

Damaris Masham and “The Law of Reason or Nature”
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Introduction

Emphasis on reason is pervasive in Damaris Masham’s writings. However, her various assertions regarding the use and importance of reason sometimes seem in tension with her emphasis on its limitations and weaknesses. As Sarah Hutton (1993, 37) notes, “On the one hand she denies that natural religion based purely on reason is possible, insisting on the importance of revelation and faith. On the other hand she argues that to ignore the role of reason in religion is the surest way to bigotry and atheism, ‘an Irrational Religion can never Rationally be conceived to come from God.’”¹ Masham holds that we come to know that God exists and what his nature is through experience of the world, however, she also holds that reason is required in order to be assured of his existence via proof. Likewise, she believes that we can know some of God’s attributes, but that we cannot be certain about the means he chooses to achieve his ends. In addition, while Masham claims that God gave us reason in order to understand our moral duty, she also holds that he gave us a strong desire for pleasure and happiness, which can thwart the proper use of our reason. Masham maintains that human happiness consists in pleasure, yet she maintains that reason is necessary for securing this pleasure. Although some of these statements may seem to generate tension in Masham’s philosophy, I believe that Masham’s views concerning the role of reason in our lives is consistent. Masham believes that reason allows us to know theoretical matters in metaphysics, science, religion, and

¹ Hutton cites *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life*, 36.

morality. However, she also holds that reason was given to us primarily to help us attain “useful knowledge.”

The purpose of this paper is not to compare Masham’s views to those of her contemporaries, although I will provide notes directing the reader to these points.² Instead, I will examine Masham’s positive views concerning the role of reason in knowledge of the existence and nature of God, moral duty, and human happiness. I begin by demonstrating one way in which Masham uses reason in her works – in her argument for the existence of God. Here, we will see that Masham’s proof makes use of the notion of the “law of reason or nature.” After discussing Masham’s general account of reason and its use in discovering the existence and nature of God, I will turn to the role that reason plays in our knowledge more generally, in morality, and in providing for human happiness. Finally, I will address Masham’s contention that human reason is weak by looking at the ways in which she thinks our reason is limited and possibly perverted.

Section 1: The Existence and Nature of God

Masham’s arguments for the existence of God can be found in *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705).³ Both arguments are similar and are versions of the cosmological argument. In the *Discourse*, Masham is primarily concerned with arguing against John Norris’s (and Malebranche’s) conception of God as expressed in his published correspondence with Mary Astell, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. There, Norris argues that God is the only proper object of our desirous love because he is the only real good. Created beings, he argues, are worthy only of the love of benevolence. Norris grounds this

² For scholarship on the various aspects of Masham’s philosophy, politics, feminism, and her relations to Locke and Cudworth, see the bibliography.

³ I will use the following abbreviations for Masham’s texts: DLG: *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) and OT: *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705). Masham’s arguments for God’s existence are given in DLG, 62-65, and OT, 60-63.

doctrine concerning the love of God in occasionalism. Norris held that since God is the sole cause of sensation, he is also the sole cause of our pleasures and good. Consequently, God is the only proper object of our desirous love.⁴ Masham disagrees with Norris' view, and, in the *Discourse*, she argues that it would be impossible to know or love God without first knowing and loving his creation. Masham then argues from the existence and nature of the world to the existence of its cause. In *Occasional Thoughts*, Masham claims that there are two things we need to know for salvation (1) that God exists and (2) what our duty to him is. She then proceeds to give the argument for God's existence and discusses God's nature. While the arguments in these texts differ in their context, they are similar in form. In both texts, Masham is not satisfied to give an argument that proves that God is merely the powerful intelligent cause of the world; she also wants to prove that he is loving and good.

Masham, like Locke, rejects innate ideas. Instead, she holds that all our ideas come through experience via sensation and reflection. Since God is an immaterial being, we cannot have direct experience of him. Thus, Masham holds that the only way to come to know and love God is through the experience that we have of his works. In the *Discourse*, she writes, 'God is an invisible Being: And it is by his Works, that we are led both to know, and to love him. They lead us to their invisible Author. And if we lov'd not the Creatures, it is not conceivable how we should love God' (DLG, 62). In *Occasional Thoughts*, she prefaces her argument for God's existence with a statement of her methodology.

To see what light we receive from Nature to direct our Actions, and how far we are

Naturally able to obey that Light; Men must be consider'd purely as in the state of Nature,

⁴ Norris was apparently not a full occasionalist, like Malebranche, for Norris held that bodies do have the power to cause impressions on other bodies; however, bodies do not have the power to cause sensations in the mind. The impressions bodies make on other bodies are the mere occasions for God to cause sensations in the mind. I am indebted to Eileen O'Neill for pointing out this distinction.

viz. as having no extrinsick Law to direct them, but indu'd only with a faculty of comparing their distant Ideas by intermediate Ones, and Thence of deducing, or inferring one thing from another; whereby our Knowledge immediately received from Sense, or Reflection, is enlarg'd to a view of Truths remote, or future, in an Application of which Faculty of the mind to a consideration of our own Existence and Nature, together with the beauty and order of the Universe, so far as it falls under our view, we may come to the knowledge of a First Cause; and that this must be an Intelligent Being, Wise and Powerful, beyond what we are able to conceive. (OT, 60-1)

According to Masham, reason plays an integral role in belief formation. Careful use of reason in comparing, deducing, and inferring ideas derived from reflection and sensation will produce sound beliefs about the world. These beliefs, in turn, regulate our actions. Here, Masham shows how the proper use of reason allows us to form beliefs about the cause of the existence of the world. She proceeds to argue as follows: After reflecting on our rational nature, we infer that the cause of our existence is intelligent. Second, we can consider our ideas from sensation concerning the existence, order, and beauty of the universe. From this, we can infer that the first cause of the universe is wise and powerful. The wisdom of the first cause is manifest in the orderly nature of the universe, and the power of the first cause is manifest in the production of the universe out of nothing.

In the *Discourse*, Masham argues that even if we understand that there must be a first powerful cause of all existence, an argument that generates God as the mere author of being does not show him to be good or praiseworthy. Given that some beings have such a miserable existence that they would sooner not exist at all, the creation of these beings is not sufficient to produce an obligation to love the creator. We cannot deny that there are such beings. She writes,

But Being, or Existence, barely consider'd, is so far from being a Good, that in the state of the Damn'd, few are so Paradoxical as not to believe it an intolerable Misery: And many, even in this World, are so unhappy, that they would much rather part with their Existence, than be eternally continued in the State they are in. (DLG, 63)

Here, Masham raises one aspect of the problem of evil – some beings are so unhappy that they would rather not exist at all. Masham seems to take this as an obvious fact, but she does not here directly address the larger issue – why would God create such beings?⁵ She does say that God wishes everyone to be happy and that he has supplied us with adequate means for achieving this end. I will return to this issue in the last section of the paper where I will discuss Masham's views concerning the natural punishment of vice.⁶ In the current context, Masham uses the problem to show that a proof of the existence of a God as merely omnipotent will suffice neither for our loving God nor for grounding our moral duty to him and to each other. She writes, 'For God as Powerful (which is all we should know of him, consider'd barely as a Creator) is no more an Object of Love than of Hate, or Fear; and is truly an Object only of Admiration' (DLG, 64). However, Masham thinks that if we find pleasure in our own being and the beings around us, we would have reason to love God.

The Author of our Being therefore merits not our Love, unless he has given to us such a Being as we can Love. Now if none of the Objects that every way surround us, were pleasing to us; How could our Beings, that have a continual Communication with, and necessary Dependence upon these, be so? (DLG, 63)

⁵ It is interesting to note that in this quote Masham denies that existence is good in itself. This view is in direct opposition to Platonic and Cartesian views about being or existence, and might also indicate why Masham does not provide an ontological proof of God's existence since these proofs tend to rely on claims about the goodness of existence versus non-existence.

⁶ Of course, Masham's account will not serve as an answer to the question why God allows the virtuous to suffer.

Masham defines love as ‘that Disposition, or Act of the Mind, we find in our selves toward any we are pleas’d with’ (DLG, 18). We first get our idea of love through the pleasure that we receive through our relations with other creatures. The love of 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. (DLG, 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 the one who is ultimately responsible for our pleasure, God, 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 in dear 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. (OT, 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 through reason that God is worthy of love, 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” (DLG, 44).⁷ Our greatest love is reserved for the most lovely being (the being who is most pleasing to us), but this does not preclude our 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.⁸

Finally, Masham 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, Masham 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. (OT, 62)⁹

⁷ 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 (OT 78).

⁸ Masham spends quite a bit of time in the Discourse discussing our duty to love other creatures. See, for example, DLG 13-14, 16, and 23-24.

⁹ Masham does not give an account of how attributes inhere in substances. However, she does provide us with an account of substance. In the correspondence with Leibniz (Masham’s letter of August 8, 1704: Leibniz (1875-90), Vol. 3: 359-60), Masham suggests that there are two types of substances: those that are extended without solidity and those that are extended with solidity. Masham also claims that thought and extension might be the attributes of the same substance, which she suggests will solve the problem of interaction better than Leibniz’s pre-established harmony. Leibniz objects that Masham must accept that God is an example of unextended substance. 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 Sleight (2005).

Masham holds that since beauty and purpose hold throughout the universe, and that only a great power could instill such features, that 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” (OT, 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” (OT, 69). Ultimately, Masham’s claim that we can know the unity of God rests on two inferences. 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.¹⁰

Having shown that God exists and is powerful, rational, and loving, Masham contends that we can know a bit more about God. She claims we can know that God wants us to be happy and that he has given us the means to be so. She writes,

The Love of God therefore as we are capable of loving him, (that is, chiefly, not solely) does effectually secure our Happiness, and consequently our Duty: For he desires nothing of us, but that we should be as Happy as he has made us capable of Being; And has laid no Traps,

¹⁰ It should be noted that Masham, like Locke, thinks that we can have knowledge and certainty of probabilistic claims. Since most of our knowledge claims are based on empirical evidence, we cannot have Cartesian certainty – that is, we cannot have indubitable certainty – however, both Locke and Masham think this is an unreasonable standard for knowledge. Masham’s arguments for the existence of God and his unity might be unsatisfying to those who reject that all our ideas must be based in experience. It is interesting to note that Locke’s argument in the *Essay* has the same problem concerning the unity of God, and that when pushed Locke provided three proofs for the unity of God, all of which rely on God’s perfections. See Locke’s February 21, 1698 letter to van Limborch.

or Snares, to render us Miserable; Nor does he require impossible Performances from us.
(DLG, 57)

According to Masham, only two things are required for salvation: belief in God and virtue. She defines virtue as “the natural result of a sincere desire to conform in all things to the law set us by our maker” (OT, 11).¹¹ If one has a sincere desire to conform to God’s will, then virtue naturally follows. Of course, as we will see, true virtue requires good use of reason in making inferences regarding our actions and in controlling our desires. However, Masham believes that successfully following God’s will is not as important as realizing and regretting any transgressions. God will forgive our transgressions as long as we sincerely regret and repent breaking the rules.

It is true that how much soever a Man is perswaded of the Authority of any Rule, a strong Passion, or Apparent Interest may yet seduce him from the Obedience due to its prescriptions; but such a Transgression being accompanied with Regret, or followed with Repentance, the Rule is still as much acknowledg’d as if it were obey’d. (OT, 148)

Since God is the source of all our powers, we receive not only our power of reason from him, but also our power of desiring (DLG, 8, 53). Desires, even desires for mere temporary finite goods, are not evil in themselves. Moreover, in line with her view that God is benevolent and forgiving, Masham denies that persons are cast into a state of necessary sinning (as a result of original sin) or that God’s punishments for those sins that we do commit will be eternal. Masham claims that such actions are incompatible with the goodness of God. God has supplied us with our somewhat frail and impressionable nature, and it would be wrong for him to create us only to fail in our duty or to damn us eternally for doing so.¹² “We cannot conceive any Being to be without

¹¹ The law here is “the law of reason or nature,” which Masham tells us is the same as God’s will.

¹² With respect to an answer to the problem of evil, Masham’s denial of eternal damnation goes a long way.

Desires but God. Nor can we conceive it to be a fault for any Creature to act suitable to its Nature” (DLG, 53). She writes,

That mankind did lose by Adam what they are restor’d to by Jesus Christ, we are plainly told in the Scripture: But that by his Miscarriage, or Eve’s, any one single Soul should be doom’d to Eternal Misery, or to any condition worse than not being; whether immediately, as some hold, for Adam’s Sin; or by subjecting them to a state of necessary sinning; Can neither comport with the Goodness of God, or is any where reveal’d in Scripture. (DLG, 106)

Masham’s use of reason in her arguments for the existence of God and her claims about his nature are fairly extensive. She claims that through experience of the world and the use of reason we can infer the properties of the cause of the world. Once we understand that God is not only powerful, but also rational and loving, we can be certain that he desires not merely our existence, but our happiness. God has given us all the means necessary to be happy both in this life and the next. We are assured by his goodness that even though we are imperfect beings, we are not created merely to be punished. Transgressions of God’s will can be amended through regret and repentance. Even those sins that go without repentance will not be punished eternally. However, it is still our duty to try to obey God’s will to the best of our abilities. The most important gift we receive from God is the ability to understand him and his creation through reason, which allows us to understand our duty. However, some of our other God-given abilities interfere with our duty. In the next section, I will discuss Masham’s views concerning this duty.

Section 2: “The Laws of Reason or Nature”

According to Masham, reason is what distinguishes us from the other animals and it is the capacity that God has given us to understand the natures of things: to follow God’s will, to preserve ourselves, to control our passions, to do our duty. Masham holds that our happiness lies in lasting

pleasure rather than short-term desire satisfaction. As we will see, reason plays a large role in helping us secure lasting pleasure. In this section, I will consider the ways in we can come to know what God's will is and what we ought to do.

Masham claims that the "laws of reason, or nature" are God's commands and they are discernible through our reason. She defines "the law of reason or nature" as "those dictates which are the result of the determinate and unchangeable Constitution of things (and which as being discoverable to us by our rational Faculties, are therefore sometimes call'd the Law of Reason, as well as the Law of Nature)" (OT, 54). She writes, "That God has made us Reasonable Creatures, we certainly know: And it is evident also, that by virtue of our being such; we are obliged to Live by the Law of Reason; which whenever we transgress, we must necessarily offend against God" (DLG, 104). Although Masham does not speak of specific physical/mechanical laws or moral laws, she does claim that these laws concern the "unchangeable nature of things," which we must consider in all our actions. Masham holds that since God is a rational and good being, he has created an intelligible world. Knowledge of the workings of nature helps us understand the probable outcomes of our actions. Understanding the probable outcomes of our actions facilitates our survival and allows us to make appropriate choices regarding actions and the pursuit of goods.

It is through our faculty of reason that we understand the nature of things. From the unchangeable nature of things, we derive our duties. Masham defines reason, which she calls "our only guide to conduct," as "that Faculty in us which discovers, by the intervention of intermediate Ideas, what Connection Those in the Proposition have one with another: Whether certain; probable; or none at all; according whereunto, we ought to regulate our Assent"¹³ (OT, 33). She claims that it is undeniable that reason "ought to be to rational creatures the guide to their belief" (OT, 32). She

¹³ Cf. Locke (1975) *Essay*, 4.17.

claims that it is reason that separates man from the other animals and makes us special – more like God. She writes,

But as Reason is that which either in kind or degree, differences Men from Brutes; and that there are few, if any, who would lose this distinction, it is by common consent acknowledg'd that Reason is in respect of all others, a preferable indowment. From All which, it undeniably follows that we do not act answerably to the Will, or pleasure of God, in making us such Creatures as we are, if we either neglect the Search of those Measures of our Actions prescrib'd to us by the discernible Natures of Things; or, if seeing these, we yet conform not our selves thereunto. (OT, 66-7)

Following God's will requires us to take account of the natures of things, that is, using our reason to understand the world and the circumstances in which we are acting. We must form correct beliefs and use these beliefs to guide our actions. If we fail understand the world to the best of our abilities or if we fail to act in accordance with our knowledge, then we fail in our moral duty.

Masham provides a fairly detailed account of the important ways that reason guides us in our actions. In the following long section, Masham outlines the four main uses of reason in our lives.

She writes,

Which attentive consideration of the Works of God objected to our view, implies an exercise thereupon of that Faculty in us by which we deduce, or infer, one thing from another: Whence (as has been said) our knowledge immediatly deriv'd to us from sensation, or reflection, is enlarg'd by the perception of remote or distant Truths. The more obviously eminent advantages accruing to us from which faculty of reason, plainly make known the Superiority of its Nature; and that its suggestions, ought to be hearken'd to by us preferably to those of Sense; where these (as it too often happens) do not concur. For did we know nothing by Inference and Deduction, both our knowledge and injoyment would be very

short of what they now are; many considerable pleasures depending almost intirely upon Reason; and there being none of the greatest Enjoyments of Sense which would not lose their best Relish, separated from those concomitant satisfactions which accompany them only as we are rational Creatures. Neither is it our greatest happiness alone which is manifestly provided for in our being indu'd with this Faculty; but our much greater safety, and preservation likewise; since these require a capacity in us of foreseeing distant Events, and directing means to an End, oftentimes through a long train of Actions; which is what we can only do by that in us, whereby the Relations, Dependencies and Consequences of things are discoverable to us. (OT, 64-5)¹⁴

According to Masham, reason is used generally to assess the best means for achieving our ends. The particular uses of reason are (1) to correct the senses, (2) to provide for mental pleasures, (3) to provide mental satisfaction from the pleasures of the senses, and (4) to provide for our safety and preservation. With respect to the correction of the senses, Masham holds that when reason and the senses conflict, we should always favor reason. For instance, although our senses might tell us that continuing to indulge in liquor is pleasurable, our reason might tell us, extrapolating from past experience, that overindulgence will lead to a lessening of pleasure. Reason, by its nature discovers “distant truths,” either that which is in our long-term best interests or general truths based on specific instances. Reason allows us to correct erroneous sensory information and helps us avoid making mistakes in similar circumstances in the future. One might think that the use of reason to correct the senses is antithetical to Masham’s empiricism. However, Masham holds that reason is a

¹⁴ Cf. Locke (1975) *Essay*, 4.17.2.

natural faculty, similar to sensation and reflection, and is a necessary and beneficial aid to our sensory faculties.¹⁵

Masham is clear that while some pleasures are mere “enjoyments of sense,” others depend “almost intirely upon Reason,” such as those of learning or conversation. From this, we can see that while Masham does hold a form of hedonism, she does not hold simple sensory hedonism. Rather she thinks that pleasure can be either sensory or mental (and oftentimes pleasures involve both). While Masham does not indicate anywhere that mental or intellectual pleasures are intrinsically better than sensory pleasures, she does hold that if one develops intellectual pursuits one will be happier in old age. She writes,

A Vertuous Woman...is but very ill provided to bear Discontent where she proposes her greatest satisfaction, if she has nothing within her self which can afford her pleasure, independently upon others: Which is what none can lastingly have, without some improvement of their rational Faculites;...on which account the most happy would not ill consult their advantage, if by contracting betimes a Love of Knowledge (which is ever fruitful in delight to those who have once a true taste of it) they provide in their Youth such a Source of Pleasure for their Old Age as Time will not dissipate, but improve. (OT, 226-7)

Pleasure, according to Masham, is what we all desire. If we are able to secure lasting pleasure, we are happy. These pleasures can be pleasures of the body or pleasures of the mind. However, the pleasures of the mind 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 “concomitant satisfaction which accompany them only as we are rational creatures.” Here, Masham points to what we would call “attitudinal pleasures.” For it is pleasurable to get a massage or feel the warmth of the

¹⁵ We can contrast Masham’s view with a more “rationalistic” one where the faculty of reason is used to grasp necessary connections or truths without the aid of sensation or refection.

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.

Finally, the faculty of reason is given to us so that we can preserve ourselves. Although it is perhaps more usual for one to argue that the faculty of reason is primarily given for our health and survival and then argue that it is conducive to our happiness, Masham seems to do exactly the opposite. She argues that reason is necessary for our pleasure and happiness, and then shows that it is also a benefit to our safety and preservation. A closer examination of Masham's views concerning our natural and moral good reveals that she sees them as closely related, if not identical. She tells us "that there is an inseparable connection, or relation of Moral Good and Evil, with our Natural Good, and Evil" (OT, 78). Masham argues against those who would claim that morality must be based on arbitrary commands of God or the rituals of various religions, claiming "...Which is yet all the ground of not allowing that Pleasure, and Pain, are truly Good, and Evil; the denying of which, can be of no Service to Morality, but the contrary..." (OT, 80). According to Masham, pleasure is good and pain is evil. She holds that a chief part of our doing good for others "consists in removing the Pains and Miseries they suffer from their Natural Wants, and Necessities" (DLG, 59). Masham holds that removing pain is good, and the causing of pain, or failure to prevent pain that we are able to prevent, is evil. This underlies her contention that virtue consists in doing good things for our own benefit and for the benefit of our fellow creatures. She argues that the extent of virtue "is equal to our liberty of Action; and its Principle the most Active one of the mind" (OT, 11). In other words, our virtue consists in good action determined by reason. As noted earlier Masham also calls virtue that which follows from a sincere desire to follow God's will. A virtuous person will use their reason to determine the actions that result in the most overall pleasure in any given situation. When

we succeed in doing this, we not only increase our own pleasure and happiness, but we act in accordance with the will of God. 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; which measures are nothing else but the dictates resulting from those views which such a consideration of things as this gives us, of what is consonant, or not so, to the design of the Creator in every particular, wherein we are concern'd to act. And these manifestations of his Will, thus discoverable to us, ought to be regarded by us, as his Commands. (OT, 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, and, through ignorance or vice, choose to act contrary to God's will. 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 scant 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.¹⁶ 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

¹⁶ 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.

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.¹⁷ Masham writes,

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. (OT, 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,

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 freedome 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. (Masham to Leibniz, August 8, 1704; Leibniz (1875-90), Vol. 3, 360-1)

¹⁷ Masham's views on freedom of action are very like those of John Locke, see *Essay*, II.xxi. Although Masham's views very closely resemble Locke's views, they also resemble Cudworth's views. Some scholars have claimed that Locke's views were influenced by Cudworth, who had written *A Treatise of Freewill* that was not published till after his death. The claim is that Locke might have had access to the manuscript at the Masham estate (Oates). However, there is evidence that Masham did not inherit her father's manuscripts. Jacqueline Broad (2006) suggests that Locke's views might have come from Masham herself.

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. In her own works, Masham seems to satisfy herself with the claim that freedom of action is given to us by God so that we can follow his will or not. Given God's goodness, we know that punishment and reward must be given in a just manner, and that just punishment of an action implies that the one punished was responsible for the action, for Masham tells us that it is inconsistent with justice to punish someone for acting from their nature alone.

Finally, 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. She writes,

... [I]t is more certain (tho' usually less reflected upon) that it is no way necessary to the punishment of any Wicked Ungrateful Nation, that God should interpose, by some extraordinary act of his Providence, to inflict upon them the due Reward of their Disobedience, and Ingratitude: Since so fitly are all things dispos'd in the Original Constitution, and the order of Nature to the All-wise ends of their Maker, that (without his especial Interposition in the case) the establish'd course of things does bring to pass the effects that he sees fit in respect of the Moral, as well as of the Natural World; nor scarcely can any People...receive any severer Chastisement, than what they will find in the Natural result and consequences of their Moral Corruption when grown to an Extremity. (OT, 230-1)

Here, in addition to denying that God must perform a miracle in order to punish people for their moral wrongdoing, Masham claims that the world is set-up by God so rational creatures can

discern that virtue and vice are naturally rewarded and punished. She writes, “And we perceive, but too sensibly, that Vice proportionably to its measure, carries along with it, its own Punishment, to need that we should search for Foreign, or Remote examples in proof hereof” (OT, 231-2). As I mentioned earlier, Masham does acknowledge that some individuals have miserable lives, but in general, she seems to believe that misery is a natural result of vice.

We have seen that the law of reason, or nature is God’s command to us, discoverable by the faculty of reason. Through the faculty of reason we can come to understand the immutable nature of things – the existence of God and the relations of cause and effect in the world – which enables us to better preserve ourselves in being by avoiding pain and seeking pleasure and to secure those lasting pleasures which are constitutive of our happiness. God has given us the ability to do as we will so that we may use our reason to achieve the end of happiness in both this life and the next. However, there are limits to our reason and there are several ways in which it may be retarded or perverted. In the next section, I will discuss Masham’s views concerning the limits of our reason.

Section 3: The Limits and Corruption of Reason

Although Masham espouses the use of reason as a guide to matters metaphysical, physical, and moral, she also maintains that our reason is “weak” and “insufficient” for the ends of natural religion. First, reason alone is not sufficient to ensure adherence to virtue – for this we also need revelation. Second, we must be careful when positing metaphysical theses concerning the nature of God or that structure of the world. Our reason is naturally limited and we err when we presume to know things that stretch beyond our “short sight.” Third, our reason may be overwhelmed by desires or passions. Although one role reason plays is in the regulation of the desires and passions, it is no match for strong passions and bad habits. Finally, Masham holds that our reason can be retarded or perverted by custom and bad education, including bad religious education. In this

section, I will discuss Masham's views concerning the natural limits of reason and the ways in which it is corrupted by custom and education.

First, reason is limited with respect to virtue. Some commentators (O'Donnell 1984, Springborg 1998, and Fletcher 2002) have held that Masham was inclined to hold that there is a faculty in man higher than reason, which allows man to achieve knowledge and virtue not attainable through natural reason alone. In early correspondence with Locke, Masham and Locke discuss the possibility of such a faculty as set forth in John Smith's *Select Discourses*. In the correspondence, Locke dismisses the possibility of such a faculty as "Enthusiasm."¹⁸ However, it seems that Masham was not so quickly convinced. She tells Locke that "there may be" such a power since there is "a Degree of Perfection to be attain'd to in this Life which the Powers of mere Unassisted Reason will never Conduct a Man."¹⁹ However, Masham immediately follows this statement with a request for Locke's reasons for denying such a faculty. In her published works there is no mention of such a faculty. Though some commentators have thought that Masham's use of "right reason" signals "reason aided by faith," it seems that her considered view is that natural reason is sufficient for knowing our duty (O'Donnell 1984). That said, Masham still believes that revelation and faith have an important role to play in virtue. It is true that we can know our moral duty through the light of reason, but Masham believes that in order to know that punishment and reward are tied to doing one's duty and being virtuous, we need revelation. She writes,

For the belief of a Superior, Omnipotent Being inspecting our Actions, and who will Reward or Punish us accordingly, is in all Men's Apprehension the strangest, and in truth the only

¹⁸ In the 17th century "enthusiasm" or "enthusiastic" was often used as a term of disparagement. In the context of Locke and Masham's discussion, the term was used to refer to those who espoused a blind faith - those who denied that the Christian religion was consistent with reason. For more on this subject, see Myers (2012).

¹⁹ Masham to Locke, February 16, 1682, (Locke 1976, No. 684).

stable and irresistible Argument for submitting our Desires to a constant Regulation, wherein it is that Vertue does consist. (OT, 15)

Although Masham holds that God created the world so that virtue and vice are rewarded and punished according to natural laws, which we can discern through reason, the strong pull of desires for present goods can subvert this system. Without fear of punishment or promise of reward in a future life, we are tempted to follow our occurrent pleasures. Since true virtue requires a desire to follow Gods' will – that we be happy and help others to be so as well – knowledge of a just God and the afterlife to come are helpful in persuading us that our long-term pleasures are of the most importance. So, Masham claims that revelation and the Christian religion are essential to the ends of natural religion. However, even here, she admits that knowledge of an afterlife might be deducible through reason alone “from all things happening alike to the Good, and to the Bad in this World, and from Men's Natural desire of Immortality” (OT, 105).

The second way in which our reason is limited is with respect to a range of metaphysical and theological theses. Masham claims that although we can be assured that the mysteries (the incarnation, trinity, etc.) are not contrary to reason, they are beyond our ability to understand. In addition, we cannot be certain about the means that God chooses to fulfill his plans. For instance, in the correspondence with Leibniz, Masham maintains that Leibniz's pre-established harmony, while certainly fitting the wisdom of God, cannot be asserted as true merely on the basis of our seeing it as such. She writes,

What you would build upon this, forms a very transcendant conception of the Divine Artifice... 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 concluding. Since we can in my opinion onely infer from thence that whatsoever God does 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. (Masham to Leibniz, August 8, 1704; Leibniz (1875-90), Vol. 3, 358-9)

So, while we can know that the means God chooses to accomplish his ends are good, we cannot with any certainty claim the truth of a particular metaphysical thesis on the basis of its consistency with God's goodness or wisdom. Given that other means are undoubtedly available to God for achieving his ends, we cannot assign a high probability to the truth of any thesis we might conceive as fitting. On these matters, Masham thinks that it is best that we remain agnostic. Our ability to conceive of the truth or falsity of a proposition is limited to our being able to conceive of the predicate as relating to the subject always, sometimes, or not at all. When discussing the possibility of unextended simples with Leibniz, Masham maintains that because she has no concept of an unextended simple, she cannot say that any predicate can be truthfully said of such a subject. And while Masham believes that we cannot simply dismiss theses out of hand by saying we cannot conceive of them, she believes that the obligation of showing that the thesis is possible lies with the one who professes it.²⁰ She writes,

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 attributeing certain affections conceiv'd to belong to the subject in question. I can by no meanes attribute any thing in a subject whereof I have no conception at all; as I am conscious to my self I have not of unextended substance. (Masham to Leibniz, August 8, 1704; Leibniz (1875-90), Vol. 3, 359)

²⁰ In her last letter to Leibniz, Masham, while defending her father's, Ralph Cudworth's, plastic natures against the objections of Pierre Bayle, comments "But to any ones bare assertion that a thing is inconceivable, it is surely answer sufficient that others find it not to be so. Tho my father has giv'n some instances which he thinks prove the possibilitie of such a manner of action..." (Masham to Leibniz, October 20, 1705; Leibniz (1875-90), Vol. 3, 371-2).

The third way in which our reason is limited is by our desires and passions. Recall, one of the main roles of reason is to aid the proper direction of desires and passions towards long-term pleasure. But Masham acknowledges that it is often difficult for us to follow reason in this respect because what is presently pleasing to us is more easily discernible. This sets up a conflict between our reason, which seeks long-term pleasure, and our desires and appetites, which seek short-term pleasures. Masham writes, “Men may possibly (in the Ignorance they are in of their own Being, and the Constitution of other things, with their mutual Relations) mistake, that which can make them finally happy; yet none can be supposed not to know what, at the present, pleases them; which is the Happiness, or Pleasure here intended” (DLG, 17). So, human beings often err and act contrary to reason due to our passions. Masham claims that the passions, desires, and appetites in us are very strong and our reason is weak, so that when the two come into conflict the passions often prevail. She writes,

And that we are so prone (as Experience shews we are) to offend against this Law of Reason, is from the Unruliness of our Affections; Which being Strong in us, (whilst Reason is weak and unable to direct them) take up with the first alluring Objects, whose impressions making settled habits in us, it is not easie for Reason to remove them, even when it does discover their Pravity; and sets us to struggle against them. (DLG, 104-5)

One of the great obstacles to our enduring pleasure is settling into a habit of choosing our present desires. Once we develop a habit of forgoing the reasoning process and settling for what is in front of us, it is very difficult to break the pattern. Moreover, Masham thinks that once we get into the habit of choosing easy pleasures for our current enjoyment, we must always seek to find new ones to satisfy our desires. Since, as noted above, without the use of reason our sensory pleasures soon become dull to us, we must constantly seek new delights in order to achieve pleasure. She writes, “Humane Nature is not capable of durable satisfaction when the Passions and Appetites

are not under the direction of right Reason... and whilst we daily create to our selves desires still more vain, as thinking thereby to be supply'd with new Delights, we shall ever (instead of finding true Contentment) be subjected to uneasiness, disgust, and vexation" (OT, 205-6).

Masham is aware of the conflict here. She is also aware of the fact that some might think that if pleasure is the good, then it does not matter whether one seeks short-term pleasures or long-term pleasures, as long as one gets pleasure constantly. The objection, of course, is that if pleasure is what constitutes human happiness, then the happiest life might lie in the pursuit of sensory pleasure since it is the most easily had. However, Masham thinks that no reasonable person could come to such a conclusion. For once we consider that the favoring of long-term pleasure is simply the favoring of greater overall pleasure to lesser amounts of short-term pleasure, we can see that there is no real conflict. We ought always to do what will produce the greatest amount of overall pleasure for us, and this means following reason in the regulation of our desires.

Whence it again appears that the love of Pleasure implanted in us (if we faithfully pursue it in preferring always that which will, on the whole, procure to us the most pleasure) can never mislead us from the observance of the Law of Reason; And that this Law enjoyns only a right regulation of our natural desire of pleasure, to the end of our obtaining the greatest happiness that we are capable of...To assert therefore that our chief Good does consist in pleasure, is far from drawing after it any such consequence as many have pretended it does, in prejudice to the Law of Reason, that Natural Revelation of Gods Will to us; since no Man can upon due consideration thereof Judge, That the Gratification of his present Appetites ought to be to him the Measure or Rule of his Actions in consequence of Pleasures being his chief Good. (OT, 76-8)

Finally, our reason can be stunted or perverted by custom and education.²¹ In both of Masham's published works, she argues that custom, poor education or lack of education, enthusiasm, and skepticism (all of which are related) can contribute to the perversion or unnatural limitation of our reason. Considering the tendency we have to violate the laws of reason, she writes, "And to this loose Education and Custom, greatly contribute: There being scarce any Vice we are capable of, which is not instill'd into us (or at least the Seeds of it) in our very childhood, by those foolish People that usually have direction of it" (DLG, 104-5).²² Masham believes it is often the case that young children are not taught by people who are both qualified and who have a proper concern for the children. Their education was often left to nannies (as Masham says "French" nannies) and young scholars. Masham, who praises Locke's *Treatise on Education*, believes that educated mothers would be the best candidates for taking on the education of their children (OT, 185). Masham also argues that women are not taught subjects necessary for their own wellbeing. In particular, Masham thinks that women need to know the ground of religion and moral duty. To do this, they need to learn to read English, understand ordinary Latin, arithmetic, geometry, chronology, and history (OT, 195). Both men and women are disadvantaged by poor education at an early age, but men are provided education later in life while women are never taught useful knowledge. In addition to the lack of educational opportunities for young children and women, what women are taught is only what will make them attractive to men. Unfortunately, according to Masham, because men are ignorant, what men find attractive in women largely consists in chastity and frivolity (OT, 199-200).

²¹ Concern regarding the effects of education and custom with respect to the duties of religion and politics is a concern Masham shares with Mary Astell, who also wrote on these subjects. For more on the commonalities between the two and on Astell's views, see Broad (2002) and Sowaal (2007).

²² Masham argues for the education of women in two ways: (1) because they are the most suited to educating their young children (men included), and (2) because they need to use their reason in order to understand their religious and moral duty. In this quote, she refers to the fact that the care of young children is often left to people who are unqualified to teach them or are disinterested in teaching them. This leads to bad habits, which she claims are difficult to correct.

This lack of education in women, leads to doubts about religion, a susceptibility to dishonest men, and unregulated desires (OT, 206-215).

Custom is also a powerful force against the right use of reason. Masham writes, “The Law of Fashion, establish’d by Repute and Disrepute, is to most People the powerfulest of all Laws...” (OT, 202). According to Masham, men are taught to be ambitious rather than honest and charitable. In addition, while women’s lives are ruined at the mere hint of sexual impropriety, men are treated very lightly for ruining entire families with their illicit liaisons. Finally, Masham holds that men neglect their personal, religious, and civic duties because it is more fashionable to be idle, ignorant, and gluttonous. Women are also the victims of custom and fashion in so far as they are taught to only value their looks and the latest fashions, rather than anything of lasting value. Providing a biting view of current custom, Masham writes,

But others there are...who would see no Evil in his misspending his Time, consuming Day after Day, and Year after Year, uselessly to himself, or others, in a course of continual Idleness and Sauntering; as if he was made only to Eat and to Drink, or to Gratifie his Senses. And how few Parents are there of Quality, even among such as are esteem’d the most virtuous, who do not permit their Daughters to pass the best part of their Youth in that Ridiculous Circle of Diversions, which is pretty generally thought the proper business of Young Ladies; and which so ingrosses them that they can find no Spare Hours, wherein to make any such improvements of their understanding.... (OT, 150-1)

Custom makes both sexes more prone to follow their occurrent desires rather than considering the dictates of reason. Masham notes that what is fashionable changes, but that it is usually still antithetic to true knowledge and virtue. She wryly remarks that one can only hope that education will someday become fashionable, since “even a reasonable thing will not want Followers, if it be once thought the Fashion” (OT, 220).

Masham holds that the dangers of enthusiasm and skepticism are closely associated with custom and education. For bad religious education, which would be any religious training that makes Christianity mysterious or unreasonable, can lead to enthusiasm. In addition, she sees custom and fashion as the major contributors to skepticism about religion. For when it is fashionable to be ignorant, people will neglect their duty to understand the grounds for their religion and will be easily swayed by bad arguments or enthusiastic sects. Because Masham sees belief in the Christian God and the afterlife as necessary to sustained virtue, once Christianity is thought unreasonable or unknowable, there is no incentive for the regulation of desire. This she sees as dangerous not only for individuals, but for society as a whole. Masham warns that allowing desires to go unabated leads to intemperate and vicious living. When the customs of a society spur people to frivolity and the satisfaction of current desires over long-term goods, the society will fail. She writes,

Luxury and Intemperance, follow'd with the neglect of industry, and application to useful Arts and Sciences, are necessarily attended with misery, and have been usually also, the Fore-runners of approaching Ruine to the best and most flourishing Governments which have been in the World. And as in the same proportion that these things do any where prevail, so must naturally the unhappiness of such a People. (OT, 232)

Here, Masham extends her view that vice and virtue are naturally punished and rewarded on an individual level to the societal level. So, just as individuals who preference their short-term desires over more rational long term pleasure and happiness suffer misery, so do entire societies and nations when they fail to follow God's will.

Conclusion

Masham argues that reason is central to our lives. It is a natural ability, given to us by God, which enables us to have knowledge of God, the world, and our moral duty. In order to best use our reason, we must understand both its purpose and its limitations. Reason will lead us to certain

metaphysical truths (God's existence and loving nature), but as limited creatures, we cannot know the full extent of God's works and ways. Reason is essential in understanding the world, ourselves, and others. It is through reason that we come to see that lasting pleasures are most conducive to happiness in this life and in the next. In addition to being rational creatures, we are creatures with desires, which are necessary for our pleasure, happiness, and wellbeing. Desires are not bad, but they must be regulated by reason in order to be directed towards lasting pleasure and happiness. Even so, we often fail in our duty to the law of reason because of strong passions or desires for short-term pleasures. Moreover, we must be careful not to pervert reason by means of custom and bad education.²³

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