

Is Anne Conway a Monist?

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Is Anne Conway a substance monist or a substance pluralist? That is, does Conway assume that there is just *one single created substance* (setting the uncreated substances of God and Christ aside) or is there a *multitude of created substances* on her view? In recent years, a lively debate about this question has emerged. Reading Conway as a substance monist is a popular reading. On such a reading, Conway holds that there is only one created substance and that the created world is in some sense one. Individual creatures turn out to be *modes*, not *substances*, according to this monist interpretation. Conway's views would thus be close to Spinoza's: apples, planets, horses, and human beings would all turn out to be modes of one single substance.

My paper argues against the recent trend of interpreting Conway as a monist. It claims that even though Conway sees all things in the created universe as closely related to one another, she should not be read as a substance monist, but as a substance pluralist. The paper thus argues that Conway does not see individual creatures as modes, as many commentators have claimed, but as substances. Moreover, the paper offers an explanation for why Conway sometimes hesitates to call created things 'substances.'

More specifically, the paper argues that the passages where Conway describes creatures as substances (in the plural!) should be taken at face value. When she writes, for instance, that "motion and action are nothing but modes of created substances" (*Principles* 9.9; CC 69), proponents of the monist interpretation have no attractive way of explaining these passages away. In contrast to that, the passages in Conway's *Principles* which allegedly show that she takes creatures to be modes are shown to be in fact compatible with a substance pluralist reading. Aside from these textual considerations, the paper argues that there are also philosophical and historical reasons for preferring a pluralist reading. Creatures, for Conway, have at least three features that are traditionally associated with substances (and not with modes): (i) they are *subjects of predication*; (ii) they are *persisting subjects of change*; and (iii) they are *causally active*.

To be sure, Conway also thinks that created individuals are mutually dependent on one another in a rather strong sense, which may explain why she sometimes (though by no means always!) hesitates to classify them as substances. Many early modern philosophers (including Descartes and Spinoza, with whom Conway engages explicitly) hold that substances are metaphysically independent in a strong sense. Perhaps Conway sometimes shies away from claiming that creatures are substances because creatures are strongly co-dependent on one another on her view. But this mutual dependence does not turn creatures into mere modes. We should conclude instead that Conway typically uses criteria (i)-(iii) for substancehood, unlike some of her contemporaries. Her conception of substancehood is thus closer to the Aristotelian scholastic one than to Descartes's or Spinoza's.

I'd like to conclude with two methodological remarks. First, with its discussion of Conway's metaphysics, my paper contributes to extending the canon in an obvious way: it deals with an early modern woman philosopher, whose work has been neglected for far too long. What is perhaps less obvious is how such an extension of the existing canon may also change our understanding of many philosophical debates in the early modern period. My paper, for instance, shows that metaphysical independence is not necessarily the only, or even the most important,

criterion for substancehood in the seventeenth century (as a focus on Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz may suggest). Second, my paper also raises questions about the alleged dichotomy of 'rational reconstruction' on the one hand and 'historical contextualization' on the other. Reconstructing and understanding a certain view from the history of philosophy oftentimes requires us to know the intellectual context very well. For example, in order to clarify whether Conway takes creatures to be substances or modes we need to have a grasp of the complex debates on substancehood in scholastic and early modern philosophy. This example suggests that oftentimes working 'contextually' is a *prerequisite* for reconstructing a theory or an argument well.