



# Anne Conway's Ontology of Creation: A Pluralist Interpretation

**ABSTRACT:** *Does Anne Conway (1631–79) hold that the created world consists of a single underlying substance? Some have argued that she does; others have argued that she is a priority monist and so holds that there are many created substances, but the whole created world is ontologically prior to each particular creature. Against both of these proposals, this article makes the case for a substance pluralist interpretation of Conway: individual creatures are distinct substances, and the whole created world is not ontologically prior to the individual creatures that compose it. The basic argument for such a view draws on Conway's claims about the freedom and moral responsibility of individual creatures. The pluralist reading is straightforwardly compatible with these claims, while the monistic readings are not.*

**KEYWORDS:** Conway, monism, ontology, moral responsibility, freedom

## Introduction

In her *Principles of Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1996), composed sometime during the late 1670s and published posthumously in 1690, Anne Conway (1631–79) develops a novel, systematic, and monistic account of the relationship between the mental and the physical. She argues that ‘the distinction between spirit and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial’ (CC 6.11, 40).<sup>1</sup> Thus, Conway explicitly rejects the common

Thanks are due to Jessica Gordon-Roth and two anonymous referees for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article, in virtue of which it has been substantially improved. I am also grateful for the feedback I received from audiences at a panel on Anne Conway's philosophy at the Pacific Conference of the American Philosophical Association (organized by Tad Schmaltz), the Midwest Seminar on Modern Philosophy (organized by Lisa Downing, Lisa Shabel, and Julia Jorati), and the History of Philosophy Circle at Michigan State University (organized by Emily Katz).

<sup>1</sup> Following most of the recent entries in this scholarship, citations of Conway's *Principles of Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* in English are to the Corse and Coudert edition (Conway 1996). These citations are labeled ‘CC’ and are given by chapter, section, and page number. I use the Corse and Coudert translation in order to connect the arguments of this article with the positions developed in other recent articles on this topic. However, there are some instances in which the original 1692 English translation (attributed to ‘J. C., *Medicinae Professor*’) appears more accurate. Where that translation contains interesting or significant departures from Corse and Coudert, I include that text (Conway 1692) with the notation ‘JC’ followed by page number. I have inserted the Latin text in brackets after the English where it seemed beneficial; all such insertions are my own. Citations of the Latin text are drawn from Peter Loptson's reprint of the original Latin translation of her notebook in Conway 1982 [1690]; these citations are labeled ‘L’ and followed by page number.



seventeenth-century view that minds and bodies have a different kind of essence—a view shared by both René Descartes and Henry More, for instance. This monistic element of her view is novel and exciting, and it has been explored in detail by a number of historians of philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

However, Conway also claims, shortly thereafter, that ‘creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence’ (CC 7.1, 41). This claim is less clear. Are created individuals mere modes of a single underlying substance, or is each individual a distinct substance of the same nature? Scholars such as Mercer (2012a, 2015), Lascano (2023), and others interpret Conway as a substance monist about creation. Mercer, for instance, takes Conway to hold that ‘The created world is one big infinitely complex vital substance, whose various modes constitute individual creatures’ (2012a: 185; see also 2015: 136). In the same vein, Sarah Hutton writes that Conway ‘was a monist: that is she postulated that there was only one substance in created nature, and that all things were composed of this single substance’ (1997: 227; see also 2004: 3). (This view is also sometimes referred to as ‘existence monism’, but I will typically refer to it as ‘substance monism’: the view that there is only one created substance.)

A number of scholars have recently challenged the substance monist interpretation. Head (2021: 159–64) proposes that Conway is a substance pluralist, such that each creature is its own substance. Gordon-Roth (2018) accepts both options: from a God’s-eye view, there is just one created substance; from a creature’s perspective, however, there are many. Thomas (2020) takes a fourth path: on her view, Conway is a priority monist. Created individuals are all distinct substances, but they ontologically depend on the created world as a whole. (Although the whole created world would seem to qualify as a created individual as well, I will reserve the terms ‘individual’ and ‘created individual’ to denote creatures that are not identical with the whole created world.)

Roughly speaking, then, we have the following set of positions about created substance:

	<i>Creatio prior to creaturae</i>	<i>Creatio not prior to creaturae</i>
<b>Creatures are substances</b>	Priority Monism	Substance Pluralism
<b>Creatures are not substances</b>	Substance Monism	X

The pluralist interpretation appears to be a minority view among scholars of Conway; this article is intended to bolster the case in its favor. On the view I advance, particular creatures are substances, and the whole of creation is not

<sup>2</sup> Chapters 7 and 8 of Conway’s *Principles* list a number of distinct but interlocking arguments against mind-body dualism. For discussion of Conway’s criticism of mind-body dualism, see Duran (1989: 69–77), McRobert (2000), Hutton (2004: 49–52, 87–90), Grey (2017), Borcherding (2019a), Mercer (2019b), and Schmalz (forthcoming a).

ontologically prior to the particular creatures it contains. Here I develop a new argument in favor of this pluralist interpretation, drawn from Conway's moral philosophy: her account of created substance in *Principles* chapter 6 is given in terms of a certain form of moral subjecthood, and she frequently treats created individuals as distinct moral subjects of precisely this sort. The first part of this article (section 1) sets out this basic argument.

Where the first part of the article focuses on the reasons in favor of the pluralist reading, the second part considers reasons *against* the various monist readings. As I will argue, the pluralist reading avoids a host of interpretive difficulties that monist interpretations face. First, as a number of scholars have observed, there is some fairly direct textual evidence that Conway classified created individuals as substances. Section 2.1 briefly recapitulates this textual evidence. If creatures are substances, as these passages indicate, then the substance monist interpretation is ruled out. Next, I argue that Conway cannot be a priority monist either. While the priority monist interpretation is in many respects insightful, in section 2.2 I make the case that there is no plausible sense of 'priority' on which the whole of creation is ontologically prior to the particular creatures that make it up. Finally, in section 2.3 I highlight a metaethical difficulty facing any monistic interpretation of Conway's creation: unlike the pluralistic interpretation, monistic views tend to undermine the attribution of moral responsibility to creatures.

Taken together, the constellation of arguments presented here strongly motivate the pluralist interpretation. It provides the most straightforward way to unite Conway's metaphysics with her moral philosophy, and it avoids the most notable difficulties faced by the monistic alternatives.

## 1. Motivating a Pluralist Interpretation

What would it mean to say that the infinitely many individuals in Conway's world are created substances? And what reasons are there to interpret her in this way? While our focus is on her ontology of created substance, the answers to these questions require us first to examine her views about substance in general. The basic argument in favor of a pluralist interpretation is drawn from the method by which Conway distinguishes the category 'created substance' from the other kinds of substance in her ontology.

One traditional way of understanding what a substance is has to do with its theoretical role: it is that which underlies and persists through change. Perhaps informed by this traditional perspective, Conway distinguishes three kinds of substance based on different kinds of change something can undergo. Moreover, she accepts the Neoplatonic view that being is essentially infused with value, and thus every change something undergoes is either a change for the better or a change for the worse (Mercer 2012b: 110–13). Conway takes this to allow for exactly three 'kinds of being [*Entium classis*]' (CC 5.3, 24), or three types of substance. The first type of substance is 'altogether unchangeable' (CC 5.3, 24), being already perfect. The second type of substance is changeable but 'can only change toward the good' (CC 5.3, 24). Finally, the third type is that which is changeable in either direction, 'from good to good as well as from good to evil'

(CC 5.3, 24;cf. JC 38).<sup>3</sup> The first two types of substance are identified with God and Christ, respectively, each of which is unique: there is only one token of each type. The third type is identified variously with creation and with creatures. The interpretive problem is that it is not clear whether this third type of substance is intended to have exactly one token.

There are many created individuals—infininitely many, on Conway’s view. But are they substances? The main reason to think that they are substances is that the account of created substance just sketched appears to be satisfied by individual creatures, as Conway describes them. As the preceding passages indicate, she characterizes the three types of substance in terms of differences in the sorts of moral transformations to which each may be subject. To be a substance of the third type—as opposed to being God or Christ—is to be a moral subject capable of changing either for the better or for the worse. Given this account, our guiding question becomes: Is each created individual a distinct moral subject, capable of changing either for the better or for the worse? If so, that provides a good reason to believe that Conway takes created individuals to be substances.

Although Conway’s *Principles* is a problematic text in a variety of respects (a point I will say more about later), there is much evidence that she does view each creature as a distinct moral subject that may become more or less good over time. The moral changes that individuals undergo can be dramatic. Indeed, Conway takes the range of possible changes to be so vast that she ultimately denies that a creature’s essence includes their membership in any particular biological species. We are not essentially human, on Conway’s view, nor is a horse essentially a horse. The reason is that, if we *were* bound to one biological species, there would be some inborn limits to our ability to seek out and participate in the good. She argues,

[I]f a creature were entirely limited by its own individuality and totally constrained and confined within the very narrow boundaries of its own species to the point that there was no mediator through which one creature could change into another, then no creature could attain further perfection and greater participation in divine goodness, nor could creatures act and react upon each other in different ways. (CC 6.5, 32)

The ‘species’ to which Conway refers in this passage is intended to include any natural kind more specific than the kind *creature* (Lascano 2013: 335 fn. 10; Grey 2019). Each created individual is essentially a creature though not essentially any particular kind of creature. Our horse might, if things go well, become human on down the line. You or I might, through a succession of bad choices and gradual changes, become a horse.

What is crucial for present purposes, however, is that Conway repeatedly insists it is the individual creature that is the proper subject of these changes. This point

<sup>3</sup> The JC translation avoids the implication of the CC translation that a creature cannot change from evil to good: ‘though it was in its own Nature indeed Good; yet could be indifferently changed, as well into Good, as from Good to Evil’ (JC 38).

matters for her in part because she holds that creatures *deserve* the changes they undergo. For instance:

And this is the nature of all creatures, namely that they be in continual motion or operation, which most certainly strives for their further good (just as for the reward and fruit of their own labor), unless they resist that good by a willful transgression and abuse of the impartial will created in them by God [*nisi Creaturae voluntaria transgressione, abusuque indifferentiae voluntatis a Deo ipsis concreatae bonum illud impediunt*]. (CC 6.6, 32)<sup>4</sup>

The suggestion is important because it has implications for the problem of evil. When a creature changes for the worse—as when a human ‘body and soul is to be turned into the nature of a brute’ (CC 6.8, 36)—the change must be reconciled with God’s wisdom and justice. Conway is at pains to highlight the fact that her system can address this problem, given that such changes are the responsibility of the individual that undergoes them:

For when a human being has so greatly degraded himself by his own willful wrongdoing [*Cum enim homo voluntaria sua transgressione tantopere deturpavit*] and has brought his nature, which had been so noble, to a lower state . . . what injustice is this if God compels him to bear the same image in his body . . .? (CC 6.8, 36; L 97–98)

The chapter makes this point with a variety of examples, all of which aim to paint the same picture: creatures that act rightly are rewarded by being transformed into better, more spiritual bodies; creatures that act in evil ways are punished with transformation into worse, less spiritual bodies; and ‘the justice of God shines so gloriously in this transmutation of one species to another’ (CC 6.7, 35) because creatures are responsible for the good or evil acts that result in their transformation.

Thus, created individuals are distinct moral subjects, each capable of changing either for better or for worse, and individually responsible for those changes insofar as they result from the creature’s own free actions. Given that what it is to be a substance of the third type is to be a distinct moral subject in this way—to have this capacity for mutability with respect to the good—this gives us a natural reason to conclude that each creature is a numerically distinct substance. This, then, is the basic motivation for accepting a pluralist interpretation: it easily reconciles (i) Conway’s insistence that each individual is a moral subject that has the inherent capacity for certain forms of spiritual evolution with (ii) her account of created substance in those very same terms.

<sup>4</sup>JC 59–60 translates the last clause as follows: ‘unless the Creatures hinder that good by a voluntary Transgression, and abuse of that indifferency of Will which God placed in them in their Creation.’ ‘Indifference’ is likely a better translation than ‘impartiality’ here, as it more clearly connects Conway’s claim to the long philosophical discussion of the liberty of indifference.

That is the pluralist proposal, simply put. Of course, with a text as difficult as Conway's *Principles*, nothing is quite so simple. The main objection to a pluralist interpretation of Conway draws on the passages in which she describes the deep and thoroughgoing unity of all creatures. Perhaps the strongest point in favor of viewing Conway's ontology of creation as monistic is her comparison of creatures to parts of a single, living body. For instance, she holds that 'all things are one in virtue of their primary substance or essence and are like parts or members of the same body [*ratione primae suae substantiae & essentiae omnes unum sint, idemque & quasi partes vel membra unius corporis*]' (CC 7.3, 47; L 111).<sup>5</sup> And, in another passage along these lines:

Thus God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body [*ut quae omnes membra sunt unius corporis*] and all, so to speak, brothers, for whom there is one common Father, namely, God in Christ or the word incarnate. There is also one mother, that unique substance or entity from which all things have come forth, and of which they are the real parts and members [*& sic una quoque mater, unica nimirum illa substantia, sive entitas, ex qua prodierunt, cujusque reales partes sunt & membra*]. (CC 6.4, 31; L 90–91)

In both passages, Conway compares the unity of created individuals to the unity of the parts of a (living) body. Such claims certainly have a monistic tenor to them; Thomas takes such texts as 'indicative of priority monism' (2020: 282), and proponents of the substance monist interpretation have also claimed such passages in their favor. What else could it even mean to say that all creatures are like parts of the same body? One might think that passages such as these indicate that Conway has a monistic view of the created world in spite of the argument I have offered for a pluralist interpretation. How does a pluralist read such passages?

One approach is to draw a distinction between *ontological* and *causal* dependence. The passages in question do suggest some form of dependence between individual creatures and the whole created world. But these passages—and the familial metaphors they invoke—need not be construed in terms of ontological dependence. They might simply reflect causal dependencies that unite all creatures to one another or to the created world as a whole. This, in my view, is the best way to interpret Conway's claims about the unity of creation. The parts of a body are causally interdependent: the state of any one part is partially determined by the activities of each other part. Likewise, the unity of creation can be construed as a form of causal holism, such that the state of any one created individual is partially caused by the activities of all other creatures. (This interpretation also seems compatible with the familial metaphors Conway invokes in the quoted passage. For instance, brothers are likely to have a strong influence on one another while nevertheless each bearing responsibility for charting their own course in life.)

<sup>5</sup> JC 99 more clearly (and correctly) presents this as an analogy of parthood, not a genuine parthood relation: 'as it were Parts and Members of one Body' (emphasis added).

While this reply may initially seem ad hoc, it is supported by the earliest passages in which Conway asserts the unity of creation. She first advances a version of the unity of creation thesis in at the end of chapter 3:

[A]ll creatures from the highest to the lowest are inseparably united to one another by their subtler mediating parts, which come between them and which are emanations from one creature to another, through which they can act upon one another at the greatest distance. (CC 3.10, 20)

Here, the unity of creation is due to the causal interdependence of all creatures, not to the ontological priority of the whole of creation over its parts. The pluralist's suggestion is that Conway's insistence upon the unity of all creatures can in general be treated in this way, as a form of causal unity. Yet there is no reason to suppose that this form of causal holism about the created world requires either that all created individuals are modes of one underlying substance or that all created individuals depend for their being on the whole of creation.

That being said, it is important that the state of each creature is only *partly* dependent upon the rest of creation or else Conway's holism would threaten her attributions of responsibility to creatures. Conway wants to allow that creatures' actions are not (always) determined; created individuals are able to direct their motion in ways that are not dictated by God or, presumably, by any other creature. This is why created individuals, rather than God, bear moral responsibility for their actions. She uses an analogy to explain this:

If . . . a ship is moved by wind but is steered by a helmsman so that it goes from this or that place, then the helmsman is neither the author nor cause of the wind; but the wind blowing, he makes either a good or bad use of it. When he guides the ship to its destination, he is praised, but when he grounds it on the shoals and suffers shipwreck, then he is blamed and deemed worthy of punishment. (CC 8.2, 58)

The degree to which each individual is causally influenced by (and 'inseparably united with') other creatures must be limited enough so that each individual still bears moral responsibility for what it does. (For a broader discussion of the role of sympathetic and vital causal connections in Conway's metaphysics, see Head 2021:164–65; Mercer 2019a; Schmalz, [forthcoming b](#))

This proposal naturally raises further questions about Conway's account of causation. For instance, what kind of causal relationships bind all creatures together? Conway describes them as 'emanations', but can more be said? The waters here are murky, but at points the text implies that Conway does not consider the state or action of a creature to be sufficient on its own to account for the communication of motion from one creature to another (CC 9.9, 69–70). The alternative she proposes has affinities with occasionalism: 'a creature gives existence to motion or vital action, not from itself, but only in subordination to God as his instrument' (CC 9.9, 70). It seems reasonable to suppose the same

rationale would apply to the causal interdependence of all creatures upon one another: it is not a relation intrinsic to each pair of creatures, but a relation between each pair of creatures *and God*. However, to say much more than this would require a detailed study of Conway's account of causation. The main point for present purposes is that Conway's remarks about the unity of creation need not be construed as endorsing a monistic metaphysics, but can be seen as a claim about the causal interdependence of all creatures.

## 2. Problems for Monists

The pluralist interpretation is further bolstered by the fact that it avoids the difficulties faced by the two most salient alternative views, substance monism and priority monism. The substance monist has difficulty accommodating the texts in which Conway labels certain created individuals 'substances', and the priority monist interpretation appears to be incompatible with some of her core doctrines about creation and essence. Finally, both forms of monism are hard to reconcile with Conway's insistence upon the moral responsibility of created individuals for their actions. These interpretive difficulties constitute a reason to prefer a pluralist reading over the monistic alternatives.

### 2.1. Problems for the Substance Monist Interpretation

Though the *Principles* contains some passages that hint at monism, it is a striking fact that the work also contains a number of passages that unambiguously refer to created individuals as substances. Though she does not take this to be decisive evidence for a pluralist interpretation, Gordon-Roth (2018: 284–86) presents an almost exhaustive list of passages from the *Principles* that either suggest or outright state that created individuals are substances. Unless we have some reason to view these passages as the product of erroneous translation (or perhaps slips of Conway's own pen), they present a serious difficulty for the substance monist interpretation.

For instance, Gordon-Roth draws our attention to CC 7.1:

a certain thing, while always remaining the same substance [*res quaedam, eadem semper manens substantia*], can change marvelously in respect to its mode of being, so that a holy and blessed spirit or an angel of light may become an evil and cursed spirit of darkness through its own willful actions. (43)<sup>6</sup>

Here, the substance *cannot* be the whole created world because it is the 'willful actions' of that very created substance that lead to its changed mode of being. If

<sup>6</sup>JC 88 has an interesting translation here: 'And so we see how a Thing (the same Substance still remaining) may be marvelously changed in respect of the manners of its Existence'. This translation could perhaps be taken to support the substance monist reading. After all, if all creatures are modes of one created substance, then *whenever* a creature changes, the underlying substance would remain the same. However, in this case, the Latin just as well supports the CC translation, which identifies the *res quaedam* with the *substantia*.



the created world were the substance at issue, the actions of the angel would make 'cursed and evil' the world as a whole, not merely the angel itself. Gordon-Roth also rightly notes that Conway twice explicitly refers to a plurality of created substances. For example: '[M]otion and action are nothing but modes of created substances [*modi substantiarum creatarum*], like strength, power, and force, through which motion and action can be magnified beyond what the substance itself can do' (CC 9.9, 69; L 143). I recapitulate just these two examples in order to highlight the fact that there is clear textual support for taking Conway's creatures to be substances.

But how seriously ought we to take such textual evidence? Scholars have been skeptical about the significance of these passages, for it looms large in the background of this debate that we do not have the original text of Conway's *Principles*. The original text was translated into Latin by an unknown hand at some point after Conway's death in 1679, and it was subsequently lost. The text was taken by van Helmont after Conway's death, but not published for over a decade. The translation could have taken place at any time during that period. (For discussion, see L 6–8. Notably, Reid [2020] contends that Knorr von Rosenroth is the translator. If that is correct, then the translation must have been undertaken between 1679 and 1689, the year of Rosenroth's death.)

From a historian's perspective, things look bleak. We lack the original text of Conway's notebook, we have extremely limited knowledge of the conditions under which it was translated, and we know that Conway was not alive to check the translation herself. For this reason, it has been difficult to approach this debate in the usual way. Simply reading the book more carefully is of little help if we do not know whether the version of the book we have is a careful translation. This tends to undermine appeals to textual evidence of the sort I have made in this section.

However, Reid (2020: 688) has recently provided a compelling argument for thinking that the original translator of Conway's *Principles* was a very careful translator indeed. In *Principles* 3.9, Conway considers an argument for the existence of atoms that is drawn from Henry More's *Immortality of the Soul* (1659). The 1692 English translation of the *Principles* reproduces More's original argument almost exactly. That translation is drawn from the initial Latin translation of Conway's lost notebook. Reid argues—persuasively, I think—that because these translations both track More's original language so faithfully, we have good reason to believe that they likely also track Conway's original language faithfully. This point is important to the present debate. It implies that Conway's references to a plurality of created substances cannot be easily swept under the rug as the imposition of a careless translator.

It must be acknowledged that although we have some reason to believe that the initial translation of Conway's notebook was accurate, we have no reason to believe it was complete. The published preface by More and van Helmont tells us that some part of Conway's original text was simply left untranscribed and untranslated, because it was 'barely legible' (CC, 7). It is hard to overstate how profoundly our understanding of Conway's views might shift if only the original notebook were recovered. However, for our purposes, the incompleteness of the remaining text is not as relevant as its accuracy. In the fragment of the text that

remains to us, Conway refers to creatures as substances, and we have reason to believe that this translation is accurate.

Based on the textual evidence we have, then, it is plausible that Conway takes the created world to contain many numerically distinct substances. Still, these observations serve to undermine only the substance monist interpretation. They are consistent with a priority monist reading, as Thomas (2020) prefers. Is the whole created world ontologically prior to the particular creatures it contains? In the following section, I will outline my reasons for skepticism about this proposal as well.

## 2.2. Problems for the Priority Monist Interpretation

The priority monist holds that the whole created world is ontologically prior to the various created individuals that compose it. Thomas (2020) has argued that this is Conway's position, but here I will make the case that none of the standard versions of priority monism are compatible with Conway's other metaphysical views.

'Ontological priority' is not a term that Conway employs. However, both in contemporary metaphysics and in the history of philosophy, ontological priority is understood in terms of asymmetrical dependence. One thing is ontologically prior to another when (i) the latter depends on the former and (ii) the reverse is not true. On this understanding of ontological priority, the claim of priority monism is that all concrete individuals—in Conway's terms, creatures—depend on the world as a whole, and the world as a whole does not depend upon any other concrete individual. For instance, in his influential attempt to revive the doctrine of priority monism, Schaffer (2010) formulates the claim that the cosmos is prior to all other things as the thesis that all other things depend on the cosmos, and the cosmos does not depend on anything else. If the dependence relation at issue is asymmetrical, we can elide the second clause; after all, if all else depends on the cosmos, it will follow by logic that the cosmos does not depend on anything else. For this reason, Schaffer concludes that priority monism is 'equivalent to the thesis that every proper part of the cosmos depends on the cosmos' (2010: 42).

The question of whether Conway embraces priority monism about the created world is thus to be understood as the question of whether each created individual asymmetrically depends upon the whole created world. It is difficult to determine whether Conway would accept this asymmetrical dependence claim. What kind of dependence is at issue? If we take our lead from scholarly debates about how to interpret other historical figures who accept that a whole is (in some cases) prior to its parts, there are two main ways of interpreting the claim. One option is that the relevant relation is necessary existential dependence. On this view, *a* ontologically depends on *b* just when *a* could not exist without *b*. Another option is that the relation at issue is essential dependence. Roughly, on this view, one thing ontologically depends on another just when the first thing could not be what it is without the second thing being what *it* is. Schematically, on this proposal, *a* ontologically depends on *b* just in case the essence or definition of *a* includes or involves *b*.

The different senses of ontological priority discussed here figure not just in early modern metaphysics, but also in ancient and medieval metaphysics. For instance, in Pasnau's (2011: ch. 11) expansive discussion of medieval views about the inherence of accidents in substances, the authors he surveys describe the metaphysical situation in terms of what I am calling necessary existential dependence: accidents could not exist without their substances. Likewise, scholars of Aristotle have tended to view his notion of ontological priority either as asymmetrical existential dependence or as asymmetrical essential dependence, as Corkum (2016) nicely summarizes. Notably, Corkum favors reading Aristotle as taking a path I do not consider at length here: treating ontological priority as a relation of *grounding*, in more or less the sense that contemporary metaphysicians think of that relation. Someone might argue that Conway is a priority monist in this sense: the whole of creation is a total ground of all particular creatures. However, grounding is typically understood either as a relation between facts ('the fact that *f* grounds the fact that *g*') or as a sentential operator ('*p* because *q*'), and it is hard for me to see how to apply either of these options in the case of Conway's ontology. After all, the fact that a particular creature exists seems for Conway to be grounded in the fact that God is maximally benevolent, wise, and powerful, not in facts about other created things. (On the various contemporary views about the formal character of grounding, see Correia and Schnieder 2012.)

Accordingly, we have two main options for understanding the claim of priority monism:

**(PM—existential reading)** The created world could exist without any individual creature, but no creature could exist without the created world.

**(PM—essentialist reading)** The essence of the world involves no individual creature, but the essence of each creature involves the created world.

These are not the only possible ways to understand what might be involved in the claim that Conway is a priority monist, but they are the most straightforward options. Yet neither of them can plausibly be attributed to Conway.

The problem with the existential reading is that it conflicts with Conway's account of the metaphysics of creation. Creation is depicted not as a contingent act of God, but as a 'perpetual emanation' (CC 2.4, 13) of divine goodness. This picture of creation leads Conway to embrace a robust principle of plenitude, which has been aptly characterized by Christia Mercer as the view 'that God fills the world with as many beings as possible and that they are unified with one another' (2019a: 58). The point I emphasize here is the *modal* component of this principle of plenitude. Conway holds that 'God is a necessary agent and that he does everything he can do [*Deum esse agens necessarium, & omnia facere quaecumque facere potest*]' (CC 3.4, 16; L 73). She argues for this by appealing to the divine attributes: God 'must do whatever he does to and for his creatures [*non possit non ficere, quidquid facit in creaturis suis, vel erga eas*]' since his infinite wisdom, goodness, and justice are a

law to him which cannot be superseded' (CC 3.2, 16; L 72). A consequence of this position is that, if it is even possible for some creature to exist, then, necessarily, that creature exists. For example, suppose that the proposition 'Peter exists' is possible but not actually true. Now, if it is possible that Peter exists, then God can create Peter. However, as the passages just quoted indicate, Conway holds that if God can create something, he must create it. Therefore, if God can create Peter, then he must do so—that is, it is necessary that Peter exists. This line of reasoning generalizes to any created individual.

In turn, this picture of creation implies that there is no actually existing creature that might not have existed. All existential truths are necessary truths. This does not entail that *all* truths are necessary truths, for not all truths are existential truths—for instance, if Peter goes on to commit some wicked act, his action is contingent and not necessitated by the divine attributes. However, Conway's position here does entail that the existence of any particular creature is just as necessary as that of the whole created world. Thus, it is false that the whole created world could exist without any one of the infinitely many creatures that make it up. (To imagine such a thing is to imagine that God acted otherwise than he actually did, which cannot happen.) For this reason, Conway's account of creation implicitly contradicts the existential reading of priority monism. While it is true that each particular creature is necessarily existentially dependent upon the whole of creation, this dependence is not asymmetrical. A particular horse could not exist without the whole created world, but neither could the rest of the created world exist without that horse. It follows that the whole created world is not ontologically prior to its parts in this sense.

What about the essentialist reading? As we have already seen, Conway holds that the only essential feature a created individual has is that it is a created individual. They all share the same nature: created being. In consequence, for Conway to embrace this form of priority monism would require her to hold that what it is to be a created individual in general asymmetrically depends on what it is to be the whole of creation. Is it plausible that Conway accepted this dependence claim?

Consider again her account of the essences of created individuals in general. The essence of a creature is its mutability with respect to the good, its ability 'to change from good to good as well as from good to evil' (CC 5.3, 24). This entails that creatures are essentially dependent upon the good: we cannot specify the capacity for change with respect to the good without some reference to the good. For example, if goodness is understood in terms of similarity to God, as Sarah Hutton (2018) has suggested, then the essence of a created individual depends on the essence of God. However, there does not seem to be any similar dependence between the essence of created individuals and that of the whole created world. Created individuals receive their nature from God, working through Christ, who is 'the true mediator between God and his creatures [*verum . . . medium inter Deum & creaturas*]' (CC 5.4, 26; L 84) and 'the most excellent creature produced outside of God' (CC 5.4, 26; L 84). Adding a further chain of mediation here (from Christ to the whole of creation to this or that individual creature) seems neither necessary nor desirable, given this picture.

To summarize: priority monism attributes to Conway the view that each created individual asymmetrically depends upon the whole created world. Yet the most

straightforward ways of understanding what form of dependence might be at issue in priority monism—necessary existential dependence or essential dependence—both conflict with other elements of her philosophical system. Although priority monism is a position with significant philosophical interest and merit, it is unlikely to be Conway's intended view.

### 2.3. Metaphysics Meets Morality

The objections to monistic interpretations raised so far have focused on the purely metaphysical question of whether such a view is consistent with Conway's account of creation and of creatures. Above and beyond these points, though, I suspect that any form of monism about creation will face difficulties due to the close connection between metaphysics and morality in her system. It is this connection between metaphysics and morality, I argued, that provided the basic motivation for a pluralist interpretation. Unsurprisingly, it is also this connection that I believe presents the most trenchant difficulties for monist interpretations of Conway's creation.

The contemporary discussion of monism has not focused much (or at all) on what practical consequences the view may have. When today's metaphysicians raise questions such as, 'Is the whole cosmos prior to its parts?', they do so with studied indifference to how the answer might affect how we ought to live. The metaphysical question is kept insulated from the moral one. And that is a fair approach, if we embrace the broadly Humean view that the metaphysical facts stand independent of evaluative facts. Yet it is clear enough that Conway would *not* embrace that Humean view. Throughout the *Principles*, she consistently draws metaphysical conclusions from moral principles. For instance, one reason that she endorses the metaphysical claim that it is impossible for one individual to become another individual is that if this were possible, 'he who sinned would not be punished for that sin but another in his stead who was innocent and virtuous' (CC 6.2, 29). This raises the question: is monism about the created world compatible with Conway's *moral* commitments?<sup>7</sup>

Here I focus on the case of priority monism, but most of the considerations I raise will apply equally well to the substance monist interpretation. Consider the central analogy that drives the priority monist reading, the analogy between the created world and a living organism. The priority monist takes literally Conway's description of creatures as 'like parts and members of the same body' (CC 7.3, 47). And notice that an organism is a great case of an integrated whole on either version of priority monism. Both the existence and the essence of each individual organ plausibly bear an asymmetrical dependence on those of the whole organism. If there were no horses, there could be no horse-hearts; what it is to be a horse-heart clearly involves what it is to be a horse. The part is to be understood in terms of its relationship with the whole.

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, Conway's moral commitments also generate other tensions in her system that are tangential to the present discussion. For instance, her atemporal, emanative account of causation seems difficult to reconcile with her views about free will and human actions as they unfold in time. Hope remains: see Sample ([forthcoming](#)) for analysis of this issue.

Yet this analogy between an individual organism and the whole created world also suggests that priority monism may have significant ramifications for our understanding of moral responsibility. To say that the human organism is prior to its parts implies that the human *qua* whole is what properly explains the effects those parts produce. This, it seems, is one reason that the question of ontological priority of a human being over its parts is significant for Aristotle—a figure often cited in discussions of the priority of a whole over its parts. In his *Physics*, he writes, ‘a stick . . . moves the stone but is moved by the hand, which is itself moved by the man, who is not moved by anything else’ (1969: 256a5–10). The man is the efficient, formal, and final cause of the motion in the hand and thereby the efficient, formal, and final cause of all the further effects that ensue from that motion. And this in turn accounts for why the human being, not its parts, is responsible for those effects. If the stick knocks over a valuable sculpture, we do not blame the hand.

To continue the analogy, if the cosmos *were* really an integrally unified whole, ontologically prior to all created individuals, then the moral responsibility of this or that individual creature would drain away. Just as we do not blame the hand for knocking over the sculpture, neither would we then be licensed to blame the human being. Yet Conway clearly thinks that created individuals *do* bear moral responsibility for their actions. When a human being sins, it is that very human being, not any larger whole of which they are part, that is the appropriate subject of reward or punishment (CC 6.7).

This point can be framed as a dilemma for monistic interpretations of Conway’s ontology. On those interpretations, the relationship between the whole cosmos and the creatures it contains is the same as the relationship between a living body and its parts (or its modifications, for the substance monist). But at least part of our reason for holding that a creature’s organs depend asymmetrically upon the whole is that the organs are *not* typically supposed to have free will. Their activities are explained in terms of the purposes and functional requirements of the whole organism, not in terms of their own indifferent will. How strictly, then, should we read Conway’s analogy between the whole created world and a living organism? On the one hand, if we take the analogy very strictly, it will support a monistic interpretation—but it will also be hard to reconcile with Conway’s views about the freedom and moral responsibility of individual creatures. Suppose, on the other hand, that we take the analogy to be a relatively weak one. Then it will be compatible with attributing freedom and responsibility to creatures—but it will no longer provide support for a monistic interpretation of Conway’s created world.

The pluralist interpretation takes the latter option: individual creatures are often morally responsible for what they do because their activities are often to be explained in terms of the fact that they possess free, indifferent wills. This makes their relationship to the whole created world almost entirely unlike the relationship between a whole living body and a particular part (or property) of that body. A cost of this approach is that we must find some other, non-monistic way of making sense of the claims Conway makes about the unity or harmony of creation. However, as I argued above (section 1), such claims are best interpreted in terms of the causal interdependence of created substances upon one another rather than in terms of the ontological priority of the whole of creation.

### 3. Conclusion.

Any monistic ontology requires that individuals depend asymmetrically upon the whole cosmos. Substance monism treats individuals as modes that inhere in a unique, underlying substance; priority monism treats individuals as substances that ontologically depend upon some unique, all-encompassing whole. I have argued that Conway's view of the created world is not best construed as monistic in either sense. Instead, she takes created individuals to be distinct substances, occupants of a created world that is causally holistic but not ontologically prior to its parts. I have argued that this interpretation of Conway's ontology is directly supported by her deep and thoroughgoing commitment to the view that each individual is a distinct moral subject that bears responsibility for its actions.

On this pluralist interpretation, what is fascinating and novel about Conway's ontology is not that it is monistic. Rather, following the suggestion of Borcharding (2019b), what makes her ontology so noteworthy is her view that each creature is infinitely nested in both directions. Using the language of the pluralist interpretation proposed here, Conway's position is that each creature is a substance that is part of infinitely many substances, ascending to the whole of creation, and each such substance also contains smaller and smaller substances, descending to infinity. Moreover, at every level, each such substance is of the same ontological kind. In the end, then, the real challenge that Conway's view poses for us is this: how are we to make sense of the notion of *substance* against such a dizzying backdrop?

JOHN GREY

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

[greyjohn@msu.edu](mailto:greyjohn@msu.edu)

### References

- Aristotle. (1969) *Physics*. Translated and with commentaries by Hippocrates G. Apostle. Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press.
- Borcharding, Julia. (2019a) 'Loving the Body, Loving the Soul: Conway's Vitalist Critique of Cartesian and Morean Dualism'. *Oxford Studies in the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, 9, 1–36.
- Borcharding, Julia. (2019b) 'Nothing Is Simply One Thing: Conway on Multiplicities in Causation and Cognition'. In Dominik Perler and Sebastian Bender (eds.), *Causation and Cognition in Early Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge), 123–45.
- Conway, Anne. (1692) *The Principles of the most Ancient and Modern Philosophy, concerning God, Christ and the Creatures, viz. of Spirit and Matter in general*. Translated by J. C. London. [JC]
- Conway, Anne. (1996) *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [CC]
- Conway, Anne. ([1690] 1982) *Principia Philosophiae Antiquissimae & Recentissimae, [de] Deo, Christo & Creatura, De Spiritu & Materia in genere*. Reprinted in Peter Loftson (ed.), *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff). [L]
- Corkum, Phil. (2016) 'Ontological Dependence and Grounding in Aristotle'. *Oxford Handbooks Online in Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935314.013.31>.

- Correia, Fabrice, and Benjamin Schnieder. (2012) 'Grounding: An Opinionated Introduction'. In Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1–36.
- Duran, Jane. (1989) 'Anne Viscountess Conway: A Seventeenth Century Rationalist'. *Hypatia*, 4, 64–79.
- Gordon-Roth, Jessica. (2018) 'What Kind of Monist is Anne Finch Conway?' *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 4, 280–97.
- Grey, John. (2017) 'Conway's Ontological Objection to Cartesian Dualism'. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 17, 1–19.
- Grey, John. (2019) 'Species and the Good in Anne Conway's Metaethics'. In Colin Marshall (ed.), *Comparative Metaethics* (New York: Routledge), 102–18.
- Head, Jonathan. (2021) *The Philosophy of Anne Conway: God, Creation, and the Nature of Time*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hutton, Sarah. (1997) 'Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and Seventeenth-Century Scientific Thought'. In Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (eds.), *Women, Science, and Medicine, 1500–1700* (Stroud: Sutton), 218–34.
- Hutton, Sarah. (2004) *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutton, Sarah. (2018) 'Goodness in Anne Conway's Metaphysics'. In Emily Thomas (ed.), *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 229–46.
- Lascano, Marcy. (2013) 'Anne Conway: Bodies in the Spiritual World'. *Philosophy Compass*, 8, 327–36.
- Lascano, Marcy. (2023) *The Metaphysics of Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway: Monism, Vitalism, and Self-Motion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McRobert, Jennifer. (2000) 'Anne Conway's Vitalism and Her Critique of Descartes'. *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 40, 21–35.
- Mercer, Christia. (2012a) 'Knowledge and Suffering in Early Modern Philosophy: G. W. Leibniz and Anne Conway'. In Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (ed.), *Emotional Minds* (Berlin: De Gruyter), 179–206.
- Mercer, Christia. (2012b) 'Platonism in Early Modern Natural Philosophy: The Case of Leibniz and Conway'. In James Wilberding and Christoph Horn (eds.), *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 103–25.
- Mercer, Christia. (2015) 'Seventeenth-Century Universal Sympathy: Stoicism, Platonism, Leibniz, and Conway'. In Eric Schliesser (ed.), *Sympathy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press), 107–38.
- Mercer, Christia. (2019a) 'Anne Conway's Metaphysics of Sympathy'. In Eileen O'Neill and Marcy P. Lascano (eds.), *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG), 49–73.
- Mercer, Christia. (2019b) 'Anne Conway's Response to Cartesianism'. In Steven Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz, and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 707–20.
- More, Henry. (1659) *The Immortality of the Soul, So farre forth as it is demonstrable from the Knowledge of Nature and the Light of Reason*. London.
- Pasnau, Robert. (2011) *Metaphysical Themes: 1274–1671*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reid, Jasper. (2020) 'Anne Conway and Her Circle on Monads'. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 58, 679–704.
- Sample, Hope. (Forthcoming) 'Anne Conway's Atemporal Account of Agency'. *Ergo*.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. (2010) 'Monism: The Priority of the Whole'. *Philosophical Review*, 119, 31–76.
- Schmaltz, Tad. (Forthcoming a) 'English Alternatives to Dualism: Hobbes, Cavendish, Conway'. In Stephen Howard and Jack Stetter (eds.), *The Edinburgh Critical History of Early Modern and Enlightenment Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Schmaltz, Tad. (Forthcoming b) 'Vitalistic Causation: More, Conway, Cavendish'. In Karen Detlefsen and Lisa Shapiro (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy* (New York: Routledge).
- Thomas, Emily. (2020) 'Anne Conway as a Priority Monist: A Reply to Gordon-Roth'. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 6, 275–84.