Conway’s Ontological Objection to Cartesian Dualism

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Abstract: Anne Conway disagrees with substance dualism, the thesis that minds and bodies differ in nature or essence. Instead, she holds that “the distinction between spirit and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial” (CP 6.11, 40). Yet several of her arguments against dualism have little force against the Cartesian, since they rely on premises no Cartesian would accept. In this paper, I show that Conway does have at least one powerful objection to substance dualism, drawn from premises that Descartes seems bound to accept. She argues that two substances differ in nature only if they differ in their “original and peculiar” cause (CP 6.4, 30); yet all created substances have the same original and peculiar cause; so, all created substances have the same nature. As I argue, the Cartesian is under a surprising amount of pressure to accept Conway’s argument, since its key premise is motivated by a conception of substance similar to one endorsed by Descartes in his Principles of Philosophy.

Keywords: Conway; Descartes; dualism; monism; substance

Anne Conway, whose notebook was posthumously translated and published as The Principles of Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy, has rightly been appreciated for her extremely original account of the relationship between mind and matter. 1 Conway adopts a form of

neutral monism, in opposition to the substance dualism prominently advocated by René Descartes and Henry More. On her view, spirits and bodies are not different kinds of substances. Rather, both are of the same nature or essence, differing only in their degree of corporeality: “crassness” (CP 6.11, 40) or “grossness” (CP 7.1, 43).² It is no surprise that scholars have focused on this feature of Conway's Principles: the possibility that spirit and body are states that lie on a single continuum, and that an entity may become more or less corporeal during its existence, is a fascinating one. However, in focusing on the details of Conway's positive view, scholars have passed quickly over some of the most interesting reasons she provides for rejecting substance dualism. In particular, scholars have in general ignored an objection that Conway raises against substance dualism on the basis of ontological considerations about substantial kinds.

Rather than focusing upon the details of Conway's positive view, then, I will here examine and develop this underappreciated objection to substance dualism. Conway's ontological objection, as I will call it, is that the distinction between thinking things and extended things is not of the right sort to ground a distinction of substantial kind (or nature, or essence). The reason for this is that distinctions of substantial kind must be grounded in differences in the types of independence possessed by those substances, but there is no such difference in the types of independence possessed by minds and bodies. So, in a nutshell, the line that Descartes draws between res cogitans and res extensa does not track an ontological difference.

My aim in this paper is to show that Conway's ontological objection poses a serious challenge for Descartes. If the interpretation I propose is correct, Conway provides a fascinating and underappreciated way to attack Descartes's substance dualism. Moreover, on the interpretation I develop, her objection does not arise solely out of her prior commitment to monism about created bodies and spirits. (Indeed, I will argue that recent commentators have seriously overstated how radical Conway's monism is.) Rather, her objection draws its force primarily from claims that Descartes himself either endorses or has reason to endorse.

Section 1 identifies the Cartesian thesis of substance dualism, and section 2 draws a distinction between internal and external objections to that thesis. Section 3 discusses Conway's ontological objection to the Cartesian argument. Section 4 makes the case for taking this objection to be internal to the Cartesian system, unlike many traditional objections to substance dualism. Finally, in section 5, I consider some possible Cartesian replies to this objection. In each case, I will argue, Conway has the means to pursue her objection in spite of these possible Cartesian replies.

Before digging into the details, a caveat is in order. Conway's philosophical writings engage a wide range of philosophical interlocutors, and it is often difficult to tease apart her criticisms of one author (Descartes, say) from another (such as Henry More). Although several of the passages I examine present objections that would apply to both Cartesian and Morean dualism, my focus here is on Conway's engagement with the Cartesian system. For better or for worse, it is Descartes rather than More who most strongly shaped subsequent philosophy of mind.³ Thus, although there is no question that Conway


³. In spite of Descartes’s subsequent influence, Jasper Reid has persuasively argued that Henry More was, in his own time, "regarded as one of the most eminent philosophical authorities in England," even though he is now rarely included among the canonical authors of the early modern period; see Reid, The Metaphysics of Henry More (London: Springer, 2012), 1-9.
formed her views largely on the basis of her frequent discourse with More, the philosophical interest of her objection is best highlighted by showing how it undermines Cartesian (rather than Morean) dualism.

1. Descartes’s Substance Dualism

In her Principles, Conway argues that “the distinction between spirit and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial” (CP 6.11, 40). By contrast, in the context of the Cartesian system, spirit and body are taken to be substances that differ in essence: the nature or essence of the body is extension, which is presupposed by all of a body’s other properties, such as shape or size. And the nature of the mind is thinking, which is likewise presupposed by all of a mind’s other properties, such as willing or doubting. So, in the terminology that he adopts in his Principles of Philosophy, Descartes’s version of substance dualism amounts to the claim that thought and extension are “principal attributes” of the substances that possess them: each is a “principal property which constitutes [the substance’s] nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred” (PP I.53, CSM I 210). Hence, for Descartes, the claim that thought and extension are the principal attributes of minds and bodies (respectively) entails that the nature of the mind is entirely different from the nature of the body. That is, no properties that are included in the nature of thinking substance are also included in the nature of extended substance, and no properties included in the nature of extended substance are included in the nature of thinking substance.

We can thus frame the Cartesian thesis that Conway seeks to overthrow as follows:


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Substance dualism: The nature of thinking substance is entirely different from the nature of the extended substance.5

Now, Descartes’s most well known arguments about the relationship between mind and body are not actually arguments for substance dualism. Most of these arguments focus on defending another central Cartesian thesis:

Real distinction of mind and body: Mind and body are numerically distinct substances.

It is worth flagging that Conway does not need to deny the real distinction of mind and body in order to reject substance dualism. If substance dualism is true, then so long as there are at least some minds and bodies, they are really distinct substances; but the reverse does not follow by logic alone.6 And so, although Descartes focuses much of

5. Both Descartes and Conway use the terms ‘nature’ and ‘essence’ synonymously. Some commentators — such as Gonzalo Rodríguez-Pereyra, “Descartes’s Substance Dualism and His Independence Conception of Substance” (“Descartes’s Substance Dualism”), Journal of the History of Philosophy vol. 46, no. 1 (2008), 70 — formulate substance dualism in stronger terms, as the thesis that no substance has both material and mental properties. Yet in the texts I appeal to below, it will be seen that substance dualism is primarily a view about how the nature or essence of a substance is related to its modes, and not a view about the modes themselves.

6. Indeed, not only is it logically possible to accept the real distinction of mind and body without accepting Descartes’s substance dualism, but some philosophers have actually held this view. Some of the Cambridge Platonists, for instance, held that the mind and body are distinct substances, but that the mind is extended throughout the body. From Descartes’s perspective, this is to say that the mind and body share the same nature but are nevertheless really distinct. See Henry More, The Immortality of the Soul, Alexander Jacob (ed.) (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987). However, note that More develops a theory on which spirit has a different nature or essence than matter, even though both are extended. The difference between the two kinds of substance, on More’s view, is that matter is impenetrable and divisible while spirit is penetrable but indivisible; see Book I, Chs. III and VII for More’s discussion of spiritual substance.
his efforts on defending the real distinction between mind and body, we will see that Conway’s objection does not directly undermine those arguments. Rather, the metaphysical question at issue has to do with distinctions among different kinds or species of substance, not among different individual substances. On the Cartesian picture, minds and bodies are not merely numerically distinct substances, but also distinct kinds of substance; this latter claim is what Conway denies.

The passage most commonly referenced in discussions of substance dualism comes from the Sixth Meditation:

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct... Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have...a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing. And on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (CSM II, 54)

As most commentators recognize, this is not an argument for substance dualism, but rather for the real distinction of mind and body—the thesis that is expressed in the last sentence of the passage. However, the passage does indicate Descartes’s endorsement of substance dualism. In particular, substance dualism seems to be involved in Descartes’s insistence that I have a clear and distinct conception of myself as “simply a thinking, non-extended thing” (CSM II, 54, emphasis added), and of my body as “simply an extended, non-thinking thing” (ibid).

Commentators have recognized the role of substance dualism in this passage in a variety of ways, some more critical of it than others. In a less critical mode, John Carriero interprets the argument as follows: “Body does not belong to the essence or nature of the mind, and mind does not belong to the essence or nature of body. Since there is no essential dependence of mind on body, and no essential dependence of body on mind, mind and body are two independent realities...” Here, substance dualism is characterized in terms of the lack of “essential dependence” of body on mind, and vice versa. Carriero’s reading thus suggests that Descartes uses substance dualism as a premise in the argument for the real distinction of mind and body.

In a more critical mode, Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra claims that the quoted passage reflects “the way Descartes intended to argue for substance dualism” (74), though in his view it misses its mark, establishing only the real distinction of the mind and body. Since I agree with Rodriguez-Pereyra that the conclusion of the argument is that the mind and body are really distinct, it is not clear to me that Descartes’s primary intention in this passage is to establish substance dualism.

8. John Carriero, Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes’s Meditations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 379. Some commentators have recognized Descartes’s reliance on substance dualism in the argument for the real distinction of mind and body and, unlike Carriero, taken this fact to sink the argument. For example, Blake Dutton, “Descartes’s Dualism and the One Principal Attribute Rule,” British Journal for the History of Philosophy vol. 11, no. 3 (2003): 395-415, observes that “[The Sixth Meditation argument] is only viable if Descartes can justify the pairing of thinking with non-extended and extended with non-thinking. Otherwise, he has no assurance that in conceiving of mind and body he is conceiving of diverse substances rather than one and the same substance conceived through diverse attributes” (414). Dutton does not think such justification can be found.
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than, say, motion) constitutes the nature of body. And, in a subsequent proposition, he adds:

Thought and extension can be regarded as constituting the natures of intelligent substance and corporeal substance; they must then be considered as nothing else but thinking substance itself and extended substance itself — that is, as mind and body. In this way we will have a very clear and distinct understanding of them. (CSM I, 215)

Since Descartes is developing the claim that minds have a different “nature and essence” than bodies, these passages bear directly on the present discussion. However else we interpret Descartes's reasoning here, it is clear from these passages that he endorses substance dualism—the view that the nature of thinking substance is entirely different from the nature of extended substance.

In subsequent sections, I will examine one of Conway's objections to this thesis. Although it is not clear that Conway developed it with Descartes specifically in mind, I will argue that the objection in question presents particular difficulties for Descartes.

2. Internal and External Objections to Substance Dualism

In Chapters VII and VIII of her Principles, Anne Conway presents (by her count) six arguments for the thesis that the distinction between mind and body is merely modal — in other words, that minds and bodies do not differ in nature or essence, but fall under the same species of substance. The arguments take a wide variety of different routes to establish this conclusion, but many of them rely on premises that Descartes would not have found compelling. Indeed, the arguments that by Conway's lights tell most decisively against the Cartesian system are not arguments that Descartes would have found troubling. They rely upon assumptions that he can and would reject.

Because I wish to show that at least one of Conway's arguments...
cannot be so readily dealt with by the Cartesian, it will be useful to consider another of her arguments that (as I will suggest) does not present a very serious challenge to Descartes. When Conway is explicitly comparing her view to Descartes’s, she writes,

Cartesian philosophy claims that body is merely 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. (CP 9.2, 63)

This nicely highlights the fact that Conway saw the crucial difference between her system and Descartes’s in terms of the body’s capacity for “life and perception.” Descartes would object to framing his view as denying life to extended substances; rather, he would contend, we should understand life as a mechanical process of appropriately organized extended substances. But the claim that Cartesian bodies lack perception is fair given his substance dualism. In Conway’s view, this conception of extended substance would make God’s creation of matter utterly mysterious: “since every creature shares certain attributes with God, I ask what attribute produces dead matter, or body, which is incapable of life and sense for eternity?” (CP 7.2, 45). On the contrary, God “communicates his goodness to all his creatures in infinite ways” (ibid, 44), which goodness includes at the very least a capacity for perception. Hence there cannot be a substance answering to the Cartesian conception of body.

However, this objection is based on assumptions that Descartes is under little or no pressure to accept. In particular, Descartes would deny the requirement that every created substance shares certain attributes with God. That would be to impose a limitation on God’s power, which Descartes takes to be limitless. Conway’s demand for some similarity between God and creation amounts to the requirement that an effect (the created universe) be related in some comprehensible way to its cause (God). But God’s power of creation is so limitless that it is, on Descartes’s view, incomprehensible.

Indeed, Descartes often appeals to the incomprehensibility of God’s limitless power as a way of getting out of metaphysical problems of this sort. In the Principles of Philosophy, Descartes reconciles the God’s power with free will by claiming that the incomprehensibility of God’s power should alleviate our concerns.11 He writes:

[W]e cannot get a sufficient grasp of [God’s power] to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined. Nonetheless we have such close awareness of the freedom and indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly. And it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves. (CSM I, 206)

God preordains all things; yet human beings act freely. How are these facts to be reconciled? According to Descartes, the power by which God preordains all things is beyond our comprehension. Since we know with complete certainty that we have free will, we should infer that both facts are somehow compatible, although the way in which they are compatible is itself incomprehensible. Descartes could avail himself of a similar strategy to respond to Conway’s objection that God could (or would) not create “dead” matter. It is true that the means by which God could create such matter is incomprehensible to us, but that in no way shows that God could (or would) not have done so. To the contrary, we have a clear and distinct idea of body as purely extended

11. This example is borrowed from Michael Della Rocca, “Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology without God,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 70 no. 1 (2005): 1-33.
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Describing the created world, Conway writes, “This creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence [Quae creatura una saltem est Entitas vel substantia quoad naturam sive essentiam suam], as demonstrated above, so that it only varies according to its modes of existence, one of which is corporeality” (CP 7.1, 41-2 [104]). In writing this, she is explicitly rejecting the claim that created substances have different natures or essences from one another. Thus she is explicitly rejecting substance dualism. Her claim is that minds and bodies—that is, created thinking substances and extended substances—do not differ in nature or essence. As I noted earlier, the real distinction of mind and body need not enter into the matter. Conway’s claim that “creation is one...in respect to its nature or essence” is compatible with the view that my mind and my body are numerically distinct substances of the same kind, i.e., of the same nature or essence. In other words, her claim is properly understood as the denial of substance dualism.

Before I turn to Conway’s reasons for rejecting substance dualism, I must flag the fact that this reading of Conway’s remarks about the unity of creation is not entirely uncontroversial. On the interpretation I defend, Conway’s remarks on this issue are merely intended to express the denial of substance dualism: she holds that there are many created substances, but only one kind or species of created substance. However, the claim that “creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature” is often taken by scholars to express a more radical form of monism. Some commentators have taken Conway’s remarks to indicate that she is a monist about created substance in the sense that there exists numerically one created substance, the whole created universe. Christia Mercer, for instance, attributes to Conway the view that “The created world is one big infinitely complex vital substance, whose various modes constitute individual creatures.” Likewise, Carol Wayne White holds that, for Conway, “all existents (from God through Christ to nondivine creation) were one substance... Created beings or species were modes of this one single substance...” And a similar interpretation seems to be advanced by Sarah Hutton, who writes that Conway “was a monist: that is she postulated that there

and unthinking substance. And the fact that it is incomprehensible how God created such a substance ought not lead us to deny our clear and distinct idea of it.

I do not mean to suggest that Descartes’s strategy here is a good one. Rather, this example is of interest because it suggests a distinction between two kinds of objection. Descartes does not feel the force of the objection from “dead matter” because it relies on an assumption—about the nature of divine creation, in this case—that is simply not part of his philosophical system. I will call objections of this sort external. By contrast, I will call internal objections those that rely solely on assumptions that are either part of the target philosophical system, or that can reasonably be inferred from it. (This is not a new distinction, but in what follows it will be useful to have names for the two kinds of objection.) Given the foregoing example, internal objections can be seen to have a key intellectual virtue that external objections lack. An external objection can be ducked simply by rejecting an external assumption, but an internal objection cannot be evaded without revising or at the very least further fleshing out the system it targets.

I said that Conway’s argument against “dead” matter is an external objection to the Cartesian system. Not all of her objections are in this sense external to Cartesianism. As I will argue, at least one of her criticisms of dualism is internal to the Cartesian system, in the sense that it relies only on background assumptions that Descartes accepts or that his other views give him good reason to accept. In the next section, I describe Conway’s ontological objection to substance dualism. Then, in the following section, I argue that this objection is internal in the sense just described, and so poses a serious problem for the Cartesian.

3. Conway’s Ontological Objection

Describing the created world, Conway writes, “This creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence [Quae creatura una saltem est Entitas vel substantia quoad naturam sive essentiam suam], as demonstrated above, so that it only varies according to its modes of


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was only one substance in created nature, and that all things were composed of this single substance."14 On this interpretation, Conway's remarks about the unity of created substance are taken to express a very strict claim about the number of created substances: there is numerically one created substance, and all finite created bodies and spirits are modes of that single created substance. Accordingly, I will call this the strict interpretation of Conway's monism.

Whether Conway adopts this view is significant because, if the strict interpretation is correct, her disagreement with Descartes runs far deeper than the mere denial of substance dualism. The strict interpretation does not make Conway quite so radical as Spinoza, since the single created substance is not identified with God. However, on the strict interpretation, Conway retains one of the most surprising and subversive elements of Spinoza's system: all human beings, and thus all human souls, are merely modes of the one created substance, the universe. In this way, the strict interpretation makes Conway's view vulnerable to many of the penetrating objections against Spinoza's monism raised by later authors such as Pierre Bayle.

Yet Conway's claim that "creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence" is ambiguous. It could be read as the strict claim that in all creation, there is a single substance, but it could also be read (as I prefer) as the more moderate claim that all created substances have the same nature or essence. Even Conway's assertion that creation "only varies according to its modes of existence [modos existendi], one of which is corporeality [corporeitas]" (CP 7.1, 41-2 [104]) is ambiguous: the fact that corporeality [corporeitas] is merely a mode of existing does not entail that corporeal things, or bodies [corpora], are modes. Thus Conway's remarks on the unity of creation do not by themselves tell us which version of monism she intends. Given this ambiguity, we need to consider other passages that could clarify Conway's meaning. And canvassing the rest of the Principles reveals more textual evidence against the strict interpretation than its proponents typically appreciate. In particular, there is strong textual evidence for ascribing to Conway only the more modest view that all created substances share the same nature or essence, but that there is a plurality of created substances. I will briefly discuss two relevant pieces of evidence here.

First, Conway sometimes speaks of particular created things, such as particular spirits, as substances. For example, while describing the mutability of creatures, she writes, "a certain thing, while always remaining the same substance [res quaedem, eadem semper manens substantiâ], can change marvelously in respect to its mode of being, so that a holy and blessed spirit...may become an evil and cursed spirit of darkness through its own willful actions" (CP 7.1, 43 [105]). The implication is that individual created spirits are to be counted as substances. But Conway also holds that there is a plurality of individual created spirits. Indeed, on her view, there are infinitely many created spirits: "the spirit of man is...composed of many spirits, indeed, countless ones" (CP 7.3, 53).15 So Conway appears to hold that there


15. The relationship of 'spirit' [spiritus], 'soul' [anima], and 'mind' [mens] in Conway's writings is difficult to unpack. A few passages shed some light, however. While describing the creation of animals, she writes, "they have their spirits, or souls [spiritus, sive animus], from the earth" (CP 6.6, 34 [95]). Conway frequently uses this conjunction of spiritus with animus (see, e.g., CP 7.3, 46 [110], and 8.2, 58 [128]), which implies that spiritus and animus are synonymous terms. By contrast, there are not clear-cut instances in which Conway identifies spiritus or animus with mens, though some passages do suggest this. When describing the bodily changes undergone by a human who becomes "a brute in spirit [spiritum]" (CP 6.7, 36 [97]), Conway writes that such a human will slowly transform into "that species of beast to which he is most similar in terms of the qualities and conditions of his mind [qualitates & conditiones mentis]" (ibid). Since in this context the human spirit and the mind are supposed to be the same thing, it appears that Conway sometimes uses 'spiritus' and 'mens' to refer to one and the same thing. However, Conway also uses 'spiritus' to refer to things that are not what we (or Descartes) would ordinarily call minds: particular thoughts or ideas are spirits, albeit ones generated by the mind (CP 6.11, 39). The most plausible interpretation is that 'spiritus' is an umbrella term that includes human minds along with many other spirits. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing on this point.)
For these reasons, I do not take Conway to hold that there is numerically one created substance, but rather a more moderate form of monism according to which there are many created substances that share a single nature or essence. What exactly does this mean? Insofar as we have a handle on Cartesian or Morean dualism, Conway's view should be readily comprehensible, even if it is surprising. Just as Descartes holds that all minds are substances with the same essence, and More holds that all created spirits are substances with the same essence, Conway holds that all created spirits and bodies are substances with the same essence. Thus her claims about the unity of creation are best understood as expressions of her rejection of substance dualism.

If this is right, then in order for Conway to establish her monistic picture of the created world, she must overthrow substance dualism. (Indeed, on the moderate interpretation of her monism, this is all that she must do to motivate her monistic picture of the created world.) But how does she argue against dualism? Here I wish to focus on one particular argument that Conway develops in chapter 7 of the Principles. The argument is quite brief:

The first reason [that spirit and body do not differ in nature or essence] is derived from the aforementioned order of things which I have already shown to be only three, namely, God as the highest, Christ as the mediator, and the creation as the lowest rank of all. This creation is one entity or substance [creatura una saltem est Entitas vel substantia quoad naturam sive essentiam suam], as demonstrated above, so that it only varies according to its modes of existence, one of which is corporeality. (CP 7.1, 42 [104])

16. An anonymous referee suggested that the strict monist might account for Conway's reference to a plurality of created substances in the following way. Conway allows that there is a broad sense of 'created substance' according to which Christ would qualify as a created substance. If she is using that broad sense of 'created substance' in the passage at issue, her expression 'all created substances' (CP 9.9, 69) refers to exactly two created substances: Christ, and the rest of the created universe taken as a unitary whole. However, I think this is a much less plausible reading of the passage in question than is afforded by the moderate interpretation of Conway's monism. She is usually careful to distinguish occasions in which she is referring to creation in the broad sense (including 'all the things that God created outside of himself' [CP 5.5, 26]) from the more narrow sense (including the rest of the created world, but not Christ). Yet subsequently in CP 9.9, Conway refers to 'creatures' in what must be the narrow sense of that term, excluding Christ. She argues, 'God and Christ alone can create the substance of any thing, since no creature can create or give being to any substance…’ (70). This argument is coherent only if Christ is not a 'creature' in the relevant sense. And since this argument comes only one paragraph after Conway's reference to a plurality of created substances, I think the most plausible reading is that the plurality of created substances referred to in this passage is not intended to include Christ.

17. For Descartes's conception of mental substance, see CSM I, 210. For More's conception of created spirit, see More, The Immortality of the Soul, 34.
The argument is direct. There are only three kinds of substance that differ from one another in nature or essence: (i) God, (ii) the mediating substance, and (iii) created substance; but all created minds and bodies are created substances; so, created minds and bodies do not differ from one another in nature or essence. Although Conway provides other arguments for this conclusion, she presents this argument first and seems to place significant weight upon it. Since it is premised upon her tripartite ontology, I will call this Conway's ontological objection to substance dualism. The ontological objection does not deny that minds and bodies may have different principal attributes; she seems to think that, at any given point in the existence of a created substance, it will either be spirit or body. But she nevertheless denies that this fact about the properties of substance indicates anything about its nature or essence.

The reason she can afford to be so brief in developing her ontological objection is that she takes the philosophical work to have been done earlier in the Principles, where she develops her ontology. The first premise—that there are only three kinds of substance—is doing all the heavy lifting.¹⁸ To appreciate her argument, then, we have to look to her earlier reasons for adopting this ontological picture.

As already indicated, Conway holds that there are only three kinds of substance: God, created things, and a substance that serves to mediate between God and created things, which Conway calls Christ or Adam Kadmon. The salient point for us is that, on this ontological picture, all created things are of the same substantial kind or nature. The chief difference between God and creation is that God is immutable while creatures are mutable. Conway reasons as follows:

[I]t is clear that God, or the highest being, is wholly unchangeable. Moreover, since the nature of creatures is really distinct from the nature of God, inasmuch as he has certain attributes which cannot be communicated to his creatures, among which attributes is unchangeableness, it necessarily follows that creatures are changeable because otherwise they would be God himself. (CP 5.3, 24)

This argument establishes what Conway takes to be the most important difference between God and created beings. God is essentially immutable. But immutability is incommunicable, that is, creatures cannot inherit it from their creator. So, creatures are essentially mutable. Creatures therefore differ from God in their nature or essence.

Yet this does not yet establish the key premise of Conway's ontological objection. What has been shown is that all created substances differ in nature or essence from God and from the mediating substance, Christ. But this does not yet directly rule out substance dualism. For that end, further argument is needed: an argument that these three kinds of substance (God, Christ, and created substance) reflect the only natures or essences that a substance could have, so that created substances cannot be differentiated into further kinds. This would rule out the Cartesian treatment of minds and bodies as created substances with different natures.

By the time we reach Conway's ontological objection at the beginning of chapter 7, she indicates that she has "already shown" the number of substantial kinds "to be only three" (CP 7.1, 41). Somewhere between chapters 5 and 7, then, we should expect to find her defense of the claim that there are at most three kinds of substance. As expected, in chapter 6, Conway writes, "[W]e must now determine how many species of things there are which are distinguished from each other in terms of their substance or essence. If we look closely into this, we

¹⁸. Descartes would probably assent to the second premise of Conway's main argument, that all created minds and bodies are created substances. However, there has been lengthy scholarly debate about whether Descartes would allow for the existence of multiple distinct extended substances. Those opposed include Martial Gueroult, “The Metaphysics and Physics of Force in Descartes,” in Descartes: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics, S. Guakroger (ed.), (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980); Roger Woolhouse, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz: The Concept of Substance in Seventeenth Century Metaphysics (London: Routledge 1993); and Thomas Lennon, “The Eleatic Descartes,” Journal of the History of Philosophy vol. 45 no. 1 (2007): 29-45.
will discover there are only three…” (CP 6.4, 30, emphasis added). The rest of the section runs together several arguments for her tripartite ontology. For our purposes, the most salient of these is the following:

Indeed, a fourth species [of substance] seems altogether superfluous. Since all phenomena in the entire universe can be reduced [sufficienter resolvi possunt] to these three aforementioned species as if into their original and peculiar causes [tanquam in originarias suas propriasque causas], nothing compels us to recognize a further species according to this rule: whatever is correctly understood is most true and certain. Entities should not be multiplied without need. Furthermore, because the three aforementioned species exhaust all the specific differences in substances which can possibly be conceived by our minds, then that vast infinity of possible things is fulfilled in these three species. (CP 6.4, 30 [89-90])

Conway here argues that, beyond the distinctions involved in her tripartite ontology, further distinctions of substantial kind cannot “possibly be conceived by our minds.” For this reason, no further species of substance exist.

Descartes rejects the claim that we cannot conceive of created minds and bodies as substances with distinct essences. So what reason does Conway have for thinking that this is inconceivable? Conway could answer this question by appealing to her claim earlier in the quoted passage that “all phenomena in the entire universe can be reduced to these three…species [of substance] as if into their original and peculiar causes” (ibid).19 This may be motivating Conway’s claim that further kinds of substance are inconceivable: there is a conceivable difference between two kinds or species of substance only if substances in each kind have different “original and peculiar” causes, but created substances (whether minds or bodies) all have the same original and peculiar causes. So there is not a conceivable difference between the nature of created minds and bodies after all.

This seems to be one line of reasoning that lies behind the key premise in Conway’s ontological objection.20 The interpretation I have proposed thus leans heavily on Conway’s claim in the quoted passage that her tripartite ontology divides up all entities “as if into their original and peculiar causes [tanquam in originarias suas propriasque causas]” (CP 6.4, 30 [89]). Conway’s claim here bears further investigation. Causation is a difficult concept to understand, especially in this historical period. How should the relation $x$ is the original and peculiar cause of $y$ be understood?

Conway does not define ‘original and peculiar cause’. However, the adjective ‘originarias’ suggests that the cause in question should be the initial cause of a thing’s generation or production. Building on this thought, I propose that we take “original and peculiar cause” to refer to that which an effect ultimately depends upon for its existence. It is a cause upon which all of the thing’s causes depend. So, for example, the original cause of a dog, Dart, would be discovered by listing those things upon which Dart depends for her existence (air, water, dog food, etc.), and then listing everything that those things depend upon in turn (the earth’s climate, the sun, humans, etc.), and so on, until we encounter some entity (or entities) that all of the others depend on but that does not depend on any of them.

Now, this notion of an original and peculiar cause is a plausible candidate for Conway’s intended meaning for three reasons. First, it

19. That the three species are species of substance is clear from the rest of the paragraph, quoted already: “the three aforementioned species exhaust all the specific differences in substances” (CP 6.4, 30, emphasis added).

20. Conway goes on to offer several other motivations for the claim that there is only one kind of created substance in CP 6.4. She argues that, were additional kinds of created substance introduced, (i) the kinds of substance would cease to track the three ways in which something can be, or fail to be, mutable, (ii) the order of the universe would be less perfect, and (iii) the structural analogy among the different kinds substance would break down. I do not discuss these arguments in this paper because they each seem to be premised on assumptions that would hold no weight with Descartes.
through which he works together with creatures, since that instrument is by its own nature closer to them. Nevertheless, because that mediator is far more excellent in terms of its own nature than all the other created beings which we call creatures, it is rightly called the firstborn of all creatures and the son of God rather than a creature of God. And he comes into existence by generation or emanation from God rather than by creation strictly speaking, although according to a broader meaning and use of this word he can be said to have been created or formed, as the Scriptures say about him somewhere. (CP 5.4, 25)

Thus the existential dependencies of Conway’s three species of substance all differ from one another: God does not depend for his existence on anything; Christ depends on God alone; and creation depends on both God and Christ. These differences in ‘original and peculiar cause’ account for the fact that there are three distinct ontological species.

Supposing, then, that this is what Conway means by ‘original and peculiar cause’, we may attribute to her the following Dependence Thesis:

Two substances have different natures only if they ultimately depend for their existence upon different things.\(^{22}\)

Now we are in a position to see how Conway can secure the key premise of her ontological objection to substance dualism. She

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21. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

22. One interpretive difficulty here is Conway’s use of *tanquam* in the passage quoted above: the three species of substance divide up all things “as if [*tanquam*] into their original and peculiar causes. This expression sometimes indicates that the subsequent clause is hypothetical, or even that it is merely a simile. In this case, I think the subsequent clause suggests that *tanquam* is best read simply as ‘as’. The hypothetical reading of *tanquam* would be appropriate for clearly metaphorical, non-literal claims like, “The three species of substance divide reality as if it were a cake.” This is not the sort of claim Conway appears to be making, however.
needs to establish that it is illegitimate to carve up the realm of created substances into any further kinds of substance. So, she works out a necessary condition on distinctions of substantial kind, the Dependence Thesis. Then she simply observes that no two creatures will satisfy the condition imposed by that thesis. We can reconstruct her argument as follows:

(1) Two substances have different natures only if they ultimately depend for their existence upon different things.\(^2\)

(2) All created substances ultimately depend for their existence on the same thing or things.

(3) So, no two created substances have different natures.

Although Conway offers several other reasons one might endorse the claim that all created substances are of the same nature, this is of special interest because it is based upon premises to which Descartes is independently committed. This makes it difficult for him to reply to Conway’s objection. It is true that Descartes and Conway would disagree about what created substances ultimately depend on for their existence: Conway would say “God and Christ,” while Descartes would just say “God.” But Descartes would agree that all created substances ultimately depend for their existence on the same thing. This suggests that Descartes would do best to reject Conway’s Dependence Thesis, which motivates premise (1) of the argument. However, in the next section, I argue that part of Descartes’s conception of substance gives him an extremely strong reason to accept the Dependence Thesis.

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23. This premise should be read as allowing for difference in nature between two substances, \(x\) and \(y\), whenever \(x\) and \(y\) differ in any of their original and peculiar causes. This is salient in Conway’s case, because she does not want to treat Christ as having the same nature as created substance, yet they both share at least one original and peculiar cause: God. However, on Conway’s view, creation has another original and peculiar cause that Christ does not: Christ. So Christ and creatures differ in substantial kind because they differ in (some of) their original and peculiar causes.

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4. Cartesian Substance and the Dependence Thesis

As I will argue, there is a part of Descartes’s conception of substance that makes it very difficult for him to coherently deny the Dependence Thesis. Descartes’s understanding of substance has at least one key feature, expressed in several different definitions set out in different texts: the Meditations and the Principles of Philosophy. The key feature is that substance is (relatively) existentially independent.\(^2\) As we will see, this leaves Descartes little room to maneuver out of Conway’s objection, since Conway’s objection is motivated by this very conception of substance.

In his Replies to Arnauld’s Objections to the Meditations, Descartes writes, “[T]he notion of a substance is just this—that it can exist by itself, that is without the aid of any other substance” (CSM II, 159). A more careful definition of substance in terms of existential independence comes in Descartes’s later work, the Principles of Philosophy. There, he writes:

> By substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on [indigere] no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence. Hence...there is no

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24. Descartes’s conception of substance has been the subject of much philosophical discussion (discussed in section 4 below), for he seems to endorse three different senses of the term. For example, in the Synopsis of the Meditations, he writes, “absolutely all substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible” (CSM II, 10). He appears to take this claim to be true, but beyond the scope of the Meditations; it is certainly a different conception of created or dependent substance than that which is laid out in his Principles I.51. He also provides yet another definition of substance in his Second Replies, according to which substance is the ground of perceived qualities. In section 5 below, I consider how this third conception of substance might be thought to get Descartes out of the difficulties that Conway raises.
distinctly intelligible meaning of the term ['substance'] which is common to God and his creatures. (CSM I, 210; AT VIII, 24)

Descartes’s definition here forces him to distinguish two different senses of substance. On the one hand, we can construe substance as an entity that is totally independent, in which case there is only one: God. On the other hand, we can construe substance as an entity that is independent of anything except for God, in which case (Descartes thinks) there may be many of them: all minds and bodies will count.

Conway would see what Descartes has said so far as being on the right track. Descartes has had a nice insight: substance is independent being; so different kinds of independence can be used to define different kinds of substance. God’s nature will be different than the nature of any created substance precisely because they are independent in different respects. Thus there is a great deal of pressure on Descartes to accept Conway’s Dependence Thesis. To be a substance is to be something that exists independently. So, on the face of it, if there are two different kinds of substance, A and B, then substances of kind A had better differ from those of kind B in terms of existential independence.

Notice that this inference is a very natural one in many domains. For instance, consider the case of persons. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that a person is a “thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself” (Locke, Essay II.xxvii). Then the only differences that we could legitimately appeal to as distinguishing two kinds of person would be differences that pertain to the intellectual capacities cited in the definition — reason, reflection, the capacity for self-consideration. So, for example, we might legitimately hold that young children are a different kind of person than adults (because young children typically do not have the capacity for reason and reflection that adults do), but it would be absurd to hold that those with red hair are a different kind of person than those with brown hair. We might quibble about the details of the proposal that young children and adults are different kinds of person, but the proposal that redheads and brunettes are different kinds of person is simply off the table — hair color is simply irrelevant to the nature or essence of persons, and so cannot legitimately be used to distinguish kinds of person. (Similar lines of reasoning apply in many different domains. Living things are things that grow, metabolize, and have reproductive capacity, so different kinds of living thing grow, metabolize, and reproduce in different ways; a screwdriver is a tool for installing and removing screws, so different kinds of screwdriver install and remove screws in different ways; a government is a ruling body, so different kinds of government rule in different ways; and on and on.)

Likewise, Conway would urge, the fact that a substance is thinking or extended is simply irrelevant to determining what its nature or essence is, for created minds and bodies are substances in precisely the same way. Minds and bodies do not ultimately depend for their existence on different things. So thinking and extension are not attributes that can legitimately be said to distinguish substances of different nature or essence.

However, rather than picking up on this insight, Descartes goes on to claim that “To each substance there belongs one principal attribute; in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension” (CSM I, 210). As we have seen, the principal attribute of a substance “constitutes its nature and essence” (ibid), and so the created world gets carved up into two distinct kinds of substance with
different natures: minds and bodies. And here, Conway would object, Descartes has betrayed his earlier insight. Although he recognizes that minds and bodies “fall under this common concept: things that need only the concurrence of God in order to exist” (ibid), Descartes has illegitimately made a further distinction of substantial kind that does not track any difference in dependence or independence. This violates the Dependence Thesis; but given Descartes’s conception of substance, he ought to accept that thesis.

The key point I wish to highlight about Conway’s argument is that, although this is not immediately apparent in the quoted passage, she has turned Descartes’s own weapons against him. By Descartes’s own lights, substances are independent beings, and so to have different kinds of substance (that is, substances that differ in their nature or essence) we must have different kinds of independence. There may still be many individual created substances, but they will all be of the same kind, since they all ultimately issue from the same source.26 Thus, even if Conway were to grant that minds and bodies have different principal attributes—attributes presupposed by all of the modes of the substance—she would nevertheless deny that these principal attributes are properly taken to constitute the nature of that substance.27

26. As mentioned above, Conway agrees with Leibniz that there are infinitely many created substances. She reaches this conclusion via reasoning similar to Leibniz’s: since “God does as much as he can,” it follows that “not only the entire universe or system of creatures as a whole is infinite or has infinity in itself, but even every creature, no matter how small…has in itself such an infinity of parts or rather of entire creatures that they cannot be counted” (CP 3.5, 17). There has long been suspicion that Leibniz was influenced by Conway’s work. On this issue, see Carolyn Merchant, “The Vitalism of Anne Conway: Its Impact on Leibniz’s Concept of the Monad,” Journal of the History of Philosophy vol. 17 no. 3 (1979): 255-269; and Hutton, Anne Conway, 228-235.

27. In other arguments, Conway makes clear that she also denies that minds and bodies have different principal attributes. Every body must have the capacity for mental properties, for anything produced by God must have this capacity: “[S]ince every creature shares certain attributes with God, I ask what attribute [of God] produces dead matter, or body, which is incapable of life and sense for eternity?” (CP 7.2, 45). So every corporeal substance has at least one property (capacity for ‘life and sense’) that cannot be understood through its extension alone. Though she does not make quite as explicit an argument for the analogous claim about minds, some of her remarks suggest that she would also deny that thought is the principal attribute of minds; see, e.g., “every spirit has its own body and every body its own spirit” (CP 6.11, 39).


the conception of substance as independent being, which motivates Conway’s Dependence Thesis, puts serious pressure on Descartes to reject substance dualism.

5. Cartesian Replies

I have argued that Conway’s ontological objection to substance dualism can be read as a principled, internal objection to Descartes’s view that minds and bodies differ in nature or essence. The objection is that, given the Cartesian conception of a substance, we ought not take the principal attributes of thought and extension to reflect the nature or essence of created substances. Although Descartes never had the chance to read Conway’s *Principles*, the Cartesian system nevertheless contains a number of philosophical seeds that could be grown into replies to Conway’s objection. In this section, I’ll briefly discuss what I take to be the strongest of these.

The strongest reply Descartes could make would be to find a way to reject the Dependence Thesis, removing the motivation for Conway’s objection. What reason could Descartes provide for rejecting it? Here is one possibility: he could appeal to a different conception of substance, one that does not emphasize its independence. It has been widely recognized that, in different texts, Descartes endorses different definitions of substance.28 We have so far considered his definition in terms of existential independence, the property of being able to exist without any other (created) thing.
However, in the Second Replies, Descartes provides the following definition:

Substance. This term applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to every thing by means of which whatever we perceive exists. ... The only idea we have of a substance itself, in the strict sense, is that it is the thing in which whatever we perceive (or whatever has objective being in one of our ideas) exists, either formally or eminently. (CSM II, 114)

So we infer the existence of substances on the basis of our immediate perceptions, though we never immediately perceive the substances themselves. On this conception, a substance is the ground of perceived qualities. Indeed, on almost anyone's understanding of substance, this is one of the most fundamental roles that substance is supposed to play in ontology. The very word 'substance' encodes this role: it is what stands under—the qualities we perceive. (Presumably the fact that we perceive the qualities is not ordinarily supposed to be relevant to whether or not they inhere in a substance; Descartes is blending metaphysical and epistemological considerations in this passage.)

Appealing to this conception of substance as subject of properties, then, Descartes could reject Conway's Dependence Thesis. Independence is one aspect of substance, but we might also make legitimate distinctions of substantial kind on the basis of the kinds of qualities that are grounded in different substances. On this view, minds are to be distinguished from bodies not in virtue of what they ultimately depend upon, but in virtue of the fact that only thoughts inhere in minds while only extended qualities inhere in bodies. Indeed, in the Second Replies, he goes on to offer definitions of body and mind that track this proposal quite closely: “The substance in which thought immediately resides is called mind. ... The substance which is the immediate subject of local extension and of the accidents which presuppose extension, such as shape, position, local motion and so on, is called body” (CSM II, 114).

This seems to be the strongest reply available to Descartes. To see how Conway might pursue her argument in the face of this proposed Cartesian reply, first consider a naïve objection that might be raised against this proposal. On the proposal being considered, the Cartesian conception of substance has two components:

- Independence component: If x is a substance, then x does not require any other (created) thing for its existence.
- Subjecthood component: If x is a substance, then x is the subject of some properties.

Someone might naïvely object that these two components are incompatible with one another. The independence component says that a substance requires no other (created) thing for its existence, while the subjecthood component entails that it does require at least some other (created) things for its existence: the properties that inhere in it. Descartes has an easy solution to this objection. A substance does not require any particular property, or set of properties, in order to exist. Descartes makes exactly this point in the Conversation with Burman: “the mind cannot ever be without thought; it can of course be without this or that thought, but it cannot be without some thought. In the same way, the body cannot, even for a moment, be without extension” (CSMK 336). So the subjecthood component is compatible with the independence component of the Cartesian conception of substance.

But this way of reconciling the two components would give Conway a nice opening to pursue her objection. The only way to render the Cartesian conception of substance coherent is to insist that, although a substance must be the subject of some properties, its existence does not depend upon its having any particular property or
set of properties. Yet, on the proposed reply to Conway's objection, the very nature of a substance is determined by what properties it has: mind is a distinct kind of substance precisely because it has thought as its principal property, while body is a distinct kind of substance precisely because it has extension as its principal property. Hence, on the proposed reply, the existence of a mind (or a body) depends upon its having a particular property, or set of properties. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a stronger form of existential dependence than Descartes has envisioned. The worry is that, even though the Cartesian conception of substance as both (i) independent of other (created) things and (ii) the subject of properties is internally coherent in principle, the proposed reply to Conway's objection would render this conception of substance incoherent. Thus, even if the Cartesian conception of substance has both of these components, the subjecthood component cannot coherently be used to distinguish different kinds of substance. And so Descartes's own conception of substance still places great pressure on him to accept Conway's Dependence Thesis.

Another Cartesian strategy for resisting Conway's objection might be to raise a charge of tu quoque. Conway has objected that Descartes illegitimately asserts that substances with different properties have different natures, even though these differences do not pertain to independence. However, as some of the earlier quotes from Conway indicate, she herself distinguishes three kinds of substance on the basis of differences in their attributes—namely, on the basis of whether or not they are mutable.\(^30\) The difference between the three kinds of substance, on Conway's view, is spelled out in terms of their mutability or immutability. God is immutable; Christ, the mediating substance, is mutable but only in the direction of increasing perfection; and creatures are mutable, but change in ways that may make them more or less perfect (CP 5.3, 24). Yet, on this characterization of the three kinds of substance, the distinction among them does not seem to track any difference in the types of independence they exhibit. So, the Cartesian might argue, Conway is guilty of precisely the sin she accuses Descartes of committing.

This complaint admits of a more straightforward reply than the previous one. The problem that Conway sees with the Cartesian account of the natures of created substances in terms of their principal attributes is that the attributes in question do not pertain to the kind of independence those substances enjoy. Such attributes (thought and extension) are irrelevant to the determination of the nature of a substance. However, in developing her tripartite ontology, Conway appeals only to attributes that are related to the kind of independence enjoyed by the three kinds of substance. For example, her justification for attributing mutability to created substances is precisely that they are created. She writes, “The work of God cannot cease, and thus it is the nature of every creature to be always in motion and always changing from good to better and from good to evil or from evil back to good” (CP 7.1, 42). Unlike the attributes of thought or extension, the attribute of mutability is tied directly to the kind of limited independence possessed by created substances. So Conway's ontology, delineated on the basis of differences in the kinds of mutability a substance may exhibit, is compatible with her dependence thesis.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that Conway's ontological objection to substance dualism is best understood as an objection to the view that the difference between thought and extension makes for a difference of substantial kind. On Conway's view, authors like Descartes cannot coherently take the fact that one substance thinks and another is extended to entail that those substances have different natures. Moreover, the objection she raises is internal to the Cartesian system, in that it relies primarily upon a conception of substance that Descartes himself repeatedly affirms. For Descartes, a created substance is something that can exist independently of any other created thing, and this is the motivation behind Conway's argument that thought and extension do not
characterize two different kinds of created substance. After all, both created thinking substances and extended substances are substances in exactly the same respect, and do not differ in terms of the type of independence that characterizes them. So, Conway reasons, they do not (qua substance) differ in nature or essence.

Finally, although we have seen that there are several paths a Cartesian might reasonably pursue to reply to Conway’s objection, none of them is quite satisfactory. In particular, the Cartesian might argue that the natures of thinking substances and extended substances are distinct in virtue of differences in the role such substances play as subjects of predication: thinking substances are only subjects of modes of thought, and extended substances are only subjects of modes of extension. However, I have suggested that this does not sit easily with the conception of substance as independent of any other created being, and so this strategy is not a happy one for Descartes to use.

There are, perhaps, further routes that Descartes could take to get out of Conway’s objection; many scholars have recognized that Descartes’s conception of substance is extremely nuanced. The important point here is that Conway is not simply talking past Descartes, but can be seen as engaging him in substantive debate about how to understand the nature of created substance. Although Conway’s philosophy is sometimes depicted as being conceptually orthogonal to the Cartesian system, she offers a substantive, internal criticism of Cartesian dualism en route to her own radical alternative.31

References


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Conway’s Ontological Objection to Cartesian Dualism


