

A Metaphysical Basis for Love?

Descartes, Spinoza, and Conway on the Metaphysics of Love: DRAFT

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In this chapter, I investigate a concept of love drawn from Descartes, which I will call “Cartesian love.” Cartesian love, as I use the term, has three distinguishing features. First, it is grounded in rationalist metaphysics. Descartes famously compares all of philosophy to a “tree,” where “the roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences,” including “morals” (IXB:14-15ⁱ). While I argue below that Descartes is unsuccessful in grounding love in his rationalist metaphysics, his account of love shows up most prominently in contexts where he transitions from the physical trunk of his system to its ethical fruit by means of analyses of human passions. Second, Cartesian love is a holistic attitude defined as joining oneself with another “in such a way that we imagine a whole of which we think ourselves to be only one part and the thing loved another” (IX:387). Finally, love is “useful” for living a good human life (IV: 290). For Descartes, love of God remains a central form of love, but there is a shift in emphasis towards a broader love, one within which love towards and amongst creatures is prominent.ⁱⁱ

This chapter investigates three broadly Cartesian philosophers on this Cartesian love. René Descartes sets the framework for discussion but ultimately falls short because the unity constitutive of love is inconsistent with core features of his metaphysics. Baruch Spinoza develops a rationalist system within which metaphysical unity amongst finite substances is a fundamental reality, which seems tailor-made for Cartesian love. Once he individuates distinct ethical agents, however, Spinozist love ends up even more deeply egoist, and strikingly even less holist, than Descartes’s. Finally, in the thought of Anne Conway, one finds Platonically-inspired rationalist metaphysics supporting genuine Cartesian love.ⁱⁱⁱ For Conway, there is a single created substance (as in Spinoza), but her principle of individuation avoids the narrowly egoist motivations present in both Descartes and Spinoza and preserves a metaphysical connection amongst distinct finite things that manifests in mutual sympathy; she thereby provides a twofold rationalist metaphysical basis for genuine Cartesian love.

1. Descartes: A Metaphysical Basis for Love?

In “Learning to Love,” I argued that the best way to integrate Descartes’s altruist account of love with his egoist account of the passions hinged on a “practical” rather than a metaphysical argument, according to which “it makes sense from the agent’s own point of view ... to progress

... [from] an egoist love ... into a morally rich, self-sacrificial love” (Frierson 2002:314).^{iv} In both his *Passions of the Soul* and his correspondence with Elizabeth and Chanut, Descartes defines love as the willing consideration of oneself as part of a whole and treats it as an important part of a philosophy that grounds ethical claims on metaphysical ones. In my earlier essay, I argued that this metaphysical defense of love is predicated not on the *truth* of the lover’s consideration of herself as part of a whole, but on the *practical value* of that consideration. In that sense, while Descartes articulates an influential conception of love and an ambition to derive it metaphysically, he does not satisfy that ambition. In this section, I briefly outline the nature of Cartesian love and show problems with attempted metaphysical defenses of it; this sets the stage for further discussion of Cartesian love in Spinoza and Conway.

The holist nature and ethical importance of Cartesian love are clearly articulated in Descartes’s correspondence and *Passions of the Soul*. In a 1645 letter to Elizabeth, he insists that “one must ... think that one ... is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society and this family” (IV:291-3). In his next letter to Elizabeth, he identifies this attitude with “the Christian virtue which we call charity [*charité*]” (IV:309). Then, in a letter to Chanut he slightly revises this into what becomes his standard definition of love:

It is the the nature of love [*l’amour*] to make one consider oneself and the object loved as a single whole of which one is but a part; and to transfer the care one previously took of oneself to the preservation of the whole. (IV:611; cf. IV:308; IX:387)

Descartes connects this love to ethics, identifying it with the Christian virtue of charity and introducing it to Elizabeth as a “truth” “most useful” “to discern the best course in all actions of life” (IV:291).

Beyond holism and ethical relevance, the final component of Cartesian love is metaphysical grounding; Descartes’s approach to love initially seems promising in this regard. He claims about both his moral theory in general (IXB:14-15) and love in particular (IV:612-13) that they are grounded in his metaphysics. He describes as “metaphysical thoughts” (IV:613) his explanation of the nature of love, and his description of “useful” truth starts with two core claims of his metaphysics – God’s existence and the soul’s nature (IV:490; cf. *Meditations* VII:1-2) – before turning to a key provision of his physics and then, finally, to his claim about love. The *Passions of the Soul*, in which he finally publishes his definition of love, proceeds from a metaphysics of mind and body through a physiological treatment of passions to a description of their nature, and Descartes explicitly describes the work as that of “a natural philosopher” (XI:326). Cartesian love *seems* solidly grounded in Descartes’s rationalist metaphysics.

Despite this appearance, however, it is unclear precisely what metaphysical basis Descartes’s exhortation to love actually has. For Descartes, each individual is a unity of mind and body. One’s mind is an independent thinking substance that can persist without the body,

and even without anything other than that power by which God sustains all things: “my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing ... I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it” (VII:78). While this argument is focused on the essential independence of mind from body, it is based on the premise that “everything that I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created ... so as to correspond with my understanding of it” (VII:78). Given this premise, the second Meditation – in which one can think of one’s own existence without the existence of any other thing – implies that one’s thinking soul is metaphysically distinct from every other thing. Moreover, whereas the union between mind and body has metaphysical reality (see VII:81), there is no metaphysically real union amongst different human minds. Except in the superficial sense that one can consider the collection of all things to be a “whole,” human beings are not, metaphysically, parts of a greater metaphysical whole.

There are several metaphysical resources in Descartes from which one might try to justify Cartesian love. One approach would be to emphasize the metaphysical unity amongst material things. While each *soul* is a separate substance, the *material* universe is a single interconnected whole. Thus my body is in fact a part of a greater whole. Because my mind is substantially united to my body, there could be a sort of transitive metaphysical unity. I am united with my body, and my body is really and metaphysically united with the rest of the universe (including other people’s bodies), so I am really and metaphysically united with the rest of the universe. This approach, unfortunately, suffers from several problems. First, it fails to take seriously an even more “useful ... thing that it is necessary to know,” which is “the nature of our mind, insofar as it subsists without the body and is much more noble than it and capable of enjoying ... contentments not found in this life,” which truth “detaches our affection from things of the world” (IV:292). Despite the importance of mind-body unity, Descartes ultimately emphasizes, even for discerning “the best course in all actions of life,” the priority of soul over body. Metaphysical unity amongst bodies cannot justify a love of soul for those bodies.^v Secondly, even for bodily passions, Descartes identifies both the origin and purpose of the passions with the preservation of the specific body to which one’s individual soul is united: “the function of the ... passions” is “to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect” (XI:430). While the body might be metaphysically united with the rest of the physical world, the purpose of passions (including love) is to preserve the integrity of the particular part of the world to which one’s soul is united. What metaphysical unity there might be provides no basis for a Cartesian passion of love.

A second metaphysical approach to defending Cartesian love would be through the consideration that “whenever we are inquiring whether the works of God are perfect, we ought to look at the whole universe, not just at one created thing” (VII:55-56).^{vi} In its context – the Fourth Meditation – Descartes uses this claim to defend God’s goodness in the light of the fact that humans are susceptible to cognitive error. While God could have made us “more perfect” and even such that we never erred,

I cannot deny that there may in some way be more perfection in the universe as a whole because some of its parts are not immune from error ... And I have no right to complain that the role God wished me to undertake in the world is not the principal one of the most perfect of all. (VII:61)

Just as I can reconcile the goodness of God with my capacity for sin and error based on a consideration of the fact that my imperfections may contribute to the perfection of the whole, so too, one might think, I can justify love on the grounds of promoting same “perfection in the universe as a whole.” However, Descartes account of motivation distinguishes two kinds of goodness, the “goodness of each thing ... in itself” and “goodness ... in relation to ourselves,” where “we should not consider anything as good, in relation to ourselves, unless we either possess it or have the power to acquire it” (V:82). Even if, in the abstract, one can recognize goodness in the universe as a whole (VII:55-6, 61; IV:291-2, 609), there is no metaphysical basis for considering this goodness to “relate to oneself.” Despite his exhortation to *consider* oneself part of a whole, in fact “each of us is a person distinct from others” (IV:293).

One way in which one might try to give motivational force to the consideration of the universe as a whole is by means of the love of God. Carole Wee, drawing on these passages from the Fourth Meditation, argues,

the Cartesian ethical agent sees the agent as embodying a God-enacted order. Far from being alienated from the universe, she recognizes herself to be a part of this wider order, fulfilling a specific function within the overall whole. (Wee 2002:262-3)

For Wee, the Cartesian agent who understands that the universe is God’s creation “accepts that the good of the larger whole must take precedence over his own good” (Wee 2002:264). As Descartes puts it in a letter to Chanut, “we [can] love God and through him unite ourselves willingly to all the things he has created” (V:56). Likewise, I have argued that once “Descartes ... establish[es] that a rational individual will love God, he has an independent basis for loving others” because, as Descartes puts it to Elizabeth, “abandoning himself altogether to God’s will, he strips himself of his own interests and has no other passion than to do what he thinks pleasing to God” (Frierson 2002: 336; IV:294; cf. V:56).

This otherwise promising metaphysical route to Cartesian love suffers from two weaknesses, however. First and most basically, it depends upon metaphysically justifying the love of God. In an early letter to Elizabeth, Descartes suggests that God’s perfection is sufficient to justify such love: “Since the true object of love is perfection, when we elevate our minds to considering God as He is, we will find ourselves naturally ... inclined to love him” (IV:291-2). However, if things’ perfection were sufficient to justify love, Descartes could directly argue for love of finite things based on their perfection rather than via love of God. His distinction between what is good in itself and what is good in relation to oneself undermines this quick

argument. God is perfect, but also distinct from me, so treating myself and God as two parts of a whole is unjustified. In fact, love of God actually seems *harder* to justify than love for other things, for a reason that Descartes himself highlights as a “strong reason for doubting that one can love God by the power of the natural light alone” (IV:607), namely that God’s attributes are “so high above us that we do not see at all how they can be fitting for us and so we do not join ourselves to them willingly” (IV:607).^{vii} Whereas other creatures might legitimately be considered part of a metaphysical whole that shares the status of having been created and governed by God, God is so metaphysically greater than us that we cannot coherently think of ourselves alongside God as parts of a single metaphysical whole. Descartes does think that there is a “way to reach the love of God,” but his argument for this requires that we “consider ... that our soul’s nature resembles his sufficiently for us to believe that it is an emanation of his supreme intelligence, a ‘breath of divine spirit’” (IV:608); this metaphysical similarity makes it possible to consider ourselves as parts of a whole of which God is also a part. But Descartes’s resort to poetic language is informative here, as is the language of “emanation,” which he never uses in his metaphysics and even expressly rejects in an early letter to Mersenne (see I:152). According to the metaphysics laid out in his *Discourse*, *Meditations*, and *Principles*, human beings are thinking substances, created by and dependent upon but essentially distinct from God. There is no metaphysical basis for a *Cartesian* love of God.

Finally, even if one could justify the love of God, this would provide at best an *indirect* metaphysical basis for Cartesian love of other people and things. I would treat myself and another thing as parts of a common whole not from the mere recognition that we *are* parts of a common whole, but from the desire to do what is pleasing to God. It is only “through him” that we “unite ourselves willingly to all the things he has created” (V:56). Thus the metaphysical unity that we *posit* with other things would be illusory, a voluntary adoption of a stance towards other things justified not directly as metaphysically true but only indirectly as a way of better loving God.

Ultimately, the best defense of Cartesian love within Descartes’s metaphysics is, like this unsuccessful theistic approach, indirect. While Wee, and at times Descartes himself, argue indirectly for a love of others via the necessity of loving God, Descartes also offers a defense of love in terms of the structure of human passions and the best hope for experiencing joy and happiness in life. The clearest and most concise explanation of this argument comes in a letter to Elizabeth:

If we think only of ourselves alone, we can enjoy only those goods that are particular to us. On the other hand, if we consider ourselves as part of some other body, we participate as well in the goods held in common, without being deprived of those that are proper to ourselves. It is not the same with the evils. For according to philosophy, evil is nothing real but only a privation. (IV:308)

This argument rests on one important metaphysical claim, that evil is mere privation, a claim to which Descartes *is* committed in his broader metaphysics (see especially VII:54-5). The argument is also based, indirectly, on claims about the nature of human enjoyment defended in Descartes's *Passions of the Soul*, where he argues that "joy" involves any "consideration of a present good ... when the good ... is one that we regard as belonging to us" (IXB:376). If joy arises whenever we consider a good as belonging to oneself, one should want to consider oneself joined with more goods in order to experience more joy.^{viii} This does not, of course, show that one is *in fact* part of a greater whole, nor does it show how (psychologically) one could come to consider oneself part of such a whole. But it provides a motivation for wanting to love others. While this justification is grounded in Descartes's account of human passions and motivation, which emerge from his physics and ultimately from his account of mind-body unity, it is fundamentally a practical argument for love, one at best indirectly metaphysical.

This practical argument for Cartesian love gives an agent reasons to consider herself to be part of a whole without providing any metaphysical justification for the claim that she *is* part of a whole. While not a complete abdication of the rationalist metaphysical project, these arguments involve a sort of noble lie. Cartesian love calls for adopting attitudes towards the world that are at odds with how that world really is; we treat ourselves as united with others, when in fact we are distinct substances. This prompts the question of whether a rationalist metaphysical approach to love might not do better. Is there a metaphysics that can more *directly* support Cartesian love, one that not only justifies *considering* ourselves part of a whole, but shows this consideration to be *true*?

2. Baruch Spinoza: Metaphysical Basis without Unifying Love.

Despite his criticisms of Descartes's conception of love as "very obscure" (III, Def. 6, Explanation), Spinoza's metaphysics actually seems well suited to metaphysically defend Cartesian love. For Spinoza, there is only one single substance: "There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God [or Nature^{ix}]" (I, 14). All "things that are finite and have a determinate existence" are merely *modes* or affections of the single substance of the universe (II, Def 7). Such modes are of some "attribute" of substance, where an attribute is "that which the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence" (I, Def 4). In keeping with his Cartesianism, the only attributes of which humans have knowledge are "thought" and "extension" (II, Prop. 1, 2). Reality, then, exists as a physical universe that takes up space (extension) and as a realm of thought, something like a space of reasons that consists solely of ideas. Each individual mode is a way that extension or thought is. The universal law of gravitation is an infinite mode of extension, an unchanging and general way that the physical universe is. A specific rock is a determinate finite mode of extension, a way that extension is in a particular time and place. A human body, like a rock, is nothing other than a determinate finite mode of extension. And the human mind, for Spinoza, "is basically nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing" (II, Prop 11); in particular, it is the specific idea within the

realm of ideas that represents the specific mode of extension that is the human body. As a mind, I am just one idea in a network of ideas that constitutes the single substance of the universe. As a body, I am just one mode of spatial extension in a network of spatial extension that constitutes the single substance of the universe. Holist metaphysics is true. As Amelie Rorty has put it, “The world is composed wholly and entirely of particular individuals so interrelated that they form a complex individual, a unified system” (Rorty 2009: 66). To go back to our definition of Cartesian love, I literally *am* “only one part” of that complex individual, where “the thing loved [is] another” (IX: 387).

This metaphysics seemingly provides a direct rationalist route to Cartesian love. One might think that as I better understand the truth, I would become more Cartesianly loving. If love consists in considering myself part of a greater whole, and in fact I am part of a greater whole, increased knowledge of this fact should necessitate increased love. Arne Naess, in his bold appropriation of Spinoza in the service of a holist environmental ethics, takes just this route.^x And Spinoza partly endorses this short argument for Cartesian love, pointing out that “love arises from the third kind of knowledge,” where knowledge “of the third kind” is rationally intuited understanding of necessary features of the universe (see V, 42 Proof; II, 40-44; V, 24). Strikingly, however, the “love” *Spinoza* emphasizes is love of *God*, not love of other individual things; and this love of God turns out to be only a form of self-love, one that does not extend to loving particular others as fellow parts of the divine whole.

To see why the direct Spinozist argument for love is erroneous, we must consider in more detail the nature of the loving agent. From the perspective of the universe, individual human beings are merely finite modes of a single substance; but this does not explain how each individual human being considers *herself*. While all individual things are merely modes of a single substance, modes are individuated as distinct things with distinct essences, ends, and motivations. Humans’ individuation is based on their physical bodies: “in order to determine the difference between the human mind and others ..., we have to know the nature of its object..., that is, the nature of the human body” (II, 13, Sch, p. 72). For Spinoza, “bodies are individual things which are distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest” (II, 13, Lemma 3 Proof, p. 73). The simplest bodies – “atoms” in the classical sense – are distinguished simply by persisting relative motion. An extended region within which no part moves relative to another is an individual atom. For more complex composite things, what matters is that the “bodies composing an individual thing...keep the same mutual relation” in a more general sense (II, 13 Lemma 6, p. 75). Spinoza’s account here is imprecise, but persistent “motion and rest” for complex things like human bodies means something like the enduring patterns or structures of a thing. Phenomena such as replacement of parts (II, 13, Lemma 4, p. 74), growth or diminution (lemma 5, p. 75), and movement relative to other complex individual (lemmas 6-7, p. 75) are consistent with an individual remaining the same individual. As Spinoza puts it, “a composite individual can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature” (II, 13, Lemma 7, Scholium, p. 75).^{xi} For a human being, what it means to be a distinct individual is that there is a coherent

complex structure of interacting parts that retain their patterns of mutual interaction over time and through various incidental changes of parts.^{xii} Because of this capacity of the human body to remain a selfsame individual while undergoing various changes, “the human mind is capable of perceiving great many things” (II, 14). As the body changes while remaining the same body, the idea of that body changes, and these changes *of* the idea are represented *by* the idea – the mind – as perceptions of (other) things.

While this account of the human individual leads to Spinoza’s epistemology and philosophy of mind, what is central here is that he ascribes to each person a distinct essence consisting of the unique patterns of motion and rest that constitute what is unchanging about that person’s bodily structure. When Spinoza turns to “the origin and nature of emotions” (III), he introduces a crucial extension of this concept of individual essences, the *conatus*: “The *conatus* with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself” (III, 7). Self-preservation is intrinsic to each individual’s essence:

the definition [or essence] of anything affirms, and does not negate, the thing’s essence ... So as long as we are attending to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we can find nothing in it which can destroy it... Each thing ... endeavors to persist in its own being. (III, 4 Proof, 5)

Conatus refers to the internal tendency of each thing to persist as the thing that it is.^{xiii} While proportion of motion and rest distinguishes things qualitatively in terms of their essential properties, *conatus* distinguishes them numerically in terms of a particular striving to maintain that essence in a particular space and time.^{xiv} Spinoza then orients his account of emotions around self-preservation. The primary postulate of his emotion theory is that “The human body can be affected in many ways by which its power of activity is increased or diminished; and also in many other ways which neither increase nor diminish its power of activity” (III, Postulate 1). As changes in one’s state of mind, emotions are ascribed to the fact that “whatsoever increases or diminishes...the power of activity of our body, the idea of said thing increases or diminishes ... the power of thought of our mind” (III, 11). “Pleasure” is nothing other than “the passive transition of the mind to a state of greater perfection” and “pain” is “the passive transition of the mind to a state of less perfection,” where “perfection” refers simply to the power of activity or thought (III, 11 Scholium). Emotions are the consciousness in thought of changes to the body that either increase or decrease its capacity to remain in active existence in the world. Emotions are thus essentially egoistic in the narrowest sense; one and all, they communicate to us what is good or bad *for our own preservation*. Love, too, is straightforwardly egoist: “Love is merely pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (III, 13, Scholium). Its object is “whatever increases or assists the body’s power of activity” (III, 19 Proof, cf. III, 42 Proof). Rorty explains that implications of this for interpersonal relationships; one who loves another “will attempt to control [him] so that those aspects of his character that enhance her are strengthened, those that debilitate [her] are weakened” (Rorty 2009: 68). A metaphysics that seemed so promising for Cartesian love devolves into egoism.^{xv}

There are two ways Spinoza *seems* to get beyond mere egoism. Most basically, there is the love of God. Spinoza claims that rational knowledge gives rise to the love of God (V, 42 Proof, p. 223) and given that “God” here refers to Reality as such, one might – as Arne Naess did – take this to refer to a concern for the good of the whole universe, over and above one’s own narrow interest (Naess 1977, cf. Rorty 2009). For Spinoza, however, the love of God is *not* a concern for the well-being of the whole, but rather a pleasure in a specific *kind* of personal well-being. “The mind judges nothing else to be to its advantage except what conduces to understanding” (IV, 26) because true understanding involves no individual thing distinct from our own reason: “the essence of reason is nothing other than our mind insofar as it clearly and distinctly understands” (IV, 26 Proof). To understand truths of reason is to be pre-eminently active and free from the influence of external things. But “the highest object that the mind can understand is God,” so “the mind’s highest good is the knowledge of God” (IV, 28 Proof). When we “love God,” we feel pleasure at the expression of self-sufficient agency involved in rationality; our love of God is a love of an object of knowledge that is accessible to us independent of other goods (cf. Nadler 2017; Rorty 2009:70-79). Spinoza raises the stakes on this even further in the final sections of the *Ethics*, when he argues that “there is necessarily in God an idea which expresses the essence of this or that human body under a form of eternity” and that *this* idea is what is eternal in the human mind (V, 22). Insofar as we come to know God through pure reason, we exercise and identify with that in our mind which does not depend upon durational existence; the love of God is really, for Spinoza, a feeling of pleasure in the extent to which our essence is independent of contingent existence; love of God is ultimately a pleasure in self-preservation.

A second place that Spinoza might seem to embrace genuinely non-egoist love is when he discusses the relations amongst human beings, where he suggests that we can “unite in friendship” with other people and insists that “the good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of humankind” (IV, Appendix 26; Proposition 37). He develops an account of the value of “living in society” and being part of a greater social structure of which one is a single part (IV, Appendix 14). As Rorty says,

The more narrowly defined is an individual’s conception of her boundaries, the more readily is she overcome by the vast number of external forces. But the more broadly she identifies herself with other free rational minds, the more actively powerful she becomes: Her nature is not then bounded by, but agrees with others. (Rorty 2009: 78^{xvi})

Even in this context, however, Spinoza’s arguments for cooperation with other human beings usually are *narrowly* egoistic in a Hobbesian way. Society provides a context for “mutual aid” (IV appx 28), so that “the principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us to be in close relationship with men” (IV, 37, Scholium 1) because “if he dwells among individuals who are in harmony with man’s nature, by that very fact his power of activity will be assisted and fostered” (IV appendix #7). Even the strong exhortation to “act in such a way as serves to strengthen friendship,”^{xvii} is so strong because “it is before all things useful to men to associate their ways of

life” (IV, Appendix#12). Moreover, because other people are subject to emotions that can threaten our well-being, we require a “civil state where good and bad are decided by common agreement and everyone is bound to obey the state” (IV, 37 Scholium 2).

At times, Spinoza seems to argue for a less instrumental and thereby somewhat less egoistic conception of the relationship between human beings. Because human reason – that which is most active and eternal in each of us – is a feature of human nature *as such*,

insofar as men live under the guidance of reason, to that extent ... do they necessarily do the things which are necessarily good for human nature [as such] and consequently for every single man, that is, which agree with the nature of every single man. (IV, 35 Proof)

Thus when he claims that “insofar as men live by the guidance of reason, they are most *useful* to man” (IV, 37 Proof, p. 173, emphasis added), this need not be a contingent Hobbesian claim about the instrumental value of other human beings, but could be an essential claim that what is for the good of human reason *as such* is for the good of *my* human reason. When we consider the identification of what is *truly* preserved in my being – my mind under a form of eternity – with my reason, this suggests that there is room for a genuine concern for the development of reason in others, not merely as a tool for the promotion of my own reason, but as a *form* of my own reason, as something we share in common in which I can take pleasure and even, in some eternal sense, participate.^{xviii}

Unfortunately, Spinoza does not adequately develop this aspect of his social and political theory. In the *Ethics*, his summary of the “right way of living” treats “other individuals of the same species” and in particular “a man who is guided by reason” as that than which “there is nothing more advantageous to man for preserving his own being,” that is, as instrumental goods towards one’s self-preservation (IV Appx 8-9, p. 197). In his *Political Treatise*, too, he relies on his Hobbesian defense of the value of political community and reemphasizes “the universal effort of all men after self-preservation” and the fact that “everything whatever, as far as in it lies, strives to preserve its own existence” (*Political Treatise* [PT], III.18, II.6) and even that “the freer [and more rational] we conceived man to be, the more we should be forced to maintain that he must of necessity preserve his own existence” (PT II.7). We join into communities of mutual self-constraint only because “men are naturally enemies ... whom I must ... be on my guard against ... [t]o which must be added, that without mutual help men can hardly support life and cultivate the mind” (PT II.14-15). In this *Treatise*, then, Spinoza abandons any *intrinsic* community with others, instead justifying community via individual self-interest. Unlike his appeal to shared human essence, his Hobbesian approach fits well with the important role for his ethical and motivational theory of individual essences, and especially the conatus by which each individual seeks to preserve herself.

Even were the more other-directed theory of human essence developed and made consistent with the rest of his metaphysics, however, it would not adequately provide the desired

metaphysical defense of Cartesian love. First, it treats others not as parts of a whole but as goods of a common kind. We ultimately love others for their similarity to us, not because we and they are part of something greater. Second, it remains deeply egoist in the sense that what is valuable about others is precisely what they contribute to our own – even if eternal – self-preservation. And finally, the scope of love within this account is overly narrow. While it is not entirely clear how he can defend them given his metaphysics, Spinoza’s account draws sharp lines between human and non-human essences. He says, for instance, that “Except for mankind, we know of no individual thing in Nature in whose mind we can rejoice, and with which we can unite in friendship or some kind of close tie” (IV, Appendix #26), explicitly relegating all other things – including the “horse” for which Descartes argued we can feel affection (IX:390) – to the state of mere tools: “whatever there is in Nature external to man, regard for our own advantage ... teaches us to preserve or destroy it according to its varying usefulness” (IV, Appendix #26).

Ultimately, despite his holistic metaphysics, Spinoza’s account of individual human beings remains – like Descartes’s – fundamentally egoist. Individual persons can be motivated only by what they take to be conducive to their own preservation and increased power. However *true* it may be that each of us is only a part of a greater whole, we remain incapable of taking an *interest* in that whole except insofar as it contributes to our personal welfare. Thus we cannot deliberately sacrifice ourselves for the greater whole. While Descartes failed to give a metaphysical grounding but was able to provide practical reasons for love, Spinoza provides metaphysical unity amongst things but without any way to connect this metaphysical fact with individuals’ psychological interests. Cartesian love is, on Spinoza’s account, psychologically impossible.

3. Anne Conway: A Metaphysics of Love

In some respects, Anne Conway (1631-79) is an odd figure to include in this chapter. While she engaged early in her philosophical education with Descartes’s *Principles* (see Coudert and Corse, xv), which she studied through correspondence with the English Cartesian Henry More, she was – like More – a fierce critic of core aspects of Descartes’s philosophy, particularly his dualism between mind and body, going so far as to call her view “anti-Cartesianism because of its fundamental principles” (IX.2). Moreover, she extended her critique to other broadly Cartesian philosophers, including Spinoza. However, like other “conciliatory eclectic[s],” she sought “a mixture of ancient and modern ideas,” testified by the title of her book – *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* – and by her ample incorporation of Neoplatonic and Kabbalistic influences into her engagement with Descartes and other early modern philosophers.^{xix} And she explicitly endorses the Cartesian principle that “whatever is correctly understood is most true and certain” (VI.4); and she regularly refers to her metaphysics as “proven” (III.4), “demonstrable” (V.2), or “necessary by the very nature of things” (V.3). With respect to love in particular, she establishes such love on the basis of the unity of created substance, the denial of which would be “superfluous” and such that “no argument can prove” it,

and on the possibility of universal sympathy, which follows from “a consideration of the infinite divisibility” of spatially extended things (VI.4; III.10).

Like Spinoza, Conway defends a unity of things “in virtue of their primary substance” (VII.3). And like Descartes, she explicitly defends metaphysically thick, unity-based love: “a certain universal love in all creatures for each other ... surely should follow from the same basic principle, that all things are one” (VII.3). One might expect Conway to affirm Spinoza’s substance monism, but she rejects it, “for [Spinoza] confounds God and his creatures and makes one being of both, all of which is diametrically opposed to our system” (IX.3). In place of monism, Conway posits exactly three “species of things ... which are distinguished from each other in terms of their substance or essence” (VI.4).^{xx} One must distinguish God from the created universe^{xxi} and posit a substantially distinct mediator between God and the universe, but when it comes to the created universe itself, her view is monist:

all creatures, or the whole of creation, are ... a single species in substance ..., although it includes many individuals gathered into subordinate species and distinguished from each other modally but not substantially.^{xxii} (VI.4)

Francesco La Nave has gone so far as to say that “*The central element* of Anne Conway’s philosophy is the participation of all things and created species in the same substance” (LaNave 2006:177). Prima facie, this monist view has all of the advantages that Spinoza seemed to have when it comes to defending Cartesian love, at least for other created things. If we literally *are* just parts of a single substance – the created universe – then loving others as fellow parts of a whole of which one is also a part is just conforming one’s love to the metaphysical truth.

For Spinoza, however, monism was insufficient for Cartesian love because there was not account of individuals that allowed a *motivationally-relevant* unity amongst distinct things. Fortunately, Conway improves on Spinoza’s monism in three important respects. She rejects *essential* differences amongst individuals, posits immortality and thus prevents self-preservation as motive, and develops a metaphysical account of “sympathy” amongst distinct created things.

First, not only are Conway’s individuals “not substantially” distinct; they also share “a single ... *essence*” (VI.4). Spinoza’s motivational theory based on *essential* differences made his *substance* monism insufficient to underwrite holist love. By contrast, after criticizing those who “maintain that all things are one substance” and thereby “confuse God and his creatures,” Conway turns to another category of philosophical error: “others ... who multiply specific entities into their own distinct essences and attributes almost to infinity” (VI.5). While this criticism would be particularly forceful against philosophers such as Leibniz, who posits infinite essentially distinct monads, both Spinoza and Descartes can also be included in its scope. Descartes’s substantial distinctions amongst human souls imply distinct essences for each distinct soul; Spinoza’s individuation by particular configurations of motion and rest multiplies *essences* – albeit not substances – to infinity.

Conway offers three criticisms of this multiplication of essences. The first is a form of Occam's razor. There are reasons why God, Christ, and created things must be essentially distinct, but any further distinction of essence is "superfluous" (IV.4).

Her second criticism is that if individual things differ in essence, their ability to self-perfect would be limited:

if a creature were entirely limited by its own individuality and totally constrained and confined within the very narrow boundaries of its own species ..., then no creature could attain further perfection and greater participation in divine goodness. (VI.5)

In Spinozist terms, if one's conatus is entirely to preserve one's individual essence, there is no way to become *fundamentally* more perfect. Any *essential* transformation for the better would be dissolution of one's "self" and the emergence of a new thing with a different essence. The only sense of "good" or "perfect" that would make sense to an individual is what preserves her as what she already is. As Conway rightly points out, it is hard to make sense of how even increased knowledge of the world, which Spinoza identifies with becoming wise, can be *self-perfecting*. If I am not already wise, and if what I am, I am essentially, then becoming wise is becoming a different person. In stark contrast, Conway's metaphysics distinguishes created things from the eternal and unchanging God precisely by our capacity to change, and especially to improve or degenerate. Given God's goodness and the created things' essentially changing nature, all things must be capable of increasing their perfection.^{xxiii}

the divine power, goodness, and wisdom has created good creatures so that they may continually and infinitely move towards the good through their own mutability ... And this is the nature of all creatures, namely that they be in continual motion or operation, which most certainly strives for their further good. (VI.6; cf. IX.7)

If creatures can continually self-perfect, it must be possible to change one's essence while remaining the self-same individual.

Beyond giving reason to reject distinct individual *essences*, self-perfection also provides an alternative principle of individuation. Without some such principle, one individual could not be said to love *another*. For Conway, however, the principle of individuation is entirely quantitative rather than qualitative. In part, she justifies individual unity physically:

the unity of spirits composing this central predominant spirit is firmer and more tenacious than that of other spirits ... This unity is so great that nothing can dissolve it ... Thus it happens that the soul of every human being will remain a whole soul for eternity. (VII.4)

Physical unity, however, is more basically grounded in a *moral* unity of each individual: "the soul of every human being will remain a whole soul for eternity ... *so that it may receive proper rewards for its labor*. The universal law of justice inscribed in everything requires this" (VII.4,

emphasis added). In order to justify and ground the unity of distinct individuals, Conway appeals to the “justice of God” (VI.7) and the need for individuals’ progress to be realized “through their own efforts” (IX.6). What it is to be an individual is to be a part of the single created world, one in substance and essence with every other part of that world, distinguished as the physical part of the universe one is by being held morally accountable for that part’s individual progress towards perfection.^{xxiv}

Conway’s third criticism of distinct individual essences is that drawing essential distinctions amongst created things would compromise the range of ways they “act and react upon each other” (VI.5). Many scholars emphasize this point in connection with Conway’s account of mind-body unity and her criticisms of Cartesian (and Morean) dualism (e.g. Broad 2002:70-75; Lascano 2013; Merchant 1979: 263). Essential distinctions amongst created things would also occlude the *sympathy* that Conway offers as the basis of adequate physics and the interconnections amongst substances are an important part of the Neoplatonic notion of harmonized plenitude to which Christia Mercer has drawn attention (e.g. Mercer 2012:115-6, 113). Any attempt to reduce all interactions between bodies to collisions fails to do justice to the true complexities of those interactions, particularly for the case of “sense and perception,” where treating these as “nothing but the mutual [local and mechanical] reaction of particular bodies” conceals how they are really spiritual-mental, “more noble and divine” (VII.4). Even cases we might think of as purely physical include actions-at-a-distance where internal properties of one thing exert on another thing forces that cannot be reduced to mere collisions but involve a “real unity of sympathy” amongst physically separate objects (VII.4). Developing a monistic metaphysics of sympathy adequate to explain natural sciences also provides just the support needed for Cartesian love.^{xxv}

Conway’s account of universal sympathy depends upon her insistence that all created things are a single substance, and also upon two further claims. First, she insists on vitalism: all material bodies are essentially extended and essentially “living” (cf. Merchant 1979). Whereas “Hobbes [and] Descartes”^{xxvi} see matter and body as “nothing except ... extension and impenetrability, which are merely ... the husk and shell, no[t] ... the kernel,” Conway’s “matter” includes perception and “life,” “a capacity for every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love,” which capacity is realized in all creatures “through their own efforts” (IX.6). Created things affect one another not only by changing each other’s shape or motion, but also through influences from and into one another’s life and perceptions. All things partake of “vital action,” a “virtual extension of the creature,” a “motion that proceeds from the proper life and will of a creature” and is “far more noble and divine ... than local motion” (IX.9). In visual perception, for example, vital motion “unites object and sight” though mutual sharing of vital activity wherein light emanates from the object and spirit emanates from the eye. Because there is more to matter than extension in motion, there are a wider range of possible influences than mere collision.^{xxvii}

Second, Conway supports universal sympathy through her view that created things are infinitely subdivided into distinct individuals, each a living and extended thing.^{xxviii} Because every created thing is extended, all such things are infinitely divisible: “the smallest particles of body or matter can be extended or divided in infinite ways” (III.9). Making a widely held Neoplatonic point, Conway argues that because God is infinitely perfect and powerful, God creates all that can be created:

Indifference of will has no place in God because it would be an imperfection ..., so that God must do whatever he does to and for his creatures ... [S]ince God is infinitely powerful, there can be no number of creatures to which he could not always add more, and ... he does as much as he can ... Thus it clearly follows that this creatures are infinite and created in an infinity of ways. (III.2-4)

This arguments’ details are less important here than its implications. The divisibility of the created universe implies that “an infinite number of creatures can be contained in and exist inside the smallest creatures and ... all of these could be bodies in their own way and mutually interpenetrable” (III.5). And where each living soul can share the “feeling, perception, knowledge, or even love” of every other, a universe of infinitely many individuals can be one of infinitely rich sympathy:

a consideration of ... infinite divisibility ... is ... of the very greatest use for understanding ... how all creatures from highest to lowest are inseparably united to one another by their subtler mediating parts, which come between them and which are emanations from one creature to another, through which they can act upon one another at the greatest distance. This is the basis of all the sympathy ... which occurs in creatures, and if these things are well understood by someone, he may easily see into the most secret and hidden causes of most things. (III.10)

Even while “a certain universal love in all creatures for each other” follows “from the basic principle that all things are one in terms of their primary substance” (VII.3; cf. VI.4), Conway adds a unity of all things that is not merely unity of substance or essence but an ever-interacting unity by means of intermediary parts.

Conway’s metaphysics grounds Cartesian love in three key claims. First and most basically, the entire created universe is a single substance with a single essence. This makes the consideration of oneself as part of a greater whole literally true, and it supports interacting with others as parts of that whole. Second, Conway’s rejection of a motivational theory focused narrowly on the preservation of one’s individual essence in favor of one emphasizing perfection towards the divine ideal of justice and love, particularly combined with her conception of a divine justice that punishes and rewards individuals, implies that the active promotion of what is best for other parts of the created universe can never ultimately harm one’s own highest goals.^{xxix} Finally, Conway’s account of infinite divisibility and living matter imply that each part of the

single created substance interacts with infinite other parts of that substance through sympathetic influence whereby, at best, each promotes the progress towards perfection of every other and thereby the progress of all. Loving others as parts of a whole of which one is also a part is not only a core aspect of one's ultimate striving towards perfection. It is also the natural consequence of the universal sympathy we can feel for each other created thing. And it is an affective appreciation of the literal, metaphysical truth: we really are all parts of a single substance striving for perfection together.

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ⁱ Throughout, references to Descartes’s works are to the volume and page number in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (revised edition, Paris Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964-76). References to Spinoza are to Part and Proposition in the *Ethics*, unless otherwise noted. References to Conway are to Chapter and Section of her *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*.

ⁱⁱ Tracing this shift in Descartes would reward further study; some (particularly Frigo 2016) have made important contributions to such study. The present chapter, however, focuses on Descartes’s concept of love with emphasis on love for finite things. For more on love of God in Spinoza and Conway, including its relation to love of fellow human beings, see e.g. Nadler 2017, Rorty 2009, and Mercer forthcoming. Moreover, while both Descartes and Spinoza discuss “love of virtue” (e.g. Descartes V:294; Spinoza IV, 60 Scholium), I focus here on the love that takes as objects such things as “a flower, bird, horse; ... persons ... [or] the supreme Deity” (IX:390).

ⁱⁱⁱ Two important caveats are called for here. First, while I argue that Conway develops a metaphysics that supports what I have called Cartesian love, I do *not* claim that she develops this metaphysics specifically in order to support Descartes’s account of love. Unlike Spinoza, who directly took on Descartes’s discussion of love and who saw himself as a sort of Cartesian, Conway does not directly address Descartes’s claims about love and explicitly rejects the label “Cartesian” for her own philosophy (see *Principles*, IX:2). Second, while I focus on Conway in this essay, some of my key claims could also apply to other philosophers, particularly Henry More and the neoplatonists of his circle. Advantages of Conway relative to those or other early modern alternatives are beyond the scope of this essay.

^{iv} While there has been considerable work in recent years on Descartes’s ethics (e.g., Frigo 2016; Rutherford 2013; Shapiro 1999, 2007, 2011; Svensson 2011, 2015; and Wee 2002) and on the *Passions of the Soul* more generally (see e.g. Rorty 1992, 2012), Alberto Frigo notes (Frigo 2016:1099n9) that the only recent detailed discussions of love in Descartes are Frierson 2002 and the editorial material in Kambouchner’s edition of Descartes and Chanut’s correspondence (Kambouchner 2013).

^v Relatedly, even if successful, this argument for love would establish only a love for others’ bodies, which could never rise to the Christian virtue of charity or even the love involved in true friendship.

^{vi} Frigo hints at this passage as an answer to my argument in Frierson 2002. See Frigo 2016: 1109n29.

Unfortunately, Frigo does not fully develop his provocative suggestion to “compare the letters of Elizabeth and some expressions of the *Fourth Meditation*” (ibid.), and I did not engage with this article until the final stages of preparation of the current chapter, so I cannot offer a full discussion of his suggestions in this chapter.

^{vii} Descartes adds another problem, that “nothing about God can be visualized by the imagination,” which is a problem only for the possibility of “sensuous love” (IV:607, 3:309) and which I will not discuss here.

^{viii} See too Frigo 2016. Frigo’s discussion of how Descartes reappropriates Scholastic notions of the “presence” of the thing loved helps support this overall account while situating it in a broader late medieval and early modern context.

^{ix} The equivalence of God and Nature is a core theme of Spinoza's *Ethics*. For the phrase "God, or Nature," see I, 29 Scholium, p. 52.

^x See Naess 1972, 1975, 1977.

^{xi} For discussions of Spinoza on finite modes, see Lin 2006 (which has a nice overview of other related secondary literature); Nadler 2002: 98-104; Pitts 2017.

^{xii} Cf. Nadler 2002:139-42; Schmitter 2010.

^{xiii} Recalling that composite things change while retaining their essence, Spinoza adds to this notion of self-preservation a notion of activity or perfection, where to be "active" is to be such that "something takes place ... through our nature" (III, Def 3). To exist as the thing that one is *is* to be active, so self-preservation is always also an effort towards increasing one's power of activity.

^{xiv} For a brief discussion of the distinction between quantitative and numerical identity, see Noonan and Curtis 2014. For an application to Spinoza, see Pitts 2017.

^{xv} For a helpful explanation of these and other problems with Spinozist love, see Bicknell 1998: 43-47.

^{xvi} Bicknell also emphasizes that "a constituent part of the self is its need for the society of others" and uses this to support an "expanded self" according to which "the 'self' of self-preservation refers not only to the individual, but also to those with whom ... he or she has a relationship" (Bicknell 1998:46; see too Wolfson 1934). Even Bicknell adds, however, that this "relationship" is one of "mutual benefit" (Bicknell 1998:46). But that suggests, as Spinoza later makes explicit, that the self of self-preservation really just is the particular individual; we promote the goods of others (friends and other members of communities of which we are a part), for Spinoza, *only* because of the benefits that such goods provide to oneself.

^{xvii} This passage, among others, is cited by Bicknell in support of her claim that "while friendship is a benefit to the individual, it is not motivated by or founded upon self-interest" (Bicknell 1998:52). As I make clear in this chapter, I do not think this reading of Spinoza is consistent with the majority of his texts (including this one).

^{xviii} These and related passages are emphasized by Bicknell 1998.

^{xix} For discussion of Neoplatonic elements of Conway's thought, see especially Mercer 2012 and Hutton 2004. For emphasis on Kabbalistic influences, see Coudert and Corse xviii-xxii; Broad 2002:73; and Merchant 1979. For an interesting discussion of Leibniz's placement of Conway at the center of a host of different philosophical approaches, see Schroeder 2007.

^{xx} While it is an important part of her overall metaphysics and sheds light on the unity of created things, a discussion of Conway's Trinitarianism and her conception of the mediating substance is beyond the scope of this essay.

^{xxi} Given the substantial distinction between created things and God, the nature of love for God is essentially different from that of love for other created things. For Conway, the basis of love is "that [things] are of one nature and substance *or ... that one has its being from another*" (VII.3, p. 46, emphasis added). Our love for God is of that second type.

^{xxii} As Christia Mercer points out, this emphasis on a "cosmic unity" that is filled with distinct individuals related to each other in myriad ways – what she calls "harmonized plenitude and enhancement" – fits with common Neoplatonic themes in early modern philosophy (Mercer 2012:112-3). The unity of substance goes even further in this direction that More did, and could also reflect Conway's engagement with the Kabbala (see Merchant 1979: 260). For discussion of Conway's Neoplatonism with specific reference to universal sympathy, see Mercer (forthcoming).

^{xxiii} For further discussion, see Duran 1989:69-70; LaNave 2006:178; Lascano 2013:331-2; Thomas 2018. Broad connects this point to the broader Neoplatonic emphasis on teleology in natural philosophy, an important feature of Conway's view that distinguishes it from both Descartes and Spinoza (see Broad 2002:81-4).

^{xxiv} On my reading, this *moral* basis for distinguishing individuals is fundamental to Conway's account of the identity of individual creatures over time. What it is to be the self-same individual over time is to be responsible for one's states over time, and we know that individuals persist over time because there must be responsible entities to experience progress or just (and restorative) punishment. My account leaves open the question of what the metaphysical ground of this persistence is, though I am more sympathetic with Emily Thomas's recent account (2018) than with Lopston's haecceity-based account (Lopston 1982).

^{xxv} Here I focus on the implications of sympathy for Cartesian love. Sympathy allows Conway to develop a richer *physics* than Descartes by allowing for a wider variety of physical forces, but discussion of that point is beyond the scope of this paper.

^{xxvi} Though it would not apply in the same way, her criticism can apply even to Spinoza, who describes "thought" and "extension" as essentially distinct attributes of his single substance, such that modes of thought (e.g., human minds) can neither affect nor be affected by modes of extension (e.g. human bodies).

^{xxvii} This aspect of her metaphysical basis of sympathy helps show the relevance of Conway's critique of mind-body dualism for her justification of Cartesian love. From the standpoint of Cartesian love, the central problem dualism raises is that the only possible source and the best possible object of love is the soul, but the only substantial unity with others is the unity of our extended bodies. Conway's ensoulment of matter allows her to extend metaphysical unity amongst bodies to souls, since souls just *are* bodies. But this same ensoulment helps her avoid the Hobbesian shallow materialism that would empty the material body of worthiness to be considered the source and proper object of true Cartesian love.

^{xxviii} Here she anticipates Leibniz's infinite monads, but without requiring that each individual be an essentially distinct substance.

^{xxix} This point could be made even more forcefully had I the time to discuss the role that "Christ" and the church play in Conway's metaphysics. For discussion, see Mercer (forthcoming).