

Rocks are Just Bad Souls: Anne Conway's Privation Account of Matter

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Abstract

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The Cambridge Platonist Anne Conway, in her only treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, articulates a complex metaphysical system, partly formed as an alternative to the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes and Hobbes. Objecting to Descartes' dualism, Conway defends a monistic and vitalistic account of matter. However, Conway's account of matter is notoriously difficult to understand. One reason for this is that Conway does not make her aims in the *Principles* explicit. Without a precise account of Conway's aims, it is difficult to evaluate her account of matter. I argue that Conway, motivated by primarily religious aims, defends a privation account of matter. Conway's concern is making her ontology consistent with the Christian doctrine of universal salvation. The paper concludes by considering how Conway defends her account of matter from mechanist objections.

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Introduction

The Cambridge Platonist Anne Conway (1631-1679),¹ motivated by primarily religious aims, defends a privation account of matter. By a privation account of matter, I mean that the principal attribute of substance is spirit or soul, and matter is substance deficient in the attribute of spirit. She develops her account of matter, as well as a complex metaphysical system, in her only treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, which was written between 1671 and 1679, but only appeared in 1690.²

In the *Principles*, Conway is explicitly concerned with the mechanist philosophers shortly preceding her: René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes. The mechanist philosophers, including Descartes and Hobbes, were interested in natural philosophy, especially the new mechanistic physics. For Descartes especially, the primary motivation for doing philosophy was providing a metaphysical foundation for mechanistic physics. There was substantial conflict between natural philosophy and established religious doctrine in the seventeenth century. However, other philosophers, especially Conway and the other Cambridge Platonists, were concerned about the religious consequences of the new natural philosophy. Conway's most important philosophical influence, Henry More, was concerned that mechanistic philosophy would lead to atheism, and explicitly tried to

¹ For a comprehensive biography of Conway, see Hutton (2004). Recent scholarship has emphasized the similarity of Conway's metaphysics to the Cambridge Platonists, especially Henry More: see, for example, Thomas (2017) on Conway's similarity to More on the metaphysics of space and time.

² The 1690 edition of the *Principles* was a Latin translation, which was not re-translated into English until 1692. The original English version was a collection of Conway's notes, which may have been edited by More or another one of Conway's intellectual influences, Francis Mercury van Helmont. The original notes have been lost. For a history of the text, see Coudert and Corse (1996), xxxviii-xxxix. I use Coudert and Corse's 1996 English translation.

reconcile it with Christianity.³ Conway's criticism of Descartes and Hobbes in her *Principles* indicates she shares More's concern about mechanistic philosophy.

Conway's explicit criticism of the mechanistic philosophy focuses on its description of matter.⁴ For Conway, the terms 'matter' and 'body' are interchangeable,⁵ and both refer to physical substance. Conway is especially concerned with Descartes' account of matter, rejecting his mind-matter dualism and positing her own monist account of matter and spirit instead.⁶ Conway ([1690] 1996) argues there is only a modal distinction between matter and spirit (6.11, 40). Her positive account of matter places it on the opposite end of a continuum from spirit.⁷ My interpretation of Conway's account of matter moves from this general claim to a more precise claim. I also connect this more precise account of matter to an account of Conway's aims. I argue Conway, motivated by primarily religious aims, defends a privation account of matter.

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I will make a systematic argument for my interpretation of Conway's aim in the *Principles*, claiming that she is attempting to provide philosophical foundations for a redemptive theology. By

³ See Hutton (2004), p. 73-93.

⁴ Hutton (2012), McRobert (2000), and White (2008) claim that Conway rejected Descartes' account of matter because she was a vitalist. The view I defend here is not a rejection of vitalism; rather, it offers an explanation of why Conway would be a vitalist.

⁵ Conway sometimes calls matter "body," and usually refers to extended created substance as body. She uses the two interchangeably, and makes it clear they can be used equivalently, describing it as "mere body or matter," and "dead matter, or body" (both [1690] 1996, 7.2, 45). In-text citations of the *Principles* refer to chapter and section, and then page number.

⁶ Other commentators concentrate on Conway's rejection of Descartes' mind-body dualism. Merchant (1979) also argues Conway was a vitalist, and claims her "break from Descartes... was sharpest on the issue of dualism" (259) and her "monistic resolution of the mind-body problem" (263). Duran (1989) claims Conway's critique of Descartes was motivated by monism (69). Coudert and Corse (1996) claim that Conway's "basic point throughout her treatise is that dualism of any kind simply fails as a philosophy because it is incapable of explaining how things in the actual world function" (xv-xvi). Broad (2002) is clear that for Conway, "body and spirit make up one kind of substance" and that on this account, "questions about how the soul interacts with the body are no longer perplexing" (89).

⁷ Duran (1989) claims "there is no clear line of demarcation for Conway between the human and nonhuman or living and non-living" (69). Loftson (1982), Frankel (1991), McRobert (2000), Hutton (2004), Hutton (2012), and White (2008) all note that for Conway, spirit and matter are opposite ends of a continuum.

philosophical foundations for a redemptive theology, I mean that Conway attempts to provide metaphysical grounds for the Christian doctrine of universal salvation. Second, I will examine her objections to the mechanistic accounts of matter posited by Descartes and Hobbes. The term mechanistic account of matter refers to accounts of matter in which matter is conceived exclusively in terms of precise mathematical accounts of extension and its modes. Third, I argue for my interpretation of Conway's account of matter: the privation account. Finally, in the fourth section, I explain Conway's responses to objections from the perspective of the mechanistic account of matter.

1: Conway's Aim in *The Principles*

Conway's most important and overarching aim in the *Principles* is to articulate what I call a philosophical foundation for a redemptive theology. To argue that, I first explain my interpretation of her aim. Second, I examine passages from the *Principles* that support my interpretation.

To begin my explanation of Conway's aims, I want to address why it is important to consider them. The question of why Conway wrote the *Principles* is not easily answered — she does not explicitly state her aims in the *Principles* itself, nor are they found in the preface or her other correspondence. However, knowledge of her aims is crucial for evaluating the success of her work on its own terms, and its philosophical importance within its historical context.

Conway's aim is both theological and philosophical. Coudert and Corse (1996) emphasize Conway's religious motivations, claiming Conway's critique of the mechanistic philosophy is to provide a "secure foundation for an ecumenical religion

uniting Christian, Jew, Moslem, and pagan in loving worship of a merciful and benevolent God” (xvii). Hutton (2004), in contrast, emphasizes Conway’s philosophical methodology, and suggests she is primarily concerned with the compatibility of philosophy and theology (11-12). However, these are both general claims, and no one to date has attempted to give a precise account of Conway’s aims and evaluate her philosophy in the context of her aims.

I argue that Conway’s aim is to articulate the philosophical foundations for a redemptive theology. That is, Conway attempts to describe the metaphysical grounds for the Christian doctrine of universal salvation. Believing all created substance has “fallen” from its original state of goodness ([1690] 1996, 7.1, 42; 7.1, 43; and 7.3, 47), Conway argues that created substance (which she also calls creatures) is redeemed or saved by becoming morally and metaphysically better than it was in its state of creation. Conway believes that God has ensured the redemption of all creatures, and explains how he has done so through a two-part metaphysical system. The first part of this system is the ontology, and the second is what I call a system of justice.

Conway’s ontology makes it possible for creatures to become morally and metaphysically better. For Conway, creatures become morally and metaphysically better when they become more like God. God is omnibenevolent, and is incapable of doing any evil, so when creatures become more like God morally they become less evil. Metaphysically, God is a spirit or soul, and is absolutely immaterial (1.1 and 1.2, 9). So, when creatures become more like him in this sense, they become less physical or corporeal and more spiritual. For creatures to be redeemed or saved, then, is for them to be more good and more spiritual than they were when they were created. Redemption

requires an ontology that makes it possible for creatures to become more spiritual, and thus more like God.

Within this system, whether creatures become more or less like God is a product of their own free wills (2.1, 15). Thus on this account, it is also possible for creatures to become less like God. The system of justice explains how God has guaranteed the redemption of creatures. This system of justice is meticulously arranged, so that each action has its own particular punishment or reward (6.7, 35; 6.10, 37). Punishment results in suffering, which for Conway has a therapeutic or restorative value (6.10, 37).⁸ When creatures suffer, they are made morally better, and thus less likely to turn away from God.

I now intend to demonstrate my interpretation of Conway's aim by examining passages from the *Principles*. In these passages, Conway assumes theological doctrines like universal salvation and the existence of God and Christ. Since Conway assumes these doctrines, she does not aim to prove them. Rather, three things Conway does in these passages suggest her aim is to defend the metaphysical conditions that make these doctrines possible. First, she defends an ontology that articulates how it is possible for all creatures to become more like God in terms of their attributes. Second, Conway explains the laws of the universe in such a way that redemption is necessary. Third, Conway explains the nature of substances in her ontology in terms of their theological purposes. Altogether, these suggest her aim is making the structure of the world consistent with her theology. If Conway assumes her theological doctrines, and defends metaphysical positions consistent with a world that make her theology plausible, that suggests her primary aim is providing philosophical foundations for her theology.

⁸ Mercer (2012) discusses the importance of suffering, especially Christ's suffering, to Conway's philosophy, and compares it to Leibniz.

In the following passage, Conway most clearly implies that she is concerned with providing the metaphysical foundations of a redemptive theology. After arguing for a modal distinction between spirit and matter, Conway also argues that there are limits to evil. Certain kinds of punishment will restore creatures to their original level of goodness as a created substance, thus redeeming them.

At this time every sin will have its own punishment and every creature will feel pain and chastisement, which will return *the creature to the pristine state of goodness in which it was created and from which it can never fall again because, through its great punishment, it has acquired a greater perfection and strength.* Consequently, from that indifference of will which it once had for good or evil, it rises until it *only wishes to be good* and is incapable of wishing any evil. Hence one can infer that all God's creatures, which have previously fallen and degenerated from their original goodness, *must be changed and restored after a certain time to a condition which is not simply as good as that in which they were created, but better.* The work of God cannot cease, and thus it is the nature of every creature to always be in motion and always changing from good to better and from good to evil or from evil back to good. And because *it is not possible to proceed towards evil to infinity since there is no example of infinite evil*, every creature must necessarily turn towards good or *fall into eternal silence, which is contrary to nature.* (Conway [1690] 1996, 7.1, 42, emphasis mine)

There are three reasons why this implies that Conway aims to provide metaphysical foundations for a redemptive theology. First, Conway explicitly states that her theology is redemptive: she claims all creatures have fallen from their original goodness, but will be “restored,” not only to their original state but a better one. Second, Conway claims there are limits to how evil reality can be. In the last sentence of the passage, Conway argues that it is not possible for creatures to become infinitely evil, or to fall into “eternal silence.” While it may not be possible for creatures to become infinitely evil, this does not give a reason for why it is possible or necessary for creatures to become more good, or be redeemed. Third, Conway implies that redemption is possible through creatures’ own essential properties. Creatures move towards the good through their own wills. The divine

system of justice created by God removes the indifference of the will, making it only good, and thus provides a metaphysical foundation for the redemptive theology. Conway assumes that all creatures are redeemable. Since Conway assumes all creatures are redeemable, she does not aim to prove that all creatures will be saved. Rather, Conway aims to make philosophical sense of salvation, by articulating the metaphysical structure of the world in a way that makes redemption possible.

The following passage is an example of how Conway explains the nature of reality in such a way that God has ensured the redemption of creatures. In the following passage, Conway discusses how God's justice applies to creatures:

That is to say, that all degrees and kinds of sin have their appropriate punishments, and all these punishments tend toward the good of creatures, *so that the grace of God will prevail of judgment and judgment turn into victory for the salvation and restoration of creatures*. Since the grace of God stretches over all his work, why do we think that God is more severe and more rigorous a punisher of his creatures than he truly is? This obscures and darkens the glory of God's attributes in an astonishing way. (Conway [1690] 1996, 6.8, 37, emphasis mine)

Two things are important about this passage. First, Conway explicitly states that she is concerned with the redemption, or "salvation and restoration," of all creatures. Second, Conway is explaining how God has designed a system of justice for all creatures, and implies that this system of justice is derived from his attributes. Conway implies this by claiming that viewing God as a severe punisher conceals the true nature of God, as revealed by his attributes. Since Conway elsewhere claims that being infinitely just, good, and wise are among God's attributes (1.1, 9), this is plausible. This system of justice, then, is part of the laws of the created universe, and thus part of the metaphysical foundation for Conway's redemptive theology.

Conway also argues that there are philosophical reasons for a redemptive theology in the following passage. Here, she argues that there is a metaphysical basis for creatures to increase in goodness:

Therefore, since the divine power, goodness, and wisdom has created good creatures, so that they can *may continually move towards the good through their own mutability*, the glory of their attributes shines more and more. *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 labour), unless they resist that good by a willful transgression and abuse of the impartial will created in them by God. (Conway [1690] 1996, 6.6, 32, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Conway suggests God created creatures with attributes that predispose them to becoming more good. Conway elsewhere claims that mutability is the essential attribute of creatures (6.1, 29). Because creatures move towards increased goodness through their own attributes, there is a metaphysical basis for this participation in further goodness. Conway also implies that for creatures, striving towards goodness is innate. Becoming more good would bring the creatures closer to their original state of goodness, and thus would allow for the creatures to be redeemed: Conway seems to suggest this when she says the “glory” of creatures’ attributes shine more when the creatures move towards the good.

Conway also explains some of her claims about the nature of created substance in terms of its theological purposes. For example, in the following passage, Conway responds to an objection from Scripture concerning a primarily metaphysical claim about the infinite divisibility of all substances:

Against this infinity of spirits in every spirit and against this infinity of bodies in each body, one may oppose [] from Scripture: “God made all things by number, weight, and measure.” Consequently a countless number of spirits cannot exist in one human being nor a countless multitude of bodies in one body. I respond, however, that this infinity or countless number of spirits and bodies must be

understood only in relation to an intelligent creature, even though no intelligent creature can enumerate that infinity or measure the outward extension of a body or spirit which can occur inside it. It is freely granted, moreover, that God perfectly knows the number and measure of all created things. For if God made everything in number, measure, and weight, then every creature will have its number, measure, and weight; and consequently, we cannot say of any creature that is only one single thing because it is a number, and number is a multitude. *Truly, it is the nature of a creature that it cannot be merely singular if it has to act and enjoy the good which the Creator prepared for it.* (Conway [1690] 1996, 7.4, 53-54, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Conway argues that creatures must be unities, or made of many smaller parts, to fulfill God's purpose for creation. This is a primarily metaphysical claim, but it is intended to make it possible for creatures to "act and enjoy" the good created by God. As stated previously, this acting to enjoy or receive God's goodness is part of the process of redemption.

Conway's characterization of the role of Christ, the third kind of substance in her ontology, strongly suggests she is concerned with providing a metaphysical basis for a redemptive theology. Conway describes Christ as a mediator, or middle nature between God and creatures (5.2, 24; 5.3, 24; 5.4, 26; 5.5, 26; 6.5, 31). As a median, his essence shares attributes both with God and creatures. Besides describing him as a substance, Conway also emphasizes his theological purpose. Consider the following passage:

Then [Christ] descended into time and for a certain period willingly subjected himself to its laws to the extent that he suffered great torment and death itself. But death did not detain him long, for on the third day he rose again, and *the purpose of all his suffering, up to his death and burial, was to heal, preserve, and restore creatures from corruption and death, which came upon them through the Fall, and so thereby put an end, at last, to time and raise creatures beyond time to himself*, where he dwells, he who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, without loss, corruption or death. Similarly, through his spiritual and inward appearance in men *he saves, preserves, and restores their souls*, and as it were, subjects himself to suffering and death, and for a certain period of time he subjects himself to the laws of time *so that he may raise the souls of men above time and corruption up to himself, in whom they receive blessing and in whom they grow by*

degrees in goodness, virtue, and holiness forever. (Conway [1690] 1996, 5.6, 27, emphasis mine)

Here, Conway is clear that Christ's theological purpose is to "restore" creatures to their original state, which is a greater level of moral goodness and a metaphysical state without time or suffering. In restoring creatures to their original state, Christ is redeeming them. However, Conway does not offer an argument for this. Rather, she assumes Christ exists, and that the biblical account of his death is accurate. This detailed account of Christ's theological purpose, as well as her lack of argument for it, suggest this is one of her fundamental assumptions. Conway does not aim to prove that Christ exists. Instead, she aims to make philosophical sense of that assumption by explaining how Christ is necessary for redemption.

Conway does offer a philosophical account of how Christ would redeem all created substance:

Yet when Christ became flesh and entered his body, which he brought with him from heaven (for every created spirit has some body, whether it is terrestrial, aerial or ethereal) *he took on something of our nature, and consequently, of the nature of everything* (because the nature of man contains the nature of all creatures, which is why he is called a microcosm.) In assuming flesh and blood, he sanctified nature so he could sanctify everything, just as it is the property of a ferment to ferment the whole mass. (Conway [1690] 1996, 5.6, 27, emphasis mine)

Conway claims that Christ adopted part of the nature of creatures, their corporeality, to make the redemption of creatures possible. Christ, Conway claims, acted analogously to a ferment. This analogy, based on the respective properties of Christ and ferments, provides grounds for understanding Christ's theological role in non-theological terms. More importantly, the analogy is based on the essential properties of each substance, which implies that there is a metaphysical basis to Conway's claim. Since Christ's purpose is

redemption, and this passage presents a subtle account of how Christ would redeem everything, it is implied that Conway is concerned with creating a metaphysical system that can support a redemptive theology.

2: Conway's Objections to the Mechanistic Account of Matter

Now consider Conway's objections to what I will call the mechanistic account of matter. The mechanistic account of matter refers to accounts of matter in which matter is conceived exclusively in terms of precise mathematical accounts of extension and its modes, including motion and shape. The mechanistic account of matter can apply to either dualist ontologies, like Descartes', or materialist, like Hobbes', but not all dualist or materialist accounts of matter are mechanistic.⁹ Mechanistic accounts of matter were especially popular with proponents of mechanistic physics, like Descartes and Hobbes.¹⁰ I argue that Conway's objections to these accounts of matter, and to Descartes and Hobbes specifically, are motivated by her aim of defending her ontology. To do so, I first discuss the types of objections that Conway makes in the *Principles*, and demonstrate how the most common objections she makes are about accounts of substance that posit a gap between matter and God. Second, I explain the interpretive problem that arises from Conway's most important objections. Third, I argue that this interpretive problem can be resolved by considering the objections in the context of Conway's aim of articulating a metaphysical basis for a redemptive theology.

⁹ Margaret Cavendish is an example of a materialist who was not a mechanist. Cavendish was a vitalist materialist, and she claimed that matter had the properties of life and self-motion. For comparisons of Cavendish's and Conway's respective philosophies, see Clucas (2000), Hutton (1997), and Broad (2002).

¹⁰ See, for example, Gaukroger (2002).

Conway makes three kinds of objections to actual or perceived opponents. The first kind are objections about Conway's definition of God. In these kind of objections, Conway argues against a phenomenon or action attributed to God because it contradicts her definition of God. For example, in 3.1, Conway argues that God cannot have an "indifferent" will, or a will unchecked by wisdom, because that would make him imperfect. Conway's ([1690] 1996) God is, by definition, perfect, as well as maximally good and wise — thus, to predicate an indifferent will would be a contradiction (3.1, 15).¹¹

The second kind of objection Conway makes is one based primarily on logical grounds. In these, Conway argues primarily on the grounds of the internal consistency or fallaciousness of her opponents' arguments. For example, Conway argues against the notion that creatures are "actually divisible" primarily because it suffers from a fallacy she calls "comparing incomparables." She claims the terms "actually" and "divisible," when joined together, create a contradiction (3.9, 19).¹²

Conway's third type of objection is the most common, appearing sixteen times in the *Principles* and comprising about half of Conway's thirty-one objections. These are explicit or implicit objections to a gap between God and created substance. What I call

¹¹ See, for example: Conway ([1690] 1996), 3.6, 17 on God's infinite power and his ability to create infinite number of creatures; 3.7, 18 on God's presence in all spaces; 3.9, 20 on a breakdown of creatures into atoms as a violation of God's wisdom; 6.5, 31 on confounding God and creatures makes evil a part of God; 9.3, 64 where Conway objects to Hobbes' and Spinoza's characterization of God as material; and 9.5, 65, where Conway objects to the confounding of creatures and God because of God's immutability)

¹² For other examples of this, see 6.4, 30 where Conway claims all logical space has been exhausted for a fourth kind of being; 6.7, 35, where Conway claims it is absurd that people cannot see the law of justice in transmutation of the species of creatures; 7.3, 49 where Conway objects to extension and impenetrability being separate attributes, because extension presupposes impenetrability; 7.4, 49-50, where Conway makes an epistemological objection to the essential distinction between body and spirit; 8.1, 57 where Conway asks why a spirit requires a body; 8.1, 57 where Conway claims that motion is only possible if both body and spirit are impenetrable; and 8.2, 58 where Conway claims the cause of sin is not God, but creatures.

Conway's explicit objections are those where she argues against a named philosopher, whereas when she makes what I call implicit objections she does not name an opponent. By a gap, I mean an account of created substance that posits it has nothing in common with God (other than the fact God created it), or that it shares no attributes with God. Specifically, Conway is concerned with a gap between God and matter. Conway mostly articulates her concern with a gap between God and matter by describing matter as "dead" or "lifeless." On Conway's account, God is life,¹³ and she also claims all his attributes are "living" (7.2, 45). Matter, if it is dead or lifeless, will have nothing in common with God, and thus there will be a gap between God and created substance.¹⁴ As we will see, this is the form Conway's most important objections take, including her explicit objections to Descartes and Hobbes.

Consider these passages where Conway reveals her concern with a gap between God and creatures. In this first passage, Conway claims that no created thing can be its own kind of substance: "There are others, moreover, who multiply specific entities into their own distinct essences and attributes almost to infinity. This altogether upsets that exceptional order of things and *quite obscures that glory of the divine attributes so that it cannot shine with its due splendour in creatures*" (6.5, 32, emphasis mine). What Conway is saying here is that if every created thing had its own completely unique essence, then it

¹³ See 1.1, 9; 7.2, 45; 8.7, 62; and 9.7, 67.

¹⁴ For Conway's other objections to the gap, see 3.9, 20 on Conway's objection to all creatures existing in their smallest parts; 6.5, 31-32 where Conway argues for the existence of a third substance as a mediator; 7.1, 42 on why creatures cannot become infinitely evil; 7.2, 45 on how God can make death or dead matter; 7.2, 46 on how dead matter can share in divine goodness; 7.3, 48 on how God has created no bare beings; 7.4, 51 on the mistakes of those who understand body as dead; 8.1, 56 on the incompatible attributes of dead body and living spirit; and 9.1, 63 on the great errors in philosophy and theology caused the ignorance of body and spirit being the same substance.

would not share attributes or have anything in common with God. Thus, there would be a gap between created substance and God.

However, Conway is more concerned with a gap between matter and God. In this passage, Conway objects to a view on which the only attributes of matter are extension, impenetrability and divisibility: “Yet God and creatures are not so infinitely different as these doctors make body and spirit, for there are many attributes which God and creatures share. But *we can find no attribute of body which agrees in any way with spirit, and therefore, with God, who is the highest and purest spirit*” (7.3, 49). Here, Conway objects to a mechanistic account of matter, in which matter is purely matter. On this account of matter, it has nothing in common with creatures who are spirits, and Conway claims it thus has nothing in common with God, because God is also a spirit. If matter has nothing in common with God, then there is a gap between God and some part of creation.

Conway’s most important objections to the gap between matter and God are those where she calls matter dead, because that is the terminology she uses to explicitly object to other philosophers. However, before discussing her explicit objections to Descartes and Hobbes, I will examine the passages that demonstrate Conway is concerned about the gap between dead matter and God.

First, Conway clearly objects to calling matter dead. She claims it is only because people are unaware of matter’s other properties that they call it dead: “when *common people perceive no motion in bodies, they call them from ignorance dead bodies without spirit and life*” (7.4, 51, emphasis mine). Explicitly, calling matter dead is a problem. Dead matter is a problem for Conway because, as above, dead matter has no spirit and thus nothing in common with God, leaving a gap.

Conway also makes the problem of a gap between God and dead matter more explicit. Conway, for example, asks: “what attributes or perfections can be assigned to *dead matter which are analogous to those in God? If we inquire closely into this matter, we shall discover nothing at all*, for every one his attributes is alive, indeed, is life itself” (7.2, 45, emphasis mine). Dead matter can share no attributes with God, and thus, there is gap between God and created substance.

Now I will examine one of Conway’s explicit objections to Descartes. I consider these to be Conway’s most important objections, because Descartes (along with Spinoza and Hobbes) is the one of only philosophers she explicitly criticizes.¹⁵ The following passage is Conway’s objection to be her philosophy being confused with Descartes’:

First, Cartesian philosophy claims that body *is utterly dead mass*, which not only *lacks life and perception of any kind but is also utterly incapable of either for all eternity*. This great error must be imputed to all those who say body and spirit are contrary things and unable to change into one another, thereby denying bodies all life and perception. (Conway [1690] 1996, 9.2, 63-64, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Conway emphasizes how Descartes conceives of matter as dead and thus how it lacks life. Conway’s language in this objection demonstrates how concerned she is with conceiving of matter as dead mass: it is a “great error.”

But this objection, as well as the other ones that fall under this type, are puzzling. They are puzzling because Conway does not explain *why* it is unacceptable for there to be a gap between God and created substance, and more importantly for explicit objections, for matter to be dead. From the mechanist point of view, Conway’s main objection is not really an objection at all. Her explicit complaint about Descartes (which also applies to Hobbes) and the mechanistic philosophy in general is that it means matter is dead.

¹⁵ Conway also objects to Hobbes and Spinoza because she claims they conflate God with the rest of creation. See Conway (1690) 1996, 9.3, 64.

However, for mechanist philosophers, especially Descartes and Hobbes, it is *not* a problem that matter is dead. Dead matter is just the view of mechanistic philosophy.

For Descartes, matter is “dead” if it is purely physical substance. Matter is inert, and is only extension, or spatiality (Descartes [1644] 1985, 1.53, 210). This means that bodies have no Aristotelian “substantial form,” or “souls” in the Aristotelian sense where souls are the principle of life. Rather, bodies are just particular pieces of space. In fact, Descartes and Hobbes intend to describe matter exclusively in terms of its spatiality and its motion. Space and motion can both be described mathematically, which is the premise of the mechanistic physics the mechanistic philosophy is designed to support.¹⁶ Both Hobbes and Descartes were supporters of this new mechanistic physics and philosophy, meaning they already believed that matter was dead or soulless in this sense.¹⁷ Perhaps more importantly, they wanted matter to be dead, or soulless, so that its motion would not be subject to teleological explanations like Aristotle’s final causes in physics. Descartes explicitly rejected the concept of final causes,¹⁸ instead claiming only mathematical descriptions of matter and motion were necessary in physics.

Conway’s main objections, as discussed above, amount to pointing out that matter is dead on the mechanist account. But mechanist philosophers, Descartes especially,

¹⁶ For Conway’s other objections to the gap, see 3.9, 20 on Conway’s objection to all creatures existing in their smallest parts; 6.5, 31-32 where Conway argues for the existence of a third substance as a mediator; 7.1, 42 on why creatures cannot become infinitely evil; 7.2, 45 on how God can make death or dead matter; 7.2, 46 on how dead matter can share in divine goodness; 7.3, 48 on how God has created no bare beings; 7.4, 51 on the mistakes of those who understand body as dead; 8.1, 56 on the incompatible attributes of dead body and living spirit; and 9.1, 63 on the great errors in philosophy and theology caused the ignorance of body and spirit being the same substance.

¹⁷ On Hobbes’ commitment to mechanistic physics, see Sarasohn (1985).

¹⁸ See, for example, Descartes ([1644] 1985): “we shall entirely banish from philosophy the search for final causes” (1.28, 202).

believe matter lacks a soul. Conway's most important objection to mechanist philosophers appears to merely deny their claim that matter is dead.

I contend that we can understand Conway's objections about dead matter, and the gap between God and created substance, only in the context of her aim: providing philosophical foundations for a redemptive theology. Conway objects to dead matter because it does not meet the ontological requirements for redemption. For creatures to redeem themselves, they must become more like God. To become more like God, creatures must be capable of moral and metaphysical improvement. On the mechanistic account, matter is inert space, and it is senseless to speak of space in moral terms. Similarly, to improve metaphysically, matter must become more spiritual. To become more spiritual, a creature must be alive. But, on the mechanistic account, matter is dead, and thus it cannot become more like God, who is life. So, if matter is pure physical substance, then it is incapable of moral or metaphysical improvement. This means there is a gap between this part of creation and God, and this gap means that matter is excluded from salvation.

Consider the following objection Conway makes to Descartes and Hobbes. While Conway does not call matter "dead" in her second explicit objection to Descartes' and Hobbes' accounts of matter, she emphasizes she is still concerned with the fact they conceive of matter as a purely physical substance. She claims that "does not help or make us understand what this remarkable substance is, which they call body and matter. They do not go beyond the husk and shell, nor ever reach the kernel. They only touch the surface, never glimpsing the center" (Conway [1690] 1996, 9.6, 66). That is, Conway is concerned that Hobbes and Descartes have a superficial account of matter, or that they are

missing a more important attribute of matter. This more important attribute of matter is “spirit” or soul (9.6, 66). So long as a creature has a soul, Conway claims even “dust and sand are capable of all these perfections” (9.6, 66). That is, if a creature is alive, it can become morally and metaphysically better.

Other passages suggest that she objects to dead matter because dead matter cannot be redeemed. Conway implies that life, or sense and perception, are necessary for the redemption of creatures. After concluding her section of explicit objections, Conway claims:

By these means it is easy to respond to all the arguments by which some people wish to prove that the body is altogether incapable of sense or perception. And it can be easily shown how the body gradually attains that perfection, so that it is not only capable of such perception and knowledge as brutes have, but of whatever perfection can befall any human being or angel. Thus, without taking refuge in some forced metaphor, we can understand the words of Christ, that “God can raise up children to Abraham from stones” (Matthew 3:9). And if anyone should deny the omnipotence of God and his power to raise up the sons of Abraham from external stones, this would surely be the greatest presumption. (9.9, 70)

While in this passage Conway refers to “sense and perception,” rather than “life,” she is still concerned with the “incapability” of creatures to have this property. With this property, Conway claims, creatures of any sort can be capable of perfections, and can become angelic. By implying that all creatures with sense and perception can become spiritually better, Conway suggests that all these creatures are alive. Creatures must be alive to become more like God, since God is life (1.1, 9). If matter lacks sense and perception, then it is not alive, and thus cannot become more like God. By positing matter as dead, Descartes and Hobbes create a gap between creatures and God, making it impossible for creatures to be redeemed. Considering this, we have a way to understand

Conway's previous complaints. Conway's main objections, as well as what motivates them, will also be salient in interpreting her own positive account of matter.

3: Conway's Positive Account of Matter

Now, I will make a textual argument that Conway's positive account of matter is what I will call a "privation" account of matter. I argue that for Conway, matter is created substance that is deficient in the essential properties of substance. I will explain the essential properties of substance below. I first explain what a privation theory is, explain how Conway's theory is a privation theory, and present textual evidence supporting my interpretation. Second, I consider how Conway argues for the privation theory of matter based on what I call the *likeness principle*.¹⁹

A privation theory explains the existence of one thing in terms of its relation to another thing. Specifically, one property is the negation of another property. There are two criteria for a property to be a privation of another. First, the property does not have its own independent or positive existence. Second, it does not have its own existence because it exists only as a way of describing the absence, lack, or deficiency of its corresponding positive property.

Consider darkness: darkness describes the absence of another property, light. The nighttime is dark because of the absence of the sunlight which is ordinarily present.

Darkness is also not a property with its own existence. There are things, like the sun or

¹⁹ McRobert (2000) also uses the term *likeness principle* to describe two of Conway's arguments against materialism (29-31). However, she uses the term to refer to two different accounts of likeness: that between God and all other substances, and that between different parts of a body. McRobert dismisses the former usage, claiming it draws heavily on theological assumptions (30). However, I use likeness principle exclusively to refer to the similarity between God and creatures. Unlike McRobert, I also argue the likeness principle is motivated by the PSR.

light bulbs, which emit light: however, nothing emits “darkness.” Thus, darkness is a privation of light.

I argue that Conway’s theory of matter is a privation theory. On a privation theory of matter, spirit or soul is the most real substance, and matter is substance that is deficient in the attribute of spirit. Spirit, or soul, is the principal attribute of substance, and what Conway calls created substance with greater amounts of the principal attribute. Spirit serves as a placeholder term for all the essential properties of substance. The essential properties of substance are the same as the “communicable” or shared attributes of God, who is the first substance. These attributes are goodness, life, light, holiness, justice, wisdom, knowledge, strength, and power (7.2, 45).²⁰ Physicality or corporeality signifies a deficiency in, or a lack of, spirit in an individual substance.

In Conway’s system, matter is a deprivation of spirit, but it is not merely the term for an absence of the attributes of spirit. Rather, Conway views matter and spirit as opposite ends of a continuum. In between each end of the continuum are infinite degrees, each more or less approaching the respective condition of matter or spirit. The privation account maps on to this continuum, with each degree closer to either end representing a

²⁰ See also 1.1, 9: “God is spirit, light, and life, infinitely wise, good, just, strong, all-knowing, all-powerful, the creator and maker of all things visible and invisible”; 2.4, 13: “the goodness communicated by God, which is his essential attribute”; 3.1. 15: “Moreover, if the aforementioned attributes of God are duly considered, and especially these two, namely his wisdom and goodness, then it is possible utterly to refute and eliminate that indifference of the will ; 6.6, 32: “Is a horse mere machine or dead matter, or does it have some kind of spirit which possesses thought, sense, love, and various other properties which are appropriate to its spirit?”; 7.2, 45: “For since 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, and this as fully as possible, and since the goodness of God is a living goodness, which possesses life, knowledge, love, and power, which he communicates to his creatures”; 9.6, 66: “If anyone asks what these more excellent attributes are, 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, which the noblest creatures have or can have, even the vilest and most contemptible.”

slightly higher or lower amount of the attributes of substance. Corporeal created substances approaching the matter end of the continuum are deficient in the essential qualities of matter, while spirits with a lesser physical presence have higher amounts.

For Conway, it seems that all the attributes of substance can be had in varying degrees: they all exist on a continuum. These are all privation continuums, with one end of the continuum representing a deficiency and the other not an excess, but an infinite amount of the attribute. When an attribute comes with an opposite, like good and evil or spirit and matter, the pairs have a positive and negative value on each end. The better of the pair, for example, good, can be had in an infinite amount, whereas the worse item refers to a limited amount of the positive attribute in question. In Conway's system, the positive attributes are at the higher end of the continuum because they are shared with God, the perfect or complete substance. The negative half of the pair refers to the state with a minimal amount of the attribute. So, a creature that is evil or bad is limited or deficient in the amount of goodness it has.

However, nothing that exists can have no amount of an attribute. This is because on Conway's view, goodness, spirit, and being are coextensive. For something to completely lack goodness, or spirit, would mean it completely lacks the principal attributes that describe anything that can exist. So, something cannot completely lack goodness, or completely lack spirit, because it would cease to exist.

Now I will examine passages from Conway's *Principles* that support my interpretation. First, I'll examine Conway's spirit-matter continuum. Second, I present evidence that a privation account maps on to that continuum.

For Conway, matter is clearly defined in relation to spirit.²¹ Matter and spirit are opposite ways of manifesting the mode of corporeality for created substance, existing on a continuum with infinite points, as “any thing can approach or recede more or less from the condition of a body or spirit.” (7.1, 41-42). There is also a hierarchy to this opposition, and spirit is clearly a positive property with a real existence, since in Conway’s continuum of corporeality, “spirit is the more excellent of the two in the true and natural order of things” (7.1, 42). Spirit and matter may be opposite ends of a continuum, and spirit is more highly valued, but that does not make matter something without its own real, positive existence.

However, Conway claims that matter does not have its own positive existence. Conway claims, “nor is anything infinitely a body having no spirit, as God is infinitely spirit having no body” (7.1, 42). By this, Conway means that there cannot be a substance that is only or “infinitely” matter, the way that God is only or infinitely spirit. If matter had its own positive existence, then there would be substances that could be infinitely or only matter. However, this passage suggests that matter exists only relationally, as a deprivation of spirit, since God is pure spirit and the pure substance. Conway also suggests that not only does matter not have its own positive existence, but that it is impossible to have a complete absence of spirit. Conway, in explaining how creatures can become more like God, claims, “no creature can become more and more a body to

²¹ Other commentators have noted this. For example, Frankel (1991) notes that while spirit and matter only differ modally, for Conway spirit is more “favourably placed” than matter (51-52). Hutton (2012) claims that Conway sees all created substance as essentially the same, but the monads differ in terms of where they fall on the scale of being: higher beings are more spiritual, lower beings are more like body (228). Lascano (2013) examines Conway’s arguments for why spirits would have bodies at all, given that Conway clearly sees spirit as better than body and that there is no essential difference between spirit and body (327-328).

infinity, although it can become more and more a spirit to infinity” (7.1, 41-42). By saying a creature cannot become more corporeal to infinity, Conway is saying there is a limit to the amount of spirit a creature can be deficient in. If there is a limit to the deficiency, then matter cannot have its own positive reality. Being completely deficient in spirit would mean it ceases to exist.

Another passage implies a privation account because Conway explicitly compares matter to darkness. She claims, “nevertheless, it is not an essential property of anything to be a body, just as it is not an essential property of anything to be dark. For nothing is so dark that it cannot become bright. Indeed, darkness itself can become light” (6.11, 38). If we assume, as I have above, that darkness and light are paradigm cases of a privative property and its opposite positive property, then this passage works like an argument by analogy. If darkness is a lack of light, then matter is a lack of spirit.

Lastly, Conway strongly implies she has a privation account of matter when discussing the definition of spirit. First, she claims the “better” definition of spirit comes from the *Kabbala Denudata*, and it is equivalent to Aristotle’s *entelechy* (7.4, 51). What Conway means by *entelechy*, and what she thinks Aristotle means by the term, is unclear: she claims it is equivalent to a “central nature,” which emits a “luminous sphere” of varying sizes (7.4, 51). I am not sure whether to take this passage literally or figuratively. However, Conway has previously used spirit to mean soul, and for Aristotle, soul was the form of a living body. Coudert and Corse note that *entelechy* means “form:” a “force intrinsic and specific to an individual” which gives it its identity or essence (Conway [1690]1996, 7.4, n.10, 51). This sense of form is similar to how Conway normally uses spirit: as a term for created substances that have higher amounts of attributes. If, for

Conway, all these different terms are equivalent, then her following discussion of the definition of matter from the *Kabbala Denudata* suggests that she thinks matter is a privation of spirit.

Conway equates the definition of matter from the *Kabbala Denudata* with Aristotle's privation. She writes, "matter is defined [in the *Kabbala Denudata*] as a pure center or a point without a radius, which Aristotle understands as a privation" (7.4, 51). She claims matter is merely a point or center, while a spirit can be an orb of light projected to varying sizes. Again, the extent to which she means this literally is unclear, but I think what is important to draw from this passage is the relation of spirit to matter. This definition of matter is clearly a deficiency in, or a lack of, the ability to project light spirit has. If we consider spirit in the sense Conway normally uses it — created substance with greater degrees of the attributes of spirit — then we can also see matter as a substance deficient in these attributes, and thus a privation.

I argue Conway's privation account of matter is justified by what I call the *likeness principle*. First, I explain what the likeness principle is, and how Conway uses the likeness principle to argue for her privation theory of matter. Second, I explain how the likeness principle is motivated by the principle of sufficient reason.

The likeness principle is my term for Conway's rule that for anything to exist, it must be like God. Specifically, it must be like God in terms of its attributes. Conway clearly states this in the following passage: "it is impossible for a creature not to have some similarity to its creator or to agree with it in certain attributes and perfections" (7.3, 47-48).²² Everything that exists must be, in some way, like God. Something that did not

²² Conway also states the likeness principle in other ways. For example: "For what attributes or perfections can be assigned to dead matter which are analogous to those in God?" (7.2, 45), "it is the nature

share an attribute with God, the creator, could not exist. So, the other substances in Conway's ontology, Christ and creatures, share attributes (like goodness, knowledge, perfection, etc.) with God.

So, how does Conway use the likeness principle to argue for her privation theory of matter? For something to exist, it must share attributes with God. It can share the attributes with God in varying, even minimal amounts, but the attributes must be shared. On the mechanistic account, matter shares absolutely no attributes with God. Matter is only extension, whereas God is immaterial spirit. One cannot describe matter's goodness or God's extension. If something shared no attributes with God, based on the likeness principle, it would be impossible for it to exist. In the following passage, Conway uses the likeness principle to argue that on the mechanistic conception of matter, it is non-being:

Since dead matter does not share any of the communicable attributes of God, one must then conclude that dead matter is completely non-being, a vain fiction and Chimera, and an impossible thing. If one should say that dead matter has metaphysical truth and goodness, to the extent that every being is true and good, I ask, what is this truth or goodness? For if it shares none of the communicable attributes of God, it will not be true and good, and consequently, will be an utter fiction, as previously said. (Conway [1690] 1996, 7.2, 45-46)

In this passage, Conway claims that since "dead" matter is not like God in any way, we must conclude it does not actually exist. This is because "dead" matter does not share any of what Conway calls the "communicable" attributes of God. By communicable attributes, Conway means attributes that are common to, or shared by, God and the other types of substance. A purely physical substance would share no attributes with God, because God is completely immaterial. Thus, "dead" matter cannot, for example, have "truth" or "goodness," which are both attributes of God. Consequently, if one accepts the

of a creature, unless it degenerates, to come always become more and more like the creator" (7.1, 42), "there is no being which is in every way contrary to God" (7.1, 42).

likeness principle, Conway's privation theory of matter is the best explanation for the existence of matter.

Conway does not make an explicit argument for the likeness principle. However, I argue that Conway's use of the likeness principle is motivated by the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). The PSR is the principle that for each fact x , there is a reason why x is such. That is, the PSR demands that no fact should go unexplained. The PSR was a common commitment of seventeenth-century philosophers. So, if Conway's likeness principle is motivated by the PSR, it is both plausible and historically precedented.

To argue that the likeness principle is motivated by the PSR, I compare it to Axiom Five from Part One of Spinoza's *Ethics* (1a5). I first explain Spinoza's 1a5 and how it is motivated by the PSR. Second, I argue that Conway's likeness principle is similar to Spinoza's 1a5, and thus is motivated by the PSR. If the PSR motivates Conway's likeness principle, and one accepts the PSR, then Conway has grounds for claiming that a purely physical substance cannot exist.

Spinoza's 1a5 claims that there must be a conceptual connection between two things for one to explain the other. Spinoza's ([1677] 1992) 1a5 is "things that have nothing in common with each other also cannot be understood through one another, or the concept of one does not involve the concept of the other" (1a5, 32.) Spinoza claims that for one thing to explain something else, they must have a conceptual connection. If there is no explanatory or conceptual relationship between two objects, then there is no way to describe a relation between them.

We can see Spinoza's 1a5 as motivated by a commitment to the PSR (Della Rocca, 2003). If two things have nothing in common, there is no way to understand or explain one through the other. If there is no way of explaining the relation of two things, or no way of understanding their conceptual connection, then there is an explanatory gap between those two things. That is, their concepts are unrelated, and trying to explain one in terms of the other will not satisfy the PSR.

For Conway, this conceptual or explanatory relation between two things must also apply to causal relations. What seems to be inconceivable for Conway is that an effect could be unconnected to its cause. Without a conceptual similarity between cause and effect, there is no way to explain the connection between cause and effect. For Conway ([1690] 1996), "it is *impossible* for a creature not to have some similarity to its creator or to agree with it in certain attributes and perfections" (7.3, 48, emphasis mine). If God is the creator of all things, then God is the cause of the existence of all things. Since God is the cause of everything else's existence, all the effects, or other substances, must be conceptually connected to him in some way. Attributes are the concepts that describe the essential nature of a substance. So, substances that are conceptually connected to God must share some attributes with God. If a substance did not share attributes with God, it could not exist.

The likeness principle, and thus the PSR, explains why dead matter cannot exist. For example, Conway asks "what attributes or perfections can be assigned to dead matter which are analogous to those in God?" (7.2, 45). Dead matter, for Conway, is a purely physical substance: it is only extended, with no spiritual qualities like "life" or "goodness." God, on Conway's account, is immaterial and incorporeal (1.2, 9). There is

no conceptual connection between a purely physical substance and a purely spiritual one. Nothing in the effect, matter, connects it to the cause, God. We would just have to accept God creating matter as a plain fact, without any way to explain or conceptually connect the two, and that would be a violation of the PSR.

Thus, if the PSR motivates the likeness principle, and the likeness principle justifies the privation account, Conway's privation account is at least plausible. Matter would be created substance with minimal amounts of the attributes of spirit. Creatures that seem inanimate, like rocks, are not dead matter, but imperfect souls. They would be deficient in the attributes of goodness, wisdom, etc., but they would still have those attributes in some degree — to lack them would be non-existence.

Conway's privation account of matter, unlike the mechanistic account, is consistent with an ontology in which creatures can become more like God. If, like Conway, we understand matter as deprived of the principal attributes of spiritual substance, then all creatures have some degree of spirit. Thus, all creatures are spiritual, and in some way like God. Moreover, Conway claims living creatures, through the activities of spirit, are also able to become morally and metaphysically better over time. That is, they can become more like God, and better than they were in the state of creation, redeeming themselves.

4: Conway's Responses to Mechanist Objections

Now I explain how Conway's privation theory responds to objections from the mechanistic point of view about the attributes of matter. That is, I will examine how Conway handles the attributes that matter has on the mechanistic point of view:

extension, impenetrability, and divisibility. Conway's created substance has all three of these attributes, but she understands them differently than her mechanist predecessors. To describe how Conway's theory of matter accommodates these three attributes, I will first explain what the attributes of matter are from the mechanist point of view, focusing on Descartes' account. Second, I will discuss how Conway incorporates extension and impenetrability into her metaphysical system. Lastly, I will explain Conway's account of divisibility.

The mechanist account of matter, especially Descartes' account, is what Conway's privation theory is a response to. While his mind-matter dualism may not have been Conway's primary target in the *Principles*,²³ Conway's own account of matter is motivated by what she perceives as its failings. To better articulate the objections from the mechanist point of view, I will first explain how Descartes' aims were opposed to Conway's, and then describe the attributes of matter and mind.

Descartes' aim was to provide a metaphysical foundation for a mechanistic physics.²⁴ This mechanistic physics was exclusively quantitative, describing the movement of particles through the new mathematics and geometry. A metaphysical basis for the new physics would help supplant Aristotelian physics, which described motion in terms of qualitative causes and an object's purpose.

Descartes' metaphysical foundations for this physics begin with his mind-matter dualism. Matter is one type of substance in Descartes' ontology. The principal attribute, or essential nature, of matter is "extension" (Descartes [1644] 1985, 1.53, 210).

²³ Sarah Hutton presents compelling textual evidence, based on Conway's use of Henry More's idiosyncratic vocabulary, that Conway's main target with her objections and responses is More. See Hutton (2004), pgs. 87-93.

²⁴ For a more thorough account of Descartes' aims and how his metaphysics served as the foundation for his physics, see Garber (1992) and Gaukroger (2002). For a detailed account of how Descartes' commitment to mechanism affected his arguments for substance dualism, see Rozemund (2006).

Extension, for Descartes, is spatiality. That is, matter is only space, or something extended in “length, breadth, and depth” (2.4, 224). Space, in itself, is infinitely divisible, and only describable in terms of mathematics (2.34, 239).

Mind is the other half of Descartes’ dualism. Mind is “thinking substance,” for which the principal attribute is thought (1.53, 210). On Descartes’ account the mind is primarily intellectual, and conscious activity is paradigmatic of it. Rozemund (1998) argues that Descartes is responsible for making the mind and the soul equivalent, and that Descartes viewed restricting the soul’s function to intellectual activities as necessary for establishing its immateriality or incorporeal nature (51). If a substance is extended, then it is divisible; so, if a substance is indivisible, then it is unextended. More importantly for Descartes, this substance of the mind is simple and indivisible outright, because it is unextended. This makes mind a “unity,” in an important sense that all real substances should be unified. This intrinsic indivisibility of the mind, as compared to the divisibility of matter, forms one of his arguments for dualism (Rozemund 1998, 217, n.2). This creates a gap between mind and matter. In fact, this gap is unbridgeable: there is absolutely nothing mind and matter have in common. This keeps the explanations of matter and the new physics separate from the explanations of mental activity, because they cannot be explained in the same terms.

Conway’s own account of matter must be able to accommodate what Descartes and other mechanists took to be the properties of physical and spiritual substance in order to provide them with a plausible alternative to the mechanistic philosophy. As discussed above, Conway wants to avoid any gaps between created substances, because this leads to gaps between created substance and God. If there is a gap between God and part of

creation, then that part of creation is not redeemable. So, Conway is left with a significant burden: she must be able to explain how spirit has extension, impenetrability, and divisibility without compromising either her own aims or interfering with the explanations of a mechanistic physics.

Now I explain how Conway incorporates extension and impenetrability into her metaphysics. First, Conway assumes that all created substance is extended, and second, she claims that extension and impenetrability are the same attribute, described in two different ways. Third, she argues that extension and impenetrability map onto the continuum of spirit and matter.

Conway just assumes that all created substance is extended, to varying degrees. She claims “body and spirit agree in certain attributes, such as extension” (Conway [1690] 1996, 7.3, 49). Conway claims when we consider a substance extended, we presuppose its impenetrability. Impenetrability is a lack of what Hutton (2004) describes as “porousness” (89). That is, penetrability and impenetrability seem to be a way of describing how much internal space an extended substance has, or how closely packed together its constituent parts are. The more closely packed together its parts are, the more impermeable it is by other substances. In the following passage, Conway argues that both matter and spirit are extended and impenetrable. First, Conway argues that extension and impenetrability are the same attribute. Next, she argues that if matter and spirit are both extended, then it is inconsistent for only matter to be impenetrable.

Yet the extension of spirit and body as they understand it, differs in an astonishing way. For the extension of the body is always impenetrable. In fact, in respect to the body, to be extended and to be impenetrable are only one real attribute stated in terms of two mental and logical notions or ways of speaking. For what is extension unless the body is impenetrable, wherever it is, in its own

parts? Remove this attribute of impenetrability and the body can no longer be conceived of as extended. Furthermore, according to the notion of these people, the extension of a body and spirit differ infinitely. Whatever extension a body has is so necessary and essential to it that it is impossible for it to be extended more or less. However, according to these people, spirit can be extended more or less. And since mobility and the capacity for a shape follow from extension — spirit has a far different shape and mobility than body because spirit is able to move and shape itself, which the body cannot do — by the same reasoning, what is valid against one attribute is valid also against the others. (Conway [1690] 1996, 7.3, 49)

In this passage, Conway first claims that for matter, extension always entails impenetrability. That is, for Conway, extension and impenetrability are ultimately the same thing. Conway claims that matter cannot only be space, unless that space is something corporeal and impermeable. If it is possible for something else to permeate, or enter, the space occupied by a particular body, then it seems like there is no substance at all. Thus, they must just be different ways of understanding the same attribute. So, Conway claims, matter, as extended substance, is also impenetrable. Conway's second claim in this passage is that because spirit is also extended, it must also be impenetrable. Otherwise, there is a contradiction: spirit cannot be extended and permeable. This is inconsistent with the definition of extension applied to matter. To resolve this inconsistency, Conway instead argues that matter and spirit can be more or less extended, and thus more or less impenetrable: there is a continuum of extension and impenetrability.

Third, Conway argues that penetrability and impenetrability are a continuum, rather than a binary. She argues it through an inference to the best explanation. In this passage, Conway suggests it is more plausible to consider penetrability as a property occurring on a continuum than a binary:

Moreover, how could they prove that impenetrability is an essential attribute of the body or penetrability an essential attribute of the spirit? *Why can the body not be more or less impenetrable and the spirit more or less penetrable, as can happen, and indeed does, with other attributes? For example, a certain body can be more or less heavy or light, dense or rare, solid or liquid, hot or cold. Therefore, why can it not also be more or less impenetrable and penetrable?* (Conway [1690] 1996, 7.4, 49-50, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Conway compares penetrability to weight, density, solidity, and heat, which she considers to be other attributes of matter. By comparison to these other properties of bodies, Conway suggests it is more plausible for penetrability to manifest in terms of degrees, rather than a binary, because all those other properties exist on a continuum.

Lastly, Conway explicitly maps the continuum of penetrability onto her continuum of matter and spirit. All creatures are more or less impenetrable: “gross” or solid, in Conway’s terms. Conway claims, when considering penetrability, that there is no difference between matter and spirit, “except that body is the grosser part and spirit the more subtle” (7.4, 51). That is, she claims that matter and spirit are merely at opposite ends of a continuum of corporeal substance. Creatures of equal solidity are not able to penetrate each other, because there is no space for them within the other creature. As Conway claims: “two bodies of equal grossness cannot penetrate one another” (7.4, 51). However, creatures that are less solid and more “subtle,” like spirits, are able to find space within another creature. For example, creatures that appear to be inanimate objects, like books, are made of many tiny bodies held together. One book cannot penetrate another — however, a more “subtle” creature, like coffee, could penetrate the book. However, Conway claims, one creature’s penetration of another may not always be perceptible to human senses, or even measurable (7.4, 52).

So this is Conway's response to two possible objections to her privation account of matter. Impenetrability and extension, like the other qualities of matter and the essential attributes of spirit, exist on a continuum. Conway conceives of all created substance as extended and impenetrable, and hence corporeal. Bodies, or more corporeal creatures, are deficient in the essential qualities of spirit. Thus, extension and impenetrability can be accounted for in Conway's account of matter.

Conway has more difficulty incorporating the third mechanistic attribute of matter, divisibility, into her privation account. Unlike extension and impenetrability, divisibility really is a binary property. Things cannot be more or less divisible, unlike the way Conway conceives of other attributes like extension or goodness as existing on a continuum.

I argue that Conway ultimately thinks matter and spirit are identical in terms of divisibility, but that she has an ad-hoc accommodation for the indivisibility of the human soul. First, I present the interpretive problem posed by Conway's account of divisibility, and a possible resolution. Second, I examine how Conway understands the divisibility of matter in the *Principles*. Third, I explain Conway's account of the human soul designed to appease those who think it must be indivisible or singular.

First, Conway's account of divisibility poses an interpretive problem because she seems to espouse contradictory views. She claims both that all created substances are infinitely divisible, and that there is a smallest "component" or physical term for created substance. For example, Conway claims: "the smallest creatures which can be conceived have an infinite number of creatures within themselves so that the smallest particles of body or matter can be extended or divided in infinite ways into ever smaller and smaller

parts” (3.9, 18). Conway appears to claim here that creatures are infinitely divisible, because there are infinite numbers of creatures within them. On the contrary, Conway also claims that it is absurd to think that the smallest conceivable particle of matter can be divided, because “it is a contradiction in terms and implies that the smallest creature may be divided into smaller parts. Thus if a body is understood as one single individual, then it is indivisible” (7.4, 52). In this passage, Conway claims that creatures are not infinitely divisible, and that there is a smallest unit that created substance can have.

What may resolve this contradiction is Conway’s implicit distinction between what I call mathematical and physical division. All created substance may be mathematically divisible, but not all created substance is physically divided. Conway claims that the term “divisible” refers to mathematical division, that is, the capacity for something to be divided (3.9, 19). When something has the capacity to be divided, it is in terms of the smallest mathematical unit. However, there is no smallest mathematical unit — one can always make a smaller number. Mathematical divisibility seems to be what is intellectually possible. So, I can imagine my water bottle being divided into smaller parts, unto infinity.

However, Conway argues that created substance is not actually physically divided into its smallest parts. For Conway, physical divisibility is divisibility in terms of the smallest physical term (3.9, 20). It refers to what is “actually divided,” or exists in its individual components (3.9, 19). So, in terms of created substance, there is a smallest or individual component.

Consider, for example, a house made of Lego. A house made of Lego can be taken apart into its rooms, and these rooms can be further taken apart into the bricks of Lego. A

single Lego brick has been divided from the original “substance” as far as it can go — but, intellectually, it is possible to divide it further. If we wanted to, we could even cut the Lego brick into smaller pieces, but it no longer coherently fits into the Lego system. Eventually we would reach a point where we could not cut the brick into smaller pieces, but we know it is still intellectually possible to divide the brick forever. This, I think, is what Conway has in mind when she discusses the distinction between mathematical and physical divisibility.

For Conway, both matter and spirit are mathematically and physically divisible. This is because both are created substance, and thus are corporeal or physical. For Conway, all corporeal things are mathematically divisible, insofar as they are capable of being infinitely divided. Conway suggests she thinks spirits, as well as bodies, are infinitely divisible in the following passage: “in every creature, whether spirit or body, there is an infinity of creatures, each of which contains an infinity in itself, and so on to infinity” (3.5, 17). That is, every creature, whether spirit or matter is capable of being divided into infinitely more creatures. Like matter, spirit cannot be physically divided beyond its smallest parts. Conway clearly states that individual spirits cannot be physically divided any further, claiming “one single spirit cannot become two or more spirits” (7.4, 52). Individual spirits are at the “smallest” physical term, like individual bodies, just in a different state of corporeality.

Lastly, I want to consider Conway’s response to the problem of the indivisibility of the human soul (or mind, for Descartes).²⁵ As previously discussed, Descartes considered the human mind or soul to be indivisible. Conway claims that human souls,

²⁵ Thomas (2018) defends a similar view of central spirits. However, Thomas is concerned with how creatures maintain their identities over time, not with Conway’s response to Descartes.

and their equivalents in other creatures, are indissoluble unities. She claims human souls are equivalent to what she calls “central, ruling, or principal spirits” (7.4, 55). These seem to be equivalent to a soul, or mind: they have “dominion” over the other spirits and bodies within the unity of an individual thing. Conway claims that this “central spirit” is a unity, and is like the centre point of a circle (7.4, 55). All the other spirits of a body meet in it, like lines extending from the circumference of a circle meet in the middle (7.4, 55). If we grant that central spirits are multiple and equivalent to human souls, how can Conway respond to the presupposition that they must be indivisible? Conway claims the unity of a central spirit is more “tenacious” than other unities, and is in fact “so great that nothing can dissolve it” (7.4, 55).

However, I think Conway’s response to the indivisibility of mind/soul is inadequate. Conway offers no argument for why central spirits are indivisible: she merely states they cannot be. Moreover, this seems incoherent on her own terms. She explicitly states a central spirit is “multiple,” made of many spirits, and thus it should be physically divisible into its constituent spirits. However, she also seems to treat it as an individual unit, which means it is incapable of further physical division.

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