Anne Conway’s Metaphysics of Sympathy

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1. Introduction

Anne Conway’s philosophy is an impressive attempt to solve a broad range of philosophical and theological problems. The full title of her main work, published posthumously in 1790, is Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy concerning God, Christ, and Creation, that is, concerning the Nature of Spirit and Matter, thanks to which all the Problems can be resolved which could not be resolved by Scholastic Philosophy nor by Modern Philosophy in general, whether Cartesian, Hobbesian, or Spinozian. A Short Posthumous Work translated from English into Latin, with annotations taken from the ancient philosophy of the Hebrews. The work is a challenge to study. The original English manuscript was translated into Latin and then lost, so the precise language of the extant text cannot be trusted. Conway’s proposals draw heavily from Christian, Jewish, and Platonist sources, and so the proper perspective from which to view her proposals has been difficult to locate. There is no interpretive history of her book, and so twentieth-century scholars had to begin their textual analysis ex nihilo. Recent work by Sarah Hutton, Carol Wayne White, and Jacqueline Broad contextualize her thought and uncover the richness and courage of her intellectual personality. There have been significant analyses of aspects of her philosophy, especially her natural philosophy. Despite the importance of these studies, the main goals of her philosophy have escaped us. Some of her concerns have become clearer, while their relation to others has remained elusive. In this paper, I begin the project of elucidating the main structure of her philosophy, which is both subtler and more radical than has been recognized. In particular, I delineate a central part of her metaphysics, what I call her metaphysics of sympathy, and expose its main goals. The richness of Conway’s thought cannot be properly evaluated unless the unity of its parts is more fully understood. It is the metaphysics of sympathy that supplies that unity.

Anne Conway’s Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy contains nine chapters and offers an account of the world based on three distinct substances: God, middle substance or Christ, and the created world. “God is one and does not have two or three or more distinct substances in himself, and just as Christ is one simple Christ without further distinct substances in himself … so likewise all creatures, or the whole of creation, are also a single species in substance or essence, although it includes many individuals gathered into subordinate species and distinguished from each other modally but not substantially or essentially” (VI §4 (30-31)). Each of the three substances is “its own species” with an essence distinct from the others. The essence of a substance is expressed in modes particular to its essence. In the second half of the seventeenth century, it was common to think of a mode as “what does not compose a thing, but distinguishes and determines it.” It was also common to describe a mode as what “expresses” its substance in the sense that it offers just such a determination. Conway maintains that God is expressed as wisdom and will, each of which is a mode of the divine essence. As the first created thing, the second substance or “Christ” differs essentially from the third substance whose vitality constitutes its essence and is expressed in the rich variety of individual creatures whose modes constitute the diversity of the created world. Chapters 1-5 of the Principles are devoted primarily to an account of God, Christ, and their relation to one another and to the third
substance. Chapters 6-9 offer the details of Conway’s vitalist account of nature as well as insightful criticisms of important contemporary philosophers.

Previous commentators have concentrated on Conway’s account of the natural world as one big vital thing, whose various modes are supposed to constitute individual creatures and explain the phenomena. They have discussed her vitalism as a rejection of Cartesian dualism, an original account of mind-body interaction, and a denunciation of the metaphysical underpinnings of the new mechanical philosophy. Conway’s account of nature does offer an innovative response to the philosophical problems facing philosophers working in the mid-seventeenth century. Her vitalism constitutes an important alternative to the natural philosophy of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes. Scholars have rightly focused on it. But this is only half the story.

Conway also gives her vitalism some striking normative features. The created world is constantly bettering itself so that all created things eventually become conscious moral beings. This moral advancement is essential to the created world. Regardless of how pointless most creaturely suffering appears, it contributes to worldly perfection. Conway’s metaphysics of sympathy stands at the center of this normative account of the world.

The Principles is philosophically richer and historically more important than it has generally been taken to be. There is insufficient space in the present chapter to offer a full overview of the system. The main goal here is to excavate the basic components of her metaphysics of sympathy. To that end, the paper will explicate her concepts of God or first substance and second substance or Christ with special emphasis on the key role that the second substance plays in the system. The major claim of this paper is that the key to Conway’s system lies in her reinterpretation of the Christian narrative about suffering. In the Principles, she combines Christian imagery with ancient and modern ideas in an attempt to create a philosophy that will appeal to people of all faiths and explain “all phenomena in the entire universe” (VI § 4 (30)). In order to understand the complications of her metaphysics of sympathy, we must make sense of her notion of Christ as the middle substance between God and the created world. Given the metaphysical centrality of Christ as logos, it is surprising how little analysis of the notion there is. Commentators have focused their attention almost entirely on Christ as metaphysical cushion between God and creatures. Conway herself insists that the second substance avoids “an utter chasm and gap between God and creatures” (V § 4 (26)), so scholars are right on the point. But the middle substance plays a much more significant role than this would suggest.

I explain why Conway made the central figure in the New Testament narrative such a key player in her philosophy. An understanding of Christ’s role will allow us to motivate Conway’s views about suffering. Conway awards suffering significant metaphysical and moral power. Scholars have appropriately turned to biographical facts to explain her concern with creaturely suffering. She endured debilitating headaches for years and eventually died from her ailment. It seems correct to assume that her own physical pain encouraged her to think seriously about the suffering of God’s creatures generally. But I provide a philosophical motivation alongside this biographical one to explain the centrality of suffering in her thought.

A account of her metaphysics of sympathy also has the advantage of offering a new perspective on the Principles’ methodological strategy. Scholars have noted that the text is not a carefully wrought product. Due to the increasing severity of her illness, Conway was probably unable to revise very thoroughly the pencil-written notes that constituted her philosophical reflections and that became her book. Particularly problematic are the first few chapters of the Principles, which offer a list of claims, often lacking thorough argumentation and explanation.
By placing these assertions in the context of early modern Platonism, I attempt to reveal their subtlety and power.

In the end, I claim that Conway is a radical rationalist. She reinvents the Christian narrative and its focus on suffering in an attempt to appeal to Christians and non-Christians. She seems hopeful that readers of her book, regardless of religious affiliation, will discover its truth and in doing so make the world better. Because all humans suffer and because the Christian narrative assigns such significance to the suffering of Christ, her reinterpretation of that narrative seems brilliant: all creatures are like Christ in suffering for the good of the world. And because Christianity makes Christ a conduit between God and humanity, her transformation of that central Christian figure into second substance seems an ingenious way to prepare Christians for some of her heterodox (and ecumenical) views. In other words, whether sympathetic to Christianity or not, because humans suffer, they are poised to find gripping the centrality of suffering in Conway’s Principles. Finally, given the religious and political chaos of the years following both the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) and the English Civil War (1641–1651) and given the enormous suffering that ensued, Conway’s proposals suggest both a noble engagement with recent historical reality and an admirably progressive position. She intends to engage all sufferers and move them toward the good while decreasing their pain.

In order to appreciate the unity and profundity of Conway’s system, we need to recognize the central role that the suffering of Christ plays. In order to grasp the centrality of Christ as second substance, we need to comprehend Conway’s account of God. I will treat each of these as a means of excavating her metaphysics of sympathy before turning briefly to her methodology and radical rationalism.16

2. First Substance or God

The first chapter of the Principles is devoted to God. It says little about creatures except as a counter-point to their divine source, and makes no mention of the second substance. Its main goal is radically rationalist: Conway intends to engage her readers, whatever their religious affiliation, in the contemplation of divinity. The goal here is insight into God’s nature. The synopsis beginning the chapter explains that sections 1–5 “concern God and his divine attributes,” while sections 6–7 treat the divinity in a manner consistent with “Scripture” and not offensive “to Jews, Turks [Muslims], or other peoples.”

Sections 1–5 offer an account of what God is and is not. The divine attributes include the fairly standard features of goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence, but also expand to less familiar ones chosen from diverse Platonist and Kabbalist sources. The divine substance suffers no change or division of parts, has “no time,” “no darkness or corporeality at all, nor any form, image or figure whatsoever” (I §2 (9)).17 At least since Plotinus (204/5 – 270 C.E), Platonists have focused on the activity (or self-sufficiency) and unity (or oneness) of the Supreme Being. As one scholar makes the point, “that which stands in need of nothing for being what it is is ontologically primary.”18 The underlying assumption here is that the divinity is essentially active and constantly makes itself the thing that it is. By producing and sustaining itself, it is fully self-sufficient and unified. Its unity means that it has no parts and depends on nothing and so can neither be divided nor destroyed.19 What is divine is, in Plato’s words, “always the same as itself.”20 Conway stands firmly in this tradition. The first substance is “wholly and universally one in himself and within himself without any variation or admixture” (I §2 (9)). About the self-sufficiency and oneness of God, she explains that “the great difference between God and creatures” is that “he is one, and this is his perfection, namely to have need of
nothing outside himself. But a creature … must be multiple” (VII § 4 (54)). Conway discusses the relation between self-sufficiency and perfection in terms of a “living goodness” and vital “power” (VII § 2 (45)). She agrees with Platonists and Kabbalists in describing divine self-sufficiency and power in terms of a spiritual vitality. Not only is God “spirit, light, and life” (I § 1 (9)), so is everything that God produces. Every product of God, including all the creatures of the natural world, have the capacity for perception, love, and joy. She writes about God’s products: “If anyone asks what are … [their] more excellent attributes, I reply that they are the following: spirit or life and light, by which I mean the capacity for every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue, joy and fruition” (IX § 6 (66)).

Four traditional Platonist assumptions underlie Conway’s account of God’s essence and the relation it bears to its products. The Supreme Being Assumption maintains that God is the most perfect, self-sufficient, unified (or simple), and real being. Each of the attributes of perfection, self-sufficiency, unity, and being is proportional in the sense that the more perfection something has, the more unity, and so on. God shares those attributes with every divine product, although the product has them in a manner inferior to God. So, God possesses the divine attributes perfectly; creatures possess them imperfectly. Modern philosophers have tended to think of being as an all or nothing affair, but there is a long line of Platonists (including scholastic philosophers) who endorsed a hierarchy of being. The assumption is that the strata in the hierarchy differ according to their unity, self-sufficiency, and perfection. What is more self-sufficient is more unified and therefore more fully what it is. What has less self-sufficiency and unity is less independent and therefore less fully “what it is.”

As we will see, Conway offers some cogent examples of the strata in such a hierarchy and their causal relations.

The second Platonist assumption most relevant to Conway concerns the causal relation among the three distinct substances. The Theory of Emanative Causation claims that, for a being A that is more perfect than a being B, A can emanate its attribute f-ness to B in such a way that neither A nor A’s f-ness is depleted in any way, while B has f-ness, though in a manner inferior to the way it exists in A. The emanative process is continual so that B will have f-ness if and only if A emanates f-ness to it. According to the tradition of emanative causation that Conway endorses, the f-ness of B is co-existent with the emanative activity of A. For theists, one of the great benefits of the Theory of Emanative Causation is that it allows God to be both transcendent from and immanent in creatures. Each stratum in the hierarchy has its attributes independently of its emanated effect and yet those attributes are immanent in the effect. As Conway puts it, God is “in a real sense an essence or substance distinct from his creatures” and yet “is not divided or separate from them but present in everything most closely and intimately in the highest degree.”

God “gives to them form and figure but also essence, life, body, and whatever good they have” (I § 3 (9)). She will address the problem of how God can be entirely distinct from creatures and yet “intimately present” to them later in the Principles.

After articulating God’s features, Conway turns her attention to the steps in creation. She writes: “In God is an Idea which is his image, or the word [verbum] existing within himself, which in substance or essence is one and the same with him, through which he knows himself as well as all other things and, indeed, all creatures were made or created according to this very idea or word” (I § 6 (10)). We will analyze God’s relation to the second substance in greater detail in the next section. The point to emphasize now is that God as subject contemplates itself as object. When it does this, it understands its own essence and also the essence of all creatures, which are “made according to” that Idea. By bringing “into actual being that which is only hidden in the
Idea,” God “produces and makes a distinct … substance.” By such means, all divine products “receive their essence and activity” (I §7 (10)).

In chapters 2-3, Conway offers more details about God and the relation between God and its products. Consistent with the Theory of Emanative Causation, God is “the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty,” which “flow perpetually” into creation. That divine “ocean” will necessarily overflow “in its perpetual emanation and continual flux for the production of creatures” (II §4 (13). Any product of God contains the divine attributes though in an inferior manner. Conway writes: “Nor can it be objected that we creatures stand as equals to God, for just as one infinity is greater than another, so God is always infinitely greater than all his creatures, so that nothing can be compared to him” (III §6 (17)). The first substance emanates the second substance which itself emanates the third. Each is a stratum in the hierarchy of being and each shares the divine attributes, though the second substance has them more perfectly than does the third.

The final two Platonist assumptions underlying Conway’s philosophy concern what God’s nature is supposed to imply about the interrelations among creatures. The Principle of Plenitude assumes that God fills the world with as many beings as possible and that they are unified with one another. Consistent with the Theory of Emanative Causation, the result of God’s emanation is a product that contains the divine attributes although in a manner inferior to God. Not only does each creature receive the divine attributes, so does the world as a collection of creatures. According to the Supreme Being Assumption, each of the attributes of being, self-sufficiency, perfection, and unity is proportional. It follows that, when the world is filled with being, it is also filled with unity, self-sufficiency, and perfection (or goodness). For Platonists like Conway, the unity or oneness of God applies to the whole collection of created things: products of God will be interrelated in that each creature “loves” all the others. Such a robust unity among creatures was supposed to increase significantly the goodness of the created world. Echoing centuries of Platonists, Conway explains: “Now, the basis of all love or desire [among creatures], which brings one thing to another, is that they are of one nature and substance, or they are like each other or of one mind” (VII §3 (46)). Accordingly, “there is also a certain universal love in all creatures for each other” (VII §3 (47)). In brief, Conway takes God’s essence to entail that the created world is chock-full of creatures standing in interrelated harmony or unity with one another.

Conway agrees with her predecessors that the order among creatures will be greater when each creature is in sympathetic harmony with all the others. The ancient notion of sympathy finds its feet in the idea that the cosmos is a single unified thing. For ancient Stoics, the cohesion among the parts of the world is to be explained in terms of sympathy so that an occurrence in one part of the world “must produce a sympathetic reaction in every other part.” Some Platonists extended this idea and posited that all creatures perceive all the others, if only unconsciously. Mutual perceiving among creatures offers a straightforward way to increase goodness in a sympathetically harmonized world: if each creature perceives all the others, then an increase in the goodness of one creature is able to benefit all the others. Philosophers keen to fill the world with as much goodness and unity as possible were motivated to develop a robust sympathetic relation among creatures. For example, Leibniz embraces the relation between goodness, sympathy, and creaturely perception as a young man and makes it a cornerstone of his elaborate metaphysics. Thinkers like Leibniz and Conway employ the ancient notion of sympathy to make God’s world more perfectly unified and hence better. For our purposes here, let’s summarize this assumption as follows: there is Sympathetic Harmony in the world such that each
creature bears an enhancement relation to every other. When two creatures are in an enhancement relation, an increase in the goodness of one will promote an increase in the goodness of another, although the relation is non-reciprocal (that is, the increase in the second will not then promote an increase in the first). For example, as I watch a friend face an illness with courage and grace, I become morally better. But my moral improvement does not then increase her goodness.³⁰

In Conway’s system, the Principle of Plenitude and Sympathetic Harmony combine to significantly increase creaturely perfection. About plenitude, for example, she insists: “God is infinitely powerful, there can be no number of creatures to which he could not always add more” (III §4 (16)). But Conway goes beyond the standard rendering of plentitude to fill the world with creatures in infinitum.³¹ For her, the infinity of God entails that “his creatures are infinite and created in an infinity of ways.” Were the world to lack such infinities, its “paltry and unseemly scale” would not express “the great majesty of God” (III §6 (17). Therefore, “he has multiplied and always multiplies and increases the essences of creatures to infinity” (III §4 (17)).³² Besides filling the world up, the divinity has made each creature stand in unified harmony with all the others. As we will see, Conway conceives the unity of the world in terms of universal sympathy, which has “the very greatest use for understanding the causes and reasons of things and for understanding how all creatures … are inseparably united one to another” so that “they can act upon one another at the greatest distance.” Such is “the basis of all the sympathy and antipathy that occurs in creatures” (III §10 (20)). Plenitude and sympathy “praise and commend the great power and goodness of God because his infinity shines forth in the works of his hands, indeed, in every creature he has made” (III §6 (17)). In sections 3 and 4, we will discuss in more detail the moral benefits of sympathy.

3. Middle Substance or Metaphysical Christ

Conway’s God “is infinitely good, loving, and bountiful; indeed, he is goodness and charity itself, the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty” whose “living waters … overflow in its perpetual emanation and continual flux (II §4 (13)). And the first product of that God is Christ. Conway’s proposals about Christ are strikingly original and exceedingly unorthodox. She uses the name ‘Christ’ to designate two different entities. In order to keep these clear, it is important to distinguish between the metaphysical Christ and the historic one. The former is the second substance and metaphysical conduit between God and creatures. The latter is a creature or mode of the third substance whose name is Jesus of Nazareth and whose birth, life, and death are chronicled in the New Testament. Conway’s brilliant twist is that she gives the metaphysical Christ features typically attributed to the historic one and thereby imbues the created world with significant normative properties. These properties constitute the created world’s unifying moral force: the metaphysical Christ has fashioned a sympathetic unity among creatures so that the moral betterment of one will improve the others. This sympathetic harmony guarantees that each and every creature will ultimately become morally good.

Because Conway sometimes plays with the double designation of the name, ‘Christ,’ it can be difficult to distinguish between the metaphysical and historic Christs.³³ In this section, I present the main responsibilities of the metaphysical Christ, display its relation to the historic one, and describe the significant normative features that the created world derives from that relation.
3.1 Metaphysical Christ

The metaphysical Christ acts as the cause and explanation for the created world. In keeping with the Supreme Being Assumption and with the Theory of Emanative Causation, the second substance is both caused by an emanation of God and itself creates the natural world through emanation. In this sense, it is a metaphysical conduit between God and creatures. In a passage we have seen, Conway writes: “In God is an Idea which is his image, or the word [verbum] existing within himself, … through which he knows himself as well as all other things and, indeed, all creatures were made or created according to this very idea or word” (I §6 (10)). This Idea is “the word” by which “God knows all things.” God brings “into actual being that which is only hidden in the Idea” (I §7 (10)). That is, God conceives the divine Idea or “word,” which contains potentially what the metaphysical Christ has actually. Christ is “hidden in the idea,” before it becomes “a distinct and essential substance” (I §7 (10)).

Wisdom and will are the modes of God most significant in the generation of the second substance. Wisdom involves God’s contemplation of his Idea. Willing consists in the production of what is “hidden in” and so entailed by knowledge of the Idea. The product is an emanation of God. The divine attributes “have been communicated to Christ” (V §4 (26)) so that the latter is a “perfect” image of God.

God wills what his Idea entails and the result is logos. The metaphysical notion of logos has a long and varied history. For the purposes of this chapter, suffice it to say that one of the most prominent senses of the term is that of word or story where the view is that the created world manifests a divinely ordained story. Most famously, the Gospel of John begins: “In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Conway transforms this ancient notion into a substance that suits her various metaphysical needs. God necessarily emanates the logos “from an inner impulse of his divine goodness and wisdom” (III §3 (16)) with the result that it constitutes a full plan of the world. Were there another infinite being to contemplate the logos, it would recognize how perfectly the plan manifests God’s attributes and would know everything that has happened and will happen in the created world.

Using Greek terminology, Conway distinguishes two aspects of Christ. Logos ousios is “the essential word of the father,” while logos proforikos is “the word which is expressed and revealed” (IV §2 (21)). She explains: “Jesus Christ signifies the whole [integrum] Christ, who is God and man. As God, he is called logos ousios, or the essential word of the father. As man he is the logos proforikos, or the word that is expressed [expressum] and revealed” (IV §2 (21)). The key to understanding the full significance of this metaphysical Christ is to grasp the difference between these two logoi. The former is a static plan; the latter is that plan unfolding in the created world. An analogy will help. Think of Christ, the logos, as the detailed blueprint of the world, statically conceived by God. For Conway, there is only one possible blueprint: the nature of God entails a single right way to manifest the divine attributes. Logos proforikos is the blueprint being instantiated in the world and unfolding through time. Unsurprisingly, the good guys win in the end: “The second [substance] can only change toward the good, so that which is good by its very nature can become better” (V §3 (24)). While the logos ousios is unchanging, the logos proforikos moves “from one good to another” (V §3 (24)). It follows that both God and the metaphysical Christ are “present everywhere in all creatures” (V §5 (26)). Conway offers Biblical support for her interpretation. Among other Hebrew and New Testament passages, she cites Paul who explains that Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the first-born
of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Relying on such Biblical evidence, Conway interprets the “son of God” as an eternal substance whose nature “expresses” the word of God while also constituting the order of the created world. I will return to the relation between logos ousios and logos proforikos in the next section.

Scholars are right to say that Conway’s metaphysical Christ functions as a conduit between God and creatures. But the second substance performs other more important tasks. In order to understand its full significance, we need to distinguish between its work and that of the historic Christ.

3.2 Historic Christ Reconsidered

The complicated relations among the metaphysical Christ, the historic one, and the created world constitute the key to Conway’s system in ways that are not immediately obvious. To understand these relations, it is crucial to recognize how cleverly she re-imagines the role of the historic Christ. By giving features to the metaphysical Christ traditionally assigned to the historic one, she conforms to a major part of the Christian story while realigning its metaphysical and moral force. In the process, she makes her version of Christ more palatable to non-Christians. In order to appreciate the sophistication of her promotion of the metaphysical Christ and the subtlety of her demotion of the historic one, some stage setting has to be done. It is particularly important to remind ourselves of three prominent elements of the traditional Christian story.

**Christ and Suffering:** God “gave his only son” so that he might suffer and die. The crucial points here are that Jesus of Nazareth, as a flesh and blood person, suffered terribly and that his “father,” God, intended such suffering. It was part of the order of things.

**Christ’s Sacrifice:** Christ endured his sufferings for the sake of humanity. God sent Christ to the world so that he could render humans immortal, enlighten them about the nature of God, support them in their lives, and effect their salvation.

**Christian Community:** Christ’s life and teachings encourage a community based on love and mutual sympathy. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus first teaches: “You shall love … your neighbor as yourself.” He then offers the story of the good Samaritan who had compassion for an injured stranger. In this tradition, a proper Christian is supposed to be sympathetic to those who suffer. The main point here is that different types of people will create a Christian community if they share a proper love and compassion for one another.

Conway takes these traditional Christian elements and reinterprets them to create a metaphysics with striking universal appeal.

**Conway on Christ and Suffering:** In order to understand Conway’s account of the historic Christ, we need to distinguish between his ontological and normative significance. As a creature, Christ is ontologically identical to all other creatures. Like them, he is a mode of the third substance. Like them, he is included in the static blueprint of the logos ousios that the logos proforikos manifests. His sole difference from other creatures lies in the moral values implied by his life, death, and resurrection. It is important to be very clear about this. The historic Christ is part of “the Idea” brought into being by God, but so are all other creatures. He suffers, but so do they. His distinctiveness rests entirely in the attention paid to his life, passions, and resurrection. Unlike other creatures that suffer, die, and live eternally, his life and sufferings have a special moral prominence. When all is said and done, the historic Christ is different from other creatures
because, in suffering as terribly as he did and in recognizing his suffering as part of the order of things, he becomes an inspiration to others. They seek to be like him as a moral ideal.

Conway’s account of the historic Christ is a highly original rendering of the Christian story and one that navigates several problems at once. She neatly sidesteps the traditional problem of explaining how Christ as God could suffer. The historic Christ is no more divine-like than any other creature. But while diminishing his divinity, she manages to maintain a significant part of the moral force of his life. Other creatures learn important moral lessons through the contemplation of his life and passions. Because he sets such a profound moral example, other creatures will emulate him. As we will see, Conway intended her account of the historic Christ to be attractive to Christians and non-Christians.

**Conway on Christ’s Sacrifice:** Conway does not think that the historic Christ is more divine than other creatures. Nor does she think that the life and suffering of the historic Christ imbued humanity with immortality. All creatures exist eternally, and did so before the historic Christ arrived on the scene. In that sense, nothing fundamental changed with Christ’s coming. But the resurrection of the historical Christ is nonetheless special in that it brings attention to the eternity of souls and to the place of suffering in human life. Playing on the dual designation of the name ‘Christ,’ Conway writes: “Yet when Christ became flesh and entered into his body, … he took on something of our nature and consequently of the nature of everything.” When Christ as *logos proforikos* generated the flesh and blood historic Christ, it created a mode of the third substance. All creatures are like the historic Christ in being modes and all creatures are like him in living eternally. The important point here is that it is the metaphysical Christ and not the historic one that renders creatures eternal. Conway is clear about the fact that the historic Christ has defect and corruption whereas the metaphysical one has neither, and therefore that the latter is a “most powerful and efficacious balm, through which all things are preserved” (V §6 (26)). The historic Christ does not change things in any fundamental way, but he does pack a significant moral and cognitive punch.

An important question arises at this point: if the historic Christ is no more divine than any other creature, then how does Conway explain his unique significance? Conway suggests that he is different from other modes of the third substance in two ways. First, he diverges from other creatures in grasping the *logos proforikos* and his role within it. While they might come to see the necessity of suffering in life and its moral benefits, he recognizes exactly why he must suffer in the particular way he does. This is the point at which the metaphysical and the historic Christs meet: in understanding the order of God’s world, the latter understands the former. Second, and more importantly, Jesus of Nazareth differs from other creatures in the moral significance of his suffering. As we will see, Conway maintains that suffering makes the world better. So, in suffering — as all creatures do — they benefit the world. But Christ’s suffering is uniquely beneficial: he differs from other creatures in the moral impact of his suffering. Because he understands his place in the order of things, he consciously and willingly submits himself to his prescribed pain. He submits himself to his “passions” as part of the moral order of things. When others meditate on his willingness to suffer, it becomes easier for them to endure their own hardships. The historic Christ motivates them to endure. The brilliant twist in Conway’s account of Christ is that she confirms his uniqueness while retaining his creaturely nature. Jesus of Nazareth’s life story inspires others to recognize the role of suffering in the order of things and to learn from it: “In assuming flesh and blood, he sanctified nature so that he could sanctify everything, just as it is the property of a ferment to ferment the whole mass.” Because he “willingly subjected himself to its laws to the extent that he suffered great torment and death
itself…, he is able to heal, preserve, and restore creatures” (V §6 (27)). The moral significance of the historic Christ resides here: he willingly suffered so that he could teach all other creatures about suffering and its place in the world.

That the historic Christ should so inspire other creatures is of course due to the metaphysical Christ. As logos proforikos, the latter creates the world so that the historic Christ will be an inspiration. It is important to be clear about the role of the logos proforikos and the richness of the relation it creates between God and creatures. Conway reinterprets the Christian story so that it is the metaphysical Christ that saves the world. She explains:

[God] is immediately present in all things and immediately fills all things. In fact, he works immediately in everything in his own way. But this must be understood in respect to that union and communication which creatures have with God so that although God works immediately in everything, yet he nevertheless uses this same mediator as an instrument through which he works together with creatures, since that instrument is by its own nature closer to them (V §4 (25)).

An analogy might help here. The logos ousios is like the score of a symphony: a static design for the performance itself; the logos proforikos is the performance of the work as an ever changing, though perfectly designed, unified whole. Like the score, Christ as logos ousios, is the static plan of the world. Like the score being performed, Christ as logos proforikos manifests the plan. Christ is in the world and in all its creatures: insofar as the score is being performed, it is present in every performed note. The string section moves through its crescendo while the flutes are silent and yet the violins’ music and the flutes’ silence are a manifestation of the score. With impressive finesse, Conway re-conceives Christ as a non-human substance that cannot itself suffer and yet saves the world. This second substance satisfies the Christian story’s demand that Christ be in the world to inspire and uplift. As she continues:

Thus, the first creation produced outside of God is more fittingly and properly called his son than his creature, because this is his living image and greater and more excellent than all creatures. It follows, therefore, that the son himself is immediately present in all these creatures so that he may bless and benefit them. And since he is the true mediator between God and his creatures, it follows, since he exists among them, that he raises them by his action to union with God…. Consequently, he must be present everywhere (V §5 (25-26)).

On the traditional understanding of the benefits of Christ’s life and passions discussed above, I noted that the historic Christ was supposed to offer salvation, immortality, enlightenment, and support to humanity. For Conway, although the historic Christ inspires recognition of and submission to the divine order, her metaphysical Christ does all the heavy lifting. It bestows salvation and immortality, encourages understanding of the order of things, is the object of that understanding, and offers constant support to each and every creature.

3.3 Conway on Christian Community

Conway takes the traditional notion of a Christian community and extends it to each and every creature. Like many Platonists, she assumes that the unity and oneness of God emanates to the whole of creation and creates a harmony among all of creation so that all creatures “are inseparably united one to another” (III §10 (20)). Like many Platonists, she takes this harmony among creatures to be one of universal sympathy: “God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body” (VI §4 (31)). In other words, Conway fully endorses the Principle of Sympathy and the enhancement
relation. Her endorsement of these Platonist doctrines does not set her apart from other thinkers, but her use of them does. What makes Conway unique among such thinkers is the role she assigns to suffering. She claims that all creatures endure pain and that, in doing so, they become better and so benefit the world. We will return to this important claim in the next section. Consistent with the enhancement relation, the suffering of a creature benefits the world and ultimately helps each creature develop perfection “to infinity.”

We have arrived at the most powerful and original feature of Conway’s philosophy: she makes each of the infinity of creatures a Christ-like figure. Each creature is like the historic Christ in suffering. For each, its suffering is part of the order of the world and makes the world better. So, each creature is like Christ in that it suffers for the sake of the world. We can now see what she means when she insists that the historic Christ “took on … the nature of everything” and thereby acted as the “ferment of it all.” Everything in the world is like the historic Christ in suffering for the sake of the world. Conway extends the Christian community to all creatures in the world. As Conway puts it: “Thus, what Paul says about human beings can also be understood about all creatures …, namely, that God made all … creatures from one blood” and in that sense “God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body” (VI §4 (31)). With the help of the members of this community, each will reach a “pristine state of goodness” (VI §1 (42)). In the end, God has arranged things so that “each and every” creature can “achieve” full moral “maturity” and “pleasure” (IX §6 (66)).

4. Moral Monism

The created world or “third substance” is a single vital thing that manifests the order bestowed on it by the second substance, the metaphysical Christ. Once we recognize the importance of the historic Christ as an inspiration to creatures and see the role of suffering and sympathetic harmony as a means to moral progress, the originality of Conway’s metaphysics of sympathy becomes apparent. Sympathetic harmony guarantees that the third substance will achieve moral perfection. Each creature, as a mode of vitality, is like God in being essentially vital. Each shares in God’s goodness and therefore has a capacity to perceive, understand, and love all things: “God is infinitely good and communicates his goodness to all his creatures in infinite ways” so that “there is no creature which does not receive something of his goodness.” This “goodness of God is a living goodness, which possesses life, knowledge, love, and power, which he communicates to his creatures” (VII §7 (44-45)). God has these features perfectly and immutably; creatures have them mutably. Creaturely change is continuous: “a creature always changes with time” (VII §4 (51)). Indeed, time itself “is nothing but the successive motion or operation of creatures, and if this motion or succession would cease, then time itself would cease” (II §6 (14)).

Although the third substance cannot attain the infinite perfection of the first substance, God, it moves toward ever-increasing perfection “to infinity” (VI §1 (42)). Creaturely “progression and ascension cannot reach God … whose nature infinitely surpasses every creature, even one brought to the highest level. For the nature of God is immutable in every way… But it is the nature of creature to be mutable” (IX §5 (65)). Many creatures will become morally worse before reverting to the good, but they will all be good eventually. There is insufficient space here to discuss the details of Conway’s views about suffering, consciousness, and moral improvement. The underlying assumption is that suffering increases vitality in that the sufferer develops moral strength. By such means, it “has acquired a greater perfection and strength” (VII §1 (42)). Given sympathetic harmony, an increase in the creature’s strength contributes, if only slightly, to worldly goodness. Each increase in vitality contributes to
moral improvement. An increase in moral improvement eventually leads every creature to become conscious. All conscious beings will slowly approach moral perfection. She writes: “the more spiritual [vital] a certain creature becomes … the closer it comes to God who, as we all know, is the highest spirit (VII §1 (41-42)). The key to Conway’s vitalism and the moral progress she promises its infinity of creatures is their sympathetic harmony.

5. The Metaphysics of Sympathy and Radical Rationalism

Conway’s Principles offers lessons about philosophical strategies extant in seventeenth-century and a radical strand of rationalism. There are three closely related aspects of her methodology.

Radical rationalism: Conway is a rationalist in that she takes the world to manifest the rationality and goodness of God, and she considers human reason sufficient by itself to grasp fundamental truths about that world and its divine source. She insists, for example, “whatever is correctly understood is most true and certain.” (VI §4 (30)). The “precepts of truth” are “innate ideas” which “all men find in themselves” (VI §2 (29)). The rationalist methodology of the Principles is to describe as clearly as possible the nature and implications of the divine attributes so that these can be properly grasped.

In the very first chapters of the Principles, Conway makes her radical rationalism apparent. In the book’s opening chapter, “God and His Divine Attributes,” we are invited to contemplate those attributes. They are listed as objects of meditation. She insists in the Synopsis that these are available to “Jews, Turks [Muslims], and other people” (I (9)). The divine attributes are there to be grasped because God “has endowed all rational creatures so that they will love him, which is the fulfillment of all the commandments” (VI §3 (47)).

In chapters 2 and 3, Conway begins to discuss the relation between the divinity and its products. She writes: “And thus the truly invisible attributes of God are clearly seen if they are understood either through or in those things which have been made” (III §6 (17)). She is a radical rationalist in thinking that the attributes of God can and will be understood by all human beings regardless of religious affiliation: “God is infinitely good and communicates his goodness to all his creatures in infinite ways, so that there is no creature which does not receive something of his goodness” (VII §7 (44)). She is a universalist in believing that people of all faiths can and will acquire such profound knowledge. When she argues for her vitalist account of nature, she sees herself as merely unpacking truths implied by the divine features and available to all: “From a serious and due consideration of the divine attributes (from which the truth of everything can be made clear, as if from a treasure house stored with riches), I have deduced another reason why created spirits can change into bodies and bodies into spirits” (VII §2 (44)). In contemplating the order of the world, we come to grasp the goodness of God and to love it. She writes: the “reason for love” is “goodness, which is the strongest attraction of love and the reason why God must be loved as much as possible by all things because he is the best….. Goodness is the great, indeed, the greatest cause of love and its proper object” (VII §3 (47)). The Principles is designed to prompt its readers to grasp the attributes of God and recognize their manifestation in the world.

Christ as Middle Substance and Mediator: Conway’s radical views are perhaps most evident to her ingenious attempt to engage non-Christians in the Christian narrative. Anyone moved by her metaphysics and its account of “that excellent order … which appears in all things” will embrace Christ as logos and therefore as mediator. She explains: “the wiser among the Jews recognize … such a mediator, which they call by different names such as Logos, … Mind, Wisdom, the Celestial Adam, etc.” When “these matters are correctly considered, they
will contribute greatly to the propagation of true faith and Christian religion among Jews and Turks [Muslims] and other infidel nations” (VI §5 (31-32)). It is important to note that Conway is not so much concerned to convert non-Christians to Christianity as to engage thoughtful people of all faiths in the metaphysical idea that there is a second substance that mediates between God and creatures:

Therefore, those who acknowledge such a mediator and believe in him can be said truly to believe in Jesus Christ, even though they do not yet know it and are not convinced that he has already come in the flesh. But if they first grant that there is a mediator, they will indubitably come to acknowledge also, even if they are unwilling, that Christ is the mediator” (VI §5 (31-32)).

Conway is also keen to incorporate into her system principles of “the most ancient philosophy” borrowed from the Hebrew Bible and Kabbalistic teachings, which can be combined with New Testament insights. But she is courageous enough to interpret these writings in the manner that suits her. Her interpretations of the Genesis story and the Christian narrative are unorthodox.52 She is obviously not concerned to present a metaphysics consistent with any particular set of religious doctrines. Rather, she intends to offer truths consistent with what reason teaches us about God, the world, and their mediator. In contemplating Christ as middle substance, we can learn that “the basis of all love or desire, which brings one thing to another, is that they are of one nature and substance, or that they are like each other or of one mind” (VII §3 (46)). In the end, she believes that human reason can penetrate through the confusion of religious differences to the underlying truths about God, Christ, and the world. The Principles is designed to make that task easier.

Suffering: Conway was acutely aware of the difficulties of life. Her continental contemporaries had witnessed the horrors of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and her countrymen those of the English Civil War (1641–1651). Conway herself endured a terrible illness and saw close up the difficulties caused by religious persecution.53 The brilliant stroke of the Principles is the role it assigns suffering. It insists that suffering is neither contrary to divine nature nor inherently bad. Rather, it is God’s way of helping us move toward perfection. Not only does it literally make us better by making us more vital, the patience and “maturity” that we develop in facing our difficulties prepare us to love others more fully and then to see the good in the world. Only if we suffer, will we need the “ministry” of other creatures. Only if we experience that ministry, will we glimpse the sympathetic harmony of things. And only when we glimpse that harmony, can we fully see that the world is good.

When Conway demotes the historical Christ by turning him into a human being just like the rest of us, she attempts to appeal to Christians and non-Christians alike. The former can still see Christ’s “passions” as a sacrifice for the sake of humanity. In Conway’s reimagining of the story, he submits to his suffering as an example to us. But she also opens the way for non-Christians to engage with Jesus of Nazareth. In giving features to the metaphysical Christ traditionally assigned to the historic one, she conforms to a major part of the Christian story while realigning its metaphysical and moral force. In the process, she makes her version of that story more palatable to non-Christians. Christ as middle substance is mediator between us and God: as we begin to see the orderly unfolding of the logos proforikos, we can recognize God’s goodness in the world. And in turning the historic Christ into a human being who submitted to his passions, she makes him an inspiration for all sufferers. In a passage we have seen: he “willingly subjected himself to its laws to the extent that he suffered great torment and death itself” and therefore “he is able to heal, preserve, and restore creatures” (V §6 (27)). Conway
suggests that he heals us because he helps us see that suffering is part of the order of things. And this prepares us to extend Christ’s imperative that we love our neighbors to all creatures. We begin to see that we are all members of a worldly community and that God has arranged things so that “each and every” creature can “achieve” full moral “maturity” and “pleasure” (IX §6 (66)).

Despite the apparently insurmountable differences among “human tribes,” the Principles argues that we are all exactly the same. Regardless of gender, class, or religion, each human being is bound to find the good and to do so through suffering. We are all just like the historic Christ: each of us must suffer for the sake of humanity. In the same way that he faced his fate, so can we. He submitted himself to the place of suffering in life, loved God and humanity despite his suffering, and went on to reach blissful enlightenment. He is supposed to inspire us to do the same. But for Conway, the redemption from suffering comes from all of us. Each of us contributes to the creaturely enlightenment of everything. In the end, the Principles strives to lead us to a proper understanding of God, the role of the metaphysical Christ, and our relation to both:

If, however, an image of a lovable God was more widely known, such as he truly is and shows himself in his dealings with his creatures, and if our souls could inwardly feel and taste him, as he is charity and kindness itself and as he reveals his intrinsic self through the light and spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ in the hearts of men, then, and only then, will men finally love God above everything and acknowledge him as the most loving, just, merciful God, fit to be worshipped before everything (VI §9 (37)).

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to articulate Conway’s metaphysics of sympathy and display its radical intentions. When we survey the nearly three hundred and fifty years since Conway’s untimely death, it is hard to find evidence of the truth of her conclusions. The world does not seem to be progressing toward moral perfection and rational toleration is hardly on the rise. But her Principles remains an important contribution to the philosophy of the seventeenth century. It richly exemplifies the range of philosophical problems that confronted thinkers of the early modern period and offers a novel attempt to solve them. Whatever we may think about the truth of its philosophical proposals, the Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy contains a philosophy of astonishing originality and striking inspiration.54

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1 On the state of the original manuscript and the history of its publication, see Hutton, Anne Conway, 5-6. Conway composed her work, which was apparently not intended for publication, in English, but that manuscript was lost after Francis Mercury van Helmont translated and published it in Latin. There is little reason therefore to fuss about the Latin terms and phraseology of the Principles. I only offer the Latin when it diverges significantly from what is offered in the Coudert and Corse translation. For a thorough discussion of van Helmont and his relation to Conway, see Hutton, Anne Conway, 145-55.
Besides her letters, which are only intermittently philosophical, the Principles is the only philosophical work that we have by Conway. It was written, in English, in the 1670’s and published in a Latin translation, posthumously, in 1690 by Francis Mercury van Helmont. For her letters, see The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne Viscountess Conway, Henry Moore, and their Friends (1642-1684), eds. Marjorie Hope Nicholson and Sarah Hutton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a translation of the Principles that includes the Latin text, see The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy, trans. Peter Loptson (Delmar, NY: Scholar’s Facsimiles and Reprints, 1998). For the most recent edition of the book, see The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy, trans. Alison Coudert and Taylor Corse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).


See especially Hutton, Anne Conway, which offers a thorough account of the rich intellectual currents of Conway’s milieu; Broad, Women Philosophers; and White, The Legacy of Anne Conway. For interesting comparisons between Conway’s philosophy and that of Margaret Cavendish, see Sarah Hutton, “Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and Seventeenth-Century Scientific Thought,” in Women, Science, and Medicine 1500-1700, eds. L. Hunter and S. Hutton (Stroud/Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1997) and Broad, Women Philosophers.


References to The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy (hereafter Principles) include the book, section, and page number from Coudert and Corse translation. So, citation here is Book VI, section 4, pp. 30-31.

This definition of modus is from a popular mid-seventeenth-century philosophical lexicon. See Johann Micraelius, Lexicon Philosophicum terminorum Philosophis unitarum (Jena, 1653), 666. In another popular lexicon first published in 1692, mode is defined as a “determination toward a fixed being.” See Stephan Chauvin, Lexicon Philosophicum, 2nd ed. (Leeuwarden, 1713; repr. Düsseldorf: Stern-Verlag Janssen & Co., 1967), 412-13. For Descartes on mode, see especially Principles of Philosophy, Part I, articles 56, 61, 64 (AT VIII A 25-25, 29-30, 31).
For example, the young Leibniz claims that the essence of the number 6 can be “expressed” as either $2 \times 3$, $4 + 2$, or innumerable other modes. Each expresses the essence in a determinant way, though each “differs from the other.” See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Series 6, volume 3, 518-19.

Conway does not attribute any modes to the second substance. Nor does it seem plausible that the *logos* would have a “determination” unless we consider the *logos proforikos* a determination of the *logos ousios*. But she does write that “the *logos proforikos*” is “the word which is expressed *expressum* and revealed” IV §2 (21). Note that Coudert and Corse translate *expressum* here as ‘is uttered,’ which misses the point of the passage. About the third substance, Conway equates mode with a property. This is a place where the Coudert and Corse translation does not fit the Latin very well. In VI §3, Conway contrasts the substance and essence with mode and property. Coudert and Corse translate the Latin *proprietatas* as attribute, which is misleading. See VI §3 (29). In a longer version of this paper, I discuss Conway’s important comments about modes of the third substance. It can be difficult to navigate her account of nature because she uses the term ‘mode’ to refer to each of the following three sorts of things: individual creatures, each of the two constituents of individual creatures (spirit and body), and subspecies (VI §3 (30)). Careful attention to the text suggests that each of these is a mode of vitality and that the difference among them lies merely in how determinant each is as a way of expressing that vitality. For example, the (sub)species, horse, is less determinant than that of the individual horse. See especially VI §3 (29-30), VI §4 (31), IX §5 65-66.


I am writing a book about Conway and Leibniz, entitled *Radical Rationalists*, in which I explicate Conway’s philosophy in much greater detail. There is insufficient space here to discuss her interesting views about the third substance or nature. There are helpful summarizes of this part of her system in the literature. See notes 5 and 6.

Hutton does not go into very many details about the precise metaphysical role of Christ as middle substance, but does explain that “Middle Nature bridges the gap between God and creatures,” forms “an ontological barrier between nature and God,” and so “is both bridge and buffer between God and the world. See Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 225. Loptson emphazes that creatures are always “being created by God through the agency or medium of Christ.” See Loptson’s Introduction to his edition of the *Principles*, 36.

Hutton’s impressive intellectual biography is the most thoroughgoing account of Conway’s life, wide-ranging intellectual sources, the curious history of the *Principles*, and the nature and consequences of her illness. See *Anne Conway*, passim. The book contains citations to other accounts of Conway’s illness.

As noted earlier, Conway composed her work in English. About her manuscript, Henry More wrote: “These Fragments of that incomparable Person, the Lady Viscountess Conway … are only Writings abruptly and scatteredly, I may add also obscurely, written in a Paper-Book, with a
Black-lead Pen, toward the latter end of her long and tedious Pains and Sickness, which she never had Opportunity to revise, correct, or perfect” (See Coudert and Corse, Principles, 3). The original English manuscript was lost after van Helmont translated and published it in Latin in 1690.

16 The present chapter is taken from a much longer one on Conway’s thought. Marcy Lascano and Eileen O’Neill have been extremely patient while I figure out how to cut my paper to a fourth of its original size. I hope to publish the longer and more thorough account of Conway’s thought as part of a book entitled Radical Rationalism.


19 Although the relationship between self-sufficiency and unity is a fascinating topic, there is insufficient time to discuss it at length here. There is a huge amount of literature on these Platonist principles. For a good introduction, see Dominic J. O’Meara, Plotinus in the Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity, 301-24.

20 Plato, Phaedo, 80a-e. Hutton discusses the complications of Conway’s relation to Plotinus and the history of Platonism. See her Anne Conway, passim. Broad reports that Conway read Plotinus (which seems likely), but offers no citations to support this claim. See Broad, Women Philosophers, 67.

21 As Coudert and Corse write in their Introduction to the Principles, “The Kabbalah is the commonly use term for the mystical teachings of Judaism, especially those originating after the twelfth century. The word itself means “that which is received” or tradition, “because it was thought to represent the esoteric, unwritten aspects of the divine revelation granted to Moses on Mount Sinai, while the Bibli represented the exoteric, written part of the same revelation” (xvii). The introduction slightly exaggerates Conway’s debt to Kabbalism, but its account is helpful (see xvii-xxii) as Hutton, Anne Conway, passim.

22 Conway does not refer to the individual things in the created world as minds, but they are clearly mind-like things in that they are subjects of perceptions and all capable of developing
consciousness.

There is a long tradition of philosophers who assume that the divine source of the world is a unified, simple thing. One of the main sources of this tradition is Plotinus who insists that the supreme being is “the One itself” where the oneness is understood in terms of simplicity. He writes, e.g.: “there must be something simple before all things, and this must be other than all the things which come after it, existing by itself, not mixed with the things which derive from it.... For if it is not to be simple, outside all coincidence and composition and really one, it could not be a first principle, and it is the most self-sufficient, because it is simple and the first of all: for that which is not the first needs that which is before it, and what is not simple is in need of its simple components so that it can come into existence from them” (Enneads V.4.1.6-15). Notice the connection here between simplicity and self-sufficiency.

Needless to say, this is a thorny topic. The hierarchy of being is often described in terms of ontological and causal dependency, but not always. For a good introduction to the issues, see O’Meara, “The Hierarchical Ordering of Reality in Plotinus,” 66-81, and Kevin Corrigan, “Essence and Existence in the Enneads,” 105-29, The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a very recent discussion of these metaphysical topics, see Lloyd P. Gerson. The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), passim.

The history of the causal theory of emanation is rich and complicated. For more on the views in early modern philosophy discussed here, see Mercer, Leibniz’s Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially 178-195. In the seventeenth century, there were a number of different ways of accounting for emanation. For a recent helpful survey of these, see Eric Schliesser, “Newtonian Emanation, Spinozism, Measurement and the Baconian Origins of the Laws of Nature,” Foundations of Science 10, 3 (2005): 1-19.


In van Helmont’s Latin version of the Principles, the word here is ‘verbum,” but in the annotations of the chapter, added to the main text by Conway, she equates verbum with the Greek logos. See I §7 (10), and Annotation 5 (11).

For a classic account of Stoic physics in general and their notion of sympathy and pneuma in particular, see S. Sambursky, Physics of the Stoics (New York: Macmillan, 1959), especially chapter II. As Sambursky makes clear, the later Stoics tended to identify the pneuma with the divinity (36-42). It would seem then that at least some Stoical explanations for sympathy did not differ greatly from those offered by the Platonists.

For Leibniz’s early endorsement of this relation, see, e.g., Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1923-), Series VI, Vol. 1, 464. In Leibniz’s Metaphysics, I discuss these ideas at greater length and argue that Leibniz’s famous preestablished harmony evolved out of his views about sympathy and related notions. See especially 192-98 and 300-340.

For more on the development of Leibniz’s account of sympathy and the mirroring of creatures, see my Leibniz’s Metaphysics, 217-20. Neither Leibniz nor Conway assumes that a mind or creature must be conscious to benefit from its enhancement relation with another mind or creature. That is, the perception need not be a conscious one.

Like Leibniz, Margaret Cavendish, and other seventeenth-century philosophers, Conway
believes that the infinity of God entails that of creatures.

32 Conway’s use of the term ‘essence’ can be confusing. Strictly speaking, there are only three substances God, Christ or Logos, and the created world, each with its own essence. But in talking about creatures, she insists that each has an essence that constitutes its identity through time. There is insufficient time to argue for this here, but Conway thinks of this essence primarily as a moral one with its own “ruling spirit.” See, e.g., VII §3 (53), (VII §4 (55)).

33 There are some passages in the Principles in which Conway does not distinguish clearly between Christ as second substance and as historic person. But once we have the distinction in mind, it is easy to see how she employs the two and sometimes plays them off one another. For example, V §3 contains a fairly lengthy discussion of Christ as mediator between God and creatures. She discusses “the moral, not the natural immutability of the Messiah” and notes that “[s]ome people object that if Christ had been naturally immutable, then he was tempted in vain.” This suggests that she has conflated the two Christs (V §3 (25)). But then she goes on to discuss Christ as the “mediating being” (V §4 (25)), who emanated from God so that he is “the perfect first born emanated immediately from God at the beginning” (V §3 (25)). Needless to say, that Christ could not be tempted. It seems clear that Conway understands Christ here as the second substance. Further evidence that she has demoted the historic Christ to the status of mere creature is available in her discussion of the third substance in chapters VI-IX and its relation to Christ. When she discusses Christ in those chapters, she is always referring to the metaphysical one. See, for example, VII §3 (48), VII §3 (50), and VIII §3 (60).

34 In van Helmont’s Latin version of the Principles, the word here is ‘verbum,’ but in the annotations of the chapter, added to the main text by Conway, she equates verbum with the Greek logos. See I §7 (10), and annotations to the first chapter, section §5 (11).

35 Conway explains that Christ “comes into existence by generation or emanation from God rather than by creation strictly speaking” (V §4 (25)).

36 Conway’s views about God’s freedom in creating the world are unorthodox. For the vast majority of thinkers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the creation story in Genesis entailed that God freely created the world. For many in the tradition, God is free in the relevant sense only if the divine nature does not necessitate creation. Conway rejects this tradition, defining freedom as lack of external compulsion. On her account, “the will of God is most free” when creation occurs “without any external force or compulsion” (III §1 (15)). In this sense, “God is both a most free agent and a most necessary one, so that he must do whatever he does to and for his creatures since his infinite wisdom, goodness, and justice are a law to him which can not be superseded” (III §2 (16)). She is admirably honest about her heterodox views: God made creatures “from an inner impulse of his divine goodness and wisdom” (III §3 (16)).

37 God has one attribute that is not “communicable,” namely, immutability. See V §3 (24), V §5 (26), and VI §1 (28).


39 Conway is quite explicit about her reliance on “the ancient hypothesis of the Hebrews” for her account of “the first-born son of God.” See annotations to I §5 (11). For a discussion of the Platonist and Kabbalistic sources of this “dual logos” and for other citations, see Hutton, Anne Conway, 159-66.

40 Commentators have noted the similarities between Conway and Leibniz, and their philosophies are strikingly similar in their details. But they also differ in crucial ways. For example, Leibniz famously maintains that the freedom God demands that there be an infinite
number of possible worlds or plans for creation among which God chose the best. For some classic citations and an account of his view, see Brandon Look, “Leibniz’s Modal Metaphysics” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2008, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibiz-modal/.

Colossians 1: 15-17, (Revised Standard Version; all further biblical references are to this edition). She also cites a passage, which will be quoted below, in which Paul explains that God sent Christ “to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Ephesians 3:9).

There has been a good deal of scholarly attention given to the question of Conway’s sources. There is no doubt that Henry More, the Quakers, and Francis Mercury van Helmont influenced her. There is some disagreement about who had the major influence on the development of her more heterodox views. There is not sufficient space here to engage in that debate. The goal here is to interpret the Principles. For citations to the major literature on Conway’s sources, see note 18.

John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” John 3: 16-18.


V §6 (27). This passage suggests that the division between metaphysical and historic Christ might not be as clear as I have been claiming. For example, Conway suggests that the historic Christ brought his body “from heaven.” However, the passage as a whole suggests that all she means to imply is that all the spirits and bodies constituting the third substance themselves are brought “from heaven” in the sense that logos proforikos emanates them. There is no denying that Conway sometimes plays with the dual designation of the name, but textual evidence makes it clear that the historic Christ is neither God nor logos. For example, at the very beginning of the Principles, she insists that “in God there exists none of the passions … [f]or every passion is temporal having its beginning and end in time” (I §5 (9)). In order to have passions, an entity must exist in time. Only creatures or modes of third substance exist in time (II §6 (14)). So, the historic Christ is such a creature.

Conway has heterodox views about the Fall. There is insufficient space here to explicate those here, but her basic idea is that, before the Fall, all creatures were the same species and so the result of the Fall introduced radical differences among them. The move to diversity of being is consistent with justice. See VI §2-10 (29-38). It is noteworthy that roughly forty years before Leibniz published his famous Theodicy (and coined the term ‘theodicy’) as an attempt to explain how divine goodness is consistent with creaturely suffering, Conway offers her own elegant solution to the problem of evil.

Recent medievalists have argued that a “revolution of feeling” occurred in the twelfth through thirteenth centuries, when devotional literature began to focus on “the Passion.” See Jack Bennett, Poetry of the Passion: Studies in Twelve Centuries of English Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 32. Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, Europe saw an increase in the richness and variety of “affective meditations” on the passions. The meditator was supposed to feel compassion for Christ, which would increase the love and connection between herself and Christ. By contemplating suffering, the meditator would become more connected with the sufferer. Given our interests, it is especially significant that suffering is assumed to increase the sympathy and connection between sufferers. See Sarah Mcnamer, Affective Meditation and

49 For more on Conway’s “moral perfectionism,” see White, The Legacy of Anne Conway, Part I. There is insufficient room here to present the fascinating details of Conway’s perfectionism. Suffice it to say here that all creatures will eventually approach moral perfection.

50 Conway insists that time “is nothing but successive motions and operations of creatures.” It is continuous in that: “For just as no time is so great that it is not possible to conceive of a greater, so likewise no time is so small that a lesser may not be imagined” (II §3 (13)). God cannot change and so is eternal. This eternity has “no times in it” whereas “the eternity of creatures is nothing other than an infinity of times in which they were and always will be without end” (II §5 (13-14)).

51 Since the publication of Jonathan Israel’s Radical Enlightenment, a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to radical elements of the Enlightenment. Israel focuses on Spinoza as a source. But there are other forms of radicalism among the rationalists. Conway and the later Leibniz represent one such trend. See Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of the Modernity, 1650-1750, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

52 According to Conway, e.g., in paradise, “all creatures ... in their primitive and original state were a certain species of human being” (VI §4 (31)). God’s punishment led creatures to descend from their “original goodness” to a state of “confusion” (VII §3 (47)) so that “crassness and hardness of bodies arose after the Fall” (VII S.1. (41)).

53 Conway was particularly moved by the suffering caused by religious persecution and especially by the difficulties endured by the Quakers. See Hutton, Anne Conway, chapter 9, especially 179-81.

54 I would like to think Claudia Sosa, Steele Sternberg, Skyler Mann, and Andrea Borghini for help with practical and philosophical aspects of this project. But mostly I would like to thank Eileen O’Neill for trusting me, an non-expert, to write an essay on Conway. She and Marcy Lascano have been more than patient as I tried to make sense of the difficult details of Conway’s system. Both have made excellent comments on this paper. Eileen has been an inspiration to me – as she has been to so many of us -- as a scholar and feminist. She has surely motivated me to try to understand something about women philosophers who were “left out” of knowledge. I dedicate this paper to Eileen.