

# Anne Conway's *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* Study Guide

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## Life and Works<sup>1</sup>

- 1631: Born Anne Finch, daughter of Sire Heneage Finch and Elizabeth Bennett
- 1650: Begins correspondence with Henry More, who was a professor of her brother's at Cambridge and the leading "Cambridge Platonist" of the time.
- 1651: Marries Edward Conway (another former student of More's), later Viscount and then Earl Conway.
- 1652: Travels to France for intensive medical care to deal with severe headaches.
- 1658: Birth of her child, Heneage Edward Conway
- 1660: Heneage dies of smallpox.
- 1670: Spinoza's *Ethics* published.  
Van Helmont visits England, meets Conway, becomes her personal physician.  
Introduces her to Kabbalistic writings.
- 1675: George Fox and other Quakers visit Conway
- 1677: Lady Conway becomes a Quaker (not an ok thing for an English aristocrat)
- 1679: Conway dies. Her epitaph reads only "Quaker Lady."
- 1690: *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* published, with an introduction by Henry More.

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<sup>1</sup> Largely taken from Anne Conway, *Principles...*, ed. A. Coudert and T. Corse, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

## **Principles, Chapters 1-5**

### **Before Reading:**

Anne Conway's *Principles* is in many ways a very different kind of text than Descartes's *Meditations* or Spinoza's *Ethics* in that both of those philosophers sought to argue for their conception of the world from premises that, in one way or another, every reader would have to acknowledge as self-evident. Conway's approach is quite different. On the one hand, she starts from presuppositions that most of those *in her time and place* would have accepted, such as that there is a God and even that God is a Trinity. These explicitly theological premises may be alien to many of us. On the other hand, while she argues for several positions on the basis of assumptions about God and the world, her overall approach is to *present* her metaphysical view of the world and show how this metaphysical view makes sense on its own terms, makes sense of our experience, and solves lots of philosophical problems that seem otherwise intractable (such as the relation between mind and body, or the relationship between an infinite God and the created world). Moreover, she sees her *Principles* as uniting what is best in the "ancient" and "modern" philosophies, where ancient philosophy here refers first and foremost to ancient Hebrew wisdom, as expressed in the Jewish Kabbalistic mystics; and modern philosophy refers to contemporary developments during her time. But she also sees her view as showing how ancient Platonism can be reconciled with modern science. And she thinks she has articulated a metaphysics that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers can all endorse. Thus her *Principles* end up justified not by means of a deductive argument, but in terms of how they unify other streams of thought and solve various philosophical problems. As you start reading, let yourself take her ideas serious as a possible way the world could be; and then see how attractive (or not) that metaphysics becomes as it develops. (You might go even further and think about whether, and if so how, Conway's metaphysics could be expanded, corrected, or refined to take into account developments in science since her time, and/or religious-philosophical traditions such as various kinds of Buddhism, Taoism, or Hinduism.)

1. What are the aspects of Descartes's and/or Spinoza's metaphysics that you find most plausible?
2. What are the aspects of those thinkers' metaphysics that you have the hardest time accepting?
3. What philosophical problems are left unsolved by those thinkers?

### **While Reading:**

#### **Book 1.**

1. Is Conway's God more like Descartes's, or more like Spinoza's?
2. In what way(s) is her conception of God different from his (whoever's it's most like)?
3. Imagine someone – a "Jew or Turk" – who believes that monotheism (the view that there is only one God) is the single most important theological truth and who rejects Christian Trinitarianism because it seems to imply three gods (Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit). Does Conway provide a way of understanding the Trinity that such a person could accept?

4. Is Conway's account of the Trinity appealing *to you*? Does it make sense, as a metaphysical vision of the world, to see God in this way?

### Book 2.

1. For this (and future) chapters, give the chapter a title.
2. What is the difference between "infinite time" and "eternity"?
3. What, for Conway, is the fundamental nature of time? (See here especially §6.) Think about this for a while...What *is* time? Does Conway get it right?
4. Think for a bit about the consequences of Conway's distinction between eternity and time. What implications might that have for the relation between God and created things?
5. Given this chapter, to what extent is Conway's God like (and unlike) Spinoza's?

### Books 3-5.

1. In creating the universe, how is Conway's God different from Spinoza's?
2. Spend some time with §5, which fleshes out Conway's claim in §4 that "his creatures are infinite." Just how infinite is the number of God's creatures? Is this conception of the infinity of creatures consistent with (current) science, as you understand it? Is it plausible? Does Conway adequately prove that she is correct?
3. Leaving aside her conception of God, how would it change your understanding of the world to accept Conway's metaphysics *of nature*?
4. Focus on Chapter 3, §8 and Chapter 4, §1. Does God create all creations at one time or one after the other? (Don't just parrot back Conway's answer...try to understand what she is really saying.) Compare this account to Spinoza's account of the creation of particular things, particularly in *Ethics* I, P28. Who has the better account of the creation of particular things? Why?
5. In Chapter 5, §3, Conway argues that "a mediator [Christ, or the logos] is necessary by the very nature of things." How does she argue for the necessity of this mediator? Is the absence of a mediator a flaw in the philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza? Does it strengthen or weaken her overall metaphysics? Does it solve problems or create them (or both)?
6. At this point in the book, what are the most attractive and appealing aspects of Conway's account? What philosophical problems, if any, does her metaphysics *solve*?

7. At this point in the book, what are the least attractive and appealing aspects of Conway's account? What new philosophical problems, if any, does her metaphysics *raise*?

### While Rereading:

1. When rereading, refine your answers to the reading questions above.
2. In addition, I encourage you to work on putting together a comparison of Conway with Descartes and Spinoza. Consider the topics below, and others that come to mind.
  - a) Nature of substance
  - b) Number of substance(s)
  - c) Relationship between things
    - i. Between God and created things
    - ii. Between one created thing and another
  - d) Nature of time and temporality
  - e) Knowledge (how do we gain knowledge? What *is* knowledge?)
  - f) The nature of freedom
  - g) The nature of God (including divine freedom)
  - h) How philosophers should deal with diversity/pluralism
  - i) The ultimate goal of human life
3. Finally, I encourage you, on this rereading, to pay attention to clues as to Conway's epistemology. What is the nature of knowledge? What are the best sources of knowledge? How does Conway defend her own views? (Through mathematical-style, "a priori," arguments? Through empirical evidence? In some other way?)

### After Reading:

1. Step back and look at your comparison of Descartes, Spinoza, and Conway; and at your answers to questions 6 and 7 above. As you compare these philosophers, which of the three visions of the universe would you ascribe to, if you had to choose one of these three? Then try to develop your own vision of the universe that preserves what is good about the one you endorse, but that corrects its defects.
2. What are the main elements of Conway's view that you find confusing?
3. What would you like to hear more about? What aspects of her metaphysics are appealing but underdeveloped? If you could tell her what to write about for the rest of the book, what would you tell her to discuss?

## Conway's Principles, Chapters 6-9.

### Before Reading:

Consider a few questions that Conway will answer in the course of this reading. Think about your own answers to these questions. (And do think about them...don't just flip through them unreflectively.)

1. Can one individual be changed into another, either of the same or a different species? In what sense can individual things "change"? In what sense do *you* change? In what sense do you stay the same?
2. How does your mind relate to your body?
3. When another person, or even an animal, trips and falls, I (and I presume you) flinch. I can empathize with other people and feel with and for them. What is going on when I do that? How is it possible?
4. What is the point of suffering? *Is* there a point? (Keep in mind that Conway suffered intensely throughout her whole life. This was a very salient issue for her.)
5. Where did you – that is, your mind or soul – come from? More importantly, what will be your ultimate end? (E.g., will you just cease to exist when your body dies?)
  - a. Now assume that there is an afterlife, as so many world religions posit. If you were to believe in the afterlife, what's the most plausible conception of the afterlife? What kind of afterlife do/could you believe in?
6. What difference do/would any of your answers to any of these questions make for how you live your life?

### While Reading

1. As you read through these additional sections, expand your comparison of Conway, Descartes, and Spinoza. Before you start reading Chapter 9, fill in as much of this comparison as possible.
2. Question 1 from the pre-reading questions is addressed early in this reading. What is Conway's answer? What is her *reason* for her answer? Are you convinced? Do you have a better account of individual identity (that is, of the way in which one thing is what it is)?

3. Much of this reading addresses question 2 in the context of an overarching metaphysics. What is Conway's account of the nature of mind and body? How can they interact/relate to each other? Is her approach better than Descartes's? Better than Spinoza's? What's sensible, and what's weird, about her view?
4. **Before you start reading chapter 9**, fill out as much of you can in terms of comparing Conway with Descartes and Spinoza and then try to formulate a couple of key objections, from her perspective, against each of those philosophers. As you read chapter 9, clearly lay out at least one key objection of Conway's against each of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes (who was a bare materialist).

### While Rereading

1. Before you start rereading these chapters, go back to the last §'s of chapters 4 and 5. In both of these, Conway says that the highest point creatures can reach is to be "like Christ" or "achieve perfect union with Christ." This can sound like a very Christian ethic, but Conway's Christianity is heavily inflected with Jewish mysticism and elements from other religious traditions. As you reread the chapters for today, reread them with an eye towards Conway's ethics. What do these readings teach us about how to live an excellent life?
2. Relatedly, recall that Conway died relatively young (at age 48) after a life of excruciating headaches, the loss of her son, and other miseries. How might the metaphysics she describes here help one confront suffering and death? Is this just a pleasant fantasy, or a realistic metaphysics that gives meaning and perspective to life?
3. Also, again, you should pay attention to what you can learn about Conway's epistemology as you reread. What role do a priori arguments play? What role does experience play? What other kinds of support does she provide for her views?
4. Finally, use this rereading to refine your account of how Conway's views relate to those of Descartes and Spinoza.

### After Reading

1. Go back to your prereading questions. Does Conway provide better answers to these questions than your initial answers? Upon reading Conway, do you see the questions in a new way? Have you improved your own answers to them?

2. Step back and look at your comparison of Descartes, Spinoza, and Conway. As you compare these philosophers, which of the three visions of the universe would you ascribe to, if you had to choose one of these three? Then try to develop your own vision of the universe that preserves what is good about the one you endorse, but that corrects its defects.
3. What are the main elements of Conway's view that you find confusing?
4. What would you like to hear more about? What aspects of her metaphysics are appealing but underdeveloped? If you could tell her what to write about for a sequel, what would you tell her to discuss? If you had to write that sequel, what would you write?