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Title

Masham, Damaris Cudworth

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Abstract

Damaris Masham engaged in debates with Mary Astell and John Norris concerning the love of God and causation. She argued against their claim that creatures should not be loved in the same way as God. In addition, she argues against the Malebranchean view of occasionalism that Norris defends in the correspondence. In her correspondence with G.W. Leibniz, she argues that Leibniz’s views have similar problems to those of Malebranche and argues that soul or spirits are extended in space. In her own works, she argues that we come to the knowledge of God’s existence through the knowledge of his works, that God provided us with desires for pleasure and happiness, which shows that he loves us and that we are immortal, and she advocates for women’s education on religious grounds.

Keywords

Love, Causation, Happiness, Education

Main Text

Damaris Masham, *nee* Cudworth, (1659-1708) engaged in 17th century debates concerning the love of God with Mary Astell (see EOPR0030) and John Norris, criticized the metaphysical views of Nicholas Malebranche (see EOPR0225) and G. W. Leibniz (EOPR0210), and was author of two books defending the reasonableness of Christianity with respect to virtue and happiness. She was born in Cambridge on January 18th. Her father was the Cambridge Platonist philosopher Ralph Cudworth (see EOPR0087 and EOPR0065). Masham was raised in the environment of Cambridge University (although, of course, as a woman she was not allowed to attend) and was likely acquainted with philosophy at a young age (Hutton 1993). She read French and taught herself Latin later in life. She met John Locke (see EOPR0216) around 1681 and began what would be a lifelong friendship. She married Sir Frances Masham in 1685 and moved to his estate in Oates. Francis Masham had nine children from a previous marriage, and he and Damaris had another boy, Francis Masham, who was born in 1686. In 1691 Locke

became a permanent resident of the Masham household at Oates until his death in 1704. Locke and Masham studied the Bible and discussed philosophical issues, including education, freedom, religion, and reason and faith. Masham published the *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (DLG) in 1696, and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (OT) in 1705. Both works were published anonymously and both were mistakenly thought to be Locke's works (Hutton 2014b). In addition to her books and correspondence with Locke, Masham corresponded with G. W. Leibniz, Le Clerc, John Norris, and van Limborch.

According to Masham, the distinguishing feature of human beings is their capacity for reason. Masham holds that reason is a natural faculty, similar to sensation and reflection, and is a necessary and beneficial aid to our sensory faculties. God has given human beings this capacity so that we may follow his will, preserve ourselves, control our passions, and do our moral duty. While our reason is useful for these practical matters, Masham is doubtful that humans have the ability to understand metaphysical truths about the structure of the world or the nature of God (Lascano 2017). However, she does think that we can use reason to know that God exists. Careful use of reason in comparing, deducing, and inferring ideas derived from reflection and sensation will produce justified beliefs about the world. After reflecting on our own rational nature, we infer that the cause of our existence must be intelligent. Our sensations convince us that an orderly and beautiful universe exists. From these reflections and sensations, we can infer that a wise and powerful cause of the universe must exist (OT 60-1). In the *Discourse*, Masham notes that an argument that acknowledges a first cause as only powerful is not sufficient to justify thinking that God is good or praiseworthy. She acknowledges that some beings have lives that are so miserable that they would rather not exist (DLG 63). Masham argues that God has supplied us with the means for achieving happiness. If we use our capacities wisely, then we will find our own existence "lovely" and realize that the objects and beings that surround us were designed to be helpful and pleasing to us (DLG 63-4). This shows us that the first cause of the universe, God, loves us and wants us to be happy.

Masham's arguments for the existence of God require us to move from facts about the world to the existence and nature of the first cause of the world (Lascano 2011; EOPR0084). Thus, she holds that the best means to knowing that God exists is through an understanding and appreciation of his works. Masham's book, *Discourse Concerning the Love of God*, was prompted by Mary Astell's and John Norris's published correspondence, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (2005), wherein Norris defends Malebranche's doctrine of seeing all things in God (see EOPR0225), and both he and Astell argue that God should be the sole object of our desirous love (where the object is loved for its own sake). Creatures, they argue, should be the objects of our benevolent love (where one desires the wellbeing of the object) only. While some scholars have argued that Astell was the target of Masham's criticisms (see Wilson 2004), Broad (2003) provides evidence that the two women were not adversaries. Norris holds that positing a distinction between two different types of love is necessary otherwise Christ's response as to what is necessary for salvation in Matthew 22:37-9 ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself") will otherwise be contradictory. Masham, like Locke, does not hold that scripture always must be taken literally. Rather, when it seems contradictory, we must use reason, which is given to us by God, to make sense of it. She claims that Christ's response tells us that our duty is to love God above all, but to love all creatures (including ourselves) equally. Masham argues that there is only one kind of love, although different desires accompany the feeling of love depending on the object of our love. Masham holds that our love of our neighbour is usually

accompanied by a desire for their continued existence and a desire for them as a good to us, and she claims that it is no contradiction to desire God's wellbeing in addition to desiring him as a good. Thus, she claims that the distinction between benevolent love and desirous love is not needed. Since Masham believes that it is impossible to know and love God without first knowing and loving his creation, she believes that Norris's views "are plainly but a complementing God with the contempt of his Works" (DLG 27). Underlying Masham's criticisms of Norris is her conviction that the Malebranchean occasionalism he defends in his correspondence with Astell is a doctrine that is contrary to God's wisdom and unbefitting his goodness.

Masham makes numerous arguments against the Malebranchean doctrine of occasionalism (see EOPR0225). The occasionalist, according to Masham, is one who holds that God is the only efficient cause in the world. Creatures are efficaciously inert, and are only occasional causes of God's efficient will. Malebranche claims that it is sinful to desire creatures as loving them prevents one from loving God properly. This view is antithetical to Masham's view that it is both necessary and good to love God's creation. Masham argues that since occasional causes are (1) always accompanied by their effect, and (2) such that without them the effect is not produced, there is no practical difference between occasional causes and efficient causes (DLG 31). Thus, even if occasionalism is true, there will be no difference in the way we treat perceived causes – they will still be desired and loved. Thus, if the doctrine of occasional causes were true, then all creatures would be damned to sin. Since Masham believes that there is no way for the vast majority of human beings to know that the doctrine of occasionalism is true, this view holds that God unjustly damns his creation. In addition, Masham argues that God's creation becomes useless if occasionalism is true. The intricate working of the human body and all the other parts of nature are mere stage setting for God's acts. However, this seems inefficient and wasteful – not to mention duplicitous. Thus, the doctrine that the things in nature are not efficient causes, as they seem to us to be, is unbefitting of God's wisdom.

God's involvement in causality is also the main subject of Masham's correspondence with Leibniz. In their twelve letter correspondence, Masham and Leibniz discuss his system of simple beings, or souls (minds or "monads"), and his doctrine of pre-established harmony (see EOPR0210). Masham understands that since Leibniz holds that everything is ultimately made of simple beings that are unextended, immaterial, and completely independent of bodies, Leibniz must give an account of how it is that these entities seem to interact with bodies. For Leibniz, the story involves a pre-established harmony between the perceptions of monads and the phenomena of body. God sets up a perfect correspondence between these two realms, so that every bodily movement corresponds to a perception of the mind or monad. Masham believes that Leibniz's system of pre-established harmony is consistent with God's wisdom. However, she does not think that this means it is true. We cannot know all the possible ways in which God might work in the world. Moreover, she claims that Leibniz's pre-established harmony has the same fault as Malebranche's occasionalism in that it makes God's works superfluous. Masham suggests that the interaction problem could be explained if both souls (or minds) and bodies had something in common, rather than being understood as completely different from each other. Masham claims that she cannot conceive of an entity that is unextended, and suggests that this means that God might have made souls or minds with extension as well as bodies. Her reasoning seems to be that if both souls and minds were extended in space, they would have something in common and so could interact with each other. She also suggests that it is more befitting of God's wisdom that he would make unseen entities similar to the entities that we experience in the world. Leibniz objects that if immaterial things were extended, then God would be extended as well (see Sleight

2005). Masham does not reply to this objection, but she noted earlier in the correspondence that her own father, who opposed the idea of extended souls or spirits, was not able to persuade her on this point.

Masham holds that we know through revelation that God rewards us for our virtue and punishes us for our sins. In order for humans to be responsible for their actions, they must be able to make some determinations about which desires they will pursue. Masham claims that human beings are free to weigh the circumstances, benefits, and possible outcomes of their actions by the use of reason. Once we have decided what action is best for us, we are free if we are able to act on this preference (OT 70-1; see EOPR0147). She argues that the imperfection of creatures – our inability to always judge what is best correctly – leads to willing contrary to our creator. However, we are also given the tools necessary to improve our judgments by the right use of reason. Although Masham’s writings about human freedom are sparse, she saw freedom as essential for moral accountability and her views are similar to those found in both John Locke and Ralph Cudworth. There is some scholarly debate as to whether Masham’s views on freedom were influenced by Locke and Cudworth or whether both she and Locke were influenced by Cudworth. However, Broad (2006) has claimed that Masham did not inherit her father’s unpublished manuscripts on freedom, and that it is likely that it is Masham who influenced Locke’s account of freedom.

Happiness and pleasure, according to Masham, is what we all desire, and as long as our pleasure is harmless there is no reason to believe it is sinful. God has given us all our desires, and he is the only being who does not have desires. If we are able to secure lasting pleasure, we are happy. Masham posits both bodily and mental pleasures. However, she claims that mental pleasures are more likely to be lasting and thus more conducive to happiness. Masham also holds that sensory pleasures would become dull to us if we did not receive the satisfaction that we, as rational creatures, are able to enjoy in having pleasure. Here, Masham points to what we would call “attitudinal pleasures.” For it is pleasurable to get a massage or feel the warmth of the sun, but as rational creatures we appreciate *that* we are getting a massage and *that* the sun is warming us. The ability to reflect upon our pleasures, anticipate them, and recall them, lends greater duration and intensity to our sensory delights. God has provided us with the desire for pleasure and happiness, as well as the ability to take additional satisfaction in these pleasures. That God has provided us with these pleasures is what causes us to love God and our fellow beings for we love only those things we find pleasing.

Masham holds that the correspondence between pleasure and pain and good and evil is so thoroughgoing that we receive natural punishments (and presumably rewards) for the good and evil that we cause in the world. God has set up the world in such a way that when people become vicious, they falter, and when they are virtuous, they prosper (OT 230-1). However, Masham also holds that there is a fair amount of injustice in the world, and that while we can know our immortality through revelation and Christ, this injustice in the world coupled with our own desire to live forever are a natural means to the knowledge of immortality (OT 50).

Masham uses the necessity of understanding religion, which she defines as “the knowledge of how to please God,” as a ground for arguments for women’s education (OT 40). She claims that the reasons one might be uncertain about the Christian religion are bad education, laziness, custom, and skepticism. She notes that women, in particular, are not educated in the content and grounds of religion. This makes them weak and superstitious. She argues that since knowledge of religion is necessary to follow God’s will, which is necessary for eternal salvation, all women should be educated in order to improve their reason, understanding

of the world, knowledge of the foundations of religion, and so that they may educate their children in these matters.

SEE ALSO:

EOPR0030
EOPR0065
EOPR0084
EOPR0087
EOPR0147
EOPR0210
EOPR0216
EOPR0225

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