Anne Conway on Omnipresence – Jonathan Head

Abstract

This paper offers a discussion of Conway’s account of omnipresence, as found in her only published work, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690). It is argued that Conway proposes a radical approach to understanding the nature of the divine presence in the world. After delineating different approaches to the question of omnipresence that can be found in the philosophical and theological tradition, it is argued that Conway offers a significant and original account that contrasts with the more traditional notions of divine presence based on God’s location, knowledge, power, and creative activity. This account is informed by an exploration of Conway’s underlying Platonist commitments and her arguments regarding the need for a mediating principle, ‘Christ’ or ‘Adam Kadmon’, between God and creation. Following this, it is argued that there is a notion of omnipresence to be found in Conway’s philosophy centred on a Platonist-inspired ‘participation-presence’, which offers a dynamic sense of the growing presence of God in the world. The paper then concludes with some more general reflections upon the manner in which Conway’s account of omnipresence fits into the wider intellectual climate of the time, including radical reimaginings of both the nature of God and his presence in the world.

Key words

Anne Conway, omnipresence, God, Platonism, Christ

1. Introduction

There are many aspects of the philosophy of Anne Conway that have yet to receive much in the way of scholarly attention, one of which is her understanding of the nature of the presence of God in the world. A closer examination of Conway’s account of omnipresence is worthwhile for a number of reasons. First, as I will argue in this paper, Conway has a significant and distinctive understanding of the nature of omnipresence that illuminates in a number of ways the radical nature of her thought. Second, the nature of omnipresence is a topic that is still debated by scholars today, and so Conway’s account could stand as a useful dialogue-partner for contemporary scholars working in this area. Third, considering Conway’s account of omnipresence, and the manner in which this account intersects with other aspects of her philosophy (such as the nature of God, the need for a metaphysical ‘middle principle’, and the goodness of creatures), can help illuminate the distinctive place she has within intellectual currents of the period, which included wide-ranging debates regarding the nature of God and the presence of the divine in the world. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the nature of omnipresence through Conway’s account of the presence of God in the world and the place that Conway has in the general philosophical tradition of reflection on this question.

In the first section that follows, I begin by delineating four different (and not necessarily competing) ways of approaching the question of omnipresence, which will help guide and focus our examination of Conway’s account of divine presence in the world. I argue that we can usefully approach omnipresence through these four different lenses, centred respectively around knowledge, power, sustaining or creating, and participation. We will see elements of all four of these models of omnipresence at work in Conway’s philosophy as found in her only published work, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (*Principles* – first published in 1690), often in ways that reveals the radical and refreshingly unorthodox nature of her thought.

Following this, I consider the role that Conway’s middle metaphysical principle, which we can call ‘Christ’ or ‘Adam Kadmon’, plays in her ontology. This is a significant question for our purposes given that the presence of this mediating figure throughout all creation may appear to signal a limiting of divine omnipresence in some important respects. I will argue that the role that Christ plays in nature does indeed shape Conway’s understanding of omnipresence in important ways. In particular, I discuss how Conway’s argument of the need for a mediating principle between God and nature reveals a significant limitation both with regard to what I call the ‘knowledge-presence’ of God in the world and the possibility of intimate connections between the divine and individual creatures.

In the next section, I then go on to consider the presence of God in nature in terms of his control of events and his sustaining of all things in existence. I argue that, though the textual evidence is not entirely clear, there are certainly significant suggestions to be found that Conway is limiting the presence of God in the world through both direct control of events and his creative activity, partly due to the mediating presence of Christ and her understanding of a timeless, passion-less God.

Finally, through the prism of Conway’s underlying metaphysical commitments, I argue that she provides a distinctive sense of omnipresence in the world that I call ‘participation-presence’. Through the radical perfectibility of creatures, and the universal presence of a middle principle that mirrors the divine nature in various ways, Conway offers a dynamic sense of the growing presence of God in the world. I then conclude with some more general reflections upon the manner in which Conway’s account of omnipresence fits into the wider intellectual climate of the time, including radical reimaginings of both the nature of God and his presence in the world.

2. Knowledge, Power, Location, Creation, and Participation

In order to facilitate our understanding of Conway’s account of omnipresence, it may be worth delineating more clearly various aspects of omnipresence that have been considered in the philosophical tradition. What it precisely means for God to be present at a place could be given different answers, which do not necessarily compete with each other. These different aspects also reveal the manner in which we can approach omnipresence from two viewpoints: the first, in terms of the metaphysical nature of God’s omnipresence, and second, in terms of the activities that perhaps partly constitute God’s presence in the world.

We will begin with the former by considering the notion of ‘*location-presence*’, which would use the notion of presence univocally between God and his creatures (whether understood as more ethereal spirits or as material bodies). According to such a notion, something is located at a region if it is contained by that region. While it might seem strange to think of God as being contained by a spatial region and indeed of him being spread across different regions of space (that might be taken to imply that God has parts, despite being simple), we can consider a notion of omnipresence that has recently been attributed to Conway in a recent paper by Emily Thomas (2017, 999): what I will call here ‘*holenmerical-presence*’. On this view, potentially with regard to both moments in time and points in space, God is both wholly present there and yet also wholly present throughout the whole of creation. One advantage of this view is that we do not have to think of God as ‘spread out’ in time or space and thus as potentially having parts (which would violate the perfect simplicity or unity of God) and neither do we have to think of God as exclusively contained in a particular moment or spatial region (the divine is wholly present there, but also wholly present everywhere). Thomas argues that this is a plausible interpretation of Conway’s account of omnipresence, at least across time, given her claims that God is both timeless and in time[[1]](#footnote-1) and it is a view adopted in at least some limited way in some texts by her philosophical mentor and friend, Henry More[[2]](#footnote-2).

There are certainly merits to Thomas’ proposal, though as is unfortunately often the case given the brevity of Conway’s *Principles*, there is no direct textual evidence in favour of, or against, this interpretation. Though Conway does indeed state that God is “in time” (2.5, 14)[[3]](#footnote-3) and is “present in everything most closely and intimately in the highest degree” (1.3, 9), this does not necessarily imply the kind of literal account of omnipresence offered by the holenmerical interpretation. There is also arguably something of a tension between a holenmerical reading of Conway, the relational accounts of both space and time we find in the *Principles*, and Conway’s desire to emphasise the distinction between God and creation. First, while it is relatively easy to conceive how God might be literally present in a spatio-temporal ‘container’ that exists independently of any creatures and their activities, it is more difficult to understand literal presence with regard to mere spatio-temporal relations. On such a view, in order for God to be literally in time and space, he would seemingly have to enter into spatio-temporal relations with creatures, which Conway may deny. For one thing, time is simply “the successive motion or operation of creatures” (2.6, 14), a clear statement of a relationist view of time that only refers to creatures. Given that God is entirely absent from time, on this view, it is difficult to see how God could be present within a particular moment of time. Further, as we see throughout the *Principles*, Conway is keen to emphasise the extent to which God is not part of creation: for example, it is argued that God cannot have any passions, as this would mean that there was a temporal aspect to his being (1.5, 9).

Further, the question of Conway’s intellectual debt to Henry More is a complicated one, as there are significant differences in their philosophies[[4]](#footnote-4) such that we should be cautious before assuming that Conway has been influenced by More in a specific way[[5]](#footnote-5): indeed, as Borcherding writes, “Conway certainly did not merely follow More but over time developed into one of his most acute critics” (2019, 15). In order to order to avoid the problems that location and holenmerical-presence readings of Conway lead to, I argue that a more fruitful route would be to avoid seeking to attribute either notion of omnipresence to Conway here, and to turn instead to other possible approaches to considering omnipresence that can be found in the philosophical tradition, linked to various activities undertaken by the divine. As we shall see, we have much more textual evidence to consider in this regard.

On this approach, we can first talk about ‘*knowledge-presence’*: God is present at a place where he has immediate knowledge of whatever occurs there. As Wierenga notes (2013, 330), this is the position that appears to be taken by Anselm in the *Proslogium*, where it is argued that spirits can be multiply-located by being able to wholly sense in more than one place. By this model, God can be located at all places by being able to directly ‘perceive’ all things at all places and thereby have perfect knowledge of them. So, omnipresence is fundamentally connected to God’s omniscience on this view: the facts that God is present everywhere and that he knows all that it is possible for him to know are inextricably intertwined.

Second, we can consider ‘*power-presence*’: God is present at a place where he can control whatever takes place there. Swinburne has explained this in terms of a ‘basic action’: “God is supposed to be able to move any part of the physical universe directly; he does not need to use one part of the universe in order to make another part move. He can make any part move as an instrumentally basic action, merely by performing the causally basic action of having the intention that it should move, without the need to do so by (non-intentionally) causing any brain events or other physical events that in turn produce the movement” (2016, 112f.). God is present in a place by being able to directly affect all events that take place there without any need for intermediaries. This appears to be the account preferred by Aquinas, who sees omnipresence as an expression of God’s power, rather than of his knowledge (see Hudson 2008, 201f.).

Third, we can focus on God’s activity of sustaining all things in existence: so, God is present in all those regions at which he is sustaining something in existence (which can be extended even to empty regions of space, if such things exist). I will call this ‘*sustaining-presence*’. This presence is contained insofar as it is limited to the extent of the created universe, though it allows for God to also transcend the created universe in a timeless, eternal existence (as Leftow puts it, we might prefer to think of omnipresence as being “God’s way to contain space rather than the way space contains God” (1989, 326)). Descartes appears to have supported such a view, as he views God’s role in both continuous creation and motion as guaranteeing divine presence in all things in nature (see Gorham 2004).

In addition to these more standard ways of considering the nature of omnipresence, I argue that there is another sense that we can consider, what I will call ‘*participation-presence*’, and this sense will also be important as we consider Conway’s account. This notion of presence relies heavily upon the underlying Platonism of Conway’s philosophy, which has been discussed by various scholars, including Sarah Hutton (2020) and Christia Mercer (2015). I will discuss in more detail how this notion of omnipresence is found in Conway’s philosophy later, but for now, a more general account will suffice. Given the manner in which being emanates through a metaphysical hierarchy in a Platonist system, all levels of being will to a varying extent reflect and participate in those higher levels. Thus, the presence of higher metaphysical levels can be found in lower levels by the extent to which beings at these lower levels participate in them. In a recent discussion of Neoplatonic participation, Rudi A. te Velde describes how this notion manifested in the Christian tradition: “participation is used in connection with creation and the causal relationship between God and the world of creatures. Especially where God, in a Platonic fashion, was conceived of in terms of Goodness Itself, the creative source of all existence, the term participation was likely to be used in a causal sense of derivation and dependency” (2021, 123). Participation is used in a Christian context to indicate the manner in which the effects of the divine nature can be discerned within creation to varying degrees, signalling our dependency on this perfect being through God’s creative and sustaining action.

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider Anne Conway’s Platonism in detail, it is worth considering her emanative account of creation, which is outlined in Chapter II of the *Principles*. Here, God’s creative action is described as a communication and overflowing of divine goodness and love: “For God is infinitely good, loving, and bountiful; indeed, he is goodness and charity itself, the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty. In what way is it possible for that fountain not to flow perpetually and to send forth living waters? For will not that ocean overflow in its perpetual emanation and continual flux for the production of creatures? For the goodness of God is communicated and multiplied by its own nature” (2.4, 13). As we can see here, creation is characterised by Conway as an overflowing of goodness, in a manner reminiscent of Platonic imagery, in which the flow of being from God cascades down different metaphysical levels, distinguished by their closeness and similarity to the source (see, for example, Plotinus’ reference in the *Enneads* to the perfection of the One leading to the generation of the Intellect – “it in a way overflows and its superabundance has made something else” (2018, 519, 5.2.1)). As Lascano explains, the overflowing of divine goodness fundamentally shapes the nature of creatures, and indeed creation as a whole: “Created beings are the result of God’s emanation of his properties into finite spirits. The properties that God communicates to creation are spirit, light, life, goodness, holiness, justice, and wisdom” (2013, 328). The nature of creatures reflects the emanative nature of the creative act, in that they are in effect the imperfect reflections of the perfect divine attributes.

For Conway, God’s overflowing goodness leads to an infinite creation comprised of beings who sit on a continuum or hierarchy separated both ontologically (in terms of how incorporeal or material a being is) and morally (in terms of a being’s goodness), with those beings both more incorporeal and morally better at a metaphysically closer level to God than others[[6]](#footnote-6). However, no matter how distant from God a creature becomes on this continuum, they can never become entirely material and evil, due to the fact that they are a product of an overflowing perfect goodness[[7]](#footnote-7). Crucially, for our purposes at this point, participation signals a two-way relation: it not only indicates our dependency upon the divine, but also the manner in which the divine is to be found manifested within us (and from Conway’s perspective, across all of nature). Our participation in the divine is strengthened by mirroring the perfect nature of God in ourselves and it is a link between God and creature that can never be severed, as far as Conway is concerned. The significance of this unbreakable link between God and creature, based on Conway’s emanative account of creation, for her understanding of omnipresence will be considered in more detail further on in this paper.

First, though, we need to consider an important part of Conway’s philosophy that we have yet to discuss and will have an important impact on her account of omnipresence, namely, the positing of a metaphysical middle principle between God and creation that we can call ‘Christ’.

3. The Middle Principle and Knowledge-Presence

One aspect of Conway’s philosophy that seems to reflect a limiting of the notion of divine omnipresence is the positing of a metaphysical middle principle, which can be called ‘Christ’ or “the celestial Adam, or the first man Adam Kadmon, the great priest, the husband or betrothed of the church, or as Philo Judaeus called him, the first-born son of God” (5.1, 23). This middle principle is understood by Conway to be a spirit that permeates all things in creation (see 5.4, 26, where Conway states that Christ “must be present everywhere”) and as a result of its universal presence in all things, it is able to fulfil a number of different roles[[8]](#footnote-8). The function that the middle principle plays in Conway’s ontology is instructive with regard to her understanding of the presence of God in creation. As we shall see, there is a distance between God and creation that requires the use of Christ as a mediating instrument that establishes various links between the two. However, given Conway’s view of the necessity of such a mediator with creation, it seems that Conway is limiting the presence of God in the world somewhat, though in what exact ways requires some examination.

An important facet of the middle principle’s role for our purposes is that of a ‘mediator’ between God and creation[[9]](#footnote-9). Why such a mediator is required takes a little unpicking, but nevertheless Conway is clear that one is required “by the very nature of things because otherwise a gap would remain [between God and creation] and one extreme would have been united with the other extreme without a mediator, which is impossible and against the nature of things, as is apparent throughout the entire universe” (5.3, 25). In what way is it ‘apparent throughout the entire universe’ that a mediator would be required between God and creation? What is it about ‘the very nature of things’ that requires a middle principle?

To explain this point, we must look to Conway’s account of love and sympathy between all things in creation[[10]](#footnote-10), as well as the role that mediating spirits have to play in all interactions between creatures. Conway argues that each creature is a collection of spirits, under the command of a principal spirit (see 6.11, 39) and that there are an infinite number of spirits in creation (on the basis that God would wish to spread his goodness as far as he is able – see 3.4, 16). On this basis, Conway states that we can understand each creature as being composed of an infinite number of creatures within themselves, which can be emanated from one creature to another, forging a sympathetic link between them[[11]](#footnote-11): “Moreover, a consideration of the infinite divisibility of everything into always smaller parts is not an inane or useless theory, but of the very greatest use for understanding the causes and reasons of things and for understanding how all creatures from the highest to the lowest are separably united one to another by their subtler mediating parts, which come between them and which are emanations from one creature to another” (3.10, 20). Crucially, the interaction is possible only through a chain of spirits at varying degrees on the spirit-matter continuum: “The most subtle and spiritual body can be united with a very gross and dense body by means of certain mediating bodies, which share the subtlety and crassness in varying degrees between the two extremes” (8.3, 59). So, genuine interaction between different beings requires that there is not a chasm between them on the spirit-matter continuum: Conway simply seems to assume that two beings need to be close enough to each other on the continuum for genuine interaction to be possible. Having established that this is how interaction between creatures must work, Conway can then apply the same model to interaction between God and creation: God and creation by themselves are too far apart on the spirit-matter continuum for interaction and communication between them to be possible. There needs to be a mediating body between them that can facilitate this interaction, which is the middle principle, Christ.

We also need to bear in mind Conway’s theory of the basis of love and sympathy in a recognition of similarity. Conway writes that, “the basis of all love or desire, which brings one thing to another, is that they are of one nature and substance, or that they are like each other or of one mind, or that one has its being from another” (7.3, 46). While the recognition of another as being the reason for your existence is sufficient for love to grow, the recognition of similarity with that being will strengthen that love even more: Conway claims that, for example, if a parent’s child “[looks] like them, either in body, spirit, or manner, love for them grows greater because of this” (7.3, 46). Leaving the question of whether this is actually true to one side, this has clear implications for the question of a creature’s love for God, i.e. such a love may be based on the recognition of God as the source of all being, but will be strengthened by an understanding of the similarities that they have with the divine and indeed by becoming more like God in some way. However, there is a barrier to this, as God is a being quite unlike us: all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect in every way.

To try to cover this distance to some extent, and to allow a creature to recognise the similarities it does share with God, Christ is required to facilitate this connection and thereby strengthen the creature’s love of God: “If, however, an image of a lovable God were more widely known, such as he truly is and shows himself in all his dealings with his creatures, and if our souls could inwardly feel and taste [God], as he is charity and kindness itself and as he reveals his intrinsic self through the light and spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ in the hearts of men, then, and only then, will men finally love God above everything and acknowledge him as the most loving, just, merciful God” (6.9, 37). The presence of Christ within allows us to gain a greater sense of the loving, personal God, and this can deepen our love for him beyond what we might have for a mere source of being with whom we have very little in common. When we feel the love and goodness of God within us, via the workings of Christ, we recognise the personal qualities of the divine that we share with God, what Conway calls the communicable divine attributes of “spirit, light, life, that he is good, holy, just, wise, etc.” (7.2, 45). Christ therefore facilitates our recognition of fundamental similarity with the source of our being, God, and allows our love for the divine to deepen.

Thus, Christ is required in order to both facilitate interaction and greater love between God and creation, in a manner which may seem to suggest that the divine presence in all things is not as strong (or perhaps as all-encompassing) as is often supposed in the major theist traditions, despite Conway’s protestations to the contrary, such as when she states that both “God and Christ alone as creators… possess the privilege of being intimately present in creatures” (7.4, 50). Further, Conway is adamant that the middle principle does not undermine divine omnipresence: “no one supposes that the son is the kind of intermediary between God and creatures, which implies that God himself is not immediately present in all creatures. Indeed, he is immediately present in all things and immediately fills all things. In fact, he works immediately in everything in his own way” (5.4, 25). We should not understand the mediating principle as standing *between* God and creation, permeating all things in a way that removes the need for the direct presence of God. Thus, both God and Christ are present in all things.

So why the need for a middle principle? Conway argues that God requires a mediator in order to achieve some things that would otherwise not be possible, given the ontological distance between a perfect God and an imperfect creation: “this must be understood in respect to that union and communication which creatures have with God so that although God works immediately in everything, yet he nevertheless uses this same mediator as an instrument through which he works together with creatures” (5.4, 25). The mediating principle is required in order to facilitate ‘union’, ‘communication’ and cooperation between God and creation. Thus, as Parageau has pointed out, Christ has an important balancing role in Conway’s ontology: “the function of the middle being is both to separate *and* join God and the creatures, preventing a conflation of the two while ensuring continuity of substance” (2018, 250). Conway is keen to avoid the dangers of pantheism (Spinoza is criticised for “[confounding] God and creatures and [making] one being of both” (9.3, 64)), of a Hobbesian materialism (which may even extend to making God a material being, alongside all his creation[[12]](#footnote-12)), and of an infinitely distant God. Given the requirement for a certain amount of closeness on the spirit-matter continuum for sympathetic interaction between two beings, it is clear why Conway believes a mediating principle between God and creation is required to forge a substantial link between the two while having enough distance to avoid reducing God to nature.

However, despite Conway’s protestations, there is undeniably a distance that the mediator is placing between God and creation, and this could potentially be undermining omnipresence in various ways. Let us return to the question of knowledge-presence, the idea that God is present in all places by having direct knowledge of everything that takes place in them. Conway holds that God is omniscient, as part of the list of divine attributes that begins the *Principles* (see 1.1, 9), but given what has been noted above regarding Christ’s necessary role in ‘communication’ between God and creation, it seems that this perfect knowledge is not based on a direct mode of apprehension. Conway writes that, “God’s knowledge is neither received nor aroused by creatures, but is innately in him and comes from him” (7.4, 54). Divine knowledge does not come from any sort of direct contact with each part of creation, but is rather embedded within God innately, perhaps on the basis that God would know infallibly what would take place in creation through his timeless creative action.

God does not even have the kind of knowledge a timeless being might have from observing all events in a kind of ‘eternal now’; rather, his knowledge is embedded in his own perfect nature. Conway writes, “In God there is an idea… through which he knows himself as well as all other things and, indeed, all creatures were made or created according to this very idea or word” (1.6, 10). While not a clear denial of knowledge-presence by Conway, this does suggest that God’s knowledge is entirely grounded in his original, internal creative action. Nevertheless, as creatures, God wishes us to feel his knowing presence within us, hence the need for a created being, the middle principle, who permeates all things and knows our deeds. As we saw earlier, Conway describes Christ’s role as an image of God, and thus as a path to coming to cognize something of the divine nature within us (see 6.9, 37). The knowledge-presence of God is thus replaced in Conway’s ontology by the knowledge-presence of Christ within us, who is a witness to our deeds and indeed a being that plays an active role as we seek to do that which is best (for example, Christ is described by Conway as directly sanctifying within us good spirits that can act as “a vehicle or chariot in [our] struggle and conflict with wicked spirits” (8.3, 59)).

It is worth noting that this model of God’s omniscience also points towards the Platonist aspect of Conway’s philosophy. Looking to Plotinus again, knowledge at higher levels of the metaphysical hierarchy is conceptualised as reflexive in nature. At the level of Intellect (the highest level at which there is thought[[13]](#footnote-13)), its knowledge is only gained through reflection on itself (its primary activity is entirely self-contained), and there is no sense in which it would have direct knowledge of what takes place in the realm that we inhabit[[14]](#footnote-14). Plotinus characterises thinking at the level of the Intellect as, “a self-awareness of the whole when many parts come together in the identical thing, that is, whenever [it] thinks itself, which is actually thinking in the principal sense” (2018, 569, 5.3.13). The Intellect thinks by thinking itself, which reveals to itself the eternal forms of all things: as Gerson describes it, in Plotinus’ ontology, “The life that the activity of Intellect is is self-reflexive intellection in which an agent is cognitively identical with all the Forms, thereby eternally attaining its good so far as it is able” (1994, 59). The upshot of this is that the Intellect’s thinking is ultimately entirely internal, even though the objects of the resulting knowledge can point beyond themselves.

Thus, in the Christian Platonist context of Conway’s philosophy, there is no sense in which God has knowledge-presence as defined earlier in this paper, given that he does not have immediate knowledge of that which takes place in creation; rather, his knowledge of creation is based on a self-reflexive action that is internal to his own being. As we have seen, Conway seeks to bridge the gap this could establish between God and creation through the knowledge-presence of Christ, a soul that is intimately present in everything that occurs in creation, including in our deeds, both good and bad. In enjoying this kind of knowledge, Christ also fulfils his role of offering the clearest image of God available in creation, in having a knowledge of all things that take place in creation. Christ is able to approach the scope of knowledge had by God in his timeless, self-reflexive state. Further, by feeling the presence of Christ within us, we are given a sense of the overwhelming knowledge enjoyed both by the middle principle and by the divine itself. Conway describes Christ as “the perfect and substantial image of God’s word”, God’s “vehicle and organ” (4.2, 21), and thus as representing God in creation in a way that reveals the divine intimately to us.

4. Creation and Divine Power

As we saw in the previous section, despite Conway’s claims that she does not undermine divine omnipresence, there is certainly at least one sense in which God is not present in creation in the manner traditionally understood in the Christian tradition; namely, God does not have knowledge-presence in the world. Instead, this gap between God and creation is filled by the middle principle, Christ, who does have direct knowledge of all things that takes place in the world, and in that way mirrors the omniscience that God does have (though this omniscience is based on an entirely self-reflexive act in the latter case). In this section, I will consider the notions of power-presence and sustaining-presence that were introduced earlier and the extent to which they are found in Conway’s philosophy. If we find that they are also limited somewhat in Conway’s philosophy, we will be building quite a significant case for the argument that she significantly undermines the notion of omnipresence in the system she offers in the *Principles*.

We will begin by turning to the notion of sustaining-presence. Conway describes the manner in which God holds all things in existence in this way: “there is spirit or will in God, which comes from him and which is in terms of substance or essence nevertheless one with him, through which creatures receive their essence and activity; for creatures have their essence and existence purely from him because God, whose will agrees with his most infinite knowledge, wishes them to exist” (1.7, 10). God wills all things into existence and sustains their activity, as part of the ‘overflowing goodness’ we saw earlier. We can therefore see quite a straightforward sense in which omnipresence is affirmed, insofar as God is present in all things at all moments, sustaining their existence.

It is worth noting that this does not make omnipresence ‘gappy’ in any way (which would arguably be a contradiction in terms). In other words, God’s sustaining-presence is not spaced-out across different creatures, with some gaps where nothing exists except empty space. The reason for this is that Conway is committed to nature being as full as it could be, with an infinite number of spirits that have existed for an infinite amount of time. The immutability and perfect goodness of God entails both that “creatures always were and always will be… [for] an infinity of times” (2.5, 13), for God ceasing to create would mean a change within him, and a perfectly good being would want to share his goodness with as many creatures as possible. Given that there is no obvious contradiction in the idea that God creates an infinite number of creatures over an infinite amount of time, Conway reasons that he must have done so. In addition, given that Conway allows that there is no lower limit to the size of spirits, including those mediating spirits between creatures that I mentioned earlier, it seems likely that all spaces are filled with spirits that are beyond our perception. Thus, God’s sustaining-presence can be found in all parts of creation, according to Conway.

However, the situation is perhaps not as straightforward as that, as it could be that God’s sustaining-presence in nature is not as direct as it might seem at first glance. Again, we have to look to the role of Christ in Conway’s ontology for some clarification (and, indeed, complication). Not only does Christ provide an important mediating role in nature, but also a creative role too[[15]](#footnote-15). Conway describes Christ as that being “through whom all things are said to have been made” (4.1, 21). Further, Conway states that, “it is said that all things are contained in him 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” (4.3, 22). We must be wary of reading too much from these statements, given Conway is signalling that this is *what has been said of* Christ, but nevertheless there is a clear implication that she thinks there is something truthful in the creative role that is being attributed to Christ through such language. There is then the possibility of reading Conway’s account of creation as a two-step process: first, God generates Christ[[16]](#footnote-16), and second, creatures are created through Christ. Such a view fits with a more stringently Platonist reading of Conway, in which each level in the metaphysical hierarchy gives rise to the next (though with all higher levels preserved in some sense in the lower levels). Whether Conway is committing herself to such a view of creation is not entirely clear from the text, though it is certainly not too much of a stretch to read this from the *Principles*.

As a result, the status of God’s sustaining-presence in nature as part of Conway’s philosophy is not entirely clear. It could be that Conway straightforwardly attributes a role to God as sustaining everything in existence at all points and at all times, and God is therefore present throughout all creation in this way, or again, as with knowledge-presence, the presence of the divine in nature is mediated by the middle principle, Christ.

We can now turn to the question of power-presence in Conway’s philosophy, that is, the understanding of omnipresence as consisting of God having control over events that take place in any region of creation at any time. Conway certainly thinks that God is all-powerful, “it is contrary to the wisdom and goodness of God or any of his attributes for him to be unable to do something” (3.9, 20). However, whether God does indeed engage in the kind of direct control of events often posited by the notion of ‘power-presence’ in Conway’s system is not entirely clear. At no point in the *Principles* does Conway claim the actual occurrence of direct divine intervention in the world, beyond the ongoing creative action of God, and claims regarding divine power, such as that God “works immediately in everything” (5.4, 25), is characterised as taking place indirectly through the immediate activity of the middle principle, Christ. Thus, it is not clear that there is a notion of power-presence to be found in Conway’s system. Of course, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, particularly in a text that we know was edited in an incomplete way from Conway’s notebooks following her death. As such, we cannot firmly establish a clear position in the *Principles* regarding the notions of power-presence and sustaining-presence, though the role of Christ certainly suggests a reduced direct presence of God in the world through these various activities. Nevertheless, I argue in the following section that there is a notion of divine presence that can bypass the mediating role of Christ, namely, participation-presence, and thus this can form the basis for a more robust form of omnipresence in Conway’s philosophy.

5. Participation-Presence and the Realisation of the Good

According to Conway, great transformations can take place as a result of a creature doing good. As part of the divine reward for fulfilling God’s will through our actions, Conway writes, we “can change into very different kinds of things, and this happens through the same process and order of that divine operation which God gave to all things as law or justice” (5.7, 27). What kinds of transformations does Conway envisage? Very significant ones indeed, for Conway argues that an individual soul can form part of a creature that has very different forms in different lifetimes[[17]](#footnote-17). The distinction between different natural kinds is finite and can be overcome by a creature, depending on how it acts (so, as an example, a particularly virtuous horse could in principle be reborn in a future life as a human being: see 6.6, 32f.). A creature can therefore be reborn in a higher state as a “reward and prize for their good deeds” (6.7, 35). This transformation is made possible by the process of how a body is generated at the beginning of a particular lifetime: whatever spirit is most powerful at that point is able to form a new body in its own image (so a beastly, evil spirit will form the body of a beast, while a better spirit will take a higher form: see 6.7, 36).

Conway conceptualises this movement up and down different forms of life as taking place on the spirit-matter continuum: the reward for good behaviour is being able to take a more ethereal, less material form. Thus, a virtuous human being can hope for the reward of being reborn in an angel-like state (or a state that is closer to an angel than the one they currently enjoy): Conway asks, “is it not just that if a man lives a pure and holy life on this earth, like the heavenly angels, that he is elevated to the rank of angels after he dies and becomes like them, since the angels also rejoice over him?” (6.7, 35). As Harrison has noted, the fact that creatures can be reborn at both higher and lower levels of creation reveals the broad scope of moral responsibility across all nature, as far as Conway is concerned: “all creatures become morally responsible. Animals are subject to God’s law, its sanctions and rewards… Animals, then, are to a degree responsible for their ‘manner of existence’” (1993, 541).

This pattern of rebirth takes place over many lifetimes, and for all creatures ultimately ends up in an overall movement towards a more spiritualized state, as the motion and suffering that is an inevitable effect of life has a gradual spiritualizing effect. With regard to suffering, Conway writes that, “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). Suffering in some way helps the creatures to escape from the grosser, more material state in which it finds itself, so it can continue on its journey back up the spirit-matter continuum towards a more spiritualized state. Motion has the same effect, as far as Conway is concerned: “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). All crassness in a creature is essentially worn away by its motion, which accumulates over numerous lifetimes in such a way that all creatures will eventually achieve a higher, spiritualized state.

There is thus a guarantee in Conway’s philosophy that each creature will eventually reach a higher state in which they both take on a more spiritualized, less corporeal form. They will also be more virtuous and loving: as we saw earlier, Conway bases love on the recognition of similarity, so the more virtuous a creature becomes, the more they will love the goodness of God, Christ and creation as a whole. Conway states that, “those creatures which are most like God love him more and are more loved by him”, (7.3, 47) and that love is spread to Christ and other creatures in the “region of perfect tranquillity” that those who have achieved goodness and a “perfect union with Christ” (5.7, 27) will ultimately enjoy. Our love for God (and therefore our loving nature more generally) will grow as we become more like him. There is thus a clear link between our participation in the divine increasing along with our loving nature.

Thus, all creatures can look forward to a state in which they are more virtuous, more spiritualized, more enlivened, more loving: in other words, given Conway’s understanding of the divine attributes, more *God-like* (as well as more Christ-like, given that Conway views such creatures as ascending on a metaphysical and moral hierarchy on which God and Christ occupy higher positions). Conway writes of creatures attaining “further perfection and greater participation in divine goodness” (6.5, 32), as a result of moving up the spirit-matter continuum. This is not to say, of course, that creatures can become anything like the infinitely perfect being that God is, but they can nevertheless strive to become more like God both morally and ontologically. As such, in the same way that Christ reveals an image of God in the world by only moving towards the good (Conway states that he has “the power of moving only from one good to another” (5.3, 24)), highly-spiritualized creatures also progressively reveal God in the world through their own forms and actions.

It is now at this point that we can return to the notion of participation-presence that I introduced earlier. As I argued, one of the ways in which God can be present in the world in a Platonist context is through lower beings exemplifying and participating in the perfect nature of the divine, though inevitably to an imperfect degree. We have seen that, for Conway, the presence of Christ throughout all creation brings God and creation closer together in an intimate way, though without violating the inevitable gap there will always be between a perfect being and an imperfect creation. Given the inevitable journey of each creature towards a more God-like state, we can see that God’s participation-presence is something that is overall increasing in each individual creature as they go through many lifetimes. As individual creatures approach a more spiritualized and virtuous existence, they themselves exemplify and participate in God’s perfect goodness to an ever-greater degree. This leads in turn to a more dynamic view of God’s presence in the world, as this sense in which God is present in the world is continually growing throughout all creation.

However, this dynamic view of omnipresence is not a simple one of moving from a small to a large amount throughout creation. Given Conway’s various other metaphysical commitments, there already an infinite number of creatures who have achieved the highly-spiritualized state of ‘union with Christ’ mentioned above. As we have seen, Conway argues that ‘creator’ being one of God’s necessary attributes implies that he will seek to create as much as he can (see 2.5, 13) and thus “an infinity of worlds or creatures was made by God” (3.4, 16), as well as this creative action taking place over an infinite amount of time. As a result, the process of creatures achieving ‘union with Christ’ is something that an infinite number of creatures have already done over an infinite period of time: indeed, the world is full of such beings (we just cannot see them, given their ethereality and the swiftness of their motions (see 5.7, 27)).

There is thus both a static and a dynamic aspect to how this aspect of omnipresence is found in Conway’s ontology. On the one hand, participation-presence overall grows in each individual creature over multiple lifetimes, and on the other, creation is already full of beings (both Christ and highly-spiritualized creatures) who exemplify this kind of presence in the world. There is also the universal presence of Christ, who, as a spirit that only ever acts towards the good, participates in the divine in the closest way possible for a being who is not God. Therefore, in Conway’s ontology, the world is filled with beings who are participating intimately in the divine, and this presence can be felt by all creatures to differing levels in an obscure way. In this manner, Conway finds a route to maintaining a strong sense of omnipresence in creation that is both true to her underlying Platonist commitments and desire to maintain the right balance between pantheism and an unbridgeable divide between God and creatures.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, in her *Principles*, Anne Conway offers a multifaceted account of the presence of God in the world that reflects her various commitments regarding (amongst other things) the emanative nature of creation, the need for a mediating principle between God and creation, and the possibility of the radical perfectibility of creatures. Though she denies knowledge-presence of God in the world, with omniscience conceived of as an entirely self-reflexive act, there is still nevertheless room for the divine in nature in various ways. God has a presence in the world by sustaining and having power over all things (though the extent to which this is limited by mediation through Christ is not entirely clear from the text). In addition, creatures themselves, as well as Christ, can express God’s presence in the world through their own perfectibility, both ontologically and morally, in the sense of becoming increasingly-perfected images of God.

In many ways, Conway’s account of omnipresence gives an insight into the radical nature of her thought. By distinguishing different senses in which God could be present in the world, we are able to understand more clearly the way in which she believes the divine to play a direct role in the world. In this way, we can see that Conway forms part of a growing intellectual trend in the late 17th century of both retreating from an orthodox understanding of the Trinity and a limiting of the presence of God in the world. Throughout this period, we see numerous thinkers seeking to rethink the Trinity in various ways, such as denying the Personhood of both Christ and the Holy Spirit, as well as reconsidering the relationship between God and the world[[18]](#footnote-18). The two projects are connected in many ways. On a traditional orthodox understanding of the Trinity, it is the Holy Spirit (as the third Person of the Trinity) who is understood to be the aspect of God most present in the world; however, if one seeks to undermine the Trinity in some way and perhaps even give up the notion of the Holy Spirit altogether, then the opportunity to rethink omnipresence becomes clear. For her part, Conway wishes to alter the notion of a Triune God significantly, stating that, in its orthodox understanding, it “has no reasonable sense in itself, and is found nowhere in Scripture” (1.7, 10). Conway’s account of Christ as a middle principle (rather than as a divine Person)[[19]](#footnote-19), and the lack of an obvious role for a third Person of a Triune God, is also a clear reflection of her anti-Trinitarianism[[20]](#footnote-20). Conway therefore forms part of what was a growing anti-Trinitarian movement and a wider questioning of the manner in which God is present in the world during this period.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of Conway’s account of omnipresence is the manner in which creatures themselves are able to bring God into the world more intimately through their growing exemplification of his nature. It adds a dynamism to Conway’s view of the presence of God in the world that fits more widely into the active nature of her philosophy that has led some to consider her as a ‘process philosopher’ (see White 2008, 81-85 and Thomas 2017, 1005-1007 for extended discussions), while at the same time ensuring the all-encompassing presence of God through Christ and an infinite number of heavenly spirits. Indeed, a consideration of Conway’s account of omnipresence adds a further dimension to a ‘process’ reading of the *Principles*, which foregrounds the sense in which nature is composed of the activities of creatures, as they engage in activity that either brings them closer to, or takes them away, from God, as well as the dynamic nature of creatures themselves and their interactions with each other. The manner in which Conway finds a balance between granting autonomy to creatures in finding their way back to God, and yet preserves an important presence for the divine in the world, is certainly something that contemporary scholars considering the nature of the possible relationship between God and the world should consider. In addition, from an historical perspective, we can reflect that, in Conway’s *Principles*, we find an original and radical account that sets her apart in her adaptation of Platonism to a Christian Unitarianism, and reveals her as part of an intellectual climate following the tumult of the Civil War in England that sought to radically confront the received notions of the established Church[[21]](#footnote-21).

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1. This interpretation has also been supported more recently by the author, who states that a timeless, immutable being “would have a distinctive presence in the world that would point towards their fundamental timelessness, and having the unique feature of being holenmerically present in time, with absolutely no extension or division of divine presence, seems to meet our expectations in this regard” (Head 2020, 76). I have since become more cautious in my acceptance of this interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Thomas (2018, 998-1002) for an extended discussion. Henry More’s holenmerism is also examined in detail by Reid (2012, 141-184), who argues that More later abandons this position, concluding that, though God could exercise “the whole of his power in a single point” (2012, 172), that does not entail that God would be wholly present at that point. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This paper refers to the 1996 CUP edition of Conway’s *Principles*, edited by Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse, by section and page number. All unattributed references are to this text. Details of this edition can be found in the Bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As an example, Conway offers a sustained critique of Henry More’s dualism: see Hutton (2004, 87-90) for a useful summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We should note again that More had also abandoned holenmerism himself by the time that Conway came to write the *Principia* (see Reid 2012, 168-172). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The link between Conway’s emanative model and the infinite nature of creation is explored by Head (2020, 69-81). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Conway argues that “nothing can be bad to infinity”, for given the fact that the world is an effect of the overflowing of God’s goodness, “in the very nature of things there are limits to evil, but none to goodness” (7.1, 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The place of Christ within Conway’s ontology, particularly his mediating and soteriological roles, is discussed in detail in Parageau (2018, 250-256) and Head (2020, 116-130). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Conway’s positing of such a mediating principle appears to place her more firmly in the Cambridge Platonist tradition, which often relied on the existence of plastic powers or a spirit of nature to act as a form of intermediate being between God and the world, as a way of attempting to avoid what was seen as a damaging Cartesian mechanistic philosophy. Given that More acted as Conway’s philosophical mentor, a comparison with his notion of the Spirit of Nature is particularly illuminating: see Head (2020, 101-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The accounts of love and sympathy in Conway’s *Principles* have been recently discussed in detail in Mercer (2015, 135-138), Borcherding (2019, 8-14) and Head (2020, 163-170). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Detlefsen (2018, 146f.) has provided an account of Conway’s theory of causation via sympathetic relations, both within and between individual creatures. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on the controversy surrounding Hobbes’ corporeal conception of God, see Gorham (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Plotinus argues that there is no thought at the highest level of reality, the One, as that would introduce plurality into a perfect unity (see 2018, 845f., 6.7.38). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sorabji traces Plotinus’ view that God can only think of himself back to Aristotle (see 1984, 146f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mercer (2019, 61-63) discusses the creative role played by Christ as both *logos ousios* (the ‘Word’ as it is in itself) and *logos proforikos* (the ‘Word’ as it is revealed or manifested in creation). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Conway states that Christ is “generated by God rather than made or created” (5.4, 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A detailed account of Conway’s theory of metempsychosis and its place within radical English thought of the period is offered by Harrison (1993, 538-542). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. An excellent overview of how some of these philosophical and theological trends played out in England during the early and mid-17th century is offered by Philip Dixon (see 2003, 5-97). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. While Conway does distinguish between the Word as *logos ousios* and the historical manifestation of Christ as *logos proforikos* (4.2, 21), it is not clear that she identifies the former with what could be considered an orthodox understanding of the Second Person of the Trinity. Considering Conway’s Christological distinction would take us beyond the scope of the paper, but for more discussion see Mercer (2019, 62f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For more on Conway’s anti-Trinitarianism, and its connection to her ecumenicism, see Head (2020, 120-128). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This paper has benefited from the comments of numerous anonymous reviewers. Many thanks to them for their insightful and helpful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)