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GOD, FREEDOM, AND PERFECTION IN CONWAY, ASTELL, AND DU CHÂTELET

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5.1 Introduction

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers afforded God significant roles in their philosophical systems. They presented arguments for God's existence and nature, his wisdom, goodness, and justice, to ground natural philosophy, morality, and social and political theories. In this chapter, I will trace a line of an essentialist perfectionism that emerges in the context of certain conceptions of our duty to God. According to these views, when God creates the world, he endows creation with some of his perfections. These God-given abilities, capacities, and powers when properly cultivated and used, provide creatures with understanding, virtue, morality, and perfection. I will examine the views of Anne Conway, Mary Astell, and Émilie du Châtelet. All three philosophers believe that we have a duty to God to perfect our nature, although they differ with respect to the means and ends of this perfection. Conway holds that the perfection of creatures comes about through moral and metaphysical improvement *ad infinitum*. Astell believes that union with God is the aim, but that the development of generosity and the perfection of our individual talents is the means. Finally, du Châtelet claims that the development of our reason, understanding, and use of our freedom allows us to achieve a certain amount of perfection.

5.2 Conway on God, Freedom, and Evil

Anne Conway's philosophical system takes God's existence and nature as its center. Indeed, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* can be read as a theodicy (Hutton 2004; Lascano 2016a; Mercer 2016). Here, instead of discussing Conway's attempts to reconcile God's goodness with the pain and suffering, I will focus on her account of freedom and metempsychosis, and how they tie moral and metaphysical perfection.

According to Conway, "An essential attribute of God is to be a creator" (P: 2.5). God creates continually by emanating his perfect goodness to creatures. She writes,

He is an infinite fountain and Ocean of goodness, charity and generosity. So, now, how could it be that this fountain would not be perpetually flowing and emitting from itself living waters? Would this Ocean not perpetually overflow by means of its emanation and a kind of continuous flowing to produce created things? God's goodness by its proper nature is communicative and multiplicative.

(P: 2.4)

Conway holds, like Astell, that God creates a variety of things, each with their own degree of perfection (see Astell 2013: 103). It is the duty of each creature to increase in perfection, as Conway says, “to infinity” as there is no limit to their improvement. The means of achieving this perfection is the proper use of freedom and the development of goodness.

Conway’s discussion of freedom in her text begins with God’s freedom. She writes,

On the one hand, God’s will is the freest, in the sense that anything he does with respect to his creatures, he does without any external pressure, or coercion, or any cause coming from creatures. For this is being free: he does spontaneously (*sponte*) anything that he does. Yet, on the other hand, in no way should the indifference between acting or not acting be said to be in God.

(P: 3.1)

According to Conway, God is the exemplar of freedom in that he is determined by nothing but his own perfect nature, that is, he is determined to act in accordance with his wisdom and goodness. She contrasts God’s freedom with those who have mere indifference of will who act “based on mere choice, and not a true and solid reason or due to the guidance of wisdom,” and who are “like the cruel tyrants in this world, who do many things merely from their will, relying on their power, and in such a way that they can provide no other reason for their deeds than their mere choice” (P: 3.1). This indifference allows a creature to choose a lesser good over a greater good either through ignorance or through willfulness. Creatures can change for the better or worse because they are not determined by their nature to choose the good like God. “For this indifference of will is the basis of all mutability and corruptibility in Creatures, in that it would not be possible that there be any evil in Creatures unless there were mutability” (P: 3.1).

For Conway, the way in which the will moves is determined by the nature of the being in question. God, as a perfect being, is incapable of any change, for any change in his will would result in either an improvement of his nature, which is impossible, or a lessening of his perfection, which is also impossible. Thus, since it is God’s nature to be perfect, and therefore immutable, his wisdom, goodness, and will are eternal and unchanging modes of God. She writes that “Wisdom and Will are in God. But they are not some entity or substance that is distinct from him; they are merely distinct modes, or properties of one and the same substance” (P: 1.7). Creatures, of course, are not perfect. It is the nature of a creature to be always in motion or changing.

The freedom of created beings to will or choose either good or evil is the cause of continual change. God does the best for his creatures and gives them the power and natural desire to seek their own good. However, it is always possible for a creature to choose evil over good. Conway writes,

...it is the nature of every creature to be in a continuous motion or operation, which with the greatest of certainty tends toward a further good as it tends to the reward and fruit of its own labor, unless Creatures hamper this good through a voluntary transgression and a misuse of the indifference of will that was created along with it by God.

(P 6.6)

Here, we see that Conway claims that we are directed toward our own good. But creatures are not necessitated by the good or the apparent good. For Conway, good and evil are relative terms. What is good for one type of being, a horse, for example, is to have the virtues of a horse (obedience, speed, calmness of nature, and so on). What is good for a human being is to have the virtues associated with our sort of being (piety, holiness, kindness, honesty, and so on). No creature can be completely evil as they must share in some of God’s goodness. Nevertheless, creatures can choose to act in ways that are unbecoming of their natures, and this seems to be what Conway refers to when she says that they will “evil.” For instance, she claims that to choose to act like a devil is to

act with “hostility, malice, cruelty, fraudulence, and cunning,” and to choose to act like a beast is “to be in terms of pleasures and earthly desires beneath any other beast—nay, to become worse than every beast” (P: 6.10 and P: 6.8).

Conway identifies evil with sin, which, according to Conway, is “ataxia, that is, an inordinate determination of a motion or power to move from one’s own obligatory place or state to another one” (P: 8.2). When we misuse our free will and choose to love that which is beneath us, we affect our moral status. For instance, if a human or an angel were to love and act as a devil or a beast, they would degenerate morally. After the death of the human or angel, their principal spirit will reform a new body for them that reflects the moral status of their past life—as a devil or beast (For Conway’s most detailed account of the process of transformation of the individual from one mode of existence to another, see P: 6.7). This metempsychosis, where the body reflects the moral nature of a being is the punishment for their sin. Likewise, a being can transform into a higher being for loving that which is above them.

5.3 Conway on Moral and Metaphysical Change

According to Conway, each creature is differentiated by a principal spirit which is a bundle of spirits that remains constant in substance, but not in structure. Conway tells us that the principal spirit of an individual reflects her inner moral nature into the “dark spirit” which constitutes her body and forms it into the natural kind that is most appropriate to her place on the scale of being.¹

The principal spirit is not only of a multitude of spirits, but of a multitude of kinds of spirits. Conway claims “human nature has in it the nature of all creatures, and hence it is called a microcosm” (P: 5.6). We should understand the principal spirit as hierarchical as she claims that every individual spirit contains intellectual spirits, brute or sensitive spirits, and vegetative or nutritive spirits. When these spirits are properly ordered, the intellectual rules over the sensitive and the sensitive rules over the nutritive. However, when one’s desires are disordered, the brute or sensitive spirit might rule the intelligent spirit. Conway explains that the principal spirit is ordered like an army. She writes,

...the spirit of a human or beast is some innumerable multitude of spirits united together in the body, and they too have their own order and government, so that one of them is the primary ruler and possesses a higher position, and another has some other rulership under it, and so on through the whole, just as one is accustomed to finding in an army of soldiers.

(P: 6.11)

The principal spirit thus organized can account for how, for instance, the sensitive spirit could become dominant in an individual that acquires bestial tendencies, and that this would cause the superior spirits to become servants to the bestial. What we bring into ourselves is held in the body and through this assimilation is loved by the principal spirit. Conway writes,

if a human is united to and joined with something, he becomes one with that thing, and that he who clings to the Lord, is a spirit one with him; and if he clings to a prostitute, he will be one flesh with her.

(P: 6.8)

5.4 Conway’s Perfectionism

Our choices determine our moral and metaphysical status. Conway tells us that we act properly when we act in accordance with, or surpass, the nature we currently enjoy. However, some have

thought that Conway's account of how we should act is not sufficient for attributing ethics to Conway. In a recent article, Sarah Hutton has argued that Conway's account of goodness is "a central component of her philosophical system" and that her account of goodness is "primarily metaphysical rather than moral" (2018: 229–30). While I largely agree with Hutton, I think that Conway's conception of goodness is equally metaphysical and moral, although the morality is not drawn merely from scripture. Instead, it seems that Conway holds that the moral and the metaphysical are inseparable aspects of God, and so also his creation, and that the duty of every created being is to be as perfect as possible.

Part of Hutton's argument for the claim that Conway's conception of goodness is not moral is that Conway does not provide an account of "the kind of behaviour that constitutes sin, and which incurs punishments" (2018: 232). Hutton acknowledges that Conway talks about "brutish" behaviour, "sin," and transgressions of our freedom, but maintains that "there is an insufficient number of examples given of sin from which to infer a moral code or guide a life" (2018: 232). It is true that Conway does not provide a moral code, but she does think that sin is acting in a way that is unbecoming of the kind of creature that one is. "[Sin] is from the Creature who has abused this power and has determined it towards something other than it ought" (P: 8.2). What is it that creatures ought to do? Each creature should "work for themselves towards attaining an ever-greater perfection, as instruments of the divine wisdom, goodness, and power that is at work in them and with them (P: 9.6). This, admittedly, is not a complete moral theory, but it certainly is an answer to the question of how we ought to live—we ought to strive for the perfection of the nature that we currently enjoy. This is achieved by increasing one's goodness, wisdom, virtue, and power as far as possible in accordance with one's present state. Indeed, this view is supported by Conway's discussion of the virtues of a horse.

First, let us take as an example a horse, which is a creature bestowed by the creator with diverse levels of perfection, not only ones like bodily strength, but also, as I would put it, a certain notion of how it ought to serve its Master. In addition, it has courage, fear, love, memory, and various other qualities that are in humans and that are of the sort that we can also observe in a dog as well as many other animals.

(P: 6.6)

Horses, and the rest of God's creatures, have their own virtues and powers (as degraded versions of God's perfections emanated into creatures) that can be either increased or decreased through choice. These perfections, as Hutton notes, are "physical, moral, and emotional qualities" (2018: 243). Each sort of creature will vary with respect to the qualities that may be perfected, but as one moves up the ladder of being the qualities will be increasingly intellectual and moral. In achieving the perfections of one sort of being, an individual will rise to a level where more perfections are available *ad infinitum*.

5.5 Astell on God's Nature

Mary Astell holds that God creates by means of communicating his goodness, or perfections, into finite forms (for more on the existence and nature of God, see Lascano 2016b, 2017). She describes God as a "communicative being" and claims that he "Communicates an innumerable variety of Perfections to his Creatures," and so he "must needs contain in himself all those Beauties and Perfections he is pleas'd to Communicate to Inferior Beings" (2002: 182). God creates human beings in order that they may freely perfect their natures in preparation for their ultimate happiness in union with God. She is particularly concerned that women develop the ability to make choices that will lead to their true happiness. In arguing that our free choices must be informed, not by

custom and habit, but by reasoning and true principles, Astell provides an account of how we are free to reform our desires. She makes use of John Locke's doctrine of suspension of desires to accommodate the better consideration of choices.

According to Astell, it is the duty of every rational being to strive for the perfection of its nature. To do this, human beings must cultivate generosity and virtue. According to Astell, virtue "consists in governing Animal Impressions, in directing our Passions to such Objects, and keeping 'em in such a pitch, as right Reason requires" (2002: 214). Generosity is a notion that Astell appropriates from Descartes (For a detailed account of Descartes' views on generosity, see Shapiro 1999). According to Descartes, true generosity makes one's self-esteem as great as it can be. He takes volition, or will, to be the only active power of the soul, and so the only power which we can control. Our power of volition is unlimited according to Descartes, and it is the way in which we are most like God. The two keys to the achievement of generosity are (1) to understand that our willings are free and are the sole determination of our moral worth, and (2) to be resolved to use our wills to do what we judge best. Generosity is necessary to attain virtue, and one needs virtue to be happy. So, the good use of our free will is key to virtue and happiness (Descartes AT XI: 445–46; CSM 1: 384).

Astell, like Descartes, believes that generosity is necessary for the attainment of virtue and happiness. She is concerned with how the will and understanding can be improved to attain generosity. This is especially important for women, who have been denied education and are trained by custom to value only material things and appearances.

5.6 Astell on Freedom and Action

Some commentators have held that Astell's views on freedom are either indebted to Descartes, John Norris, or Malebranche (For Norris and Malebranche's influence see Broad 2012, 2015: 41–42, 111–12; For Astell's Cartesian influence, see Sowaal 2007; Detlefsen 2016). However, when it comes to understanding the nature of freedom and how we can reform our judgments, she seems to follow John Locke. Her definition of a free agent, what moves us to action, and how we can train our wills to avoid error and sin are indebted to Locke. The narrative that Astell saw Locke as her "lifelong nemesis" was popularized by Patricia Springborg's influential work on Astell's politics (2005: 40), and it is true that Astell is critical of some of Locke's political views as well as his suggestion that matter might think. Yet it seems that Astell's attitude toward Locke is more nuanced than previously thought. For instance, Jacqueline Broad (2014) has shown that Astell uses Locke's definition of slavery and draws on his views on education in her 1706 edition of *Some Reflections upon Marriage*. In what follows, we will see more evidence of Locke's influence.

Astell provides only one clear statement of what she takes a free agent to be. It is found in *The Christian Religion*, and there she writes,

Now the difference between a free and a necessary agent consists in this, that the actions of the former, or more properly the motions of his mind, are in his own power. He has the ability, as everyone of us is sensible, to determine them this way or that, according to his own pleasure, and as he is affected by the supposed agreeableness of the objects he pursues. This power or faculty is what we call liberty.

(2013: 93)

We can compare this to Locke's definition of freedom: "so far as a Man has a power to think or not think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man free" (*Essay*: II.xxi.8, 237). We can see that for both Astell and Locke freedom is a power to move the mind or body in one way or another according to one's own preference or

pleasure. Astell goes on to contrast her view of a free agent with that of a necessary agent who “does not determine itself, has no command over its own motions, but is absolutely governed by a foreign cause” (2013: 93).

According to Astell, God has given us the power to determine ourselves and it is up to us to use it properly to choose the true and the good. While Astell’s remarks on the nature of freedom are brief, she spends quite a bit of time discussing the understanding and will and their relation to proper action.

Astell’s most detailed account of human action is in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part II where she gives a method for the improvement of the understanding. She begins with a Lockean definition of understanding and will. She writes,

As the Capacity which we find in our selves of Receiving and Comparing Ideas is what we call the Understanding, so the Power of Preferring any Thought or Motion, of Directing them to This or That thing rather than another is what we mean by the Will

(2002: 205)

With respect to what determines the will, she writes,

‘Tis true the Will does always pursue the Good, or somewhat represented to it as such, but it is not always, or rather very seldom, determin’d to the Choice of what is in it self the greatest Good. And though I suppose we always Chuse that which in that Juncture in which it is propos’d seems fittest for our present turn, yet it is often such as we wou’d not prefer, did we impartially examin and observe the Consequences.

(2002: 207)

Astell and Locke share the worry that if God is the greatest good, and the will is determined by the good, then we should always do as God wills. Of course, we do not. Locke’s solution to this worry is two-fold. First, he claims the will is determined by uneasiness, which is the desire for a particular absent good. Second, we can suspend our assent to particular objects of desire to better determine their true worth (for more on Locke on suspension, see Rickless 2000, 2014, 2020). Astell adopts Locke’s understanding of what usually moves the will. She writes,

An Inclination therefore after Happiness is that to which we shall at present reduce all the rest; which Happiness we pursue by removing as far as we can from that which is *uneasie* to us, and by uniting ourselves as much as we are able to some Good which we suppose we want. The former of these being indeed a pursuit of Good, tho not so directly as the latter.

(2002: 205; *emphasis mine*)

Astell claims that our “[perverse Inclination] fixes our Thoughts on a Present Uneasiness which it says must be remov’d, and our Desires gratify’d at any rate, without suffering us too weight the ill Consequences of doing so” (2002: 207). These uneasinesses of which she speaks are for earthly desires. For Astell, the only uneasiness we ought to experience is one that arises from a fear of losing eternal happiness in union with God. The question is how do we train our judgment so that we are made uneasy at the thought of lacking this distant good rather than present earthly goods? Like Locke, Astell thinks that we form bad habits through the repetition of choosing only apparent goods rather than our true good. She writes,

But the misfortune is as has been once observ’d already, that we Will e’re we are capable of examining the Reasons of our Choice, or of viewing our Ideas so exactly as we must if we

wou'd Judge aright. And the frequent repetition of such unreasonable Choices makes them Customary to us, and consequently gives a new and wrong bias to our Inclinations, which upon all occasions dispose the Will to the Choice of such things as we suppose, tho by mistake, to contribute to our Happiness.

(2002: 206)

According to Locke, we have the power to suspend our desires and particular actions to better examine and judge the true value of a particular end or action. The doctrine of suspension allows us to break the chain of judgments that have become habitual due to custom or education. Locke writes,

To which, if, besides accidental harms, we add the fantastical uneasiness (as itch after honour, power, or riches, &c.) which acquired habits, by fashion, example, and education, have settled in us, and a thousand other irregular desires, which custom has made natural to us, we shall find that a very little part of our life is so vacant from These uneasinesses, as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter absent good.

(*Essay: 2.21.45*)

Suspension allows us to better align our desires with God's will. Astell writes that "ignorance and a narrow education, lay the foundation of vice, and imitation and custom rear it up" (2002: 67). She claims that error and sin arise because we have an "inordinate thirst after a great reputation or the power and riches, the grandeurs and pleasures of this world" (2002: 163). She advises ladies to suspend their habituated assent to particular desires in order to further examine them lest they fall into error and sin.

But we will not do that, chusing rather to Act by the Wrong Judgments we have formerly made, and to follow blindly the Propensities they have given us, than to suspend our Inclinations as we both May and Ought, and restrain them from determining our Will, till we have fairly and fully examin'd and ballanc'd, according to the best of our Knowledge, the several degrees of Good and Evil present and future that are in the Objects before us.

(2002: 207)

Astell claims, like Locke, that the will and understanding are closely connected powers of the mind. The best way to improve one is to improve the other. The causes of our corruption are largely prejudice – unexamined beliefs – and custom. She writes, "As Prejudice fetters the Understanding so does Custom manacle the Will, which scarce knows how to divert from a Tack which the generality around it take, and to which it has it self been habituated" (2002: 139). She then provides the cure:

And the best way I can think of to Improve the Understanding, and to guard it against all Errors proceed they from what Cause they may, is to regulate the Will, whose Offense it is to determine the Understanding to such and such Ideas, and to stay it in the consideration of them so long as is necessary to the Discovery of Truth; for if the Will be right the Understanding can't be guilty of any Culpable Error. Not to Judge of any things which we don't Apprehend, to suspend our Assent till we see just cause to give it, and to determine nothing till the Strength and Clearness of the Evidence oblige us to it.

(2002: 164; compare *Essay: 2.21.47*)

Astell's account of action blends Descartes's account of the virtue of generosity, with Locke's account of freedom. Our freedom lies in our power to direct our minds to this or that thought.

The act of suspending our habituated desires allows us to reform them through reasoning about their true worth.

5.7 Astell on Happiness and Perfection

As noted, our ultimate happiness is everlasting union with God, which is attained by obeying God's will and developing our talents. Astell defines "good" as that which glorifies God, and "evil" as that which offends God (2013: 152). To glorify God is to perfect oneself by properly developing one's talents. According to Astell, what offends God are the "hinderences which Rational and Free Agents put in their own, and in each others way, towards the attainment of that Happiness which the Wisdom and Goodness of God originally design'd for them" (2013: 152). Astell maintains that God wants us to be happy, which is evident by the incessant desire for happiness he has placed in us. But our desire for happiness cannot be satisfied with what can be achieved in Earthly life. We not only desire happiness—we desire endless happiness (2013: 54). Astell posits that this desire is not an "improper" or "irregular" desire since her reason does not reproach her for having it. This desire for endless happiness provides proof of our immortality.

In this life "our duty to ourselves consists in making the best use of our talents, and hereby aspiring to the highest degree of happiness and perfection of which we are capable" (2013: 179). We owe this to God since the perfection of each individual increases the perfection of the world as a whole. There is a natural progression toward perfection for each sort of being, but several factors can thwart this progression. For humans, who are rational beings, our perfection is achieved through the development of our intellectual and moral abilities. However, our passions and irregular desires can impair this development. Astell writes,

But in whatever Degree of Being a Creature is plac'd, whether it be a Free or Necessary Agent, there must be a certain measure of Perfection belonging to its Rank, which it cannot attain but by some certain and stated Progressions or Methods, suitable to the Nature that God has given it, and in the same manner as a Seed becomes a Plant, or a Plant a Tree. Some actions therefore do naturally and necessarily tend to the Perfection of Mankind, and others as naturally and necessarily drag us down into Misery.

(2013: 93)

The obligation to perfect one's nature, for rational human beings, consists in the perfection of understanding and will through the good use of reason. The more a person's actions are guided by reason, the more virtuous their intentions and actions will be, and thus they will better conform to God's will. Astell writes, "For what is it that God requires of us? No very hard task one would think, for it is only a sincere and constant endeavor after our own perfection" (2013: 102). She claims that there is "no way to be happy but by being perfect," and that God has made us "rational and free agents" who are "capable of enjoying the happy effects" of following his will (2013: 102).

For Astell, a perfect God created us with the power to reflect on our choices to break habits brought about by bad custom and prejudice. When we use these capacities and powers correctly, we increase the perfection of our nature and secure true happiness.

5.8 Du Châtelet on God and Creation

According to du Châtelet, God chooses to create this world because his perfect nature determines him to the best, and this world contains the greatest amount of perfection. She claims in *On Liberty*, that to be determined to action by the good is the greatest perfection (2021: 7). While God

is always determined to act in this way, humans, as finite and imperfect beings, must take care to use their limited reason and understanding to determine what is best.

According to du Châtelet, God in creating wanted to communicate his perfections. He chooses our world because in creating it, God maximizes this communication. She writes,

God, being the most perfect of all beings, none of his actions can be without a sufficient reason. So he had his own reason for determining to create a world, and this reason is the satisfaction he found in imparting a portion of his perfections, and the reason that determined him to give actuality to this world rather than to any other was the greater perfection he found in this one.

(2009: 43)

Du Châtelet describes God as good, simple, eternal, intelligent, powerful, and as one who always chooses the best (for more on God's nature and existence, see Lascano 2011, 2019; Detlefsen 2014). While God creates the best of all possible worlds, this world does not require his day-to-day involvement. Like Conway, du Châtelet believes that God must act in accordance with his wisdom and goodness, nevertheless, she maintains that he is free in his creation choice. She writes,

The choice that God made among all possible worlds of the world we see is proof of his liberty...he chose the succession of things that constitute this universe to make actual, because this succession pleased him the most: He was the absolute master of his choice. The necessary Being is thus a free Being; for to act following the choice of one's own will is to be free.

(2009: 143)

5.9 Du Châtelet on Freedom

Like Astell, du Châtelet's views on freedom were influenced by Locke's account. She holds that our freedom is freedom of action rather than freedom of will (for alternative accounts of du Châtelet's views on liberty, see Jorati 2019; Wells 2021). In the *Foundations of Physics*, she writes, "to act following the choice of one's own will is to be free" (2009: 143). She elaborates in *On Liberty*, "I call freedom the power to think a thing, or to not think, to move or to not move, according to the choice of one's mind" (2021: 1). Her definition is close to a direct quote of Locke, who writes, "so far as a Man has the power to think, or not to think; to move or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man free" (*Essay* II.xxi.8; for the French, see du Châtelet 1989: 485; Locke 1714: 277).

We are free so long as we can act in accordance with our judgments, but we are not free to determine our will, desires, or choices. In many accounts of freedom, whether we are free or not, turns on how the will is determined or not determined. However, like Locke, Du Châtelet, denies that our freedom consists in an ability to determine our will. Rather, she claims, again like Locke, that willing and judging are two functions of the same understanding, and both are passive powers (2021: 6). It is the active power of moving our bodies and minds that constitutes freedom. She argues that the will, being merely an "abstract notion," cannot affect our active power of moving. We choose to move or act when we judge that doing so is the best course of action.

Those who attribute libertarian accounts of freedom to du Châtelet seem to ignore that one of her main arguments for compatibilism is that it is the sort of freedom that God has, and therefore is the best freedom possible. She argues,

God can only be free in this way. The moral necessity of always doing the best is even greater in God, because his infinitely perfect existence is above ours. Hence, the true and the only

freedom is the power of doing that which one has chosen to do; and all the objections that have been raised against this type of freedom destroy equally that of God and that of man. As a result, if it were to follow that man is not free, because his will is always determined by the things that his understanding judges to be best, it would also follow that God is not free, and that everything in the universe would be effect without cause, which is absurd.

(2021: 7)

Du Châtelet's views about God's freedom, as was noted, are like Conway's views. If God is perfect and the sort of freedom that he has is one where he is determined to do what he judges best, then this sort of freedom must be the most exemplary. But while Conway holds that creatures have freedom of indifference, du Châtelet holds that we are moved to act by whatever most pleases us, that is, whatever we judge is the best. She writes,

Man is, by his quality of being intelligent, necessitated to want what his judgment has presented to him as the best. If it were otherwise, he would be subject to the determination of something other than himself, and he would not be free; for to will that which is not most pleasing, is a real contradiction; and to do what we judge best, which is the most pleasing, is to be the most free.

(2021: 8)

According to du Châtelet, freedom comes in degrees. God is the freest being since he always can do what pleases him. Humans have imperfect freedom. She writes,

God was able to give his creatures a small portion of freedom, just as he gave them a small portion of intelligence. ...The freedom God gives to man is a low power and is limited to the operation of certain movements and the application of a few thoughts.

(2001: 10)

We have an imperfect freedom because we are not always able to use our power to think or move. In addition, we also have imperfect intelligence. With respect to our understanding, she writes, "The more our determinations are founded on good reasons, the more we approach perfection; it is this perfection, in a more eminent degree, which characterizes the liberty of beings more perfect than us, and even of God" (2021: 7). And she notes that "to be determined by what seems to us to be best, is as great of a perfection as the power to do what we have judged to be such" (2021: 7).

Du Châtelet thinks that we can improve upon our understandings and thereby become more perfect. She writes,

Freedom in man, is the health of the soul. Few people have this health entirely and unalterably. Our freedom is weak and limited like all our other faculties: we can strengthen it as we become accustomed to reflecting and managing our passions; and this exercise of the soul makes it a little stronger.

(2021: 4)

The mechanism that du Châtelet adopts for accomplishing this is Locke's doctrine of suspension; she writes,

We have the faculty of suspending our desires and of examining that which seems best to us, so as to be able to choose it: this is one aspect of our freedom. The power to then act in

accordance with this choice makes this freedom full and whole. When we misuse this power to suspend our desires and determine ourselves too quickly, that is when so many mistakes are made.

(2021: 7)

The doctrine of suspension is an exercise of our freedom because it involves the power to think further on some option (rather than acting without reflection). When we reflect on our options, we can determine whether we would be acting in accordance with reason or acting from passion or prejudice. With practice, we can become accustomed to reflecting on our choices to determine whether we have sufficient reasons for doing as we will before we act.

According to du Châtelet, we are always free insofar as we have the active power to do what we will. However, it is also in our power, as intelligent beings, to make good use of this power by choosing to reflect more thoroughly on our reasons for acting.

5.10 Du Châtelet on Human Perfection

Du Châtelet's views on freedom and perfection have implications for her views on morality and happiness as she tells us that the "contemplation of perfection is the source of pleasure in intelligent beings" (2009: 143). However, it seems that it is the study of the natural world that brings us closer to perfection. As she notes,

The study of nature raises us to the knowledge of a supreme Being; this great truth is, if possible, even more necessary for good physics than for ethics, and it must be the foundation and the conclusion of all the research we make in this science.

(2009: 138)

It is by means of studying God's creation that we see the perfection in the world and understand the order of the universe and the interconnection between all things. The success of science in unveiling the workings of the world demonstrates the progress that human beings may achieve through the strengthening of their reasoning and understanding.

In studying nature, one discovers some part of the intentions and the art of the Creator in the construction of this universe. Thus Virgil was right to say *Felix qui potuit, rerum cognoscere causas*, since the knowledge of causes raises us to the level of the Creator and allows us to enter into the mystery of his designs by showing us the admirable order that prevails in the universe and the relationships of its different parts.

(2009: 144)

We are able to succeed in understanding our world because an all-good creator has made it regular, predictable, and intelligible. According to du Châtelet, God creates the world "where the greatest variety exists with the greatest order, and where the largest number of effects is produced by the simplest laws" (2009: 144). The establishment of order and intelligibility is evidence of God's goodness. This gives us reason to think that nature includes final causes and that all things are endowed with purpose. She writes,

The Creator has Intended, In The least of his works, purposes that he always achieves and that Nature unceasingly works to carry out. Thus, this universe is not in chaos, it is not a disordered mass without harmony and without connection, as some ranters would persuade us; but

all its parts are arranged with infinite wisdom, and none could be transplanted or removed without harming the perfection of the whole.

(2009: 144)

Of course, as was noted before, this does not mean that creatures can achieve complete perfection as God grants “to each thing in particular as much essential perfection as it could receive,” but no finite being can attain perfection without becoming God (2009: 146). However, du Châtelet does not think we should “renounce the faculties of man” for not being like God.

Man is a finite being, bounded and limited in all by his essence. How many evils happen to us because our understanding is limited, because we cannot know everything, understand everything, or be wherever our presence is necessary? But these are faculties

the creature could not have without becoming a God; thus, the imperfections in the creature, a succession of his limitations, are necessary imperfections.

(2009: 146)

As finite beings we are limited, and these limitations are the cause of errors and of evil in the world. So, while du Châtelet does not think that humans can achieve the perfection of God, she does hold that we can achieve the perfection of our kind. To do this, we must strive to improve our reason, understanding, and make the best use of our freedom. In doing so, we increase the overall perfection of the world.

5.11 Conclusion

For the three philosophers considered here, the fact that God creates by communicating his perfections into the world implies that creatures are meant to be as perfect as they are capable of being. This perfection might be achieved by developing certain virtues, strengthening our understanding and reason, or contemplating the order of the universe. God’s creation, in an imperfect imitation of the creator, strives to bring themselves closer to his perfect being through this moral, intellectual, and metaphysical development. Through this process, creatures play a role in the perfection of God’s creation.

Note

- 1 According to Conway, everything is spirit. That which we call ‘body’ is merely dark and dense spirit. I do not take Conway to be an idealist. Instead, I believe she posits a unique single spiritual substance that has all the properties usually associated with mind and body. See, Lascano 2013 and 2023.

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