Welby, CUP Element Script

Victoria Welby was a British philosopher, who began engaging with science and philosophy in the 1880s. This was a heady period: thinkers were still grappling with biological theories of evolution; physicists were advancing new, vortex accounts of matter; and mathematicians were advancing ‘four dimensional’ accounts of space. Welby waded straight into these debates, reading everything she could get her hands on, and writing letters to all the main players. She created her own intellectual network, bringing major scientists and philosophers together. Gradually, using the science of her day, Welby created her own metaphysical system, a system designed to tackle all the ‘big questions’ about reality.

Frustratingly though, Welby published almost none of it. She published a lot on the philosophy of language, and it is this work she is best known for. American philosophy CS Peirce praised her 1903 book *What is Meaning?* as ‘really important’, on a par with Bertrand Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics.* Imagine, then, my delight when I began working in the Welby archives, and discovered that *hundreds* of her unpublished papers and letters concern metaphysics. As best I can tell, some of these haven’t been looked at since they were archived.

Based on these archive papers, this Cambridge Element offers the first study of Welby’s metaphysics. At the heart of her system lies Motion, which Welby describes as her ‘governing idea’. As I read Welby, what we usually think of as the material universe is merely a complex of motions: motions comprise material bodies, living beings, and conscious minds. And this idea of the universe, as Motion, underlies all her further metaphysical views, on the nature of matter, mind, idealism, space, change, time, and perhaps even God. Her system is well worth exploring.