

Is Anne Conway a Monist?

- I. Conway's Metaphysical Framework
- II. Monism and Pluralism
- III. An Impasse?
- IV. Conway's Pluralism

CLAIM: Conway is not a monist (contrary to what many commentators have suggested).

- All passages, which *prima facie* suggest a monist interpretation, are in fact compatible with a pluralist reading.
- Many pluralist sounding passages are difficult to reconcile with a monist reading.
- Overall, the pluralist reading is a better interpretative fit.

I. Conway's Metaphysical Framework

Conway subscribes to a tripartite ontology. On her view, there are exactly three kinds of being: God, Christ, and creatures.

- (i) *God* is eternal and immutable.
- (ii) *Christ* is mutable, but can only become better.
- (iii) *Creatures* are also mutable, but they can become better and worse.

So, mutability/changeability is one of the crucial differences between the three types of being:

[A] “[T]here are three kinds of being. The first is altogether immutable. The second can only change toward the good, so that which is good by its very nature can become better. The third kind is that which, although it was good by its very nature, is nevertheless able to change from good to good as well as from good to evil.” (P 5.3; CC 24)

The relation between these three types of beings is one of *emanation*:

[B] “[God is] the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty. In what way is it possible for that fountain not to flow perpetually and to send forth living waters? For will not that ocean overflow in its perpetual emanation and continual flux for the production of creatures?” (P 2.4; CC 13)

Christ is “the mediator between God and the creatures” (P 5.2; CC 24):

[C] “As proof of this, namely, the existence of Christ as mediator, the following things must be considered: first, the nature or essence of God, the highest being; second, the nature and essence of the creatures, which are so unlike each other that the nature of this mediator will become immediately apparent to us.” (P 5.3; CC 24)

II. Monism and Pluralism

TYPE MONISM: There is exactly one kind/type of object.

EXISTENCE MONISM: There is exactly one (actual, concrete) object. (Schaffer 2010, 65-66)

PRIORITY MONISM: There is exactly one (actual, concrete) fundamental object. (Schaffer 2010, 65-66)

PLURALISM: There is more than one (actual, concrete) fundamental object.

Example for a (priority-)monist position in the 17th century: Spinoza's substance monism.

[D] E1p14: "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived."

[E] E1p15: "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God."

[F] E1p15d: "Except for God, there neither is, nor can be conceived, any substance (by P14), that is (by D3), thing that is in itself and can be conceived through itself. But modes (by D5) can neither be nor be conceived without substance. So they can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone. But except for substances and modes there is nothing (by A1). Therefore, [NS: everything is in God and] nothing can be or be conceived without God, q.e.d."

QUESTION: Does Conway endorse such a monist view with respect to the created world?
Or does she instead advocate a pluralist view?

III. An Impasse?

PROBLEM: In the *Principles*, there are passages which *prima facie* suggest a monist position. There are also passages, however, which *prima facie* suggest a pluralist position.

Pluralist sounding passages:

[G] "And so we see how a certain thing, while always remaining the same substance, can change marvelously in respect to its mode of being, so that a holy and blessed spirit or an angel of light may become an evil and cursed spirit of darkness through its own willful actions." (*Principles* 7.1; CC 43)

[H] "Here one may observe a kind of divine spirituality or subtlety in every motion and in every action of life, which no created substance or body is capable of, namely through intimate presence. As shown above, no created substance is capable of this and yet every motion and action whatsoever is. For motion or action is not a certain matter or substance but rather a mode of being." (*Principles* 9.9; CC 68)

[I] "[M]otion and action are nothing but modes of created substances, like strength, power, and force, through which motion and action can be magnified beyond what the substance itself can do." (*Principles* 9.9; CC 69)

Monist sounding passages:

[J] “[T]here are many species which are commonly said to differ, but nevertheless are not different from each other in substance or essence, but only in certain modes or attributes. And when these modes or attributes change, the things itself is said to have changed its species. But indeed, it is not the essence or entity itself but only its modes of being which thus changes.” (P 6.3; CC 29)

[K] “[A]ll 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.” (*Principles* 6.4; CC 31)

[L] “Truly, every body is a spirit and nothing else, and it differs from a spirit only insofar as it is darker. Therefore the crasser it becomes, the more it is removed from the condition of spirit. Consequently, the distinction between spirit and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial.” (*Principles* 6.11; CC 39-40)

[M] “There exists a general unity of all creatures one with another such that no one can be separated from his fellow creatures.” (*Principles* 7.4; CC 52)

[N] “In whatever way bodies or spirits may be divided or separated from each other throughout the universe, they always remain united in this separation since the whole creation is always just one substance or entity, and there is no vacuum in it.” (*Principles* 7.4; CC 52)

[O] “God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body and all, so to speak, brothers, for whom there is one common Father, namely, God in Christ or the word incarnate. There is also one mother, that unique substance or entity from which all things have come forth, and of which they are the real parts and members.” (*Principles* 6.4; CC 31)

The monist interpretation is rather popular. Two examples (for more examples, see Hutton 2004, 3 and Gordon-Roth 2018):

[P] “The created world is one big infinitely complex vital substance, whose various modes constitute individual creatures.” (Mercer 2012, 185)

[Q] “[O]n the priority monism reading, the seemingly conflicting passages are reconciled by arguing that Conway is a priority monist. In answering how many created substances are there, there is no need for Conway to oscillate between the perspectives of God and creatures. There is simply one created substance, and it is prior to its many parts.” (Thomas 2020, 283)

But is this right? Does Conway see the entire creation as one substance and created individuals as nothing but modes? Or are there several created substances on her view? And why does Conway seem to fluctuate between monism and pluralism?

IV. Conway's Pluralism

1. Does Conway think that creatures are modes? (If so, Conway's position would be somewhat similar to Spinoza's substance monism.)
2. Why does Conway sometimes hesitate to classify created individuals as substances?
3. Why does Conway sometimes classify created individuals as substances?

1. Does Conway think that creatures are modes?

Conway never explicitly says that created individuals are modes. That creatures are 'modally distinct' from one another can be understood in different ways.

2. Why does Conway sometimes hesitate to classify created individuals as substances?

Substances are often understood as metaphysically independent entities (examples: Descartes, Leibniz). Perhaps this is why Conway sometimes hesitates to call created individuals 'substances.' According to Conway, created individuals are mutually dependent on one another in a rather strong sense:

[R] "Moreover, a consideration of the infinite divisibility of everything into always smaller parts is not an inane or useless theory, but of the very greatest use for understanding the causes and reasons of things and for understanding how all creatures from the highest to the lowest are inseparably united one to another by their subtler mediating parts, which come between them and which are emanations from one creature to another, through which they can act upon one another at the greatest distance." (P. 3.10; CC 20)

3. Why does Conway sometimes classify created individuals as substances?

Monist interpretations cannot answer this question in a satisfactory way. Conway's created individuals have at least three features which are traditionally associated with substances (and *not* with modes):

- Created individuals are subjects of predication. (See [I] und [J])
- Created individuals are persisting subjects of change. (See [G])
- Created individuals are causally active. [See [R])

Bibliography

- P = Anne Conway. *Principia philosophiae antiquissimae et recentissimae de Deo, Christo et Creatura id est de materia et spiritu in genere*. Amsterdam 1690
- CC = Anne Conway. *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. Ed. by T. Corse & A. Coudert. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996).
- Gordon-Roth, Jessica (2018). “What Kind of Monist is Anne Finch Conway?” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4.3: 280-297.
- Hutton, Sarah (2004). *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mercer, Christia (2012). “Knowledge and Suffering in Early Modern Philosophy: G.W. Leibniz and Anne Conway.” In: Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Ed.). *Emotional Minds*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 179-206.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2010). “Monism. The Priority of the Whole.” *Philosophical Review* 119.1: 31-76.
- Thomas, Emily (2020). “Anne Conway as a Priority Monist: A Reply to Gordon-Roth.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6.3: 275-284.