

Contraries and Contradictories:

Exploring the Identity and Nature of Conway's Enduring Creature through Time

*"...but indeed, it is not the essence or entity itself [that changes]
but only its mode of being which thus changes."*

Conway¹

In the sixth chapter of her work *"Principle,"* Anne Conway advances a compelling argument in favor of the soul's immortality. She posits that the soul, which she defines as an individual's essence, persists through time. It is noteworthy, however, that Conway also asserts elsewhere in her metaphysical discourse that her system does not necessitate the existence of immaterial entities. Consequently, she characterizes the nature of the soul as fundamentally material. This assertion raises a series of intriguing questions and challenges.

One commonly held assumption is that the physical body consists of matter, inherently associated with mortality due to its propensity to decay over time. Conversely, another widely accepted notion suggests a clear distinction between the soul and the body. According to this perspective, the soul is typically perceived as immaterial, lacking material substance. Given its immaterial nature, it is commonly believed to possess the attribute of immortality, as immaterial entities are thought not to succumb to the ravages of time. Thus, a perplexing conundrum arises: How can Conway reconcile her concept of a material soul with the expectation of its immortality?

¹ Conway, *Principles*, 29

The unresolved contradiction within Conway's argument regarding the immortality of her soul forms the crux of the matter. In the following discourse, I tackle this contradiction by introducing a concept I refer to as "the contrary thesis" to her argument for the soul's immortality. Through this analysis, it will become evident that while Conway maintains that the enduring identity of the individual is embodied in the soul, the intrinsic nature of her soul cannot be entirely confined to the material realm; it likely possesses some degree of immateriality.

The "contrary thesis" posits that the statement "if x is y, then x cannot be z" is inherently contradictory because asserting x as y inherently denies x being z. However, it is essential to recognize that the relationship between "x being y" and "x being z" could be false, where both the antecedent and consequent of the conditional statement are untrue. Consequently, this conditional serves as a contrary, necessitating identifying a novel interpretation beyond the combination of its antecedent and consequent.

Consider the statement, "If I am a body, I cannot be immaterial." This statement appears contradictory because if I am a body, it implies materiality, making immateriality impossible. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that if we view the relationship between "I am a body" and "I cannot be immaterial" as contrary, both propositions become false. Consequently, the conditional statement must be approached with a fresh perspective that transcends the mere summation of its antecedent and consequent. My thesis asserts that applying this nuanced perspective to Conway's concept of the soul suggests that while the enduring identity within her individual may find expression

through the soul, its inherent nature cannot be rigidly confined to the material realm. Instead, it likely encompasses an element of immateriality.

In the ensuing discussion, I will construct my thesis based on Conway's argument in paragraph 3 of chapter 6 of her work "*Principles*." This analysis aims to demonstrate that Conway cannot logically dismiss the possibility that her soul may possess some degree of immateriality. Additionally, I will reinterpret Emily Thomas' argument, illustrating that while Conway establishes the soul as her individual's enduring identity across time, this soul's nature cannot be exclusively confined to the material realm, suggesting a likely element of immateriality. Furthermore, I will summarize Marleen Rozemond and Allison Simmons' argument succinctly, highlighting a potential oversight in their analysis of Conway's position. Notably, they may have neglected Conway's assertion that the soul serves as the identity of her enduring individual. This oversight could have implications for their interpretation, particularly regarding the nature of Conway's "created spirit," which, as I contend, cannot be strictly characterized as material.

In the third paragraph of the sixth chapter of her magnum opus "*Principles*," Anne Conway presents a compelling argument for the soul's immortality, which she contends is the essence of the individual enduring throughout time. She asserts that the soul "remains a whole soul for eternity and endures without end."² This unceasing endurance of the soul inevitably leads to the logical conclusion that Conway's soul must be immortal. Its perpetual existence throughout eternity precludes any notion of mortality, as it persists

² *Principles*, 55

indefinitely without succumbing to the specter of death. Moreover, Conway further elucidates her position by introducing the concept of a "change of species"³ upon death. She clarifies that this change entails transforming the mode of existence rather than the essence or identity itself. In essence, it signifies a transition of form as the substance relinquishes one configuration and adopts another. In simpler terms, this implies that Conway's soul, which endures eternally without experiencing death, must be the quintessential essence of the individual. Upon the transition from one body to another, the soul remains unaltered, with the change occurring solely in the mode of being of the body. This understanding emphasizes that the soul merely shifts from inhabiting one body to another while retaining its enduring nature.

Conway provides an illustrative example of this transformative process by considering the transition of a soul from the body of a man to that of a horse. In this scenario, the transformation of an individual from a man to a horse entails the enduring and, consequently, immortal soul departing from the prevailing mode of the human body and adopting the mode of being associated with a horse's body. It is vital to emphasize that Conway unequivocally states that the nature of the individual, represented by the soul, remains unaltered throughout this process. What transforms is solely the mode of being of the body: the soul transitions from inhabiting a human body to residing within the form of a horse's body.

Conway's thesis grapples with a fundamental contradiction, as it posits the coexistence of an immaterial entity, her soul, within the material realm. The assertion that

³ *Principles*, 29-30

the soul endures through time and transitions between different bodies implies its exemption from mortality, as material properties inherently follow a trajectory towards decay and ultimate cessation. Consequently, if the soul persists throughout time, it logically suggests an immaterial essence, thereby conferring the attribute of immortality upon it. In simpler terms, the statement "If I am immortal, I cannot be material" presents a contradiction since the declaration of immortality inherently negates the material nature. However, considering that this conditional may represent a contrary argument is worth considering. It could be argued that it is not definitively established that the soul is strictly immortal, particularly given Conway's rejection of the necessity for an immaterial entity. There might exist nuances about the nature of the soul that are beyond one's comprehension. Nonetheless, if such nuances are indeed at play, it cannot be asserted that the soul is exclusively material, given Conway's assertion that it endures through time and transitions between different physical bodies.

Up to this point, it becomes evident that although Conway identifies the soul as the enduring core of her individual across time, its intrinsic nature cannot be confined solely to the material realm. Instead, it likely possesses some degree of immateriality. However, it is crucial to address two potential objections at this juncture. The first objection, raised by Emily Thomas, contends that Conway's individual enduring through time is indeed the soul, yet maintains that its nature remains fundamentally material. Secondly, Marleen Rozemond and Allison Simmons present an alternative argument suggesting that the nature of Conway's enduring individual is not the soul but rather a material spirit. I will first delve into Emily Thomas's objection in the ensuing discussion.

In her work "*Anne Conway and the Identity of Individuals over Time*," Thomas presents a counterargument asserting that the identity of Conway's enduring individual is, in fact, the soul and that this soul is inherently material. She articulates this position by stating, "For Conway, the principal spirit of an individual is its soul, and it is this soul which secures the identity of an individual over time,"⁴ and adds that "Conway holds that spirits are continually embodied."⁵ Thomas asserts that Conway's soul, synonymous with an individual's principal spirit, maintains its material essence due to its continuous embodiment. To elucidate further, it is worth noting that if the soul transitions from one body to another, one might assume it experiences moments of disembodiment. However, Thomas contends that according to Conway's philosophy, even as the soul undergoes these transitions between bodies, it remains in a perpetual embodiment, thereby upholding its essential material nature.

In Conway's conceptualization, Thomas contends that the soul is a composite entity with discernible parts. According to this perspective, the soul functions within an organized framework of created spirits over which it exercises authority. To illustrate this point, Thomas employs an analogy, likening the soul, the principal spirit, to the central hub of a wheel encircled by ministering spirits. It is crucial to emphasize that in Conway's philosophy, solely the soul, as the principal spirit, undertakes the transition from one body to another, thus forming the bedrock of her notion of identity. For this discussion, it is

⁴ Thomas, *Identity*, 143

⁵ *Identity*, 147

worth acknowledging the potential contradiction in Thomas's assertion that although we can speak of this principal spirit as a singular entity, it has parts. This statement might appear contradictory, as a singular entity typically suggests a lack of division into parts. However, it is plausible to consider that this entity, despite being continually embodied and therefore material, may still possess a composition of parts while maintaining its unity – much like the central hub of a wheel, which remains a singular entity while consisting of various integral components.

However, if we interpret Thomas's premise within the framework of the contrary thesis, while the antecedent denies the consequent, it opens the door to the possibility that both assertions may be false. In this context, it challenges the notion that the principal spirit must be strictly singular and precludes the idea that it cannot possess a plural character. Consequently, the statement that although we can speak of this principal spirit as a singular entity, it has parts becomes logically coherent when considered through the lens of the contrary thesis. Consequently, conceiving the principal spirit as simultaneously singular and plural becomes plausible. This understanding aligns with the idea that, despite our capacity to describe it as a singular entity, it may consist of distinct parts.

As I will later argue, if we accept that the contrary thesis can render Thomas's conditional logically plausible, it also offers a logical pathway to address the contradiction surrounding the nature of Conway's soul. Nevertheless, it remains an enigmatic challenge to reconcile how such a material entity can possess immaterial attributes, as suggested by Conway's arguments for her soul's immortality. However, Thomas posits that Conway's soul, the entity she designates as the enduring identity of Conway's individual over time, is

unequivocally material. Thomas concludes by highlighting Conway's assertion that "spirits are continually embodied."⁶ Thomas further elucidates that in Conway's framework, all spirits, be they terrestrial, aerial, or ethereal, invariably connect with a physical body. According to Conway, this perpetual union must persist indefinitely, akin to the eternal bond between God's word and Him. Consequently, Thomas aligns herself meticulously with Conway's philosophy, ultimately concurring with the notion that Conway's soul possesses an inherently material nature due to its perpetual embodiment.

However, a critical issue with Thomas's argument arises from her analogy, suggesting that because God's word is perpetually united to Him, the body must remain perpetually united to the soul. This analogy inadvertently commits the fallacy of division, assuming that what holds for the immaterial entity of God must also apply to its material components. However, it is not logically sound to assert that attributes applicable to God as a whole must necessarily extend to its parts unless one posits that God's parts can simultaneously possess both material and immaterial qualities. This consideration introduces a potential scenario in which materiality and immateriality are not inherently inconsistent. If I entertain this possibility, then Conway's soul, by this analogy, might encompass both material and immaterial aspects concurrently, challenging Thomas's claim that Conway strictly advocates for the soul's material nature. Therefore, the analogy does not effectively serve as an airtight foundation for Thomas's argument.

⁶ *Identity*, 147

In the context of this paper, if one perceives Thomas's premise as inherently contradictory, it follows that the conditional statement, "if God's word is perpetually united to him, then the body is perpetually united to the soul," cannot logically hold. This is due to the fundamental distinction between an immaterial and a material entity, where one's truth negates the other's validity. These two realms are inherently incompatible. However, when approaching Thomas's conditional from the perspective of the contrary thesis, while the antecedent denies the consequent, it becomes conceivable that both assertions may be false. In such a scenario, it challenges the strict dichotomy between what can be true for an immaterial entity versus a material one. This interpretation suggests that the statement that if God's word is perpetually united to him, then the body is perpetually united to the soul holds logical coherence within the framework of the contrary thesis. Consequently, it opens the possibility that aspects actual for an immaterial entity can also hold for a material entity. This perspective aligns with my view of Conway's argument, where neither the body nor the soul is strictly confined to being purely material or immaterial.

Therefore, the overarching conclusion thus far is that while I concur with Thomas regarding the identity of Conway's enduring individual as the soul, I diverge from her position in asserting that the nature of this soul need not be strictly material. Conway's argument for the soul's immortality undeniably supports Thomas's premise that the soul constitutes Conway's enduring identity. However, within the framework of Thomas's argument, it appears illogical to insist upon the strict materiality of the soul. Now, let us turn our attention to the second objection raised by Rozemond and Simmons.

In their work "*It's Alive*," Rozemond and Simmons vehemently reject two fundamental propositions: firstly, the notion that Conway's enduring individual finds its identity in the soul, and secondly, the possibility that the nature of this individual may contain an immaterial dimension to some extent. However, this discussion will focus briefly on Rozemond and Simmons' argument regarding the identity of Conway's enduring individual, dedicating more substantial attention to their argument that asserts the strict materiality of this identity.

I will just briefly address the claim made by Rozemond and Simmons that the identity of Conway's enduring individual is a material spirit because, as Thomas and I have previously demonstrated, Conway's writings offer explicit textual evidence that the soul constitutes her enduring substance, a point that Rozemond and Simmons overlook. The critical error in Rozemond and Simmons' perspective lies in their assumption that a component of Conway's whole soul, namely the material spirit, is the core of this identity. However, Conway has argued consistently that the entire soul, encompassing its entirety, endures across time. This oversight in their analysis ultimately leads to a flawed logical maneuver, resulting in absurd consequences and an improperly framed dilemma.

Rozemond and Simmons argue in response to a pertinent objection: Conway's created spirit must be immaterial since it is considered material only concerning its association with the body. In addressing this objection, Rozemond and Simmons contend that Conway's assertion that a created spirit exists within or has a connection to a body, thereby implying materiality solely through association, represents a more tempered claim. In their own words, this assertion is a weaker version of Conway's more robust

assertion that spirits fundamentally constitute bodies. Given their reservations about the clarity of Conway's original argument, they reconstruct it. However, this reconstructed interpretation inadvertently leads to an absurd-consequences scenario and a misaligned dilemma. In a subsequent discussion, I will demonstrate that the horns of this dilemma do not withstand scrutiny, as they present a false binary choice.

Rozemond and Simmons put forward a compelling argument asserting that Conway rejects the notion of spirits as immaterial entities. This conclusion derives from a reductio premise they articulate: "God is essentially immutable; [individuals] are essentially mutable... If materiality is a condition of mutability, it would follow that [individuals] must be material on pain of being immutable."⁷ In simpler terms, Rozemond and Simmons contend that Conway's spirits cannot be immaterial precisely because individuals exhibit mutability. According to their line of reasoning, mutability inherently implies materiality, as the only entity that can possess immutability is God, who is also immaterial. Hence, labeling Conway's individuals as immaterial leads to the absurd implication that they would be immaterial and, simultaneously, subject to mutable characteristics, a logical incongruity. While this stance presents several complexities and relies on multiple assumptions within the conditional statement mentioned above, I will apply the contrary thesis to Rozemond and Simmons' argument for this paper.

The central issue with Rozemond and Simmons' argument lies not in its failure to accommodate the possibility of the contrary thesis but in its reliance on a contradiction. This contradiction asserts that if Conway's individual is anything other than God, it cannot

⁷ Rozemond and Simmons, *It's Alive*, 34

possess even a modicum of immateriality. While it theoretically allows for considering the contrary thesis, I will not delve deeply into the resulting conclusion in this discussion. Suffice it to say that this line of thinking contends that it is indeed possible for Conway's individual to exhibit some degree of immateriality.

Even prior to delving into this aspect, a more fundamental problem emerges. Rozemond and Simmons' argument arrives at its ultimate conclusion – that there are no immaterial entities – from the initial premise that Conway's individual is a created spirit. They posit, "As Conway depicts it, an individual's identity consists in a collection of 'principal' or 'central' or 'ruling' spirits... that, in transmutation, abandon one body and grow a new one."⁸ As mentioned, this standpoint disregards the critical textual evidence wherein Conway explicitly identifies the soul as the enduring substance over time – the substance that relinquishes one body and takes on another. Furthermore, she maintains that it is not just any spirit or a component thereof but the soul's entirety that persists across time.

Hence, while Rozemond and Simmons argue that Conway's created spirits, which they interpret as a part of the soul, may be material, it is an unwarranted leap to generalize from this particular premise to the sweeping assertion that there are, in general, no immaterial entities. As demonstrated earlier through the consideration of the contrary thesis, Conway's concept of the soul, constituting the identity of her individual, cannot be categorically deemed strictly material, thereby suggesting a likelihood of possessing some degree of immateriality. Considering Rozemond and Simmons' argument that Conway's

⁸ *It's Alive*, 25

enduring individual finds its identity in the created spirit and posits its nature as material, it is conceivable that if Conway's entities were immaterial, they might indeed be immaterial on the grounds of mutability. After all, according to this perspective, the created spirit must be mutable, as mutability is typically associated with materiality.

However, this interpretation faces a critical challenge when we consider Conway's textual evidence, which unmistakably identifies the soul as the enduring essence of her individual across time. As previously established, it has been shown that the soul cannot be classified as strictly material and possesses the potential for immateriality. Consequently, it is unreasonable to assert that if Conway's soul were immaterial, it would be immaterial by necessity due to mutability. In this scenario, the linkage between mutability and materiality is disrupted, and mutability is no longer a definitive materiality condition. This reevaluation of Conway's argument invalidates the absurd-consequences move that Rozemond and Simmons initially anticipated. Furthermore, if I accept that mutability is not an inherent condition of materiality, it follows that there is no genuine dilemma concerning the compatibility of mutability and immateriality.

In summary, it becomes evident that the identity of Conway's enduring individual, posited by Rozemond and Simmons, is not synonymous with their concept of the created spirit. As a result, their assertion that the nature of this identity must adhere strictly to materiality is also unsubstantiated. Consequently, Rozemond and Simmons cannot assert that Conway rejects the notion of an immaterial entity unequivocally. In light of the textual evidence emphasizing that Conway's soul serves as an enduring substance over time and cannot be exclusively classified as strictly material, it becomes plausible to

consider that it holds some immateriality. Therefore, the argument by Rozemond and Simmons does not substantiate the claim that Conway altogether dismisses the existence of immaterial entities within her philosophical framework.

Areas for further investigation in this realm could delve into the insights offered by non-Western philosophical traditions, such as Vedānta, concerning the questions surrounding the identity and nature of that which endures through time. In the Vedāntic perspective, the body comprises two distinct components: the gross and the subtle. The gross component pertains to the observable physical body, while the subtle body encompasses the mind, intelligence, and ego. Positioned beyond the gross and subtle constituents of the body, the soul governs and maintains its immaterial essence while intermingling with the body's materiality. In this context, the soul stands as the enduring substance over time.

It is worth noting that Conway might raise specific concerns regarding the strict immateriality of the soul in this context. However, given her nuanced perspective, she would unlikely hastily dismiss such a notion. Consequently, examining how Conway's philosophy aligns or diverges from Vedāntic principles could yield valuable insights into the discourse on enduring identity and its interplay with material and immaterial aspects. Her line of thinking, as implied by her statement, "Indeed, it is not the essence or entity itself [that changes], but only its mode of being which thus changes,"⁹ suggests a willingness to explore the intricacies of identity and the evolving nature of entities.

⁹ *Principles*, 29

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