Abstract:
In 1666 Margaret Cavendish published her utopian work of science fiction The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World as a companion to her philosophical and scientific treatise Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. In the Preface to the Reader Cavendish notes that the Blazing World offers the opportunity to rest and rejuvenate the mind, in contrast to the “more laborious and difficult” studies in the Observations. Cavendish’s comments understate the significance of the Blazing World, which is much more than a restful exercise for a weary intellect.

A number of authors have commented on the philosophical significance of the Blazing World. Sarah Hutton argues that the Blazing World is crafted after popular fictionalized speculation about journeys to other worlds and travelogues, thereby rendering Cavendish’s natural philosophy accessible to a wider audience. Lisa T. Sarasohn emphasizes that Cavendish is offering a commentary on the politics of scientific enquiry especially in connection with Thomas Hobbes. Susan James and Sara H. Mendelson read the Blazing World as a satirical parody of Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis (1627), offering a feminist critique of Bacon’s methodology and scientific practice. The Blazing World also offers a critical commentary of experimental philosophers of the Royal Society (portrayed as lumbering Bear-men), and presents a narrative of political and intellectual empowerment.

In addition to the political and feminist critiques, how does the philosophy of the Observations interact with the narrative of the Blazing World? I focus on the status of the Blazing World as complimenting and extending Cavendish’s aims in her philosophical treatise with respect to two aspects of her philosophy: materialism and the epistemology of perception.

First Cavendish’s materialism, according to which matter has both “self-perception” and “self-motion,” renders the rational bear-men of the Blazing World a natural possibility, and not merely a fanciful parody. This is a result of treating bodies as a complete and thorough mixing of animate and animate matter. Moreover, the episodes in The Blazing World extend Cavendish’s arguments from Observations against understanding causes through effects (as the experimental philosophers do) and against understanding immaterial beings as having natural causal powers. I argue that Cavendish’s account of the “self-motion” of matter is best understood as a type of teleological causation, which complicates Cavendish’s rejection of Aristotelian Scholasticism.

Second, the episodes in the Blazing World extend Cavendish’s account of visual perception and her subsequent criticisms of telescopes and microscopes found in the Observations (50-51, 58-60, 99-100, 135-6, 201-2, 245). Cavendish’s treatment of telescopes and microscopes are sometimes parallel, but ultimately differ in the Blazing World, which helps to clarify otherwise puzzling aspects of her theory of perception according to which the mind patterns itself after external objects. This is importantly related to the teleological account of causation from the previous section.
Drawing together themes from *Observations* and the *Blazing World* emphasizes the philosophical import of Cavendish’s speculative fiction for her account of causation and perception. In the final section of the discussion I turn more broadly to Cavendish’s definition of art—contrasted with nature—and whether her own work of art, the *Blazing World*, is subject to the very same criticisms she recommends of experimental philosophers. Ultimately Cavendish explores some of the contingent features of her natural philosophy by imagining worlds constrained by many though not all of her philosophical principles. The *Blazing World* offers philosophical clarification and development in service of her arguments in *Observations*. More broadly, this discussion engages the history of the relationship between science fiction and philosophy.

References


