

A Difference in Manner, not Matter: A Theological Defense of Anne Conway's Metaphysics

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In the 17th and 18th centuries, western philosophy saw an influx of metaphysical systems of philosophy and the natural world. New ideas, which challenged Aristotelian and scholastic thought formed the basis of a new approach to philosophy itself. Conway was one of these philosophers who, despite not being able to attend formal school, built a metaphysical system of the universe with the goal of uniting and reconciling several schools of philosophy. Conway's main philosophical influence came from the Cambridge Platonists. She was very interested in Cartesian philosophy and her philosophical system of the natural world attempts to resolve the issues of Descartes' mind-body dualism, while challenging the strict materialism of figures like Hobbes. In 17th century England, where Conway is writing, the overwhelming majority of those engaging in philosophy were less likely to accept or take seriously a system of the world which could not be reconciled to the Christian faith. I argue that this is a key goal of Conway's system, and provides a path

to defending her philosophical ideas. Although Conway's philosophy is extremely overlooked, it is well known as a key influence on the metaphysics of Leibniz, who is generally regarded as one of the more influential German philosophers of the 18th century. Conway's only work of philosophy, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, was published posthumously in 1690. It includes her metaphysics, an in depth theodicy, and a wide ranging critique of Descartes and Hobbes. I will first explain the key aspects of her metaphysics concerning natural substance, and then examine its compatibility with two specific Christian doctrines.

The first essential claim Conway makes is that there are only three substances in the universe: God, Christ, and the creatures. God is a single entity, who is immutable and wholly perfect. Christ serves as the mediator between God and the creatures, and can change only for the better. The creatures, or creation, which for Conway refers to everything on Earth, is infinitely mutable. Interestingly, Conway's metaphysics differs from other 17th century metaphysics in that she argues that all of creation is composed of one distinct substance: spirit. Everything on Earth is made of spirits, which are arranged in a multitude of ways. These spirits can differ greatly in manner from each other, making the immaterial and the material two ends of one continuum. I argue that Conway's metaphysical theory of physical substance successfully reconciles the natural world to two specific Christian doctrines. This makes her system of the natural world digestible to a large Christian audience, while also using the discussion of spirit to combat the problematic implications of Cartesian dualism. The first theological benefit of Conway's metaphysics is that it explains how apocatastasis—the Christian doctrine of infinite restoration—is possible. Because all aspects of creation are composed of a continuum of spirits, Con-

way argues that they are able to change within that continuum to become more or less perfect. The second theological benefit is that Conway's metaphysics provides an explanation of how creation executes Christ's second commandment: to "love your neighbor as yourself."¹ Because God made all of creation out of the same substance, there are natural sympathies between the species of creation, even if sin has made it more difficult for those sympathies to be actualized. These theological benefits provide the basis for a defense of her metaphysical system.

The first aspect of Conway's metaphysics concerns the way in which beings are "distinguished from each other in terms of their substance."² This point is essential for establishing the broader cosmos that her philosophical and theological theories exist in. Conway argues that there are only three of these beings: "God, Christ and creatures."³ Not only are these entities distinguished from each other, they encompass the "vast infinity of possible things," meaning they are the only types of beings that exist in the universe. These three distinct beings exist in a hierarchy, descending from the wholly perfect God, through Christ the mediator, to the creatures, who Conway asserts as the "lowest order of being." Each of these three entities have distinct attributes, specifically with respect to their changeability. Because God is the "supreme being," He is "altogether immutable."⁴ God is a wholly perfect being, meaning He is not subject to change. On the opposite end of that spectrum are the creatures, who are "altogether mutable," and can change "for good or bad." Christ serves as the mediator between God and

¹Mark 28:31.

²Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, trans. Allison P. Coudert & Taylor Corse (Cambridge University Press 1996): 30.

³Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 30.

⁴Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 30.

creation, communicating God's nature to the creatures. Christ is "partly mutable" and can only change "in respect to good."⁵

For Conway, it is clear that both God and Christ are composed of only one distinct substance, as they are both single entities. It therefore follows that, "the whole of creation are also a single species in substance or essence."⁶ For many readers in the Early Modern period, this conclusion would not have been intuitive. The notion that all of the natural world is composed of a singular substance is not self-evident, due to the varying states of matter, different species, and the complexity of living creatures. To respond to this potential objection, and help convince a potentially skeptical reader, Conway argues that all creatures are composed of a "body and a spirit."⁷ More specifically, bodies and spirits are dispersed throughout the human body, forming a distinct whole. Conway argues that man, for example, is made up of a "countless multitude of bodies," and a "countless multitude of spirits,"⁸ which can be arranged in a multitude of ways to form the different species that exist throughout creation. Moreover, the body is the "passive principle" and the spirit is the "active principle,"⁹ meaning that the spirits make active decisions that the bodies receive. Conway goes on to assert that "every body is a spirit and nothing else, and it differs from a spirit only insofar as it is darker."¹⁰ A body, then, is only a "darker"¹¹ type of spirit because it is more corporeal, receiving the light that emanates from the more active spirit. In this sense, body refers to all material substance, and spirit refers to all

⁵Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 30.

⁶Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 30.

⁷Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 38.

⁸Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 39.

⁹Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 38.

¹⁰Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 40.

¹¹Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 40.

immaterial substance. Consequently, Conway concludes that “the distinction between spirit and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial.”¹² In other words, the body—which refers to all material substance—and the spirit—which refers to all immaterial substance—are the same in essence, since a body is only a darker type of spirit. This makes the material and the immaterial two opposite ends of the continuum of spirits that compose the natural world.

I argue that Conway’s metaphysics are defensible because of the theological doctrines they explain. The first theological doctrine that Conway’s metaphysics explains is apocatastasis: the Christian doctrine of infinite restoration, in which all of creation can become infinitely more perfect. Conway argues it is in creation’s fundamental nature to strive toward perfection. She asserts that “the divine power, goodness, and wisdom has created good creatures so that they may continually and infinitely move towards the good through their own mutability.”¹³ Because God—an infinitely perfect, immutable being—created the creatures to be mutable, it is necessarily in their nature to ascend toward His perfection. This also applies across different species, because for Conway, specific creatures can be reborn as different species.¹⁴ Because different species or “entities” are not distinct in essence, the spirits that compose them can change into different species, and ascend through the hierarchy of creation. To articulate this, Conway uses the negative side of that argument: “For if a creature were entirely limited by its own individuality and totally constrained and confined within the very narrow boundaries of its own species [...] then no creature

¹²Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 40.

¹³Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 32.

¹⁴Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 32.

could attain further perfection.”¹⁵ It would be against the fundamental nature of the creatures if they were unable to ascend toward God and perfect itself through this perpetual restoration. Furthermore, this “continual motion” of the creatures is more fundamental than their goodness, because they are mutable to the point where they can turn away from God. Conway argues that creatures will strive for their “further good,” unless they “resist that good by a willful transgression and abuse of the impartial will created in them by God.”¹⁶ Because God also gave creatures free will, they can turn away from God. This is possible in the same way that ascension towards God is possible, but is distinct insofar as it is a willful act of the individual creature.

The second theological benefit of Conway’s metaphysics is that it allows for creation to satisfy Christ’s second commandment: to “love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁷ Conway argues that this is possible because all of creation has the same essence: God “made all tribes of human beings from one blood so that they would love one another and be bound by the same sympathy.”¹⁸ Because all human beings are made from the same blood, they naturally have sympathy and love for each other. Conway extends this to all of creation, concluding that “God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body.”¹⁹ It is in the creatures’ nature to love each other because of the mutual sympathies that God infused in them. Furthermore, Christ commands this to the creatures because “sin has weakened

¹⁵Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 32.

¹⁶Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 32.

¹⁷Mark, 28:31.

¹⁸Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 31.

¹⁹Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 32.

this love and sympathy [...] to an astonishing degree,"²⁰ inhibiting their natural capacity to love each other. Christ acts as a mediator by commanding the creatures to love your neighbor as yourself. Creatures can then follow this commandment because of the underlying natural love that already exists within them.

In conclusion, Conway's metaphysics provides a theory of physical substance that has positive theological implications. Conway argues that there are three beings in the universe that are distinct in essence: God, who is infinitely perfect, and unchangeable; Christ, who is the mediator between God and creation; and creation, which encompasses all of the natural world, and is infinitely changeable. Creation itself is also composed of one substance, which Conway calls spirit. Each aspect of creation is composed of a multitude of spirits, ranging greatly in manner from each other, with some being more or less corporeal. They can also be arranged in a multitude of ways, resulting in multiple species and entities with different appearances that are still the same in essence. Conway's metaphysics reconciles apocatastasis, the idea that all of creation is in perpetual restoration and can be infinitely more perfect. Because all creatures are composed of a substance that ranges in manner, they can either ascend or descend through the hierarchy of creation. While it is in creation's nature to emulate the perfect attributes of God, their free will allows the creatures to turn away from Him through active transgressions of God's laws. Conway also explains that creation is predisposed to follow Christ's commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself,"²¹ as, being composed of the same substance, mutual sympathies exist between the different creatures throughout the hierarchy of creation. Sin has made mutual love more difficult,

²⁰Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 31.

²¹Mark, 28:31.

but has not demolished it completely. The explanation of both apocatastasis and Christ's second commandment provide the basis for a theological defense of Conway's metaphysics.

Bibliography

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