Anne Conway’s philosophy has been categorized as “vitalism,” “vital monism,” “spiritualism,” “monistic spiritualism,” “immaterial vitalism,” and “antimaterialism.” While there is no doubt that she is a monist and a vitalist, problems arise with the categories of “spiritualism,” “immaterial vitalism,” and “antimaterialism.” Conway conceives of created substances as gross and fixed spirit, or rarefied and volatile matter. While interpreters agree that Conway’s “spirit” shares characteristics traditionally attributed to matter (e.g., extension, divisibility, impenetrability), and that she is critical of Henry More’s immaterial spirit, Conway’s spirit is still conceived as an immaterial soul-like or mind-like entity. I argue that Conway’s vitalism is material, and is best understood in the tradition of Renaissance vital naturalism. First, Conway does not criticize materialism per se, only mechanical materialism, which characterizes matter as lifeless. Her vitalism has to be materialistic in some sense, since only God is an immaterial substance. Second, Conway’s conceptions of matter and spirit, the language she uses, and the fact that she attributes thinking to extended, divisible, and impenetrable substances all place her within the tradition of Renaissance vital naturalism, wherein Bernardino Telesio, Tommaso Campanella, and Francis Bacon used “spirit” to account for all natural processes.

When common people perceive no motion in bodies, they call them from ignorance dead bodies without spirit and life. But truly there is no body anywhere which does not have motion and consequently life or spirit. (Conway 1996, 51)

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1. Introduction

Since the discovery of her text *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1996), Anne Conway’s philosophy has received a variety of labels, many of which were soon challenged. Because of her lifelong relationship with Henry More, Conway has usually been included in the Cambridge Platonists group, or considered as a “spiritualist” (Merchant 1979; Hutton 1995, 1997; Popkin 1990). However, given her fierce criticism of More’s conception of spirit, and the fact that she does not argue for the existence of a Neoplatonic Spirit of the world, her inclusion in this group is unconvincing. Because of one reference to “physical monads,” Conway was taken to be a forerunner of Leibnitzian monadology, but this idea has been refuted on the basis that the reference to physical monads is most probably the insertion of the translator, and, even if not, Conway’s ontology cannot accommodate immaterial and indivisible monads. Again, because the translator or editor of Conway’s text inserted several references to the *Cabala denudata*, the influence of this tradition has been overstated, and it seems more sensitive to say that the ideas she shares with the Kabbalistic tradition are minimal, and they refer in particular to the ideas of divinity, less so to the created world. In addition, it has been claimed that her monist view might reflect her collaboration with Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, but it is clear from her correspondence with More that she was inclining towards a monist view before meeting Van Helmont (Hutton 2004). Finally, because for Conway everything in the created world is spirit, and because she criticizes the materialist conceptions of Descartes and Hobbes, she has been labeled as an antimaterialist. However, it has been shown that her concept of spirit shares more characteristics with the traditional idea of matter than with some immaterial entity.

1. On the discovery of the text and the story of its Latin and English early modern editions, see Merchant (1979), Hutton (2004), and Reid (2020).

2. On her criticism of More, see Hutton (1995). Conway criticizes Ralph Cudworth’s concept of “plastic natures” as well. While Conway’s conceptions of the three substances (God, Christ, and creatures) and of the emanation are Neoplatonic, when it comes to her monist view of the created substances, she departs from (Neo)Platonic dualism in general, and from More’s in particular.


4. On Conway and the Kabbalah, see Courdet (1996). On the addition of the references to the *Cabala denudata* by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, see Reid (2020). It is in any case relevant that the references to the Kabbalistic corpus are mainly added to the first chapters, where Conway discusses mostly Christ and God, and occur less frequently when she moves to the created world.

5. The antimaterialist label is related to the “spiritualist” one, and suggests an idealist interpretation of Conway’s ontology. See Hutton (1997, 2004), Popkin (1990), and Pasnau (2011). On how the concept of spirit is closer to what traditionally was viewed as matter and not the immaterial soul, see Broad.
It is in particular Conway’s concept of spirit, on the one hand used in a deceptive dichotomy with that of matter, and on the other opposed to that of Henry More, that attracted most of this controversial labeling. But while More’s spirit is conceived in opposition to matter, and is indivisible, penetrable, and active (matter being divisible, impenetrable, and passive), Conway describes matter and spirit as sharing the same characteristics in different degrees, as a consequence of the fact that they are modes of the same substance. As modes or degrees, matter and spirit are convertible into one another: “body is nothing but fixed and condensed spirit, and spirit nothing but volatile body or body made subtle” (Conway 1996, 61).

The aim of this paper is to show that, for Conway, spirit and matter create a continuum, and that the only difference between them consists in their respective degrees of condensation or volatility. Along with the fact that Conway opposes this kind of spirit to Henry More’s, this leads to the conclusion that she is a materialist. Moreover, because matter is a kind of spirit, everything is full of life, perception, and motion, which means that she is a vital materialist. However, most of the literature on Conway tends to describe her an antimaterialist.

Sarah Hutton suggested that Conway is a “monistic spiritualist.” According to this reading, Conway is not a dualist like Descartes, nor is she a monistic materialist like Spinoza and Hobbes: “In place of the dualism of soul and body, spirit and matter of Cartesianism, she posits a single created substance. Against the monistic materialists, Hobbes and Spinoza, she argues that body or matter itself belongs to a continuum of spirit-like substance” (Hutton 2004, 3). What Hutton emphasizes here is that monist authors take the single substance to be either the Cartesian soul (the thinking substance) or the body (the extended substance). Monistic materialists such as Hobbes and Spinoza choose the body, while Conway takes the created substance to be a soul-like entity. We can conclude that, for Hutton, Conway’s spirit is the equivalent of Descartes’s mind.6

While focusing on the materialistic features of Conway’s spirit, Jacqueline Broad concludes that “Conway’s spiritual particles are not quite ‘spiritual’ in the orthodox sense, because they are always extended and (potentially) divisible and impenetrable” (Broad 2003, 78). Broad is thus assuming that the orthodox sense of spirit is that of Henry More and the (Neo)Platonic tradition, this is to say,

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6. Before Hutton’s detailed studies of Conway’s philosophy, Richard Popkin had already called Conway a “spiritualist.” Popkin (1990) takes it for granted that More and Conway have a similar ontology and that they understand the same by the concept of spirit, which is to say that spirits are capable of penetration and being penetrated, of self-motion, dilatation, contraction, and indivisibility.
spirit should be nonextended (even though, for More, spirit is extended), indivisible and penetrable. In different words, “spirit” is the equivalent of the Cartesian thinking substance. Jasper Reid also saw Conway going against the tradition in her use of a divisible and impenetrable spirit: “In denying the simplicity of the human soul, she was not only going against centuries of philosophical tradition: she was going against those nearest and dearest to her” (2020, 700).

My claim in this paper is that Conway did not use the concept of spirit in a nontraditional way, nor was she alone in attributing thinking to a divisible and impenetrable substance. Instead, she has not been placed in the right tradition, which is Renaissance vital naturalism. Authors in that tradition such as Bernardino Telesio (1509–88), Agostino Doni (around 1550 to after 1583), Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), and Francis Bacon (1564–1626), to name the more prominent figures, argued that all natural phenomena, including thinking, can be explained by the activity of a material but very subtle and rarefied spirit. This is to say, no immaterial entity is needed to explain activity in nature or the faculties of the human mind. Moreover, they argued, as Conway will do later, that this spirit is extended, divisible, impenetrable, has different degrees of rarity or density, is active, perceptive, and can convert into more tangible body. Naturalism refers to the belief that all natural phenomena can be explained by natural causes, without the need to introduce supernatural or divine intervention. This implies that, for the above authors, nature has vital force or motion in itself. Hence, we can say that these authors represent a current of “vital naturalism.” Guido Giglioni has argued that the main influence was Stoic naturalism, because “the strong emphasis on the very rationality of being and the ordered chain of causes met the requirements of the new philosophies of nature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (including various currents of the mechanical philosophy)” (2008, 313).

While previous scholarship analyzed Conway’s philosophy in relation to traditions that are either marginal to her monist conception of the created world (such as Kabbalah), or that she herself criticizes and places her doctrine in opposition to (such as More’s Neoplatonism), I will place her vitalism within a tradition that is closest to her conception of spirit. Throughout history, “spirit” has been conceived both as material (a conception originating in the Stoic pneuma, and heavily used in the medical context of the medieval and early modern periods) and immaterial (the religious concept of the Holy Spirit [Spiritus Sanctus] and the Neoplatonic Spirit of the World). While vital naturalism draws on the medical conception, these authors deviate from the Galenic and Scholastic traditions in two respects: (1) they argue

7. On why Girolamo Cardano (1501–76) could be added to this list, see Regier’s article in this issue.
8. The concept of “spirit” has a complex history, precisely because of the various contexts and senses in which it had been used. Spirit is not only the translation of the Stoic and Galenic material pneuma, but also the translation of the Holy Ghost, conceived as immaterial. Nowadays, it is only the last sense, which can be
that spirit is not an intermediary between soul and body, but a subtle body that can perform all the functions attributed to the soul, including thinking and intellection; and (2) they consider that all beings, including stones, possess such spirits. Since nature is active in itself, one does not have to introduce nonmaterial or superadded entities in order to explain natural phenomena.

While we lack the historical evidence that Conway read and used these authors, the conceptual similarities are striking, and we can assume that a curious and avid reader such as Conway was aware and made use of this tradition. Moreover, during Conway’s lifetime, Bacon was the emblematic figure of the Royal Society, and Telesio was mentioned several times by Conway’s contemporaries. As we will become clear from this paper, only by including Conway within Renaissance naturalism we can gain a better understanding of her philosophy.

In what follows, I will first focus on Conway’s concept of spirit, its relation on the one hand with the immaterial God, and on the other with mechanist views on matter. I will show (1) that claiming that the created spirit is immaterial blurs the distinction between God and creation, and this is a consequence that Conway would not have allowed; and (2) that Conway did not criticize materialism per se, but the mechanist concept of a dead and lifeless matter. Then, I will move to placing Conway in the tradition of Renaissance vital naturalism, by emphasizing the similarities between her concept of spirit and the way it has been conceived within this tradition. I will focus on the issue of how thinking is attributed to the material spirit, and on the characteristics of this subtle entity.

2. Conway’s Material Spirit

Though scholars tend to agree that Conway is a monist with respect to the created substances, disagreement appears when it comes to the nature of the unique applied to God, angels and the Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit), as well as souls, that is kept. Gérard Verbeke’s book on the history of the notion of pneuma in antiquity argues that the initial material sense of the Stoic pneuma was lost in the first centuries of Christianity, when pneuma or spirit started to be conceived as purely immaterial (Verbeke 1945). While this might be the story of its use within a theological context, the same cannot be said about the medical and natural philosophical contexts. While the theological (and Platonic) context might be relevant to better understand Henry More’s concept of spirit, this is not the case with Conway, whose concept is closer to the medical tradition. Moreover, More’s Spirit of the World replaces the Neoplatonic Soul of the World, conceived by the ancient authors as immaterial. More does not follow Ficino, who introduced a Spirit of the World, but conceived it as material. This is to say, even in the Neoplatonic tradition, spirit was material before More, who is the first to combine the Anima mundi and Spiritus mundi. If this is so, then the differences between Conway and More can be accounted by their different sources: the material medical spirit for Conway and the immaterial Anima mundi for More. I would like to thank Jonathan Regier for drawing my attention to the relation between the Anima mundi and the Spiritus mundi in ancient and Renaissance Neoplatonism.
substance. More confusion is created by the fact that Conway seems to use the dualist language of matter or body and spirit, as if the two entities, though of a single substance, had opposite characteristics. Conway was aware of this and took precautions in this regard: in the last chapter, she explains once more why her philosophy is not “Cartesianism in a new guise.” In brief, the problem arises from the fact that Conway uses the terms “matter” and “spirit,” the same terms Henry More uses when he accommodates Descartes’s extended substance and thinking substance into his system. Indeed, for More, these two concepts describe entirely opposite entities: “I will define therefore a Spirit thus, A Substance penetrable and indiscernible. The fitness of which Definition will be the better understood, if we divide Substance in generall into these first kindes, viz. Body and Spirit, and then define Body to be A Substance impenetrable and discerpible. Whence the contrary kind to this is firly defined, A Substance penetrable and indiscernible” (More 1659, 16–17). Following this dualist trend, body is defined as material, divisible, impenetrable, and inert. Mind or soul, on the contrary, is defined as immaterial, indivisible, penetrable, and active. In contrast to More, Conway considers that both matter and spirit are divisible and impenetrable, and that, because of attributes they have in common, they can easily transform into one another. Spirit is light and matter darkness, and because nothing can be completely dark without some light in it, no body can be without spirit. Moreover, there is a tendency of the created world to improve and become more and more rarefied and subtle, this is to say, to became more and more spirit-like.

But because everything is spirit in Conway’s created world, there is a tendency in secondary literature to equate Conway’s and More’s concepts of spirit, and as a consequence to treat Conway’s spirit like Descartes’s mind or the thinking substance, and, more generally, as the traditional concept of the immaterial soul. In these readings, Conway is viewed as an antimaterialist. For instance, in comparison with two materialists, Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes, Conway’s philosophy has been described as a kind of idealism or monistic spiritualism.

9. Conway is a trialist with respect to all existing substances (God, Christ, creatures) and a monist with respect to the created substances. For discussion of different ways of reading Conway’s monism, as type or token, see Gordon-Roth 2018 and Thomas 2020.

10. Sarah Hutton, for instance, notices this tension between a dualist language and a monist ontology of creatures: “Conway’s account of the creatures of the third species employs the dualist language of spirit and body, but she conceives of these as different modes of the same substance, and she deems spirit as ‘the more excellent’ (Conway 1996, 42)” (Hutton 2020, 4). Wolfe also describes Conway’s philosophy in dualist terms: “Conway’s description of body and spirit as relative points on a spectrum could be thought of in terms of matter and form” (Wolfe 2020, 11).

11. On the dichotomy between mind and body and their characteristics, see Rozemond (2014).

12. Chapter VII of the Principles brings arguments in favor of the transmutability of body and spirit unto one another.
Regarding the comparison with Cavendish, Sarah Hutton concludes that, although Conway is a monist and a vitalist like Cavendish, “In her case the substance in question was not body; rather it was a form of spirit” (Hutton 1997, 227). She further clarifies that the spirit she refers to is the Platonic spirit, having life, perception, and motion. Regarding the comparison with Hobbes, Robert Pasnau says: “In refusing to see any fundamental divide between mind and body, her view is again reminiscent of Hobbes. But whereas Hobbes treats minds as bodies, Conway instead treats bodies as much more like minds” (Pasnau 2011, 651). Following Sarah Hutton, Deborah Boyle claimed that Conway argues against materialism, even though in a few instances she qualifies Conway’s spirit as material (Boyle 2006). Responding to Hutton, and also employing a comparison with Cavendish, Jacqueline Broad showed that the monist conceptions of the two women philosophers were more similar than they are different. Conway’s spirit is extended, infinitely divisible, and impenetrable. However, Broad makes it clear that “although Conway is not a materialist, there are aspects of her monist theory of substance that closely resemble Cavendish’s” (Broad 2003, 66).13

In my view, Conway’s monism aims at eliminating these kinds of dualist assessments. The material-immaterial divide has no place in the created world, because such a divide would entail the inability of material and immaterial to communicate. If by “matter” we understand dead body, then there is no matter. But if by “matter” we mean extended, divisible, impenetrable, self-moving, and living bodies, then everything is matter. At the same time, if by “spirit” we understand something immaterial, then there is no spirit. But if spirit means an active and living principle, then the created world is spirit. According to Conway, everything that exists shares some characteristics with both matter and soul, as they were traditionally conceived, without collapsing into either of these two extremes: dead matter and immaterial spirit, that is, nonbeing and God.

Given that for her spirit is rarefied matter, Conway cannot be classified as an idealist, as the readings provided by Hutton, Popkin, and Pasnau suggest. But can we say that Conway is a materialist? I will claim that we can. Except for the fact that her spirit is endowed with those characteristics traditionally attributed to

13. Broad notices the dangers of seeing Conway as a spiritualist, as if she agrees with More’s idea of spirit: “From these statements, one might be led to believe that when Conway collapses the distinction between soul and body, she is more concerned to emphasize the spirituality of matter, rather than the other way around. Or in other words, it seems that Conway primarily attacks More’s concept of matter as essentially passive and inert, but agrees with his conception of the soul” (Broad 2003, 72). She admits that this is not the case, and that Conway does criticize More’s concept of spirit or soul as well. Broad adds that “nevertheless, while Conway might be called a spiritualist, there are undeniably materialistic overtones in Conway’s conception of ‘spirits’ and ‘spiritual particles.’ Conway’s critique of More’s pneumatology reveals that her theory of substance has more affinities with Cavendish’s than might first appear to be the case” (73).
matter, such as extension, divisibility, and impenetrability, there are two passages that can clarify this issue further. The first is the relation between God as spirit and the created spirit. The second is the way in which she positions herself with respect to Hobbes and Descartes, for whom matter is a dead body. The first point will make it clear that Conway cannot be seen as an idealist. The second point will show that she does not criticize materialism but a certain kind of mechanical materialism.

Regarding the relation between God, the pure spirit, and the created spirit, Conway goes as far as to claim that the essence of the first is to be immaterial and that of the latter is to be material:

Secondly, as for Hobbesianism, it is even more contrary to our philosophy than Cartesianism. For Descartes recognized that God is clearly an immaterial and incorporeal spirit, whereas Hobbes claims that God is material and corporeal, indeed, that he is nothing but matter and body. Thus he confounds God and creatures in their essences and denies that there is an essential difference between them. These and many other things are and have been called the worst consequences of the philosophy of Hobbes, to which one may add that of Spinoza. For he confounds God and creatures and makes one being of both, all of which is diametrically opposed to our philosophy. (Conway 1996, 64)

For Conway, God alone is immaterial, and this is one of his essential attributes. Moreover, even Christ, the firstborn and intermediary between God and creatures, has some kind of body.14 God is thus the only immaterial or pure spirit. Not only does saying that God is material and corporeal blur the distinction between God and creatures, the same happens if one says that the created spirit is immaterial.15 However, Conway is at pains to explain how God and creatures are different, even if some of God’s attributes are communicable. Making use of an old geometrical analogy, Conway concludes that created spirits will never become God, no matter how much they improve. A multiangled shape, no matter how many sides are added to it, will never be a circle. Similarly, spirits will become

14. This body is different from creatures’ bodies, and Conway in not clear with regard to its nature: “And as Christ shares mutability and immutability and eternity and time, he can be said to share spirit and body and consequently place and extension. For his body is a different substance from the bodies of all other creatures. (Indeed, he is the beginning of them and closest to God.)” (Conway 1996, 50)

15. For instance, Hutton claims that God and the created spirit are of a similar immaterial nature: “Created nature is also like God in the respect that it is immaterial, which is the foundation of Conway’s monistic view of substance.” The footnote following this sentence reads: “Since she calls God ‘spirit,’ one must assume that this substance is a kind of spirit. Conway denies the existence of matter, but allows that created substance may assume some of the properties normally associated with matter” (Hutton 2018, 237 n. 8).
more and more subtle to infinity, but they will never be like God, a pure and im-
material spirit.16 In this context, Conway clearly opposes immaterial spirit, that is
to say God, to created material (and impure) spirit. In the same way in which
there is no part of matter without life and spirit, there is no spirit without matter
or body. If that were the case, then that spirit would have become God, and this is
not possible.

When it comes to the relation between God and creatures, Conway says, Des-
cartes is closer to the truth than Hobbes and Spinoza, because Descartes recog-
nizes the immateriality of God. Nevertheless, when it comes to the created world,
Conway admits that her philosophy is close to Hobbes’s, in that they are monists
and agree that creatures change into one another. The big difference between Con-
way and Hobbes arises from the attributes of that one substance. This is to say, while
Conway is willing to name that one substance “matter” or “body,” she does not ac-
cept that its attributes are those ascribed to matter by the mechanist philosophers:

Second, when someone objects that according to this philosophy every
creature is material and corporeal, indeed, is matter itself and body itself,
as Hobbes teaches, I reply that by material and corporeal, or by matter and
body, I mean something very different from Hobbes, and this did not occur
to Hobbes or Descartes except in a dream. For what do they understand by
matter and body, or what attributes do they ascribe to these? Obviously,
nothing except the following: extension and impenetrability, which, how-
ever, are only a single attribute, insofar as mobility and the capacity to have
a shape are reducible to the former. Let us imagine, however, that these attri-
butes are distinct. It does not help or make us understand what this remarkable

16. “We have such an example in a triangular prism, which is the first figure of all solid rectilinear
bodies into which a body can be changed. From this it may change into a cube, which is a more perfect
figure and includes the prism. From the cube it can change into another more perfect figure, which
comes nearer to a sphere, and from this into another which is even closer to perfection. Thus it ascends
from a less perfect figure to another more perfect figure to infinity. For there are no limits; nor can it be
said that this body cannot be changed into a more perfect figure. I mean that this body consists of
straight lines on a plane, and it can always change into a more perfect figure. Nevertheless, it can never
attain the perfection of a sphere, although it always comes closer to it. The same holds true for the var-ious degrees of life, which have a beginning but no end. Thus a creature is capable of a further and more
perfect degree of life, ever greater and greater to infinity, but it can never attain equality with God. For
his infinity is always more perfect than a creature in its highest elevation, just as a sphere is the most
perfect of all other figures, which no figure can approach” (Conway 1996, 66–67). This geometrical
analogy can be found in previous authors, probably the most famous being Nicolas of Cusa. While
most of these authors use the analogy to express the incommensurability between God and creature,
Conway does so to emphasize the distinction between impure material spirits and the pure immaterial
spirit, which is to say between creatures and God. I would like to thank Jonathan Regier for drawing my
attention to this issue.
substance is, which they call body and matter. They do not go beyond the husk and shell, nor ever reach the kernel. They only touch the surface, never glimpsing the center. For they ignore the most noble attribute of that substance, which they call matter and body, and understand nothing about it.

If anyone asks what are these more excellent attributes, I reply that they are the following: spirit or life and light, by which I mean 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, even the vilest and most contemptible. (Conway 1996, 65–66)

For Conway, this one substance is “matter itself and body itself,” as Hobbes says, but the difference is that, in addition to extension and/or impenetrability, this substance also possesses life, which means that it is capable of perception, knowledge, feelings, and passions or appetites. Conway does not criticize the materialism of Hobbes, but his mechanical views.17 For her, matter must be alive. Is the attribute of life superior to that of extension? Conway would probably say yes: life is the attribute creatures have in common with God, while extension is what makes creatures different from God. Nevertheless, extension and life are not opposed, otherwise they could not be attributes of the same substance. Moreover, they are both equally important: without life creatures could not improve, without extension (and the divisibility and impenetrability that come with it) they would not be different from God.

In opposing her philosophy to mechanism and ascribing perception and knowledge to matter, Conway places herself in the camp of vital naturalism. Furthermore, I claim that her choice of the term spirit for her vitalist conception is neither due to More, nor to a random choice, but to a continuation of this tradition, to which I turn in the next section.

3. Conway and the Vital Naturalist Tradition

Conway’s philosophy, and its peculiar monism, was an answer to one of the main problems of any dualist system: how can two opposed entities communicate? While Descartes’s substance dualism, expressed in terms of an extended and a thinking substance, can be seen as new, the problem of the interaction between the material body and the immortal soul had been around for centuries. Since most Scholastic authors could not reject the existence of any of the two entities, they

17. Another argument against the concept of dead matter comes from the goodness of God and the fact that he could not have created something that shares nothing of his attributes. See Boyle (2006, 180–81).
needed an intermediary, and most of them found it in the concept of “spirit.” With its roots in the Stoic pneuma and the Galenic medical spirit, the animal or vital spirit was conceived as an airy and fiery entity. As such, it was material, because it was composed of the two elements, but at the same time it was subtle, since air and fire are the most subtle of the four elements. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, spirits were used as a bridge between the material body and the immaterial soul: spirits were material, that is, of the same kind as the body, but very subtle, so that they were able to communicate with the immaterial soul (see Walker 1984; Clericuzio 1994; Rusu 2021).

It is not this intermediary role I want to consider. The need of an intermediary entity entails a dualist system, and, in fact, both Descartes and More used animal spirits as an intermediary in their dualist philosophies.18 I am concerned here with those cases in which the spirit takes over the functions of the soul, while keeping its materiality, a revival of the Stoic concept of pneuma within vital naturalism. A second characteristic of vital naturalism, besides that of assigning the functions of the mind to the material spirit, is that spirits are not confined to animals and humans only, but belong to nature as a whole.19 In other words, Conway is best seen as part of a tradition in which there is continuity between matter and spirit, a system where there is no need for something to bridge two completely different entities, because everything is of one kind.

One of the first authors who used spirit to argue against dualism, as Conway will do later, was Bernardino Telesio.20 As D. P. Walker remarks, Telesio needed a concept able to explain his vitalist system: the fact that everything is extended and sentient. Activity and subtlety were already conceived as characteristics of spirits, so this concept seemed to be best suited to describe a kind of matter that is active, perceptive, and alive.21 One consequence of Telesio’s and his followers’ monism is

18. For a short overview of how both Descartes and More used this concept in a traditional way, see Rusu (2021).

19. In the early modern period, Galenic medical spirits went through a transformation caused no only by the revival of Stoicism, but also of Neoplatonism, as well as by the Paracelsian chemical influence. Not only the division between natural, vital, and animal spirit started to disappear, but several authors considered that the spirits obtained through distillations are identical with the spirits produced in the human body. On this, see Walker (1984) and Clericuzio (1994).

20. On Telesio, see esp. Bondi (2018). Telesio was one of the first Renaissance authors to argue against the Aristotelian system, and we can find him on all the early modern lists of novatores, sometimes being described as the first of the moderns.

21. Walker notices: “In expounding this philosophy [of heat and cold], which is an attempt to overcome the dualism of nearly all previous systems—to remove the transcendence of mind and matter, Telesio was inevitably faced with almost insuperable difficulties of terminology, since most traditional terms implied the dualism he was trying to avoid. But there was one set of terms, spirit and its derivatives, which had long been used to bridge the gap between body and soul, and these terms play a very important part in his system” (Walker 1958, 189).
that it is the spirit that performs the functions of the mind, including thinking.\(^\text{22}\) I will first analyze this issue in comparison with Conway, and then I will turn to the characteristics of spirits. The way in which Renaissance naturalist philosophers, on the one hand, and Conway, on the other, tackle these issues, the dualist systems they answer to, and the criticisms they are at pains to prevent are strikingly similar.

For Telesio and his followers, spirit is an airy and fiery body, similar to the Stoic pneuma, that runs through the body and in the case of animals (and humans) has a central chamber, that is, the brain. The spirit is contained in all parts of the body with the exception of bones and other parts similar to bones (i.e., those parts that are white and bloodless), even though it is concentrated in certain parts: the brain and the heart. The process of generation of a human being is a separation of gross and subtle parts from the semen: the spirit is exhaled from the more subtle parts and the rest of body, more material and gross, from the grosser parts. This means that spirit and other parts of matter are not of a different kind, the only difference is one of degree of subtlety or rarefaction (and fieriness). This leads to a continuity in Telesio’s ontology between types of matter: spirit is exhaled from a kind of matter grosser than itself. Bones, on the other hand, which are very hard, are the result of concretion and congelation of less dense matter. Put differently, from the same matter (semen), several things are produced through contrary processes: exhalation or rarefaction on the one hand and concretion/congelation or condensation on the other.

As a vestige of Galenic animal spirits, Telesio’s spirits also increase their quantity with the food taken in, and with the air we breathe. However, a distinction appears when it comes to the rest of the characteristics. For Telesio, this spirit is consumed in the various activities it supports—speaking, thinking, and especially moving the heavy corporeal mass—and needs to be replaced with new spirit. Spirit is replenished by the food taken in (which is rarefied) and the air that enters through breathing. These vapors are of the same nature as human spirit, even though more gross; and once they mingle with it, they become more subtle and identical with the spirit. However, at some point the spirit is too weakened

\(^{22}\) After not mentioning the immaterial soul in the first edition of his book, Telesio was obliged to introduce it in the second, enlarged edition. However, this entity has no proper function; reason and intellection are clearly activities of the material spirit. Telesio does mention altruism and the thought of a future life as possible activities in which this immaterial soul is involved, but he does refute this thought later in his book by explaining how these are also activities of the spirit. Though he never denies the existence of the immaterial soul, it is obvious that this have no place in his philosophy. It is not surprising then that his books were placed on the index of prohibited books (see Granada 2019). Campanella will follow a similar route in mentioning an immaterial soul, but then asserting that it has no power whatsoever over the material, and Bacon will say that this immaterial soul is the subject of theology, not philosophy; everything that is natural can be explained through the spirit.
and replenishment cannot take place. This is when death occurs. We find clear echoes of these ideas in Conway’s explanation of how food becomes spirit in order to supply the spirits emanated in diverse processes:

For all motion wears away and divides a thing and thus makes it subtle and spiritual. In the human body, for example, food and drink are first changed into chyle and then into blood, and afterwards into spirits, which are nothing but blood brought to perfection. These spirits, whether good or bad, always advance to a greater subtlety or spirituality. Through those spirits which come from blood, we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and feel, indeed, think, love, hate, and do everything we do. From these spirits also come the semen, through which the race propagates, and especially the human voice and speech, which is full of those good or bad spirits made and formed in the heart. (Conway 1996, 61–62)

Conway considers that voice and speech, in general, are made of spirits. In other places, she makes it clear that bodies emanate spirits all the time in their surroundings, which means bodies are worn out and need to replenish the quantity of subtle matter they lose. Food, drinks, and air can do this, and of course the spirits we receive from the bodies around us.

But if human spirits can be replaced by all kinds of other spirits from the surroundings, it results, as we could notice in Telesio, that the difference between human and nonhuman spirits is not that great. And indeed, this is something that Conway argues for. There is a hierarchy, but all spirits are of the same nature and in continuous change from one step of the hierarchy to another; the difference is only in the degree of perfection or subtlety. Conway thus departs from the Galenic theory of three kinds of spirits within the human body (natural, vital, and animal). Moreover, this is something Telesio was very much concerned with:

23. This issue is discussed by Telesio in particular in Books V and VI of his De rerum natura. Campanella, Doni, and Bacon would closely follow Telesio in this regard. For instance, when it comes to describing the organic soul, Bacon says that this is “a corporeal substance, attenuated and made divisible by heat; a breath (I say) compounded of the natures of flame and air, having the softness of air to receive impressions, and the vigour of fire to propagate its actions; nourished partly by oily and partly by watery substances; cloths within the body, and in perfect animals residing chiefly in the head, running along the nerves, and refreshed and repaired by the spirituous blood of the arteries; as Bernardinus Telesius and his pupil Augustinus Donius have in part not altogether unprofitably maintained” (Bacon 1859–64a, 398). On Bacon’s concept of spirit, see Rusu (2018). Agostino Doni (sometimes written Donio) wrote a book (De natura hominis, 1581) in which, without mentioning Telesio by name, he argued for the existence of one soul, the immaterial spirit. It is not surprising then that Bacon considered him Telesio’s pupil. On the book, its publication, and the relation with Telesio, see Suitner (2019).

he wrote a book arguing against the idea that there are spirits of a different nature, because this would affect the unity of the human being.25

Further, the similarities are more striking because for authors such as Telesio, Doni, Persio, Bacon, and Conway, thinking is performed by the same entity that also resides in the bodies of stones, plants, and animals.26 One of the main aims of Telesio’s *De rerum natura* was to prove that generalizations, abstract thinking, and mathematics are performed by the material spirit—not only is an immaterial entity unnecessary, but such an entity cannot contribute anything to the process of thinking. An immaterial entity could simply not process information coming from the senses, nor could it operate with geometrical forms, since imagination is the faculty needed for such processes, and imagination is a material faculty of the spirit.27 Telesio goes so far as to say that while performing the processes of sensation and understanding, the spirit dilates and perfects itself.28 This is highly reminiscent of Conway’s relation between the dilatation of spirits and their perfecting. It is however remarkable that, in comparison with Telesio who spends hundreds of pages to prove this point, Conway does not feel the need to argue for this thesis; she just states it: “Through those spirits which come from blood, we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and feel, indeed, think, love, hate, and do everything we do” (Conway 1996, 62). She is more concerned with arguing for their divisibility and impenetrability.

In fact, impenetrability is an issue that Telesio also argued for. In a way similar to how Conway argued against More’s idea of a spirit infused in body, Telesio argued against the Aristotelian idea that form is infused in the body. Both Telesio and Conway conceive of spirits as being found in the pores of the bodies, even

25. Telesio wrote *Contra Galenum*, a book dedicated to this issue, published after Telesio’s death and included on the index of prohibited books. The existence of only one kind of spirit is a more general feature. Not only the division between natural, vital, and animal spirit started to disappear in the early modern period, but several authors considered that the spirits obtained through distillations are identical with the spirits produced in the human body. Another source for Conway could have been Jan Baptista Van Helmont, Franciscus Mercurius’s father, who, as well as other Paracelsians, also argued for the existence of one spirit. On this, see Walker (1984) and Clericuzio (1994). However, specific for Telesio and his followers was the rejection of the immaterial soul to account for the faculties of the mind.


27. On why all sciences, including geometry, depend on the spirit, see in particular Chapter IV of Book VIII of *De rerum natura*, titled “The principles of all sciences and of geometry itself depend on the sense and the close similitude with those things perceived by the sense, and all their conclusions depend on the same” (“Scientiarum omnium et geometricae ipsius principia a sensu haberi vel proxima eorum, quae sensu percepta sunt, similitudine, et conclusiones omnes ex iis pendere” [Telesio 1965–76, vol. 3, 174–80]).

when these are not visible. Telesio is concerned with how spirits can be inside a body, since they are material, and he thus rejects the idea that they infused matter in a way similar to that which Aristotelian form does. He agrees with Aristotle that two bodies cannot be in the same place at the same time, and he explains how the spirits enter other parts of the body even though we do not see any pores in those parts. One of the bodies, he says, has to be soft, relaxed, and a little bit open (the grosser body), and the other one has to possess the faculty of softening, relaxing, and opening; and it also has to be small enough as to penetrate through the little holes it continuously produces in the first body (the spirit). And even if we have the impression that flesh and bones are continuous bodies, they are not so hard and dense that they cannot be somewhat condensed to make room for another body to enter (Telesio 1965–76, vol. 2, 536–39). This must be so: experience tells us that nutriments penetrate, just as excrements have to be eliminated; thus both flesh and bones must be traversed by fluids (Telesio 1965–76, vol. 2, 540–53). The same applies to spirits, the nature of which is even more subtle.

Conway has a similar explanation. Spirits cannot be in bodies through intimate presence for two reasons: (1) this is characteristic of God and Christ only and (2) the presence of spirits in bodies would make two created, and thus extended and impenetrable, substances, occupy the same place:

One must conclude from this that all created spirits, which are present in bodies, are either in the pores of those bodies or in certain concavities, such as moles make in earth; or else the created spirits make the bodies swell and acquire greater extension, as when fire enters into iron and makes it swell and stretch notably. Although this swelling of bodies cannot always be observed by our external senses, it cannot however be denied. For it is possible that a body can increase notably in its dimensions and become greater, and yet this increase escapes all external observation. (Conway 1996, 52)29

29. In another place, she states: “If one says that we always see in these changes that the body remains impenetrable, just as iron when it is tempered remains impenetrable, I concede that it remains impenetrable by any other equally coarse body. But it can be penetrated and is penetrated by a more subtle body, namely, by fire, which enters it and penetrates all its parts. It thus becomes soft, and if the fire is strong, it completely liquefies. If against this they object that the fire does not enter the iron in a philosophical sense, as if the fire and the iron occupy only one place and are consequently most intimately present one to the other, since it is clearly not true that tempered iron swells and takes on greater mass than when cold, or that when cooled it becomes hard again and returns to its former dimensions. To this I reply that if they understand by penetration what we call intimate presence, as when a certain homogeneous substance enters into another of an equal size, which should not increase in size or weight, this appears altogether irrational, and it would be an utter impossibility and contradiction to endow creatures with such intimate presence” (Conway 1996, 50).
Bacon goes farther than Telesio in analyzing the unobservable changes of bodies. In fact, several experiments and instruments are designed by Bacon to measure these changes in bodies that, due to the subtlety of spirits, cannot be noticed by the senses. In general, his experiments analyze those processes in which spirits enter, exit, change place within tangible bodies, or change their type of motion. Spirits are thus at the center of Bacon’s natural philosophy since, as the only causal agents in nature, spirits are essential to the explanation of phenomena. As Conway will do later, Bacon distinguishes matter into tangible and pneumatic as two poles: at one end there is the gross, heavy, dense matter, and at the opposite end, the subtle, light, and rare pneumatic matter. But these are only the extremes: since there is continuity in nature, there are several entities in between the tangible and pneumatic, so much that for some of them it is unclear to which state they pertain. It is in the *Historia densi et rari* that Bacon puts forward a classification of pneumatic bodies, starting with those of an intermediary nature: volatiles of metals and fossils; after-volatiles of the same; vapors, fumes, after-fumes, exhalations; after-exhalations, breaths; after-breath, crude spirits attached to tangible bodies; air; living or inflamed spirits, attached to tangible bodies; flame (Bacon 2000, 65-67). As for the last four entities: spirits are a mixture of air and flame, but perfectly mixed; air and flame are pure, and they have a degree of subtlety starting from crude spirits (more airy); followed by air and living spirits (more flame-like); and ending with flame, the most subtle type of matter. Though trying to capture the distinctions in one classification, for Bacon matter is a continuum, and such a classification can only help us in getting to know nature better through experimental philosophy.

As a result of this continuity, tangibles and pneumatics transform into one another, a characteristic that is illustrated by Bacon in a pair of qualities also used, as we will see, by Conway. Some bodies, according to Bacon, “have a nature capable of assuming the pneumatic state (naturam potentialem ad pneumaticum) (i.e. they can be dissolved and turned into vapour and spirit by fire or in other ways),” while other bodies “have nothing whatever to do with this or scarcely put up with it at all” (Bacon 2000, 177). These characteristics of bodies are “volatile” and “fixed.” Water is a volatile body; a stone is fixed. This does not mean that a stone will never become spirit, but that it cannot become water from its actual state, a dense and gross portion of matter. It first has to become earth, then a more watery juice, and only later it might become water. It comes as no surprise that Conway uses “volatile” and “fixed” to distinguish between grades of matter: “This captivity of spirits in certain hard bodies, and their liberation when the bodies become soft, offers

30. For an illustration of the role of spirits in the production of natural processes, see his discussions on filtration, maturation, generation, putrefaction, and so forth in the *Sylva sylvarum* (Bacon 1859–64b).
a clear argument that spirit and body are of one original nature and substance, and that body is nothing but fixed and condensed spirit, and spirit nothing but volatile body or body made subtle” (Conway 1996, 61). Conway’s terms of rarefaction and condensation, gross and subtle, dense and rare, volatile and fixed, are not only comparable to those of Bacon (and Telesio), but they are used to describe a material entity—if spirit and matter are the same substance, how can these attributes refer to one and not to the other? If we say that spirit is a less gross, dense, and fixed body, and that matter is less subtle, rare, and volatile spirit, we use materialistic language to describe the spiritual entity.

Moreover, until now, Conway’s philosophy has been analyzed in relation to Neoplatonism, in particular to More’s ontology. However, this is not the only tradition that used the concept of spirit. There is another tradition, which made use of medical material spirits, but instead of using them in the same context as Galenic physicians, these philosophers endowed matter with life and perception. Using the concept of spirit, they solved the itching issue of an insurmountable gap created by dualist systems. This is what Conway herself aims at achieving, and drawing on this tradition must have seemed to be the best option.

4. Conclusion

Anne Conway’s philosophy has received the label of “spiritualism” or “monistic spiritualism,” “immaterial vitalism,” “antimaterialism,” and “idealism.” These labels resulted from the assumption that when she talks about matter or body and spirit, Conway has in mind the same concepts as Henry More, and thus spirit is an immaterial, mind-like entity. Moreover, because of her fierce criticism of Hobbes and Spinoza’s philosophies, Conway’s monism has been seen as a kind of idealism, because matter or body can be reduced to spirit.

In the second section of this paper, I showed that Conway is not critical of materialism per se but of mechanical materialism, which assumes that matter is a dead body. Quite the contrary, for Conway matter has to be vital, which is to say must have life, motion, and perception. In addition to the fact that spirit shares the traditional attributes of matter (extension, impenetrability, divisibility), Conway claims that the only immaterial spirit is God: however much creatures perfect themselves, they will never become like God, a pure and immaterial spirit.

In the third section, I emphasized the similarities between Conway’s concept of “spirit” and that of the vital naturalist philosophers. They all use the concept of “spirit” to describe a material, but subtle and active entity. In doing so, they argue against the dualism between body and soul or material and immaterial, since they consider that no intermediary concept can connect the two. Conway uses the
term “spirit” in a similar way, to create a monistic view that can solve the problems arising from dualist systems, such as those of Descartes and More. The language she uses when she talks about matter and spirit, the continuity between gross matter and subtle spirit, their mutual transformation, and the fact that spirits can account for perception, motion, and thinking, is reminiscent of this tradition of Renaissance vital naturalism.

REFERENCES


