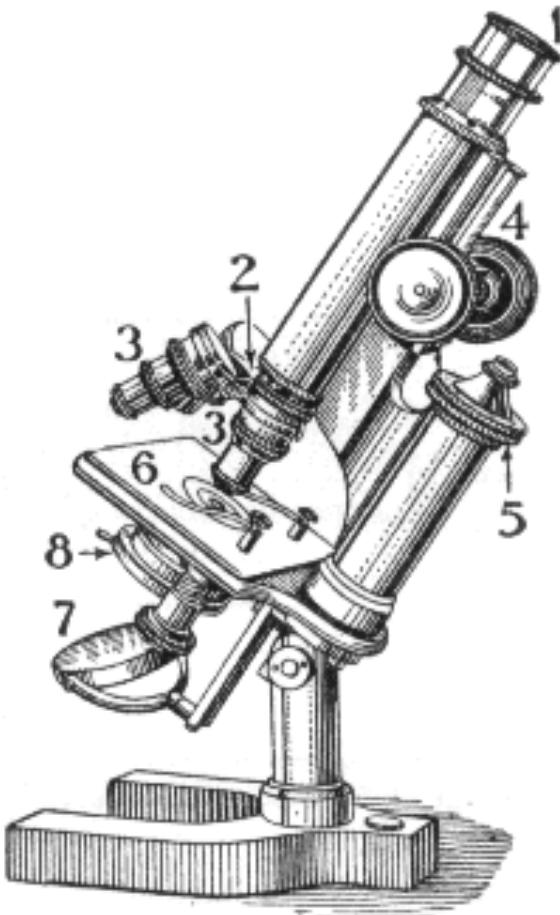


Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627 - 1678)
Perspective View with a Woman Reading a Letter

Margaret Cavendish's materialism vs. Conway's immaterialism

- In contrast to Conway's natural theology, Cavendish has a more celebratory approach to the human and material existence.
- Cavendish: The mind itself is material → departure from **Descartes**, who believed that the mind was a “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*) and made of an immaterial substance (c.f. Hobbes's critique of “immaterial substances”) → Descartes: subordinated the physical material body to the immaterial mind
- Cavendish promoted materialism and centered her philosophy around the body as a physical and knowable substance → the body was “the cause”, a source of motion and dynamism (c.f. Hobbes's idea of the human as motion)
- Cavendish focuses on natural minutiae → whereas Conway concerned with praising God as ‘in a proper and real sense, a Substance or Essence distinct from his Creatures’
 - a distinction that does not, however, hinder Conway being able to find in nature ample cause for celebrating him.

The Epistemology of Cavendish: What we can know?



- Though a natural, materialist philosopher, Cavendish recognizes God as a great “Being” → but “Unexpressible, and Incomprehensible” → God is not accessible to us in His “infinite nature”
- Though this philosophy is **skeptical** (philosophical idea that certain knowledge is impossible), she still gives a “one ground or principle” which we can be certain of: “which is self-motion, or self-moving matter” observable in nature.
- Her *Observations* claim that there is “more than man is able to know” → but she is interested in the material, natural, and immediate world → interested in experimental knowledge that can be gained from the material world
- Interested in new technologies like the microscope, a tool which she often praises

Conway & Cavendish on God

- Cavendish doesn't ignore God: "God [who] hath implanted a faculty of knowing in every creature"
 - Writes a panegyric on 'the variety of nature in all her works' as a physical being
- Conway more open and jubilant in her praise of God, opening her treatise with 'God is a Spirit, Light, and Life, infinitely Wise, Good, Just, Mighty, Omniscient, Omnipresent, Omnipotent, Creator and Maker of all things visible and invisible'.
 - Rejoices that God is "universally one in himself, and of himself, without any manner or Variety or Mixture"



Conway and Cavendish on writing

- Use similar analogies to describe the process of their thinking and writing
- Both consider their writing and thought expansive, guided by rational systems
- Conway and Cavendish use similar architectural metaphor when describing the transcription of abstract idea to concrete thought:
 - Conway: “the Will join’d with the Idea, as when a Master-Builder conceives in his Mind the *Idea* of an House [...] co-operates”.
 - Cavendish justifies her literary pursuits and departure from typical feminine duties, terming her writing a form of ‘*Spinning with the braine*’.
- Differences in literary motivations:
 - Cavendish a personal goal: : ‘[I] endeavour to Spin a Garment of Memory, to lapp up my *Name*, that it might grow to after Ages’ → wants her book to gain ‘*Respect, and Esteeme in the World*’
 - Conway asserts an impersonal goal, while her publisher wanted her to have the fame sought by Cavendish, it has no origin in Conway’s own philosophy