



Ontology

Anne Conway's Critique of Cartesian Dualism

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ABSTRACT: I describe and analyze Anne Conway's critique of Cartesian dualism. After a brief biographical introduction to Conway, I sketch some of the influences on her philosophy. I then describe her non-Cartesian view of substance. According to Conway, there is only one substance in created reality. This substance contains both matter and spirit. A purely material or spiritual substance is, she argues, an impossibility. Next, I discuss several of Conway's arguments against Cartesian dualism. Firstly, dualism is inconsistent because dualists, while denying that concepts such as divisibility and extension are applicable to spiritual substance, nevertheless use such terms when describing the soul or spirit. They assume that soul or spirit is something particular which can be located somewhere. Secondly, she argues that dualism results in mechanism because it makes too sharp a distinction between body and soul, thus regarding the body as a mechanical machine and the soul as something which is not integrally related to the body. Thirdly, dualism cannot account for the interaction between mind and body. The two substances of which a dualist speaks are defined on the basis of the exclusion of characteristics. But the two things which have nothing in common cannot influence each other causally.

1. Introduction

During his lifetime and in the centuries following, the dualism and mechanism of Descartes' philosophy gave rise to a great number of objections and discussions. In this article, I would like to consider a response to Descartes' views which is somewhat less well-known than others, that of Anne Conway. Conway's reaction to Descartes is interesting because she speaks from out of a metaphysical tradition different from those of many other philosophers who discussed his ideas. ⁽¹⁾ In addition, she makes use of a pre-modern, non-abstract idea of spirit, a conceptualisation of spirit which has been lost or sidelined in the philosophical tradition after Descartes. On the basis of an entirely different ontology of matter and spirit from that of Descartes, Conway questions the presuppositions of dualism as well as its abstract view of spiritual substance.

In this paper, I will begin with a short biographical sketch of Conway and a survey of some of the main influences on her thought. I will then briefly describe her philosophical system. I will then discuss her critique of Descartes' dualism. Finally, I will consider the question of how her views can be of value to us today.

Anne Conway (1631-1679) née Finch, was the daughter of Sir Heneage Finch, Sergeant-at-Law, Recorder of the City of London and Speaker of the House of Commons and his wife Elizabeth Cradock. She grew up in Kensington House in London. She was educated at home by tutors in mathematics, languages (Latin, Greek, presumably French and Hebrew) and philosophy. She was married in 1651 to Edward Conway (1623-1683), who became the third Viscount Conway. After her marriage, she continued to stay at Kensington House and she also lived at the Conway family estate, Ragley, in Warwickshire. (2) Conway was well versed in philosophy, having been taught by tutors at home. Via her brother, who was a student of Henry More (1614-1687), she studied with More, a Cambridge Platonist, first corresponding with him, later becoming a friend and having him stay at times in her home. More was acquainted with the philosophy of Descartes and corresponded with him. At the time he met Conway, he was an enthusiastic supporter of Descartes. Later, however, More turned away from the philosophy of Descartes. Conway most likely acquired her knowledge of Descartes' work by reading his *Principia philosophiae*. (3)

Conway was also influenced by the Christian Kabbalist movement, a mixture of Christian and Jewish thought combined with ideas gleaned from gnosticism, neo-Platonism, Renaissance occultism and the Hermetic tradition. Henry More was also interested in the Kabbala but Conway's study of it is mainly due to the influence of Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont (1614-1698), a Dutch philosopher, mystic and physician whom she met via More. (4)

Another important person of influence on Anne Conway was Christian Freiherr Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689). Von Rosenroth was an acquaintance of Van Helmont. Van Helmont worked with Von Rosenroth on the latter's book *Kabbala Denudata*. This book contains translated excerpts from the *Sohar* and commentaries on them. The *Sohar*, the book of light or splendour, is one of the central books of the Kabbala. Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata* was published in two volumes, of which only the first appeared before Conway's death. (5) Most of the references in Conway's book are to the *Kabbala Denudata*.

Conway wrote down her ideas in a notebook which became the basis for the text of her only published work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy: Concerning God, Christ, and the Creature; that is, concerning Spirit, and Matter in General*. This posthumously published book was a partial transcription of the notebook because some sections of it were illegible. It was published on the initiative of Van Helmont in Amsterdam in 1690 in a Latin translation of her English text. (6) In this book, Conway attempts to prove that all of reality is one, that all things in the world contain spirit, that all things in the world are subject to change and, in the case of animate creatures, to reincarnation. She therefore includes in her book arguments against dualism because dualism, including that of Descartes, separates matter and spirit, the non-conscious and the conscious, God and the world, thus breaking up the unity of nature and the relationship between the spiritual and the material.

2. Conway's Concept of Substance.

While Descartes thought that there are two kinds of substances, Conway distinguishes between three kinds: the one of God, of Christ and that of creatures. The substance of God is pure spirit. Christ is both God and man and hence his substance contains a high degree of spirit as well as matter. He is the medium through which creation takes place and through whom the relationship between God and the world, God and man, is established. All creatures existing in the world, that is, created beings, animate and inanimate, share in one substance which is a mixture of matter and spirit.

The three substances of which Conway speaks, those of God, Christ and creatures, share characteristics. All three contain spirit; Christ and the creatures share the characteristic of

having matter. For Conway, the fact that these substances share characteristics accounts for the relatedness of God, Christ and the creatures and for matters such as change and causality.

The creaturely substance is made up of combinations of particles or monads which are either spiritual or material. Both matter and spirit are composed of parts which have extension. The parts which make up the spiritual are lighter, ethereal elements; the parts which make up the material are heavier, darker, elements. The spiritual combines with the material through a middle element, an element lighter than matter and heavier than spirit. Matter and spirit are both locatable in time and space, influence each other, and are divisible.

There is therefore no substantial difference between a stone, an animal and a human being. The difference between them lies in the fact that the stone will have fewer spiritual particles and the human being more. Moreover, the spiritual particles in a stone are not fine or numerous enough for the stone to have consciousness. In a human being, there are spiritual particles throughout the body and they form clusters which at a certain point become conscious. These clusters are controlled by a "governing spirit", that which makes a person seem one spiritual whole.

Within created reality, completely isolated substances which have nothing in common with other substances are an impossibility. There is therefore no such thing as a Cartesian spiritual substance except for God who is entirely spiritual but not of this world. All creatures, including souls, contain matter. That which is solely spirit cannot be known since knowledge is "reflection" and something which does not contain dark matter cannot reflect anything. In addition, spirit is perfection, and nothing in the world is totally good. Furthermore, no creature can be purely spiritual because it requires material particles to interact causally with other creatures.

The existence of a purely material substance of which Descartes speaks is also an impossibility, according to Conway. One reason is that matter is considered to be evil by Conway, spirit good. Since God is a good God, He would never create something which is exclusively matter, for that would be something which is totally evil, cut off from spirit. Furthermore, if a body has nothing spiritual in it, it is completely cut off from the spiritual, including God, who is Spirit. Something purely material would therefore be, Conway says, "a non-entity or fiction". Things can only exist in relationship to other things in the world and this relationship is based on the fact that all things share the basic characteristic of being composed of matter and spirit. Furthermore, Conway cannot imagine that it is possible to have bodies which do not in some sense share the characteristic of being spiritual with God. Moreover, because the spiritual makes things visible, matter which does not contain spirit would be unable to reflect light, that is, it would be unknowable.

Conway's disagreement with Descartes is based on the idea that spirit and matter do not differ substantially because both are divisible and have extension. This does not, however, mean that Conway is a materialist. She explicitly denies materialism because materialists, such as Hobbes, do not do justice to the reality of spirit. Hence her metaphysics, which speaks of monads with dual matter-spirit characteristics precedes and resembles that of Leibniz. (7)

3. Conway's Criticisms of Cartesian Dualism.

Conway presents a total of six arguments for what she calls the convertibility of matter and spirit. By this she means that matter and spirit are not totally different substances but are able to change into each other. Material entities can become spiritual entities and vice versa. In the course of these arguments, she presents arguments against dualism since

dualism denies the possibility of convertibility. Since her arguments are very extensive, I will only discuss a few of the points she makes against dualism in her third and fourth arguments.

The first point I would like to discuss is found in Conway's third argument against dualism. (8) Conway here argues that dualists are inconsistent. On the one hand, they seem to be making absolute distinctions between body and soul and on the other hand they seem to admit that body and soul must have certain characteristics in common.

Dualists are inconsistent because they distinguish sharply between body and spirit, that is, the penetrable and the impenetrable, the extended and non-extended, the locatable and non-locatable, the divisible and the non-divisible, the figurable and the non-figurable, but they smuggle in concepts to describe the spiritual substance which in fact are not as dualistic as they claim. Spirit, according to dualists, can in fact be attributed "extension, mobility and figurability", (to quote Conway) all attributes of penetrable bodies. For example, even dualists speak of spirit as locatable somewhere, perhaps in the sense that a person's spirit is seen as residing in the same location as his body because such a location allows a spirit to experience that which is happening inside and in the area around the body). Spirit is also seen as something which can move, for example, one can imagine oneself being in another place, an example which Descartes himself uses. It is also seen as having figurability, in other words, it is characterised in certain ways or even perhaps seen to have a physical form such as the form of an aura or ghost. Spirit is thus seen by dualists as having extension and divisibility, as locatable and moveable. But, if this is the case, Conway says, then surely spirit must also be penetrable, that is, it must be seen as sharing in the essential characteristics of matter. Conway wonders why "...the Extension of Body and Spirit, as they [dualists] understand it, do wonderfully differ..."

In Conway's fourth argument, she argues that Descartes, in separating matter and spirit, has a view of the bodies as dead or lifeless, as not containing spirit. Conway objects to this that since all things can in principle change into all other things and that hence the animate comes forth from the inanimate, one cannot separate reality into spiritless, lifeless matter on the one hand and non-material spirit on the other.

As to the body of an animate creature, in Descartes' view, it is a machine which moves itself. But such a body, because it is solely made up of matter is lifeless, Conway argues. This is because, for Descartes, even though the body is moved by animal spirits, the material from out of which it is made does not contain anything spiritual.

Conway's critique of Descartes' view of the body as "dead matter" must be seen in the context of the 17th century discussion of Aristotelian vitalism versus Cartesian mechanism. The vitalists regarded the soul as the form of the body, making it that particular body and as the source of the vital functions of the body, that is, the vegetative, sensitive and rational functions. The mechanists thought that all the vital functions of the body could ultimately be explained through the laws of physics, the ultimate science of the material world. Descartes believed that the body of animals was a machine whose functions could be fully explained in a mechanical way and that of humans as a similar type of machine, except that it is also the bearer of an eternal soul.

Conway does not completely deny the truth of mechanism as spoken of by Descartes, stating: "...although it cannot be denied that Cartes taught many excellent and ingenious Things concerning the Mechanical part of Natural Operations, and how all Natural Motions proceed according to Rules and Laws Mechanical, even as indeed Nature her self, i.e. the Creature, hath an excellent Mechanical Skill and Wisdom in it self, (given it by God, who is the Fountain of all Wisdom)". (9) Yet, Conway goes on to argue, there is a difference between mechanical motion (for example, that of a clock) and vital motion (for example,

that of a living body). Her only argument for saying this is that the vital is more sublime than the mechanical.

The reason why Conway considers the idea of "dead matter" as the greatest error of the dualist is that because of this idea he cannot account for the interaction and the "vital agreement" between body and spirit or soul. This is because the dualist sees them as having no characteristics in common.

Conway states that there might be philosophers who would argue that asking how an immaterial spirit can interact with a material body is irrelevant. It is simply a fact that this is possible, since it is also the way in which God (who is immaterial) works in the world (which is material). God is Spirit and God moves bodies/causes things to move in the world. Why then can an immaterial soul not move a body in the same mysterious way?

Conway's answer to this objection is that the way in which God moves bodies and the way in which spirit moves bodies are two different types of occurrences. The soul is both particular to a body and determined by a body, while God is in Conway's Aristotelian view the creator of the world who does not move individual beings around in it or reacts to them in the same integral way (except as Holy Spirit) as the soul moves and is moved by the body. Therefore, it makes sense to ask for an answer to the question of how the immaterial soul can by a process called interaction move a body.

Conway's next point concerning interaction is to ask, as Descartes did, why the spirit or soul feels corporeal pains. She suggests that a dualist may answer that only the body feels pain, not the soul. This response, she argues, is inconsistent, because a dualist believes that the body itself does not have life or feeling in it. Conway argues that the only answer to the question of how the soul feels bodily pain is to say that body and soul are of one substance.
(10)

In summary, Conway attacks the dualist for being inconsistent when formulating separate definitions of matter and spirit, for having a view of matter as dead, for seeing mechanical motion as the only type of motion for material entities, and for failing to account for the interaction and communication between body and spirit. The solution which she proposes is that all bodies contain both material and spiritual units. This accounts for the presence of body and spirit in a creature, the activity and sensibility of the body and the interaction between body and spirit.

4. Concluding Remarks

I have tried to show that Conway, working from out of a very different intellectual tradition, develops a philosophy which attempts to address many of the same issues which Descartes concerned himself with. The theoretical pivotal point of Conway's anti-Cartesianism is her claim that matter and spirit are not two totally different entities but that they share the characteristic of having extension, penetrability, and divisibility. There seems to be little doubt that this is true of matter, at least down to the smallest particle levels, but what of spirit? It may seem that Conway's ether-like or particle view of spirit is outmoded, not fitting into the modernity of Descartes' view of the soul as completely immaterial. Yet, contemporary philosophers have not gotten very far in answering the ontological question "what is spirit?". This could well be partly due to the fact that we are encouraged by the Cartesian tradition to see spirit in a non-concrete way.

Perhaps Conway's view of spirit should be cause for a reconsideration of radical abstractions of the concept of spirit. Yet, for Conway's theory to be accepted a great deal of clarification would have to take place concerning the nature of the spiritual particles.

NOTES

- (1) Sarah Hutton, *Ancient Wisdom and Modern Philosophy*. Utrecht, Utrecht University Press, 1994, p. 7.
- (2) For a short biography by Loptson as well as contemporary and later accounts of Anne Conway, see: P. Loptson, "Introduction" to Anne Conway, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. The Hague/Boston/London/Martinus Nijhoff, 1982, p. 5-8. In addition, a good source of information on Conway is Marjorie Hope Nicolson, ed., *The Conway Letters. The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and their Friends 1642-1684*. Revised by Sarah Hutton. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.
- (3) Sarah Hutton, *op.cit.*, p. 3.
- (4) Sarah Hutton, *op.cit.*, p. 8.
- (5) P. Loptson, *op.cit.*, p. 3-5. See also: Allison Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, Dordrecht/Boston/London 1995, p. 43-46.
- (6) P. Loptson, *op.cit.*, p. 5-8.
- (7) The extent of the influence of Conway on Leibniz' philosophy is unclear. Merchant, for example, thinks that this influence exists, Coudert doubts it.
- (8) Sarah Hutton, in her article, "Anne Conway Critique d'Henry More: L'esprit et la matière", *Archives de Philosophie* 58 (1995), p. 371-384, argues that the inconsistency argument used by Conway is in fact an argument directed not so much against Descartes as against Henry More.
- (9) Anne Conway, *op.cit.*, p. 222.
- (10) Anne Conway, *op.cit.*, p. 214.