Nothing Is Simply One Thing
Conway on Multiplicity in Causation and Cognition

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1. Introduction: Simplicity, Multiplicity and Agency

Looking back across the history of Western philosophy, we find a long line of tradition that emphasizes the unity and simplicity of the minds of epistemic and moral agents. For Aquinas, for instance, the mind's ability to engage in higher-level cognition crucially depended on its simplicity: If it was to cognize the universal natures of things, it had to be simple and incorporeal, rather than material, complex and therefore limited in nature.[1] Moreover, many held that the identity of particular agents in and through time required an underlying simple substance. Only a simple substance, Plato for example argued in the *Phaedo*, is guaranteed to be stable, since any change would imply a change of parts.[2] Relatedly, moral agency – in particular once combined with the Christian promise of just reward and punishment after death – was often thought to call for a simple soul that would provide a fixed locus for the attribution of responsibility even after an agent's bands of memory had become frayed.

Let us call the view demarcated by these and related claims the "simplicity thesis." Two prominent proponents of the simplicity thesis in the early modern period were Descartes and Leibniz. Both held the mind to be grounded in a simple substance, and both indeed went on to assert that we can introspectively confirm this to be the case. Moreover, both regarded the soul's simplicity as implying its immateriality and distinctness from body.[3] "[W]hen I consider the mind," Descartes famously argues in the Sixth Meditation, "or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete."[4] And having understood thought and extension to be opposites, we can then infer that "the mind is completely different from the body", insofar as the latter is extended, while the former is simple and thus immaterial.[5] In a similar vein, Leibniz argues in numerous writings that our reflective experience of the self as a unified subject that apperceives a complex perceptual content forces us to admit that the subject of perception must be an indivisible and thus immaterial substance.[6] Yet while these and further considerations in favor of the simplicity thesis certainly proved influential, not everyone in the period followed suit. Among its deniers were materialists such as Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi. But a particular intriguing example of someone resisting the allure of simplicity was Anne Conway. For on the one hand, she – against the materialists and in line with Leibniz and Descartes –

endorsed the mind's spiritual nature. Yet on the other, she also – alongside the materialists – rejected its simplicity.

Following in the footsteps of her teacher Henry More, Conway attributes extension to both body and spirit.[7] However, she then rejects More's attempt to uphold Cartesian dualism and the simplicity of the soul, which for More – as for Descartes – was the only thing that could secure its immortality. According to More, unlike the body's extension, the soul's extension does not imply its divisibility. For if the soul, he argues, were an aggregate of "truly disjoined Atomes", it could not persist, nor could it perform any of the functions required of it. It would be too weak to move its body, could not provide the unity so clearly present in sensation or thought, nor could it account for personal identity.[8] Conway, by contrast, rejects More's commitment to the simplicity thesis, thus breaking the connection between divisibility and immateriality that he strives so hard to maintain. All of creation, she argues against More's modified Cartesianism, consists of spiritual particles, each of them potentially divisible *ad infinitum*, be they called "minds" or be they called "bodies."[9] But not only does Conway regard multiplicity and spirituality to be mutually compatible. She also takes a close consideration of the nature of cognition and causation to show that the minds of moral and epistemic agents not only can be, but indeed *must* be complex and multiple. Contrary to Descartes, Leibniz or More, she thus proposes what I will call the "multiplicity thesis." Anything "that has any life, sense, or motion", she asserts, "must be multiple or numerous," and this holds true just as much of minds as of bodies. Even a "central or ruling spirit," she insists, is not "a single atom," but "multiple."[10]

The remainder of this essay will examine Conway's commitment to this intriguing thesis in greater depth. I begin by outlining some key features of her ontology as she presents them in her only surviving philosophical work, the *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, and draw out some crucial points of similarity and contrast between her view and the Leibnizian one, to which it has frequently been compared in the literature.[11] I then present Conway's case of the "lonely atom," which she uses to advance her claim that any individual creature as well as any individual mind needs to be a multiplicity, and examine the views that I take to underwrite it: her account of motion as vital action, and her account of cognition as spiritual generation. Finally, I return to some of the broader features of Conway's ontology, and briefly develop a suggestion for how – in light of her views regarding causation and cognition – we might best frame Conway's ontology as a whole.

2. Starting Points: Emanation and the Nature of Creation

While Descartes' philosophy takes its starting point in the *cogito* of the thinking self, Conway's begins with a consideration of God's nature, from whose attributes, she holds, ultimately all properties of the natural world can be deduced. God, Conway asserts, is "sprit, life and light" and his goodness a "living goodness, consisting of life, knowledge, love, and power."[12] As each created being must flow from the being of God, it therefore must also – at least to a degree – share in His vital nature. All of God's communicable attributes, she

argues, imply life, and therefore no being created by God could be without it.[13] Moreover, God is both transcendent and immanent: He is a substance essentially distinct from His creatures, yet He is also "present in everything most closely and intimately" and "operates in and with creatures in producing and generating all things."[14] Presenting an emanative influx model, Conway describes how God infuses creation with life and activity by means of a vital force that cascades through descending orders of being. Like the "vital" or "plastic" natures postulated by More and his fellow Neoplatonist Ralph Cudworth, Conway identifies a vital principle that mediates the spiritual force emanating from God, and eventually unites it with matter.[15] This principle is "Christ" or the "Adam Kadmon" of the Kabbalah, who figures as a mediator or "middle nature" between God and creatures.[16] As *logos prophorikos* (the word of God insofar as it has been spoken) and the first emanation of God, Christ's intimate presence in creatures enables them to act, and affords the potential for perfection to each.[17]

Against a Cartesian conception of the physical world filled with passive matter and populated by bodies that are but the objects of geometry made real, Conway thus posits a constantly transforming universe of creatures animated by spiritual principles. "Cartesian philosophy," she concludes in the final chapters of the *Principles*,

> claims that body is mere 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 that body and spirit are contrary things and unable to change into one another, thereby denying bodies all life and perception. This is completely contrary to the fundamentals of our philosophy.[18]

While she still retains a distinction between bodies and minds in terms of their differing qualities, Conway insists that these qualities are grounded only in modal or accidental differences, not in an essential one: What we call "body" and "mind" or "spirit" are merely more "dense" or more "volatile" portions of animated matter. Any portion of this "spiritual matter" thus has the traditional attributes of both spirit and body: It has size, solidity, shape, and motion, but also life and perception.[19] Everything material, therefore, is ultimately "nothing but spirit," differing from a spirit "only insofar as it is darker."[20] "Creation," she writes

> is only one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence, as demonstrated above, so that it only varies according to its modes of existence, one of which is corporeality.[21]

In sum, Conway defends what we might nowadays call a "type monist" view about created substance: All created beings fall under exactly one highest type ("spirit"), and differ merely with respect to their mode of existence.

But while she arguably espouses the view that creation is only one in *kind*, it is less clear whether she also defends the stronger claim that it is also only one in *number*. This

"token monist" reading views Conway as going beyond type monism to embrace an essentially Spinozist ontology that allows for only (numerically) one created substance, and views all finite individual creatures as modes of this substance. Even under very close scrutiny, the text of the *Principles* seems to remain ambiguous on this issue, with some passages pointing one way, and others another.[22] Indeed, the passage just quoted above seems indicative of this difficulty. For how should Conway's claim there that creation is "only one entity" be understood? Is it merely one in kind, or also one in number? The question, however, is an important one, and commentators' answers clearly diverge.[23] While I do not believe that a consideration of Conway's views on causation and cognition alone will solve this puzzle, it is my hope that they may help us make some headway towards a resolution. I will therefore briefly return to this puzzle in the fourth and final section of this essay, after having considered these views more closely. But to start with, let us inquire a little further into how Conway conceives of the created individuals that serve as the loci of causal and epistemic agency.

3. The Nature of Created Individuals

According to an influential interpretation first proposed by Caroline Merchant, Conway's metaphysics of created substance strikingly resembles Leibniz's metaphysics of monads.[24] To begin with, both philosophers seem to use the term "monad" to describe created individuals.[25] Indeed, Merchant suggests, Leibniz in fact appropriated the term from Conway's doctor and friend Francis Mercury van Helmont, after the latter had acquainted him with Conway's work on a visit to Hanover in 1696.[26] Moreover, Merchant points us to a number of significant philosophical parallels between Leibniz's and Conway's system, for instance between Conway's view of individuation via a "ruling spirit" and Leibniz's account of "monadic domination."[27]

We now have good textual reasons to doubt Merchant's historical claim, as more recent scholarship has revealed at least one occurrence of the term "monad" in Leibniz's writings that precedes this visit.[28] But what about the alleged philosophical parallels between Leibniz and Conway? There are indeed, I would now like to suggest, some intriguing similarities between their views. However, these owe their existence not to a shared metaphysics of substance, but to a shared commitment to vitalism – the view that there is, as Leibniz puts it in the *New Essays*, "life and perception in all things."[29] Moreover, I shall further argue, a closer investigation of this shared commitment in the end only helps to bring some distinctively un-Leibnizian elements of Conway's account into sharper focus. For while Leibniz holds that the universal presence of life and perception within the created universe requires us to assume the existence of simple, indivisible, causally isolated unities or monads, for Conway, it requires precisely the opposite: If a created being is meant to act and perceive, this being must be divisible, multiple, and intimately connected to others.

But let us start with some common ground. Importantly, both Leibniz and Conway view creation as pervaded by activity. For Conway, "vital action" is an essential attribute of

creation and a force intimately present in all its parts. As we will see in more detail below, it explains the motions of creatures, as well as their ability to sense and perceive. Similarly, Leibniz identifies activity and perception as the essential features of monads, and emphasizes that there is "nothing sterile, fallow, or dead in the universe."[30] This further implies, as Leibniz perceptively points out, that for both him and Conway, mechanical and final causes proceed in tandem.[31] Each creature is moved by mechanical motions, yet at the same time also engages in goal-directed activity to achieve what it perceives to be a greater good, such that everything in the natural world is engaged in constant flux and transformation.[32] However, Conway here is even more radical than Leibniz. For while Leibniz still holds on to categorical boundaries between different types of substances, Conway ensures the possibility of universal salvation by arguing that any creature is of the same substantial kind as any other and thus has the potential to climb up and down the latter of species.[33] In due time, she argues, any creature is able to further perfect itself by increasing its vitality, and can thus change, for instance, from a plant to a horse, from a horse into a human being, or from a human being into an angel.[34]

Next to their vitalist, perfectionist account of creaturely action, Conway and Leibniz also conceive of organic life as possessing an infinite structure, and of individual creatures as nested aggregates that contain yet further creatures.[35] Conway's commitment to this view follows from a divine principle of plenitude. God's infinite power, she argues, led Him to multiply creatures to infinity, and to place a creature within every creature, such that every creature has "infinity within itself."[36] Further, both hold that the unity of any natural, living body is grounded in a "dominant monad" or "principal spirit" that unifies all the others that compose it, and that for Conway forms the core of a human soul.[37] Finally, they also both place a shared emphasis on the embodied nature of all cognition. Even our grasp of necessary truths, Leibniz argues in the *New Essays*, is always conditioned by our embodied existence insofar as it depends on images and symbols we employ in thought.[38] Similarly – as I will more fully explore below – Conway insists that any cognitive act, from perception to intellection, requires both a spiritual and a bodily principle.

However, next to these similarities, a closer consideration of Conway's and Leibniz's shared commitment to vitalism also reveals a number of underlying deeper differences. For even though Conway's creatures and Leibniz's monads share the same vitalist features, they render these features dependent on contrary assumptions about the underlying ontological make-up. Crucially, whereas the activity, perception, and – ultimately – reality of Leibnizian monads depend on their unity and simplicity, for Conway, parthood is essential to a creature's ability to act and cognize, and indeed to its very existence.[39] For Leibniz, monads are non-extended and non-spatial combinations of active and passive power. Their activity, in turn, requires their simplicity and causal independence. They are not aggregates, but true unities, which – at least for the Leibniz of the *Monadology* – implies that they are truly without parts.[40] Moreover, as Leibniz famously puts it in the same work, they do not have "windows": Rather than being causally affected from the outside, monads are the autonomous sources of their own activity, and thus able to perfect themselves individually.

Conway, however, defends the very opposite: In order to be able to cognize and act, minds need to be multiple. Hence, contrary to Leibnizian monads, Conway's "spirits" *do* have parts. They are "physical," extended and potentially infinitely divisible aggregates.[41] "[T]he smallest creatures which can be conceived," she emphasizes, still "have an infinite number of creatures within themselves so that the smallest particles … can be extended or divided in infinite ways into ever smaller and smaller parts."[42] This view puts her in opposition not only to Leibniz, but also to More, who postulates "physical monads," yet denies that they are divisible into parts.[43]

In response to Conway, a Leibnizian might point to a regress that seems to threaten here: If all that existed in the created universe were aggregates, then we could never reach anything substantial or real that could ground their reality.[44] It is interesting to note that Conway is aware of this line of argument, and also attempts a response. It is true, she grants, that anything extended is in principle infinitely divisible. However, given His benevolent nature, God would never in fact reduce creatures to their smallest physical parts. For if He did so, all motion would then cease, since "it is the nature of motion to divide something into smaller and smaller parts."[45] A Leibnizian, of course, may not find this response particularly compelling. For even if God did not in fact reduce creatures *ad infinitum*, they still *could* in principle be so reduced, and thus the worry that there are no ultimate entities to ground their reality still seems to stand. However, Conway's response is instructive insofar as it further highlights a key difference in their respective ontologies: Conway's individuals crucially differ from their Leibnizian counterparts insofar as their vitality – their ability to move, cognize and act, and to thereby perfect themselves – depends on their extended, complex nature. "Truly," Conway writes, explicitly drawing out this consequence of her view, "it is the nature of a creature that it cannot be merely singular if it has to act and enjoy that good which the creator prepared for it."[46] The next two sections will explore this "multiplicity thesis" in more detail. I will first present a small thought experiment Conway uses to illustrate her claim, and then go on to examine the account of causation and cognition that underwrites it.

4. Causation as Vital Action

To support her claim that a creature's vitality requires its multiplicity, Conway asks us to imagine a "lonely" atom:

> [L]et us suppose a single atom separated from all its fellow creatures. What can it do to perfect itself and become greater and better? What can it see, or hear or taste or feel, either within or without? It cannot have internal motion, since any motion has at least two ends or extremes, namely a starting point and an end point. And if this atom is single, or if its center certainly cannot have motion from a beginning to an end within itself, and if it therefore cannot see, hear, taste, or feel anything from

> within itself, it certainly also cannot receive anything from without, from other creatures.[47]

A single atom, internally simple and existing in isolation from all others, Conway claims in this passage, could never achieve greater perfection. It cannot engage in motion, and therefore also not in any sensory activity. For motion, she argues, requires both a starting point (*terminus a quo*) and an end point (*terminus ad quem*). An isolated atom, however, being internally simple, could not engage in the internal motion such cognition requires, nor could it, being single, receive any sensory information from without.[48]

But why exactly should all motion and sensation require such complexity? In order to gain a better understanding of Conway's claim, let us skip ahead to Chapter 9 of the *Principles*, where Conway offers her theory of "vital action" as an explanation for how motion can be transmitted between bodies, even though it "certainly is neither a substance nor a body."[49] According to Conway, each creature has two attributes: spirit or "life", which she defines as "the capacity for every kind of feeling, perception or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue," and extension, which accounts for its shape and mobility.[50] Extension, in turn, is of two kinds: Insofar as it simply takes up physical space, a body is "materially" extended. This type of extension remains constant as long as the same body persists. However, as a result of its "virtual life" or God-given force each creature's body also has "virtual" extension (*extensio virtualis*). Unlike material extension, this type of extension varies according to a creature's degree of vitality – the more it perfects itself, the greater its vitality, and the more mobile and subtle its matter.[51]

Moreover, corresponding to these two types of extension, a body can engage in two kinds of motion: Merely mechanical locomotion (*motus localis*) or "the carrying of the body from one place to another", and internal motion or "vital action" (*actio vitalis*). In contrast to the passive locomotion of bodies, which solely consist in their change of place, Conway characterizes vital action as the exercise of the spiritual force emanated by God and mediated through Christ that is intimately present in all creatures, and accounts for their ability to cognize and act.[52] She further points out that while mechanical motion and vital action are distinct, they are also often inseparable, because mechanical motion can serve as an "instrument" to excite vital action in the subject or percipient.[53] Along with her claim that vital action is a kind of extension, this highlights vital action's spatial nature: Via the medium of mechanical motion, creatures can extend themselves across space through their "subtle parts" and thereby communicate motion and life to others, or – conversely – receive motion or life from them. Here, vital action and mechanical motion work together. Visual perception, for instance, involves the mechanical movement of the eye through particles of light. These particles, in turn, excite the vital action of the eye which properly constitutes vision, and which consists in the eye's sending out spiritual particles to the object, thus "uniting object and sight."[54]

Crucially, given this account, all vital action thus depends on the presence of parts in the subject of activity, as well as on the ability to physically extend by means of them.

Contrary to Leibniz, for Conway vitality is therefore closely linked to multiplicity, because only a complex being is able to extend itself and become more subtle through its parts. Nature, she writes

> always works toward the greater perfection of subtlety and spirituality since this is the most natural property of every operation and motion. For all motion wears away and divides a thing and thus makes it subtle and spiritual … Through those spirits … we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, feel, indeed, think, love, hate, and do everything we do.[55]

An individual's complex nature, Conway emphasizes, is a necessary condition for its vital action and thus for its very survival, since if it were simple, all its motions and operations would cease. "[I]t is," she argues, "the nature of motion that it breaks down and divides something into finer parts." If, therefore, God reduced a creature to a simple, indivisible atom, this atom could no longer act, and thus "would be entirely useless in creation, and no better than if it were pure nothingness and non-being."[56] Moreover, in grounding a creature's capacity for vital action, its multiplicity also grounds the relations of sympathy that according to Conway link all of creation. Created beings act through a constant interchange of parts, whereby they send out their own parts to others, and incorporate their parts in turn. This interchange of parts explains both sympathetic relations that hold between individual creatures, as well as those that hold between the parts of any given creatures body.[57] This aspect of Conway's account further underlines that unlike Leibnizian monads, her creatures – no matter how small – *do* have windows. "All creatures," she maintains, "from the highest to the lowest are inseparably united one to another by their subtler mediating parts," which form the basis for any interaction and productive union between them.[58]

In sum, Conway's account of vital action already takes us closer to an explanation of the sad fate of our lonely atom. For according to it, all genuine creaturely activity involves some internal division of the agent into subtler parts, which it can then exchange with others. However, a simple substance or atom would lack the ability to so, and thus could never truly act or interact. "[A] consideration of the infinite divisibility of everything into always smaller parts," Conway thus concludes, "is not an inane or useless theory, but of the very greatest use for understanding the causes and reasons of things."[59]

5. Cognition as Spiritual Generation

Besides her general account of creaturely activity as vital action, Conway also offers us a more detailed account of their cognitive operations. At its center, we again encounter a version of the multiplicity thesis: "[A]ll cognition," she argues, "requires a variety or multitude as the subject or receptacle of that knowledge." Consequently, our lonely atom could not "see, hear, taste, or feel any other creature," because in order to do so

> it would have to receive an image of this other creature within itself, which it cannot do, because it is only an atom and so small that it cannot receive anything inside itself. For just as the organs of the external senses are composed of many parts, so are the organs of the internal senses.[60]

Both external and internal perception, Conway suggests, require the reception of an image. A simple atom, however, lacking complex organs, would not be able to sense any other creature or object, because it could not "receive anything inside itself".

Once more, the question arises why exactly this should be so. What is it about Conway's account of cognition that requires the perceiving subject to be a complex one? Her views on vital action already provide us with a start: In order to cognize something external to it, our atom would need to be able to engage in vital motion to receive or send out sensory information. However, lacking parts, it could not engage in such motion, which – as we just saw – always requires both a division into parts and an exchange of them, and thus sense organs that possess the requisite complexity. However, the passage also provides us with a further detail regarding the nature of creaturely cognition, namely that it proceeds via the transmission of "images" (*imagines*) of the objects cognized. But in order to be able receive such images, Conway goes on to emphasize, the perceiving subject needs to be a multiplicity:

> Since there are various objects of our knowledge, and since every objects sends us its own image and that image is a real entity, it follows that we have many images in us, all of which cannot be received in an atom, but they need their own distinct places in us for their distinct form and shape.[61]

All images transmitted, Conway argues here, are "real" extended entities with a specific shape and location. Therefore, no simple, non-extended creature could receive or store them.

An important question raised by this additional element of Conway's view is whether we should regard her as defending a flat-footed "pictorial" theory of perception, according to which perception always literally involves the transmission and reception of imagistic representations or little "copies" of its objects. But even though the *Principles* do not supply us with a highly detailed account of the cognitive processes involved, enough suggests that this is not the case. To be sure, the claim that the images transmitted have a specific "form" (*forma*) or "shape" (*figura*) which the perceiving agent needs to incorporate undoubtedly plays a crucial role within Conway's conception of perception, and goes a long way in accounting for her commitment to the multiplicity thesis. "[S]hape," Conway argues, is "the instrument of life, without which no vital operation could be performed." The extended nature of images in turn necessitates the multiplicity of the percipient, whose particular sense organs – in virtue of themselves being "composed of many parts" – are fitted to receive and incorporate the specific shapes of the images transmitted.[62] However, this emphasis on the

specific form or shape of the images involved by itself by no means commits Conway to the view that those images model or copy the objects cognized in a straightforwardly pictorial fashion. Rather, it may merely suggest that the specific physical extension or shape of the parts transmitted carries structural information about the specific objects from which they originate, and which is in turn fitted to the specific sense organs that receive it. This reading is further supported by the broader 17th-century meaning of the term "image" and its Latin counterpart *imago*, which denotes not only pictorial representation, but a much more general sense of "likeness", so that the similarity in question could be merely structural in nature or grounded in certain shared features.[63] A closer look at the *Principles* reveals a similarly broad use of the term. Hence, Christ is a "living image" or "likeness" of God insofar as "an image signifies something which has been made visible and which represents and reveals in some unique way the invisible God more than any of his creatures." Similarly, human beings are "images" of God insofar as they instantiate certain divine attributes (most importantly, spirituality or "life").[64]

Finally, note that at least in one instance, Conway equates "image" and "idea," but also clearly does not conceive of all ideas as pictorial.[65] This non-pictorial use of image in turn seems to go along well with a further important feature of Conway's account: Her striking claim, forcefully highlighted by Marcy Lascano, that *all* creaturely cognitive operations – not only sense perception, but also all higher cognitive faculties up to the level of abstract thought – involve the transmission and retention of "images," and therefore some degree of materiality and multiplicity.[66] According to Conway, this marks the "great difference" between God and His creatures: God is one, and the entirety of his knowledge, "through which he knows himself as well as other things," is innate. He has "no darkness or corporeality" in himself, nor "any form, image, or figure." By contrast, creatures need to be multiple in order to gain knowledge, which always has some basis in the external world and, Conway further emphasizes, which can only be acquired in collaboration with others.[67]

What commits her to this view? Conway, I would now like to suggest, conceives of all cognition, of sense perception just as of intellection and retention, on the model of a process she terms "spiritual generation." "Every generation and production," she argues, requires the "union and simultaneous operation" of at least two elements: a more active, "male" principle ("spirit") and a more passive, "female" principle ("body"). The latter, she further explains, is required by all productive processes – including all cognitive processes – because all spiritual particles are in need of a "darker," more condensed medium that can retain them.[68] Conway's primary example of spiritual generation is the conception of a child, which for her proceeds not according to the Aristotelian, but according to the Galenic model. Contrary to Aristotle, Galen had argued that both men and women produce semen and can contribute to the bodily and mental characteristics of the child. The male semen, Conway explains, contains a rarefied formative power, while the female semen, as "the purest extract of the whole body," has "a remarkable power of retention." However, both are complex mixtures that contain spiritual (more rarefied) and material (more condensed) parts. Either may thus provide the dominant spirit whose image is retained by and comes to

shape the fetal matter.[69] Here also, the images transmitted in such spiritual generation again seem best thought of non-pictorially, as carriers of a particular type of information. In more contemporary terms, we might perhaps think of the images involved in sexual reproduction as the specific DNA carried by the male sperm that shapes the fetal matter by fusing with the "spirits" or "images" (the female DNA) contained therein. Similarly, in the case of vision, the "images" in question may be the particular physical stimuli that are transmitted via a specific arrangement of particles or "shape."

As Sarah Hutton points out, both Francis van Helmont as well as his father, the physician and chemist Joan Baptista van Helmont, present likely sources for Conway's account.[70] Like Conway, Francis defends a vitalist monism that views all parts of creation as containing both a male and a female principle. Moreover, he also emphasizes the importance of the imagination in shaping and influencing the body, and even argues in his *Spirit of Diseases* that most bodily ailments are psychosomatic in nature.[71] However, the more important source is likely his father, whose widely received medical views certainly also constituted an important influence on his son.[72] Similar to Conway, J. B. van Helmont describes individuals as inseparable unions of matter and spirit, shaped by an image of their dominant spirit and animated by a vital principle (*archeus influens*). Moreover, as for Conway, the transmission of images through which this vital principle operates is involved in all interactions and communications between creatures and their parts, and occurs via the transmission of a "seed" (*semen*) – a substance containing vital spirits – emanated by an active and received by a passive principle.[73]

But while the elder van Helmont mainly employs spiritual generation to explain the genesis of diseases (via the intrusion of hostile foreign seeds which then shape the body's matter) as well as their possible cures (via the restoration of the original bodily images), Conway puts the theory to more metaphysical use. For her, it provides a basic model for any cognitive process, as well as an account of how – via such processes – particular creatures are individuated. Each individual, she agues, has a "ruling spirit," which – with the help of a number of other subordinate ruling spirits (its cabinet of "ministers") – shapes and structures the body "according to its own ideas and inclinations." It exercises this formative power via the imaginative faculty, which "conceives as strongly as possible its own image, according to which the external body must take shape."[74] Here again, Conway advances and underlines the multiplicity thesis by insisting that not only every individual, but also every individual's ruling spirit must be a multiplicity. This holds true of the human soul, which is conceived of as a complex, highly organized collection of spirits governed and structured by a ruling spirit:

> It should be noted that although the spirit of man is commonly said to be one single thing, this spirit is composed of many spirits, indeed, countless ones; and as the body is composed of many bodies and has a certain order and government in all its parts, much more so is the spirit, which is a great army of spirits, in which there are distinct functions (*officia*) under one ruling spirit.[75]

Moreover, she further adds, contrary to what others may have claimed, the same applies to the ruling spirit itself: "But if someone says, it is necessary that a central or ruling spirit be a single atom … I answer, no. For this central, ruling, or principal spirit is multiple."[76] Any spirit, including any human soul, Conway thus insists, must be a multiplicity. But why should this be? An important reason, I would like to suggest, is that Conway not only conceives of reproduction and individuation on the cooperative model of "spiritual generation." Rather, she argues that "all productions of the mind" are generated "in the same way." They are, she explains – recalling her discussion of reproductive generation – our mind's "inner children", who are "*all* masculine and feminine; that is, they have a body and a spirit."[77]

We have already encountered spiritual generation's role in sense perception and individuation: Whenever we perceive something with our senses, we are exchanging spiritual particles with the bodies that surround us and, via our sense organs, incorporate specific particles or "images" we receive from them. These are taken up and retained by our bodily matter, and, ultimately – via the imagination and the activity of our ruling spirits – come to shape it. This latter element of Conway's account also has an important moral dimension, insofar as she regards the transformations effected by this shaping as the fundamental manifestation of divine justice, which therefore has no need for external punishment or reward.[78] For if we pursue merely objects more base and corporeal than ourselves, we will ultimately be shaped by the images we thus incorporate and become "darker" and more corporeal ourselves, while perceiving more spiritual objects will render us more spiritual.[79] However, not only sense perception and individuation, but all cognitive processes involve the cooperation between a spiritual (male) and a material (female) principle that is the hallmark of spiritual generation. Most straightforwardly, this holds true of any act of memory. Memory, Conway explains, in addition to spiritual images always requires a body that retains "the spirit of the thing conceived of," so that when we remember something we once perceived, "we see within ourselves its image, which is the spirit that proceeded from it." But just like our memories, our thoughts and reflections equally have both "a body and a spirit." For, she further argues, they both involve retention, which necessary requires a material element.[80]

How so? To begin with, as Lascano emphasizes, for Conway thoughts and reflections, like everything else, have not only spiritual, but also material being: They are "real entities," and thus require a material substratum if they are to be retained by us.[81] Plausibly, one assumption in the background here may be that both types of mental acts indeed often involve an element of memory: We can entertain the same thought across a period of time, form long chains of ideas, or engage in higher-order reflection on a prior notion. But memory, as we just saw Conway argue, requires materiality. In addition, Conway sometimes also appears to hint at a further feature of our mental acts that requires a material substratum, namely that they all involve an element of consciousness awareness or first-order reflexivity (*reflexio*). In one passage, she characterizes the essential activity of the mind as "the light or the eye looking at its own proper image" (*lux sive oculum contemplans propriam*

suam imaginem). Such reflexivity, however, she then proceeds to explain, requires a darker, more bodily medium that can reflect and thereby generate the spirit's images, as spirit itself is too diaphanous or ethereal to do so. Hence, just as in the case of the spiritual generation constitutive of reproduction or individuation, the mind in generating its "internal productions," shapes matter in accordance with its notions or "images." The material principle involved here, which Conway also characterizes as the "semen of our brain" (*semen cerebri nostri*), in turn functions as the "opaque" medium that, in receiving and retaining the respective image, allows the mind to contemplate it, as if "someone sees himself in a mirror."[82]

Like her account of individuation, Conway concludes her discussion of cognition as spiritual generation by stressing the complex nature of both principles at work: "[E]very spirit has its own body and every body its own spirit," and their cooperation is vital for cognition to take place. But in order for spirit and body to be able to cooperate, they need to be able to engage in an exchange of parts, and they need to do so in a coordinated and structured manner. Hence, the bodily principle involved in cognition is in fact "a countless multitude of bodies collected into one and arranged in a certain order," while the spiritual principle is "a countless multitude of spirits united in this body" which also "have their order and government."[83]

6. Conclusion: The Importance of Being Multiple

The preceding discussion of Conway's views regarding causation and cognition has brought a fundamental feature of her conception of creatures into sharper relief: In order to be able to cognize and act, any individual creature needs to be both internally multiple, and an integrated part of a greater multiplicity. No single atom would be capable of action, perception, or change, if, like a Leibnizian monad, it were truly simple and isolated. This strong commitment to what I have labeled the "multiplicity thesis" gives us good reason to not liken Conway's ontology too closely to a Leibnizian metaphysics of monads. Instead, I would now briefly like to suggest in closing, she may be better regarded as conceiving of nature as a holistic system. According to Michael Esfeld, the distinctive feature of such a system is that one or more of the essential properties of its members is a "holistic" property: A property that is such that no thing or individual can have this property unless there are others together with which it forms a functional whole.[84] Now, insofar as the multiplicity of created beings is essential to their capacity to cognize and act, their essential feature – vitality – precisely appears to be such a property. For without being multiple, and thereby able to participate in the collective interchange of particles that allows Conway's creatures – from the largest animals to the smallest bodily spirits that compose them – to act and perceive, none could engage in the operations that render it alive.

While such a holistic framework need not entail a Spinozistic token monism that regards creatures as mere modes, Conway certainly does place much greater emphasis on collective agency and the fluidity of boundaries between both individuals and species than

on the preservation of the unity and substantiality of the "I," as a Leibnizian defendant of the simplicity thesis might.[85] This feature of her view is perhaps most poignantly brought out by her discussion of an individual's ruling spirit, which, we saw, unlike a Leibnizian dominant monad is itself a multiplicity just like the spirits it directs. Its unity, she explains, is simply rendered "more tenacious," so that it may in the end "receive proper rewards for its labor" in accordance with the "universal law of justice" that God has inscribed in everything.[86] But Conway sometimes seems to push her view even further than this. In one passage, for instance, she explains that just as the lines that extend from "every part of the circumference" of a circle meet in and thereby constitute its center, the "central, ruling spirit … is called central because all the other spirits come together in it."[87] With this geometric analogy, Conway undermines the idea that by committing oneself to a single ruling spirit, one necessarily commits to the existence of a *simple* spirit that fulfills this function, just as the center of the circle constituted by the meeting lines is not itself a single point, but in fact constituted by the multitude of lines that meet in it. However, the analogy indeed seems to do even more, namely insofar it suggests that – ontologically speaking – a ruling spirits is not even a distinct entity over and above the spirits that compose it, but simply their union (just as the midpoint of a circle is no more than the intersection of all the lines radiating from its circumference). Conway thus here seems to dispel with the idea that there is a *single* distinct ruling spirit at all.[88]

If correct, this result may have significant consequences for both Conway's views of the nature of individual agents and the possibility of their salvation. Importantly, it raises the question whether her commitment to the multiplicity thesis ultimately really allows for distinct, stable agents or "souls" that can serve as the loci of moral responsibility. Moreover, it may lead us to wonder what may have compelled Conway to embrace the multiplicity thesis as fully as she does. One possible source of motivation may be the support the multiplicity thesis lends to her case against dualism, insofar as its truth – if independently established – has the potential to undermine Descartes's central claim that the mind's simplicity allows us to clearly conceive of it as separate from the body. But what may push Conway even more to reject an ontology centered on independent, simple substances is her firm commitment to an Origenist account of universal salvation, which regards every creature as capable of achieving greater perfection by undergoing a series of transformations.

As Hutton has pointed out, Conway's soteriology is heavily underwritten by her physics, insofar as the perfection of a creature is tied to the spirituality of its matter, which it can increase by engaging in its natural operations and motions.[89] Its ability to do so, however, is always dependent on its multiplicity, which in turn grounds its ability to perceive and interact. If therefore, Conway emphasizes, a creature "were entirely limited by its own individuality ... then no creature could attain further perfection … nor could creatures act and react upon each other in different ways."[90] Created beings, we saw, transform and improve by exchanging and receiving new parts through vital action, and shape and reshape their natural bodies through spiritual generation. Both processes, however, require creatures to be internally multiple, and to be united with other creatures into a greater whole. A single

atom, we witnessed Conway contend, thus could never engage in any act, sensation, cognition or any other type of motion, and consequently could never change and perfect itself. In this, she emphasizes, lies the great difference between God and creatures: "For he is one, and this is his perfection, namely, to have need of nothing outside himself. But a creature, because it needs the help of its fellow creatures, must be multiple to receive this help."[91] Without multiplicity, universal salvation must thus remain an impossibility. For while we – despite all our imperfections – can change and are able to improve, we can only do so collectively.[92]

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Notes

[1] See ST 75.2. For detailed discussion of this argument, see Pasnau 2002, 45-72.

[2] A classic version of this argument is Plato's "simplicity" or "affinity" argument in the *Phaedo* (78b-50d). For further discussion, see Apolloni 1996.

[3] Indeed, in the eyes of Kant, this is the only true use of the simplicity thesis: "[T]he assertion of the simple nature of the soul has value only insofar as I can thereby distinguish this subject from all matter, and consequently can exempt it from the decay to which matter is always subjected." (KdrV, A 356).

[4] CSM II, 59: AT VII, 86. See also CSM II, 9: AT VII, 13.

[5] CSM II, 59: AT VII, 86.

[6] GP IV, 559-60: NS, 112 (transl. mod.). For further discussion of this argument, see Borcherding 2019.

[7] Conway uses the term "spirit" both as a token term, to refer to an individual mind or soul, and as kind term, to denote immaterial (versus material) substance. I will conform to this usage here, using "mind", "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably where appropriate.

[8] More, *Immortality*, 8; *An Antidote Against Atheism*, Appendix, ch. 13, §§8–12 (both included in SPW). For further discussion of More's dualism, see Reid 2012 and 2003, Leech 2013, and Henry 1986.

[9] P 3.5.17.

[10] P 7.4.54-55.

[11] Conway wrote the *Principles* in English in the 1670s, shortly before she died. The work as we have it today has a complicated textual genesis that raises a number of challenges for any interpretation both with regard to its translation and its authorship. The manuscript, now lost, was published posthumously, in Latin translation, in 1690 by Francis Mercury van Helmont, and then retranslated to English by 'J. C.' (the initials likely refer to John Clarke, who also translated van Helmont's *Seder*

Olam) and published again in 1692. For a translation of the *Principles* that includes the Latin text, see Peter Loptson's edition [L]. The most recent edition of the book is by Allison Coudert and Taylor Corse [P]. Citations in this paper follow Coudert and Corse, and their translation is used unless otherwise noted. References are formatted as follows: *P*[*riniciples*] [*chapter number*].[*section number*].[*page number in the Coudert-Corse edition*]. Hence, *P* 2.4.13 refers to chapter 2, section 4, p. 13 in Coudert's and Corse's edition of the *Principles*.

[12] P 1.1.9; P 7.2.45

[13] P 7.2.45.

[14] P 1.3.9; P 3.9.20.

[15] For further discussion of Platonist theories of emanation within the context of early modern philosophy, see O'Neill 1993 and Schliesser 2013. For further discussion of Cudworth's account, see Hunter 1950; for further discussion of More, see Reid 2012; for a nice overview of both views, see Kringler 2013, 39-52.

[16] The natures of God, Christ, and creation differ according to their degrees of mutability: God is essentially immutable, creation is essentially mutable, and Christ is, like God, incapable of changing from good to bad, but also, like creation, capable of further change towards the good. See P 5.2.24.

[17] P 5.4-7.26-27. For Conway's definition of intimate presence, see P 7.4.50. Hutton 2004, 197ff., suggests the kabbalistic theology of the Quaker George Keith as a likely influence on Conway's Christology. Like Conway, Keith employs Platonist emanation to describe Christ as the "proper vehicle and conduit" for God's spiritual force, and explains his immediate presence in creatures by appealing to the kabbalistic doctrine of Adam Kadmon, whose soul extends throughout creation. For further discussion of Conway's Christology, see Mercer (forthcoming).

[18] P 9.2.63.

[19] P 8.4.61.

[20] P 6.11.41. See also P 8.4.61; P 8.2.58.

[21] P 7.1.41-2.

[22] See e.g. P 6.4.30-31 and P 9.5.65 for possible support of a token-monist, and P 9.9.69 for possible support of a type monist only reading.

[23] For type monist readings, see Grey 2017; Loptson 1982; Merchant 1979. For token monist readings, see Lascano 2017; Mercer 2015; White 2008. In addition, Gordon-Roth 2019 suggests that we adopt a reading according to which Conway deliberately oscillates between type and existence monism.

[24] Merchant 1979. See also Loptson 1982; Coudert & Corse 1996; Hutton 2004, 234f; Grey 2017.

[25] See P 3.9.20. However, as Reid (unpublished manuscript) has recently argued, the passage in question is very likely not by Conway at all, but was later inserted by either van Helmont or Christian Knorr van Rosenroth, and thus does not reflect her own terminology.

[26] Merchant 1979, 255-56.

[27] Ibid., 263; cf. P 7.4.53.

[28] *Leibniz to l'Hopital* (12/22 July 1695): A III.6, 451. Both Wilson 1989 and Becco 1975 emphasize Leibniz's familiarity with the extensive use of the term "monad" by modern Platonists.

[29] See, e.g., NE I, i, 1: A VI.6, 72. This parallel is also highlighted by Hutton 2004, 234, who, however, then goes on to claim that like Leibniz, Conway "elaborated her vitalism as a monadology", postulating "monads as simple entities expressive of the unity … of God through the simplicity of the individual monad."

[30] *Mon.* 69: GP VI, 618.

[31] *Leibniz to Burnett* (1697), GP III, 217.

[32] See, e.g., GP VI, 543-45.

[33] P 6.6.33-34; P 6.7.35.

[34] P 6.5-6.

[35] See also Merchant 1979, 262-63; Hutton 2004, 234.

[36] P 3.4-5; see *Mon.* §66.

[37] *Mon.* §70; P 7.4.55; P 6.11.39. For a careful exploration of Leibniz's view of monadic domination, see Look 2002 and Duarte 2012.

[38] *NE* I, i, 11: RB 81. For further discussion, see Julia Jorati's contribution to this volume.

[39] P 3.9.20; cf. P 7.4.54.

[40] *Mon.* §1-3; see *Theod.* §10.

[41] P 3.9.20.

[42] P 3.9.18.

[43] *Enchiridion metaphysicum*, vol. 1, ch. 9, §3.

[44] For further discussion of this line of argument, see Levey 2012.

[45] P.3.9.20.

[46] P 7.4.54.

[47] P 7.4.53 (transl. mod.).

[48] This passage bears some interesting similarities to an argument against materialist atomism in the Appendix to More's *Antidote Against Atheism* (ch. 13, §§7-13; in SPW). However, their dialectical strategies clearly diverge: More, on his part, affirms the existence of physical atoms, but argues against the possibility of their vitality. He then uses this result to establish his vitalist dualism, according to which matter needs to be informed by a vital principle (the "Spirit of Nature). For Conway, by contrary, the atom's lack of multiplicity and thus vitality ultimately seems to imply the very impossibility of its existence.

[49] P 9.9.69. For a discussion of possible sources of Conway's account, see Weichert 2012 and Hutton 2004, 200-202.

[50] P 9.6.66.

[51] P 9.9.69.

[52] Ibid. For further discussion of the mediating role of Christ, see Weichert 2012, 165-170.

[53] P 9.6.66; P 9.9.67. As Hutton (2004, 201) notes, the medieval term *virtualis* has its roots in the Latin terms *vis* ("power") and *virtus* ("excellence"), thus suggesting "both inherent properties and a capacity to exert influence through those properties."

[54] P 9.9.67.

[55] P 8.5.61.

[56] P 3.9.20

[57] P 7.3.53; see P 6.8.36-37.

[58] P 3.10.20. For seventeenth-century Platonists such as More and Cudworth, sympathy plays an important role as a universal principle uniting the world (see, e.g., SPW 126). For further discussion of Conway's notion of sympathy, see Mercer 2015.

[59] P 3.10.20.

[60] P 7.4.54. (transl. mod.).

[61] Ibid.

[62] P 9.8.67.

[63] I am grateful to Dominik Perler for highlighting this point to me.

[64] P 5.4.25; P 4.2.21-2; P 6.6.34; P 6.7.36.

[65] P 6.11.39, cf. P 6.3.30.

[66] See Lascano 2013. It is interesting to note that More, despite his dualism, like Conway insists on the embodied nature of all cognitive operations. For further discussion of More's reasons for holding this claim – which differ markedly from Conway's – see Reid 2012, 359-360.

[67] P 7.4.54; P 1.6.10.

[68] P 6.11.38. See also Lascano 2013, 330. While the male-female contrast introduced here may seem to reiterate traditional dichotomies (see Frankel 1991), it could also be read in a more subversive spirit, as Conway immediately proceeds to clarify that "it is not as essential property of anything to be a body, just as it is not a property of anything to be dark," P 7.4.54. The use of gendered language also seems to emphasize the generative character of all causal processes.

[69] P 6.11.39. For a detailed discussion of Conway's account of sexual generation, see Boyle 2006. On the Galenic theory in contrast to the Aristotelian view, see Boylan 1986.

[70] See Hutton 1996 and Hutton 2004, 141ff.

[71] Hutton 1996, 140-153.

[72] While Joan Baptisa van Helmont is never mentioned by Conway directly, many of his works had been translated, and she was very likely aware of them due to her friendship with his son.

[73] For references and a detailed discussion of van Helmont's views, see Pagel 1982.

[74] P 6.7.36.

[75] P 7.4.53. Both van Helmonts similarly couch their descriptions of the archeus or ruling spirit in political terms. See Pagel 1982, 98, and F.M. van Helmont, *The Spirit of Diseases*, §33: 56.

[76] P 7.4.55.

[77] P 6.11.39 (my emphasis). Here again, Conway could be read as subverting the traditional conception of reason as masculine.

[78] P 6.8.35-36. For an extended discussion of this point, see Lascano 2013, 330-333.

[79] P 6.7-9.35-37.

[80] P 6.11.38-39.

[81] Lascano 2013, 332; see P 6.11.39.

[82] P 6.11.38-39.

[83] P 6.11.39.

[84] See Esfeld 2001, 1-27.

[85] Whether Spinoza himself in fact defended such a strong monism is subject to some scholarly controversy. For further discussion, see e.g. Carriero 2002.

[86] P 7.4.55. While more in line with Christian orthodoxy, this claim also seems to be in tension with Conway's earlier pronouncement that the excellency of divine justice finds its foremost expression in the natural transformations of creatures since they eliminate the need for external punishment and reward (see P 6.8.36).

[87] P 7.4.55.

[88] I am grateful to John Callanan for very helpfully pressing me on this point.

[89] See Hutton 1996 for this claim and further discussion of Origenist elements in Conway and More.

[90] P 6.5.32.

[91] P 7.4.54.

[92] In this spirit, I would like to thank Maria Rosa Antognazza, Sebastian Bender, James Bryson, John Callanan, Clare Carlisle, John Grey, Matthew Leisinger, Dominik Perler, Jasper Reid and the audiences at the King's College History of Philosophy Seminar and the D-Society Research Seminar Cambridge for all their helpful comments and suggestions, which collectively much improved this paper.