

A Panpsychist Interpretation of Anne Conway's Metaphysics

ANDREW FYFFE*

University of St Andrews

Abstract This paper proposes a panpsychist interpretation of Anne Conway's (1631-1679) metaphysics, as elucidated in *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. Contemporary versions of panpsychism attempt to explain how consciousness is realised in the natural world. They posit that matter is intrinsically experiential, such that when it is arranged into the form of a human brain, it gives rise to human consciousness. Similarly, Conway argues that substance is constituted by both Body and Spirit. The former serves as an explanation of a substance's material properties, whereas the latter explains how a substance can have various kinds of perceptual experiences, as well as experiencing sensation and emotion. I argue that Conway uses her concept of Spirit to refer to the same set of experiential properties as our contemporary concept of consciousness does. Understood thus, Conway's metaphysical framework appears to embrace a form of panpsychism.

1 Introduction

Scholarly interest in Anne Conway (1631-1679) has often directed attention to her arguments in favour of 'vitalism'.¹ By virtue of this, philosophers have failed to notice or, at the very least, properly account for the panpsychist elements of her only extant work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*.

*Andrew Fyffe is a soon-to-be graduate of the University of St Andrews. Unable to pry himself from rural Fife, he will return to the department in September to undertake the MLitt in Philosophy. His primary interests lie in the so-called 'hard problem' of consciousness. In particular, he wishes to encourage scientific and philosophical investigations into consciousness which view it as a fundamental constituent of the world around us. He is also interested in conceptual engineering, normative reasons, and linguistic communication.

1. For example, see: Carolyn Merchant, "The Vitalism of Anne Conway: Its Impact on Leibniz' Concept of the Monad," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979): 255-269.

I have two aims in this essay: one interpretative and one normative. First, I propose an interpretation of Conway in which her concept of Spirit is understood as coextensive with our contemporary concept of consciousness. This will consist of two sections: (i) an exposition of Conway's metaphysics of substance, and (ii) an attempt to show that 'Spirit' and 'consciousness' refer to the same set of mental properties. Second, I argue that one should adopt my interpretation, as doing so highlights the definite correlations between Conway's metaphysics and that of contemporary panpsychists. This will consist of two sections: (i) an overview of contemporary panpsychism, and (ii) an attempt to situate Conway's views amidst current discussions of panpsychism.

2 Introducing: The Metaphysics of Anne Conway

In *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Anne Conway provides grounds for rejecting Cartesian dualism and Hobbesian materialism, whilst outlining a metaphysics which inherits the virtues of both. In this sense, Conway provides an intermediate between two philosophical extremes: viz. the reduction of the mental to the physical (à la Hobbes) and the ontological separation thereof (à la Descartes).

2.1 Anne Conway's Metaphysics of Substance

Conway's ontology is monistic insofar as it commits her to the existence of a single type of substance.² Despite her adherence to monism, Conway respects the Cartesian intuition that there is *some* distinction to be drawn between the mental and the physical.³ Unlike her Cartesian contemporaries, however, Conway argues that there is no *essential* distinction between *that substance which possesses physical properties* and *that substance which possesses mental properties*.⁴

According to her framework, a substance can instantiate properties from either class, as substance is a coalescence of the physical (Body) and the mental (Spirit).⁵ For her, the existence of mental and physical properties does not imply the existence of ontologically distinct mental and physical substances. Rather, it implies that mentality and corporeality are two modes of a single substance.⁶

2. Peter Lopston, "Introduction," in *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (Martinus Nijhoff: London, 1982), 21.

3. The reader should note that I use 'physical' and 'material' interchangeably. Thus, physical and material properties are the same class of properties.

4. An essential distinction is one of essence or nature, e.g. Descartes' distinction between mental and physical substance.

5. Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 191.

6. This allows a substance to possess both mental and physical properties, as its nature is not restricted to the instantiation of either/or.

2.2 Conway's Concept of Spirit

There is nothing remarkable about Conway's discussion of Body. It shall suffice to say that her analysis mirrors Descartes' analysis of material substance. Simply put, Body is that which constitutes the physical aspects of a substance. That is, the properties of having a certain shape, breadth, and weight.⁷ In this sense, Body is sufficient to metaphysically explain the physical aspects of an entity.

In Chapter VI of *The Principles*, Spirit is introduced to refer to that aspect of substance which allows for the instantiation of mental properties.⁸ Spirit is, therefore, invoked to explain how, *qua* physical entity, a substance can have experiences in the visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory modalities; sensation and emotion.⁹

Conway situates Spirit alongside Body as a fundamental part of the natural world. It constitutes one aspect of a substance's nature and is instantiated by all entities to varying degrees, ranging from rocks to God. As such, Conway presents us with a picture of the natural world exhibiting a hierarchy of mentality; with the most Spiritual substances occupying the highest and the most Bodily occupying the lowest echelons.¹⁰ Most importantly, however, as there appears to be 'a scale of gradual shading' from the top to the bottom. Such that, regardless of the tier they occupy, all created substance is both mental and physical.¹¹

2.3 The Interconvertible Nature of Spirit and Body

Another curious feature of Conway's metaphysics is the convertibility of Body and Spirit. God, *qua* infinitely Spiritual substance, has the power to alter the nature of particular substances. That is to say that God is responsible for conferring greater or lesser degrees of Body and Spirit onto each individual substance. And because Conway equates Spirit with perfection (i.e. Godliness), the more a substance ameliorates itself (e.g. morally), the greater the degree of Spirit God allows it to possess. Consequently, the further a substance moves away from God, the more corporeal it becomes.¹²

It is in this sense that created substances can be transformed (or can evolve) into different species of substance; realise greater or lesser degrees of mentality; and move further up the Spiritual hierarchy.¹³ Such that, by divine contrivance, dust can become plants, plants can become dogs, dogs can become chimpanzees, and chimpanzees can become humans.¹⁴

7. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 224-5.

8. *Ibid*, 180-81.

9. *Ibid*.

10. Lopston, "Introduction," p.15.

11. *Ibid*.

12. *Ibid*, 21.

13. *Ibid*.

14. *Ibid*, p.23.

2.4 The Key Features of Conway's Metaphysics

Firstly, Conway argues that there is only one type of substance, constituted by Body as well as Spirit. Secondly, where Body accounts for material properties, Spirit accounts for mental properties. Thirdly, Spirit is instantiated by *all* substances to varying degrees, thereby reflecting the difference in mental complexity across the natural world. Fourthly, through the will of God and in accordance with their moral conduct, substances can become more mentally complex by virtue of how much Spirit they possess.

3 The Coextension of 'Spirit' and 'Consciousness'

I will now proceed to show that Anne Conway's concept of Spirit and our contemporary concept of consciousness are coextensive. In other words, they are both used to denote the same set of mental properties.

3.1 Introducing: Phenomenal Consciousness

'Consciousness' herein refers to phenomenal consciousness.¹⁵ Simply put, phenomenal consciousness is experience. To say that an entity is phenomenally conscious is to say that there is *something that it is like* to be that entity; that it has subjective experience. In this sense, phenomenal properties are experiential properties.¹⁶

Conscious states are a class of mental phenomena such as *seeing the colour blue* which have a distinct subjective feel. What it is like to be in a conscious state (that is, the subjective feel of the state) is determined by the set of experiential properties constitutive of that state.¹⁷ For instance, feeling a sharp jolt of pain in your left leg feels a certain way; similar in nature yet phenomenally distinct from having toothache. On my account, conscious states *just are* experiential states. These states are individuated by their associated experiential properties. The totality of which determines what it is like for a subject to be in that state.

3.2 Taxonomy of Experiential Properties

From the recent literature, we can provide a coarse-grained taxonomy of experiential properties, including:

15. 'Consciousness' and 'experientiality' (and their associated properties/states) denote the same phenomena.

16. Ned Block, "On a Confusion About a Function of Consciousness," *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 18 (1995): 230-31.

17. Thomas Nagel, "What is it Like to be a Bat?" in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979b), 166.

1. The various kinds of perceptual experience; such as *seeing* a red flower, *hearing* Frank Zappa's "Peaches en Regalia", *touching* a soft surface; and so on.
2. Bodily sensation; such as feeling dehydrated or cold.
3. Feelings of emotion; such as love, fear, desire, and regret.
4. Moods; such as happiness, sadness or boredom.^{18 19}

3.3 Textual Evidence for Coextension

Conway criticises Hobbes for thinking that an analysis of substance is exhausted by an analysis of extension. In doing so, one reduces material entities to 'mere Fabrick or dead Matter'.²⁰ Something was amiss in Hobbesian materialism – the absence of which rendered substance unfeeling and unthinking. And, although Conway does not use the term 'consciousness' in the *Principles*, it is clear that her concept of Spirit is referring to that class of experiential properties which Hobbesian materialism fails to account for.

For example, in Chapter IX of *The Principles*, Conway claims Spirit is that which gives substance the capacity for: 'Feeling, Sense, and Knowledge, Love, and Joy'.²¹ In other words, the instantiation of Spirit allows for – or, at the very least, provides the potential for – a substance to undergo certain perceptual experiences ('Sense'), sensations ('Feeling'), emotions ('Love'), and moods ('Joy').²²

3.4 Why Accept My Interpretation?

It appears that the properties of Spirit are experiential in the same sense that the properties of consciousness are experiential. States of love and joy, feelings and sensations, are all experiential states instantiated by conscious entities. And it is only by virtue of possessing Spirit that a substance can undergo these states. Conway therefore appears to be developing a theory concerned with the same mental phenomena as contemporary theories of consciousness.

18. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-6. Michael Tye, "Philosophical Problems of Consciousness," in *Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, ed. Velmans et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 23.

19. This list is amenable to the narrow interpretative focus of this paper, not to substantive discussions of consciousness. As such, I do not take this taxonomy to be exhaustive. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who emphasised this point.

20. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 180.

21. *Ibid*, p.225.

22. One sympathetic to the so-called 'knowledge argument' against materialism may wish to correlate Conway's 'Knowledge' with the type of phenomenal knowledge discussed in: Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia."

Perhaps this common *explanandum* has eschewed scholarly acknowledgement due to Conway's use of 'Spirit' in lieu of 'consciousness'. Nevertheless, that Conway was concerned with consciousness is noted by her Early Modern contemporary and philosophic admirer, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). In a letter dated 1697, Leibniz writes: 'My philosophical views approach somewhat closely those of the late Countess of Conway [. . .] because I hold that [. . .] everything takes place according to a living principle and according to final causes - *all things are full of life and consciousness*.'²³

Therefore, given the sufficient textual evidence to substantiate my interpretation and the distinct lack of attention paid to the preceding considerations, one *should* read 'Spirit' as 'consciousness'. What's more, such an interpretation illuminates another underappreciated facet of Conway's metaphysics. Namely, the correlations it has with contemporary panpsychist theories of consciousness. Thus interpreted, Conway is understood as arguing for the view, as Leibniz put it, that all things are full of consciousness.

4 Introducing: Contemporary Panpsychism

Much like Conway's monism, contemporary panpsychism can be seen as an intermediary between reductive materialism and dualism. In fine, it is an attempt to explain how consciousness is realised in the natural world, whilst assuming the phenomenon to be irreducibly mental and ubiquitous throughout nature.²⁴

4.1 The Intrinsic Nature of Matter

The general panpsychist commitment is that the basic constituents of the physical world such as atoms and quarks possess experiential properties as well as physical properties.²⁵ Matter, according to panpsychism, is *intrinsically* mental. Thus, when it is arranged into different kinds of organisms with different kinds of neurological structures, the basic experiential properties combine to realise different kinds of consciousness.²⁶ For example, when these basic constituents are arranged in the form of a human brain, the combination of their experiential properties gives rise to human consciousness. Panpsychism therefore posits that: (i) all physical entities possess some degree of consciousness by virtue of matter's intrinsic experientiality, and (ii) this explains how consciousness is realised in the physical world.

23. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, letter to Thomas Burnett, 1697, in *Philosophischen Schriften*, ed. Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1960). [Italics are my own.]

24. William Seager, "Panpsychism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, ed. McLaughlin et al. (Oxford University Press, 2009), 207.

25. Thomas Nagel, 'Panpsychism', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979a), 181.

26. *Ibid*, 182.

4.2 Degrees of Experientiality

It must be stressed, however, that panpsychists are in no way committed to the claim that *all* substances instantiate full-blown phenomenal consciousness.²⁷ A panpsychist needn't claim, for example, that a rock possesses the hallmark features of mentality. As Chalmers notes, resistance to panpsychism tends to arise from a tacit conflation of experiential properties with other features of mentality. Most of which require a greater degree of material complexity for their instantiation.²⁸

To say that a rock possesses some form of experientiality is not to imply that it will have a rich mental life. It won't, for instance, have a sense of selfhood, possess memories, or have the capacity to think and reason as intelligent creatures do. Rather, panpsychists merely affirm that everything which is physical possesses experiential properties. Which, when constitutive of a plant, dog, or a human, realise *what it is like* to be that particular substance.²⁹

5 Anne Conway: The Panpsychist Interpretation

5.1 Matter as Intrinsically Mental

Conway's monistic substance is jointly constituted by physical and experiential properties. She writes in Chapter VI of the *Principles* that: '... indeed every Body is a Spirit, and nothing else, neither differs any thing from a Spirit [...] so that this distinction is only modal and gradual, not essential or substantial.'³⁰ In this sense, material substances are numerically identical to mental substances; they are one and the same thing.

Like Conway, panpsychists advocate a form of monism: viz. materialism (or physicalism). On this account, matter is posited as the basic constituent of the natural world. Furthermore, panpsychists make no essential distinction between mental and material substance. Consequently, all substances possess both experiential and physical properties. On their analysis, matter is intrinsically experiential; so that, by virtue of the nature of matter, *all* substances are constituted by basic experiential properties.

Strawson, a contemporary advocate of panpsychism, notes that one is led to the view through accepting three propositions: (a) matter is a phenomenon which exists in the natural world; (b) consciousness is a phenomenon which exists in the natural world; and (c) there is only one *type* of thing in the world.³¹ If one accepts these claims,

27. David Chalmers, "Panpsychism and Protropsychism," in *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Bruntrup et al. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

28. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, 295.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 190.

31. Galen Strawson, 'Realistic Monism', in *Consciousness and its Place in Nature*, ed. Freeman (Exeter:

then one is naturally led to the conclusion that whatever constitutes substance must be both physical and mental (in the sense of instantiating experiential properties).

In Chapter XI of *The Principles*, Conway writes that the Cartesian and Hobbesian analysis of matter in purely physical terms: ‘. . . profits nothing [. . .] for they have never proceeded beyond the Husk of the Shell, not reached the Kernel.’³² In other words, they have, in their respective ways, failed to notice that since the world is monistic, and since both matter and consciousness are real phenomena, whatever constitutes the world must be both physical and experiential. Moreover, Conway asserts in Chapter VII that: ‘. . . every Body is a certain Spirit or Life in its own Nature, and that the same is a certain Spirit in its own nature [. . .] having Knowledge, Sense, Love, Desire, Joy, and Grief.’³³ Hence, like the panpsychists, Conway views the mental and material as constitutive of a monistic substance, and accounts for the former through the intrinsically experiential nature of the latter.

5.2 Hierarchy of Mentality

For Conway, the hierarchy of mentality is determined by the degree to which a substance instantiates Spirit (which I have argued should be understood as coextensive with ‘consciousness’). Admittedly, Conway’s story has more theological implications than most contemporary panpsychists would admit. Nevertheless, the moral remains: the basic constituents of the world possess some degree of experientiality, with a greater degree of experientiality being instantiated the further up the hierarchy one inspects. In fine, the more Spirit instantiated, the greater mental complexity realised.

Chalmers’ discussion of panpsychism seems to suggest a similar continuum of consciousness throughout the natural world.³⁴ He claims that experiential properties are instantiated by all entities, with the combination of these properties realising their most complex instantiation in human minds. In other words, degrees of phenomenal consciousness are realised even by the most unthinking substances (e.g. thermostats, rocks, tables, etc.). And, by virtue of their experiential properties, there is *something it is like* to be those entities.

6 Conclusion

In short, I have shown that Anne Conway can be interpreted in such a way that she is implicitly arguing for panpsychism: the view that all substances in the world are

Imprint Academic, 2006), 7.

32. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 225.

33. Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 191.

34. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, 293-7.

intrinsically mental. This was illustrated by showing that Conway's concept of Spirit denotes the same experiential properties as our contemporary concept of consciousness, and by tracing the similarities between her analysis of substance alongside contemporary panpsychists' analysis of matter.

This interpretation, I hope, will allow for a dual-appreciation of Conway *qua* subject of scholarly investigation, and Conway *qua* panpsychist with noteworthy ideas pertaining to the metaphysics of mind.

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