**Anne Conway on Heaven and Hell**

**Abstract**

This paper examines Anne Conway’s accounts of heaven and hell, as found in her only published work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690). We see that Conway seeks to portray hell in a manner that she sees as more consonant with the postulation of a loving and just God, partly by denying eternal torment and emphasising the benefits that suffering brings to a creature. I also review Conway’s account of heaven, a realm of ‘perfect tranquillity’ in which creatures enjoy unity and harmony with Christ and other heavenly spirits. We see that Conway’s account of universal salvation in this heavenly state involves an increase of understanding of the world, a continuing process of perfection, and harmony with other heavenly spirits. Throughout the paper, I also consider Conway’s eschatology within the wider intellectual context of the revival of Origenist theology in her intellectual circle and the shifting framework of eschatological thought in the early Quaker community. By reading the *Principles* as responding to this context, we can deepen our understanding of the radical and original contribution Conway makes to the tradition of eschatological thought.

**Keywords**

Anne Conway, Heaven, Hell, Eschatology, Origen, Platonism

**1. Introduction**

While the philosophy of Anne Conway is receiving an increased amount of attention from scholars, her views concerning the afterlife have yet to receive a sustained examination. This paper seeks to remedy this gap to some extent by examining her accounts of both heaven and hell, as well as exploring how these fit more widely into the eschatological discourse of the period. Conway’s account of the afterlife is complicated by her commitment to the transmigration of souls across different lifetimes; nevertheless, there is certainly a sense in which notions of heaven and hell fit into the metaphysical system that is offered in her only published work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (first published posthumously in 1690, [[1]](#footnote-1) based on notes left behind by Conway after her death in 1679).

The first section that follows begins with Conway’s account of hell. Though sometimes overlooked, Conway does indeed refer to hell in the text of the *Principles*, and I seek to reconstruct the role this place has to play in her philosophy, both from a metaphysical and soteriological perspective. For Conway, hell has a role to play in the overall soteriological narrative of her philosophy, embedded in a commitment to the transmigration of souls. In contrast to the traditional Christian conception of hell as a place of eternal punishment, Conway views hell as a temporary space for the suffering required to return a sinful creature to earthly life, as part of an overall journey towards perfection and salvation. By emphasising the limited nature of the punishment, and the abuse of free will that condemns a creature to hell, Conway seeks to portray hell in a manner that is more consonant with the postulation of a loving, good, just God.

After that, I review Conway’s account of heaven, a realm of ‘perfect tranquillity’ in which creatures enjoy unity and harmony with Christ and other heavenly spirits. We see that Conway’s account of universal salvation in this heavenly state involves an increase of understanding of the world, a continuing process of perfection, and harmony with other heavenly spirits. Such a state is inevitable for all creatures due to the purifying and perfecting effects of both motion and suffering. Conway also offers us a ‘this-worldly’ and ‘realizing’ eschatology, insofar as the heavenly state is beyond our experience but nevertheless part of the world, and has been coming to fruition for an infinite number of creatures for an infinite period of time. I also consider the notion of the resurrection of the body as found in the *Principles* and argue that Conway establishes a position that seeks to go beyond a Neoplatonic approach in which a sharp distinction is made between earthly and heavenly bodies.

Throughout the paper, I also consider Conway’s eschatology within the wider intellectual context of the revival of Origenist theology in her intellectual circle (including in the work of Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, and Joseph Glanvill) and the shifting framework of eschatological thought in the early Quaker community that she joined in the final years of her life. By reading the *Principles* as responding to this context, we can deepen our understanding of the radical and original contribution Conway makes to the tradition of eschatological thought.

**2. Hell**

In arguing for a doctrine of universal salvation, Conway’s *Principles* formed part of a growing body of literature in the late 17th century that posed a radical account of the afterlife, including a rejection of the notion of hell or eternal torment for those who have sinned. Though a number of intellectuals at the time were beginning to question the doctrine of eternal torment, this was often done in anonymous or posthumous works. It was generally thought that dire social consequences may follow if the possibility of eternal torment were openly questioned, and thus intellectuals who questioned the existence of hell were opening themselves up to accusations of atheism and supporting widespread debauchery. As a result, as D.P. Walker explains, such discussions were seldom published: “In the 17th century disbelief in eternal torment seldom reached the level of a firm conviction, but at most was a conjecture, which one might wish to be true; it is therefore understandable that one should hesitate to plunge the world into moral anarchy for the sake of only conjectural truth… [As a result] the evidence we have is from posthumous and anonymous publications, manuscripts and hearsay” (1964: 5f.). Though the *Principles* falls under the rubric of posthumous publications, we do not know what Conway’s intentions in fact were with regard to the writing of her notes, which were later edited for publication by F.M. van Helmont (one of Conway’s closest friends and intellectual collaborators) or one of his associates. It may have been that they were never intended for publication; rather, they may have simply been for her own use as she worked out her own ideas, or they may have been intended as notes to inform private discussions with van Helmont, Henry More and others in her intellectual circle. Thus, the *Principles* forms part of what was a growing body of private or anonymous literature at the time that questioned the doctrine of eternal torment in hell.

Another important contextual factor for our discussion here is the position Conway’s *Principles* has in the growing Quaker eschatological literature of the period. Though we cannot be entirely sure when Conway wrote the notes that were later edited and published as the *Principles*, it is highly likely that they were written in the final years of her life, following her conversion (or ‘convincement’ in Quaker terminology) to Quakerism. Given the relative youth of the Quaker religious community at the time, doctrinal matters within the group were largely unsettled and evolving, including in relation to the afterlife and other eschatological matters. Nevertheless, there were some general themes to Quaker eschatology that can be discerned. Early Quakers had emphasised an immanent eschatology, in which believers were able to achieve immediate redemption and the rejection of sinful ways through embracing the ‘Christ’ or ‘light within’ and thereby finding unity with God. [[2]](#footnote-2) The Quaker community also saw itself as marking the arrival of the Kingdom of God on Earth. [[3]](#footnote-3) Eschatological speculation beyond the immediate seems to have been generally avoided (apart from reports of various visions or prophecies offered by members of the community), and so there was no clear Quaker doctrine concerning the existence and nature of heaven and hell.

However, Quaker eschatological thought had evolved somewhat by the 1670s, when Conway came to write her *Principles*. Changing political circumstances in Britain had scuppered hopes for an immediate ‘this-worldly’ eschatology, leading to a focus on organising the community, rather than effecting substantial change: as Barbour puts it, at this time, from “the viewpoint of Quaker reformism, the world was no longer a hostile field to be conquered but a neutral arena” (1964: 243). Removing immediate eschatological hopes from this world paved the way for Quakers to engage in more detailed eschatological theology that looked beyond it, aided by an increased acceptance of the use of reason alongside a believer’s conscience. [[4]](#footnote-4) As we will see, Conway reflects this development in Quaker eschatological thought, using reasoned arguments to explore both heavenly and hellish realms that are beyond our current experience, but are nevertheless very much part of this world that we currently inhabit. We will continue to consider Conway’s relation to Quaker eschatological thought as we proceed through the discussion.

We also can view Conway’s eschatology as part of a renaissance of interest in the theology of the Church Father, Origen, beginning in the 16th century and extending into the 17th. It is unclear how familiar Conway was with Origen’s works. At the least, though, we have good reason to believe that Conway was familiar with two recent texts that had defended Origenist thought: the anonymous text, *Letter of Resolution Concerning Origen*, published in 1661, [[5]](#footnote-5) as well as *Lux Orientalis*, published in 1662 by Joseph Glanvill. As Kempson has noted, though, given the different possible influences on Conway’s thought, it can be difficult to disentangle what indeed can be imputed to an Origenist strain in the *Principles*: “Many themes and phrases are *over-determined* in that they could have been drawn from more than one of her potential sources. Parallels of thought in Origenist, kabbalistic, and Quaker thought (not to mention philosophical ideas, theological concepts, and biblical language) were a boon for Conway’s *perennial philosophy*, but for the scholar attempting to tease out intellectual lineages, it is a tangle” (2021: 395). As a result, given the absence of evidence regarding Conway’s philosophical development outside of the *Principles* and a few scattered letters, it is difficult for us to claim that particular strands of influence in her philosophy can be found. Nevertheless, given the rising interest in Origenist thought at the time within her intellectual circle (including her friend, the Cambridge Platonist Henry More: see Hutton 2004: 69), it is difficult to believe that Conway would not have found theological inspiration in Origen, either directly or indirectly.

Of particular note in this regard is both Origen’s doctrine of universal salvation for all human beings and a related view of hell as fulfilling a function of purging creatures of sin in order to prepare them for a return to earthly life (and eventually salvation), rather than as being a place of eternal punishment, as a result of the carrying out of divine justice. We find Origen’s views concerning hell described in the previously mentioned *Letter of Resolution*: “after long periods of time the *damned* shall be delivered from their torments, and try their fortunes again in such Regions of the World as their Nature and present disposition fits them for” (1661: 71). Eternal suffering in hell, the anonymous author argues, would be incompatible with true justice and the forgiving nature of God: “why should we think that the pain and smart of it shall be infinitely great and long, when the pleasure reaped by the Transgression which brought the punishment is not in any degree equal; and when a shorter torture may make the punished change their minde, or leave it very probable they would doe so were they out of their torture and in an opportunity to shew it?” (1661: 75). We can see that though Origenist thought of the time did not go so far as to reject the existence of hell, it nevertheless attempted to mitigate some of its features to seemed to be in tension with a loving and just God, such as questioning whether such punishment could be eternal (given that any sins committed by a creature would be finite in nature) and seeking to emphasise the benefits that such suffering ultimately brings to the creature consigned temporarily to hell.

Looking at the text of the *Principles*, we see that Conway has room in her metaphysical system for a place characterised by torment, ‘hell’, though this is not a place of eternal suffering. First, Conway argues that hell can form part of a genuinely just divine scheme: “However, a man who lives such an impious and perverse life that he is more like the devil raised from hell than like any other creature, then, if he dies in such a state without repenting, does not the same justice hurl him down to hell, and does he not justly become like the devils, just as those who live an angelic life become equal to angels?” (6.7; 35f.). [[6]](#footnote-6) This quote comes in the context of a passage where Conway is discussing her account of metempsychosis or transmigration of souls across different lifetimes. Conway views each creature as composed of a hierarchy of souls, some of which are able to battle for dominance over the character and resultant behaviour of the creature as a whole: for example, it is possible that within a human being, a previously dominant spirit can be overcome by another spirit that is more beastly, or indeed devilish, in nature. Such a battle for dominance has great significance beyond the natural bodily lifetime of a creature, as the bundle of spirits that composes the central core of a particular individual then goes on to form another body for itself, reflecting the character of the new dominant spirit: Conway states that the dominant spirit has a “formative power” which shapes a new body by its own image in its imagination (see 6.7; 36). If a previously dominant human spirit is overcome by a beastly spirit, then the bundle of spirits that was previously embodied in human form may come back in the form of a lower creature. As Conway argues, it is only just that a creature who has become “a brute in spirit and allowed his brutal part and spirit to have dominion over his more excellent part” be transformed in its “corporeal shape into that species of beast to which he is most similar in terms of the qualities and conditions of his mind” (6.7; 36). The possibility of a higher spirit being overcome in such a way is due to its embodied nature. For Conway, spirit and matter lie on an ontological continuum: matter is seen as condensed or gross spirit (see 7.1; 43). This ontological continuum is also a moral hierarchy, insofar as those creatures who are more spiritualized are also closer to the infinite perfection and goodness of God. As the spirit requires a body in order to pursue an earthly life, it has to combine with more material spirits which stand at a lower level on the moral-ontological hierarchy, but this unity leaves the higher spirits open to giving way to these lower spirits in terms of dominance over the whole creature. As a result, the creature can give way to beastly or devilish ways through the misuse of its free will, and eventually end up in a lower form of existence in the next life.

As we saw in the quote above, a human being not only faces the potential onslaught of beastly spirits, but devilish spirits also. As a result, metempsychosis not only potentially leads to the life of a brute, but indeed the life of a tormented creature in hell (though how often Conway thinks this actually happens is unclear). [[7]](#footnote-7) The punishment of allowing oneself to be overcome by a beastly or devilish spirit, then, is to be reborn in the body of a lower animal or indeed in some sort of hellish existence. It is worth noting that God’s role in punishing a creature is therefore quite indirect, indeed one of omission (not stopping the process of rebirth, rather than actively placing a creature in hell for torments). There is thus a sense of divine justice in play here, insofar as God could in principle intervene to halt the rebirth of the creature into a lower form of existence, but instead allows a creature to face the natural consequences of the misuse of their own free will. This is perhaps partly a reflection of Conway’s desire to emphasise the love and goodness of God, which appears to conflict somewhat with the idea of an angry, vengeful God[[8]](#footnote-8) who intends to torment and punish some of his creatures. It is just the actions of spirits and the misuse of free will that leads to a creature’s punishment, and so the role of God in punishment is diminished to some extent. There is a sense in which the process of rebirth for Conway is a natural process that is an inevitable part of the soteriological journey of creatures first away from, and then back towards, God.

It is likely that, like many others of the time, including Joseph Glanvill (see Almond 1994: 177f.), Conway locates hell within the earth itself. As a result, spirits from that lower region may come to affect human beings negatively as ‘earthly spirits’ who have come from the ground as relatively material things in order to compose the body of a creature (though, as we shall see, it may be that the human being helps to lift up these earthly spirits both ontologically and morally). These earthly spirits contained in “dust and sand” are even able to develop both morally and ontologically to such an extent that they are can eventually reach the status of human beings or angels, enjoying the capacity for “every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue, joy and fruition, which the noblest creatures have or can have” (9.6; 66). Thus, even those spirits who have been condemned to hell will always have an opportunity to return to earthly life and return to the proper path of perfection (both spiritually and morally).

How is it, though, that these earthly spirits are able to escape hell in the first place? Or, in other words, how is it that hell is not a place of *eternal* torment? The key to this is that, although Conway attributes some punitive function to suffering (insofar as it is just that creatures face a penalty for their previous sinful ways), such a punishment can only be temporary given that it is also necessarily reformatory. Suffering is able to purify a creature, encouraging its transformation away from its fallen, material state: “all pain and torment stimulates the life or spirit existing in everything which suffers”, with the result that “whatever grossness or crassness is contracted by the spirit or body is diminished” (7.1; 43), and so, Conway argues, eternal torment in hell (without the creature being reformed to at least some extent and thus returning to the higher realm from whence they had fallen) is impossible.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Those spirits who have descended into the earth are eventually able to re-join the rest of nature above the surface. Conway states that we can see this introduction of spirits from the earth in nature: “does not rotting matter, or body of earth and water, produce animals without any previous seed of those animals?” (6.6; 34). Not only do spirits from the earth have the opportunity to be reborn as various animals, they can also be incorporated into higher creatures, such as human beings: “the human body was made from earth, which, as has been proved, contained various spirits and gave those spirits to all the animals” (6.6; 34). Conway suggests that these earthly spirits are given a further opportunity to be improved by being incorporated into a creature such as a human being: “The human spirit ought to have dominion over these spirits, which are only terrestrial, so that it might rule over them and raise them to a higher level and, indeed, to its own proper nature” (6.6; 34f.). By coming under the direction of a spirit that is higher in both ontological and moral terms (in other words, is closer to God), the earthly spirit is influenced in a positive manner by becoming part of a creature that is (at least, we would hope) inclined towards doing good in the world. When the spirit is eventually discarded by the creature at bodily death, the spirit can then perhaps go on to become part of another animal, where more opportunities for improvement will be offered. Eventually, over numerous lifetimes, the spirit will (through suffering and the influence of higher spirits) raise itself to the status of a higher creature, for whom salvation is in the offing (more on that in the next section).

In this way, Conway moves away from a traditional notion of hell in which God directly brings about a purely punitive state of eternal suffering for sinful creatures. It was becoming an increasingly prevalent viewpoint (though one that many authors were still unwilling to put into print, at least under their own name) that eternal punishment beyond any kind of suffering experienced during earthly life could not possibly be just (for example, the punishment seemed to significantly outweigh any possible crimes one could commit during the limited timeframe of a single earthly life). Conway’s system of divine justice also allows for a gradation of punishment, so that the punishment can more obviously fit the crime:[[10]](#footnote-10) a ‘beastly’ way of life could lead to being reborn as a lower form of life, whilst a devilish character will receive a worse punishment by being banished to hell (though no sin would be bad enough to result in an eternal banishment to hell). In addition, a purely punitive function for suffering in hell also seemed to conflict with the loving, omnibenevolent nature of God, even if the experience of seeing sinners suffering were giving vicarious joy to those who had been saved. For Conway, the punishments of hell ultimately have a restorative function of bringing the creature ultimately back to goodness and to God, culminating eventually in the reward of a heavenly state. Thus, no creature is eternally condemned or annihilated, and will indeed eventually return to the loving embrace of God.

In this section, we have seen that Conway seeks to incorporate hell within an account that emphasises the justice and loving goodness of God. Conway’s account of the transmigration of souls, alongside its location within the earth, allows hell to be posited as only a temporary place for those who are condemned to it by the misuse of their free will. The punishment meted out in hell is ultimately justified (and made compatible with a loving God) by its positive benefit for the tormented creature itself. The purifying and vivifying effect of suffering prepares a creature for a return to earthly life, either as its own creature or incorporated into the life of a higher creature, in which it has a new opportunity to increase its perfection and become closer to God. In the following section, we will consider where this journey through multiple lifetimes (including possibly through a temporary state of hellish existence) will eventually lead for all creatures, namely, to a place of perfect tranquillity in unity with Christ.

**3. Heaven**

Conway’s vision of heaven is brief, though highly suggestive: “those who achieve a perfect union with Christ are raised to a region of perfect tranquillity, where nothing is seen or felt to move or be moved. For although the strongest and swiftest motions exist there, nevertheless because they move so uniformly, equally, and harmoniously, without any resistance or disturbance, they appear completely at rest” (5.7; 27). There are numerous aspects of this statement that require exploration.

First, we can consider what it may mean, for Conway, to achieve a ‘perfect union with Christ’. One thing we can immediately note is that Conway is clear that this is not a union with God, in the form of a traditional notion of the beatific vision, a kind of maximal intuitive knowledge of, and ontological unity with, God that brings the soul to eternal peace.[[11]](#footnote-11) There is perhaps a sense, though, in which those who have achieved union with Christ will have an increasing sense of the presence of God, though this will not be the kind of immediate epistemic access provided by the beatific vision. The details of Conway’s epistemology are not entirely clear, though it is likely that she would see an increasingly incorporeal state as giving rise to an enhanced sensitivity to, and understanding of, the world.[[12]](#footnote-12)

According to Conway, knowledge is gained through the reception of images transmitted by other creatures through the medium of mediating spirits. Each creature is made up of a collection of spirits, under the control of a single principal spirit (see 6.11; 39) and is able to undertake a “subtle emanation of its parts” (9.9; 70), which amongst other things allows for it to be perceived by other creatures. However, the more material a creature is, the more difficulty it will face in receiving these emanated spirits, and its ability to perceive will thereby decrease: “in all hard bodies, such as stones (whether common or precious), and also in metals, herbs, trees, and animals, and in all human bodies, there exist many spirits which are as if imprisoned in gross bodies and united with them because they cannot flow out or fly away” (8.5; 61). It stands to reason that if a more material creature will find it more difficult to emanate spirits, it will also find it more difficult to receive them, and thus it will be less sensitive to the world around it. By extension, the more spirit-like a creature becomes, the more sensitive they will become to their environment and those things that are intimately present within it (Conway argues that inner perception or reflection also relies upon these kind of “internal productions of the mind” (6.11; 39). The more subtle the creature becomes, the more they will be able to feel the presence of God through Christ’s action within them, a growth in knowledge that will approach the kind of direct knowledge of God conceptualised in the beatific vision (though it will never reach it). The notion of spirits being ‘imprisoned’ in gross bodies also explains why Conway believes the strongest motions to exist in a higher, more spiritualized state. The more ethereal a creature, the less they will be confined by their material state, and thus the easier it will be for them to engage in the motion required to bringer them closer to God.

In addition, there is arguably a notion of deification, glorification or theosis at work here, insofar as beings are in a state of becoming increasingly God-like and thereby unified with God, without ever reaching a state which would allow for confusion between God and creature. As stated earlier, this places Conway as part of the growing tendency in Quaker thought in the late seventeenth century towards emphasising a Patristic notion of deification and gradual growth to perfection, as opposed to an earlier Quaker view that posited the immediate possibility of sanctification (for more on this shift in Quaker thought, see Tousley (2013: 172f.)). According to Conway, the process of going through multiple lifetimes has an overall purifying effect, with the result that the creature in question progressively becomes more spirit-like and thus becomes ontologically closer to the infinite spirit that is God. One aspect of this is the cleansing effect brought about by the suffering that is an inevitable part of life: as we have seen already, our material condition that has distanced us from God is reduced by our experience of suffering and thus in a quite literal sense we become more God-like at least partly through our suffering. In addition, there is a natural spiritualizing that takes place through the motion that is intrinsic to all life: “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” (8.5; 61). Conway argues that there is a ‘wearing away’ of the hardness of spirits that takes place through any sort of motion, though the exact mechanics of this is unclear.

As an example of this action, Conway claims that the emanation of subtle spirits from the body is part of a process by which the body takes in grosser spirits by digestion and eventually transforms them into more subtle spirits that can then be emanated. There is clearly supposed to be some sense in which the more ethereal spirits in the body facilitate the transformation of gross, digested matter into the emanated spirits. Conway states that spirits in the body “make those more subtle spirits” (8.4; 61), but this cannot be meant in the literal sense of creation, insofar as only God can create spirits. This facilitation process, I suggest, operates by spirits in the body bringing more material spirits into a bundle of spirits that, through the influence of a higher spirit, is able to have a positive transformative effect upon them, perhaps simply by bringing them into motion through its internal vital action. As we have seen, a particular bundle of spirits naturally forms a hierarchy, under the control of a single principal spirit. It is perhaps through the operation of the principal spirit’s impact upon the spirits under its command that the ‘wearing away’ of spirits is brought about within the body.

As a result, given that “it is the nature of every creature to be always in motion” (7.1; 42) and that motion has a gradual effect of purifying or spiritualizing all things in nature, it follows that all things will undergo a process of theosis, in the sense that it will continually become more spiritual and ontologically closer to God. This deification, though, is limited by the unbridgeable ontological distance between God and creation, and as a result, Christ is required to mediate between God and those individuals who have been saved. Those who have reached this exalted stage are only brought into indirect union with God through a direct union with Christ: “Christ and the soul can be united without any other medium because of their great affinity and likeness” (8.3; 60). Though the sense in which the saved are united with or ‘adopted’ by Christ[[13]](#footnote-13) is not altogether clear, it is apparent that the sense in which both Christ and the saved are in motion is important, as well as the role that Christ plays in motion itself. In this heavenly state, there is a harmonious and swift movement shared by Christ and the believer. Conway argues that the only kind of change or motion that Christ can undergo (and this is what distinguishes him from other creatures) is one that brings him further towards the good (in other words, makes him more God-like): “The second [being, Christ] can only change toward the good, so that which is good by its very nature can become[[14]](#footnote-14) better” (5.3; 24). The fact that those who are saved have come into harmony with this movement shows that they too have reached a state in which they only move in such a way that they become better, and in a much faster way than was open to them in an earlier, more material and fallen state.[[15]](#footnote-15) The deep connection this forges between Christ and creature is emphasised if we consider the intimate role Christ plays in motion.

Conway argues that though God is ultimately the first cause of motion, Christ is its immediate facilitator. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider Conway’s account of motion in detail, we find in the *Principles* the claim that the immediate presence of Christ is required for both the internal motions of life and the communication of motion from one creature to another (see 9.9; 67ff.). This ‘vital action’ is achieved only through a ‘vital force’ that does not come directly from the creature itself as it involves a “real production or creation” (9.9; 70) of motion that can only be carried out through the divine instrument, Christ, as an extended soul throughout all creation.[[16]](#footnote-16) As Hutton notes, it is this generation of vital force through Christ that grounds his “consubstantial union with created things such that, although thereby united to God, they are not with God” (2004: 201). However, as already noted, though the proper direction of motion is towards the good, creatures can be deflected on this trajectory by sin and thereby move towards the bad instead. Given that the natural motion of Christ is towards the good, any motion of the creature towards the bad will place Christ and creature out of sync with each other: the proper harmony between them will be interrupted. As a corollary of this, the greater the extent to which the creature moves towards the good through their vital action, the greater their union and harmony with Christ will be (and by being more united with Christ as the instrument of God, they will also be closer to God too). The creature in question will also feel the presence of Christ and God within them more keenly too: it is through the experience of vital action that we are able to “observe a kind of divine spirituality or subtlety in every motion and in every action of life” (9.9; 68), and so the closer our action matches the motion of Christ, the greater the sense of divinity within will be. Thus, we can see why the harmony of motion in both creature and Christ will bring a closer unity between them.

As we have seen, those creatures who achieve this heavenly state will live in a realm of ‘perfect tranquillity’. This does not necessarily mean that heaven, for Conway, will in some sense be a different world; rather, these spirits will inhabit the same world as ours (indeed, they are perhaps all around us) but their highly spiritual state means that they are not perceivable by us. We are therefore talking very much of a ‘heaven on earth’, rather than a transcendent realm outside of the one we currently occupy. By placing spirit and matter on a continuum within the same realm, Conway is therefore able to incorporate a strong commitment to the immanent presence of Christ in our moral renewal within creation without falling into a materialist Christology,[[17]](#footnote-17) as well as offering a simplified ontology in which the entire soteriological journey of a creature (fall and redemption) take place in the same created space. We cannot experience these higher spirits partly because of their immateriality, but also because of the speed of their motion. Conway writes, “there are two kinds of rest which seem to our bodily sense of sight to lack motion, namely, that which is extremely swift and rapid and that which is very slow. Consequently we can only perceive the middle kind” (5.7; 27).[[18]](#footnote-18) In the same way that we cannot detect the slow motion of lower, grosser forms of life (which leads us to think erroneously that things such as rocks are devoid of life: see 7.4; 51), we are neither able to detect the motion of those heavenly spirits that are incredibly swift. This would also explain at the same time why we are unable to perceive Christ, as a soul that is extended throughout all of creation, as he is also beyond the middle range of motion that we are able to detect through our senses.

The ‘tranquillity’ of this realm for those who dwell within it will presumably come from the harmony it has with Christ and other beings within that state,[[19]](#footnote-19) as well as the enjoyment of feeling closer to Christ and God. Further, such spirits will perhaps no longer feel the inner conflict that arises from having an indifferent will that pulls them both towards the good and the bad.[[20]](#footnote-20) Though creatures will still have a will that is in principle indifferent, nevertheless they are able to attain a state in which they are only inclined to choose the good: “from that indifference of will which it once had for good or evil, it rises until it only wishes to be good and is incapable of wishing any evil” (7.1; 42). There would conceivably be a kind of peace or tranquillity to be found in such a state of harmony, both within (with all spirits contained within the individual creature striving together for the good) and without (with Christ and the other heavenly spirits). Though only God is perfect, such a state is the best that is possible for us as creatures. There is a sense of completion or fulfilment, as creatures return to the kind of purified spiritual state that they enjoyed before they originally fell. Conway argues that all creatures “in their primitive and original state [prior to their fall] were a certain species of human being designated according to their virtues” (6.4; 31), and as such heavenly spirits have regained their former spiritualized status, though now purified and chastened by the suffering they have endured through many lifetimes, which has resulted in their new status in which they are only inclined to choose the good.

In this way, Conway rejects the possibility of a second fall for creatures, insofar as it is possible for heavenly spirits to reach a point where they are not able to turn against their inclination to the good and pursue sinful ways again. We can now therefore see a further way in which a creature finds harmony and perfect tranquillity within the heavenly realm, namely, a harmony with regard to the hierarchy of spirits within. As we saw earlier, Conway attributes wrongful action to a conflict between spirits within a creature, in which a beastly or devilish spirit has overcome a previously commanding good spirit. If a creature is now only inclined to choose the good, that signals that all spirits within the creature in question are now in a harmonious structure in which all follow the commands from the principal spirit to do that which is good. So, a creature in the realm of perfect tranquillity has not only achieved harmony with Christ and other heavenly spirits, but has also found harmony within itself.

We can find similar views concerning the possibility of perfect obedience, tied to unity with Christ and a greater understanding of the divine, within other Quaker literature of the period. Early Quakers argued that such a state was immediately available to members of the community, following a process of convincement: as Tousley explains, Quakers believed that they had found “an experience of regeneration, an unshakeable unity with the indwelling Christ, through which the now fully convinced Friend is both justified and sanctified, or set free from sin, and has a new, intimate understanding of God’s will. Abiding in the love of Christ, the person is transformed, made obedient, and given the power to bear the Cross of Quaker discipline” (2013: 173). Though Christ is unable to sin, the regenerated Quaker can nevertheless attain a Christ-like moral status by coming to a state (aided by Christ’s presence within them) in which they no longer ever choose to sin. Like other Quakers of the period, though, Conway is clearly moving theologically towards a position in which growth towards perfection is gradual, rather than immediate, and finds its culmination in a future life, rather than in this one (though Conway finds some accommodation with the earlier Quaker view by situating the heavenly realm within our world). Gwyn has suggested that the term ‘realizing eschatology’ be attached to the view espoused by the early Quaker George Fox (see 2013: 205), and this could also be applied to Conway in a number of ways. First, the perfection of creatures is something that has already been realized for some: given that an infinite amount of time has already passed in the universe (2.1-4; 12f.), during which an infinite number of creatures have already been created, and the inevitability of salvation, through the purifying effect of suffering and creaturely activity, some creatures will have already achieved this heavenly state. Second, our preparation for this heavenly state is currently ongoing, through the presence of Christ within us and the purifying effects of life and its attendant suffering. Third, it is a state that will never be fully ‘realized’, in the sense that the journey towards infinite perfection will never cease.

Thus, Conway is not committed to the kind of ‘eternal return of the same’ through potentially multiple falls that Origen, who also argued for universal salvation within a framework of infinite time, has been accused of. Perhaps, however, Conway falls foul of the objection to Origen raised by Mühling (2015: 316) that not quite enough has been established here to explain why it is not possible for creatures to fall again. At the least, some sort of account of the purifying effect of suffering would be helpful in order to understand how this kind of irreversible heavenly state postulated by Conway is achievable. Though providing such an account is beyond the scope of this paper, Mercer has suggested (2012: 195f.) that part of the significance of suffering for Conway lies in its function of increasing the sympathy and unity both amongst creatures and with Christ, both in his historical and spiritual manifestations. Given that a heavenly state will consist in a greater union and harmony with Christ and other spirits, if suffering is a means to increasing this, it will be clear why it has such an important soteriological role for Conway.

Further, it is worth noting that the glorification of the creature as a whole includes both that of the soul and of the body, insofar as every spirit retains a body for itself, regardless of its current ontological state: “every spirit has its own body and every body its own spirit” (6.11; 39). As such, Conway can be seen as supporting a weak version of resurrection of the body in the afterlife, though this body is not necessarily one from a previous lifetime. However, such a body will certainly be transformed or glorified in the sense that such a body will also be at a high level of spirituality, suitable for a heavenly spirit. As Conway explains, each creature forms a body in line with its fundamental character (6.7; 35), and thus a heavenly spirit will have a body suited for the realm of perfect tranquillity. Conway’s commitment to a spirit-matter continuum, in which a ‘body’ can be at a high level of spirituality, allows her to posit a glorified, spiritualized body for heavenly spirits, which is ontologically closer to God than the body it has enjoyed in previous lifetimes. This sort of Neoplatonic approach, in which heavenly spirits inhabit aethereal bodies that are distinguishable from the kind of material bodies that they had in a different form of existence, is described by Almond as essentially reducing the resurrection of the body to the status of mere imagery and siding with Paul (who appears to mark a strong distinction between a resurrected and earthly body at 1 Cor. 15) against belief in the resurrection of the *same* body (see 1996: 136-140). However, due to Conway’s commitment to the spirit-matter continuum, the eschatology found in the *Principles* is able to find a middle approach, insofar as the body of a creature in the heavenly realm is both glorified and appropriate to that state, and yet it is continuous with (and not qualitatively distinct from) the bodies that the creature would have had in earlier lifetimes. Thus, Conway is able to both follow a Neoplatonic and Pauline approach, in which the heavenly spirit enjoys a glorified body, and a more heterodox approach in which there is some important continuity between an earthly body and an aerial one.

To recap, Conway posits a heavenly state in this world, in which a creature has achieved a high degree of goodness and spirituality. Such a state is characterised by a peaceful unity with Christ and other heavenly spirits, as well as an increased sensitivity to, and understanding of, the world. These heavenly spirits will feel the direct presence of Christ, and thereby the indirect presence of God, within them. Conway argues that all creatures can look forward to attaining such a state, given the purifying and spiritualizing effects of motion and suffering. Such a process of perfection is facilitated by the presence of higher spirits, including that of Christ, who is a soul that extends throughout all creation.

Taken as a whole, Conway’s account stands as part of a shift in Quaker eschatological thought from a focus on the now to a potential end-state in a future life. However, it is notable that this heavenly state is still very much part of this world and is an ongoing eternal process, a ‘realizing’ rather than a ‘realized’ eschatology. Conway’s commitment to universal salvation is also potentially a sign of the influence of Origenist thought that was prevalent in her intellectual circle, though her account of the purifying effect of suffering allows her to avoid the problem of a potential ‘second fall’ of creatures. Conway also retains some sense of the resurrection of the body, though one that is significantly high on the spirit-matter continuum that she posits at the heart of her ontology. In addition, it might be argued that Conway has effected an interesting reconciliation of both predestinationist theologies (insofar as it is ordained in advance that a creature will be saved) and a Pelagian approach that establishes perfection as an achievement of the use of free will. All in all, Conway offers us radical and original accounts of heaven and hell that interact in interesting ways with her other philosophical and theological commitments. Given its systematic nature, there is no doubt that continuing to investigate these accounts will lead to further insights into Conway’s philosophy in the *Principles*.

**4. Conclusion**

We have seen in this paper that Conway’s *Principles* contains accounts of heaven and hell that seek to redefine its role in a metaphysical system that emphasises God’s love, goodness and justice. Given that our sins can only be finite, and that God cannot be angry and instead only ever wishes the best for us, Conway rejects the notion of an eternal punishment in hell; rather, hell is reconceptualised as a temporary state in which a creature undergoes the purifying suffering that is required for them to be able to return to earthly life and continue moving towards salvation and unity with Christ. Further, heaven is posited as a state within this world that is characterised by both endless striving towards goodness and spiritual purity. A heavenly spirit is one who acts in harmony and unity with Christ (as an extended soul throughout all of creation) in becoming ever closer to the infinite perfection of God, as well as gaining in understanding of the divine. This is a state that all things in nature can look forward to achieving at some point in the future, given the purifying effects of motion and suffering that are inevitable features of life. In these accounts of heaven and hell, as I have argued, Conway responds creatively to shifting intellectual trends in both the Origenism of various members of her intellectual circle and the Quaker community that she became part of in the final years of her life.

Conway’s account of heaven and hell, and indeed the afterlife more generally, is one characterised by balance. As already mentioned, Conway seeks to incorporate both a predestinationist soteriology with giving a distinct and necessary role for free will in achieving salvation. In addition, a balance is struck between a morally dynamic and morally static afterlife: on the one hand, bodily death does not signal the end of potential moral development for a creature (even in a heavenly state, the creature continues on their infinite journey towards the perfection of God), and on the other, once a creature has achieved a heavenly state, there will be no backtracking towards sin and materiality. Further, Conway seeks to resolve tensions between theologies that, on the one hand, emphasize God’s justice, and on the other, emphasize God’s love. There is a system of divine reward and punishment in play here, but punishment is only ever undertaken for the benefit of a creature and will always fit the crime. In addition, all creatures will ultimately be saved and find glorification and tranquillity in unity with Christ, as an instrument of God.

We can therefore see in this account of heaven and hell an example of Conway’s penchant for syncretism in her philosophy, seeking to take what she sees as the insights in apparently competing philosophical and theological positions and reconciling them in a coherent system. Conway is also clearly attempting to give a secure rational basis for her accounts of heaven and hell, based both on theological arguments taken from reflections upon the nature and attributes of God and reflections on our experiences of the workings of nature. Such rational arguments, perhaps, could persuade those who have taken competing theological positions to reconcile their differences. Thus, it is clear that Conway is not just interested in unifying Jews, Muslims and Christians (as noted by Parageau 2018: 251-256), but also seeking to heal theological schisms within the Christian church itself, as well as with those on the heretical fringes of Christianity, such as Pelagians and Socinians. This syncretic approach is shared to some extent with colleagues and collaborators, such as Henry More and van Helmont, but results in Conway’s case in the unique and appealing philosophy that we find in her *Principles*.

**Bibliography**

Almond, Philip C. 1994. *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Anonymous. 1661. *A Letter of Resolution Concerning Origen and the Chief of his Opinions*. London.

Barbour, Hugh. 1964. *The Quakers in Puritan England*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Birch, Jonathan C.P. 2019. *Jesus in an Age of Enlightenment: Radical Gospels from Thomas Hobbes to Thomas Jefferson*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Conway, Anne. 1982. *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Loptson. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Conway, Anne. 1996. *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, eds. Taylor & Corse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gilbert, Pamela K. 1997. “The ‘Other’ Anne Finch: Lady Conway’s ‘Duelogue’ of Textual Selves.” *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 26: 15-26.

Gwyn, Douglas. 2013. “Quakers, Eschatology, and Time.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, edited by Angell & Dandelion, 202-217. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Head, Jonathan. 2020. *The Philosophy of Anne Conway: God, Creation and the Nature of Time.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hutton, Sarah. 2004. *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutton, Sarah. 2020. “Philosophy, Religion, and Heterodoxy in the Philosophy of Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, and Anne Conway.” *Church History and Religious Culture* 100 (2-3): 157-171.

Kempson, E.S. 2021. “Anne Conway’s Exemplary Engagement with Origenist Thought.” *Modern Theology* 38 (2): 389-418.

Lascano, Marcy. 2017. “Anne Conway on Liberty.” In *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Broad & Detlefsen, 60-87. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, Rhodri. 2006. “Of ‘Origenian Platonisme’: Joseph Glanvill on the Pre-existence of Souls.” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69 (2): 267-300.

Mercer, Christia. 2012. “Knowledge and Suffering in Early Modern Philosophy: G.W. Leibniz and Anne Conway.” In *Emotional Minds: The Passions and the Limits of Pure Inquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Ebbersmeyer, 179-206. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Moore, Rosemary. 2000. *The Light in their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain 1646-1666*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Mühling, Markus. 2015. *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Eschatology*, translated by Adams-Maßmann & Gilland. London: Bloomsbury.

Parageau, Sandrine. 2018. “Christ in Anne Conway’s *Principia* (1690): Metaphysics, Syncretism, and Female *Imitatio Christi*.” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 5 (2): 247-265.

Tousley, Nikki Coffey. 2013. “Sin, Convincement, Purity, and Perfection.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, edited by Angell & Dandelion, 172-186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walker, D.P. 1964. *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

1. This paper refers to the 1996 edition of Conway’s *Principles*, edited by Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse, by page number and section. All unattributed references are to this text. Details of this edition can be found in the Bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These elements of early Quaker theology are examined by Moore (2000: 75-87 *et passim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Gwyn explains (2013: 203-205), these eschatological hopes for the early Quaker community were particularly pronounced in the early writings of George Fox. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Barbour points to William Penn as a particularly notable example of this shift in Quaker theological methodology (see 1964: 244f.), and I argue that Conway’s *Principles* is also an illustration of this change. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The authorship of this text is unclear to this day: see Lewis (2006: 274-276) for a discussion of possible authors, though the most likely candidate is the Cambridge theologian, George Rust. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some scholars (for example, Hutton (2020: 170) & Gilbert (1999: 19)) have stated that Conway denies the existence of hell, but this is only the case if we reserve this term specifically for a place of eternal torment (as I think they do). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As Walker states (1964: 35-40), one of the main theological concerns regarding hell in this period concerned the sheer number of people who were usually taken to be damned, far beyond what would appear to be just and proportionate. Conway leaves open that there could be very few beings indeed who sin to such an extent that they are reborn into a hellish existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Conway denies that God has any passions, on the basis that they can be had only by a temporal being (1.5; 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. However, we may also wish to consider how earthly spirits in hell are able to suffer, given the contrast that Conway seems to draw between ‘nobler’ and lower creatures regarding their capacity for “feeling, perception, or knowledge” (9.6; 66). The important point to note here is that Conway does not deny such capacities to lower creatures *tout court*; rather, their capacities are diminished relative to higher creatures. In turn, this potentially points to another sense in which Conway lessens the severity of the punishment of hell in contrast to a more orthodox approach, insofar as the creatures in a hellish state will have a diminished capacity for feeling suffering. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A rejection of infinite punishment by God as fundamentally unjust is also found in the Helmontian text *Two Hundred Queries*, which was published alongside Conway’s *Principles* in its original Latin edition (see Hutton 2004: 206-212 for an extended discussion). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This kind of eschatological end-state for those who have achieved union with God is often thought to be signalled by Paul in this famous passage: “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end… For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully” (1 Cor. 13:9-12) - taken from *The New Revised Standard Version: Anglicized Edition*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This reading of Conway may seem to be contradicted by her claims regarding the necessity of a body for sensation: “if [creatures] did not have a body, [thoughts] could not be retained nor could we reflect on our own thoughts” (6.11; 39). However, when Conway refers to the ‘body’ of a creature, it is worth bearing in mind that this is in a relative sense to the spiritualized status of the controlling, principal spirit. In other words, the ‘body’ of a creature can also be in a highly spiritualized state, but it has to be at a lower point on the spirit-matter continuum in order for it to fulfil particular functions for the creature, such as retaining thoughts and memories. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Conway uses the Pauline terminology of adoption: see (4.4; 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In the Latin edition of Conway’s *Principles* (1982: 83), we find the verb ‘evadere’, which means to go forth or escape, and in many contexts implies specifically an upwards motion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In this way, creatures are able to become both more Christ-like, so that they only move towards the good, and more God-like, in that they take on a more spiritualized state. However, creatures do not *become* Christ, as they still have the possibility of acting on a bad reason for action, even though they *in fact* never do once they have reached this higher state. Following the analysis proposed by Head (2020: 148f.) of the distinction between Christ’s freedom and creaturely freedom, we can infer from the text that Christ, due to his nature, is only ever presented with good reasons for action, while creatures will always be confronted with both good and bad reasons for action (and in this way, the distinction in essence between Christ and creatures is preserved). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though Conway does not explicitly refer to Christ as an extended soul, it is arguably implied by the functions she attributes to her mediating principle with regard to its vivifying role throughout all of creation. Hutton (2004: 199-202) provides a useful overview of Conway’s account of Christ as an extended soul, in comparison with George Keith’s Christology and Henry More’s ‘Spirit of Nature’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Birch discusses the potential materialist pitfalls for various radical religious viewpoints of the period, including Quakerism, that emphasised theological immanentism: see Birch (2019: 62f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This quote comes just after Conway’s reference to the ‘realm of perfect tranquillity’, noted earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As Gwyn notes (2013: 205), early Quaker eschatology, including that of George Fox, offered a vision of unity in ‘eternal oneness’ with both Christ and fellow believers. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For an in-depth examination of Conway’s account of creaturely freedom, see Lascano (2017: 166-173). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)