



## *God's Mind and Human Knowledge in Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659–1708)*

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Nicolas Malebranche's doctrine of "vision in God" is the epistemological theory that all the ideas in our minds are located in the divine understanding. On this view, our ideas are neither produced nor created by us; rather, we perceive ideas only by virtue of the fact that our minds participate in the mind of God. In her *Discourse concerning the love of God* (1696), Damaris Cudworth Masham challenges the Malebranchean doctrine of "seeing all things in God" and the related theory that God is the sole efficient cause of all our sensations (occasionalism). She specifically targets her English contemporary John Norris's view that we are obliged to love and desire God alone, a moral theology based upon the Malebranchean doctrines.

As a Lockean empiricist, Masham maintains that human knowledge consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas derived from sensation and reflection (1705: 61). In her opinion, we can love God only once we have formed an idea of love, and yet to form this idea, we must have had pleasing sensory experiences of other human beings and material objects. It follows that it is necessary to love other creatures before we can love God himself. But if this involuntary love is wicked, as Norris suggests, then God has compelled us to become wicked by nature. Alternatively, if we agree with Malebranche's theory of "vision in God" and his occasionalism, then we must accept that our idea of love comes from God, and that God himself inclines us toward the love of sensual pleasure; that is, that God himself excites the sentiment of pleasure in his creatures, whenever they are disposed to be wicked (1696: 102). In Masham's view, both positions are untenable. While we must love God above all things, it is still nevertheless lawful to desire his creatures.

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### **Keywords:**

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