Introduction

The year 1690 saw the appearance in Holland of an anonymous octavo volume entitled *Opuscula philosophica*.[1] The second of the three *opuscula* it contained was entitled *Principia philosophiae antiquissimae et recentissimae*.[2] Two years later, an English translation of this work was published, with the title *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy: Concerning God, Christ, and the Creature; that is, concerning Spirit and Matter in General*. The preface to the book explains that it was a translation by one 'J. C.' of 'a little treatise published since the Author's Death', originally published in Latin in Amsterdam. No author is named, but the address to the reader explains that it 'was written not many Years ago, by a certain English countess, a Woman learned beyond her Sex'. The Latin edition, of which this is a translation, gives no further clues as to the identity of this erudite Countess, but her authorship treatise was not altogether a secret in the early Enlightenment. In his biography (1710) of Henry More, Richard Ward prints the preface originally prepared for publication with this treatise, and gives an account of its author, 'the Lady Viscountess Conway', whom he describes as the 'Heroine pupil' of the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More (1614–87). The unpublished preface speaks of her 'singular Quickness and Apprehensiveness of Understanding' and her 'marvellous Sagacity and Prudence in any Affairs of Moment'.[3] The most famous reader

[1] *Opuscula philosophica quibus continetur, principia philosophiae antiquissimae & recentissimae ac philosophia vulgaris refutata quibus junctur sunt C.C. problemata de revolutione animarum humanorum* (Amsterdam, 1690). (Note that primary sources are cited in full at first mention throughout; secondary sources are cited by author's name and date only.)

[2] *Principiae philosophiae antiquissimae & recentissimae de Deo, Christo & creatura id est de spiritu & materia in genere* (Amsterdam, 1690).

[3] Richard Ward, *The Life of the Pious and Learned Henry More* (London, 1710; rev. edn 2000), p. 123. Ward does not actually mention that Lady Conway's book had been published. He also erroneously attributes the unpublished preface to More, saying that it was written by him in Van Helmont's name. The content, however, indicates that the author was Van Helmont himself. The author states, 'I Can witness from these Seven or Eight Years Experience of her', which is consistent with Van Helmont's having resided at her home at Ragley Hall for most of the decade prior to Anne Conway's death.

of Lady Conway's *Principles* certainly knew her identity: Leibniz inscribed her name, 'La comtesse de Konnouay', on his copy of the Latin original, which is preserved among his collection of books at the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hanover.[4] Nevertheless, almost a century later her identity as the author of *The Principles* was not widely known in England, as may be seen in the correspondence published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1784 answering a query about the name of the author, which was established as 'the illustrious Anne, Viscountess Conway'.[5] This did not redeem Anne Conway from obscurity, and it was not until Marjorie Nicolson published her correspondence with Henry More in *The Conway Letters* in 1930 that she was brought back into focus as a thinker connected with Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists.

Anne Conway's *Principia philosophiae* is a book that deserves the attention of historians of philosophy on many counts. Not only is it one of the earliest philosophical treatises by a woman to have seen print, but it is a treatise in dialogue with the philosophy of the seventeenth century. In the process of setting out an original system of metaphysics, Anne Conway engages in the critique of the philosophies of Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza, as well as of her teacher, Henry More. Furthermore, the system she propounds has some striking similarities to the philosophy of Leibniz. She was also conversant with contemporary science and natural philosophy. Her treatise is a work of metaphysics, which, as its subtitle tells us, deals with 'spirit and matter in general' (*de spiritu & materia in genere*). It claims to be able to solve problems which neither scholasticism, nor Cartesianism, nor the philosophy of Hobbes or Spinoza have been able to solve: the benefit of her treatise will, she says, resolve all the problems which could not be solved by the scholastics, or the moderns, Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza ('omnia problemata, quae nec per Philosophiam Scholasticam, nec per communem modernam, nec per Cartesianam, Hobbesianam, vel Spinosianam resolvi possunt'). Her distinctive solution to these problems is set out as tripartite ontology, deduced from the nature of God. In this Neoplatonic order of three species (as she calls them), the created world is derived from God via an intermediate species, Middle Nature, which is the

Moreover, he refers to More indirectly as a third party – 'that Party, who knew her from her Youth, and had the Honour of her Friendship to her Dying Day' – this is consistent with More's having been her friend for over twenty-five years.

[4] The book was probably presented to Leibniz by Francis Mercury van Helmont, mutual friend of Leibniz and Anne Conway. See Coudert (1995), Coudert (1999) and chapter 11 below.

[5] Since Anne Conway's reputation as a philosopher has been established under her married name, I shall normally refer to her by that, as a pen name rather than by her maiden name, Anne Finch.

first efficient cause through which all things come into being, and, as the imparter of God's providential design, the final cause of all things. 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. 'Spirit and body' she writes, 'are originally one and the same thing in the first substance'.[6] In opposition to new philosophies of the seventeenth century, which sought to explain all phenomena in the natural world in terms of matter in motion, matter being merely extension, differentiated by shape, size and position, Anne Conway argues that body is not 'dead matter', but a substance endued with life. Even where she differs from Descartes and More, Anne Conway remains philosophically indebted to them by virtue of the fact that, between them, they provided her starting point in philosophy. It was in response to them that she worked out her own system, which is in many ways a continuation of the process of cross-fertilisation of Cartesianism and Platonism initiated by Henry More.

Even after the first appearance of Marjorie Nicolson's magisterial edition of Anne Conway's correspondence in 1930, interest in her philosophy was slow to gather momentum. It is only within the last twenty-five years that there has been any appreciable study of it. The publication of a modern edition of both the Latin and the English versions of her philosophy, edited by Peter Loptson in 1982, and a new English translation of the Latin by Allison Coudert and Taylor Corse in 1996, have made her philosophy available to modern audiences as never before, while the revised edition of *The Conway Letters* (1992) has restored the philosophical content of her correspondence omitted in Marjorie Nicolson's 1930 edition.[7] In the wake of the women's movement and the new interest in women's history which it has generated, there is increasing interest in Anne Conway as a woman philosopher. This is registered in the inclusion of extracts from the *Principles* in recent anthologies of writings by female philosophers, and in

[6] Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, trans. Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 63. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Conway's *Principles* are from the translation by Corse and Coudert. And unless the context requires the Latin version to be specified, I shall refer to the work by its English title.

[7] The story of the discovery and preservation of the Conway correspondence by Horace Walpole is told in the Prologue to *The Conway Letters. The Correspondence of Vicountess Anne Conway, Henry More and their Friends*, ed. S. Hutton and M. H. Nicolson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). However, Walpole's restricted idea of what constitutes a historical document led him to consign a good many of the papers he discovered to the flames (he regarded documents like bills and bonds as 'useless'). Horace Walpole, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 41 vols. ed. W. S. Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1937–83), vol. IX, p. 17.

the appearance of entries on Anne Conway in philosophical dictionaries.[8] The growing interest is also evident from the fact that her treatise is being translated.[9]

Anne Conway lived at a time when only a minority of women received much by way of education, and when philosophy was considered a male preserve. It is therefore truly remarkable that she managed to become a philosopher in her own right. It is equally remarkable that we have as full a picture as we do of both her philosophy and her life. The major biographical work on Anne Conway was done by Marjorie Nicolson. Although this has been added to subsequently, the biographical framework established by Nicolson remains largely unchanged. What Marjorie Nicolson did not set out to provide was an intellectual biography which mapped her intellectual milieu and traced the development of her thought. In fact Professor Nicolson sidestepped philosophical questions altogether, by excising from her edition the letters which discuss Descartes, and by refraining from examining Conway's *Principles* in *The Conway Letters.* Nevertheless, from this correspondence we can learn something about Anne Finch's education, especially her relationship with her brother's university tutor, Henry More of Christ's College, Cambridge, who took her on as a kind of extra-mural pupil, since she, as a woman, was debarred from attending the university (I deal with the curriculum she followed with More in chapter 2). It is clear from the surviving letters from More's epistolary tutorials that Anne Conway's introduction to philosophy was through the new philosophy of René Descartes. It is therefore the more remarkable that Anne Conway's own *Principia philosophiae* entails a repudiation of Cartesian dualism. But apart from telling us something about her early philosophical education and about the circle surrounding Anne Conway, *The Conway Letters* gives few clues as to the evolution and writing of her *Principles.* Marjorie Nicolson's sidestepping of the philosophical life of her subject is understandable, for the letters reveal very little directly about Conway's philosophical life and the genesis of her treatise. Furthermore, the majority of the letters published in *The Conway Letters* are by Henry More. We therefore access Anne Conway indirectly through his replies to her no-longer-extant letters. But even here it is difficult to detect the developments in her thinking which resulted in the composition of her *Principles of Philosophy.* Her silence on this, together with the fact that one of the most important sources of information about her is indirect mediation, must give us pause. The compact

[8] For example, Atherton (1993), and *Women Philosophers*, ed. Mary Warnock (London: Dent, 1996). Also Craig (1998), see under 'Anne Conway'; Audi (1995), see under 'Conway, Anne'.

[9] At the time of writing, a Polish translation by Joanna Usakiewicz has just appeared, and a Spanish translation by Bernadino Orio de Miguel is being prepared.

self-consistency of her *Principles* and the relatively large amount of documentation of her life (large, that is, compared to most other women intellectuals of this period), belie the fact that our purchase on her life and thought is more fragile than it seems.

Aside from the anonymity of the published versions of her philosophy, we have to reckon with the fact that it is based on private notebooks, and does not, apparently, constitute everything she wrote. The unpublished preface by Van Helmont, printed in Ward's *Life* of Henry More describes the treatise as 'these broken Fragments': 'Thou art to understand, that they are only Writings abruptly and scatteredly, I may add also obscurely, written in a Paper Book, with a Black-lead Pen, towards the latter end of her long and tedious Pains and Sickness; which she never had Opportunity to revise, correct, or perfect.'[10] Her first editor tells us that her philosophical papers, originally written in English, were found among her effects after her death. They were never intended for publication but 'for her own use', and much of what she wrote was illegible. Nor do we have the original text. What we do have are two translations, one in Latin, and the other of that Latin into English: 'she wrote these few chapters for her own use, but in a very small and faint handwriting. When these were found after her death, part of them were transcribed (because the rest were hardly legible) and translated into Latin, so that the whole world might derive some profit from them.'[11] This translation was, the English version tells us, printed 'at Amsterdam, by M. Brown' in 1690, apparently at the behest of Anne Conway's erstwhile physician and friend Francis Mercury van Helmont.[12] The anonymous volume, *Opuscula philosophica*, in which the Latin version appeared, contains two other anonymously printed treatises, one by Van Helmont and the other by Jean Gironnet.[13] This means that, when Anne Conway's philosophical treatise was first published, it appeared in Latin translation. The subsequent English edition was a translation of a translation. The printed versions were, moreover, incomplete and published more than a decade after she died. And we cannot rule out the possibility that Van Helmont made some additions to the text.[14] Yet this is the fullest and most systematic work of philosophy by any woman writing in the English language in

[10] Ward, *The Life*, p. 123. [11] 'To the Reader', in *Principles*, p. 7. [12] See Coudert (1995).

[13] The two other works are Jean Gironnet's anti-scholastic discussion, *Philosophia vulgaris refutata* (Amsterdam, 1690) and *De revolutione animorum humanorum quanta stet istius doctrinae cum veritate. Christianae religionis conformitas problematum centuriae duae* which is a Latin translation of Van Helmont's *Two Hundred Queries Modestly Propounded Concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of the Human Souls and its Conformity with the Truth of the Christian Religion* (London, 1684).

[14] At least some of the notes which give page references to the *Kabbalah denudata* must post-date the writing of the treatise, since they refer to the second volume, not published until 1684. See chapter 8 below.

the seventeenth century. It is an extraordinary chance that her treatise has survived. Without it, we would have, at best, only circumstantial evidence of her engagement in philosophy. Although there is sufficient surviving evidence of her writings for us to be able to identify her as a philosopher, her letters, like her treatise, are an imperfect record, since not many of them have come down to us, and those that have are reticent about her compilation of her philosophical notebook. The information to be obtained from these sources is therefore patchy. The best documentation we have gives us incomplete and indirect access to the nature and development of her philosophy.

PLACING ANNE CONWAY

The case of Anne Conway is in many ways emblematic of the anomalous position of women in history, and especially in the history of philosophy: they are visible like footprints in other people's lives, discernible largely by their impact on those around them. One notable example one might cite is Boyle's sister Lady Ranelagh, who by all accounts played a shaping role in the practical affairs of her time, but is only known from what others said about her. Another example is Elizabeth of Bohemia, who comes into view as a correspondent of Descartes. Common sense tells us that she did not stop doing philosophy when she stopped writing to Descartes. But she left no writings that confirm this. A further irony of Anne Conway's case is that, even at the point where her philosophy became known (the point of publication), its author had no name. Nor could she have enjoyed her anonymous fame, having predeceased the publication of her work by a decade. In recovering her as part of our philosophical heritage, we have to find a way of working with a record that seems, at times, more like a palimpsest.

Aside from the problems arising from discontinuities in the documentary record, there are other difficulties to overcome when recovering Anne Conway as a philosopher. These are in many respects the kinds of difficulty involved in reclaiming any forgotten female philosopher of the past. But each such philosopher is a special case, according to the character of her philosophy. And each has her own *fortuna* or lack of it in the history of philosophy. In Anne Conway's case, situating her as a philosopher in relation to philosophy as it is understood and practised today is not easy. Her treatise is a work of metaphysics, largely devoted to discussing the nature of substance and doing so in distinctly seventeenth-century terms. Moreover, the terms are not those familiar from the philosophical vocabulary of Descartes

and Locke. Rather she employs the philosophical idiom of thinkers and philosophers no longer regarded as frontline, and in some cases considered definitively defunct. The philosophers with whom she was most closely associated were the group known now as the Cambridge Platonists. She also adopts terms from the language of alchemy and the kabbalah, while her vitalism has affinities with the biological thought of two figures not normally treated as philosophers, Jan Baptiste van Helmont and his son Francis Mercury van Helmont. Her very choice of title, 'Most Ancient and Modern', confounds the modern understanding of historical categories and our sense of the distinctness of one philosophical school from another. Her incorporation of religious and theological material in her treatise, in particular her use of kabbalistic and Origenist doctrines, runs counter to our sense of the modernity of seventeenth-century philosophy, and even our idea of philosophy. With her letters, as with her treatise, much of the intellectual subject matter is not recognisably philosophical – at least not philosophical discourse as we would understand it today. Many of the discussions consist of apparently abstruse topics with little direct bearing on philosophy – religious enthusiasm, millenarianism and kabbalism.

Not only does the example of Anne Conway aptly illustrate the general problem of the unfamiliar in philosophical history, but it highlights the particular case of the misfortunes of Platonism. Many of the non-canonical philosophers of the past worked within philosophical traditions that have since been declared suspect or unimportant. This is particularly the case with the Platonist philosophies with which Anne Conway was familiar through her contact with the so-called Cambridge Platonists. There has been a long history of hostility to Platonism ever since its recovery for the Western philosophical tradition in the Renaissance. This hostility manifests itself as a challenge to Platonism's status as real philosophy with Jacob Brucker and the German Enlightenment. It was Brucker who undermined the philosophical credentials of such figures as Plotinus, Iamblichus and Porphyry, by grouping them together under the heading *Neoplatonism*, separate from Plato, and associated with such dubious thinkers as Paracelsus.[15]

Recent attempts to place Anne Conway philosophically have tried to see her as a prototype of more familiar philosophical traditions or areas of philosophy. Jane Duran and Anne Becco, for example, have pointed out

[15] Jacob Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae* (Lipsiae, 1742–67). Brucker's prejudices against Platonism are echoed by Johan Lorenz Mosheim in his Latin translation of the works of Cudworth, *Systema intellectualis huius universi* (Jena, 1733). During the Renaissance and the seventeenth century the main objections to Platonism were theological, often relating to the issue of the Trinity.

the parallels between her system and Leibniz's philosophy.[16] Peter Loptson, more boldly, detects anticipations of Wittgenstein, Kripke and others in the *de re* modality he discerns in her work.[17] Duran and Becco illustrate the problem of what may be called the 'coat-tail syndrome', that is a well-meaning attempt to recommend women philosophers (and other philosophers perceived as minor) by linking them to more famous canonical figures. This approach may have the advantage of bringing less familiar figures to the attention of established industries in philosophical scholarship, but it has the inbuilt danger of consigning such figures to permanent 'minor' status. Alternatively, we may, like Peter Loptson, read Anne Conway as a proto-modern, focusing on recognisable modern philosophical issues. This has the advantage of helping to give modern philosophers some sense of kinship with a remote figure from the past. But it is only possible by distortion and omission. On this kind of reading, much of the content of her book has to be consigned to the category of dross, or perhaps 'mysticism'. And in that category one will find her use of the kabbalah and of alchemical terminology, as well as such weird and wonderful concepts as 'vital extension'. Exceptionally among Conway studies, Coudert and Corse have tried to reverse this approach, and focus on Conway's use of the kabbalah as a key feature of her treatise. In doing so they lay themselves open to the charge that they have muddled mysticism with 'real' philosophy.[18] These apparently mystical features of *The Principles* mean it is difficult to accept the classification of Conway as 'a rationalist' according to the rationalist–empiricist opposition adopted in the twentieth century.[19] Of the few attempts to acknowledge Anne Conway's Platonism, Carolyn Merchant's study is limited by the fact that it is too narrow in its invocation of that context, with the result that she classes Conway's mentor, More, in the opposite philosophical camp from her own. Lois Frankel is another commentator who acknowledges a Platonist element in Conway's *Principles*. But her study illustrates precisely the ambivalent view of Platonism among contemporary analytic philosophers, in so far as she seems to regard Conway's Platonism as primarily a matter of *imagery* rather than conceptual framework.[20] More

[16] Becco (1978), Duran (1989). Also Merchant (1980).
[17] In *The Principles*, parallel text edition, ed. Peter Loptson (Delmar, NY: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1998), pp. 10–11, 17, 146–9.
[18] Mary Warnock, in her review of the Corse and Coudert translation of Conway's *Principles*, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 1996.
[19] See, e.g., Duran (1989).
[20] Frankel (1991), p. 44. Loptson is another who sets the 'rationalism' of Conway in opposition to Platonism, as represented by the religious and poetic concerns of Henry More (*The Principles*, ed. Loptson, p. 16).

recently, by offering a historically nuanced analysis of informed feminist philosophy, Jacqueline Broad's study of early modern women philosophers signals a new departure in this area.

APPROACHING BIOGRAPHY

The discontinuous nature of the source material means that it is impossible to structure an intellectual biography of Anne Conway as a continuous chronological narrative of the kind that Marjorie Nicolson did when she packaged the letters as the story of a Platonic friendship, framing the correspondence with biographical commentary. In order to show that her philosophical treatise was the outcome of the philosophical concerns of a lifetime (or even to show that it was not), chronology is important, but the only philosophical text we have of Anne Conway's dates from her very last years, and there is no chronological lead-in from her letters. However, the letters do yield enough information about Anne Conway's conduct of her intellectual life to suggest an alternative approach, or rather to suggest ways of making the *indirect* access we have to her thinking into an asset. For this *The Conway Letters* gives us vital clues. Most importantly of all, they indicate that Anne Conway's philosophising was not confined to her treatise, even though that is the best evidence we have of what she thought. Her letters indicate that she was at the centre – the nerve centre perhaps – of continuous intellectual debate, in which she played the lead role in setting the agenda. As her letters show, it is she who asks the questions – questions which shape the answers emanating from her circle.[21] From the very beginning of her acquaintance with More right up to her last letters to him, it is she who poses questions that others answer. Nor does she simply initiate debate, but she conducts it, not so much as an interlocutor, but as an orchestrator. As we shall see in chapter 10, this is clearly the case when she involves Henry More in a debate with George Keith. This manner of proceeding raises the question of the authorship of treatises written in response to her or at her request. When Van Helmont tells us that *Two Hundred Queries* was put together at the request of 'a Person of quality', when we see her instructing More to respond to Keith's *Immediate Revelation*, or when we see echoes of Conway in the writings of Van Helmont and Keith, we ought to consider the possibility that her philosophical authorship is wider than the *Principia philosophiae antiquissimae et recentissimae*.

[21] A parallel (albeit a semi-fictional one) for this may be found in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, where the duchess of Urbino presides over the dialogue of her courtiers and dictates the subject matter of their debate. However, she does not actually contribute a word to it.

Although Anne Conway's philosophy appears to have been conceived as a definitive system of metaphysics, when it is set in context we can see that it was the outcome of collective dialogue. In this respect (as well as others to be discussed later) she may be compared to Leibniz, whom Stuart Brown has described as 'a collaborative philosopher', a contributor to the debates of his time, and comfortable with a conception of metaphysics as open-ended, that is amenable to modification in the light of new problems.[22] A major difference between Anne Conway and Leibniz is the conditions under which they conducted their dialogues. As the employee of princes, and a full citizen of the republic of letters, Leibniz had privileged contact with the leading public minds of his day. As a woman and an invalid, Anne Conway's collaborative space was confined to what was possible within the social and physical constraints that circumscribed her intellectual activities.

Since *The Conway Letters* gives few obvious clues as to the evolution and writing of her *Principles*, the history of her philosophical activities has to be pieced together, by a process of what might be called reconstructive archaeology, from the intellectual circle she was fortunate enough to inhabit – a circle which included the chief mentors of her philosophical life: her brother John Finch, her teacher Henry More, and her physician Francis Mercury van Helmont. Given the dialogic nature of Anne Conway's conduct of her intellectual enquiries, the obvious means of access to the life of her mind is to examine those with whom she was in dialogue. This does not mean that hers was a reach-me-down package of disparate elements patchworked into a whole. Far from it. We could not even begin to document her mental life without examining its traces in the mental lives of others, as recorded in their writings. To gain any insight into her intellecual activities, it is imperative to contextualise Anne Conway's thought by examining the personal, cultural and philosophical circumstances in which she lived, in so far as these can be reconstructed from her letters and the writings of those with whom she was in contact.

For this reason, the optimum starting point for an investigation of Anne Conway's philosophy is her starting point: Cambridge Platonism. When Marjorie Nicolson discovered and published More's correspondence with Anne Conway she confirmed the link with the Cambridge Platonists, especially with Henry More. Anne Conway became a philosopher not *in spite of* Cambridge Platonism, but *through* it. However, to underline the link between Conway and Cambridge Platonism is, again, to risk classifying her among the 'also-rans' of philosophy. But it is a risk that has to be

[22] Brown (1984), p. 8.