Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange[1]

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the English reception of Locke's *Essay*, scholars have identified a little-known philosophical dispute between two seventeenth-century women writers: Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659-1708). On the basis of their brief but heated exchange, Astell and Masham are typically regarded as philosophical adversaries: Astell a disciple of the occasionalist John Norris, and Masham a devout Lockean. But in this paper, I argue that although there are many respects in which Astell and Masham are radically opposed, the two women also have a surprising amount in common. Rather than interpret their ideas solely in relation to the "canonical" philosophies of the time—Lockean empiricism and Malebranchean occasionalism—I examine the ways in which Astell and Masham are influenced by the metaphysical theories of the Cambridge Platonists, Ralph Cudworth and Henry More. On this basis, I argue that a remarkably similar theological approach underlies the metaphysical and feminist arguments of Astell and Masham.

I. Introduction

For historians of philosophy, the late-seventeenth century is renowned for its great philosophical antagonisms. During this time, no publication was greeted with greater criticism and controversy than John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690. More recently, against the backdrop of the English reception of Locke's *Essay*, scholars have identified a rare occurrence in the history of philosophy: a heated philosophical dispute between two women. In 1696 and 1705, Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659-1708) exchanged

[1] This paper was originally derived from chapters 4 and 5 of my book, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). I presented an earlier version of the paper at a symposium on "Women Philosophers in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association meeting in Seattle, 29 March 2002. I am extremely grateful to Sarah Hutton and Catherine Wilson for their comments on that occasion, and to the organizers of the symposium, Eileen O'Neill and Bill Uzgalis. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Australian Research Council: this paper was revised while I was a research associate for the ARC-funded Mindful Things project in the Philosophy Department at Monash University in 2002. In addition, I would like to thank Jeremy Aarons, Karen Green, Rae Langton, and audience members at a La Trobe University staff seminar in May 2001. Special thanks to James Buickerood for his many excellent suggestions and comments on several aspects of this paper.

opposing views about the love of God. Their exchange was far more anonymous than the famous Locke-Stillingfleet and Leibniz-Clarke debates—neither woman named the other in print, and it is only recently that commentators have started to examine their conflict in detail.[2] But the tone of the dispute was no less bitter or acerbic than its masculine counterparts. Astell, in particular, took great offence at Masham's remarks, despite the fact that the latter's insults were not explicitly directed at her.[3]

In her day, Mary Astell was highly acclaimed as the author of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), a popular feminist treatise calling for the higher education of women. She is now best known as one of the earliest feminists to employ Cartesian ideas in defense of female reasoning abilities.[4] But prior to her *Proposal,* from 1693 to 1694, Astell was engaged in a more conservative enterprise: a correspondence with the "English Malebranche", John Norris. In these letters, published as *Letters Concerning the Love of God* in 1695, Norris defends the thesis that one ought to love and desire God alone, and Astell gives her qualified assent to this view. Astell's anonymous part in the correspondence was highly praised by her English peers, and her letters also won the admiration of Leibniz.[5]

But in 1696 an anonymous work, titled *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God,* issued a scathing reply to the *Letters* and to Norris's

[2] On the Astell-Masham exchange, see Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton* (1657-1712) (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1979), 172-80, 237-38; Sarah Hutton, "Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1 (1993): 34-37; Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 73-82, 87-97; Patricia Springborg, "Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics," in Hilda L. Smith, ed., *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105-25; Patricia Springborg, "Introduction" to Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997), xiv-xix; and E. Derek Taylor, "Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Matter," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62:3 (2001): 505-22. For the earliest historical account, see George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain (who have been celebrated for their writings or skill in the learned languages, arts and sciences),* with an introduction by Ruth Perry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 332-8. On the similarities between Masham and Astell, see Margaret Atherton, "Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason," in Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt, eds., *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993).

[3] I am indebted to James G. Buickerood, "What Is It With Damaris, Lady Masham? The Historiography of One Early Modern Woman Philosopher" (forthcoming), for bringing this point to my attention.

[4] On Astell's feminist arguments, see my *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century,* chapters 4 and 5.

[5] C. I. Gerhardt, ed., *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (Berlin: Georg Olms Hildesheim, 1960), vol. III, 199.

Practical Discourses of 1693. The *Discourse* was written by Damaris Masham, a close friend of John Locke's,[6] and the daughter of the distinguished Cambridge Platonist, Ralph Cudworth. Norris had previously expressed an admiration for Masham's "extraordinary Genius".[7] In 1688, he dedicated his *Theory and Regulation of Love* to her, referring to the "Esteem, wherewith your Ladyship honour'd my former writings".[8] Then in 1689, in *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life*, Norris compliments Masham for being "so much a *Mistress*" of the works of Descartes and Malebranche.[9] Of his own philosophy, Norris says that "the more your *Ladyship considers*, the more you will be convinc'd both of the *Truth* of what I have *Discours'd*, and of the *Reasonableness* of what I *design*".[10] But by 1696, Masham had become more sympathetic to the empiricist views of Locke, a permanent resident in her home from 1691. Far from finding Norris's views "reasonable", in her *Discourse* Masham attacks Norris for espousing an impractical or "unserviceable" moral theory, rather than one based on common sense.[11] It is obvious, she says, that creatures are designed for a sociable life, and they can no more love and desire God alone than fishes can fly in the air.[12] Masham also targets Astell's part in the correspondence, dismissing her as a "young Writer,

[6] Masham met Locke in London in about 1681 and they began to write to one another shortly thereafter. The bulk of their correspondence is dated from 1683 to 1689, Locke's period of exile abroad. Upon his return, Locke lived with the Masham family at Oates from 1691 until his death in 1704. On Masham's indebtedness to Locke and the Cambridge Platonists, see Hutton, "Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham," 29-54.

[7] John Norris, *The Theory and Regulation of Love. A Moral Essay. In Two Parts. To which are added Letters Philosophical and Moral between the Author and Dr Henry More* (Oxford: Henry Clements, 1688), "The Epistle Dedicatory," n. pag.

[8] Norris, *Theory and Regulation*, "Epistle."

[9] John Norris, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life: With reference to the Study of Learning and Knowledge. In a Letter to the Excellent Lady, the Lady Masham* (London: S. Manship, 1690), 62.

[10] Norris, *Reflections*, 160.

[11] Commentators have speculated that there were also personal differences between Norris and Masham: in 1692, Norris was accused of breaking the wax seal on one of Locke's letters to Masham; and Masham apparently became offended when Norris failed to omit a mistaken reference to her "blindness" in the first edition of his *Reflections*. In a letter to Jean Le Clerc (18 June 1703), Masham says that her eyes are "not strong enough to hold out well for all the use I have, or would Willingly make of them: altho they never were in any either Apparant, or Invisible Likelihood, that I know of, of leaveing me in the Dark; as Mr Norris long ago perswaded many that they had done, by a Printed Letter to me to Console me for being Blind" (Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam [UvA], MS J.58[v]). For further details on relations between Locke, Norris, and Masham, see Charlotte Johnston, "Locke's *Examination of Malebranche* and John Norris," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958): 551-8.

[12] Damaris Masham, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1696), 82-83.

whose Judgment may, perhaps, be Byassed by the Affectation of Novelty".[13]

In their subsequent replies, both Astell and Norris mistake Masham's work for the work of Locke.[14] Their misattribution is understandable given that Masham's arguments are steeped in the empiricist philosophy of Locke's *Essay*.[15] Masham has been described as a "bluestocking admirer" of Locke,[16] someone who "sat loyally" at Locke's feet as a pupil,[17] and "a clear and ardent exponent" of Locke's ideas.[18] As a consequence of their brief exchange, Astell and Masham are typically regarded as philosophical adversaries: Astell a disciple of Norris, Masham a devout Lockean. Commenting on the differences between the two women, Ruth Perry says that "All of this was predictable: that Masham's position would be as sensible and down-to-earth as Astell's was abstract and idealist, that Masham would focus on life-on-earth while Astell stressed preparation for the hereafter. Like seconds in the duel between Locke's empiricism and Norris's idealism, their exchange is a fascinating reprise of that debate".[19] Patricia Springborg likewise observes that in this exchange "Astell proved to be the spiritual daughter of Ralph Cudworth and Masham the Platonist consort of Locke".[20]

There are, to be sure, many fundamental differences between Astell and Masham due to their respective allegiances to Norris and Locke. Astell was a fierce and persistent critic of Locke in all her subsequent writings; and Masham's *Discourse is* heavily indebted to Locke's *Essay*. Nevertheless, in this paper, I argue that Astell and Masham also have a surprising amount in common. The similarities are apparent, I believe, if we look at each writer independently of her so-called "mentor". In recent times, scholars have started to question the ways in which we incorporate

[13] Masham, *Discourse*, 78.

[14] Their replies can be found in John Norris, *Practical Discourses upon several Divine Subjects* Vol. IV (London: S. Manship, 1698); and Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England. In a Letter to the Right Honourable, T.L. C.I.* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705).

[15] Locke himself formulates objections to occasionalism following Norris's attack on his *Essay*, and there are similarities between Locke's criticisms and those of Masham. Locke's critiques of Norris can be found in the posthumously published *Examination of Malebranche* (1706) and "Remarks Upon some of Mr. Norris's Books," in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke* (1720).

[16] Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Letters of Advice to Young Spinsters," in *The Lady of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (Los Angeles: 1969), 14.

[17] Benjamin Rand, ed., *The Correspondence of John Locke and Edward Clarke* (1927; rpt., New York: Plainview, 1975), 14.

[18] Ada Wallas, *Before the Bluestockings* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1929), 95.

[19] Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 97.

[20] Springborg, "Introduction" to Astell, *Proposal*, xv.

women thinkers of the past into the philosophical canon.[21] One common method of inclusion is to show that women participated in the great intellectual debates of their time, and that they were perceptive critics of their famous male contemporaries. To some extent, this is a plausible approach: women such as Astell and Masham were not writing in an intellectual vacuum—they were well acquainted with the contemporary literature, and, for the most part, the only way they could engage in philosophy was through the guidance and mentorship of men. But it is also agreed that the "add women and stir" method is somewhat limited. First, with this approach there is the danger that women's philosophy will not be appraised in its proper historical context. Sarah Hutton has observed that if we interpret their ideas only in relation to dominant philosophical trends, then we may overlook the profound influence of lesser-known figures.[22] We might also ignore the importance of those areas that no longer conform to modern standards of philosophy, such as moral theology or natural philosophy. Scholars ought to be cautious, therefore, about assimilating the views of women thinkers to the "canonical" philosophies of their time. Second, there is the problem that if we interpret women's writings as that of "surrogate men" or "men in petticoats" (as Mary Astell remarked in 1705),[23] then we may lose sight of the subtle divergences in *women's* thought. Yet these divergences are often crucial for establishing a place for women in the history of philosophy: some of the most original and modern contributions from early women writers, for example, are their derivations of *feminist* ideas from the philosophies of their male contemporaries. To put it simply, it is now well established that these women were the interlocutors of influential male philosophers; it is time, one might argue, to appraise women's philosophy on its own terms, and to focus on lines of development in their writings, independently of the male-dominated traditions.

In the following discussion, I take a middle path. I begin by examining the differences between Mary Astell and Damaris Masham in light of their respective allegiances to John Norris and John Locke. But then I focus on a somewhat subtle, but no less significant, philosophical influence on their work: I emphasize that both women are indebted to the Cambridge-

[21] Here I am thinking of Sarah Hutton, "Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham," and "Like Father Like Daughter? The Moral Philosophy of Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham," presented at the South Eastern meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Atlanta, 28-30 December 1996; as well as Eileen O'Neill, "Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and their Fate in History," in Janet A. Kourany, ed., *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 39-43.

[22] Hutton, "Like Father Like Daughter?"

[23] Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter of The Church of England. In a Letter to the Right Honourable, T.L. C.I.* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705), 293.

Platonist tradition. The Cambridge Platonists were a group of philosopher-theologians associated with the University of Cambridge in the mid-seventeenth century.[24] Masham spent her formative years in the company of the Platonists at Christ's College, Cambridge; and her letters to Locke demonstrate a strong familiarity with the doctrines of her father, Ralph Cudworth, and his colleagues, Henry More and John Smith. Astell, on the other hand, was partly educated by her uncle Ralph, a former student of Emmanuel College in the heyday of Cambridge Platonism; and her early writings also demonstrate a sympathy for the views of Henry More. Although there is no univocal "Cambridge" position, the members of this group are united in their theological purpose: the Cambridge philosophers tend to accept or dismiss a philosophical viewpoint solely in order to affirm the existence of a providential God, the spiritual world, and immaterial souls. From this tradition, I argue, Masham and Astell each inherit a distinctive conception of God's relationship to the created world, and a critical stance toward occasionalism. Finally, I demonstrate that, unlike Locke and Norris, both Masham and Astell are champions of women's education, and they argue that women ought to improve their rationality to become useful members of society. In these respects, I maintain, they can be regarded as intellectual allies, rather than mere "seconds in the duel" between Norris's occasionalism and Lockean empiricism.

II. Background: The Astell-Masham exchange

The primary difference between Astell and Masham lies in their opinions about Norris's theory of love. Although Norris has been called a "Cambridge Platonist", this label is somewhat inappropriate given that he was first and foremost an Oxford-trained advocate of Nicolas Malebranche's philosophy.[25] The Malebranchean theory of causation, known as *occasionalism*, is an unorthodox blend of Cartesianism and Augustinian theology, according to which there is no genuine interaction between the soul and body. The Cambridge Platonists, on the other hand, claim that there is a "vital congruity" between the soul and body that enables the two substances to interact. Toward this end, they adapt the ancient Platonic doctrine of a "World Soul", the theory that an incorporeal

[24] The central figures in this group are Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), Henry More (1614-1687), John Smith (1618-1652), Nathanael Culverwell (*c.*1618-*c.*1651), and Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683).

[25] On Norris's philosophy, see Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris*; Charles McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 156-79; and Flora Isabel MacKinnon, *The Philosophy of John Norris* (Baltimore: Psychological Review Publications, 1910).

"spirit of nature" (or "plastic nature") pervades the material world. The Platonists and occasionalists also have significantly different conceptions of God's causal role in his creation: the occasionalists maintain that God plays a *direct* causal role in the created world, whereas the Cambridge Platonists hold that God acts *indirectly* through a spiritual intermediary. The Malebrancheans, moreover, believe that God ought to be the sole object of our desire, whereas the Platonists reject such an extreme position. Although Norris was initially supportive of the Cambridge-Platonist theories, from 1688 he was an avowed occasionalist. The *Practical Discourses* (1693 and 1698) and *Letters Concerning the Love of God* are clear expressions of Norris's break with Platonism. To call Astell "the spiritual daughter of Ralph Cudworth"[26] is therefore misleading: if Astell were a supporter of Norris's occasionalism, then this would *distance* her from Cudworth's theology and metaphysics.

Norris, like his mentor Malebranche, acknowledges that if matter consists only in extension, figure, and motion, then it is inconceivable how it could cause any effect in a thinking substance. Material things, Norris maintains, are completely without power or force, and all bodies are utterly disconnected from souls. Instead, there is a perfectly harmonious *correlation* between souls and bodies, orchestrated by God. Norris defends this view in an essay titled "A Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love, with the Natural and Moral Grounds upon which it stands", in the third volume of his *Practical Discourses* (1693).[27] It is a common belief, he says, that bodies have some inherent qualities that are analogous to our sensations. But there is no more reason to suppose that "there is such a Quality as Heat, resembling what you feel in Fire, then you have to conclude *Pain* to be in a *Needle*".[28] There is nothing conceivable in bodies but magnitude, figure, and motion, so they cannot possibly have any other essential qualities. This view is held by many seventeenth-century thinkers, including Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, and Locke. But these men are mistaken, Norris says, in supposing that material objects still have the power to cause our sensations in some way, because "the very same Reasons which prove that Bodies have not any Qualities in them like our Sensations, do also prove that they do neither produce Sensations in us".[29] If bodies are mere magnitude, figure, and motion, then they cannot produce "sentiments of the mind". This is because there is no proportion or affinity between the cause and the effect: a material thing cannot

[26] Springborg, "Introduction" to Astell, *Proposal*, xv.
[27] John Norris, *Practical Discourses Upon several Divine Subjects*, Vol. III (London: S. Manship, 1693), 1-83.
[28] Norris, *Practical Discourses*, III: 25.
[29] Norris, *Practical Discourses*, III: 32.

"produce an Effect more Noble and Excellent and of an Order so very much higher than it self".[30] Furthermore, he says, bodies affect each other through impact and resistance.[31] But the body cannot move the soul in the same way, since the soul is penetrable: "And therefore since Spirits make no resistance against Bodies, it is not possible that Bodies should have any Action, or make any Impression upon Spirits."[32]

Norris believes instead that we must look to forces outside of bodies to explain apparent causal relations between the body and soul. Only a being of infinite wisdom and power could produce all things by the immediate efficacy of will. Hence Norris claims that God must be the only causal agent, and the only efficient cause of all sensations is divine intervention. Material things, on the other hand, are merely the *occasions* for that intervention. When the sun shines in my eyes, it is God who gives me the sensations of heat and light. "'Tis not the most delicate Fruit, or the richest Perfume, that delights either our Tast or our Smell," he says, "but 'tis God alone that raises Pleasure in us by the Occasion of these Bodies."[33] Similarly, when I will my leg to kick, my volition is merely the occasion for God to intervene and make my leg move. Even if the material world did not exist, according to Norris, we could still have the sensations we currently have. God could, if he so pleased, raise in my soul the sensation of burning without the presence of fire.

Norris uses this theory of causation to argue that God must be the sole object of our love. He maintains that we love only that which brings us pleasure, and because God is the only truly causally efficacious being, only he can be the cause of our pleasure. Consequently, God alone is deserving of our love. No causally inefficacious being could be "a fit or reasonable object of love" if it never really causes our pleasure.

Mary Astell agrees with Norris that we ought to love and desire God alone.[34] But she believes that this claim holds up *whether or not*

[30] Norris, *Practical Discourses*, III: 28.

[31] Norris markedly differs from Malebranche on this point. Malebranche's occasionalism is just as much a theory about body-body relations as soul-body interaction (see Steven Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 4). For Norris, however, occasionalism applies *only* to soul-body relations, and not to body-body relations; one body can be the efficient cause of motion in another body through impact. On Norris's position, see John Norris, *An Essay Towards the Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World ... Part II* (London: S. Manship, 1704), 223-24, 231-33; Norris, *Practical Discourses*, III: 34-35; and McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 172, n. 52.

[32] Norris, *Practical Discourses*, III: 34.

[33] Norris, *Practical Discourses*, III: 55.

[34] More specifically, Astell agrees with Norris's claim that creatures deserve only a love of *benevolence*, a disinterested love motivated by altruism and charity. God, on the other hand, merits a love of *desire*. The creatures could never satisfy our desires, she says, so it is irrational to desire them as our good. An absolutely perfect being, on the other hand, could

occasionalism is true. Even if bodies were able to affect souls, she says, God would still be the only deserved object of our love, because all our good is brought about solely by his will. She points out that "If a bountiful Person gives me Money to provide my self Necessaries, my Gratitude surely is not due to the Money but to the kind Hand that bestowed it".[35]

By contrast, Damaris Masham rejects Norris's theory on the grounds that it opposes the "everyday experience" of human beings.[36] Following Locke, Masham denies that we have any innate moral principles; all our moral ideas are derived from either sensation or reflection on the mind's activities. Hence no human being is born with the notion that "we ought to love and desire God alone"; it is not a self-evident truth. Human beings must "know many other Truths before we come to know this; which is a Proposition containing many complex ideas in it"; and we are not capable of framing such propositions "till we have been long acquainted with pleasing Sensations".[37] To attain the idea of "love", for example, we must first experience the sensation of pleasure in our interactions with other creatures. We come to love our children or our friends, Masham says, because their being is a pleasure to us.[38] In this way, we learn that love is "that Disposition, or Act of the Mind, we find in our selves towards any thing we are pleas'd with".[39] So in Masham's view, we can love God only *after* we have loved other people: "if we lov'd not the Creatures, it is not conceiveable how we should love God."[40]

Masham is also critical of Astell's support for Norris's Malebranchean views. Masham says that

> how unserviceable or injurious soever it [i.e. Malebranche's theory] really is to Piety, it has yet been

want nothing that we could wish for him, so he does not need our charity; we can only desire him as our good. Masham, however, believes that creatures can be loved with *both* a love of desire *and* a love of benevolence.

[35] Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris: Wherein his late Discourse, shewing That it ought to be intire and exclusive of all other Loves, is further cleared and justified* (London: J. Norris, 1695), 282.

[36] Masham, *Discourse*, 29.

[37] Masham, *Discourse*, 66.

[38] Masham, *Discourse*, 18. Locke also claims that "the Being and Welfare of a Man's Children or Friends, producing constant Delight in him, he is said constantly to *love* them", in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), II.xx.5, 230.

[39] Masham, *Discourse*, 18. Here she echoes Locke's definition in the *Essay* that "our Ideas of Love and Hatred, are but the Dispositions of the Mind, in respect of Pleasure and Pain in general, however caused in us"; see Locke, *Essay*, II.xx.4-5, 230.

[40] Masham, *Discourse*, 62.

> Seriously and Zealously pretended to be of great Use to Religion; And that not only by a young Writer, whose Judgment may, perhaps, be thought Byassed by the Affectation of Novelty; But also it is made the very Ground of Christianity, by a Man of establish'd Character in the World of Philosophical Science.[41]

Here Mary Astell is undoubtedly "the young Writer" in question: in "The Preface" to the *Letters*, Norris refers to Astell as a "young Gentlewoman";[42] and it is extremely unlikely that Masham is referring to anyone else. From this, we can infer that Masham's attack on Norris's moral theory is also implicitly directed at Astell.

Nevertheless, in a forthcoming paper, James Buickerood points out that other supposed references to Astell in the *Discourse* are not so well founded.[43] In the "Preface" to the *Letters*, for example, Astell modestly describes her own writings as "crude Rapsodies".[44] Then in the *Discourse*, Masham's observes that "Pompous Rhapsodies of the Soul's debasing her self, when she descends to set the least part of her Affections upon any thing but her Creator ... are plainly but a complementing God with the contempt of his Works".[45] These "rhapsodies", according to Masham, are "only allowable as the unpremeditated Raptures of Devout Minds, and not the Productions of Philosophical Disquisition".[46] Commentators typically interpret these remarks as references to Astell's letters; and Astell herself takes the same view. But, as Buickerood observes, there is no compelling evidence that Masham's remarks were deliberately aimed at Astell: the only connection between the two writers is their shared use of the word "rhapsodies"—a perfectly common word at the time.

Commentators also suggest that Masham is critical of Astell's proposal for a female academy. In the first part of the *Proposal*, Astell says that she proposes to "erect a Monastery, or if you will (to avoid giving offence to the scrupulous and injudicious, by names which tho' innocent in themselves, have been abus'd by superstitious Practices,) we will call it a Religious Retirement". This "Retirement", Astell says, will offer women a "convenient and blissful recess from the noise and hurry of the world".[47]

[41] Masham, *Discourse*, 78.
[42] Astell and Norris, *Letters*, sig. A3^{r}.
[43] James G. Buickerood, "What Is It With Damaris, Lady Masham? The Historiography of One Early Modern Woman Philosopher," forthcoming.
[44] Astell and Norris, *Letters*, sig. b4^{v}.
[45] Masham, *Discourse*, 27.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, edited by Patricia Springborg, new edition (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997), 18.

In the *Discourse,* Masham says that Malebranche's enthusiasm "can End in nothing but Monasteries, and Hermitages; with all those Sottish and Wicked Superstitions which have accompanied them where-ever they have been in use".[48] She concedes that retirement is sometimes useful for "Those who live always in the hurry of the World",[49] but

> As for Monasteries, and Religious Houses, (as they are call'd) all who are acquainted with them, know that they are nothing less than what is pretended; And serve only to draw in Discontented, Devout People, with an imaginary Happiness. For there is constantly as much Pride, Malice, and Faction, within those Walls, as without them; And ... very often as much licentiousness.[50]

For Masham, it is more reasonable to assume that God created human beings to enjoy a sociable, rather than a monastic life. It is possible that Masham here regards Astell's *Proposal* as an expression of Malebranchean monasticism.[51] But there is no compelling evidence that Masham has Astell explicitly in mind in the above passages. As James Buickerood points out, Masham's comments are explicitly aimed at *Malebranche's* proposals for monasteries, not Astell's.[52] Hence Masham's "criticisms of Astell" in the *Discourse* may not be as extensive or as scathing as scholars have thought.

It is undeniable, however, that Masham's Lockean views on morality set her at odds with Astell. Like Locke, Masham believes that our idea of love originates with our sensations. On these grounds, Masham claims that we must love the creatures before we can love God, else we can have no idea of love. She dismisses Astell and Norris's claim that we must love

[48] Masham, *Discourse*, 120. Masham's comment is preceded by the claim that Norris's opinions are in danger of "introducing, especially amongst those whose Imaginations are stronger than their Reason, a Devout way of talking". Astell also felt herself implicated in this remark.

[49] Masham, *Discourse,* 125.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] There is evidence that Masham had a copy of the *Proposal* in her library when writing the *Discourse*. Locke's journal for 22 December 1694 reads:
To Oates,
Delivered to my Lady Masham
M^{rs} Astels Proposal to y^{e} Ladies
M^{r} Norris's letters.
(Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Locke MS f. 10, f. 251).

[52] Buickerood, "What Is It With Damaris, Lady Masham?"

and desire God alone, and she rejects a life devoted solely to contemplation.

In her response, *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell attacks Masham's Lockean definition of love, pointing out that this confounds "the notion of Love with the sentiment of Pleasure, by making Love to consist barely in the act of the Mind toward that which pleases".[53] But equating love with pleasure poses a problem for moral agency: since we cannot help being pleased with that which pleases, then this "love" "is no more in our power than the motion of our Pulse".[54] For this reason, Astell says, it is far better to define love as an intellectual endeavor of the soul toward good. She also takes up Masham's assertion that every human's experience confutes the view that no creature is a good to us. Astell says that she will allow this point "just so much and no more than they will allow me, That the daily sense and experience of Mankind disproves what a great Philosopher asserts when he tells us, That *Flame* is not *Hot and Light*, nor *Snow White and Cold*, nor *Manna White and Sweet*".[55] If all philosophical explanations must be answerable to common sense (as Masham suggests), then by the same light Locke's theory of secondary qualities is highly questionable. Overall, Astell apparently finds nothing in the *Discourse* to make her revise her opinions about the love of God and his creatures.

These are the views, then, that have led commentators to regard Astell and Masham as philosophical opponents. Their debate might not have been as extensive or as antagonistic as some scholars suggest, but the two women do occupy different moral positions. I now demonstrate, however, that in the early stages of their exchange, the two women agree in one key respect: they both oppose any theory that denies interaction between souls and bodies.

III. Astell's objections to Norris

Masham is simply wrong to regard Astell as the unquestioning disciple of Norris. Although Astell's early letters are not directed against Norris's occasionalism, there are lines of dissent throughout their correspondence. In her first letter, Astell expresses a difficulty she found when reading volume three of Norris's *Practical Discourses*.[56] She points out that if God is the only true cause of all our sensations, then he is also the only true cause of our *pain*. Yet we do not love that which causes us pain, and thus

[53] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 131-32.
[54] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 136.
[55] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 131.
[56] Although Astell does not name Norris's "A Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love", her comments indicate that she is referring to this essay in particular.

"if the Author of our Pleasure be upon that account the only Object of our Love, then by the same reason the Author of our Pain *can't* be the Object of our Love".[57] In other words, Norris's argument leads to the paradox that the cause of our sensations is both the object of our *love* and of our *aversion*. To avoid the inconsistency, Astell suggests that "that which Causes Pain does us Good as well as that which Causes Pleasure",[58] and that we ought to love God because he alone does us good, not merely because he is the author of our pleasure.

In his reply, Norris concedes that we must love God in spite of, not because he causes our pain, and that pain comes from God "only indirectly and by Accident".[59] But Astell dismisses this explanation, saying that "though Pain considered abstractedly is not a Good, yet it may be so circumstantiated, and always is when GOD inflicts it as to be a Good". We ought to love God because, in his infinite wisdom, he "designed Pain as well as Pleasure in order to our Happiness".[60] We must love him even though he inflicts pain, because he intends for painful sensations, like our pleasurable ones, to contribute to our overall good.

Here the basis of Astell's criticism of Norris is her conception of God. Like the Cambridge Platonists, Astell advocates an *intellectualist* theology according to which God's wisdom and benevolence are capable of overriding his omnipotence. An intellectualist, according to John Henry, maintains that God "had no choice but to create the world in accordance with the moral demands placed upon Him by His own goodness and in accordance with the essential relationships inherent in the nature of things". [61] While Norris's theory emphasizes God's *causal power*, Astell maintains that God's omnipotence is constrained by his *wisdom and goodness*. A supremely rational and perfectly benevolent being, she says, could only cause pain in order to bring about good. In the *Proposal*, she adheres to the same idea: "GOD being Infinitely Wise," she says, "all his Judgments must be Infallible, and being Infinitely Good he can will nothing but what is best, nor prescribe any thing that is not for our Advantage".[62] In *The Christian Religion*, she says that God always does what is "best and most becoming His Perfections, and cannot act but

[57] Astell to Norris, 21 September 1693; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 5.
[58] Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 6.
[59] Norris to Astell, 13 October 1693; *Letters*, 17.
[60] Astell to Norris, 31 October 1693; *Letters*, 33, 34.
[61] John Henry, "Henry More Versus Robert Boyle: The Spirit of Nature and the Nature of Providence," in Sarah Hutton, ed., *Henry More (1614-1687): Tercentenary Studies* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 62.
[62] Astell, *Proposal II*, 153.

according to the essential Nature and Reason of things".[63] There are no random or arbitrary features, such as pain, in God's universe.

Astell's notion of divine wisdom and goodness is responsible for her eventual rejection of Norris's occasionalist metaphysics. In her final letter, Astell attacks the central premise of Norris's philosophy: the view that God is the only efficient cause of our sensations. She objects "First, That this Theory renders a great Part of GOD's Workmanship Vain and Useless" and "secondly, That it does not well comport with his Majesty".[64] For the first, Astell argues that if external objects are not able to produce our sensations, then these objects cannot serve any relevant purpose. Yet, if this is so, then Norris's theory is contrary to the idea that an infinitely wise being creates nothing in vain: it would be unnecessary for God to give us the inclination to believe that material things cause our sensations when he himself causes them.

> That this Theory renders a great Part of *GOD's* Workmanship vain and useless, it may be thus argued. Allowing that Sensation is only in the Soul, that there is nothing in Body but Magnitude, Figure and Motion, and that being without Thought itself it is not able to produce it in us, and therefore those Sensations, whether Pleasure or Pain, which we feel at the Presence of Bodies, must be produced by some higher Cause than they; yet if the Objects of our Senses have no natural Efficiency towards the producing of those Sensations which we feel at their Presence, if they Serve no further than as positive and arbitrary Conditions to determine the Action of the true and proper Cause, if they have nothing in their own Nature to qualifie them to be instrumental to the Production of such and such Sensations, but that if *GOD* should so please (the Nature of the things notwithstanding) we might as well feel Cold at the presence of fire as of water, and heat at the Application of Water or any other Creature, and since *GOD* may as well excite Sensations in our Souls without these positive Conditions as with them, to what end do they serve? And then what becomes of that acknowledged Truth that *GOD* does nothing in vain, when such Variety of Objects

[63] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 95.

[64] Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 278. This letter and Norris's reply are included as "Two Letters by way of Review" in an appendix to the *Letters*.

> as our Senses are exercised about are wholly unnecessary?[65]

An infinitely wise being, Astell suggests, would not permit such superfluous features in his design. Norris's idea of a God who could make us feel cold at the presence of fire offends Astell's belief in a supremely rational deity.

Astell's second objection is that Norris's theory does not comport well with God's majesty. She implies that it would be beneath a perfect being to be constantly intervening in earthly events, when he could simply create an instrument to enact his will. Instead Astell asks

> Why therefore may there not be a *sensible Congruity* between those Powers of the Soul that are employed in Sensation, and those Objects which occasion it? Analogous to that vital Congruity which your Friend Dr. *More* (*Immortality of the Soul, B. II. Chap. 14. S. 8.*) will have to be between some certain Modifications of Matter, and the plastick Part of the Soul, which Notion he illustrates by that Pleasure which the preceptive Part of the Soul (as he calls it) is affected with by good Musick or delicious Viands, as I do this of *sensible* by his of *vital Congruity*, and methinks thay are so symbolical that if the one be admitted the other may. For as the Soul forsakes her Body when this vital Congruity fails, so when this sensible Congruity is wanting, as in the Case of Blindness, Deafness, or the Palsie, &c. the Soul has no Sensation of Colours, Sounds, Heat and the like, so that although Bodies make the same Impression that they used to do on her Body, yet whilst it is under this Indisposition, she has not that Sentiment of Pleasure or Pain which used to accompany that Impression, and therefore though there be no such thing as Sensation in Bodies, yet why may there not be a *Congruity* in them by their Presence to draw forth such

[65] Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 278-80. This objection anticipates John Locke in his "Remarks Upon some of Mr. Norris's Books, Wherein he asserts F. Malebranche's Opinion of Our Seeing all things in God", in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke*, 2nd ed. (London: R. Francklin, 1739). Locke's essay was written in 1693 and first published in 1720. He observes that "if the perception of colours and sounds depended on nothing but the presence of the object affording an *occasional cause* to God Almighty to exhibit to the mind, the Ideas of figures, colours and sounds; all that nice and curious structure of those organs is wholly in vain" (48).

> Sensations in the Soul? Especially since in the next place, it seems more agreeable to the Majesty of GOD, and that Order he has established in the World, to say that he produces our Sensations *mediately* by his Servant Nature, than to affirm that he does it *immediately* by his own Almighty Power.[66]

Astell implies that there is a natural efficacy in bodies to produce sensations in the soul. She accepts Norris's claim that sensory qualities do not reside in the material objects themselves. But against Norris, she suggests that there is something in the body, a "sensible congruity," that promotes its interaction with the soul and enables the body to cause sensations. In so far as material bodies are connected to, or have a correspondence with, certain plastical powers in the soul, they do "really better our condition", they do "contribute to our happiness or Misery", and they do "in some sense produce our Pleasure or Pain".[67] God's "servant nature", according to Astell, acts as a causal agent in the natural world, making material things "necessary Instruments", rather than mere "occasions".[68]

Astell's theory of a sensible congruity between "certain Modifications of Matter, and the plastick Part of the Soul" owes its origins to the Cambridge-Platonist doctrine of "plastic nature" or "the spirit of nature". The Cambridge school, namely More and Cudworth, were devoted to stemming the rise of "Hobbist atheism" by using a blend of Cartesian and Platonist principles to affirm the reality of the immaterial world. The Cambridge men, like Astell, believe that "it seems not so agreeable to Reason ... that Nature as a Distinct thing from the Deity should be quite Superceded or made to Signifie Nothing, God himself doing all things Immediately".[69] Instead, they strike a balance between mechanistic and occasionalist-style philosophies. They argue that there is a spiritual intermediary between spirit and matter, giving material things life and activity, when they would otherwise be dead and passive. In *The*

[66] Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; in Astell and Norris, *Letters,* 280-82.
[67] *Letters*, 284.
[68] Norris objects by saying that "even Instruments belong to the Order of efficient Causes, though they are less principal ones, and 'tis most certain that GOD has no need of any, since his Will is efficacious itself" (Norris to Astell, 21 September 1694; *Letters*, 306-307). This counterobjection is not very strong, because one might still ask: if God has no need of material objects, and "his Will is efficacious itself", then why do such objects even exist?
[69] Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part; Wherein, All the Reason and Philosophy Of Atheism is Confuted; And Its Impossibility Demonstrated,* facsimile reprint of 1678 edition (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1964), 150.

Immortality of the Soul (1659), Henry More calls this intermediary the "spirit of nature",

> A substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising a plastical power therein according to the sundry predispositions and occasions in the parts it works upon, raising such *Phaenomena* in the World, by directing the parts of the Matter and their Motion, as cannot be resolved into mere Mechanical powers.[70]

More claims that the union between soul and body cannot be explained in mechanical terms, but only in terms of a "vital congruity" between the plastic part of the soul and the body.[71]

In her challenge to Norris, Astell refers to a passage in *The Immortality of the Soul* where More claims that this congruity is "chiefly in the *Soul* it self", but that it can also be in matter. More says that

> it is termed *Vital* because it makes the *Matter* a *congruous* Subject for the Soul to reside in, and exercise the functions of life. For that which has no *life* it self, may tie to it that which has. As some men are said to be tied by the teeth, or tied by the ear, when they are detained by the pleasure they are struck with from good Musick or delicious Viands.... Now as we see that the *Perceptive* part of the Soul is thus vitally affected with that which has no life in it, so it is reasonable that the *Plastick* part thereof may be so too; That there may be an Harmony betwixt Matter thus and thus modified, and that Power that we call *Plastick*, that is utterly devoid of all Perception. And in this alone consists that which we call *Vital Congruity* in the prepared Matter, either to be organized, or already shaped into the perfect form of an Animal.[72]

[70] Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul; So farre forth as it is demonstrable from the Knowledge of Nature and the Light of Reason,* facsimile reprint of 1659 edition (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 450.

[71] Mary Astell was not the only woman philosopher to take an interest in More's theory. On Anne Conway's treatment of vital congruity, see Sarah Hutton "Anne Conway Critique d'Henry More: L'Esprit et la Matiere," *Archives de Philosophie* 58 (1995): 371-84.

[72] More, *Immortality of the Soul*, 263-64.

In the same chapter, More calls the spirit of nature the "*Inferiour Soul of the World*",[73] and says that matter enjoys a vital congruity with this part of the soul. Likewise, in an earlier letter to Norris (31 October 1693), Astell explains her theory of sensation with reference to the "inferior" and "superior" parts of the soul.[74] The inferior part, she says, corresponds to sensible objects, it feels sensations of pain, colour, and so on; whereas the superior or intellectual part, comprised of the understanding and will, is capable of knowing abstract truths.[75]

In sum, there are significant differences between Astell's metaphysical views and those of Norris in the *Letters*. Astell advocates a theory of causation that reaffirms the body's interaction with the soul. She believes that material beings are capable of a sympathetic relationship with the soul and are necessary, not arbitrary features of the created world. In these respects, Astell has a closer affinity with the Cambridge Platonists, rather than Norris.[76] There are, moreover, strong similarities between Astell's objections to occasionalism and those of Damaris Masham.

IV. Masham's objections to Norris and Leibniz

First, Masham arrives independently at Astell's own objection that Norris's theory "renders a great Part of GOD's Workmanship Vain and

[73] More, *Immortality of the Soul*, 266.

[74] Although Astell borrows this notion from Norris's *Christian Blessedness*, she takes the distinction more literally than he intended. In a letter dated 13 November 1693, Norris claims that he cannot form a "clear Idea of any such Parts", and he only meant for the distinction to be a figure of speech (*Letters,* 60).

[75] Astell to Norris, 31 October 1693; *Letters*, 37.

[76] In his recent article, "Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke," E. Derek Taylor reminds us that Astell does not completely abandon occasionalism in her later work. Taylor observes that in one section of the *Christian Religion,* Astell refers to God as "the true Efficient Cause of all our Good, of all our pleasing sensations" (*Christian Religion,* 141). Then in another passage, Astell appeals to "the efficacy of the Divine Will" to explain relations between the mind and body (*Christian Religion,* 337). Taylor also suggests that Astell echoes the terminology of Norris's response to her final objections in the *Letters*. According to Taylor, Astell's reference to "the Powers of GOD giving you divers modifications" (*Christian Religion,* 141) is a clear reference to Norris's claim that only God has the power to give our spirits "new Modifications" (*Letters*, 289). It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Astell was probably persuaded by Norris's rejoinder.

I do not deny that Astell appears to recant her objections to Norris in the *Christian Religion*. My claims in this paper primarily relate to Astell's views in the *Letters* and the *Proposal*, Parts I and II. But I do think that Astell harbors *some* ambivalence to Norris's ideas in that later work. In one passage in the *Christian Religion*, she says "neither do I comprehend the Vital Union between my Soul and Body, nor how and in what manner they are joyn'd, tho' I am sure that it is so" (*Christian Religion,* 51). We must not forget, moreover, that Astell herself introduces the terminology of "modifications" in the "Two Letters by way of Review" (*Letters,* 280), and so it is not obvious that she is deliberately echoing Norris's letter in the aforementioned passage.

Useless".[77] In the *Discourse*, Masham argues that if material beings are causally inefficacious, and if it is God himself who represents the idea of material things to our souls, then our sensory organs must be completely superfluous. Masham accuses Norris of detracting "from the Wisdom of God, in framing his Creatures like the Idols of the Heathen, that have Eyes, and see not; Ears, and hear not, &c."[78] If we believe that creatures are the occasional, rather than the efficient causes of our sensations, then

> the Wisdom of God cannot herein be equally admired, because it is not equally conspicuous. For if God immediately exhibits to me all my Idea's, and that I do not truly see with my Eyes, and hear with my Ears; then all that Wonderful Exactness and curious Workmanship, in framing the Organs of Sense, seems superfluous and vain; Which is no small reflection upon infinite Wisdom.[79]

This is also the foundation of Masham's objection to Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony, as presented in his "New System" of 1695. On the question of soul-body interaction, Leibniz says that he can find no intelligible way of explaining how the body transmits or communicates anything to the soul, or vice versa. Instead he claims that there is a "perfect agreement" or an "adaptation of the soul to the body". He believes that God created the soul so that everything must arise in it from its own inner nature, with a perfect conformity to the things outside it. The soul and the body follow their own separate laws, without corporeal laws being affected by the soul and "without bodies finding windows through which to exert their influence over souls".[80]

Masham engaged in a correspondence with Leibniz from early 1704 until 1705. In one letter to Leibniz, Masham comments on his theory of concomitance, saying that

> such an inference as this from our Ignorance, I remember Father Malbranche (or some other assertor of

[77] Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 278. Here I am being charitable to Masham by assuming that she lighted upon this objection herself: she may have been influenced by Astell's criticisms in the "Appendix" and simply not acknowledged the debt.

[78] Masham, *Discourse*, 29-31.

[79] Masham, *Discourse*, 31-32.

[80] Leibniz to Masham, May 1704; in *Leibniz's New System and Associated Contemporary Texts*, trans. and ed. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 206.

> his Hypothesis) would make in behalf of Occasional Causes: to which Hypothesis, amongst other exceptions, I think there is one, which I cannot (without your help) see, but that yours is alike Liable to and that is from the Organization of the Body; wherin all that Nice Curiositie that is discoverable seeming useless; becomes Superfluous, and Lost labour.[81]

By "some other assertor", Masham obviously meant John Norris. She rejects Leibniz's system of pre-established harmony for the same reason she rejects Norris's occasionalism: it makes sensory organs and other material bodies superfluous and redundant.

There is evidence that Masham's criticisms of occasionalism and pre-established harmony are influenced by her father's theological principles. One of Cudworth's main theses in *The True Intellectual System* is that God presides over everything. Cudworth opposes those mechanical theories that render God an "idle Spectator" in his creation, thus making "his Wisdom altogether Useless and Insignificant, as being a thing wholly Inclosed and shut up within his own breast, and not at all acting abroad upon any thing without him".[82] But he also challenges the view that God does everything "Immediately and Miraculously".[83] The theory of plastic nature is essential to Cudworth's system, because it strikes a medium: it is "a living Stamp or Signature of Divine Wisdom" in the created world, and yet it does not require God to exert a "sollicitous Care or Distractious Providence".[84]

In another letter to Leibniz, Masham defends Cudworth's theory of plastic nature. From 1703 to 1706, Jean Le Clerc published selections from *The True Intellectual System* in his new journal, *Bibliothèque Choisie*.[85] Cudworth's views were greeted with controversy. As each issue of the periodical appeared, the French scholar Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) published his own highly critical response to Cudworth's philosophy.[86]

[81] Masham to Leibniz, 3 June 1704; in *Leibniz's New System*, 209.
[82] Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, 148.
[83] Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, 150.
[84] Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, 150, 155.
[85] For further details see Rosalie Colie, *Light and the Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 117-44, and Susan Rosa, "Ralph Cudworth and the *République des Lettres*: The Controversy about Plastick Nature and the Reputation of Pierre Bayle," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 23 (1994): 147-60.
[86] These rejoinders were published in Henri Basnage de Beauval's *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savants* and in Bayle's *Continuations des pensées diverses sur la comète*.

Plastic nature or "plastic powers" are the executors of God's grand design, his causal instruments in the natural world. These incorporeal spirits have the formative power to determine the organization, growth, vitality, and movement of living things. But while plastical powers within the universe act like minds in that they are purposeful, they are also unconscious and nondeliberative in their activities.[87] Against this view, Bayle claims that Cudworth's theory of an insensible plastic nature implies that matter might conceivably exist and act by itself, independently of God.[88] Bayle suggests that the doctrine is atheistic in tendency, because it makes it unnecessary to suppose that wherever purpose is exhibited, God must be at work; in short, it appears to make God superfluous.

Masham defends her father's theory in a letter to Leibniz, dated 20 October 1705. Masham criticizes Bayle for saying that God cannot make an unconscious agent act for wise ends unless God himself is giving perpetual direction to material causes (i.e., unless occasionalism is true). Masham says

> my Fathers Hypothesis is methinks sufficiently secur'd from *the Retorsion of Atheists*, without being *in the same case* with any one which makes God the immediate Efficient Cause of all the Effects of Nature. Since my Father dos not therein assert (as M^r^ Bayle says he dos) That *God has been able to give to Creatures a Facultie of Produceing Excellent Works (viz such as is the Organization of Plants and Animals) seperate from all Knowledge* &c.: but onely a Facultie of Executeing instrumentally his Ideas or Designs, in the Production of such *Excellent Works*: so that (*according to him*) *there is* (differently from what M^r^ Bayle asserts of his Hypothesis) *an inseparable union betwixt the Power of Produceing Excellent Works, and the Idea of theire Essence, and manner of Produceing them*: and it seems to me that there can be no pretence to the *Retorsion of Atheists* unless it were asserted, That God had been able to give to Creatures a Facultie of Produceing *excellent works*; the Ideas whereof never were in any

[87] Masham says that plastic natures can be likened to "habits" in humans, such as "those of singing and danceing: which shall oftentimes direct the motions of body, or voice without any consideration of what the next note, or motion should be" (Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in Gerhardt, ed., *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. III, 372). Here she echoes Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, 157.

[88] Colie, *Light and the Enlightenment*, 138.

> understanding: But my Father is so far from asserting any such thing as this, that he holds the Operations of the Plastick Nature to be *essentially and necessarilie Dependent* on the ideas in the Divine Intellect.[89]

In short, God gives creatures a faculty of executing his "ideas" instrumentally. These ideas or essences must have existed prior to the existence of the creatures, and, moreover, they must have existed in a mind. From this we can conclude that plastic nature is essentially and necessarily dependent on the ideas in the divine mind: the plastical powers could never be autonomous.[90] Matter does not have the power to act independently of God; it has "onely a Pow'r to Execute the Ideas of a Perfect Mind; if there were no *Mind* in the universe; this Pow'r in the Matter must Lye for ever Dormant and unproductive, of any such Excellent Work as is spoken of".[91]

From Masham's remarks, it is unclear whether or not she holds Cudworth's theory as her own. Nevertheless, her argument does depend upon a presupposition that underlies her earlier objections to Norris and Leibniz. In her defence of Cudworth's doctrine of plastic nature, Masham once again makes the divine mind or *divine wisdom* a fundamental premise in her argument.[92] Like Astell, Masham's aim is to promote the wisdom of God against the imputations of occasionalism, and to affirm the harmony and order he has established in the world.[93] In defending her father's theory of plastic nature, Masham emphasizes the connections, relations, and interactions between matter and spirit. Material things, she suggests, could never be radically separate or detached from spirits and God.

Finally, Masham also shares Astell's belief that Norris's theory does not comport well with God's majesty. Astell implies that it would be beneath a perfect being to be constantly intervening in earthly events, as Norris believes he does. Similarly, Masham says that it is "unworthy of, and mis-becoming the Majesty of the great God, who is of Purer Eyes than to behold iniquity, to be as it were at the beck of his sinful Creatures,

[89] Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in Gerhardt, ed., *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. III, 370-71.

[90] Cudworth writes that "if there had been no *Perfect Mind* or *Intellect* in the World, there could no more have been any *Plastick Nature* in it, then there could be *an Image in the Glass* without a *Face*" (*True Intellectual System*, 172).

[91] Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in Gerhardt, ed., *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. III, 371.

[92] For this point, I am indebted to Hutton's "Like Father Like Daughter?"

[93] In *Occasional Thoughts*, Masham's intellectualism is more explicit. She says that the divine will is "one steady, uniform, unchangeable result of infinite Wisdom and Benevolence, extending to and including All his Works" (69).

to excite in them Sentiments of Delight and Pleasure, whenever they are dispos'd to transgress against his Laws".[94] Masham rejects Norris's theory because it forces God to be "a partner in our wickedness".[95] On Norris's view, every act that carries our desires toward the creature is sinful, or "a kind of Spiritual Adultery".[96] An unacceptable consequence of this theory is that God *intended* human beings to have such sinful desires.

In sum, if Masham had paid closer attention to Astell's early writings, she would have detected many affinities with her own. In Norris's occasionalist philosophy, bodies are incapable of affecting the soul. Both Masham and Astell, however, object to any view of matter that suggests that a supremely rational God has rendered it causally ineffective or purposeless. They are both, moreover, motivated by an intellectualist aim: to promote the goodness and wisdom of God against the imputations of occasionalism, and to affirm the rational order that he has established in the world. These same theological principles are employed in Astell and Masham's feminist arguments for women's education.

V. Their feminist views

In seventeenth-century England, the "intellectual deficiency" and "innate irrationality" of women were cited as reasons for their exclusion from universities. A woman's worth was defined primarily in terms of her body or her physical being. In the *Proposal*, Astell is principally concerned with opposing the stereotypical view that women are mere material objects, or beings possessed of a limited intellect. She calls on women to consider the welfare of their "true selves", their *minds*, and rails against the "unthinking mechanical way of living, when like Machins we are condemn'd every day to repeat the impertinencies of the day before".[97] She encourages her female readers to break with tradition and history, and to rely on their own introspective capacities to acquire knowledge. In other words, Astell's objective in the *Proposal* is the same as that of the *Letters*: to reaffirm the worth of a part of God's creation that has been rendered purposeless, by reaffirming its connection with the spiritual-intellectual realm. The same principle that leads Astell to reject an utter separation between spirit and matter—the idea that *God creates nothing in vain*—also leads her to reject the view that women are not fully rational. In the second part of the *Proposal*, Astell says that "GOD does nothing in vain, he gives no Power or Faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to Mankind a Rational

[94] Masham, *Discourse*, 102.
[95] *Ibid.*
[96] Masham, *Discourse*, 115.
[97] Astell, *Proposal I*, 32.

Mind, every individual Understanding ought to be employ'd in somewhat worthy of it".[98] The author of our being would not allow any superfluities in his supremely intelligent design; thus, "If GOD had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason, He wou'd not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain".[99] She warns that when a woman is taught that her duty is to serve men, or to live a life devoted solely to the body, she is taught to disregard her obligations to God. Instead Astell stresses that women must be educated so that their rationality is exercised toward higher virtues, and not neglected as vain and useless. "For unless we have very strange Notions of the Divine Wisdom," she says, we must admit that "Our Powers and Faculties were not given us for nothing".[100] Even when propounding Cartesian method in the second *Proposal*, Astell's examples of self-evident principles are a significant indication of these beliefs. "If it be farther demanded what these Principles are?" she says, "no body I suppose will deny us one, which is, *That we ought as much as we can to endeavour the Perfecting of our Beings, and that we be as happy as possibly we may.*"[101] She emphasizes that women must use their rational faculties to move closer toward perfection and God, "the Supream and Universal Reason":[102]

> For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs? Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of one, as well as from the enjoyment of the other?[103]

"A desire to advance and perfect its Being," she says, "is planted by GOD in all Rational Natures, to excite them hereby to every worthy and becoming Action."[104] A supremely rational God would not have given

[98] Astell, *Proposal I*, 118-19.
[99] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 6.
[100] Astell, *Proposal II*, 149.
[101] Astell, *Proposal II*, 82-3.
[102] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 13.
[103] Astell, *Proposal I*, 22.
[104] Astell, *Proposal I*, 12.

women this desire unless he required them to act on it. Therefore women must be educated to use their reason to raise themselves toward perfection.

Masham premises her feminist arguments on similar presuppositions. Masham's only published feminist work, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life*, was first written in about 1703, and was revised and corrected for publication after Locke's death. Ruth Perry believes that Masham partly rewrote the work in response to some of Astell's points in *The Christian Religion*.[105] But Perry's reasons for saying this are unclear. There is actually more evidence that Masham was *positively* inspired by the second part of Astell's *Proposal* (1697). In this work, Astell claims that women will find knowledge useful, not just for their souls, but for the management of their families and relations with their neighbors. The education of children, Astell says, should "be laid by the Mother, for Fathers find other business, they will not be confin'd to such a laborious work, they have not such opportunities of observing a Childs Temper, nor are the greatest part of 'em like to do much good, since Precepts contradicted by Example seldom prove Effectual".[106] The idea that the improvement of women's reason will benefit the education of children is taken up by Masham in the latter half of *Occasional Thoughts*. The foundation of Masham's feminism, like Astell's, is the belief that a supremely wise and benevolent God would not have endowed women with reason, if he did not intend for them to exercise their rational faculties toward perfection. Masham points out that

> no one is Born into the World to live idly; enjoying the Fruit and Benefit of other Peoples Labours, without contributing reciprocally some way or other, to the good of the Community answerably to that Station wherein God ... has plac'd them; who has evidently intended Humane kind of Society and mutual Communion, as Members of the same Body, useful every one each to other in their respective places.[107]

Women, she says, must be educated for the sake of order and harmony in society; because mothers, after all, are the early educators of men, and if mothers are not educated, then the education of men will suffer too.

These views bear a notable resemblance to Plato's claims about the education of women in Book V of *The Republic*. Plato argues that women must be educated so that they might become the best they can possibly be.

[105] Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 96.
[106] Astell, *Proposal II*, 149-50.
[107] Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, 179-80.

The natures of men and women, he says, do not differ in any crucial respects when it comes to the capacity to learn; men and women, therefore, must have a common education. Plato justifies this view with appeal to the State. To attain the highest good for the State, female citizens must be permitted to attain the highest good suitable to their natures. In this way, the State—like "a body and all its members"—will achieve harmony, unity, and concord. But Masham takes these Platonist ideas further when she argues that a woman's education is also for the *individual's* benefit.[108] Masham says that it is essential that women be educated for the sake of their own spiritual welfare. She emphasizes that "Women have Souls to be sav'd as well as Men".[109] They are endowed by God with rational abilities which enable them to understand the principles behind their religious beliefs. But, she says, "be Nature ever so kind to them in this respect, yet through want of cultivating the Tallents she bestows upon those of the Female Sex, her Bounty is usually lost upon them; and Girls, betwixt silly Fathers and ignorant Mothers, are generally so brought up, that traditionary Opinions are to them, all their lives long, instead of Reason".[110] Women must be taught that "their Duty is not grounded upon the uncertain and variable Opinion of Men, but the unchangeable nature of things".[111] Masham believes that "chastity" in particular is an overrated virtue because it gives the impression that a woman's moral duty consists in regulating her body alone. As part of the educational process, she says, women must be taught to value and cherish their minds as well as their bodies.

VI. Concluding remarks

At the end of the seventeenth century, Mary Astell and Damaris Masham were engaged in a dispute about the love of God. Masham attacks Norris and Astell's theory that God alone ought to be sole object of our love. She dismisses their moral views on Lockean grounds as an affront to common sense. Several years later, Astell responds to Masham in equally hostile terms, and criticizes Masham's definition of love as consisting in nothing but the bare sentiment of pleasure. As a consequence of their brief exchange, commentators have regarded these women as opponents, or "seconds in the duel" between Norris's occasionalism and Locke's empiricism. But this common interpretation obscures significant similarities between the two women. If one looks beyond the canonical

[108] On the limitations of Plato's feminism, see Julia Annas, "Plato's *Republic* and Feminism," *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 307-21.
[109] Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, 166.
[110] Masham, *Occasional Thoughts* 162-63.
[111] Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, 17.

philosophers of the time, and to the influence of Cambridge Platonism, it is possible to detect a common theological outlook in the works of Astell and Masham. This theology brings the two writers closer together in terms of their metaphysics and their feminism. In Norris's occasionalist philosophy, matter is causally impotent and incapable of affecting the mind. Astell and Masham, however, object to any view of matter that suggests that a supremely rational God has rendered it causally ineffective or purposeless. Their objections to Norris depend upon a teleological presupposition: that God has designed a harmonious order, where each part is suited to its end, and where there is no waste or "lost labour". In his infinite wisdom, according to Astell and Masham, God would not have created material things if they did not serve some purpose. Likewise, a supremely wise being would not have endowed *women* with a rational faculty, if he had not wished them to use it. In both cases, the writers regard created things as purposeful and there for the sake of some greater goal. Their theological beliefs lead to a re-establishing of connections between the material and intellectual worlds: to be purposeful, material things must have a sympathetic interaction with the intellectual realm; and, similarly, *women* must be more than mere bodies to fulfill their divine purpose. In these respects, at least, it is possible to regard Astell and Masham as allies, rather than adversaries.