

Anne Conway: Bodies in the Spiritual World

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Abstract

Anne Conway argues that all substances are spiritual. Yet, she also claims that all created substance has some type of body. Peter Loftson has argued that Conway didn't carefully consider her view that all created beings have bodies for it seems God could have (and perhaps should have) created only disembodied spirits. There are several reasons to think he is right. First, Conway holds that God is all-good and will do the best for his creation. She also holds that spirit is better than body. So, how is it that creatures always have bodies? Second, although she maintains that incorporation is punishment for sin, Conway holds that some creatures can fall without acquiring visible corporality. I argue that when we examine these views more closely, we will see that not only did Conway give them careful consideration, but that there is no inconsistency. Finally, I show that Conway's views concerning the nature and function of body provides further evidence of her carefully crafted system. Conway holds that bodies play an important role in a finite beings' ability to change and interact with others. Even more surprising is Conway's view that the body is the repository of thoughts, memories, and knowledge.

Introduction

In her work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Anne Conway argues that everything is “spirit, life and light.”¹ Yet, Conway maintains that bodies exist as “dark and gross” or “corporeal” spirit. Given that God is good and that all creatures strive for greater goodness and spirituality, one might wonder what reason there could be for the existence of bodies in such a spiritual world. As Peter Loftson writes, “Why could God not have created substances that either never were embodied, or else that evolved into substances that were totally unembodied? [Conway] seems to think this impossible, but perhaps the answer we ought to give is that this is one question she simply didn’t think through as thoroughly as she did many others” (“Introduction” 23). Is Conway’s positing of body a careless mistake? Is it perhaps a mere residual feature of a Cartesian worldview that should have been jettisoned? In this paper, I argue that Conway did think through her commitment to spiritual bodies. I first look at two features of Conway’s philosophy that seem in tension with her commitment to body: (1) that God’s goodness requires him to do the best, and (2) that moral failing does not always result in visible incorporation. I argue that upon careful consideration of these views, the tension dissolves. I then examine Conway’s views on the nature and function of body. Here, we find further evidence that Conway’s views on body are well thought out and even quite original. We see that in contrast to the view of body as the prison of the soul, Conway’s spiritual bodies are the outward reflection of our inner selves. Perhaps even more surprising is her view that it is the body, not the soul, which is the repository of knowledge.

The Possibility of Disembodied Finite Spirits

Before discussing why Conway thinks there are bodies we should first ask, “what is body?” according to Conway. As Jacqueline Broad notes, “In [Conway’s] view, there is no essential

¹ The *Works Cited* list contains more references than cited in this short piece. This was done in order to direct those unfamiliar with Conway’s views to useful literature.

difference between spirit and body, they differ only modally: ‘body is nothing but fixed and condensed spirit; and spirit is nothing but volatile body or body made subtle’” (Broad 70).² Since all things are essentially spirit, and, as Conway notes, “it is not an essential property of anything to be a body,” body has the properties of spirit (6.11 38).³ Conway writes, “There are many degrees of [corporeality] so that any thing can approach or recede more or less from the condition of a body or spirit” (7.1 42). Created beings are the result of God’s emanation of his properties into finite spirits. The properties that God communicates to creation are spirit, light, life, goodness, holiness, justice, and wisdom. Conway tells us that all of creation shares these properties with God to some extent. In addition to being alive and, at least, capable of sensation, spirit also has, to some degree, properties that are typically associated with matter or body. These are extension, motion, hardness, shape, and impenetrability. Since God, who is pure spirit, cannot have properties like actual extension, mechanical motion, hardness, shape, weight, and quantity, we know that these properties are not communicated in creation, but arise merely as the consequence of the finite nature of creation. Spirit has the capacity to contract and expand. And although “every creature has its own due weight or extension, which it cannot exceed and which cannot be diminished,” spirit can become more “condensed,” “dark,” “gross,” or “hard” by the “division of parts” or the swelling of bodies which occurs when more subtle bodies or spirits enter them (7.4 52). This condensed and dark spirit is “body,”⁴ and Conway maintains that every created being has some body.

² Broad quotes Conway 8.4 61.

³ I cite Conway’s *Principles* by Chapter and Section followed by reference to the page number of the Coudert and Corse translation (1996).

⁴ One of the most difficult questions concerning Conway’s ontology is whether and in what way it can be said to differ from that of a materialist like Margaret Cavendish who holds that all things are matter but that matter has spiritual qualities. Most importantly, Cavendish, like Conway, holds that

Loftson claims that Conway simply did not give much consideration to her view that all created beings have some body, and there are features of her view that lend credibility to Loftson's criticism.⁵ First, Conway holds that God, as a perfectly good and incorporeal spirit, creates by emanating his own properties into finite spirits. Conway tells us that God will always do the best for his creation, and that spirit is "more excellent" than body. So, it seems that God would want to create beings that are completely spiritual or who will eventually be so. Second, Conway holds that there are ways for spiritual beings to become morally worse without becoming more visibly corporeal. While these two views might seem in tension with the claim that every created spirit has a body, once we examine them closely, we will find that the tension is dissolved.

The first problem concerns the consistency of God's goodness with the creation of body, given that spirit is more excellent. According to Conway, God's creatures "in their primitive and original state were a certain species of human being designated according to their virtues" (6.4 31). Conway tells us that originally all creation "was one and the same substance," and that "all the crassness of visible bodies comes from the fall of spirits from their original state" (7.1 43). Conway

matter is vital. One might conclude that the difference is merely terminological: both posit the same "stuff" in the world, but one calls it "spirit" and the other "matter." I think that the only way to differentiate their views might lie in consideration of their of the bounds of substance and the nature of God. See Jacqueline Broad (2002) for a detailed account of the two views and a consideration of their similarities and differences.

⁵ Conway's correspondence with Henry More shows that she was deeply interested in questions concerning the relationship between matter/body and spirit as early as 1651. She was particularly concerned to understand how the Fall could cause embodiment and how man could be restored. See Ward (2000) 169-79, for Conway's letter to More requesting his views on these matters and for More's reply.

defines sin as “ataxia, or a disorderly direction of motion or the power of moving from its appropriate place or state to another” (8.2 58). Conway believes that incorporation is the result of wickedness or sin. As Sarah Hutton notes, Conway was influenced by the early Christian church father, Origen, who recounts Plato’s view that the soul becomes corporeal when it inclines to wickedness. Hutton explains, “[Origen] writes of this moral decline of the soul as incorporation of the soul, that is, the soul’s acquisition of physical properties (principally weight) and its becoming attached to a body (Hutton “More and Conway” 122-3).⁶ Likewise, Conway claims that when we fall away from God by choosing to love other things before him, our spirit becomes more corporeal. God endows his creation with free will, which Conway describes as “indifference of will.” She argues that indifference of will is an imperfect form of freedom, and that God, who is the moral exemplar, is completely determined by goodness in his actions (yet he is also completely free). Our ability to choose something that is not good allows us to move away from God, which is sin. However, Conway believes that creatures can overcome their indifference of will and seek only the good. She writes, “From that indifference of will which it once had for good and evil, it rises until it only wishes to be good and is incapable of wishing any evil” (7.1 42). God’s justice demands that individuals be appropriately punished for indifference to goodness by incorporation, but this same justice and goodness ensures that no individual is eternally punished. Since God places in all human beings a desire for goodness, all beings eventually turn back toward goodness. Conway explains that nothing can become completely dark and corporeal because it would share no attributes with God, who is completely light and spirit. Creation, however, can improve continually without end. Thus, there are limits to evil, but no limits to goodness.

So, Conway does hold that God must always do the best for his creatures. However, this does not seem incompatible with creating creatures so that they receive appropriate punishments for

⁶ See also Hutton (2004) for a full account of Origen’s influence on Anne Conway.

their freely chosen digressions. God's goodness places limitations on the way in which creatures are punished and the duration of punishment. There is no eternal punishment in hell since this is inconsistent with God's nature. All suffering associated with incorporation is medicinal and purgative, so that every individual eventually attains greater spirituality and goodness through their punishments.⁷ She writes,

But if anyone should say that it falls into eternal torment, I answer: If you understand by eternity an infinity of ages which will never end, this is impossible because all pain and torment stimulates the life or spirit existing in everything which suffers. As we see from constant experience and as reason teaches us, this must necessarily happen because through pain and suffering whatever grossness or crassness is contracted by the spirit or body is diminished; and so the spirit...is set free and becomes more spiritual and, consequently, more active and effective through pain. (7.1 43)⁸

⁷ See La Nave (2006) and Mercer (2013) for more on the role of suffering in Conway's philosophy. Mercer argues that both suffering due to incorporation and sympathetic harmony lead to moral improvement in Conway's system.

⁸ To those who object that transformation into a lower being is too harsh a punishment, Conway counters: "For when a human being has so greatly degraded himself by his own willful wrongdoing and has brought his nature, which had been so noble, to a lower state, and when that nature has demeaned itself in spirit to the level of a most foul brute or animal so that it is wholly ruled by lust and earthly desires and becomes like any beast, indeed, worse than a beast, what injustice is this if God compels him to bear the same image in his body as in that spirit into which he has internally transformed himself? Or which degeneration do you think is worse, to have the image of a beast in one's spirit or body?" (6.8 36)

Here, we see that although incorporation is the result of sin, there is no eternal torment. Every punishment is finite in nature. Moreover, the pain and suffering that results from incorporation leads to an inner refinement of spirit and allows one to change back toward the good.

The second worry one might have regarding the existence of body in Conway's system is that although incorporation is the result of movement down the ontological and moral ladder, it is still the case that Conway holds that some beings can fall without acquiring a visible corporeal nature. She writes, "By the same token, spirits can remain for long periods of time without any of the crassness of body characteristic of visible things in the world, such as hard stones or metals or the bodies of men and women. For surely the bodies of the worst spirits do not have the same crassness as a visible body" (7.1 43). However, if incorporation is the natural consequence of falling away from the moral exemplar, then how is it possible to fall without an increase in corporality? Here, Conway makes a distinction between two types of grossness or hardness found in bodies.

We must recognize that the grossness and hardness of bodies is twofold: one sort is visible and palpable to our external sense; the other is invisible and impalpable, but can be perceived internally by our inner senses, although it does not affect our external senses.

Therefore, invisible and impalpable grossness and hardness is characteristic of those bodies which are so slight that our external senses cannot perceive them. (7.1 43-4)

Although it is true that spiritual beings, such as angels, can fall away from goodness and become supremely evil (she mentions devils) without obtaining a visible body, these beings really do obtain the properties of hardness and grossness relative to the rest of their spirit. Conway insists that this hardness is not merely metaphorical, but an actual difference in spirit which can be sensed by appropriately aware beings.⁹

⁹ Conway compares the invisible hardness of spirits to the way that water can hold sand or small stones without them being visible to our senses (7.1 43).

So, while the issues of the constraints God's goodness places upon his creation and Conway's views concerning the incorporation of spirit might seem in tension with the idea that every created individual has some body, it does not appear that Conway has not thought enough about the issue. To our first concern, Conway maintains that God creates free creatures with an unlimited capacity for goodness. God's justice demands punishment for sin, but this punishment is temporary and restorative.¹⁰ To our second concern, Conway maintains that although some creatures, such as angels and devils, do not exhibit a corporality visible by our external senses, when these spirits turn away from God, they nevertheless do acquire a real hardness and crassness.

Conway's careful attention to the nature and function of body is further evidenced by the fact that body plays an important role in the retention of thoughts, knowledge, and memories. Body is what allows creatures to interact and change. In the next section, I will discuss the retentive nature of body and Conway's contention that the body is the vessel of knowledge.

The Retentive Nature of Body

There are three important functions that body plays in Conway's philosophy. First, body reflects the image of the principal spirit and the individual's moral and ontological status. Second, body holds the images received from outside of the individual that result from interaction with the rest of creation. Finally, body serves as the repository of thoughts, memories, and knowledge.

Conway continually refers to body as "dark" and "condensed." This is not accidental. The fact that body is dark and condensed spirit is what allows it to function as a repository. Perhaps the

¹⁰ One might still worry that this does not explain why created spirit doesn't eventually become disembodied. Conway has two answers to this question. First, if created beings were completely incorporeal, they would be not be distinct from God. Second (as we will see in the next section), created finite beings need a body to retain knowledge.

most important function of the retentive nature of dark and condensed spirit is forming the body of an individual creature. Conway writes, “Moreover, spirit is light or the eye looking at its own proper image, and the body is the darkness which receives this image. And when the spirit beholds it, it is as if someone sees himself in a mirror...since the reflection of an image requires a certain opacity, which we call body” (6.11 38). Conway tells us that the principal spirit of an individual, which is the bundle of spirits which always remain the same and which constitutes the personal identity of a creature, causes the dark and condensed spirit connected with it (body) to reflect the inner moral nature of the individual in the shape that is most appropriate. This conjunction of spirit and body forms every created thing. For Conway tells us that “every created spirit has some body, whether it is terrestrial, aerial, or ethereal” (5.6 27). Conway’s most detailed account of the process of transformation of the individual from one mode of existence to another is given in this passage:

But if someone lives neither an angelic nor a diabolical life but rather a brutish or animal life, so that his spirit is more like the spirit of beasts than any other creature, does the same justice not act most justly, so that just as he became a brute in spirit and allowed his brutal part and spirit to have dominion over his more excellent part, he also (at least as regards his external shape) changes his corporeal shape into that species of beast to which he is most similar in terms of the qualities and conditions of his mind? ...It necessarily follows that this body, which the vital spirit forms, will be that of a brute and not a human, for the brute spirit cannot produce or form any other shape because its formative power is governed by its imagination, which imagines and conceives as strongly as possible its own image, according to which the external body must take shape. (6.7 36)

Here, we see Conway’s view that every individual is capable of transforming into another kind of creature or species. Recall that incorporation is the natural result of moving away from God and the more spiritual. Likewise, one can become closer to God and acquire a less corporeal nature.

According to Conway, since all of creation is one substance, all individuals in creation are able to transform into different species within creation.¹¹ Of course, these changes occur slowly and incrementally, but an individual can, over time, change from a man to a horse, or from a horse to a stone, or from a man to an angel, etc. All of these changes are effected by the determination of a bodily form through the reflection of the nature of the principal spirit. It is in this way that one's body reflects one's ontological and moral status on the scale of being. Conway writes, "Just as every spirit needs a body to receive and reflect its image, it also needs a body to retain the image. For every body has this retentive nature in itself to a greater or lesser degree" (6.11 38-9). Of course, one might wonder how such changes occur. How does the nature of the principal spirit become bestial instead of human or angelic instead of demonic? To answer this question, we must turn to Conway's account of interaction.

According to Conway, interaction between individuals occurs, as Carol White notes, "by a process analogous to emanation or radiation" (Book 58). Conway explains that God has created

¹¹ Conway does not always use her terms consistently nor does she use them in ways analogous to contemporary usage. However, a careful reading supplies us with the following terminology: By *substance* Conway means one of the three types of spirit that are essentially differentiated by their mutability conditions: God, Christ, and Creation. Within creation there are *subordinate species* or *subspecies* and *creatures* or *individuals*. Species or subspecies refer to what we normally think of as natural kinds. However, Conway holds that these are merely collections of individuals designated by general terms. She writes, "For species are nothing but individual entities subsumed under one general and common idea of the mind or one common term, as for instance, a man is a species including all individual men and horse is a species including all individual horses" (6.3 30). The classifying of species is based on objective similarity of features of a group of individuals. Finally, *creatures* or *individuals* are particular entities within creation that maintain their identity over time.

humans with a desire for the good. She writes, “For nature always works toward the greater perfection of subtlety and spirituality since this is the most natural property of every operation and motion. For all motion wears away and divides a thing and thus makes it subtle and spiritual (8.5 61). In addition, there is a “universal love in all creatures for each other,” which she believes follows from the fact that “all things are one in virtue of their primary substance or essence and are like parts of members of the same body” (7.3 47). According to Conway, whenever we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch, we are exchanging spirits with other things. When we perceive things as good, or love them, we take part of them into ourselves. She writes,

There are also many other very subtle spirits which continually emanate from them [the principal spirits] and which, because of their subtlety, cannot be contained by the hardness of the bodies in which they dwell; and these subtle spirits are productions or conjunctions of the greater spirits detained in the body. For although these are detained therein, they are not idle in their prison since the body serves as their work place to make those more subtle spirits, which then emanate in colors, sounds, odors, tastes, and various other properties and powers. (8.5 61)

We produce subtle spirits in our own bodies, which are perceived as colors, sounds, odors, etc., and taken in by other created beings. When we receive these sorts of images from others, they are stored in our body. These spirits literally become part of us and can influence our future desires and thoughts. Conway claims that we are united to things by loving them. However, when we love something more bestial or corporeal than our present state, we become more bestial and corporeal ourselves. She writes,

Also, if a man is united and joined with something, then he becomes one with that thing. He who unites himself to God is one with him in spirit, and he who unites himself with a

prostitute is one in flesh with her. Shouldn't someone who is united to a beast become one with that beast for the same reason and similarly in every other case? (6.8 37)

By loving things beneath our natures as spiritual or intellectual beings, we bring disorder to our principal spirit. Conway is never explicit on this point, but one might interpret her as holding that the principal spirit is composed not only of a multitude of spirits, but of a multitude of *kinds* of spirits. In this way, we can interpret her claim – “the nature of man contains the nature of creatures, which is why he is called microcosm” (5.6, 27) – as the view that one’s principal spirit contains multiple natures in a hierarchical structure. It is consistent with what she says in various passages that every individual spirit contains intellectual spirits, brute or sensitive spirits, and vegetative or nutritive spirits.¹² When these spirits are properly ordered, the intellectual rules over the sensitive and the sensitive rules over the nutritive. However, when one’s desires are disordered, the brute or sensitive spirit might rule the intelligent spirit. Conway explains that the principal spirit is ordered like an army. She writes, “the spirit of man or brute is also a countless multitude of spirits united in this body, and they have their order and government, such that one is the principal ruler, another has second place, and a third commands others below itself and so on for the whole, just as in an army” (6.11, 39). And again,

It should be noted here that although the spirit of man is commonly said to be one single thing, yet this spirit is composed of many spirits, indeed, countless ones; as the body is composed of many bodies and has a certain order and government in all its parts, much

¹² For instance, she might hold a view similar to those found in Thomas Aquinas’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, 413a11– 44a28. Harrison (1993) notes Conway’s similarity to Aquinas with respect to the distinction between a type of soul and its modes of existence (540, note 102).

more so is the spirit, which is a great army of spirits, in which there are distinct functions under one ruling spirit. (7.4, 53)

If the principal spirit is organized in this way with different kinds of spirits, then we can see how, for instance, the sensitive spirit could become dominate in an individual that acquires bestial tendencies, and that this would cause the superior spirits to become servants to the bestial. Conway writes, “For, according to Scripture, anyone who obeys another is his servant inasmuch as he obeys him” (6.8 37). Of course, we can also love and unite ourselves to that which is higher and nobler, and when this happens the proper ordering of the principal spirit is maintained (or restored) and our bodies (when we next receive one) will reflect this fact. What we bring into ourselves is held in the body and through this assimilation is loved by the principal spirit. Thus, the body plays an important role in our interaction with the rest of creation by influencing our inner natures through the assimilation of outside spirits and by reflecting our inner natures in the transformation process.

This same procedure holds when new individuals are born.¹³ Conway maintains that when new principal spirits are formed, during generation, the female semen holds the male semen along with other spirits from outside of the man and woman. She writes, “And whatever spirit is strongest and has the strongest image or idea in the woman, whether male or female, or any other spirit received from outside one or the other of them, that spirit predominates in the semen and forms a body as similar as possible to its image. And thus every creature receives its external shape” (6.11 39). Here, again, it is not just the principal spirits of the individuals involved that determine the resulting individual’s shape, but influence from outside spirits can play a substantive role. The retentive nature of the female semen holds these outside images/spirits and if they are strong in her, the resulting individual’s body may reflect these images rather than those of the parents. Conway holds that this form of generation, the coming together of the active and passive principles, which

¹³ See Boyle (2006) for a rigorous discussion of generation in Conway’s work.

corresponds to spirit and body, applies to every type of production in the world. For according to Conway, the body is the repository not merely of images from the outside, but also of our own thoughts, memories, and knowledge.

It would be natural to assume that the principal spirit is the vessel of thought and knowledge for Conway. After all, the principal spirit plays the role of soul in Conway's ontology. Conway was certainly aware of the fact that most of her philosophical predecessors maintained that the mind is the soul or is located in the soul. However, Conway holds that thoughts are composed in part by bodies and that they reside in body. She explains that the "internal productions of the mind," or thoughts, are creatures which have a "body and spirit" (6.11 39). She continues, "For, if they did not have a body, they could not be retained nor could we reflect on our own thoughts." In addition to the retention of our own thoughts, we also retain the images of our past perceptions in our body, which constitute our memories. "Thus when we remember something, we see within ourselves its image, which is the spirit that proceeded from it, while we looked at it from the outside. This image, or spirit, is retained in some body, which is the semen of our brain" (6.11 39). Finally, all our knowledge, whether received by reflection upon our own internal states or through sensation and perception, requires body in order to be received and retained. Conway writes,

Moreover, I understand all creaturely knowledge as knowledge received or aroused by the things or objects which are known (whereas God's knowledge is neither received no aroused by creatures, but is innately in him and comes from him). Since there are various objects of our knowledge, and since every object sends us its own image and that image is a real entity, it follows that we have many images in us.... (7.4 54)

Perception involves the reception of very light spirits or images from the objects we perceive. In order to retain knowledge of these objects, we must hold the images/spirits within ourselves in order to consider the objects, reason about them, and recall them. Our knowledge is

essentially different from God's knowledge since God, who is pure spirit, does not retain images of creatures within him (he does not have a body to do this). Rather, God's thoughts concern the essence of all existence (his own essence), which is eternally present to him. Although Conway does not explicitly mention it, her view that body is the repository of memory and thoughts, provides an explanation of why we do not remember our previous modes of existence (past lives). For when our bodies are released from our principal spirits (a process which is due to the release of the middle spirits connecting the "light" principal spirit with the "dark" and "condensed" spirit of body) and a new body is formed, the new body will not contain the thoughts, memories, and knowledge previously held in the old body. Of course, one might wonder how incorporation is a punishment if one does not remember why one is being punished. However, we must recall that, according to Conway, God's justice is not for the purpose of revenge upon the wrongdoer, but rather for purposes of purification and refinement. Knowledge of one's past lives is not necessary for this sort of moral improvement (although one might think it couldn't hurt). What is important is that one love the good and act in accordance with the proper object of the good – God's will. What is appropriate action in accordance with goodness will vary according to what mode of being an individual currently enjoys. That is, the actions proper to a horse differ from those proper to an angel. And so knowledge of one's previous mode of existence will not necessarily be useful in one's current mode of existence. Conway holds that incorporation is merely part of the continual process of refinement. She writes, "the divine power, goodness, and wisdom has created good creatures so that they may continually and infinitely move towards the good through their own mutability... And this is the nature of all creatures, namely that they be in continual motion or operation, which most certainly strives for their further good (just as for the reward and fruit of their own labor)" (6.6 32). So, while some creatures will fall and become more incorporated, they will eventually turn back towards the good and become more subtle spirits.

Conclusion

According to Anne Conway, all created beings are essentially spirit and yet all have some body. Her view of the nature and role of body is both thoughtful and original. She maintains that incorporation is the result of moving away from God, and thus down the ontological and moral scale of being. However, the purpose of body is not to imprison our spirits, but to reflect our inner natures, interact with others through the emanation and retention of spirits, and to perceive, think, achieve knowledge, and remember.¹⁴

¹⁴ The research for this paper was completed at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion. I would like to thank the Center for its support. My work on Conway benefited greatly from discussions there, and I would like to thank Colin Chamberlain, Liz Goodnick, and Eric Stencil for their questions and comments. I would also like to thank Eileen O'Neill for her useful comments and suggestions.

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