



Human Nature in Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659–1708)

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For Damaris Cudworth Masham human nature is, above all, reasonable and sociable. By virtue of their natural constitutions, human beings are capable of following the law of reason and of feeling a great number of sociable passions, such as a desire to please others and a desire to be loved by them in return. Human beings could never live successfully in complete isolation from one another, and they could never be completely indifferent to one another's well-being. To expect them to live in isolation and indifference, Masham says, is like expecting fish to fly in the air or to ride on horses—it is simply not in their nature.

Of course, human society can also corrupt and degrade human beings. In early childhood, before an agent's reason has matured, "loose Education" and "ill Custom" can exert a negative influence: these external forces can instill bad habits and lead individuals slavishly to follow their unruly affections and appetites (Masham 1696: 105). Nevertheless, by virtue of being free agents, human beings are capable of changing themselves for the good; all human beings can exercise their "*Freedom or Liberty of Action*" to attain self-excellence (Masham 1705: 69–70). They are capable of freely following the law of reason, which tells them that in order to be happy in society with others, they must regulate their desires in proportion to the worth of objects.

In Masham's view, any practicable system of morality must acknowledge the inherent sociability and reasonableness of the human species. A religion that expects its followers to renounce the love of this world threatens to render that religion ridiculous, or else drive its followers into despair. In her writings, Masham uses these principles to challenge the extreme moral-theological views of her contemporaries, Nicolas Malebranche, John Norris, and Mary Astell.

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