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ANNE CONWAY'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Elizabeth Burns

Anne Conway (1631–79) produced only one short treatise – The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy – *but addressed key problems in the philosophy of religion which are still much discussed today. The most significant of these are the problem of religious diversity and the problem of evil. Although the sources of her ideas may be found in the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and the work of the Cambridge Platonists and the Quaker George Keith, among others, she offers her own unorthodox solutions to these problems. The idea of Christ as an indwelling mediator of the divine who assists us in our moral endeavours is designed to appeal to those of all religions and none, while her claim that God created creatures knowing that they would eventually be redeemed, and that suffering promotes moral development which leads to redemption offers a novel response to the problem of evil. Conway's work is also important for its influence on the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and some have argued that it prefigures, at least in outline, the field theory of modern physics.*

Anne Conway (née Finch) was born in 1631 to Sir Heneage Finch (who died a week before her birth) and his second wife Elizabeth Cradock and lived her early life in the house now known as Kensington Palace. Although she received no formal education, she was tutored at home and later received instruction in philosophy from Henry More (1614–87), one of the so-called Cambridge Platonists, who

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was the tutor of her half-brother, John Finch, at Christ's College, Cambridge. Since women were not permitted to attend the University, the instruction took place by letter and appears to have focused on the philosophy of René Descartes (1596–1650). Some of these letters have survived and are reproduced in *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, and Henry Moore, and their Friends, 1642–1684*, edited by Marjorie Hope Nicolson and revised by Sarah Hutton. A smaller selection may be found in chapter 2 of *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth-Century England: Selected Correspondence*, edited by Jacqueline Broad.

In 1651 Anne married Edward Conway (1623–83), who became Viscount Conway in 1655, but her friendship with More continued for the remainder of her life. Her only son, Heneage, died of smallpox before his second birthday, and, from her teenage years, she suffered from headaches which became increasingly more painful until her death in 1679 at the age of 47. Through More, Conway met the physician Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–98). He was unable to cure her but, during the last nine years of her life, most of which he spent at her home, Ragley Hall in Warwickshire, he introduced her both to the Lurianic Kabbalah, a version of the secret wisdom of the Jewish people preserved by Isaac Luria (1534–72), and to Quakerism, to which she converted. During this time Conway produced her only philosophical work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy.* Soon after her death, van Helmont took it to the European Continent to have it published. It was not published until 1690, however, when parts of it (the Preface refers to other sections which were illegible and therefore not transcribed (7)) were published in Amsterdam as a Latin translation from the original English version. These parts were eventually translated back into English, presumably because the original English version had been lost, and published in 1692.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given her personal history, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, as

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Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse note, may be regarded as 'essentially a theodicy' (xi) – an attempt to explain why a good God permits suffering.

The first three of its nine chapters are concerned with the nature of God and the nature of the relationship between God and God's creatures. In Chapter 1, Conway addresses a problem with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the claim that God is three persons in one – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This doctrine, she argues, is 'a stumbling block and offense' to those of other religions; it 'has no reasonable sense in itself … and is found nowhere in Scripture' (10). She suggests, instead, that 'the most knowledgeable and judicious among Christians' (10) understand the Trinity as God, God's wisdom, and God's will, the latter two of which cause creatures to exist. If the claim that God is three distinct persons were to be disregarded, she argues, all would be able to agree on this definition of the Trinity.

In Chapter 2, Conway argues that God has always been a creator. If this were not the case, God would be able to change but, for Conway, God is unchangeable. The logical outcome of this is that, in some sense, creatures have always existed and will always exist (13). God's eternity is different from that of creatures, however. Although time passes for God's creatures, God is timeless (nothing is past or future for God) because God is perfect; God cannot change to become more perfect.

In Chapter 3 we are told that God is both a free agent and a necessary one. God makes choices, but God's choices are constrained to some extent by God's own nature; because God is infinitely wise, good and just, God cannot perform actions which are not wise, good or just. His wisdom and goodness caused him to bring creatures into existence; he is the 'first mover' of all his creatures (18). These creatures can be infinitely divided into smaller parts and this, Conway suggests, is not an 'inane or useless' occult theory but is of the greatest importance for understanding how all creatures are inseparably connected

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to each other, and how they can influence each other from the greatest of distances (20). More recently, a similar idea may be found in the work of John Hick, who argues that Hinduism's story of Indra's Net, a net of infinite extension which has a jewel at every knot, each of which reflects every other jewel, illustrates the idea that all human beings are linked together in a network of interdependence (Hick 2006: 185).

In Chapters 4–6, Conway elaborates on the role of Jesus Christ who, although not referred to as the second person of the Trinity in Chapter 1, as one might expect in a more orthodox interpretation of Christianity, is, in Chapter 4, nevertheless said to be both God and man. As God, Christ is 'the essential word of the father' and, as man, he is 'the word which is uttered and revealed'; he is the image of God who serves as the vehicle of God (20–1). In Chapter 5, Christ is described as the mediator between God and God's creatures. His existence 'is as demonstrable as the existence of God' (24), but he is 'of a lesser nature than God' while being of a more excellent nature than all other creatures, which is why he is called the son of God.

Conway offers us a two-stage proof for this theory. The first part reiterates her previous claim that the nature and being of God cannot change because God is the greatest being; he cannot change for the better because he is already perfect, and he cannot become less good because then he would not be a perfect being (24). The second part argues that creatures must be changeable because otherwise they would be God. Experience also shows 'that creatures are mutable and continually change from one state to another' (24). Conway argues that there are two kinds of change – the power to change oneself for the better or the worse, and the power to change from one form of goodness to another. Creatures can change in both ways, but Christ can change only in the second way. This means that there are three kinds of being; the first is immutable, the second can change only towards goodness, and the third, although good by nature, can change both from good to

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good and from good to evil (24). The first and third types of being are opposites and so it is the second type of being who serves as the most appropriate mediator between the two.

This does not mean that God is not present in all creatures, however. It means that Christ is the instrument which God uses to work with God's creatures because Christ has more in common with creatures. But because Christ is more excellent than creatures he is called both the first-born of creatures and the son of God. He comes into existence by generation or emanation from God rather than creation; a house or ship is not said to be the son of the maker, and the son of God is the living image of God (25). The son of God is like God in all of his attributes and is therefore present everywhere. This means that he is present in all creatures to bless and benefit them, and to raise them to union with God (25–6). Since the son of God is mid-way between God and creatures, he shares eternity with God and shared time with creatures during his life on Earth as Jesus of Nazareth. But if 'time' refers to 'a successive increase or decrease of things during which they grow for a certain period and then decline until they die or change into another state' (26), the mediating being and those who are perfectly united to God are not subject to time in this sense: '[T]hose who achieve a perfect union with Christ are raised to a region of perfect tranquillity, where nothing is seen or felt to move or be moved' (27).

In Chapter 6 Conway observes again that there are three types of being, now clearly identified as God, Christ and creatures (30). God has implanted in his creatures sympathy and love for each other, which means that they are all brothers with one common Father – God – who is manifested in Christ (31). Interestingly, particularly from a feminist point of view, Conway also suggests that they have one mother, 'that unique substance or entity from which all things have come forth, and of which they are real parts and members' (31). Those who acknowledge that there is a mediator between God and creatures 'can be said truly to

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believe in Jesus Christ, even though they do not yet know it and are not convinced that he has already come in the flesh' (32). This, then, is Conway's solution to the problem of religious diversity which, from a Christian point of view, is the problem of whether those who have never encountered Christ can achieve salvation. It bears some resemblance to Karl Rahner's twentieth-century argument that there can be 'anonymous Christians' (Rahner 1980).

Conway then turns to a series of arguments for a form of monism, the idea that the body and mind are two aspects of the same substance. She rejects the dualism of Descartes and More, who thought that body and mind were separate entities, because she thinks that the idea that physical matter has no soul is destructive of both religion and morality. In Chapter 6 she argues that our thoughts require a body because, without a body, we would be unable to retain or reflect upon our thoughts. Memory also requires a body 'to retain the spirit of the thing conceived of', without which it vanishes, as an image in a mirror vanishes when the object is removed (39); when we remember something we see in ourselves its image, the spirit which proceeded from it when we looked at it from the outside (39).

In Chapter 7 Conway's key motivation for presenting her arguments for monism becomes clearer. Three of these arguments appear in this chapter. First, she suggests that anything can vary the degree to which it is body or spirit, and that the spirit is the more excellent; the more spiritual a creature becomes, the closer it moves towards God who is the highest spirit. The nature of a creature is to become more like the creator. Nothing is contrary to God in every respect, so no creature can make infinite progress in becoming more of a body, but it can make infinite progress in becoming more of a spirit. So 'in the very nature of things there are limits to evil, but none to goodness' (42). As Conway has already noted in the previous chapter (37), every degree of sin has its own appropriate punishment, designed by God to restore the sinner to a state of perfect

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goodness in which she has only the desire to do good (42). As she also said in the previous chapter, all punishments are ultimately for the good of creatures, 'so that the grace of God will prevail over judgment and judgment turn into victory for the salvation and restoration of creatures' (37). Moreover, there is no such thing as eternal torment because 'all pain and torment stimulates the life or spirit existing in everything which suffers' (43). Presumably she means by this that, although not all suffering is a punishment for sin, all suffering has the power to stimulate moral development, and this means that, the more a creature suffers, the sooner it will be restored (43).

Her second argument for monism is that God is infinitely good and therefore created all creatures in such a way that they are able to enjoy divine goodness. This means that all creatures have life and the power of perception to some degree, for all time (45). Her third argument for monism in Chapter 7 is derived from the soul's love for bodies, particularly its own. Love is usually focused on creatures which are similar to oneself, and this is supported by the fact that humankind and animals tend to love their own offspring more than the offspring of others, their own species more than other species (46), and other creatures more than things which are not creatures (47). On this basis, she argues, the body must have much in common with the soul which loves it.

In Chapter 8, Conway offers three more arguments for monism. Arguments five and six need not detain us long. Argument five claims that since, for example, a pool full of water produces fish when no fish have been placed in it, every body contains 'the spirits of all animals and other things' (60). And argument six refers to various texts from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament to prove 'that everything has life and is truly alive in some degree' (62). Argument four is more substantial, however. Conway argues that the spirit and the body are connected because, if this were not the case, why would the spirit need 'a corporeal eye so wonderfully formed and organized

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that I may see through it?' (57). She acknowledges the possible objection that God is able to move a body without being connected to a body, but argues that the way God moves a body is different from the way in which a soul moves a body. God is the cause of motion, but is himself unmoved. In an argument similar to that of Aquinas (1920) she claims that this does not mean that God is the cause of sin because,

> although the power to move comes from God … sin in no way comes from God but from the creature which has abused this power and directed it to something other than it should … If, for example, a ship is moved by wind but is steered by a helmsman so that it goes from this place or that place, then the helmsman is neither the author nor cause of the wind; but the wind blowing, he makes either a good or bad use of it. (58)

Conway also questions why, if the soul is not connected with the body, it suffers so much as a consequence of bodily pain and concludes that 'the soul moves the body and suffers with it and through it' (58).

Since parts of Conway's treatise are missing, we do not know whether Chapter 9 was its intended conclusion. In this chapter she offers a refutation of the view of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) that God and creatures are the same substance (65). For Conway, God is the supreme being whose nature is immutable and surpasses that of every creature. The divine may be seen in every motion and every action in the form of 'intimate presence' (70), but every creature remains an instrument of God (70).

So what are we to make of Conway's arguments? Are they largely derived from the arguments of earlier scholars and therefore mainly of historical interest, perhaps primarily as a record of the endeavours of a woman who overcame some significant obstacles in order to produce the

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philosophical work which survives her? Or do her arguments still have something to contribute to philosophical debate today?

Conway is, indeed, to be commended for transcending many of the limitations imposed upon women of her time (Coudert and Corse, xxxiii) and for pursuing her arguments where, in her view, they led, despite contemporary attitudes to non-orthodox forms of Christianity, particularly Quakerism – although the connections afforded to her as a member of the English aristocracy and a tolerant and influential spouse, along with sufficient leisure time and access to a private meeting space, would certainly have assisted her in both of these respects. She is also to be applauded for producing her treatise despite many years of intense physical pain, largely unalleviated by the limited medical interventions available at the time.

A number of scholars have, indeed, identified similar arguments in earlier sources. For example, Sarah Hutton suggests that Conway's Christology contains 'many striking verbal and conceptual parallels' (2004: 199) with the theology of the Quaker George Keith (1638–1716). Jacqueline Broad observes that Conway's criticisms of More's dualism bear a 'striking resemblance' to those of Lady Margaret Cavendish (1623–73) (Broad 2002: 70) and notes that the claim that humankind is gradually moving towards the good is Platonic (83). And Coudert and Corse suggest that Conway's concept of restoration was derived from the Lurianic concept of *tikkun* (xxi).

Hutton observes, however, that Keith's 'attempt to harness kabbalism to Quaker theology was piecemeal to say the least' (2004: 202). She also suggests that Conway's conception of Christ as Middle Nature has, to her knowledge, 'no parallel in Christian theology' (2004: 172), and that it might be regarded as 'a divinised version of the intermediary causal principle posited by the Cambridge Platonists' (201) – but whereas More, for example, argued for a 'Spirit of Nature', Conway's Christ as Middle Nature is

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'neither a subordinate deity nor an alternative deity, but God himself' (201).

Conway studied kabbalistic philosophy with van Helmont, who was also a friend of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), and Coudert and Corse refer to manuscript evidence that kabbalistic philosophy was a formative influence on the philosophy of Leibniz, particularly his concept of monads (the basic building blocks of the created world) and his theodicy. Conway refers to 'physical monads' as the first state of the formation of concrete matter on page 20 of her treatise. Leibniz read an annotated version of her treatise (Coudert and Corse, xxxi) and remarked in a letter to Thomas Burnett: 'My philosophical views approach somewhat closely those of the late Countess Conway … all things are full of life and consciousness' (quoted in Coudert and Corse, xxx). Like Conway, Leibniz rejects Cartesian dualism, arguing that mind and matter are not separate because this would make interaction between them impossible. And, like Conway, he argues that monads are not passive parts of matter but have the power to move and develop. Christia Mercer (2012) suggests that both Conway and Leibniz argue that partial knowledge of the divine is available to people of all religions, and that suffering enables moral development. Although Leibniz does not say, as Conway does, that God is a just God because every creature will eventually be saved, as proposed by the concept of *tikkun*, Coudert and Corse think that this is likely to have been because he was a public official working for conciliation between Catholics and Protestants, and because the Kabbalah was not favourably regarded by most Christians and he did not want to be seen as an irrational mystic (xxxii–xxxiii). They argue, however, that careful readings of his published works and his unpublished manuscripts show that he did believe this, and that he did so on the basis of the Lurianic Kabbalah.

Coudert and Corse also quote the claim of George MacDonald Ross that Leibniz anticipated modern field theory, which regards material particles as concentrated

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fields of force (xxxii), and suggest that this also applies to Conway, who may be said to have anticipated modern physics (xxxii).

While it is possible to identify a number of sources for Conway's philosophy of religion, then, there are also some respects in which she made an original contribution to key debates, and her work was also an important influence on at least one major philosopher. Despite the circumstances in which she lived, she was not afraid to advance a form of Christian theology which was, in many respects, quite unorthodox in order to address significant problems in the philosophy of religion, at least two of which – the problem of religious diversity and the problem of evil – are still key problems in the discussion today.

The idea of a mediating figure who assists our moral progress is not, however, uncontroversial, even if it is at least partly divested of traditional Christology. But, if we understand it as a spark of divinity which dwells within all human persons, we might, perhaps, be able to incorporate it into a theodicy which focuses on the value of moral development. This theodicy is enhanced by the idea that there is only one substance, in which the material and the spiritual are on the same spectrum. On this spectrum, the highest aspects emanate from the lowest aspects, which means that everything is ultimately derived from the lowest aspects, and that everything is therefore interrelated and can influence everything else (20). On Conway's view, there is no distinction between moral evil as the evil actions of human beings and natural evil as evil of all other kinds; for Conway, evils of all kinds can function as punishments for past sins and/or as challenges which we face throughout our lives. In overcoming these evils, or at least coping with them to the best of our ability, we achieve moral development and move closer to the point of redemption. If, as Conway appears to suggest, this progression is a progression from embodied soul to, at the point of death, disembodied spirit – with all the challenges associated with personal identity which the latter represents – we might

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then entertain at least the possibility that there is some kind of post-mortem existence in some higher, timeless realm.

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