

Please note that this is **an earlier version** of an article that is now published: Jacqueline Broad, ‘Conway and Charleton on the Intimate Presence of Souls in Bodies’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79, no. 4 (2018): 571-91.
Please cite the published version.

Conway and Charleton on the Intimate Presence of Souls in Bodies

Jacqueline Broad

INTRODUCTION

In a mid-nineteenth-century footnote, English editor James Crossley described Anne Conway (1631–79) as an “extraordinary person, the profoundest and most learned of the female metaphysical writers of England.”¹ Crossley’s compliment was rather undermined by the fact that, up to that point, there had been very few female metaphysicians in England. But it was also diminished by his earlier—rather uncharitable—observations about Conway’s letters to the Cambridge Platonist Henry More. In their early philosophical correspondence, Crossley noted, Conway had bothered “that excellent and single-minded man by requiring answers to the most extraordinary questions ever proposed.”² She so invaded More’s quiet seclusion, Crossley said, with “a pitiless hail-storm of closely written letters . . . till at last, I have no doubt, he would have

I completed this paper as an associate professor in the School of Philosophical, Historical, and International Studies at Monash University, Melbourne. For helpful and insightful comments on an earlier draft, I am extremely grateful to participants in the conference “New Narratives in Philosophy: Rediscovering Neglected Works by Early Modern Women” at Duke University, Durham, NC, in April 2016. I would like to express my gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which generously funded my participation in the conference, and to the main organizers Marcy Lascano and Andrew Janiak. I would also especially like to thank Colin Chamberlain, who provided an excellent commentary on my paper, and Christia Mercer, who granted me permission to cite from her forthcoming paper.

¹ See John Worthington, *The Diary and Correspondence of Dr. John Worthington*, ed. James Crossley, 2 vols. (Manchester: The Chetham Society, 1847), 1:142n.

² Worthington, *Diary and Correspondence*, 140n.

[had] some apprehension of being afflicted with that complaint, for which Lady Conway tried every kind of medical prescription . . . a constant incurable head-ache.”³

Today Conway’s metaphysical writings continue to give scholars a headache, but for somewhat different reasons. Historians of philosophy now approach Conway with greater generosity than Crossley—she has been justly admired for constructing a tight-knit and impressively consistent philosophical system of her own⁴—but scholars are still troubled by the fact that Conway left so little in terms of philosophical output. Apart from her letters to More,⁵ there is only one short treatise titled *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, first published in Latin in 1690.⁶ According to Francis Mercury van Helmont, Conway’s closest

³ Worthington, *Diary and Correspondence*, 141n.

⁴ For twenty-first century studies of Conway’s philosophy, see Deborah Boyle “Spontaneous and Sexual Generation in Conway’s *Principles*,” in *The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Justin E. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 175–93; Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65–89; Stephen Clucas, “The Duchess and Viscountess: Negotiations between Mechanism and Vitalism in the Natural Philosophies of Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway,” *In-Between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism* 9, no. 1 (2000): 125–36; Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Hutton, “Lady Anne Conway,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2015, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/conway>; Marcy P. Lascano, “Anne Conway: Bodies in the Spiritual World,” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 4 (2013): 327–36; Lascano, “Anne Conway on Liberty,” in *Women and Liberty, 1600–1800: Philosophical Essays*, eds. Broad and Karen Detlefsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 163–77; Jennifer McRobert, “Anne Conway’s Vitalism and Her Critique of Descartes,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2000): 21–35; Christia Mercer, “Seventeenth-Century Universal Sympathy: Stoicism, Platonism, Leibniz, and Conway,” in *Sympathy: A History*, ed. Eric Schliesser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 107–38; Mercer, “Knowledge and Suffering in Early Modern Philosophy: G. W. Leibniz and Anne Conway,” in *Emotional Minds: The Passions and the Limits of Enquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Göttingen: de Gruyter, 2012), 179–206; Mercer, “Platonism in Early Modern Natural Philosophy: The Case of Leibniz and Conway,” in *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature*, eds. James Wilberding and Christoph Horn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103–26; Mercer, “Anne Conway’s Metaphysics of Sympathy,” in *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women’s Philosophical Thought*, ed. Eileen O’Neill and Lascano (Dordrecht: Springer, forthcoming); Steven Schroeder, “Anne Conway’s Place: A Map of Leibniz,” *The Pluralist* 2, no. 3 (2007): 77–99; and Carol Wayne White, *The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631–1679): Reverberations from a Mystical Naturalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

⁵ The bulk of the More-Conway correspondence is published in *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More and Their Friends, 1642–1684*, eds. Marjorie Hope Nicolson and Hutton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). For two letters not published in *Conway Letters*, see Richard Ward, *The Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More* (London: Joseph Downing, 1710), 289–90, 291–310.

⁶ The work was published anonymously as *Principia philosophiae antiquissimæ et recentissimæ de Deo, Christo & creatura, id est de spiritu & materia in genere*, in *Opuscula philosophica* (Amsterdam: [M. Brown ?], 1690). For a modern edition of the Latin text, see Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, intro. Peter Loptson (Amsterdam: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982). In 1692, an Englishman with the initials “J. C.”

companion in the last years of her life, this published text was first copied from “Writings abruptly and scatteredly, I may also add obscurely, written in a Paper-Book, with a Black-lead Pen, towards the latter end of her long pains and sickness; which she never had opportunity to revise, correct, or perfect.”⁷ Some of these “broken Fragments” (the ones that were legible, that is, despite being written in “very small and faint handwriting”) were then translated into Latin and published in a three-part collection titled *Opuscula Philosophica*.⁸ Along the way, Van Helmont appears to have added his own footnotes, and, perhaps, to have embellished the text with some of his own observations.⁹

To sum up the difficulty: *The Principles* gives us only a partial and imperfect glimpse of Conway’s philosophical thought. The Latin *Principia* is the closest thing we have to an authoritative text, but it is merely a selective translation of the original notebook. For this reason, it is likely that certain verbal clues have been lost, and it remains difficult to pinpoint the exact targets of Conway’s critiques. From the title and the text itself, we can be certain that her explicit targets were Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza—she mentions these philosophers by name. In addition, Conway’s references to the doctrine of “vital congruity” and the “indiscernibility” of the soul, as well as her allusions to “aetherial, aerial, and terrestrial vehicles,” point us to her critiques and adaptations of Henry More’s distinctive philosophy.¹⁰ But other potential targets

translated the Latin text back into English (without the benefit of the original manuscript), and published the work as *The principles of the most ancient and modern philosophy, concerning God, Christ, and the creatures, viz. of spirit and matter in general; whereby may be resolved all those problems or difficulties, which neither by the School nor common modern philosophy, nor by the Cartesian, Hobbesian, or Spinosian could be discussed*, trans. J. C. (London, 1692).

⁷ Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

⁸ See Conway, “Preface” and “Published Preface,” in *Principles*, 3, 7.

⁹ Compare, for example, Conway’s cases of “real unity and sympathy” of limbs—a man who has a nose transplant and another who has his leg amputated (*Principles*, chapter VII, section 4, page 53)—and the same cases in Van Helmont’s *The Alphabet of Nature* [*Alphabeti vere Naturalis Hebraici*, 1667], trans. Coudert and Corse (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 89. Henceforth, unless otherwise noted, my references to Conway’s *Principles* are to chapter, section, and page numbers in the 1996 English translation by Coudert and Corse.

¹⁰ See Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 87.

remain hidden and obscure. It has thus been difficult to determine precisely how Conway came up with her own independent answers to those “extraordinary” metaphysical questions she posed to More, and we still have only a limited knowledge about the shaping and development of her thought in relation to that of her contemporaries.

In this paper, I attempt a partial cure of the scholarly headache by identifying a potential target of Conway’s critique of the “intimate presence” of souls in bodies. In the ninth and final chapter of her *Principles*, Conway claims that dualist philosophers “have generally erred and laid a poor foundation” by supposing that the soul and body are distinct substances and 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.”¹¹ From these weak foundations, she says, many “crass and dangerous errors have arisen, not only in philosophy but also in theology . . . to the detriment of true piety.”¹² In her eighth chapter, she argues against those “learned men” or “those doctors” who construct dualist theories about how the soul is united with and moves the body. First, she attacks the claim that the soul enjoys a “vital congruity” with the body; second, she dismisses the theory that the soul is “intimately present” in the body—a theory that, in her view, is especially lacking in piety.¹³ The first target is obviously Henry More—the references to *vitalis congruitas* in the Latin alert us to his distinctive theory¹⁴—but who, we might ask, is the advocate of the second theory of *intima praesentia*, or intimate presence? It is clear that this learned man would have to have been someone who upheld a dualist theory of soul and body, as well as a mechanist

¹¹ Conway, *Principles*, IX.1–2, 63.

¹² Conway, *Principles*, IX.2, 63.

¹³ Conway, *Principles*, VIII.3, 59.

¹⁴ Henry More’s idea of vital congruity appears first in his 1652 letter to Conway, see Henry More to Anne Conway, [1652], in Ward, *Life of the Learned and Pious*, 291–310; then in the 1655 second edition of his *An antidote against atheism, or, An appeal to the naturall faculties of the minde of man, whether there be not a God*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Flesher, 1655), 306–7; and finally in his 1659 work *The immortality of the soul, so farre forth as it is demonstrable from the knowledge of nature and the light of reason* (London: J. Flesher, 1659), 263–64.

conception of body or matter as dead and inert, lacking in all life and perception—and someone who claimed that the soul is united with and moves the body through “intimate presence.”

In what follows, I propose that this someone is Walter Charleton (1620–1707), a well-known defender of Epicurean atomism in mid-seventeenth-century England.

To substantiate this claim, I spell out Charleton’s views about the soul and body in his 1657 treatise *The Immortality of the Human Soul*. I outline his commitment to a mechanist conception of matter as inherently lacking in motion, life, and perception, as well as his commitment to Cartesian dualism and a theory of intimate presence. In the second part, I examine Conway’s critique of the dualist theory of the intimate presence of souls in bodies and explain how her criticisms apply to Charleton’s philosophy. In the third and final part, I outline Conway’s own theory about how the soul is united with and moves the body, a theory that relies on an emanative model of causation. As we will see, this too is a theory of “intimate presence,” but crucially one in which only God’s spiritual presence in his creation enables souls to bring about the vital motion of bodies. My underlying purpose here will be to highlight the depth and sophistication of Conway’s theory of the soul-body relationship vis-à-vis that of Charleton.

I. CHARLETON ON INTIMATE PRESENCE

Walter Charleton is best known today as someone whose ideas are representative of crucial developments in English natural philosophy of the seventeenth century.¹⁵ In his earliest works,

¹⁵ See Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform, 1626–1660* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 178. More recently, however, Webster’s characterization of Charleton, as an “intellectual barometer” of his age, has been brought into question. See, for example, Emily Booth, “*A Subtle and Mysterious Machine*”: *The Medical World of Walter Charleton (1619–1707)* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005); Nina Rattner Gelbart, “The Intellectual Development of Walter Charleton,” *Ambix* 18, no. 3 (1971): 149–68; and Eric Lewis, “Walter Charleton and Early Modern Eclecticism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 4 (2001): 651–64.

Charleton presented himself as an ardent admirer of the Flemish physician and chemist Jan Baptiste van Helmont (the father of Conway's friend Francis Mercury). Charleton's translations and commentaries, including *A Ternary of Paradoxes* (1650) and *Deliramenta Catarrhi* (1650), served to popularize Helmontian iatrochemistry and to challenge the traditional Galenic approach to medicine in England.¹⁶ In his later works of the 1650s—or so the common story goes—Charleton renounced Van Helmont's ideas, condemning them as delirious, “Hairbrain'd and Contentious,” and instead redirected his efforts toward defending Pierre Gassendi's modernized version of Epicurean atomism.¹⁷ In a series of interrelated works—including the *Darknes of Atheism* (1652), *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charltoniana* (1654), *Epicurus's Morals* (1656), and *The Immortality of the Human Soul* (1657)—Charleton proposed to follow Gassendi's lead and rehabilitate Epicurean atomism by stripping the ancient philosophy of its immoral and atheistic principles.¹⁸ His chief aim, as Jill Kraye nicely puts it, was “to save the atomist baby while throwing out the pagan bath water”: he proposed to remove the offensive pagan aspects of Epicureanism, while leaving behind those core doctrines that were amenable to Christianity.¹⁹

Toward that end, in his *Darknes of Atheism* and his *Physiologia*, Charleton followed Gassendi by rejecting that “fæculent” Epicurean doctrine that motion is inherent in matter or that the “*Motive Faculty*” of atoms is “*eternally inherent in them, and not derived by impression from*

¹⁶ See Jan Baptiste van Helmont, *A Ternary of Paradoxes: The Magnetick Cure of Wounds, Nativity of Tartar in Tine, Image of God in Man* (London: James Flesher, 1650), and Van Helmont, *Deliramenta Catarrhi: Or, the incongruities, impossibilities, and absurdities couched under the vulgar opinion of defluxions* (London: E. G. for W. Lee, 1650).

¹⁷ Walter Charleton, *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charltoniana, or A fabrick of science natural, upon the hypothesis of atoms founded by Epicurus* (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1654), 58.

¹⁸ On this topic, see Robert H. Kargon, *Atomism in England from Harriot to Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 77–92 and Robert Kargon, “Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle, and the Acceptance of Epicurean Atomism in England,” *Isis* 55, no. 2 (1964): 184–92.

¹⁹ Jill Kraye, “British Philosophy Before Locke,” in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 287.

*any External Principle.*²⁰ In its place, Charleton argued for a mechanist conception of atoms as inert and inactive by nature. In his view, atoms have no inherent life or purpose of their own: their essential properties are merely “consimilarity of substance,” magnitude (or corporeal dimension), figure, solidity, and weight.²¹ This means that atoms *require* God’s causal agency in order to move—at their creation, he says, it was necessary for God to invigorate or impregnate them with an “internal energy”²²—and thus, on Charleton’s account, God is rendered utterly necessary to the atomist worldview.²³ Later still, in his *Immortality of the Human Soul*, Charleton also rejected the “dangerous” Epicurean idea that the soul is material and mortal by nature. To bolster his arguments, Charleton departed from Gassendi and sided with “the excellent *Des Cartes*” by upholding a dualist theory of the soul and body. Following in Descartes’s footsteps—and those of his countryman Kenelm Digby—Charleton argued throughout this work in favor of the idea that the soul is naturally immaterial and therefore immortal.²⁴

Charleton’s *Immortality* takes the form of a dialogue between three chief protagonists: Athanasius (who represents Charleton himself), Lucretius (who most likely represents John Evelyn),²⁵ and Isodicastes (Henry Pierrepont, to whom the work is dedicated). In the course of this dialogue, Athanasius attempts to persuade Lucretius about the truth of the soul’s immortality, against the Epicurean idea that the soul perishes with the body. On the grounds of faith, Lucretius believes that the soul is immortal (he is a Christian, after all), but he is

²⁰ Charleton, *Physiologia*, 125–26. See also Charleton, *The darknes of atheism dispelled by the light of nature* (London: J. F., 1652), 61.

²¹ Charleton, *Physiologia*, 111–12.

²² Charleton, *Physiologia*, 126.

²³ On this topic, see Antonio Clericuzio, “Gassendi, Charleton and Boyle on Matter and Motion,” in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Corpuscular Theories*, eds. Christoph Lüthy, John E. Murdoch, and William R. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 467–82.

²⁴ On Descartes, see Charleton, *The Immortality of the Human Soul demonstrated by the Light of Nature, in two dialogues* (London: William Wilson, 1657), 73, 103, 106; on Digby, see Charleton, *Immortality*, 95, 103, 106, 109, 180.

²⁵ See Sharp, “Walter Charleton’s Early Life,” 335–37. Evelyn was the translator of a 1656 edition of book I of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*.

nevertheless willing to hear Athanasius's reason-based arguments. Throughout their discussion, as Athanasius justifies each of his claims according to "the light of nature," Lucretius raises various objections from a materialist-mortalist point of view, while Isodicastes acts as an impartial arbiter in their dispute.

At one point in the exchange, Athanasius presents "physical" arguments for the soul's immortality based on the premise that it is immaterial. One such argument is "that what[ever] wants Matter, wants likewise parts, into which it might be distracted and dissolved: and what is incapable of being dissolved, must of perfect necessity always continue to be what it is"; thus, the immaterial soul must be immortal.²⁶ But Athanasius also provides "moral" arguments. A perfectly just God, he says, would not allow virtuous persons to go unrewarded, and vicious persons to remain unpunished; "since it doth evidently consist with the method of Gods justice, that it should be well with Good men, and ill with evil men; . . . It follows that there must be another life, wherein Virtue is to receive its reward, and Vice its punishment."²⁷

In response, the mortalist-materialist Lucretius points to evidence that the body exerts a strong causal influence on the soul. When the body is diseased, he observes, the soul can become discomposed "by way of sympathy," as in cases of madness, frenzy, depression, lethargy, and so forth.²⁸ It is not improbable, then, that if the body can thus disturb the soul, it is also capable of destroying it. He points specifically to cases of drunkenness, in which the soul suffers from "the violence of the wine." If the soul is capable of experiencing such damage from external causes, then who can tell? If the force of these causes were to become even more intense, is it not then possible that the soul might be brought to a total dissolution?²⁹ In response, Athanasius asserts

²⁶ Charleton, *Immortality*, 79.

²⁷ Charleton, 145.

²⁸ Charleton, 160.

²⁹ Charleton, 162.

that it is *the brain* and not the soul that is enfeebled by wine. A talented and gifted lute player is incapable of playing well on a defective or damaged instrument, but when she does play badly on such an instrument, nobody thinks that she has lost her skill in music. Along the same lines, when the brain succumbs to “the malignant and Narcotical vapours of Wine,” the brain becomes a defective instrument for the soul.³⁰ But it does not follow that the soul itself is damaged or diminished.

In one of his next counterattacks, Lucretius takes a slightly different approach. He points to the fact that the death of the human body usually advances by degrees, limb-by-limb, as if the soul were not a single indivisible substance, but rather diffused and extended throughout the body, “and so subject to dissipation part after part.”³¹ In response, Athanasius points out that the soul *is* diffused throughout the whole body, but not by extension of bulk. It is diffused “by *position of the same Entity in each part of the body.*”³² When the body begins to die, it is not the case that part of the soul dies or diminishes along with it; rather, the soul simply retreats into those parts that are still infused with a vital heat or flame. If the vital organs are no longer fitly disposed (if they have all decayed through old age or infirmity), the soul ceases to have an animating and invigorating influence on the body. And then, of course, at death the soul departs entirely “for want of those Dispositions in the Organs of life, by which she was enabled to enliven the body.”³³

At length, a few pages later, Lucretius fights back with a version of the classic mind-body problem: the problem of how two completely heterogeneous substances can be combined or

³⁰ Charleton, 164.

³¹ Charleton, 167.

³² Charleton, 167.

³³ Charleton, 175.

united to form a single thing.³⁴ “Considering the vast disparity . . . betwixt the affections of a Corporeal and Incorporeal Nature,” he says, “it seems unreasonable to conceive, that they can be conjoynd in one Composition, such as Man is.”³⁵ What is it that joins or unites the two together in the human being? In reply, Athanasius concedes that an incorporeal and immortal being, on the one hand, and a corporeal and mortal being, on the other, appear to be at two incompatible extremes. But two extremes might be brought together by a “mean,” or rather “a certain sort of third Nature, so mixed and compound of both the others, as to be Incorporeal and Immortal, on one part, and Corporeal and Mortal, on the other.”³⁶ Athanasius notes that many philosophers have allowed the reasonableness of this conjunction, such as the Platonists who have asserted the doctrine of “the *Anima Mundi*, or Universal Soul . . . being diffused through all parts of the Universe.”³⁷ To back up his claims about a middle nature, he asks: “are not Heat, and Cold, white and black, as different each from other, as Immortal and Mortal? And yet you see, they are often conjoynd together, so as that a Middle or Third nature doth result from their union, as in particular, warme, from Heat and Cold, and Grey or browne, from white and black.”³⁸ The union of soul and body, he says, results in a third or middle nature, the composite known as the “man” or the human being. The soul and body are married or joined together as one single thing by means of a “*Common Medium, Cement, or Glew*,” namely the blood.³⁹ The soul, according to Athanasius, has its “principal residence” in the most refined and spiritual part of the blood,⁴⁰ and by this “mediation” or “vehicle,” the soul is able to exert an animating influence over all the

³⁴ I am indebted to Colin Chamberlain for pointing out that here Charleton articulates a mereological version of the mind-body problem, not the problem of mind-body causal interaction.

³⁵ Charleton, *Immortality*, 181.

³⁶ Charleton, 182.

³⁷ Charleton, 182.

³⁸ Charleton, 183.

³⁹ Charleton, 184, 183.

⁴⁰ Charleton, 184.

body.⁴¹ To support these claims, Charleton cites William Harvey's newly developed theory concerning the circulation of the blood.⁴² By means of "perpetual Circulation," he points out, the soul is capable of being *tota in toto* (whole in the whole) and *tota in qualibet parte* (the whole in every part) of the body.⁴³

Charleton seems perfectly aware that this theory does not fully explain *how* the soul and body are conjoined or exactly *how* the soul causally influences the body. His doctrine of intimate presence is a last-ditch effort to address this problem of exactly how two contrary substances can be united in the blood, or how the soul can be positioned in each part of the body, and thereby causally influence the whole. At last, he says,

Concerning the *Manner* of this Conjunction of the Soul and body, by the Mediation of this vital Nectar, the Blood; it is not necessary, with the Vulgar, to imagine, that they should mutually touch, and by hooks take reciprocally hold of each other, in order to Cohæſion and constant Union; for, that is competent only to Corporeals; but that Incorporeals should be conjoined either one to another, or to Corporeals, no more is required but an *Intimate Præſence*, which is yet a kind of Contact, and so may serve in stead of mutual Apprehension and Continency. So that this *ſpecial Manner of Præſence* is that and only that, by which an Incorporeal Entity may be united to a Corporeal. And now I have explained thoſe difficulties concerning the Conjunction of the Soul and Body, the one an

⁴¹ Charleton, 184.

⁴² Charleton, *Immortality*, 184; see also 35–36. On Charleton's involvement in Harvey's circle, see Charles Webster, "The College of Physicians: 'Solomon's House' in Commonwealth England," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 61 (1967): 393–412.

⁴³ On this popular Scholastic slogan, "*tota in toto, et tota in qualibet parte*," see Jasper Reid, *The Metaphysics of Henry More* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 141–47.

Incorporeal and Immortal Being, the other Corporeal and Mortal; which you seemed to think inexplicable.⁴⁴

Needless to say, this theory of soul-body union still leaves a great deal unexplained. What does Charleton mean, for example, when he says that incorporeals are united with corporeals by means of intimate presence? If the two are incapable of “touching” or “taking hold of each other,” then in what way is intimate presence a special “kind of contact” between the two? The adjective “intimate” here means “inmost, most inward, deep-seated,”⁴⁵ and so if the soul is intimately present in the blood, then it must be positioned deep inside its inmost parts. But even if we imagine that the soul is deeply embedded in the blood, it is still difficult to imagine how the soul can exert any influence over the corporeal body, even by means of the blood’s perpetual circulation, given that the soul cannot physically touch or take hold of the blood or the rest of the body in any way.

II. CONWAY ON INTIMATE PRESENCE

Let us now see what Anne Conway has to say about the theory of intimate presence between souls and bodies.

It is not a complete stretch to think that Conway was familiar with Charleton, both the man and his writings. Charleton began his professional life as a practicing physician in London in the 1640s. In *The Conway Letters*, there is a 1648 letter from the French doctor Theodore

⁴⁴ Charleton, *Immortality*, 184–85.

⁴⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “intimate, adj. and n.,” accessed May 28, 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/98506.

Turquet de Mayerne to Lord Conway, in which Mayerne reports that his assistant Walter Charleton “has been to see me, and, being assured that nothing is pressing upon your ear drum and that all the trouble is internal, refuses to undertake the cure.”⁴⁶ Though Anne (*née* Finch) did not marry into the Conway family till 1650, and Charleton ceased to work with Mayerne in about the same year, it is likely that she knew Charleton by reputation at least. Conway later consulted Mayerne about her own medical problems, while another of Conway’s physicians, Thomas Willis, was with Charleton in his early years at Oxford.⁴⁷ Conway’s husband Edward, her brother John Finch, and her friend Henry More were also members of the Royal Society, of which Charleton was a fellow as of 1662.

To understand why Conway might oppose Charleton’s theory of intimate presence, we must turn to the fundamentals of her philosophy. According to her title, the aim of the *Principles* is to resolve certain metaphysical difficulties that “could not be resolved by Scholastic Philosophy nor by Modern Philosophy in general, whether Cartesian, Hobbesian, or Spinozian.”⁴⁸ Toward this end, she proposes to derive her principles from “a serious and due consideration of the divine attributes, (from which the truth of everything can be made clear, as if from a treasure house stored with riches).”⁴⁹ Her metaphysical views are thus founded on the very first presupposition of her work: that “God is a spirit, light, and life, infinitely wise, good, just, strong, all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, the creator and maker of all things visible and invisible.”⁵⁰ The order in which Conway lists God’s attributes here is likely significant: for Conway, God’s wisdom, goodness, and justice always *take precedence* over his strength and

⁴⁶ See Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne to Lord Conway, September 19, 1648, in *Conway Letters*, 20–21. On Charleton as Mayerne’s junior assistant, see Lindsay Sharp, “Walter Charleton’s Early Life, 1620–1659, and Relationship to Natural Philosophy in Mid-Seventeenth Century England,” *Annals of Science* 30, no. 3 (1973): 311–40, esp. 318–19.

⁴⁷ See Booth, *Subtle and Mysterious Machine*, 7.

⁴⁸ Conway, *Principles*, 1.

⁴⁹ Conway, VII.2, 44.

⁵⁰ Conway, I.1, 9.

omnipotence. More than once, she emphasizes that God is not like those cruel tyrants who act merely according to their arbitrary will and pleasure, “relying on their power, so that they are unable to give any other explanation for their actions other than their own pure will.”⁵¹ Rather, God’s “infinite wisdom, goodness, and justice” are “a law unto him” which he cannot transgress, regardless of his infinite will and power.⁵²

This conception of God is undoubtedly influenced by the teachings of the Lurianic Kabbalah.⁵³ According to the sixteenth-century kabbalist Isaac Luria, God is above all just, merciful, and benevolent—he could never have produced creatures only to let them suffer pain and torment for all eternity; his creatures must therefore be capable of raising themselves toward perfection through their own efforts. Like her close friend Van Helmont, Conway embraces Luria’s doctrines in an effort to vindicate God from charges of injustice and cruelty toward human beings. Yet Conway’s concept of God’s nature is also reflective of the rationalist, anti-voluntarist views of her Cambridge contemporaries Henry More and Ralph Cudworth.⁵⁴ Like these men, Conway asserts that God’s choices are bound to be made in accordance with his goodness and wisdom. For the rationalist, as Steven Nadler explains, this must be the case because to “pursue ends that one does not believe to be good, or to follow a path toward one’s end that one knows not to efficiently lead there, is to act irrationally.”⁵⁵ God is therefore moved to choose the best through moral necessity. God’s nature constrains him to act in accordance with his divine wisdom and goodness; he always does what is most fitting and becoming of an infinitely wise, benevolent, and just creator.

⁵¹ Conway, III.1, 15; see also VI.9, 37.

⁵² Conway, III.2, 16.

⁵³ See Coudert and Corse’s Introduction to Conway, *Principles*, xviii–xxii.

⁵⁴ On rationalist conceptions of God in the early modern period, see Nadler, “Conceptions of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Desmond M. Clarke and Catherine Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 525–47.

⁵⁵ Nadler, “Conceptions,” 528.

From these truths about God’s nature, Conway proceeds to deduce certain truths about his creation. We can know, she says, that God created the world according to “the inner impulse of his divine goodness and wisdom.”⁵⁶ God’s will perfectly aligns with the idea in his mind: in God “there is an idea which is his image or the word existing within himself . . . all creatures were made or created according to this very idea or word.”⁵⁷ It follows, therefore, that he could not have created a single atom in isolation from every other creature. If there were such an atom, then it would be forever incapable of perfecting itself.⁵⁸ This purely singular entity would have no internal motion, because that would require a transition from one state to another (i.e., a plurality of states); and, likewise, it would have no way of perceiving anything within itself, because that would require the internal capacity to perceive a multitude of things. A single isolated atom would therefore have no mental or physical capacity to benefit from God’s goodness—it is, therefore, an impossibility.

For similar reasons, in Conway’s view, God could not have created “dead matter,” a material substance incapable of all life, self-motion, and perception. Here Conway specifically targets “the Cartesian philosophy” which holds 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.”⁵⁹ In one key passage, she states that

Since God is infinitely good and communicates his goodness to all creatures in infinite ways, so that there is no creature which does not receive something of his goodness, and this as fully as possible, and since the goodness of God is a living

⁵⁶ Conway, *Principles*, III.3, 15.

⁵⁷ Conway, I.6, 10.

⁵⁸ Conway, VII.4, 54.

⁵⁹ Conway, IX.2, 63.

goodness, which possesses life, knowledge, love, and power, which he communicates to his creatures, how can any dead thing proceed from him or be created by him, such as mere body or matter, according to the hypothesis of those who affirm that matter cannot be changed into any degree of life or perception?⁶⁰

It follows that all created substances must have life and perception among their essential attributes; if they did not have them, then they would be unable to enjoy divine goodness.

The aforementioned views about atomism and dualism could be read as criticisms of Charleton's ad hoc attempts to purge Epicurean atomism of atheism. In defense of the soul's immortality, Charleton's mouthpiece Athanasius had reasoned that a perfectly just God would never allow virtuous persons to go unrewarded.⁶¹ But, Conway suggests, the same reasoning should tell us that a perfectly just God is incapable of creating an isolated atom, on the grounds that it could never perfect itself or benefit from the divine goodness. The same reasoning, moreover, should tell us that an inherently dead and inert material substance is an impossible thing. On her view, God is not required to "jump-start" the motion of atoms (as Charleton had claimed), because a supremely benevolent God would never have created dead unmoving matter in the first place. And finally, it is implied, the same reasoning should lead us to reject the dualist assumption that the soul and body are distinct substances.

Needless to say, Conway's philosophy is essentially anti-dualist. In her view, there is no strict division between bodies and spirits; all created beings are naturally capable of life and perception. The only difference between body and spirit is a modal one (a distinction in their

⁶⁰ Conway, VII.2, 45.

⁶¹ Charleton, *Immortality*, 145.

way of being): while body is “more passive,” spirit is a “more active” principle;⁶² body is darker, harder, thicker, and grosser than spirit, but “any thing can approach or recede more or less from the condition of a body or a spirit.”⁶³ Despite their apparent differences, body and spirit remain one and the same substance: “body is nothing but fixed and condensed spirit; and spirit is nothing but volatile body or body made subtle.”⁶⁴

In the later chapters of her *Principles*, Conway is particularly scathing about those dualist philosophers who attempt to explain the conjunction of soul and body to the detriment of true religion. If spirit and body are so contrary to one another, she says, such that spirit has life and perception, while body is merely “a dead mass” forever, then it is difficult to conceive how the two can ever be united.⁶⁵ The problem is that “these doctors,”⁶⁶ she says, make the spirit and body so vastly different in terms of their essence. She notes that “nothing in the entire universe can be conceived of as so contrary, as body and spirit are in the minds of these people. For in all their attributes they are utterly contrary because impenetrability and penetrability are more opposite than black and white or hot and cold, since black can become white and hot can become cold. But, as they say, what is impenetrable cannot become penetrable.”⁶⁷ On this view, it is difficult to see why spirit requires an organized body in order to perform its vital actions: why can’t it just perform its operations in a corrupted body regardless? It is also difficult to see how a spiritual substance can ever move a body: “For if spirit so easily penetrates every body, why, when it moves from place to place, does it not leave the body behind since it can so easily pass through it without any or the least resistance?”⁶⁸

⁶² Conway, *Principles*, VI.11, 38.

⁶³ Conway, VII.1, 42.

⁶⁴ Conway, VIII.4, 61.

⁶⁵ Conway, VIII.1, 56.

⁶⁶ Conway, VII.3, 49.

⁶⁷ Conway, VII.3, 49.

⁶⁸ Conway, VIII.1, 57.

It must be noted that these criticisms could apply equally well to any number of Cartesian dualists in the period, such as More and Descartes himself, and not just Charleton. In the same passages, Conway's terminology indicates that she almost certainly has Henry More's philosophy in mind. In his *Immortality of the soul* (1659), More suggests that the soul requires a "prepared" or an "organized" body in order to exert its influence.⁶⁹ The vital congruity (correspondence or harmony) between the soul and body unites or "ties" the two together in the living human being.⁷⁰ When this congruity is absent, the soul and body are no longer united together as one, as in the case of mortality (when the human being dies). Nevertheless, as Sarah Hutton has noted, in her critique of dualism, Conway also refers to "those doctors" in the plural.⁷¹ And so, we might ask: who are the other potential targets of her remarks? Who else could she have in mind?

There are at least three reasons to think it is Charleton.

First, as we have seen, Charleton also asserts that the soul requires an organized body in order to exert its animating influence over the whole human being. In the *Immortality of the Human Soul*, Charleton's character Athanasius claims that when death approaches, the soul retreats from the bodily parts "for want of those Dispositions in the Organs of life, by which she was enabled to enliven the body."⁷² It is therefore conceivable that Conway responds to Charleton as well as More when she asks, "why does spirit require such an organized body?"⁷³ Why does spirit require a fitly disposed body, she says, in order to perform its vital actions and to move the body? If the spirit and the body share an affinity, then surely this affinity remains the same whether the body is organized or corrupt.

⁶⁹ More, *The immortality of the soul*, 264.

⁷⁰ More, 263–64.

⁷¹ Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 87n41.

⁷² Charleton, *Immortality*, 179.

⁷³ Conway, *Principles*, VIII.1, 57.

Second, Charleton's Athanasius responds to the mind-body problem by pointing out that "Heat, and Cold, white and black" are as different from one another as mind and body; yet it is possible for these opposites to be united, he says, such that "a Middle or Third nature" results from their union, "as in particular, warme, from Heat and Cold, and Grey or browne, from white and black."⁷⁴ Here Conway's terminology likely indicates that she is responding to Charleton when she points out that, for the dualist, body and spirit are *more* opposite than black and white, and hot and cold: "since black can become white and hot can become cold," but body cannot become spirit.⁷⁵

And third, as we have seen, Charleton addressed one version of the mind-body problem by proposing that, for incorporeals to be united or conjoined to corporeals, "no more is required but an *Intimate Præsence*."⁷⁶ In her own text, following her scathing remarks against the dualists, Conway points out that "these doctors" might be tempted to draw parallels between the motion of God and that of souls. They might observe, for example, that the incorporeal God is capable of moving bodies simply by being "intimately present" in them.⁷⁷ Perhaps this, too, is how spirits move bodies? After all, God, who is both incorporeal and intimately present in bodies, is perfectly capable of moving them. But, for Conway, this solution is deeply problematic: the "motion by which God moves a body," she says, "is completely different from the way a soul moves a body."⁷⁸ Conway writes:

If they object that God, who is completely incorporeal and intimately present in
all bodies, nevertheless moves whatever bodies he pleases and that he is the prime

⁷⁴ Charleton, *Immortality*, 183.

⁷⁵ Conway, *Principles*, VII.3, 49.

⁷⁶ Charleton, *Immortality*, 185.

⁷⁷ Conway, *Principles*, VIII.2, 57.

⁷⁸ Conway, VIII.2, 57.

mover of all things, yet has nothing impenetrable about him, I answer that this motion by which God moves a body is completely different from the way a soul moves a body. For the will of God, which gave being to bodies, also gave them motion. Hence motion itself comes from God, through whose will all motion occurs. For, just as a creature cannot give being to itself, so it cannot move itself.⁷⁹

In her view, God alone is capable of bringing about motion through intimate presence in creatures.⁸⁰ If any creature were to have such intimate presence in a fellow creature, then it would cease to be the thing that it is; it would have obtained one of the incommunicable attributes of God—a will that is capable of immediately bringing into being the idea in its mind. In her final chapter, this negative point is reiterated: no created substance, she says, is capable of causing motion through intimate presence.⁸¹

It is highly probable that Conway had Charleton’s theory of intimate presence in mind here. The idea of God’s intimate presence was commonplace in early modern texts: it can be found in many works, ranging from George Keith’s Quaker pamphlets of the mid-seventeenth century,⁸² to John Norris’s defenses of Malebranchean metaphysics in the 1690s, through to George Berkeley’s *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1734). Norris suggests that God is “*intimately Present*” within human beings insofar as “God is immediately united to the Mind of Man,”⁸³ while Berkeley says that to “an unbiased and attentive Mind,

⁷⁹ Conway, VIII.2, 57–58.

⁸⁰ Conway, VII.4, 41, 50.

⁸¹ Conway, IX.9, 68.

⁸² On the influence of George Keith’s Quaker doctrine of “immediate presence” on Conway’s thought, see Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 190–202.

⁸³ See John Norris, *Reflections upon the conduct of human life: with reference to the study of learning and knowledge* (London: S. Manship, 1690), 38, 64.

nothing can be more plainly legible, than the intimate Presence of an *All-wise Spirit*, who fashions, regulates, and sustains the whole Systeme of Being.”⁸⁴ But these writers use the idea to explain how God is immediately present to his own creation. By contrast, Charleton uses the doctrine to explain how incorporeal things might unite and interact with inherently dead, passive, and inert corporeal things. Conway targets the inadequacies of *this* particular kind of theory of intimate presence. Though her relevant chapters seem to be primarily focused on More’s brand of dualism, her references to the intimate presence of souls in bodies suggest that she has Charleton in her sights as well.

III. CONWAY ON HOW THE SOUL MOVES THE BODY

I noted earlier that Charleton’s theory about how the soul unites with and moves the body still leaves a great deal unexplained—his theory of intimate presence fails to explain precisely how two completely different substances can be united with, and causally related to, each other. In this final part, I demonstrate how Conway’s own theory about how the soul is united with and moves the body fills this explanatory gap. My intention is to highlight the depth and sophistication of Conway’s theory as a response to a metaphysical problem of her time.

Conway writes that “if one admits that the soul is of one nature and substance with the body . . . then all the abovementioned difficulties vanish; and one may easily understand how the soul and body are united together and how the soul moves the body and suffers with and through it.”⁸⁵ Still, we might ask: how do the difficulties vanish? After all, in Conway’s philosophy the soul and body are still utterly dissimilar in many respects: the soul is the central ruling or

⁸⁴ George Berkeley, *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1734), 169.

⁸⁵ Conway, *Principles*, VIII.2, 58.

governing spirit of a body, and it is made up of multiple spirits united together,⁸⁶ while the body is made of passive, harder, grosser, darker, and thicker stuff. So how does the lighter, nimbler, more active spiritual stuff move the hardened bodily stuff?

Conway's solution to her own mind-body problem is also a theory of intimate presence—but not of creatures inside other creatures.⁸⁷ Instead “one may observe,” she says, “a kind of divine spirituality or subtlety in every motion and in every action of life, which no created substance or body is capable of, namely through intimate presence.”⁸⁸ To grasp how the soul moves the body through God's intimate presence, it is useful to consider Conway's illustrative example of “a stone . . . thrown into still water.”⁸⁹ When a stone is cast into a standing pool, she says, it causes motion outward from its center to the circumference, forming ever wider and wider concentric circles as the motion passes through the water. This shows how motion can be “transmitted from the center to the circumference without any body or substance to carry this motion from the stone.”⁹⁰ The motion is vital not mechanical, and it is caused through emanation, not by the transference of one piece of body or substance to another, as Descartes had held. More literally, for Conway, God stands at the center of the cosmos (like the stone at the center of the circumference), as the “infinite fountain” whose “living waters” perpetually flow in “emanation and continual flux.”⁹¹ By a mere act of will, through this influx, God immediately brings into effect the motion or “the power to move” in creatures.

In Conway's view, God and created substances are nevertheless distinct from one another because God is perfectly immutable by nature (he cannot change at all), whereas everyday

⁸⁶ Conway, VII.4, 53.

⁸⁷ For her argument against the view that *any* created being (whether spirit or body) can be intimately present in another created being, see Conway, *Principles*, VII.4, 50.

⁸⁸ Conway, IX.9, 68.

⁸⁹ Conway, IX.9, 68.

⁹⁰ Conway, IX.9, 68.

⁹¹ Conway, II.4, 13.

experience tells us that creatures change all the time, sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad. And so we might ask: if God is so radically distinct from his creation, then *how* can he influence his creatures in this way? Conway's answer is that *because* these two beings are so radically different, reason tells us that there must be a third nature in between them, otherwise there would be an unbridgeable gulf between God and his creation.⁹² According to Conway, God requires an instrument in order to communicate his goodness to the creatures. This instrument or intermediary is Middle Nature (or "Christ"), a substance that is capable of changing but only for the good. On this point, we can once again discern the influence of the Lurianic Kabbalah, a doctrine that explains God's relationship to his creation via a middle nature or "Adam Kadmon," the first born of all creatures.⁹³ Such a medium, Conway says, is necessary "by the very nature of things" to help confer the blessings and benefits of God upon his creation.⁹⁴

And thus, on Conway's metaphysical model, all motion emanates from the original motion of God himself, first through the intermediary of Middle Nature, and then outward to his creatures, from the most perfect to the least perfect in an infinite hierarchy of being. The motion is produced by a kind of "virtual extension" or vital action proceeding from God and coexistent with him. The theory bears a notable resemblance to some Neoplatonist influx models of emanation insofar as (1) whatever flows from God is distinct from God himself (Middle Nature and creatures are substances distinct from God); (2) the influx from God is from the superior to the inferior, the highest to the lowest, or the more perfect to the less perfect in a hierarchy of being; (3) the motion brought about by the influx is coexistent with the motion of God; and (4)

⁹² Conway, *Principles*, V.3, 25.

⁹³ See Coudert and Corse's Introduction to Conway, *Principles*, xx.

⁹⁴ Conway, *Principles*, V.3, 25.

the act of inflowing in no way detracts from or diminishes God's essence and power.⁹⁵ In sum, as Christia Mercer observes, Conway's model of hierarchical emanation "allows God to be both transcendent from and immanent in creatures."⁹⁶

But does it really explain how the soul is united with and moves the body? Conway claims that it does. First, she says, the soul is united to the body by means of subtler bodies that possess characteristics in between the two extremes. The soul remains captive in the body while the latter is hard and dense, but is then released from its prison upon death, when the body softens and dissolves.⁹⁷ Second, she says that "the soul moves the body just as one subtle body is able to move another crass and dense one"—that is to say, by means of "certain mediating bodies, which share the subtlety and crassness in various degrees between the two extremes" of soul and body.⁹⁸ When the soul moves the body via these gradated mediums, it is not, strictly speaking, the true author of the motion in the body; it is merely the means or the instrument for *activating* that motion. The original vital motion comes from the emanative influence of God through Middle Nature, and this motion is communicated to creatures because Middle Nature is immanent or intimately present in them.

So what exactly was wrong with Charleton's theory that the soul is united with and moves the body by means of intimate presence? After all, like Conway, Charleton allows that two contrary things might result in "a certain sort of third Nature."⁹⁹ The union of black and white, and hot and cold, he says, brings about a third nature in between the two: such as grey in the case of black and white, and warmth in the case of hot and cold. Similarly, he thinks, the union of the

⁹⁵ On these features of Neoplatonist models, see Eileen O'Neill, "Influxus Physicus," in *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism, and Preestablished Harmony*, ed. Nadler (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 27–55, esp. 32–35. On Conway's theory of emanative causation, see Mercer, "Conway's Metaphysics of Sympathy."

⁹⁶ Mercer, "Conway's Metaphysics of Sympathy."

⁹⁷ Conway, *Principles*, VIII.4, 61.

⁹⁸ Conway, VIII.3, 59.

⁹⁹ Charleton, *Immortality*, 182.

soul and body is capable of bringing about a middle nature—the “man” or human being—with the assistance of that common cement or glue that unites them; that is, the blood. Within the soul-body composite, by virtue of its presence in the blood, the soul is apparently capable of exerting its animating influence over all the body.

For Conway, however, on a strictly dualist framework, it’s just not possible for souls and bodies to create a third or middle nature themselves, or for souls to create motion in bodies through a mere act of will. If they could do so—if souls had the power to create being and motion out of a mere idea—they would become God, since this is God’s privilege and prerogative as creator. It follows, therefore, that “a creature gives existence to motion or vital action, not from itself, but only in subordination to God as his instrument. In the same way motion in one creature can produce motion in another. And this is all that a creature can do to move itself or its fellow creature, namely as an instrument of God.”¹⁰⁰ For Conway, once again, it all comes down to a serious and due consideration of God’s attributes: it follows from God’s nature that only God has the power to bring into effect the idea or word in his mind; and hence only God is the true cause of all motion in the world, including the motion that souls cause in bodies.

CONCLUSION

It’s not difficult to see why Conway might have targeted Charleton’s theory of intimate presence in her critique of contemporary dualism. The doctrine of intimate presence is a recurring *motif* throughout Conway’s *Principles*; from the first to the last chapter, it is a key feature of her emanative theory of motion in the natural world. It’s not too improbable that in her efforts to

¹⁰⁰ Conway, *Principles*, IX.9, 70.

resolve the difficulties presented by early modern metaphysics—difficulties such as the mind-body problem in its various guises—Conway would have targeted a theory with the same nomenclature as her own, but one that was evidently lacking in solid religious and metaphysical foundations. It is likely therefore that, among other thinkers, Conway had Charleton in mind when she wrote,

For various reasons offered that spirit and body were originally one and the same in the first substance, it plainly appears that the so-called philosophers who have taught otherwise, both ancient and modern, have generally erred and laid a poor foundation from the beginning. . . . From such an absurd foundation, many other most crass and dangerous errors have arisen, not only in philosophy but also in theology with great injury to the human race, to the detriment of true piety, and in contempt of the most glorious name of God.¹⁰¹

In Conway's view, Charleton's Gassendist-Epicurean philosophy was doomed to failure because it began from an "absurd foundation"—a metaphysical theory of atoms in motion that, in terms of its core doctrines of substance and causation, could never be reconciled with God's goodness and wisdom. Conway herself avoided the same difficulty by beginning with God's attributes and consistently following through on their implications. From her perspective, I think it's fair to say that in his efforts to save the atomist baby while throwing out the atheist bathwater, Walter Charleton failed.

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¹⁰¹ Conway, IX.1, 63.