

**‘Heads Cast in Metaphysical Moulds’:
Damaris Masham on the Method and Nature of Metaphysics**
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1. Introduction

If you come across the term “metaphysics” in Damaris Masham’s work, it is likely that it will be in the context of an insult. She may, for instance, claim that someone has an ‘extraordinary, and Metaphysical Constitution’ that causes him to be ‘unacquainted with the World, and Humane Nature’ (Masham 1696: 37). Or she may claim that metaphysical speculations arise from being ‘mighty fond of’ or ‘prepossess’d with an hypothesis’ or because one is ‘tempted by Affection of Novelty’ (Masham 1696: 10, 46, 6). She might even sarcastically claim that ‘He whose Head is cast in a Metaphysical Mould has, it may be, Privileges of Nature which accompany it, that ordinary Mortals are Strangers to’ (Masham 1696: 36). Masham disparages the notion of metaphysics when she criticizes the systematic philosophies held by John Norris, Nicolas Malebranche, and G. W. Leibniz. However, Masham is willing to discuss, and sometimes put forth her own views concerning, the existence and nature of God, the essence of substances, the possibility of intelligence elsewhere in the universe, the nature of causation, and the nature of freedom. All of these are topics that today we would firmly assent to as metaphysical. So, a chapter on Damaris Masham’s metaphysics must be set in the context of seventeenth century debates about the subject matter and methodology of metaphysics.

In this chapter, first we will provide a brief discussion of part of the larger debates concerning metaphysics and attempt to place Masham alongside her friend John Locke in holding that the subject matter of metaphysics is usually either strictly the providence of revelation or is beyond human understanding. Next, we will explore Masham’s criticisms of Norris, Malebranche, and Leibniz to see how these views inform her objections. Here, it will become clear that Masham eschews metaphysics as an *a priori* investigation into

supernatural causes and spirits. She argues that not only do we lack positive evidence for the truth of these metaphysical hypotheses, but we have good reason – from experience and revelation – to believe them false. Finally, we will turn briefly to some of Masham’s positive views concerning the existence and nature of God, the nature of substances, and human freedom. Here, we will see that while Masham does not approve of metaphysical theses that seemingly conflict with our experience of the world, we can know some things about the nature of God and ourselves through experience and reason. This leaves room for Masham to engage in a fair amount of what we would currently consider metaphysical discourse.

2. The Debates about ‘Metaphysics’

In the seventeenth century, as Sarah Hutton notes, ‘metaphysics came to be derided as “abstruse” or “useless” knowledge, and it was often associated with scholasticism’ (Hutton 2015: 15). Part of the problem was that there was no clear definition of the subject matter of metaphysics. Dimitri Levitin notes, ‘Aristotle had been famously ambiguous’ about the subject matter of metaphysics (Levitin 2016: 69).¹ On the one hand, he called it ‘first philosophy,’ and in this sense it was the study of *being qua being*, or the study of the nature of matter. On the other hand, he equated it with the study of theology, which was understood as the study of supernatural causes and spirits (Levitin 2016: 69).² This confusion about the subject matter of metaphysics, along with the emergence of experimental natural philosophy, led to disputes about how to understand metaphysics and what role, if any, it might play as a part of natural theology, natural philosophy, or both. Figures like Thomas Hobbes held that metaphysics was properly understood as ‘first philosophy’ or natural philosophy, while others, like Henry More, held that metaphysics was properly understood as natural theology. There are two issues at stake in this debate. The first issue, as noted above, is the subject matter of metaphysics. Is it the material world and perhaps the soul (as considered as part of the union or mind)? Or is it the supernatural world of God and spirits? The second problem is the issue of methodology. Is it possible to use reason and deduction from principles alone to discover natural, as well as supernatural, truths? Or

¹See also (Hutton 2015: 15-6); and for a very detailed explanation of the various positions taken in the debate, see (Levitin 2015: 230-446).

² Levitin cites Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* IV 1003a21 and 1026a19-20.

must we use experience to understand things in the world while regulating most of theology to what is gleaned from reason and revelation? These two issues are important for placing Masham's discussions in context. Unfortunately, she does not have a work dedicated to epistemological and methodological issues (although she does note some of her views in her works). However, Masham's close intellectual friendship with Locke, and the similarity of their views on issues concerning knowledge and methodology, indicate that an examination of Locke's views on this subject will help us to better understand Masham's position.³

In the *Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke tells us that there are three subjects, or sciences, fit for human understanding. The first is the nature of things as they are in themselves, the second is ethics, or what we ought to do, and the third is semantics. Since it is the first subject that concerns us, we will focus on it.

Locke discusses the subject as follows:

First, The Knowledge of Things, as they are in their own proper Beings, their Constitutions, Properties, and Operations; whereby I mean not only Matter, and Body, but Spirits also, which have their proper Natures, Constitutions, and Operations, as well as Bodies. This, in a little more enlarged Sense of the Word, I call physika, or *natural Philosophy*. The end of this, is bare speculative Truth, and whatsoever can afford the Mind of Man any such, falls under this branch, whether it be God himself, Angels, Spirits, Bodies; or any of their Affections, as Number, and Figure, &c. (Locke, 1979: 720)

Here, it seems that Locke wants to take the two definitions of metaphysics from Aristotle and combine them all into the subject matter of natural philosophy.⁴ In doing so, it might seem he undercuts metaphysics as a part of philosophy. However, Locke expands his discussion in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which Masham praises in her own *Occasional Thoughts*. There, Locke writes, '*Natural Philosophy* being the Knowledge of the Principles, Properties, and Operations of Things, as they are in themselves, I imagine there are Two Parts of it, one comprehending Spirits with their Nature and Qualities; and the other Bodies. The first of these is usually referr'd to *Metaphysics*.' (Locke 1989: 245). So, it seems that Locke was willing to

³ Locke and Masham were close personally and philosophically. While there is some debate over the extent to which Masham influenced Locke's philosophical work, there is no doubt about his influence on hers. See (Broad 2006), (Buickerood 2009), (Hutton 1993 and 2015), (O'Donnell 1984), and (Springborg 1998). Both of her published works have strong Lockean frameworks and, since both were published anonymously, contemporaries took them both for Locke's work. During the later years of his life, Locke resided in Masham's house. These years were productive philosophically for both Locke and Masham. It was during this period that Locke encouraged the publication of her two works: the *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* and *Occasional Thoughts Concerning a Vertuous or Christian Life*.

⁴ For a discussion of how Hobbes makes this move, see (Levitin 2015: 242-252). We should also note that the study of spirit or soul was often considered part of natural philosophy as it concerned the nature of human beings.

afford metaphysics some role in natural philosophy. Metaphysics is the study of the nature and qualities of spirit. Locke, however, goes on to say that our knowledge of spirits can only come through revelation. But what exactly is Locke's objection to metaphysics as a part of natural philosophy?

It seems that a large part of Locke's aversion to metaphysics comes from his epistemological claim that human beings cannot know the essence of substances. Because all of our ideas come to us through the senses, and because the real, or primary, qualities of things are not subject to human sense, we cannot know the essence of substance. We can only understand the nominal essences of things, which are based on our ideas of secondary qualities – that is, those qualities that affect our sense organs. Locke thinks that when we engage in metaphysics, we are attaching definitions, based on incomplete ideas of the entities to which they are supposed to apply, to real things in the world. But since our ideas of them are incomplete, we gain no real knowledge of the entities by doing so. He writes,

By this method one may make Demonstrations and undoubted Propositions in Words, and yet thereby advance not one jot in the Knowledge of the Truth of Things: v. g. he that having learnt these following Words, with their ordinary mutual relative Acceptations annexed to them; v. g. *Substance, man, animal, form, soul, vegetative, sensitive, rational*, may make several undoubted Propositions about the Soul, without knowing at all what the Soul really is: and of this sort, a Man may find an infinite number of Propositions, Reasonings, and Conclusions, in Books of Metaphysics, School-Divinity, and some sort of natural Philosophy; and, after all, know as little of GOD, *Spirits*, or *Bodies*, as he did before he set out. (Locke 1979: 615)

So much for the possibility of discovering the nature or qualities of the soul by means of providing definitions and demonstrations. But Locke's worry is not merely that certain methodologies in metaphysics will not provide results. For it seems that no methodology is adequate to the task of discerning truths in metaphysics. For instance, we might think that the use of hypotheses would help to formulate ideas of the causes and principles of things and would be such that Locke would see the advantage of them for natural philosophy. However, his view seems to be that hypotheses are often made to fit metaphysical presuppositions, which makes them fairly useless in the discovery of truth. He writes,

Not that we may not, to explain any phenomena of nature, make use of any probable hypothesis whatsoever: hypotheses, if they are well made, are at least great helps to the memory, and often direct us to new discoveries. But my meaning is, that we should not take up any one too hastily (which the mind, that would always penetrate into the causes of things, and have principles to rest on, is very apt to do) till we have very well examined particulars, and made several experiments, in that thing which we would explain by our hypothesis, and see whether it will agree to them all; whether our principles will carry us quite through, and not be as inconsistent with one phenomenon of nature, as they seem

to accommodate and explain another. And at least that we take care that the name of *Principles* deceive us not, nor impose on us, by making us receive that for an unquestionable truth, which is really at best but a very doubtful conjecture; such as are most (I had almost said all) of the hypotheses in natural philosophy. (Locke 1979: 648)

Again, the main objection seems to be that when we work with hypotheses in natural philosophy we assume that we have knowledge about the natures, principles, or essences of things of which we do not. All these things lead Locke to declare that “This way of *getting and improving our knowledge in substances only by experience and history*, which is all that the weakness of our faculties in this state of mediocrity which we are in this world can attain to, makes me suspect that *natural philosophy is not capable of being made a science*” (Locke 1979: 645). For Locke the only way to achieve some knowledge of the nature of body is through our experience of bodies, and given that we can have no experience of souls at all, our knowledge of these entities can only come through revelation.

It is in the context of these debates that we must place Masham’s disparaging comments about metaphysics and her criticisms of particular metaphysical hypotheses. We will examine two places where Masham expresses doubts about the usefulness of metaphysical hypotheses: In her *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* and in her correspondence with Leibniz.

Masham’s *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* is a sustained attack on the view that God should be the sole object of our desirous love presented by John Norris in his published correspondence with Mary Astell. In the correspondence, Norris defends Nicolas Malebranche’s occasionalism, which is the view that God is the only efficient cause and that creatures are mere occasional causes of his actions. Norris argues that since God is the sole author of our pleasure, he should be the sole object of our love to the exclusion of loving other creatures with anything but well wishing. Masham’s correspondence with G. W. Leibniz began in 1704. In the correspondence, she provides objections to Leibniz’ pre-established harmony between minds and bodies, his view of unextended souls, and argues against his methodology. In what follows, we will see that Masham’s objections to Malebranche’s and Leibniz’s views are very much in keeping with Locke’s views of epistemology, metaphysics, and hypotheses.

3. Criticisms of Metaphysics

As noted above, 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*, wherein Norris defends Malebranche's doctrine of seeing all things in God, and both he and Astell argue that God should be the sole object of our desirous love.⁵ Masham makes numerous arguments against the Malebranchean doctrine of occasionalism in the *Discourse*.⁶ 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. In addition, as Norris argues in the correspondence with Astell, because God is the sole efficient cause of all our pleasure, he is also the only proper object of all 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. In the Preface to her *Discourse*, Masham notes that the hypothesis of occasional causes is derived from the doctrine of 'seeing all things in God'.⁷ Masham writes that Malebranche's doctrine is 'in no great danger' of being generally accepted. This on account of 'It being too Visionary to be likely to be received by many Intelligent Persons; And too abstruse to be easily entertain'd by those who are altogether unconvertant with Scholastick Speculations' (Masham 1696: A3).

Masham argues against Norris's definition of love claiming that his definition is the result of a deduction from his hypothesis of seeing all things in God. She claims that instead of following this procedure for understanding love, we should examine our own experience of love and the various desires that accompany it. She writes,

But as that Definition which Mr. N. has given us, (viz. That Love is that Original Weight, Bent or Indevour, whereby the Soul stands inclin'd to, and is mov'd forwards to Good in general, or Happiness) tells as not so well what Love is, as our own Hearts can when we consult them; So perhaps an Examination of them will not only better acquaint us with the Nature of our Passions; but also direct us better to the Measures of their Regulation, than Notions concerning them deduced from the Consequences of an Hypothesis. (Masham 1696: 19-20)

⁵ For more on the debate between Astell and Masham, see (Broad 2002 and 2003), (Hutton 2013 and 2014), and (Wilson 2004).

⁶ While Masham's criticisms are prompted by the Norris and Astell correspondence, she cites both Norris's works and Malebranche's works in the *Discourse*.

⁷ Masham describes the doctrine of 'seeing all things in God' as the claim that all our ideas and perceptions come directly from God.

Here, Masham asserts that the better method for discovering the nature of human love is examining our experiences of love. She claims that Norris' definition does not tell us what love really is, but rather is devised to conform to his metaphysical views. Masham's own definition is 'Love being only a Name given to that Disposition, or Act of Mind, we find in our selves towards anything we are pleas'd with' (Masham 1696: 18).⁸ She goes on to explain her love of God, her children and neighbours, and herself and to argue that while there is only one kind of love, the desires that accompany the feeling of love vary according to the object of love.

Masham also argues that there is no practical difference between an occasional cause and an efficient cause. Masham notes that according to the hypothesis of 'seeing all things in God', creatures are still *causes* of our sensations, albeit *merely* occasional causes. However, occasional causes are such that (1) they are always accompanied by their effect, and (2) without them the effect is not produced (Masham 1696: 31). If this is so, she asks, in what sense are occasional causes different to us than efficient causes? She writes,

There being none of [creatures], perhaps, that we approach, which either does not, or may not, contribute to our Good, or Ill; And which truly are not in Effect allow'd to do so, by those who deny them to be Efficient Causes. For it will be found to amount to the same thing in regard of us, and our Obligation to desire them, whether they are Efficient, or Occasional Causes, of our pleasing Sensations: The proof of which last Opinion, (taken from their own Ignorance of any other way to explain the Nature of our Ideas, and Perceptions) They can hardly feel the force of; Without having a great Opinion of their own Faculties, or a very small one of the Power, and Wisdom of God. And they must also be very clear sighted, if they can discern how this Hypothesis of seeing all things in God, helps us one jot further in the Knowledge of our Ideas, and Perceptions; which is the thing it was Primarily pretended to be design'd for. They who advance this Notion, do only fetch a Circuit, and then return where they were before, without gaining any advantage, by Derogating (as they do) from the Wisdom of God, in framing his Creatures like the Idols of the Heathen, that have Eyes, and see not; Ears, and hear not, &c. (Masham 1696: 30-1)

There are two points to focus on in this paragraph. The first is the complaint that the distinction between efficient and occasional causes does not make any difference to our experience of the world. Masham notes that the colour of the flower will cause pleasure and desire in us whether we understand its power to do so as coming directly from the flower or from God. Since there is no way to discern that the power of the flower to affect us come from God, our desire will be directed at the flower. Moreover, even according to the occasionalist, the flower is necessary for the pleasurable experience. Thus, the doctrine of

⁸ Compare with Locke: 'But it suffices to note, that our *Ideas* of *Love* and *Hatred*, are but the Dispositions of the Mind, in respect of Pleasure and Pain in general, however caused in us' (Locke 1979: 230).

occasionalism will have not change our desires. According to Masham, this makes the doctrine is irrelevant, since we act only upon what we find pleasurable and so desire. However, the doctrine is not irrelevant as it pertains to God's wisdom. She continues,

But the Wisdom of God cannot herein be equally admired, because it is not equally conspicuous. For if God immediately exhibits to me all my Ideas, and that I do not truly see with my Eyes, and hear with my Ears, then all that wonderful Exactness and curious Workmanship, in framing the Organs of Sense, seems superfluous and vain; Which is no small Reflection upon infinite Wisdom. (Masham 1696: 32)

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.

The second point to note is Masham accusation that 'They who advance this Notion, do only fetch a Circuit, and then return where they were before' (Masham 1696: 30-1). That is, she accuses them of circular reasoning. While Masham does not make the circularity explicit, it seems to be as follows. The doctrine of seeing all things in God, according to Masham, is supposed to explain our ideas and perceptions. However, the doctrine forces one to suppose that creatures are mere occasional causes and not the efficient causes of ideas or perceptions. This, in turn implies that we really do not have ideas or perceptions, since these only belong to God, and so we end up without an account at all. Here, we should note the similarity to Locke's claim that we can define propositions about terms without advancing at all in our knowledge of those terms.

Masham claims that one of the main difficulties arising from the doctrine of occasionalism is how one could come to know its truth. She acknowledges that we have pleasing sensations even in infancy, but how is it possible that a baby understand that these pleasing sensations do not come from objects themselves, but from God alone? If a baby or a child cannot know that it is sinful to desire any object other than God, then they are doomed to sin. Masham argues that the best route to knowledge of God's existence is through the love of his creation. If we cannot know that God exists, then we cannot know that it is sinful to love creatures. But if knowing his existence requires the love of creatures first, then everyone is doomed to sin. She writes,

If this be so, this seems also to lay an Imputation upon the Wisdom and Goodness of God, who has laid the Foundation of our Duty in a Reason which he has concealed from us. For this great Cause why we should love him alone, (viz. because the Creatures are not the efficient Causes of our Sensations) is so hidden from us by all the Art, and Contrivance, observable in Nature, that if it were purposely design'd to be conceal'd, and we purposely intended to be misled, it could not be more so. For in Effect till this last Age, it has not been discover'd; Or at least very sparingly; And even still (as it seems) only Heads cast in Metaphysical Moulds are capable of it. (Masham 1696: 32-3)

Since occasionalism is not a doctrine that can be understood at a young age (or perhaps at any age), there is no avoiding these problems. Masham goes on to argue that the idea that creatures are not efficient causes is 'only an Opinion grounded on an Hypothesis, perhaps Demonstrably false; That has evidently no proof, but the poor one from our Ignorance, that yet is not at all help'd by this Hypothesis: Which is (therefore) as well as for the Ends of Morality, plainly useless' (Masham 1696: 118-9).

Finally, she argues that if occasionalism were true, then God would partake in our wickedness.

Masham noted that the occasionalist holds that when we choose to love a finite being or object and receive pleasure and delight from such an object, we sin.

No Creature he says, indeed, can be Loved, or Desired, without Defrauding God, and even committing the Sin of Idolatry...Consequently therefore, there can be no more hateful Sin to the Almighty than (feeling Cold, or Hunger) to desire Fire, or Food, as any good to us: But he tells us at the same time, 'That tho' the things which satisfie these Natural Cravings are by no means to be desired as Goods; Yet they may be securely sought for as such, and enjoyed...He whose Head is cast in a Metaphysical Mould has, it may be, Privileges of Nature which accompany it, that ordinary Mortals are Strangers to. (Masham 1696: 35)

The desire of food as a good when one is hungry or of fire when one is cold is sinful. Masham holds that there is no way we could discern this view by experience or reason. It is quite natural to desire such things in these situations, and surely it is God who has set up our constitutions to desire these things as such. But the advocate of seeing all things in God must hold that not only does God take part in our sin, but he also is forced to reward us for it – with pleasure. Masham acknowledges that this is what makes sin so bad according to the view. She writes,

But the Author of this Hypothesis tells us, that this is that indeed which makes Sin to be so exceeding sinful, viz., that we oblige God in Virtue of that first immutable Law, or Order, which he has established (that is, of exciting Sentiments of Pleasure in us upon some operations of Bodies upon us) to Reward our Transgressions against him with Pleasure and Delight. It is strange that we cannot seem sinful enough, without having a Power of forcing God to be a Partner in our Wickedness! But this is a Consequence of an Hypothesis whose uselessness, and want of proof, are alone sufficient Causes for rejecting it. And if we will once quit what Reason and Revelation

evidently and plainly tell us, to build our Religion upon the foundation of uncertain Opinions; where must we stop? (Masham 1696: 102-3)

That God would be forced to reward us for sin is something that Masham thinks is also unbefitting God's wisdom and justice. Moreover, she ridicules the view by claiming that we would have power (over God), contrary to the hypothesis, if we were able to *force* God to reward us for our wickedness.

When we consider Masham's arguments against occasionalism, the overall argument against the view becomes clear. First, there is no positive evidence for occasionalism – neither from experience, reason, or revelation. The view would not cause individuals to behave any differently with respect to morality if it were true. Second, there is positive evidence against the view. The occasionalist makes God's creation superfluous, and so undermines God's wisdom. God's justice is also undermined because the doctrine of occasionalism cannot be known, and therefore dooms all of creation to sin. For these reasons, Masham believes that we should reject the doctrine.

Causal relations are also the main subject of Masham's correspondence with Leibniz. Masham and Leibniz discuss his system of simple beings, or souls (monads), and his doctrine of pre-established harmony. First, Masham explains how she understands of his system in her letter of 3 June 1704.

Any Action of the soul upon Matter, or of Matter upon the Soul is Inconceivable: These two have their Laws distinct. Bodies follow the Laws of Mechanisme, and have a tendencie to change *suivant les Forces Mouvantes*. Souls produce in themselves Internal Actions and have a tendencie to change according to the Perception that they have of Good or Ill. Now Soul and Body, following each their Proper Laws, and neither of them acting thereby upon, or Affecting the other, such Effects are yet produc'd from a Harmonie Preestablish'd betwixt these Substances, as if there was a real communication betweene them. So that the Body acting constantly by its owne Laws of Mechanisme without receiving any Variation or change therein from any Action of the Soul dos yet always correspond to the Passions and Perceptions which the Soul hath. And the Soul, in like Manner, tho not operated upon by the Motions of Matter, has yet at the same time that the Body Acts according to its Laws of Mechanisme, certain Perceptions or Modifications which fail not to answer thereunto. (Leibniz 1923-: 585401)⁹

Masham understands that since simple beings are unextended, immaterial, and completely independent of bodies, Leibniz must give an account of how it is that they seem to interact with bodies. For Leibniz, the story involves a pre-established harmony between the perceptions of monads and the

⁹ All references to the Masham-Leibniz correspondence are from (Leibniz 1923-), although the whole correspondence may also be found in (Leibniz 1965), a partial translation is available in Leibniz (1998), and all of Masham's letters are collected in (Atherton 1994). Masham's letters are written in English and Leibniz's in French. There is currently no complete English translation of Leibniz's side of the correspondence.

phenomena of body. God sets up a perfect correspondence between these two realms. 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. She criticizes Leibniz's claim to truth in a way similar to her criticisms of Malebranche's occasionalism. In her letter of 3 June 1704, she writes:

But it appears not yet to me that This is more than an Hypothesis; for as Gods ways are not limited by our Conceptions; the unintelligibleness or inconceivableness by us of any way but one, dos not, methinks, much induce a Beleeve of that, being the way which God has chosen to make use of. Yet such an inference as this from our Ignorance, I remember P. Malebranche (or some other assertor of his Hypothesis) would make in behalf of occasional causes: to which Hypothesis, amongst other exceptions, I think there is one, which I cannot, without your help, see, but that yours is alike liable to. And that is, from the Organization of the Body: wherein all that Nice Curiositie that is discoverable seeming Useless: becomes Superfluous and lost labour. (Leibniz 1923-: 585401)

Here, we see Masham claiming that to move from framing a hypothesis that fits with some of the data to affirming its truth is a mistake. She calls it an "inference from our ignorance" (a criticism she makes of Malebranche's view as well), because 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. She repeats her claims that God's ways are beyond our understanding in a later letter dated 8 August 1704.

But if you infer the Truth of this Notion onely from its being the most Agreeable one that you can Frame to that Attribute of God, this, Singly, seemes to me not to be Concludeing: Since we can, in my opinion, onely infer from thence that whatsoever God dos must be according to infinite Wisdome: but are not able with our short and narrow Views to determine what the operations of an Infinitely Wise Being must be. (Leibniz 1923-: 585601)

The limitations of human knowledge make it impossible to know the mechanisms by which God as set up the world. However, Masham thinks that it is clear that some systems are more fitting of God's wisdom and justice than others. While she seems to prefer Leibniz's pre-established harmony to Malebranche's occasionalism, it is also clear that she thinks there is little reason or evidence for believing either of them to be true. Her primary reason for this is that they both seem to make God's creation, which she sees as good and useful, largely useless. Masham's criticisms of the Malebranchean and Leibnizian views of causation turn on our inability to know that they are true and the ways in which they conflict with what we know from experience and revelation about God and his creation. We will now turn to Masham's positive

views concerning metaphysical topics. Masham's views in metaphysics are confined to those topics that are necessary or conducive to understanding our place in the world and our duty to God and creatures. We will see that Masham's views are based on experience of the world, in keeping with a significant amount of epistemic modesty, and are confined to things we know to be consistent with God's nature.

4. Metaphysical Views – Mind & Body, God, and Freedom

As noted above, Masham criticizes the causal views of both Malebranche and Leibniz. However, in the correspondence with Leibniz, Masham puts forth her own hypothesis regarding the relationship between mind and body. Hers allows for the real interaction between minds and bodies because they have something in common – extension. She begins by claiming that unextended substance is something inconceivable. She writes in her letter of 8 August 1704,

...and Extension is to me, inseparable from the notion of all substance. I am yet sensible that we ought not to reject truths because they are not imaginable by us (where there is ground to admit them). But truth being but the attributing certain affections conceiv'd to belong to the subject in question. I can by no means attribute any thing to a subject whereof I have no conception at all; as I am conscious to my self I have not of unextended substance...from whence I can affirm or deny any thing concerning it. (Leibniz 1923-: 585601)

Unextended substance is something inconceivable and therefore we cannot say what attributes such a thing may have. Masham takes our inability to conceive of an unextended substance as a reason for rejecting them. Moreover, all our experience is of extended substances. This leads her to claim that we have reason to believe that all substances are extended. Her most extended discussion of substance is contained in this letter of 8 August 1704. She writes,

...but my owne Beleeve that there is no substance whatever unextended is (as I have already said), grounded upon this that I have no conception of such a thing. I cannot yet but conceive two very different substances to be in the universe, tho exstnsion alike agrees to them both. For I clearly conceive an extension without soliditie, and a solid extension: to some system of which last if it should be affirm'd that God did annex thought, I see no absurditie in this from there being nothing in extension and impenetrability or soliditie, from whence thought can naturally, or by a train of causes be deriv'd; the which I beleeve to be demonstrable it cannot be. But that was never suppos'd by me; and my question in the case would be this: whether god could not as conceivably by us as create an unextended substance, and then unite it an extended substance (wherein, by the way, there is methinks on your side two difficulties for one) whether God, I say, could not as conceivably by us as his Doing this would be, add (if he so pleas'd) the Power of Thinking to that substance which has soliditie. Soliditie and thought being both of them but attributes of some unknown substance and I see not why it may not be one and the same which is the common support of Both These; there

appearing to me no contradiction in a so existence of thought and soliditie in the same substance. Neither can I apprehend it to be more inexplicable that God should give thought to a substance which I know not, but whereof I know some of its attributes, than to another, suppos'd, substance of whose very Being I have no conception at all, and that any substance whatsoever should have thought belonging to it, or resulting from it, otherwise than as God has will'd it shall have so, I cannot apprehend. (Leibniz 1923-: 585601-2)

In this part of the letter, Masham claims that she can conceive of two types of substance in the world: (1) non-solid extension, and (2) solid extension.¹⁰ By non-solid extension, it seems likely that Masham is referring to spiritual substance, as in a mind or soul. However, Masham goes on to defend John Locke's claim from the *Essay on Human Understanding* (Locke 1979: 540-3) that God might "superadd" thought to matter. Here, Masham argues that there is no contradiction in God's adding the power of thought to matter since it is well within God's power to add an attribute to a substance. Moreover, she argues that our inability to conceive of how God should do this is no barrier to its being true, for we do not understand how God might make an unextended substance or how he could make such a substance interact with an extended substance. Masham's suggests that there may be one substance underlying the attributes of both thought and substance. This statement would have immediately brought to Leibniz's mind Spinoza's view that God, or Nature, is one substance that contains the attributes of thought and extension (among infinite other attributes). Spinoza's view was widely criticized as heretical and atheistic. However, Masham, like Locke, claims that we do not know the nature of substance. She notes that claims that minds/souls are unextended and are interacting with extended substances pose two questions: (1) how could something exist that is not extended, and (2) how could such an entity interact with something that is extended? Given that we only have access to some of the qualities of substances, and that those substances we do know about are all extended, we do not have enough information to make certain claims about the nature of spiritual substance is in itself.

Given her views above, we can infer that human beings, for Masham, are likely composed of two extended substances – one with solidity and one without. She seems to hold that it is likely that it is spiritual substance that thinks. Of course, Masham cannot claim that we can be certain of this. But if there are two substances in union that create human beings, her view seems to be that they must both be extended to allow

¹⁰ Masham's assertion of both solid and non-solid extension is also reminiscent of Henry More's views, with which she was likely to be familiar. See (Reid 2012).

for some sort of connection and interaction between them. Thus, Masham's solution to mind and body interaction is to claim that these two substance (if indeed they are two) and not completely distinct.

Masham's views about the existence and nature of God are also based primarily on reasoning about our experience of the world. She claims that our love for those around us gives us reason to believe that the one who created us also loves us. Masham writes,

And like as our own Existence, and that of other Beings, has assur'd us of the Existence of some Cause more Powerful than these Effects; so also the Loveliness of his Works as well assures us, that that Cause, or Author, is yet more Lovely than they, and consequently the Object the most worthy of our Love. (Masham 1696: 64)

Even though there are some instances of misery and pain in the world, the overall pleasing nature of the world suffices to show us that the author loves and cares for those creatures he creates. Masham believes that through recognition of the pleasing nature of the world, we come to love other creatures. This experience provides us with the idea of love, and leads us to the belief that God, who is ultimately responsible for the existence of the beings that bring us pleasure, loves us and we should love him. She writes in *Occasional*

Thoughts:

And as we delight in our selves, and receive pleasure from the objects which surround us, sufficient to indear to us the possession and injoyment of Life, we cannot from thence but infer, that this Wise and Powerful Being is also most Good, since he has made us out of nothing to give us a Being wherein we find such Happiness, as makes us very unwilling to part therewith. (Masham 1705: 61-2)

Since we have been provided with faculties of sensation, reflection, and reason, and the external objects that are necessary for our pleasure and happiness, we can infer that the first cause of the universe is good. Moreover, Masham believes that since we can know that God gives us pleasure, he is worthy of love, and so we have a moral duty to love him. She writes, "The Duty then that we are taught is plainly what reason requires, viz. That we love the most lovely Being above all others" (Masham 1696: 44).¹¹ Our greatest love is reserved for the most lovely being (the being who is most pleasing to us), but this does not preclude our

¹¹ Masham often uses the term "duty" without any qualification. I believe that Masham would make no distinction between a moral and a rational duty, although she never discusses the issue explicitly. She does say that our natural good and our moral good are the same (Masham 1705: 78).

loving his creation. Other created beings are pleasing to us, and we have a moral duty to love them, as they are gifts to us from God.¹²

Masham also addresses the issue of the unity of God. For although she has, up to this point, argued that the first cause of the universe is intelligent, powerful, and good, she has not shown the cause to be a singular substance. Masham makes the case in two parts. First, she argues that the attributes manifest when we contemplate the universe – intelligence, wisdom, power, and goodness – must inhere in a substance. The substance that contains these attributes is the first cause, i.e., God. She writes:

And thus, by a consideration of the Attributes of God, visible in the Works of the Creation, we come to a knowledge of his Existence, who is an Invisible Being: For since Power, Wisdom, and Goodness, which we manifestly discern in the production and conservation of our selves, and the Universe, could not subsist independently of some substance for them to inhere in, we are assur'd that there is a substance whereunto they do belong, or of which they are the Attributes. (Masham 1705: 62)¹³

Masham holds that since the universe is the product of power, goodness, and wisdom, there must be a directing mind which is the substantial first cause of the entire universe. Second, Masham argues that we can see that there must be one “steady, uniform, and unchangeable” will that directs all things, and that we can know this from the “frame and government of the universe” (Masham 1705: 68-9). She writes,

...the Divine Will cannot be (like ours) successive Determinations without dependence, or connection one upon another; much less inconsistent, contradictory, and mutable; but one steady, uniform, unchangeable result of infinite Wisdom and Benevolence, extending to, and including All his Works. (Masham 1705: 69)

Ultimately, Masham’s claim that we can know the unity of God rests on two inferences, each of which is based on our experiences of the world. First, we know that the properties that the first cause has must inhere in a substance. Second, we know that there is only one substance because otherwise we would not find the consistency and unity of laws and purposes that we find in the universe.

In addition to what we can know through reason and experience, 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

¹² Masham spends quite a bit of time in the *Discourse* discussing our duty to love other creatures. See, for example, (Masham 1696: 13-14, 16, and 23-24).

¹³ Masham does not give an account of how attributes inhere in substances. However, when Leibniz objects to Masham’s suggestion that all substances are extended, he claims that surely she holds that God is a counterexample to her view. However, Masham does not respond to this objection. I take her silence to indicate that she does not see God as a counterexample. For more insight on this matter, see (Sleigh 2005).

be responsible for their actions, they must be able to make some determinations about which desires they will pursue. Masham holds 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. She writes.

But God having made Men so as that they find in themselves, very often, a liberty of acting according to the preference of their own Minds, it is incumbent upon them to study the Will of their Maker; in an application of the Faculty of Reason which he has given them, to the consideration of the different respects, consequences, and dependencies of Things, so as to discern from thence, the just measures of their actions in every circumstance and relation they stand plac'd in. (Masham 1705: 70-1)

While it is true that all human beings desire pleasure and happiness, it is still possible that we be mistaken about what we should do. Masham claims that we have a liberty of acting in accordance with our preferences. Even though she claims we oftentimes have the liberty of doing as we will, she nowhere says that we have the liberty of willing as we please. Her few comments about liberty all seem to confirm that she believes humans have freedom of action rather than freedom of will, and that her position is, as was not unusual at the time, a compatibilist view of freedom.¹⁴ Masham held that liberty was necessary in order for moral responsibility, both in this life and the next. As Jacqueline Broad (2006: 505) writes, “Masham thus affirms that liberty, or will as self-determination combined with practical judgment, is a necessary condition for accountability.” However, it should be noted that what she writes of liberty of action is consistent with agnosticism regarding the extent of our freedom.¹⁵ Masham writes,

¹⁴ In 17th century debates, *freedom of action* is often described as “the ability to do what you will,” while *freedom of will* is “the ability to will as you wish.” Freedom of action is compatible with one’s will being subject to deterministic laws and processes, while freedom of will usually requires that the will not be included in such causal chains.

¹⁵ Masham’s views on freedom of action are very like those of Locke (Locke 1979: 233-286). Although Masham’s views very closely resemble Locke’s views, they also resemble her father’s, Ralph Cudworth, views. It is possible that Cudworth’s views influenced Locke. Although Cudworth’s *A Treatise of Freewill* was not published until 1838, Locke might have had access to the manuscript at the Masham estate (Hutton 2015). In addition, it was fairly common that unpublished manuscripts were passed around. Jacqueline Broad (Broad 2006) notes that there is some evidence that Masham did not inherit her father’s manuscripts and suggests that Locke’s views on free will might have come from Masham herself. Cudworth, although a libertarian with respect to free will, held that willing was the self-determination of an individual that is directed towards the good, and that freedom of the will is necessary for moral accountability. He also held that there is no distinction between willing and understanding or intellect, but that these are powers of the self (see Cudworth 1996).

We being then indu'd, as we are, with a capacity of perceiving and distinguishing these differences of Things; and also with a liberty of acting, or not, suitably and agreeably hereunto; whence we can according to the preference of our own minds, act either in conformity to, or disconformity with, the Will of the Creator (manifested in his Works no less than the Will of any Humane Architect is in his) it follows, That to act answerably to the nature of such Beings as we are, requires that we attentively examine, and consider the several natures of Things, so far as they have any relation to our own actions. (Masham 1705: 64)

Masham's views on liberty may be somewhat undeveloped in her works, but she clearly was concerned with both theological determinism and freedom of action sufficient for moral responsibility. In the correspondence with Leibniz, she worries that his "hypothesis" of pre-established harmony might not be consistent with human freedom. She writes in a letter dated 8 August 1704,

I will, however, now mention to you one difficultie...Viz how to reconcile your Systeme to Libertie or Free Agencie: for tho in regard of any compulsion from other causes, we are according thereto free, yet I see not how we can be so in respect to the first mover. ...I cannot make out Libertie either with or without any Hypothesis whatsoever. Tho as long being persuaded that I feel myself a free agent and that freedom to act is necessarie to our being accountable for our actions, I not onlie conclude we are indu'd therewith, but am very tenacious hereof. (Leibniz 1923-: 585602)

Here, again, we see Masham insisting upon freedom of action. But she also expresses the worry that, at least with respect to the system of pre-established harmony Leibniz advocates, our freedom might not be compatible with God's attributes. However, Masham does seem to think that our inner feeling of being free, along with the knowledge that we are morally accountable to God for our actions, is good evidence that we are, in fact, free. In her own works, Masham argues that without the ability to act contrary to the will of God, there would be no perfection nor any defect in creatures. She writes,

But as without a capacity in The Creature to act contrary to the will of the Creator there could be no defect, or self-excellency in any Created Being; contrariety to the Will of God is therefore permitted in the Universe as a necessary result of Creaturely imperfection, under the greatest endowment that a Created Being is capable of having, viz. *That of Freedom or Liberty of Action*: And as the constitution of such Creature, as this, implies that what is *best* in reference to the design of the Creator, and of its own Happiness, should not be always necessarily present to the Mind as Best; such a Creature may oppose the Will of his Maker with various degrees of Guilt in so doing; or (possibly) with none at all; for no Agent can offend farther than he wilfully abuses the Freedom he has to act. (Masham 1705: 33)

Masham 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.

As we have seen Masham's positive arguments with respect to metaphysical issues concern the nature of God and humans insofar as they are necessary to understand our duty to God, creatures, and ourselves. Her arguments are based on reason guided by experience and revelation, and are their conclusions are limited by the extent of human knowledge.

5. Conclusion

While Masham is critical of metaphysics as an *a priori* endeavour into the nature and essence of substances, she is happy to use experience, reason, and revelation to discuss aspects of God and the world. She does not think that it is useful to posit metaphysical hypotheses that cannot be known through experience, and she has no patience for those that demean God's wisdom or creation. Her metaphysical concerns lie mainly in those issues that are necessary to understand that God exists, that his creation is good and useful, and that we have the ability to achieve virtue and happiness in this world and the next.

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