Contraries and Contradictories: The Identity and Nature of Conway's Creature that Endures through Time

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, WARNING: No applicable access license found.

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story.

Accessibility
Contraries and Contradictories:
The Identity and Nature of Conway’s Creature that Endures through Time

“...but indeed, it is not the essence or entity itself but only its mode of being which thus changes.”

Conway

One of the central problems in Anne Conway’s metaphysical philosophy is answering the question: what is the identity and nature of the creature than endures through time? There are two basic ways of interpreting Conway’s answer to this question. One interpretation is that the identity is that of a soul, and its nature is material. This is the interpretation taken by Emily Thomas. Another interpretation is that a created spirit is the identity, and its nature is also material. This is the interpretation taken by Rozemond and Simmons.

In this paper, I present an interpretation that is a version of Thomas’ thesis. It claims that the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time is the soul. However, my interpretation goes beyond Thomas’ thesis and against Rozemond and Simmons in that the nature of the soul cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial. This thesis relies on what I call “the contrary thesis,” as applied to Conway’s metaphysical philosophy.

The contrary thesis states that “if \( x \) is \( y \), then \( x \) cannot be \( z \)” is contradictory to the extent that \( x \) being \( y \) denies \( x \) being \( z \). It is still possible, however, that the relation between “\( x \) being \( y \)” to ”\( x \) being \( z \)” is false in that both the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional are false. In this way, the conditional functions as a contrary that must pick out a new meaning beyond the aggregate of its antecedent and consequent. In other words, “if I am a body, I cannot be immaterial” is contradictory to the extent that “if I am a body” denies that I can be immaterial because if I am a body, I must be material. It is still possible, however, that the relation between “I am a body” to “I

---

1 Conway, *Principles*, 29
cannot be immaterial” is false if the relation is understood as a contrary. In this way, both “I am a body” and “I cannot be immaterial” are false, and the conditional must pick out a new meaning beyond the aggregate of its antecedent and consequent. My thesis is that this new meaning entails that the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time is the soul and that its nature cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial.

Thus, my argument for the conclusion above is:

1. “If \( x \) is \( y \), \( x \) cannot be \( z \)” cannot be strictly a contradiction because it can function as a contrary
2. “If I am a body, I cannot be immaterial” cannot be strictly a contradiction because it can function as a contrary (instantiation, 1)
3. “If I am a soul, I cannot be material” cannot be strictly a contradiction because it can function as a contrary (instantiation, 1)
4. Given that these contradictories can function as contraries, they must pick out a new meaning beyond the aggregate of its antecedent and consequent
5. This meaning in (2) is that it is not the case that the body is strictly material
6. This meaning in (3) is that it is not the case that the soul is strictly immaterial
7. Given that Thomas argues that the soul is the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time, the nature of Conway’s soul cannot be strictly immaterial (hypothetical syllogism 3, 4, 6)
8. Given that Rozemond and Simmons argue that Conway’s created spirit is the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time, the nature of Conway’s created spirit cannot be strictly material (hypothetical syllogism 2, 4, 5)
9. Given that the nature of Conway’s soul cannot be strictly immaterial, it can be material
10. Given that the nature of Conway’s created spirit cannot be strictly material, it can be immaterial.

11. Given that it is the whole soul that rules the created spirit, Conway’s soul can be neither strictly immaterial nor strictly material (absorption 9, 10)

12. Thus, against Thomas and Rozemond and Simmons, Conway’s soul cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial (absorption 7, 8, 11)

In other words, given that I argue that the identity of Conway’s creature that persists through time is the soul and that the nature of the soul cannot be strictly material, it is thus possibly immaterial to some extent. The contrary thesis, then, functions as an inference to the best explanation to make sense of the identity and nature of Conway’s creature that endures through time, given that the nature of that identity can be neither strictly immaterial nor strictly material. As Thomas argues that “although Conway holds the unusual view that souls have parts, this does not preclude her from also grounding the identity of bodies in their unions with the same soul,” the contradiction in “if I am soul, I cannot be material” disregards the contrary possibility that the soul shares in the materiality of the body by association. Likewise, the contradiction in “if I am a body, I cannot be immaterial” disregards the possibility that the body shares in the soul’s immateriality by association. In that sense, the soul shares in the body's materiality while the body shares in the soul's immateriality. In other words, the identity of Conway’s creature is the soul, and its nature cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial.

Two objections can be raised here: one minor and another major. The minor one consists in that I am playing logical games. Given the logical game I am playing, it makes sense that the conclusion of my logical game is just a game-ish, playful conclusion. In response to the objection, I would like to point out that neither Conway, Rozemond, Simmons, nor Thomas work with

---

2 Thomas. *Identity*. 134
definitions of immateriality and materiality set in stone. While Rozemond and Simmons bring forth the idea that the soul may be immaterial and is material only by association with the body, they argue this is a weaker premise than the major premise that a spirit is just a subtle and volatile body. What still remains unclear, however, is what precisely defines a spirit and a body and a subtle and volatile body and how materiality and immateriality work around them. If precision is not there, any conclusion is just a logical inference.

The major objection to my thesis is Thomas’s inference that because Conway claims that her creatures are eternally embodied, they must be strictly material. It is to this major objection that I now turn. In what follows, then, I will (1) reconstruct Thomas’ argument to show that while Conway establishes the soul as the identity of her creature that endures through time, the nature of this soul cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial, (2) reconstruct Rozemond and Simmons’ argument to show how they have disregarded Conway’s position that the soul is the identity of her creature that endures through time, and that the nature of Rozemond and Simmons’ identity, the created spirit, cannot be strictly material, and (3) build my thesis from Conway’s paragraph 3 argument in chapter 6 of her Principles to show that Conway cannot logically reject the possibility that her soul can probably be immaterial.

In “Anne Conway and the Identity of Creatures over Time,” Thomas argues that the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time is the soul, whose nature is material. In her own words, “for Conway, the principal spirit of a creature is its soul, and it is this soul which secures the identity of a creature over time,” and “Conway holds that spirits are continually embodied,” thus material. In other words, Thomas argues that the whole soul provides the identity of a creature over time and that this soul has parts. Thus, it is an ordered system of spirits with the soul ruling created

3 Thomas. Identity. 143
4 Thomas. Identity. 147
spirits. Thomas provides an argument by analogy to illuminate her case: the soul, the principal spirit, is like the central hub of a wheel surrounded by ministering spirits. The central hub and the outer rim of the wheel, comprised of bodies, are connected by subtle bodies acting as spokes. It is only the soul, the principal spirit, that moves from one body to the other, and it is this in which Conway’s identity consists.

Thomas’ argument for the conclusion that the soul is the identity of Conway’s creature can be reconstructed thus:

1. The principal spirit of a creature is its soul
2. Conway’s whole soul has parts
3. The principal spirit is not one single indivisible substance but has parts (simplification 1)
4. Although we can speak of this principal spirit as a singular entity, it has parts
5. The principal spirit works in an ordered system of spirits
6. The soul, though we can speak of it as a singular entity, has parts and works in an ordered system of spirits (absorption 4, 5)
7. It is this soul which secures the identity of a creature over time
8. Thus, the soul is the identity of the creature that endures through time (simplification 7)

If one takes Thomas’ premise as contradictory, the premise that “although we can speak of this principal spirit as a singular entity, it has parts” cannot hold. The principal spirit cannot be plural if it is a singular entity. One denies the other. If one takes Thomas’ premise to involve the contrary thesis, while the antecedent denies the consequent, both may be false. If both are false, then it is not the case that the principal spirit is strictly a singular entity. It is not the case that the principal spirit cannot be a plural entity. It follows that “although we can speak of this principal spirit as a singular entity, it has parts” only makes logical sense if it involves the contrary thesis. Thus, the principal
spirit can be singular and plural simultaneously. That is why although we can speak of it as a singular entity, it has parts.

Likewise, if one takes Thomas’ premise as contradictory, the instantiate premise that “although we can speak of this soul as a singular entity, it has parts” cannot hold. If this soul is a singular entity, it cannot be a plural entity. One denies the other. If one takes the instantiation in Thomas’ premise to involve the contrary thesis, while the antecedent denies the consequent, both may be false. If both are false, then it is not the case that the soul is strictly a singular entity. It is not the case that the soul cannot be a plural entity. It follows that “although we can speak of this soul as a singular entity, it has parts” only makes logical sense if it involves the contrary thesis. Thus, the soul can be singular and plural time. That is why it makes sense for Thomas to argue that although we can speak of this principal spirit, the soul, as a singular entity, it has parts, works in, and rules in an ordered system of spirits. Suppose the contrary thesis makes it possible to logically understand the contradiction in the antecedent and consequent of Thomas’ conditional. In that case, it can also make it possible to logically understand the contradiction about the nature of the soul.

However, Thomas argues that the nature of Conway’s soul, which is the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time, is strictly material. Thomas argues so because “Conway holds that spirits are continually embodied.” In other words, Thomas quotes Conway and argues that all of Conway’s spirits have a body, whether terrestrial, aerial, or ethereal, and that Conway implies that this must be perpetually the case because God’s word is perpetually united to him just like the body in respect to the soul. Because Thomas follows Conway to the letter here, it follows for her that Conway’s soul has a strictly material nature because it is perpetually embodied.

Thomas’ argument for the conclusion that the nature of Conway’s creature is strictly material can be reconstructed thus:

---

5 Thomas. *Identity*. 147
1. God’s word is perpetually united to him
2. The body is perpetually united to the soul (*instantiation*, 1)
3. Every created spirit perpetually has a body
4. Conway’s creatures are continually embodied
5. Given that they are continually embodied, they must be material
6. The nature of Conway’s creature is strictly material because spirits are continually embodied
   *(hypothetical syllogism 3, 4, 5)*

The problem with Thomas’ argument is the analogy that because God’s word is perpetually united to him, the body must be perpetually united to the soul. Given that such is the case for Conway, Thomas argues that the soul is then perpetually united to a body and is thus perpetually material. The analogy itself, however, involves a fallacy of division: that what is true of the immaterial entity that is God must be true of its material parts. However, it cannot be the case that what is true of God must be true of its parts unless one considers that God’s creatures can be material and immaterial simultaneously. Otherwise, there could be no strict analogy between an immaterial entity and a material one. The problem of the definition of materiality and immateriality and how it involves God, and his creatures is still at play here. It makes the analogy not strictly functional for the argument.

Let us see if it becomes possible to make logical sense of the analogy by applying the contrary thesis. If one considers Thomas’s premise contradictory, the conditional that “if God’s word is perpetually united to him, then the body is perpetually united to the soul” cannot hold. What is true for an immaterial entity cannot be true for a material entity. One denies the other. If one takes Thomas’ conditional to involve the contrary thesis, while the antecedent denies the consequent, both may be false. If both are false, then it is not strictly the case that what is true for an immaterial entity cannot be true for a material entity. It follows that “if God’s word is perpetually
united to him, then the body is perpetually united to the soul” only makes logical sense if it involves the contrary thesis. Thus, what is true for an immaterial entity can be true for a material entity. That is why it makes sense for Conway to argue that if God’s word is perpetually united to him, the body is perpetually united to the body. The conditional, however, does not in a strict sense, only in a probable sense.

The upshot of all this is that while I agree with Thomas that the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time is the soul, I disagree with Thomas that the nature of this soul must be strictly material. If the conditional cannot hold in a strict sense, the soul's nature may also be immaterial.

To reinforce this conclusion, I now turn to Conway’s paragraph 3 in chapter 6 of her Principles, wherein she provides evidence for both claims I make above.

In paragraph 3 of chapter 6 of Principles, Conway argues that her soul is the substance that endures through time. In her own words, when there is a change of species, “it is not the essence or entity itself but only its mode of being which thus changes,” and that “there is merely a change of form inasmuch as the substance relinquishes one form and takes on another.” In other words, “man” is a species including all men. A man can change into a horse. “Horse“ is a species including all horses. Conway argues that while a creature can change from one species to another, the substance or essence of the creature does not change. In this way, the creaturely change from a man to a horse is a mode of being of the creature’s substance or essence. In other words, Conway makes it clear that while some think that because a creaturely change from a man to a horse has occurred, the creature itself has changed, what has changed is only the mode of being of that creature’s substance or essence. Moreover, because the substance can leave one body for another, it endures through time. Because Conway claims that her soul “remains a whole soul for eternity and endure

---

6 Conway. Principles. 29-30
without end,” it follows that her substance that endures through time is her soul that endures without end “so that it may receive proper rewards for its labour.”

Conway’s argument for the conclusion that the soul is her substance that endures through time can be reconstructed thus:

1. Species are not distinct from each other in substance but only in certain modes
2. When these modes change, the substance remains the same
3. When there is a change in mode, the substance persists through time as it moves from one body and takes on another
4. When species are not distinct from each other in substance but only in certain modes, when there is a change in mode, the substance persists through time (hypothetical syllogism 1, 2, 3)
5. Given that one substance leaves a body and takes another so that it may receive proper rewards for its labour, Conway’s substance is the soul for it is the soul that remains whole and endures without end (instantiation 4)

This reconstruction of Conway’s argument proves Thomas’ premise that the soul is Conway’s creature that endures through time true, given Conway’s textual evidence. By the argument alone, however, it is not clear what its nature is. What is clear, however, is that the nature of Conway’s soul cannot be strictly material given the analysis above of Thomas’ argument according to the contrary thesis. It has been shown that it is an inference to the best explanation that because Conway’s soul can be neither strictly material nor immaterial, it is possibly immaterial to some extent, given that it rules the ordered system of spirits, and it is the substance that leaves one

---

7 Conway. *Principles*. 55
8 Conway. *Principles*. 55
body for another. Rozemond and Simmons, in “It’s Alive,” strongly reject this possibility by arguing that Conway rejects the conception of any immaterial entity beyond God.

The argument Rozemond and Simmons provide is one whose conclusion is that Conway’s spirits cannot be immaterial. Because they think that the identity of Conway’s creature is the created spirit, the nature of this spirit must be material. Now, it is not in the scope of this paper to apply the contrary thesis to Rozemond and Simmons’ conclusion that the created spirit is the identity of Conway’s creature. All I want to show is that because they disregard the textual evidence that the soul is for Conway the identity of her creature that endures through time, the absurd-consequences move and the dilemma following that move in Rozemond and Simmons’ reconstruction of Conway’s argument do not hold.

Rozemond and Simmons’ argument reconstruction of what I call Conway’s mutability argument is a response to an objection they have posed to themselves: that Conway’s created spirit is immaterial because it is material only by association with the body. In response to their objection, Rozemond and Simmons argue that while Conway claims that a created spirit is in or has a body, thus implying that they are material only by association, this is a weaker claim than the stronger claim Conway makes that spirits are bodies. Because Rozemond and Simmons do not find this argument of Conway’s the most transparent, they reconstruct it into what I call the mutability argument. As I mentioned above, it includes an absurd-consequences move leading to a dilemma. I will show how the horns of the dilemma do not hold because it presents a false dichotomy.

In “It’s Alive,” Rozemond and Simmons argue that Conway rejects the conception of spirits as immaterial entities. This follows from the reductio premise that “God is essentially immutable; [creatures] are essentially mutable… If materiality is a condition of mutability, it would follow that [creatures] must be material on pain of being immutable.”\footnote{Rozemond and Simmons, It’s Alive, 34} In other words, Rozemond and Simmons
argue that Conway’s spirits cannot be immaterial because creatures are mutable. Mutability entails materiality because God is the only immaterial entity and the only immutable. Thus, to regard Conway’s creatures as immaterial leads to the absurd consequence that they would be immaterial on pain of being mutable.

I divide my reconstruction of Rozemond and Simmons’ argument into three parts: the core of the argument, the absurd-consequences move, and the dilemma. As I mentioned above, Rozemond and Simmons’ core mutability argument is itself their reconstruction of Conway’s “not the most transparent argument”\(^\text{10}\) for the conclusion that Conway rejects the existence of immaterial creatures:

1. God is the only immaterial entity
2. God is the only immutable entity
3. God is the only immaterial and immutable entity \((\text{addition } 1, 2)\)
4. Conway’s spirits are entities other than God
5. Conway’s spirits are material and mutable entities
6. Conway’s spirits are other than God, material and mutable entities \((\text{addition } 4, 5)\)
7. Other than God, there are no immaterial entities \((\text{absorption } 3, 6)\)

The core problem with this argument is not that it does not allow for the possibility of the contrary thesis and that it relies on the contradiction that if Conway’s creature is other than God, it cannot be immaterial. It allows for the contrary thesis, and the resulting conclusion is that it is not the case that Conway’s creature cannot be immaterial. However, even before that, another problem lurks: it arrives at its conclusion that there are no immaterial entities from the premise that the identity of Conway’s creature is a created spirit: "as Conway depicts it, an individual creature’s

---

\(^{10}\) Rozemond and Simmons. \textit{It's Alive.} 34
identity consists in a collection of “principal” or “central” or “ruling” spirits… that, in transmutation, abandon one body and grow a new one.” It disregards the textual evidence that Conway considers the soul the substance that endures through time – the substance that abandons one body and grows a new one. Thus, while Rozemond and Simmons’ created spirits may be material, it is a rash generalization based on a fallacy of composition to assert that what is true from the particular premise that this identity must be material that there are, in general, no immaterial entities. It has been shown above, through the contrary thesis, that Conway’s soul, what she considers the identity of her creature to consist of, cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial to some extent.

The absurd-consequences move in Rozemond and Simmons’ argument can be reconstructed thus:

8. Suppose there are immaterial entities other than God
9. They are immutable because immutability is a condition of immateriality
10. Being immutable, they cannot change
11. Thus, suppose there are immaterial entities other than God, they cannot change (*hypothetical syllogism* 12, 14)
12. Suppose Conway’s entities are immaterial
13. They are immutable because immutability is a condition of immateriality
14. Being immutable, they cannot change
15. Thus, suppose Conway’s entities are immaterial, they cannot change (*hypothetical syllogism*, 16, 18)
16. But Conway’s entities are mutable, so they cannot be immaterial entities (*modus ponens* 6, 9)

---

11 Rozemond and Simmons. *It’s Alive*. 25
17. Thus, if Conway’s entities are immaterial, they are immaterial on pain of being mutable (the absurd-consequences move)

Given that Rozemond and Simmons argue that the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time is the created spirit and that its nature is material, it may be that if Conway’s entities are immaterial that they would be immaterial on pain of being mutable given that the created spirit is mutable because mutability is a condition of materiality. Given, however, Conway’s textual evidence that the identity of her creature that endures through time is the soul and that the soul cannot be strictly material, thus possibly immaterial, it is not the case that if Conway’s soul is immaterial that it would be immaterial on pain of being mutable. Mutability, in this case, cannot be a condition of strict materiality.

Rozemond and Simmons’ absurd-consequences move at last leads to this dilemma: if Conway’s entities are immaterial, they cannot change.

18. If Conway’s entities are material, they can change

19. Either Conway’s entities are immaterial or Conway’s entities are material

20. Therefore, either they cannot change or they can change (dilemma 22, 23)

The horns of this dilemma hold if the dilemma involves a contradiction but not if it involves the contrary thesis. The disjunctive premise contradicts each other because both cannot be true: either they cannot change or they change. If one is true, it denies the other. Nevertheless, if it is not the case that one denies the other, there is no dilemma. Applying the contrary thesis, it is not the case that they cannot change, and it is not the case that they can change. Because the contrary thesis denies both the antecedent and the consequent, the meaning of the conditional must pick out a new meaning from the aggregates of its conditional. This meaning is that it may be that Conway’s entities change and cannot change simultaneously, that they can be material and immaterial simultaneously.
Again, this results from a lack of firm definitions for immateriality and materiality and how they involve terms such as body, spirit, and soul – which themselves lack firm definitions.

Thus, the contradiction ensues that if the created spirit must be strictly material, the nature of Conway’s soul cannot be strictly material. Applying the contrary thesis, it is possibly immaterial to some extent. If it may be immaterial to some extent, the horns of the dilemma do not hold because it presents a false dichotomy. The false dichotomy lies in its contradiction.

In conclusion, it is not the case that the identity of Conway’s creature that endures through time is Rozemond and Simmons’ created spirit. Because this is not the case, it is not the case that the nature of this identity must be strictly material. Conway then must not reject the conception of an immaterial entity altogether. Given that her soul is the substance that endures through time and cannot be strictly material, it is possibly immaterial to some extent.

Topics for further research on this matter can involve what answers non-Western philosophical traditions, such as Vedânta, can provide to the question of the identity and nature of what endures through time. Vedânta considers that the body comprises two parts: a gross and a subtle one. The gross part is the physical body one sees; the subtle body is made up of the mind, intelligence, and ego. Above the body, grossly and subtly constituted, reigns the soul, which, while partaking of the body’s materiality, retains its immateriality given that it is the substance that endures through time.

What would Conway think of this? While she would probably have a problem with the strict immateriality of the soul in this case, I think she would not dismiss it at a chance, given her implicating thought that “indeed, it is not the essence or entity itself, but only its mode of being which thus changes.”

---

12 Conway, *Principles*. 29
Bibliography

