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Priority Monism in Anne Conway: Mediation through the Whole

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There are passages of Conway's *Principles* that treat all of creation as one integrated substance, but others that treat creation as constituted by indefinitely many substances. Recent work attempts to assuage the tension between these possibilities by arguing that Conway is a priority monist about creation, while other work has pushed back on this position, holding that Conway is better interpreted as a straightforward pluralist. In defense of the priority monist reading, this paper entertains a radical thesis: that Conway's Christ is the most fundamental created substance of which all other created substances are proper parts. On this reading, Christ is identical to the whole of creation, despite Conway's commitment to substantial distinction between Christ and creatures on the basis of their mutability. While creatures are mutable for better and worse, Christ is only mutable toward the good. Since the proposed view identifies Christ with the mereological totality of created beings, it holds that the world is perpetually increasing in goodness, though any of its parts may intermittently deteriorate.

In recent years, there has been a growing debate over the nature of Anne Conway's fundamental ontology. In an insightful article, Gordon-Roth (2018) demonstrates that scholarship on Conway's metaphysics has failed to appreciate the extent to which there is disagreement over the number or cardinality of basic constituents of Conway's ontology. There are, in fact, two

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relevant debates. First, there is a question about how we can differentiate between the three most basic species of Conway's ontology: God, Christ, and creation. Conway is clear that these three species are substantially different from one another, and this difference is cashed out in terms of mutability. God is immutable, Christ is mutable toward the good, and creatures are mutable toward both good and evil (CC: 24, 5.3).[1] But beyond their being mutable, what is it that distinguishes these substances? Is Conway a type monist or a type trialist?[2] This is the first question relevant to the debate over basic ontology in Conway scholarship and is the question that Conway herself addresses most explicitly. While the view I discuss in this paper may have implications for answering this first question, my aim is to explore a possible answer to the following second question: putting aside God and Christ, how many substances should we expect to find when we count the created things in Conway's ontology? While the first question is about how many *types* of substances there are, the second question is about how many *created substances* there are.

There are several available answers to this question: none, one, and many. The first of these is obviously false. Not only does Conway's *Principles* (1690) entertain the existence of created substances throughout, but on philosophical grounds, ontological nihilism is incompatible with God's creative nature. According to Conway, it is in God's nature to create infinitely, leaving no possibility unactualized (CC: 9, 1.1; CC: 12, 2.4). The view that there are no created things amounts to a significant restriction on God's power. The other two answers, however, are much more plausible, and the text yields support for both. There are passages of the *Principles* that treat all of creation as one integrated substance, leading interpreters such as Mercer (2019) to hold that Conway understood each individual creature to be 'a mode of vitality and that the difference among them lies merely in how determinant each is as a way of expressing that vitality' (Mercer 2019: 52, note 10) and that 'the cosmos is a single unified thing' (Ibid., 59).[3] However, other passages of the *Principles* treat creation as constituted by indefinitely many substances, leading thinkers like Boyle (2006: 178) to characterize creation and all of its constituents as 'composed of a multitude of bodies and a multitude of spirits'.[4] Thus, neither the monist nor the pluralist option can be discarded with the same ease as ontological nihilism.

1. Citations of the *Principles* take this form, including page numbers in CC (the 1996 translation by Coudert and Corse), followed by chapter and section numbers. So, this reference is to *Principles* chapter 5, section 3, page 9.

2. For the former, see Lascano (2023, ch. 2). For the latter, see Boyle (2006) and Gordon-Roth (2018).

3. See also Hutton (2004) for another reading that emphasizes such passages, thus taking Conway as a monist about creation.

4. See also Loptson (1982); Head (2020: 159–64); and Grey (2023) for other readings that emphasize such passages, thus taking Conway as a pluralist about creation.

Thomas (2020) presents an intriguing way of dealing with this tension: Conway is a priority monist about creation, who thinks that any given created individual is ontologically dependent upon the whole of creation. While priority monism is a contentious and complicated view in contemporary metaphysics,[5] for present purposes, priority monism can be understood as the conjunction of two theses: (i) if a substance is a proper part of another substance which is an integrated whole, then that substantial proper part is ontologically dependent on the substantial integrated whole of which it is a proper part, and (ii) the totality of creation is a substantial integrated whole. On this reading, the most ontologically basic created substance is creation considered as an integrated whole, where each of its proper parts is some other created substance that ontologically depends on the whole of which it is a part. On Thomas's view, Conway's created ontology features many substances, but only one ontologically basic substance. A similar reading is endorsed by Lascano (2023, ch. 2), though her view is modified in some interesting ways which make it better characterized (at least, for my purposes) as a form of substance monism, as I discuss below. Grey (2023) responds to the priority monist reading with an argument in favor of the view that Conway is committed to the existence of many created substances and that these created substances should not be understood as dependent on the whole of creation.

Thus, there are a total of three options available to the interpreter of the *Principles*.[6] Call these options the following:

(i) *Substance monism*: There is one created substance (Lascano's view).
(ii) *Substance pluralism*: There are many created substances (Grey's view).
(iii) *Priority monism*: There is one fundamental created substance which has many other created substances as dependent proper parts (Thomas's view).

Though Lascano identifies her own view as a priority monist view, I have classified it as a substance monist view here, on the grounds that she understands individual creatures to be *both* modes and parts of a more fundamental, single created substance. I am concerned in this paper with the number of created *substances* in Conway's ontology, and Lascano's view ultimately counts only one substance. Though this view is structurally similar to priority monism, in that it holds individual creatures to be parts of created substance *and* holds individual creatures to be dependent on created substance, it does not fit the mold of priority monism (for the purposes of this paper) on the grounds that it regards individual creatures as modes. For my purposes, the priority monist interpreter of Conway holds that the whole of creation is a substance with infinitely many

5. See Schaffer (2010, 2012, 2013) and Horgan and Potrč (2012) for a start.

6. In fact, there are four, as Gordon-Roth (2018) presents a distinct view. While her view is interesting, I think Thomas (2020) effectively replies to it, so I elect not to include it here.

proper parts, each of which is also a substance.[7] Lascano's view, rather, is that the whole of creation is a substance with infinitely many proper parts, each of which is a mode of that substance.[8]

With this in mind, it is worth noting that substance pluralism is compatible with priority monism.[9] However, Grey's pluralist reading explicitly rejects the notion that all created substances are ontologically dependent on the whole of which they are parts. So, for present purposes, I treat substance pluralism and priority monism as opposed. Grey makes a strong case against the priority monist reading (as I outline below), and as such, I think nobody could be blamed for thinking that priority monism is on the ropes, so to speak, if not outright defeated. If one is well-motivated to accept a priority monist reading of Conway and one also finds Grey's objections convincing, one may therefore be in something of a desperate position. In that desperation, one may be willing to entertain options that otherwise appear too radical or out-of-step with received wisdom. In this paper, I offer precisely one such option. I argue that one way of saving the priority monist reading of Conway is by accepting the radical, speculative thesis that Conway's Christ is identical to the mereological totality of creatures, such that each individual creature is a proper part of Christ. I do not contend that the text makes such a reading obvious, but I hope to demonstrate that the text is far less opposed to this thesis than one might initially think. It may not be a natural reading, but it is an *available* reading and may be attractive on the grounds that it escapes the objections Grey offers against priority monist readings. Of course, there are elements of the *Principles* that are in tension with this reading. But, as I demonstrate below, this is true of any straightforward reading of the *Principles* which tries to develop a thoroughgoing answer to the question of how many substances there are in creation. What I offer here is thus a reading of the text that (like others) may

7. One could reasonably reject my classifications here on the grounds that the salient feature of priority monism has to do with the general priority of unity to variety, rather than the mereological characterization of that priority. This is fair enough, but I rest my case on the fact that I am counting *substances*. While Schaffer's (2010) original introduction of priority monism counts *objects* (and neglects technical teasing of the early modern term, 'substance'), his mereological casting of the view is what makes it interesting in other discussions of early modern thinkers. For instance, the mereological characterization of the priority relation is precisely what many scholars take issue with in analyzing Schaffer's attribution of the view to Spinoza, who surely did not hold that his one substance is *composed* of its modes. See Guigon (2012); Melamed (2021); and Costa (2021).

8. This is implied in the published version of this view by Lascano (2023), but some of the details, particularly those about individual creatures being *both* modes *and* parts of a single created substance come from Lascano's (2024) reply to Grey during an Author Meets Critics session at the January 2024 meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in New York, the materials for which are available on Lascano's website (www.strivingessences.com). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to these resources.

9. Though his discussion does not engage Conway, Guigon (2012) presents a helpful gloss of the relations between priority monism, substance (or existence) monism, and substance (or existence) pluralism.

be in tension with its precise letter, but in harmony with its spirit. I thus take it as my task to show that Conway's *Principles* is compatible with a reading according to which Christ is identified with the mereological totality of created things.

In §1, I review some elements of the existing debate and highlight the opposing passages of the *Principles* that lead to the tension between monism and pluralism. §2 explains how the priority monist reading purports to harmonize these passages, explains Grey's objections, and concludes by explaining how an identification of Christ with the mereological totality of creatures might overcome those objections. §3 searches the *Principles* for an understanding of the key roles and features of Christ in Conway's system and explains how these can be grasped on an acceptance of the proposed view. In §4, I wrestle with some passages from the *Principles* that present apparent tensions with the proposed view.

1. Pluralism, Priority Monism, and Problems

In the following passage, Conway clearly rejects ontological nihilism about the created world while laying the groundwork for her refutation of Hobbesianism and Spinozism:[10]

> [God] is also in a true and real sense an essence or substance distinct from his creatures, although not divided or separate from them but present in everything most closely and intimately in the highest degree. Nevertheless, they are not parts of him or changeable into him, just as he is not changeable into them. He himself is also in a true and real sense the creator of all things, who not only gives them form and figure, but also essence, life, body, and whatever good they have. (CC: 9, 1.3)

The passage establishes that creatures are explicitly barred from being God's parts. We might even take this passage as locutionary evidence of a substance pluralist reading, given that it refers to created beings in the plural, as does most of Conway's discussion of creation. But, of course, this tendency could simply be for the sake of linguistic simplicity; regular conversation generally takes place in a framework that accepts the existence of a plurality of objects, so the fact that Conway commutes this kind of language to discussion of created substances is perhaps not revealing about her philosophical commitments. Further, the existence of many *creatures* may not entail the existence of many created *substances*. Some members of this plurality of creatures may occupy a different ontological category than substances (hints of which we will see below). Still,

10. See Pugliese (2019) for a discussion of this refutation.

there are credible theoretical reasons for thinking that Conway is committed to substance pluralism about creation.

In arguing for the pluralist reading, Grey points out that Conway explicates the distinctions between God, Christ, and creatures in terms of mutability:

> Therefore there are three kinds of being. The first is altogether immutable. The second can only change toward the good, so that which is good by its very nature can become better. The third kind is that which, although it was good by its very nature, is nevertheless able to change from good to good as well as from good to evil. The first and last of these three kinds are opposites. The second is the natural medium between them, through which the extremes are united… (CC: 24, 5.3)

The first two (types of) substances are, according to Grey, 'unique: there is only one token of each type. The third type is identified variously with creatures' (Grey 2023: 4). Grey thinks there are many tokens of the third type because there appear to be many individual creatures that satisfy Conway's description of the type. For Grey, this passage (among others) indicates that to be a created substance is to 'be a moral subject capable of changing either for the better or for the worse' (Ibid.). And Conway's text seems to treat many individuals as capable of doing so. For instance, to accommodate her doctrine that there are no species-boundaries on a created individual's ability to change,[11] Conway holds that moral punishments must respect uniqueness of individual essence.

It is important for Conway that, though some individual might be able to change from one species to another, no individual could possibly become a different individual:

> For example, if one man could change into another, namely Paul into Judas or Judas into Paul, then he who sinned would not be punished for that sin but another in his stead who was innocent and virtuous. Thus a righteous man would not receive the reward of his virtue but another steeped in vice. But if we suppose that one righteous man is changed into another, as Paul into Peter and Peter into Paul, then Paul would surely not receive his proper reward but that of Peter, nor would Peter receive his but that of Paul. This confusion would not suit the wisdom of God. (CC: 29, 6.2)

This demonstrates that the proper subjects of moral evaluation are individuals: Paul, Judas, and Peter. The implication is that each of these individuals is a

11. See Bender (2022).

created substance, since a created substance is just 'a moral subject capable of changing either for the better or for the worse' (Grey 2023: 4). Since individual objects like Paul, Judas, and Peter are substances, Conway seems to be an existence pluralist about creation.

But this is hard to square with certain other passages which seem to explicitly endorse the notion that creation is one substance. For instance, when explicating the unity of God and the similar unity of Christ, Conway notes that

> all creatures, or the whole of creation, are also a single species in substance or essence, although it includes many individuals gathered into subordinate species and distinguished from each other modally but not substantially or essentially. (CC: 31, 6.4)

Conway points further in this direction in the subsequent chapter, where she again explicates that there is a unity of created things that exhibits a singularity of substance:

> [I]n whatever way bodies or spirits may be divided or separated from each other throughout the universe, they always remain united in this separation since the whole creation is always just one substance or entity, and there is no vacuum in it…. There exists a general unity of all creatures one with another such that no one can be separated from his fellow creatures. (CC: 52, 7.4)

Together, these passages certainly give the impression that Conway thought of creation as a single substance, and that individuals (like Paul, Judas, and Peter) are its modes.[12]

So, we are now in a difficult position. Conway appears to be committed both to the multiplicity of substances in creation and to the substantial unity of creation. This is ultimately what has driven Thomas to put forward the priority monist reading, to which the next section is dedicated. The priority monist reading is a clever way to work around the tension between monistic and pluralistic passages about creation, but objections from Grey (2023) show some difficulties even with this view. Thus, in the next section, I explain the priority monist view, Grey's objections to it, and how an adoption of the striking thesis that Christ is identical to the mereological totality of creaturely individuals might circumvent those objections.

12. Such a monist reading does not contradict Conway's refutation of Spinoza. Conway rejects Spinozism because she takes it to identify creatures with God. See Pugliese (2019). The view expressed in *Principles* 6.4 and 7.4 holds that creatures are modes of a single *created* substance (i.e., not God). More on this below (see especially note 28).

2. Christ Saves… Priority Monism from Objections

If Conway is a priority monist, then since creatures are proper parts of creation, such individuals are dependent upon the whole of creation. This view accords with the monistic reading of Conway since it holds that there is a single fundamental created substance. Creation considered as a whole depends on no other created substances, and is thus (in a sense) singular. On the other hand, individuals like Peter, Paul, Judas, and any others are dependent upon the whole of which they are parts. Thus, while these individuals are substances, they are ontologically dependent upon, and therefore less fundamental than, creation considered as a whole. According to Thomas, '[p]riority monism agrees with existence pluralism that many things exist. However, priority monism agrees with existence monism that the universe is, in an important sense, one' (Thomas 2020: 281). Thomas thinks this dual agreement makes priority monism the right view for making sense of Conway's contrasting commitments about the cardinality of created beings.

In support of this reading, Thomas points to the following passage, where Conway appears to discuss the totality of creation as the ground of other created individuals:

> God has implanted a certain universal sympathy and mutual love into his creatures so that they are all members of one body… for whom there is one common Father, namely, God in Christ or the word incarnate. There is also one mother, that unique substance or entity from which all things have come forth, and of which they are the real parts and members. (CC: 31, 6.4)

This passage appears to endorse the view that the parts of creation 'come forth' from the unique substance that is the whole of creation. In conjunction with the aforementioned passages treating creation as a single substance, it is easy to see how priority monism makes sense of the text. If the proper parts of creation are ontologically dependent upon (i.e., come forth from) creation as a whole, then it makes sense to be committed to the view that creation is a singular substance (where 'substance' emphasizes ontological fundamentality) that is composed of many substances (where 'substance' emphasizes ontological distinctness).

Still, Grey holds that the relevant question as to the truth of priority monism in Conway is 'the question of whether each created individual asymmetrically depends upon the whole created world' (Grey 2023: 10). Grey outlines two possible ways to understand this asymmetrical dependence: (i) necessary existential dependence, where '*a* ontologically depends on *b* just when *a* could not exist without *b*' (Ibid.), and (ii) essential dependence, where 'one thing ontologically

depends on another just when the first thing could not be what it is without the second thing being what *it* is' (Ibid.). So, for the priority monist reading to work, it must be the case that either (i) creation could exist without any given creature, but no creature could exist without the whole of creation, or (ii) the essence of creation involves no individual creature, but the essence of each creature involves the created world. According to Grey, both options are doomed to conflict with some of Conway's metaphysical commitments.

The existentialist reading contravenes Conway's commitment to the view that 'God is a necessary agent and that he does everything he can do' (CC: 16, 3.4). Grey explains the implication that 'if it is possible that Peter exists, then God can create Peter. However… Conway holds that if God can create something, he must create it. Therefore, if God can create Peter, then he must do so—that is, it is necessary that Peter exists' (Ibid., 12). So, there are no existing creatures that might not have existed. In other words, the existence of any given individual creature is just as necessary as the existence of the whole world. Thus, it cannot be true that the created world could exist without any given creature: 'While it is true that each particular creature is necessarily existentially dependent upon the whole of creation, the dependence is not asymmetrical' (Ibid.). Peter could not exist without the rest of the created world, but the totality of the created world could not exist without Peter. This calls the existential priority of the whole of creation into question.

The essentialist reading runs up against Conway's commitments about the shared essence of all created individuals. Recall from above that 'all creatures, or the whole of creation, are also a single species in substance or essence' (CC: 31, 6.4). Grey takes this to mean that all created individuals share the same essence: the essence of any created individual is just that it is created. This is why created individuals can change subordinate species (e.g., horses turn into human beings, in accordance with the doctrine of radical mutability), but they themselves cannot ever change into Christ or God.[13] The essence of any given created being is that it is mutable with respect to both good and bad. Thus, the essence of a created individual depends on some conception of the good. According to Grey, this is why Christ is the mediating substance between God and creatures. Christ represents the conception of the good in terms of which the essence of creatures can be conceived; in this way, the essence of creatures depends on the essence of Christ. For the essentialist version of priority monism to be the right reading of Conway, it would have to be the case that the essence of all created individuals somehow also depends on the essence of the whole of creation: 'Adding a further chain of mediation here (from Christ to the whole of creation to this or that individual creature) seems neither necessary nor desirable, given this picture' (Grey 2023: 12).

13. This is spelled out in *Principles* 5. See Bender (2022).

For a priority monist interpretation to work, it must be shown either that the ontological dependence of creaturely individuals on the whole of creation is asymmetric, or that there is some reason for thinking that the relation between God and any individual creaturely essence is mediated by the whole of creation. As such, Grey suggests that the pluralist reading is better, so long as we read passages seeming to endorse monism as instead endorsing an intricate causal interconnectedness in creation, rather than a genuine substantial unity. I purport to show that Grey's objections to the priority monist reading can be answered by an acceptance of the view that Conway's Christ is numerically identical to the whole of creation. I call this the 'Christocentric priority monist' (hereafter, CPM) reading. For present purposes, I intend to leave Grey's objections to existentialist priority monist readings alone. While I think that there may be some available strategies for dealing with Grey's existential objection,[14] the CPM thesis bears more clearly on the essentialist priority monist possibility, so that is where I focus my attention.

All created individuals share in the same general essence: they are capable of improvement and degeneration. Grey is right to hold that this means the essences of created individuals are necessarily tied up with Conway's conception of the good. This conception of the good is rooted in God and (insofar as it can be exemplified by a mutable being) is exemplified by Christ, who changes only for the better. Thus, the essence of any given created individual involves and depends on the essence of Christ. Grey points out that for the essentialist priority monist reading to work, there must be room in this system for the essence of every created individual to be similarly dependent on the essence of the whole of creation. Not only is textual evidence for this lacking, but this would just be a further link in the chain of mediation, to which Conway is generally opposed on ontological and aesthetic grounds (CC: 30, 6.4). But this is only a further link in the chain if the whole of creation is numerically distinct from Christ. If one adopts the view that Christ is the mereological sum of created individuals, then one will also accept that the essence of the *whole* of creation just is the essence of Christ. So, holding that the essences of created individuals depend on the essence of the whole of creation does not imply a further mediating being between Christ and creatures. On this reading, created individuals do essentially depend upon the essence of the whole of creation, but this is just another way of saying that they depend on the essence of Christ, which is uncontroversial.

14. Since Grey's objection to the existentialist priority monist reading points out that it requires a dependence asymmetry between a given creature and the whole of creation, I see a possible strategy in showing that entailment relations do not track priority in dependence relations. See Fine (1995: 271) and Correia (2008). Paul's existence may entail the existence of the whole of creation, even though the whole of creation does not depend on Paul. More space and time are needed to develop the details of how such a response might work.

Grey's objection to an essentialist construal of the priority monist reading is therefore successfully overcome by an adoption of the CPM thesis. As such, reading Conway as a priority monist is viable, so long as one is willing to accept the identification of Christ and the whole of creation. But of course, demonstrating that an acceptance of this thesis overcomes objections is a far cry from demonstrating that this thesis coheres with Conway's system. That is a much more difficult and intricate task. In the next section, I take on this task and try to show that the CPM thesis respects Christ's many roles in Conway's system. §4 is then dedicated to addressing some of the ways the *Principles* resists a CPM reading.

3. Christ as the Whole of Creation

Conway's first explicit mention of Christ outlines that 'all creatures were created at the same time, especially if one considers the Messiah or Christ, who is the first born of all creatures, through whom all things are said to have been made, as John[15] declares…' (CC: 21, 4.1). This establishes Christ as the most fundamental being following from God, and it is through Christ that all other things follow from God. Additionally, this passage links the terms 'Christ' and 'Messiah', revealing that the associated concept has shown up prior to *Principles* 4.1.

Appended to the first chapter of the *Principles* is a short collection of annotations that transpose the structure of the hitherto revealed metaphysics into the framework of Lurianic Kabbalah. These annotations spell out Conway's system in terms of *tzimtzum* [צמצום], the Kabbalistic doctrine that God's act of creation begins with a diminishing of God's light in order to make a space or void for creatures.[16] These annotations are somewhat out of step with the majority of the *Principles.* While Conway was surely influenced by her contact with Kabbalism, these annotations both exaggerate and outright invent connections between it and Conway's way of thinking. This is because these annotations were likely not written by Conway. Reid (2020) quite decisively demonstrates that certain portions of the *Principles*—at least, as it has been handed down to us—are not original to the text, but were rather added by an editor or editors (likely either Francis Mercery van Helmont or Christian Knorr von Rosenroth) in the intermediate years between Conway's death (1679) and the book's publication (1690). These annotations are very likely among such additions.[17] For this reason, it is important that a reader of Conway not take these as indubitable representations of

15. A reference to John 1:3.

16. For a brief historical gloss on the *tzimtzum* doctrine, see Garb (2020: 50–60).

17. Reid does not engage with these annotations in detail, but focuses on other similar pieces of the text. His arguments apply relatively well to these annotations too. See also Hutton (2004: 166–71).

Conway's view. However, this does not mean that these annotations cannot be informative. After all, both van Helmont and Knorr were personally and intellectually acquainted with Conway, especially so in the case of the former. They likely knew her views well. Of course, this does not mean that their amendments to the text correctly explicate Conway's thought, but it is worth keeping in mind that the annotations are extrapolations of the text that represent some of the ways in which the earliest interpreters of Conway's philosophy understood it.

What I want to pull from these annotations is a commitment to a particular relation between Christ and individual creatures. In particular, I think they understand creatures to be 'in' the Messiah—contained by the Messiah—in some sense. The reason I focus on the annotations to begin is because this is where the 'containment' relation is most explicit. But importantly, there are passages of the *Principles* outside these annotations that similarly support Conway's commitment to such a relation between Christ and individual creatures, which I discuss below. If the annotations were the only reason for reading this relation in Conway, then this assertion would surely be on shaky ground. Fortunately, while the annotations are where the relation is most prominent, we will see that it comes up elsewhere too.[18]

The annotations tell us that the void or space created by God for creatures 'was not a privation or non-being but an actual place of diminished light, which was the soul of the Messiah… who filled this entire space' (CC: 10, 1.A3). This shows that the annotator understands Conway's Christ as something like the very being of the space that creatures occupy. The following annotation is likewise illuminating: 'This soul of the Messiah was united with the entire divine light, which remained in the void to a lesser degree, so that it could be tolerated. This soul and light constituted one entity' (CC: 11, 1.A4). Though cryptic, this passage seems to explain that God's presence in the world is possible due to Christ's existence, which mediates the divine presence. Lastly, the following annotation connects the doctrine to creatures: 'This Messiah (called *logos* or the word and the first-born son of God) made from within himself (the diminution of his light having recently occurred for the convenience of the creatures) the succession of all the creatures' (CC: 11, 1.A5). Hence, creatures are created by God through the Messiah and—in combination with the two prior annotations—creatures exist in the Messiah. If we take seriously these annotations (and Conway's later association of 'Messiah' and 'Christ' in *Principles* 4.1), then we should accept the notion that creatures exist in Christ.

Moving away from the suspect annotations, Conway's commitment to this relation of containment between Christ and creatures is only further confirmed

18. There are, however, passages that warn against reading Conway as accepting the relevant containment relation. I address this in §4.

when she imparts that 'all things are contained in [Christ] and have their existence in him, because they arise from him just like branches from a root, so that they remain forever in him in a certain way' (CC: 22, 4.3). There is a sense in which this passage may warn against treating the containment relation as a parthood relation: branches are not parts of the roots from which they arise. We might thus think that creatures are similarly not parts of that from which they arise. But the Latin text reveals a qualification that this translation obscures: '*… quod in ipso omnia consistant, sive suam habeant existentiam, quodque ex ipso exorta sint tanquam rami a radice, ita tamen ut semper permaneant in eo certo quodam modo*'. In this passage, *tamen* should be translated as 'yet' or 'however', such that Conway respects the limitations of the root/branch metaphor. Thus, the following translation (from 1692)[19] better reflects the meaning of the Latin: '…in [Christ] all Things are said to consist or have their Existence; for that they did arise from him as Branches from the Root; yet so as that they still remain in him after a certain manner' (Conway 1692: 32). This translation draws attention to the fact that Conway is aware that the metaphor fails to capture a specific feature of the relation between Christ and creatures. Creatures arise from Christ as branches do from a root, but in such a way that maintains their status as existing 'in' Christ. Thus, understanding the containment relation as a parthood relation is not precluded by this passage, so long as this parthood relation is understood as also involving a dependence of the parts on the whole. In fact, this might help to make sense of the final phrase from this quotation, '*in eo certo quodam modo*', respectively translated as 'in a certain way' and 'in a certain manner'. The particular way, or manner, or *modus*, in which things exist in Christ may be as parts.

Conway invokes the Messiah again in *Principles* 3.7, where she notes that '[w]hatever [God] does for creatures is done through the Messiah, who is not limitless like *Aensoph*' (CC: 18, 3.7). This coheres with Conway's claim from *Principles* 4.1 that Christ is ontologically prior to creatures, but ontologically dependent on God. As Christ is an emanation of God,[20] it makes good sense that Christ will not feature the same immensity that is to be found in God. Later on, Conway explains, a bit differently, that '[t]he existence of such a mediator is as demonstrable as the existence of God, as long as such a being is understood to be of a lesser nature than God and yet of a greater and more excellent nature than all remaining creatures' (CC: 24, 5.2). Accordingly, in essence or nature, Christ exists somehow between God and creatures. After all, 'creatures could not be equal to Christ nor of the same nature because his nature could never degenerate

19. Though the *Principles* was originally written in English, it was first published in 1690 in Latin translation. The original English text is lost to us. However, in 1692, the Latin text was translated into English by an individual, 'J. C.' On the identity of J. C., see Nicolson (1992: 453) and Reid (2020).

20. See Bender (2022) for a helpful explication of emanation in Conway.

like theirs and change from good into bad' (CC: 22, 4.4). So, like creatures, Christ is mutable. But, like God, Christ is forever good. In fact, since Christ's nature is mutable only toward the good, Christ is perpetually in a state of improvement, continually becoming more like God.

So far, we have confirmed two things about Conway's Christ: all created individuals exist in Christ and Christ perpetually changes for the better. Two further features must be expounded, both of which are suggested by the aforementioned passages. First, not only are creatures in Christ, but Christ is in creatures. Lastly, Christ is, in an important sense, the first created being.

In general, containment relations are not symmetrical: if x contains y, it is usually safe to infer that y does not contain x. But Conway tells us that '… if [Christ] were not present everywhere in all creatures, there would be an utter chasm and gap between God and creatures in which God would not exist' (CC: 26, 5.4). So, Conway seems to think both that all creatures exist in Christ and that Christ exists in all creatures. Taking the asymmetry of containment relations seriously, the right account of Christ must make sense of the notion that Christ stands in (at least) two distinct containment relations to created individuals: one running from Christ to creatures, the other running from creatures to Christ.

Finally, we have already seen that Conway calls Christ 'the first born of all creatures' in *Principles* 4.1.[21] Similar commitments are expressed in *Principles* 4.3 ('Christ is called the first of all created beings' and 'first born of all sons'), 5.4 ('first creation'), 6.4 ('first of all'),[22] and 6.5 ('first-born son of God'). The terminology Conway employs when referring to Christ often gives the impression that she thinks of Christ as some idiosyncratic or special kind of creature. This is explicitly confirmed as Conway explains that

> because that mediator is far more excellent in terms of its own nature than all the other created beings which we call creatures, it is rightly called the first born of all creatures and the son of God rather than a creature of God. And he comes into existence by generation or emanation from God rather than by creation strictly speaking, although according to a broader meaning and use of this word he can be said to have been created or formed, as the Scriptures say about him somewhere. (CC: 25, 5.4)

Since creatures (the narrower category, excluding Christ) are produced by God through Christ, but Christ is produced immediately, it seems that the origins of Christ and creatures (the narrower category) are distinguished by degree of

21. And she does so several more times in *Principles* 5.

22. '…*omnium primus*…'. Coudert and Corse translate this as 'first of all creatures', but I elect not to include the final English word, as no forms of '*creatura*' or related Latin words appear in the relevant clause.

mediacy from God. Though Christ is produced immediately and creatures (the narrower category) are produced mediately through Christ, all things which follow from God belong to some broader category of creature, simply by virtue of having been produced by God.

Whatever theories are presented about the ontological status of Christ in Conway thus must respect at least these requirements:

(i) Christ is mutable perpetually toward the good.
(ii) Creatures are contained in Christ.
(iii) Christ is (in some other sense) contained in creatures.
(iv) Christ is ontologically prior to (or more immediately related to God than) creatures.

Fortunately, the proposed CPM interpretation does respect these four requirements, though for at least some of the four, demonstrating this requires some nuance.

One might bristle at the notion that the mereological sum of created individuals can meet the first requirement. After all, it is in the nature of created individuals to be mutable with respect to both improvement and deterioration. If the mereological sum of created individuals has parts that can deteriorate, we might want to cast doubt on the notion that the mereological sum of created individuals perpetually improves. This worry is understandable but is also straightforwardly fallacious. The inference from 'some or all of the parts of *x* have feature *y*' to '*x* has feature *y*' is notoriously invalid. Thus, from the fact that some of its parts deteriorate, one cannot infer that the created universe deteriorates. In accordance with passages like the following, Head (2017) interprets Conway as thinking that the universe itself is in an undying upswing toward greater moral goodness:

> For nature always works toward the greater perfection of subtlety and spirituality since this is the most natural property of every operation and motion. For all motion wears away and divides a thing and thus makes it subtle and spiritual. In the human body, for example, food and drink are first changed into chyle and blood, and afterwards into spirits, which are nothing but blood brought to perfection. These spirits, whether good or bad, always advance to greater subtlety and spirituality. (CC: 61–62, 8.5)

Head (2017: 284–86) connects this thesis about universal improvement to Conway's theory of divine punishment as a source of universal soteriology, but this passage expresses in naturalistic terms the thesis that, though its parts may fluctuate, nature itself always improves. If this is correct, then an identification of Christ with the mereological sum of creatures is only further corroborated.

These three substances are distinguished on the basis of their mutability: God is immutable, Christ is mutable toward the good, and creatures are mutable toward both good and evil. But if the mereological sum of created individuals perpetually improves, then it does not seem to be distinguished from Christ on grounds of mutability. Only its parts—creatures—are mutable toward good and evil, not the mereological sum itself. If the whole universe perpetually improves, then the whole universe is not distinguished from Christ on the basis of mutability. This is strong evidence for an identification of Christ with the mereological sum of creatures.[23]

As for the second requirement, that creatures are contained in Christ, it is natural to treat parthood relations as a species of containment relations. That is, where x and y are concrete objects, it is natural to hold that if x is a proper part of y, then y contains x. Thus, since all creatures are proper parts of creation, it is natural to hold that the whole of creation contains all created individuals. And since, as we have seen, there is a good case that Conway understands all created individuals to be contained in Christ, identifying Christ and the mereological sum of all created individuals respects this requirement. But what of the third requirement? If created individuals are contained in Christ by being proper parts, in what sense can it be said that Christ is contained in those proper parts?

Ultimately, Christ is in creatures insofar as each creature's status and character are causally dependent on the whole of creation. That is, the proper parts of the universe depend on the universe not only to *be*, but also to *be the way that they are*. The character or status of any given part of the universe is a function of the causal relations in which that part stands to all other proper parts of the universe. This second containment relation which accounts for the character and status of creatures can be illuminated by Conway's conception of creaturely geometric shape. Though her account of shape is intricate and deserves its own dedicated treatment, one particular element of it is relevant to priority monism. For Conway, a creature's 'figure' is characterized by an interaction of two principles: an internal image levied by its spiritual parts and forces impressed by external creatures:

23. One could resist this with recourse to modality: Christ is of a kind that *necessarily* always improves, while the improvement of the whole of creation seems more like a contingent fact arising from the relations that hold between its parts, all of which either improve or deteriorate. Thus, Christ and the whole of creation are distinguished by virtue of the modal status of their moral improvement. While this is a possible reading, it does not seem especially motivated by the text. The *Principles* makes a distinction between substances on the basis of their mutability, not on the basis of the modal status of their mutability. Additionally, there does not seem to be any reason to think that the moral improvement of the whole of creation is contingent. Of course, the moral improvement of its parts is contingent, but to assume that the improvement of the whole of creation is also contingent on this basis is again to commit a fallacy of composition.

> In every visible creature there is body and spirit, or a more active principle and a more passive principle…. Moreover, spirit is light or the eye looking at its own proper image, and the body is the darkness which receives this image…. Just as every spirit needs a body to receive and reflect its image, it also needs a body to retain the image…. And whatever spirit is strongest and has the strongest image or idea… [that spirit] forms a body as similar as possible to its image. And thus every creature receives its external shape. (CC: 38–39, 6.11)[24]

This passage explains that a creature's shape is a result of its strongest spiritual parts forming its more bodily parts in accordance with the image or idea internal to the spiritual parts (further confirmed by *Principles* 6.7). The mechanics of this determination are spelled out in Conway's discussions of spiritual extension (CC: 49, 7.3), impenetrability (CC: 49–52, 7.4), and the role that shape plays in grounding vitalism (CC: 66–67, 9.6–9.8). But most relevant here is that the creature's more active parts determine the creature's figure.

Conway is also committed to the notion that a creature's shape is determined by its interactions with other creatures as a result of material impenetrability. Because creatures cannot co-locate (CC: 50, 7.4), they necessarily determine one another to different positions, shapes, and motions:

> Clearly, this is the cause of all those motions which we see in the world when one thing moves another, namely that the two are impenetrable, in the sense already explained. For were it not for this impenetrability, one creature could scarcely move another because they would not oppose or resist each other in any way…. Thus we see how this impenetrability causes the existence of this motion and produces it. (CC: 57, 8.1)

Impenetrability is what leads to creatures engaging in locomotion. When one creature collides against another, they resist each other (in accordance with the figures determined by their active parts), thus forcing one another to occupy separate spaces and often causing one or the other to move. Given a plenum physics, according to which there is no empty space or vacuum separating creatures from direct contact with immediately contiguous bodies (CC: 52, 7.4), an implication of this impenetrability is that the shape and motion of any given creature is a determinant of surrounding creatures. Every creature is thus in some way causally related to every other creature and is causally related to itself insofar as its active parts determine its figure. In other words, the shape and

24. The original is muddled with Conway's understanding of Galenic reproduction, which I omit for relevance.

motion of any given creature is a function of its relation to the whole created universe.

I therefore agree with Grey that creation is a causally integrated system, where the status and character of all creatures are intricately interconnected. The whole created universe determines any given creature to be this way or that. And this is how I propose the CPM reader should understand Christ as contained in every creature. If a creature's motion and shape are determined by the whole of creation, then an identification of Christ with the whole of creation implies that Christ determines every creature's motion and shape. This containment relation is clearly distinct from the parthood relation that characterizes the inverse containment relation, and it is one that coheres well with the text:

> [T]here is a certain mutuality between creatures in giving and receiving, through which one supports another so that one cannot live without the other. What creature in the entire universe can be found which does not need its fellow creatures? Certainly none. Consequently, every creature which has any life, sense, or motion must be multiple or numerous; indeed, from the perspective of every created intellect, it must be numerous without number or infinite. (CC: 55, 7.4)

Every creature partially determines itself and every other creature. Thus, the second and third requirements are met: creatures are contained in Christ insofar as they are proper parts of the whole of creation, and Christ is contained in every creature insofar as they are determined by the total system of which they are proper parts.

One might worry here that this account sounds deterministic: if every creature is determined to be the way that it is by Christ, how can it be that creatures have freedom of indifference?[25] This is a reasonable worry, but one that can be dispelled by an examination of the two ways in which creatures are determined: a creature is determined *by itself* (consistent with *Principles* 6.11, quoted above) insofar as it has dominant spiritual parts which impose a figure on its more bodily parts in accordance with an image internal to those spiritual parts. In other words, the creature is self-determining insofar as its active parts confer upon it a certain figure. Of course, this is only part of the story, since the creatures that surround it and are in immediate contact with it also mechanically impose upon the creature, such that its figure and disposition conform to theirs. Thus, since the creature is partially determined by every other creature *and* is partially determined by itself, Christ determines it in being the totality of

25. Conway is clear that creatures *do* have freedom of indifference in *Principles* 3.1, for instance.

all creatures. Christ's determination of any given creature to be the way that it is *involves* that creature's self-determination (since on the proposed view, the creature is itself a part of Christ). Creatures maintain indifference of will on this view in virtue of the fact that each creature's more spiritual parts are capable of partially determining its status by imposing an image on its bodily parts. But since the creature is a part of Christ, this self-determination partially contributes to Christ's determination of the creature.

This brings us to the final requirement: that Christ is more immediately related to God than creatures are—or rather, that Christ may properly be considered the first in the broader category of creature. This is the requirement for which the proposed view most easily accounts. The priority monist holds that any given created individual is ontologically dependent on the mereological sum of created individuals. A conjunction of priority monism with the identification of Christ and the mereological sum of created individuals thus necessitates that all created individuals are ontologically dependent upon Christ. The ontological priority of Christ is, more or less, baked into the view.

Thus, each of these four requirements is met by the proposal that Christ is identical to the whole of creation, where the whole of creation is taken to be ontologically prior to each of its proper parts. Not only does this make sense of Conway's most basic commitments about the ontological status of Christ, but it also opens new avenues for exploring Conway's understanding of Christ as a mediator. Christ's role in mediating between God and created individuals can be understood strictly in mereological and causal terms: the being of any given creature is grounded in its standing as a part of Christ, and the mechanical status of any given creature is grounded in its causal relations to its own parts and to every other part of creation. But of course, there are passages in the *Principles* that are ostensibly opposed to the proposed view, so I now turn to those.

4. Not To Be Confounded

Conway's *Principles* is, at least apparently, in tension with itself over the number of created substances there are. Any view of Conway's ontology on the matter of counting created substances will be haunted by passages that either cannot be made to cohere with the view or cannot be made to cohere *comfortably* with the view. For instance, the substance pluralist like Grey will struggle with some of the passages already quoted above, like this one from *Principles* 7.4:

> [I]n whatever way bodies or spirits may be divided or separated from each other throughout the universe, they always remain united in this

> separation since the whole creation is always just one substance or entity, and there is no vacuum in it…. There exists a general unity of all creatures one with another such that no one can be separated from his fellow creatures. (CC: 52, 7.4)

This passage clearly refers to all of creation as a single substance, emphasizing the unity it has in virtue of the deep integration among all its parts. For this reason, Grey reads this passage (and others like it) as simply emphasizing this unity, using the vocabulary of 'substance' loosely enough that we ought not to take it as ontologically committing in this instance. The substance pluralist view is thus only viable to whatever extent one buys into this rationalization of Conway's vocabulary in such passages.

The same is true for the substance monist, like Lascano. The substance monist must explain how we can make sense of Conway's classification of a created substance as that which has the ability 'to change from good to good as well as from good to evil' (CC: 24, 5.3), but then also her description of individual creatures as engaging in just such kinds of change (e.g., Peter, Paul, and Judas). If substance monism is true, then Conway's understanding of created substances as those things which are capable of changing for both good and evil needs to be qualified in some way that is not explicit solely from the text, nor strictly comfortable with it. And similarly, a straightforward priority monist reading like Thomas's will need to offer some explanation of essential or existential asymmetry between the whole of creation and its parts, without thereby introducing rudiments to Conway's ontology that undermine Christ's mediation. Once again, this is in tension with elements of the text, e.g.:

> No argument can prove that there is a fourth species distinct from the other three. Indeed, a fourth species seems altogether superfluous. Since all phenomena in the entire universe can be reduced to these three aforementioned species as if into their original and peculiar causes, nothing compels us to recognize a further species according to this rule: whatever is correctly understood is most true and certain. Entities should not be multiplied without need. (CC: 30, 6.4)

No matter what view one accepts on the number or cardinality of created substances and their basic metaphysical status, one is going to find oneself requiring rationalizations for portions of the text that are ostensibly unfriendly to a straightforward acceptance of one's view.

It is not my task to defend Grey's (2023), Lascano's (2023), and Thomas's (2020) respective views on this matter, though each of them provides defenses in light of tensions arising from the text of the *Principles*. I leave it to the reader to

determine for themselves what level of security they achieve in providing those defenses. My task, in this context, is to provide the reader with the same kind of rationalization and defense with regard to passages of the text that are in tension with the CPM reading. With this in mind, there is no denying that the *Principles* includes passages that are obstacles to that reading.

One of the more explicit such passages explains that Christ is 'not to be confounded with' creatures. In this passage, Conway discusses 'intimate presence'. Broad (2018: 587) explains that 'intimate presence was commonplace in early modern texts', and offers several examples from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English writers, from George Keith to John Norris and George Berkeley. Conway is no exception here, using the term in a technical sense. Lascano (2023: 65) explains that, for Conway, an instance of 'intimate presence is an instance of colocation'. To say that something can be intimately present with another is to say that something can exist in the same place as some other object without also increasing the amount of space that the objects together occupy. Conway's use of the term parallels common understanding of 'penetrability'. Where some object is penetrable in the Cartesian sense, it is capable of intimate presence in Conway's sense. Ultimately, contra Descartes, she thinks that no creaturely substance—not even a soul—is capable of intimate presence with other creaturely substances.

> This, I say, should be attributed primarily to God and secondly to Christ inasmuch as he is a mediator between God and creatures. And as Christ shares mutability and immutability and eternity and time, he can be said to share spirit and body and consequently place and extension. For his body is a different substance from the bodies of all other creatures. (Indeed, he is the beginning of them and closest to God.) Therefore, it can be truly said that he is intimately present in them, yet is not to be confounded with them. (CC: 50, 7.4)

This passage includes several assertions that might give one pause in accepting the CPM view. First, Conway holds that Christ's body is a different substance from the bodies of all other creatures. Second, Christ is capable of intimate presence in creatures, while creatures are not. Third, we are specifically implored not to confound Christ with creatures.

The first of these issues is the easiest with which to contend. There is an agreeable intuition that any given body is identical to the bodies of its parts. Thus, if Christ is identical to the whole of creation, it might be surprising to find that Christ and the parts of creation are different substances. However, this intuition ignores the operative characteristic distinguishing the relevant substances. For Conway, what substantively differentiates Christ and creatures is their mutability: Christ is mutable for the better, and creatures are mutable for

better and worse. Thus, it is perfectly reasonable for the mereological sum of created individuals to be a different substance from its parts. So long as its parts are mutable for both better and worse, while it remains mutable only for the better, then it is appropriate to hold that they are both different substances. Since §3 of this paper has shown that it is reasonable to read Conway as thinking that the whole of creation perpetually improves, Conway's claim that Christ's 'body is a different substance from the bodies of all other creatures' (CC: 50, 7.4) does not cause any problems for the proposed view.

The second issue (that Christ is intimately present in creatures) is more difficult. Recall from above that one can reasonably take the containment of Christ in every creature to be capturing the causal interconnectedness that determines each creature's status and character. However, the above passage seems to hold that Christ is contained in each creature insofar as Christ is intimately present in each creature. Conway seems to have spelled out intimate presence in a way that is quite different from causal determination, so how can the proposed reading make sense of this?

The key lies in Conway's attribution of intimate presence to Christ only 'inasmuch as he is a mediator between God and creatures' (CC: 50, 7.4). Since God is attributed intimate presence 'primarily', I take Conway to think that God is intimately present in the way she explicitly describes in the text: God occupies exactly the same space as any given creature without increasing the creature's volume. That is to say, I here understand intimate presence, in this primary sense, in accordance with the standard reading as expounded by Broad and Lascano.[26] By contrast, since Christ is attributed intimate presence only insofar as Christ is a mediator, it may not be right to characterize Christ's intimate presence congruently. Recall that Conway invokes the existence of a mediator between God and creatures because some explanation is required for how God can be understood to interact with creatures. Christ mediates this relation by being alike both relata. So, when Conway attributes intimate presence to Christ inasmuch as Christ is a mediator between God and creatures, I take her to be indicating that Christ's mediation is ubiquitous among created individuals. Understood this way, Christ's intimate presence may be spelled out as the causal interconnectedness that characterizes the relevant containment relation. The way that God can be understood to interact with creatures is by arranging the whole of creation, understood as Christ, such that any of its parts exist in some particular way. This is a possible explanation for why Conway attributes motion ultimately to God (CC: 57–58, 8.1–8.2; CC: 69–70, 9.9): creatures move because of Christ's mediation of God's creative act.[27]

26. While Broad and Lascano operate with similar conceptions of intimate presence, they ultimately draw opposing conclusions about its role in characterizing God's relation to creaturely motion. See note 27 below.

27. In her first attribution of motion to God, Conway quotes Acts 17:28: 'in him and through him we move, live, and have our being'. This perhaps indicates that her attribution of creaturely

Lastly, the above passage implores the reader not to confound Christ with creatures. As explained above, there is a broad sense of 'creature' that includes Christ as the first of all creatures, and a narrow sense of 'creature' that includes all created individuals, but not Christ. The former category includes all concrete beings that follow from God, while the second includes only those concrete beings that are mutable for better and worse. The view that Christ is identical to the whole of creation certainly holds Christ to be a creature in the first (broad) sense but does not hold Christ to be a creature in the second (narrow) sense. The above passage clearly warns against confounding Christ with creatures in the narrow sense, but the proposed view does not do so.[28] As such, I think the view can be made reasonably safe from any of the three concerns that arise from this passage.

Another passage that one might invoke against the proposed reading is the following, in which Conway draws a strict distinction that might be tested by the identification of Christ with the whole of creation:

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motion to God is metaphorical. Thus, while motion comes from God, it is not clear that this means Conway thinks God moves everything. It is worth noting what comes immediately before the citation of Acts, however: 'For the will of God, which gave being to bodies, also gave them motion. Hence motion itself comes from God, through whose will all motion occurs. For, just as a creature cannot give being to itself, so it cannot move itself' (CC: 57–60, 8.2). In conjunction with *Principles* 9.9 (which holds communication of motion from one body to another to be an instance of real creation—which is attributable to God alone), this passage seems to imply that God is at least involved in all creaturely motion, even if not causally responsible for its direction. See Broad (2018) and Lascano (2023: 81–64) for opposing cases on the scope of God's role in creaturely motion.

28. A similar worry might arise from *Principles* 9.3, where Conway objects to Spinoza on the grounds that by confounding creatures with God, he has 'made one being of both'. Though the proposed view does not hold God and creatures to be one being, one might worry that the claim about Christ is similarly problematic. However, such a worry is unwarranted. This CPM reading does not hold Christ and creatures to be one being. On the proposed reading, any given creaturely individual (i.e., any part of creation) is distinct from the whole of creation on mereological and moral grounds. No proper part of the whole of creation is taken to be one being with the whole of creation. Further, no proper part of the whole of creation is taken to have the same essence as Christ. Only the whole composed by all creatures has the same essence as Christ. Since the whole of creation is not identical, existentially or essentially, with any of its parts, this causes no problems. However, one might worry that Conway would similarly object to Christ having 'sin and the devils' as parts, as she objects to the view that God might have them as parts in *Principles* 6.5. I see two possible CPM replies. First, Christ must *somehow* mediate between a perfect God and imperfect creatures. 'Sin and the devils' have to find their way into the picture somehow—and Conway clearly wants to put some distance between them and God, which is why she rejects understanding them as related to God in the Spinozistic sense (at least, as Conway understands Spinoza). There is a similar problem in saying that God generates creatures immediately: God is of the wrong ontological type for that, and so needs a mediator of the right ontological type in Christ. Similarly, since God is of the wrong *moral* type to have 'sin and the devils' as parts, Christ may stand in as a mediator of the right moral type. This is not to say that Christ *is* 'sin and the devils'. But Christ must stand in *some* mediating relation between God and sin: that this relation is a mereological one does not seem particularly problematic. Second, the CPM reader can possibly rely on a distinction I spell out below, between Christ insofar as he is emanated from God and Christ insofar as he emanates creatures.

> The creatures could not be equal to Christ nor of the same nature because his nature could never degenerate like theirs and change from good into bad. For this reason they have a far inferior nature in comparison to the first born, so that they can never strictly speaking become him, just as he can never become the Father. Moreover, the highest point they can reach is this, to be like him, as Scripture says. Consequently, inasmuch as we are only creatures, our relation to him is only one of adoption. (CC: 22, 4.4)

But once again, this language can rather easily be interpreted in accordance with the proposed view. So long as the whole of creation never degenerates, it is not a problem that creatures degenerate. The proposed reading in fact reinforces one point in this passage. Conway notes that creatures can never become Christ. But what of a creature that, having gone through any number of cycles of divine punishment, has reached the point that it now only changes for the better? In such a case, this creature is no longer distinguished from Christ in terms of mutability. So, in what sense are they different? On the proposed view, they are different insofar as an asymmetrical mereological relation holds between them. One of them is a proper part of the other. Thus, though they may no longer differ in terms of mutability, they differ on account of mereological status. This might ground a new understanding of the 'adoption' relation, which Conway invokes at the end of the passage: the relation that holds between Christ and a created individual that, in virtue of having endured divine punishment for past transgression and degeneration, only changes for the better. Such a creature has 'adopted' something of the nature of Christ but remains nonidentical to Christ because it is a proper part of Christ.[29]

I move on now to two final passages—and I have saved them for last because they strike me as the most difficult with which to contend, though I think options are indeed available. The first (and most explicit of all those discussed in this section) comes from *Principles* 6.4:

> [S]ince it agrees with sound reason and with the order of things that just as God is one and does not have two or three or more distinct substances in himself, and just as Christ is one simple Christ without further distinct substances in himself (insofar as he is the celestial man or Adam, first of all creatures), so likewise all creatures, or the whole of creation, are also a single species in substance or essence, although it includes many individuals gathered into subordinate species and distinguished from each other modally but not substantially or essentially. (CC: 30–31, 6.4)

29. Head (2018) characterizes the relation similarly, though without the contentious emphasis on mereology. See also Head (2017).

Notably, this passage is particularly conducive to a substance monist reading like Lascano's, as it explains individual creatures as modes, rather than as substances. For the same reason, it is a difficult passage to be dealt with on a substance pluralist reading. For the CPM reader, the difficulty comes not from the classification of creation's composition, but from the classification of Christ's composition. It would be quite natural to come away from this passage thinking that Conway precludes Christ from being composed of further substances, just as God surely has no parts (substantial or otherwise).

This is undeniably the most natural reading, which is what makes this passage difficult for the CPM interpreter. But a pathway is open to such a reader, given the parenthetical qualification on the monistic classification of Christ. The passage understands Christ as containing no substances in himself, but only 'insofar as he is the celestial man or Adam, first of all creatures'. Presumably, this leaves open the possibility that, insofar as Christ is understood as other than the first of all creatures, Christ is possibly composed by other substances—or rather, has 'further distinct substances in himself'. The CPM interpreter can thus read this passage as indicating that, if we understand Christ in terms of his emanation from God (that is, as the first creation), then Christ must be understood as simple. However, if we understand Christ solely in terms of his relations to what emanates from him (creatures), then this passage does not provide us with any explicit reasons to think Christ must be simple. The parenthetical qualifying Christ's simplicity indicates that the simplicity is salient only when considering one of the two most basic metaphysical relations that Christ stands in with the two other species in Conway's ontology. Insofar as Christ is understood as the first emanation of God, Christ is simple. But insofar as Christ is understood as emanating creation, Christ may be internally complex.

A final passage worth considering suggests that Christ is prior to the world—a claim that is naturally opposed to the notion that Christ is the mereological sum of creatures:

> By the son of God (the first born of all creatures, whom we Christians call Jesus Christ, according to Scripture, as shown above), is understood not only his divinity but his humanity in eternal union with the Divinity; that is, his celestial humanity was united with the Divinity before the creation of the world and before his incarnation. (CC: 23, 5.1)

This passage cannot be suggesting that Christ is prior to the whole of creation in time. Nearly the entirety of *Principles* 2 is dedicated to arguing against the notion that there was a time before creation or a time in which creation began. So, this passage cannot be read as suggesting that Christ existed before creatures. What

is at stake here is not temporal priority, but ontological or logical priority. Still, if x is prior to y, then of course x cannot be identical to y. However, I think there are strategies for reading this passage as conforming to the identity of Christ and the whole of creation.

The most promising strategy is to read 'world' [*mundus*] as referring to something other than the whole of creation. Conway uses 'world' this way elsewhere; for instance, in *Principles* 3.3, she holds that God 'created worlds [*mundos*] and creatures as quickly as he could, for it is the nature of a necessary agent to do as much as he can' (CC: 16, 3.3). This passage makes little sense if 'world' refers to the whole of creation, as it would imply that there is more than one whole of creation. Thus, Conway clearly sometimes uses 'world' to pick out some subset of creatures.[30] If she is doing so in *Principles* 5.1, then the above passage does not imply a non-identity of Christ and the whole of creation. A possible second strategy (which I cannot fully develop here) for conforming this passage to the proposed interpretation would be to read 'celestial humanity' as referring to some fixed *aspect* of Christ. The passage would then hold that some *aspect* of Christ is ontologically prior to the whole of creation. The passage would then suggest that some aspect of x is prior to x. This is not so obviously problematic as holding that x is prior to x.

There are, no doubt, more passages in the *Principles* that might produce similar apparent conflicts, but I hope the above are a representative sample. Where such ostensible conflicts arise, I contend that they can likely be addressed by proper consideration of the possibilities for interpretation in light of the proposed view. Though many of the ways in which Conway writes can seem opposed to an identification of Christ with the whole of creation, careful consideration reveals that such indications may often be illusory. As with the other views about Conway's created ontology that I have discussed in this paper (substance monism, substance pluralism, and a more straightforward priority monism), defenses against objections on the basis of problematic passages are impossible to avoid. Thus, what matters in the debate over the scope of created ontology in Conway is how well an interpreter can accommodate those problematic passages. While there may be lingering discomfort or tension with the text, I hope the above illustrates that there are pathways open to the CPM reader in the face of such textual elements.

30. Further such uses of the word abound in *Principles* 3.3 and 3.4. That said, I do not claim that Conway always uses the word this way: there are many passages in the *Principles* that very clearly use 'world' to refer to the whole of creation. My claim is that Conway is not consistent in this usage and that there is no reason to think of the word as referring to the whole of creation rather than some relevant subset in *Principles* 5.1.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for the thesis that Conway can be read as a priority monist against Grey's (2023) objections, on the acceptance of the thesis that Christ is identical to the mereological sum of created individuals. The adoption of this thesis saves priority monist interpretations of Conway's *Principles* from objections offered by Grey and offers new routes for understanding other pieces of Conway's text (such as the relation of adoption between Christ and creatures). I do not pretend this thesis is uncontroversial or obvious. However, given careful attention, the text is less opposed to this reading than one might initially expect, and any reading that respects the text is worth consideration. I thus hope to have shown that the text is largely compatible with a Christocentric priority monist reading, suffering from some of the same kinds of reservations that might warn against a straightforward substance monist reading or substance pluralist reading. So there remains a viable reading of Conway as a priority monist, though a striking, unexpected one.

I end with something of a personal report. I do not myself subscribe to the view I propose and defend in this paper, but I believe that I have shown how far one can get with it, despite initial doubts. For this reason, *if* I became convinced that mereologically-construed priority monism should be properly attributed to Conway, then in light of objections like those from Grey, I would be glad to find the Christocentric brand still standing.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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