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LOCKE AND DAMARIS CUDWORTH MASHAM

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Abstract

In the last decade of his life, John Locke lived with Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659-1708) and her extended family in the English countryside of Essex. Masham was herself a philosopher and spent her early years among the Cambridge Platonists, a group of religious thinkers based at the University of Cambridge in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1682, shortly after they first met, Locke and Masham engaged in a correspondence concerning the Cambridge Platonist John Smith’s *Select Discourses*. Though this exchange is incomplete (only two of Locke’s letters survive and five of Masham’s), it is clear that Locke and Masham had a difference of opinion about whether or not Smith was an ‘enthusiast,’ someone who claims knowledge of direct divine inspiration without any grounding in reason. Locke maintains that Smith is an enthusiast, while Masham denies it. At the end of their exchange, however, Masham suggests that the two friends had reached a point of agreement. In the absence of Locke’s letters, this raises the question: on what grounds did they come to agree? This chapter demonstrates that an answer can be found if we examine Locke and Masham’s letters together with Locke’s chapter ‘Of Enthusiasm’ in the fourth and final edition of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

The philosopher Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659–1708) was one of John Locke’s closest friends and constant companions in the final years of his life. In her lifetime, she published two anonymous moral-theological treatises, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696) and *Occasional Thoughts In Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705); she also corresponded with the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1704–5). Locke once praised Masham as ‘a remarkably gifted woman’ who was ‘capable of discussing with such insight the most abstruse subjects ... and of resolving the difficulties they present’ (*Correspondence*, 1976–, IV: 1375). They seem to have first met in 1679, when Locke was

forty-seven and Masham only twenty years old.¹ Shortly afterwards, they began a lengthy correspondence, the bulk of which was conducted from 1682 to 1688, a period spanning Locke's exile in Holland (1683–9), as well as Masham's marriage to the widower Sir Francis Masham in 1685, and the birth of her only child, Francis Cudworth Masham, in 1686. Upon Locke's return from exile, he made several trial visits to the Mashams' manor house of Oates in High Laver, Essex, before settling there permanently from 1691 till his death in 1704. During this time, Locke completed a number of new works as well as several revisions to editions of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

In this chapter, my focus will be on Locke and Masham's early epistolary exchange between February and May 1682. In these letters—two by Locke (extant in draft form only) and five by Masham—the friends engage in an amicable dispute about the second edition of John Smith's *Select Discourses* (1673), a posthumous collection of religious essays. In the mid-seventeenth century, Smith was a fellow of Queens' College at the University of Cambridge and one of the earliest Cambridge Platonists, a group of thinkers characterised by their commitment to rational religion. Though Masham never knew Smith personally, she spent most of her early life among the Platonist philosopher-theologians at Cambridge, where her father Ralph Cudworth was Master of Christ's College from 1654 to 1688. In a letter dated 16 February 1682, Masham asks Locke for his opinion about Smith's first discourse on divine knowledge, saying 'I would gladly know your thoughts but you must remember to tell me them truly, and to let me know what those things are that you dislike in it' (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 684). Locke's response, however, comes as a surprise, for he affirms that Smith is an 'enthusiast,' someone who is firmly persuaded of religious truths on the grounds that they have been 'wrought in the minde extraordinarily by god him self,' without any foundation in reason (696). In his *Discourses*, Smith explicitly warns against the

excesses of enthusiasm, which he regards as religious revelation based on fancy and imagination rather than reason (1673: 186). In her reply to Locke, Masham denies that Smith is an enthusiast (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 699).

Scholars maintain that these letters provide some insight into Locke's new chapter 'Of Enthusiasm' in the 1700 fourth edition of his *Essay* (4.19.1–16). Nicholas Jolley has claimed that this additional chapter serves an important function in the larger project of the *Essay*: it enables Locke to complete his critique of those religious thinkers who affirm that God gives us direct assistance in the acquisition of truth (2003: 180). Amidst growing cries of heresy against his work, this chapter serves to distance Locke's ideas from those of the Protestant dissenters, while also providing a counterpoise to his earlier critique of Roman Catholicism. More recently, Philippe Hamou (2008) has suggested that Locke's 21 February 1682 letter to Masham sheds further light on the strategic purpose behind this chapter. Building on Jolley's account, Hamou claims that this letter reveals that Locke was a long-standing critic of enthusiasm because of the link between it and a Platonist conception of 'disincarnated' or disembodied knowledge (2008: 333). According to Hamou, in this context the chapter 'Of Enthusiasm' has the further strategic purpose of promoting Locke's conception of human knowledge as founded on corporeal conditions alone. Also in keeping with Jolley's analysis, Peter Anstey has revisited Locke's letters to Masham in light of the chapter 'Of Enthusiasm,' to show that Locke's critique of enthusiasm might be linked to a long-standing opposition to the Quaker doctrine of immediate inspiration (2018: 6–7). While Locke does not explicitly target the Quakers in these letters, he does restrict his definition of enthusiasm to propositions about religion alone.

These commentators have demonstrated how Locke's letters to Masham might be pertinent to

our understanding of *Essay* 4.19. But by and large they have approached his letters as self-contained discourses or statements of Locke's firmly-held views about enthusiasm rather than part of a give-and-take exchange of ideas with a respected interlocutor. Hamou concentrates primarily on Locke's letter of 21 February 1682, and Anstey repeatedly refers to Locke's other letter as a journal entry rather than part of a correspondence (2018: 6–7). There has been little acknowledgement that Locke might have changed his mind or modified his views in light of Masham's remarks. Curiously, however, on 6 May 1682 Masham ends their quarrel by stating that 'therefore since wee are so far agreed I think it will be best to end that Dispute' (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 704). This raises the question: on what grounds did Locke and Masham agree? In the absence of a complete correspondence, any answer can only be speculative. But a plausible source of agreement can be found, I maintain, if we examine both Locke and Masham's letters together with section 16 of Locke's chapter 'Of Enthusiasm.' Viewed as a whole, this material suggests that Locke might have responded to Masham's arguments with a caveat to his views on enthusiasm.

The quarrel

The dispute between Locke and Masham chiefly concerns the third section of the first discourse of Smith's work, 'Of the True Way or Method of attaining to Divine Knowledge.' In this section, Smith divides human beings into four 'ranks of men' according to their methods of acquiring divine knowledge and their capacity for moral goodness. The first kind of man fails to attain both divine knowledge and moral perfection because he cannot unravel his senses and his reason; he is made up of equal parts soul and body. The second kind of man considers himself to be more soul than body and follows his reason rather than his senses. But he, too, falls short of knowledge and perfection because he cultivates 'human virtue' in the moral and political domain rather than 'divine virtue' through participation in

the divine life (Smith 1673: 18–19). The third sort of man has a soul ‘purged’ of human virtue and is thus capable of ‘flying off from the Body and Bodily passion’ (19). But this man is still subject to the vices of pride, arrogance, and self-conceit. Finally, the fourth rank of man, in Smith’s view, uses the best methods to attain knowledge of the divine and thus achieves the highest degree of moral perfection. He is ‘the true Metaphysical and Contemplative man’ (20), the man who strives to have the nearest union with God by leading an intellectual life. He is capable of ‘abstracting himself from himself’ and attaining a fervent love of god-like perfection. This man’s godly disposition reciprocally exalts his divine knowledge: his moral purity and his knowledge develop together, until at last he attains a ‘Sight of God’ or an intimation of that ‘higher Knowledge’ attainable only in the afterlife (21).

In her letters to Locke, Masham situates these views in the context of Smith’s wider moral-theological agenda. On her interpretation, Smith’s chief design is ‘to recommend Puritie of Life as the onely true way of attaining to Divine Knowledge’ (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 699). Because corrupt affections and wayward passions lead the understanding astray, in Smith’s opinion, purity of moral character is a necessary precondition to the search for divine knowledge. To attain this knowledge, we must ‘endeavour more and more to withdraw our selves from these Bodily things, to set our Souls as free as may be from its miserable slavery to this base Flesh’ (1673: 16). Accordingly, Masham reads Smith as saying that something more than reason alone is required to attain the highest degree of divine knowledge and moral perfection. Human beings will be incapable of obtaining religious enlightenment with only ‘the Powers of meere Unassisted Reason’ (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 684). But if they combine their use of reason together with purity of life, then they might ‘come to be acted by

a Higher Principle' (684); they might become Smith's 'Metaphysical and Contemplative man.'

In his response of 21 February 1682, Locke asserts that the so-called divine knowledge attributed to Smith's fourth type of man is a species of enthusiasm. He allows that a religious proposition held firmly in the mind might *seem* like knowledge, but if it lacks a foundation in reason, then it does not merit the name. To illustrate his point, he draws an analogy between our reasoning abilities and our capacity for vision. Though our eyesight might be improved by spectacles, he says, whatever assistance the eye receives from such instruments, the eye itself is still the faculty *doing the seeing*. Likewise, in the case of reason and knowledge, 'what ever is known however sublime or spirituall is known only by the naturall faculty of the understanding reason, however assisted' (Aaron and Gibb 1936: 124-5). Hence Smith's fourth division of man seems 'to savour of Enthusiasme' (125). Smith suggests that this man attains divine knowledge by shooting *above* his own logical or rational self (1673: 20). He is directly 'enlightned by Him who is the Truth itself' and experiences 'God's own breath within him' (21). But for Locke it is difficult to make sense of any knowledge that could be above the natural faculty of reason.

Eighteen years later, in his chapter 'Of Enthusiasm,' Locke reiterates a number of these same points. God, he says, has bestowed upon our minds all the natural principles that we require for knowledge. When enthusiasts are persuaded of some truth, they firmly believe that this truth has been directly revealed to them by God. But to assent to the truth of a divine revelation, we must have evidence that is *extrinsic* to the persuasion itself; to have grounds for assent, we 'must know it [the revelation] to be so either by its own self-evidence to natural Reason; or by the rational Proofs that make it out to be so' (*Essay* 4.19.11). If a man

does not have such support, then he simply begs the question: when asked why he is persuaded of some truth, he appeals to immediate revelation; to justify that revelation, he then appeals to the strength of his persuasion. This circular reasoning can be used to justify any number of contradictory propositions about religion (4.19.10). And so, in Locke's view, we must reject any groundless claims to direct divine inspiration.

The resolution?

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that Locke might have revised his negative opinion about Smith in light of Masham's defence. In her 16 February letter, Masham locates Smith's views about divine knowledge somewhere *in between* groundless enthusiasm and an exclusive adherence to natural reason. She says to Locke 'I know not what you may call Vision nor how much you may attribute to the power of Reason, onely as I understand them it seemes to mee that there may be something betweene these two things' (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 684). In her view, it is conceivable that human beings might be both informed by reason and yet assisted by the acquisition of a higher disposition toward divine knowledge. To support this view, in a letter dated 20 April 1682, Masham appeals to Joseph Glanvill's opinion that God communicates directly with those better souls who are 'Qualify'd' or 'prepar'd' for communion, and she also refers to Henry More's idea that human beings might acquire a 'divine sagacity' or a divine wisdom that is conformable and not contrary to reason (699). Of Glanvill's better souls and More's divine sages, Masham says that

Provided that *they Act not nor Admit any thing but what they can give a Rational Account of*, That they Pay a Universal Obedience to all the laws of God, and that they beleeve the Holy Scriptures I do not see any Reason why there [sic] opinion should be quarrel'd with, or themselves Condemn'd as Persons who let themselves be impos'd

upon by there Immaginations and by the Suggestions of unbridled Phancie since thus long *they do not quit there Reason*; as the Enthusiast does, who pretends to leave that light for a better (in which I suppose is there great Mistake, there being no suggestions of the Holy Spirrit but what are *always agreable to, if not Demonstrable from Reason*). (699; my italics)

Masham suggests that Smith's fourth type of man might be open to direct divine inspiration *without forsaking his reason*, and that these views are compatible with Locke's own; Smith need not be dismissed as an enthusiast.

There is some evidence in the *Essay* that Locke was willing to accept this compromise. In the last paragraph of his chapter 'Of Enthusiasm,' he adds a final qualification to his critique of enthusiasm. 'In what I have said,' he says,

I am far from denying, that GOD can, or doth sometimes enlighten Mens Minds in the apprehending of certain Truths, or excite them to Good Actions by the immediate influence and assistance of the Holy Spirit, without any extraordinary Signs accompanying it. But in such Cases too we have Reason and the Scripture, unerring Rules to know whether it be from GOD or no. Where the Truth imbraced is consonant to the *Revelation* in the written word of God; or the Action conformable to the dictates of right *Reason* or Holy Writ, we may be assured that we run no risque in entertaining it as such ... (*Essay* 4.19.16).

Here, contrary to received wisdom, Locke *is* amenable to the possibility of direct divine assistance in the apprehension of truth. He emphasises that this immediate inspiration must

be conformable to either scripture or ‘that Standard of Reason which is common to us with all Men’ (4.19.16) in order to avoid the charge of enthusiasm. But like Masham, he allows that God might supernaturally intervene to enlighten the minds of human beings.

And so, by situating Locke’s ideas in the context of his epistolary exchange with Masham, together with his chapter ‘Of Enthusiasm,’ it is possible to see how Locke and Masham may have come to agreement about Smith. In particular, we might think that Locke eventually conceded Masham’s point: even by the lights of Locke’s own philosophy, he need not have dismissed Smith’s metaphysical and contemplative man as an enthusiast, provided that this man’s divine inspiration was consistent with, or demonstrable from, reason and revelation.

Further reading

Broad, J. (2006) ‘A Woman’s Influence? John Locke and Damaris Masham on Moral Accountability,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (3): 489–510.

This article critically examines the idea that Masham may have had an influence on the second edition of Locke’s Essay (1694).

Hutton, S. (1993) ‘Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment,’ *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1 (1): 29–54.

This article traces the development of Masham’s principal philosophical ideas situated in historical-intellectual context.

Lascano, M. P. (2011) ‘Damaris Masham and “The Law of Reason or Nature”,’ *The Modern Schoolman* 88 (3–4): 245–65.

This article examines Masham's commitment to reason in her moral philosophy and her arguments for the existence of God.

Masham, D. (2004) *The Philosophical Works of Damaris, Lady Masham*, Intro. J. G.

Buickerood, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum.

This book is a facsimile reprint of Masham's two treatises, her Discourse and Occasional Thoughts.

Related topics

Locke on Knowledge and Certainty; Locke on Reason, Revelation, and Miracles; Locke on Enthusiasm.

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Hamou, P. (2008) 'Enthousiasme et Nature Humaine. À propos d'une lettre de Locke à Damaris Cudworth,' *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 59 (3): 337–50.

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Smith, J. (1673) *Select Discourses*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: John Hayes for W. Morden.

¹ Locke first refers to ‘Philoclea’ (his pseudonym for Masham) in a pocket memorandum book of 1678–79 on a page headed ‘79’ (i.e., 1679): ‘Philoclea. Th: Andrews crown in Cornhill’ (Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Locke f. 28, fol. 43). In a later letter of 16 June 1684, Masham advises Locke to use this same postal address (*Correspondence*, 1976–, II: 779).