

[Please note that this is **an earlier version** of a published article: ‘Mary Astell: liberty of judgment for women’, in *Geschlechterordnung und Staat: Legitimationsfiguren der politischen Philosophie (1600-1850)*, edited by Marion Heinz and Sabine Doyé, a supplement to *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* [German Journal for Philosophy] 27 (2012), 139-49. Please cite the **published** version.]

1. Mary Astell: liberty of judgment for women

2. Life and Work

Mary Astell was born on 12 November 1666 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. Her father, Peter Astell, was a gentleman, and her mother, Mary Errington, was the daughter of a wealthy coal merchant; both were from old and respectable families. Together with her younger brother, Mary Astell was educated by her uncle Ralph Astell, a curate at St Nicholas Church, Newcastle. Ralph Astell had been a student of Cambridge University at the height of the Cambridge-Platonist movement, and was himself a published author. From this uncle, Astell seems to have imbibed a love of poetry, philosophy, royalist politics, and—above all—the Anglican religion. But when he died in 1679, Astell’s formal education came to an abrupt end. Shortly before this time, Astell’s family fortunes also took a dramatic turn for the worse: in 1678, her father died, and the Astell family were left in grave financial peril. In the ensuing years, Astell’s mother came to rely upon loans, gifts, and charity for income. As a result, the young Mary Astell faced an uncertain and possibly desolate future. Without a reasonable dowry, she could never hope to marry someone of her own social status; and, as the daughter of a gentleman, it was not an option for her to enter into service. In her later works, Astell would emphasise the need for respectable employment for

gentlewomen who either could not or would not marry. When her mother died in 1684, Astell moved to London, probably with the aim of becoming an author.

In her early years in the city, Astell relied upon a network of family, friends, and patrons for her income. In 1689, Astell presented a manuscript of religious poetry to Archbishop William Sancroft, thanking him for his kindness and charity. In subsequent years, she was supported by a group of gentlewomen, including Lady Ann Coventry, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, and Lady Catherine Jones. From the 1690s onward, Astell lived near her female friends in Chelsea, and spent her time immersed in philosophical and religious works. Unable to read either French or Latin, Astell's reading was confined to English authors, such as John Norris, Henry More, and John Locke, and to English translations and popularisations of the works of French philosophers, such as René Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche, Antoine Arnauld, and Pierre Nicole. The influence of all these male philosophers can be discerned in Astell's writings.

In 1693, Astell initiated an intellectual correspondence with John Norris, an English disciple of Malebranche. In 1695, Norris published their exchange as *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695). Astell's letters to Norris are largely concerned with the religious subject of the creature's obligation to love and desire God alone, but they also contain Astell's early philosophical views about the mind and body. This correspondence seems to have provided Astell with the confidence to launch her formal writing career.

Astell published nine works in her lifetime, all of them anonymous. In her hey-day (c. 1694-1706), her writings on women were remarkably popular. Her first published work was *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (1694), a strikingly modern proposal for an all-female

academic institute. Calling herself a “Lover of her Sex”, Astell argued that the intellectual inferiority of women was the result of custom rather than nature; and that if women were provided with a higher education, they might improve their understanding. Although this work was well received, Astell’s central proposal—the founding of an academy or a “religious retirement” for single gentlewomen—failed to find active support. In 1697, Astell issued a second part to the *Proposal*, this time calling for women to improve their minds through their own efforts, using a method based upon Cartesian principles. Her next book was *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), a work of advice for both men and women about how to choose suitable marriage partners. The work was inspired by the memoirs of Hortense Mancini, the Duchess of Mazarin, a woman who suffered psychological and physical abuse at the hands of her husband. Astell argued that the institution of marriage was degraded by the fact that people marry for the wrong reasons, such as money and passion, rather than true virtue and friendship.

In 1704, Astell turned her attention to party political controversies, and published three anonymous pamphlets: *Moderation truly Stated*, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*, and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War*. The first two pamphlets deal with issues arising from the occasional conformity debates in early eighteenth-century England. As a committed High-Church Anglican and Tory royalist, Astell opposed the toleration of Protestant dissenters who took occasional communion in the Church of England for the purpose of retaining government posts. The third pamphlet, *An Impartial Enquiry*, contains Astell’s views about events leading to the death of Charles I in 1649, and was intended to provide a lesson about the toleration of dissenters in Astell’s own time. These political pamphlets continue

the moral-theological themes of Astell's previous works, but do not directly touch on the situation of women.

In 1705, Astell published the most mature expression of her philosophical thought, *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by A Daughter of the Church of England*. This work contains Astell's views about the ultimate nature of reality, the true source of knowledge, about our duties and obligations to God and our sovereign, and general guidelines on how best to live, and how to treat other people. It also represents a continuation of Astell's feminist project: in this book, once again, Astell's purpose is to teach women how to lead useful lives of virtue and wisdom. Astell's final work was *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry After Wit* (1709), a response to a *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708) by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury. In this book, Astell strongly opposes Shaftesbury's call for the freedom to criticise, or even ridicule, sincerely-held religious beliefs. Shortly after this publication, Astell became the schoolmistress of a girls' charity school in Chelsea, and her writing career came to an end. Astell remained single all her life, and died of breast cancer on 9 May 1731.

3.1

Astell's philosophical approach is essentially that of a Cartesian, but as a devout Christian, her Cartesian philosophy is deeply informed by her moral-theological views. In all of Astell's writings, the main objective is to turn the reader's attention away from the corruptible body to the immortal mind; and to promote the idea that true happiness consists in the love of God and conformity to his will, not the mutable things of this world. While Astell addresses questions about knowledge, metaphysics, and politics, she is first and foremost a moral philosopher: the ultimate aim of her

philosophical project is to cultivate human happiness, and to provide guidance on the attainment of virtue.

In terms of her epistemology, Astell supports the Cartesian view that the true path to knowledge is through reason, and that the senses, passions, and imagination tend to lead us astray. She says that “Knowledge in a proper and restricted Sense ... signifies that clear Perception which is follow’d by a firm assent to Conclusions rightly drawn from Premises of which we have clear and distinct ideas” (*Proposal II*, 102). Like Descartes, Astell maintains that the main criteria of truth and certainty are clarity and distinctness. An idea is clear when it is immediately present to the mind; and it is distinct when it is both clear and “contains not any thing in it self which appears not manifestly to him who considers it as he ought” (*Proposal II*, 123). Unlike Descartes, Astell never advocates an initial “method of doubt”, or the use of an exaggerated scepticism in order to discover certain and indubitable truths. When Astell recommends Cartesian method, she recommends Descartes’ method of avoiding error: his theory of judgment. In Astell’s view, anybody can attain clear and certain knowledge provided that they avoid making erroneous judgments. We can avoid error by regulating the will according to the intellect, and by affirming only those ideas that are clear and distinct. Above all, Astell highlights the importance of using our faculty of judgment in order to avoid vice and sin.

In Astell’s metaphysical system, there are two created substances: an essentially thinking thing called the mind (or soul—she uses the terms interchangeably); and an essentially extended thing known as matter or material body. Her argument for the mind-body distinction proceeds in much the same way as Descartes’ argument for the real distinction in the Sixth Meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). In this work, Descartes moves from the proposition that he can clearly and distinctly

conceive of the mind existing apart from the body, to the conclusion that he is really distinct from his body and can exist without it. Along similar lines, Astell begins with the proposition that we have two “complete” ideas of thought and extension. By complete, she means that we do not gain either idea from abstraction or from a partial consideration of the ideas themselves. More importantly, our ideas of a thinking being (a mind) and an extended being (a material body) can be contemplated by us without “any Relation to, or Dependance upon one another, so that we can be sure of the Existence of one, even at the same time we can suppose that the other does not Exist” (*Christian Religion*, 250). We can have a complete idea of the mind that does not include the idea of body; and we can have a complete idea of body that does not depend upon our idea of the mind. From these rationalist premises, Astell concludes that the mind and body are “truly Distinct and of Different Natures” (*Christian Religion*, 250). For Astell, this argument reveals important truths about the nature of the self. She asserts that “because I and all other Reasonable Creatures Think, therefore we are something that is not Body” (*Christian Religion*, 251). The self is a non-bodily or immaterial substance, and “for this reason, it is not liable to Separation of Parts or Corruption”—it is, in fact, immortal (*Christian Religion*, 251).

As immaterial and immortal beings, according to Astell, the true source of our happiness must be spiritual and immutable rather than temporal. Our ultimate happiness, in other words, must lie with God and the spiritual life to come. Astell presents an ontological argument for the existence of God, based upon clear and distinct ideas (*Proposal II*, 129). She notes that, in our minds, we have an idea of an infinitely perfect being; and we also have the idea of existence as a perfection (because the idea of perfection necessarily includes that of existence). From these premises, we can deduce that if any being is infinite in all perfections, then we cannot

deny that that being exists; yet God is a being who is infinite in all perfections; therefore God exists.

Astell maintains that, in order to attain happiness with God, we must take into account the fact that, in this life, human beings are necessarily and inseparably united with a body. Like Descartes, Astell claims that each human mind is composed not only of the pure understanding and the will, but also the senses, the imagination, and the passions (by-products of the mind's union with body). To attain everlasting happiness, in our practical deliberations we must find the best method of overcoming the influence of the body on the mind.

3.2

Astell's three major works—*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (parts I and II), her *Reflections upon Marriage*, and *The Christian Religion*—are chiefly addressed to women, and are designed to reveal to women the true nature of the self and the true source of human happiness. Above all, Astell aims to undermine the cultural association between women and the material body. In late seventeenth-century society, she observes, women are mistakenly treated as if they are mere mechanisms, or purely material things without rational minds. Custom perpetuates the association between women and the body in several ways. First, women are taught that their chief concern is to preserve their physical beauty in order to attract the love and admiration of men. They pride themselves on the latest fashions, their romantic intrigues, and on making themselves agreeable and entertaining to others. In short, women are encouraged to cultivate a mistaken self-love: a love of the body rather than the mind. Second, women are denied a university education, and those women who do pursue higher learning are publicly mocked and ridiculed. Without the benefits of

intellectual training, the bulk of women appear to be hopelessly ignorant and lacking in the capacity for true virtue. And lastly, most egregious of all, women are taught to base their faith on trust rather than reason, and treated as if they do not have free will or the capacity to judge for themselves. From a Cartesian standpoint, this is to treat women as if they are mere animals rather than human beings, and incapable of voluntary action.

Astell maintains that men must be blamed for the female condition, because men deny women the practical means to improve their minds. But while many women live up to the cultural stereotype, every woman has a natural capacity to improve herself. As human beings, Astell says, all women have rational minds. Women are capable of attaining clear and certain knowledge provided that they follow the appropriate rules. To avoid error and sin, they simply need to be shown how to use their minds to their best capacity. They must also learn that self-love is love of the mind or soul, and not the mortal and material body. In short, Astell points out that the association between women and their bodies is a cultural construction, and subject to change. While women might appear as though they possess a lesser rationality than men, in reality they are naturally endowed with an equal capacity for rational thought—they are on an equal intellectual footing with men.

Astell does not develop these arguments about the intellectual equality of women into a full-blown challenge to women's subordination to men in civil society. In her later work on marriage, far from advocating rebellion against men, Astell emphasises that women have a duty of passive obedience to abusive and tyrannical husbands. For Astell, liberty is a spiritual rather than a political concept: it consists in the subject's choice to pursue or not to pursue that which is good for the soul, not in a liberal freedom from interference, or the freedom to do what we will. Astell's

conservative notion of freedom originates with her religious views, but it is also consistent with her wider metaphysical beliefs about the true nature of the self, and the important role of free will in avoiding erroneous judgments. Women have everything they need within themselves to bring about their emancipation from men—at least, in terms of the emancipation of their minds; they do not need to challenge their external circumstances in order to attain wisdom and virtue.

Despite Astell's conservatism, however, in later works such as the third edition of the *Reflections*, she repeatedly emphasises that women's political subordination to men is an historical and contingent state of affairs, not a necessary one. "That the Custom of the World has put Women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection, is not deny'd," she says, "but the Right can no more be prov'd from the Fact, than the Predominancy of Vice can justify it" (*Reflections*, 10). She points to the example of women rulers in past and present times, and she emphasises that women have all the mental qualities necessary to be strong political leaders. In former times, she asserts, women have been very different "from what they appear in the common Prejudices of Mankind" (*Reflections*, 23). While Astell does not challenge the supremacy of men in the public and private spheres, she does indicate that there is no natural reason why women could not be the political equals—or even the superiors—of men, in an alternative political society.

4.

4.1 *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I*

In her first *Proposal*, Astell puts forward a suggestion to help ordinary women overcome obstacles on the path to wisdom and virtue. Figuratively speaking, she styles her treatise as a medical manual: she proposes to describe a "disease", to

establish the cause of that disease, and then to offer a remedy, before finally considering a few possible objections. For Astell, the main malady for women is that they suffer from a profound ignorance, and this ignorance typically leads them into error and vice. But Astell challenges the common perception that women are “naturally incapable of acting Prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly” (*Proposal I*, 9). According to Astell, women’s incapacity to discern between virtue and vice is “acquired not natural; and none of their Follies are so necessary, but ... they might avoid them if they pleas’d themselves” (*Proposal I*, 10). For her, it is indisputable that women have rational, intelligent minds: though most women might direct their thoughts to trivial matters, such as the management of an intrigue or an estate, they nevertheless display a capacity for reason. The main cause of female ignorance and vice is that women are deprived of a useful education, “the most effectual means to direct them into ... the ways of Vertue” (*Proposal I*, 11). Astell’s remedy is for women to have a place of retirement, away from the noise and hurry of the world, where they might study the essential principles of philosophy and religion in peace and quiet. Once they have obtained a higher education at this institution, and improved their natural reasoning ability, women might then be in a position to become useful and virtuous members of society.

4.2 *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*

In 1697, Astell published a second part to the *Proposal* outlining a method for the improvement of their minds. She wrote this second work in order to persuade women to educate themselves through their own efforts, rather than wait for the establishment of a women’s academy. Astell specifically targets her work at those women who are so used to a life of ignorance and laziness that they are reluctant to begin a makeover.

She offers a method that will enable such women to overcome a purely sensuous and animal life, and to attain happiness regardless of their external circumstances.

For Astell, one of the greatest obstacles to obtaining true virtue is the influence of “Custom” on one’s moral judgments. Custom inclines us to judge an action as right or wrong for no other reason than that such an action has been deemed right or wrong by long use and by the sanction of our forebears. Custom thus constitutes a powerful but potentially irrational influence on our judgments about how we should or should not act. In particular, Astell believes that custom reverses the proper power relations between two chief faculties of the mind: the understanding and the will. The understanding is that faculty of “Receiving and Comparing Ideas”, and the will is “the Power of Preferring any Thought or Motion, of Directing them to This or That thing rather than to another” (*Proposal II*, 153). Although the understanding ought to govern the will, under the influence of custom the will becomes a “head-strong and Rebellious Subject” (*Proposal II*, 84). Moral judgments are made when the will either accepts or rejects the understanding’s notion of “what is fit”. Such judgments can go wrong when the understanding has only obscure and confused ideas, and the will is compelled to accept them anyway. Astell observes that in our early life, before our reason has matured, the passions incite the will to make certain choices (*Proposal II*, 90-1). The will fixes our thoughts on a present source of uneasiness, and we fail to consider our future happiness. In later life, we become habituated to this way of thinking, and thus “we generally take that course in our search after Happiness, which Education, Example, and Custom puts us in” (*Proposal II*, 83). The key problem for Astell is to explain how ignorant, uneducated women can overcome those early influences that set their inclinations on the wrong path.

First, Astell emphasizes that the will is free. Custom, she says, makes it seem as though we are not at liberty to resist our inclinations, yet this is simply an illusion: human beings, unlike animals, have the free capacity to regulate their will according to their understanding (*Proposal II*, 82). Astell urges women to embrace their essential humanity and to recognize that “Natural Liberty within” them (*Proposal II*, 148). According to Astell, erroneous judgments can be avoided if we carefully follow a reliable method for thinking. Astell borrows her rules from Descartes’ followers, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the authors of *Logic, or the Art of Thinking* (first published in 1662). This work is a practical guide to rational thought, based on the manuscript of Descartes’s *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (first written in 1628), and his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason* (1637). Like Arnauld and Nicole, Astell begins with the recommendation that we acquire a clear understanding of any terms or concepts to be used in our judgments. We should reason only about those things of which we have clear and distinct ideas. Implicitly, this requires that we “Disengage our selves from all our former Prejudices, from our Opinion of Names, Authorities, Customs and the like, not give Credit to any thing any longer because we have once believed it, but because it carries clear and uncontested Evidence along with it” (*Proposal II*, 89). Our train of thought should proceed in a natural and logical order, beginning with the simplest ideas and moving by degrees to the more complex. We must assure ourselves that we have not left any part of our subject unexamined, and divide our subject into as many parts as we can in order to understand it. We must also keep the subject matter close in mind, avoiding a hasty and partial examination. Then finally we must “judge no further than we Perceive, and not ... take any thing for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so” (*Proposal II*, 128). Sometimes this will mean that we cannot readily make a judgment about a

particular subject. In this case, reason dictates that we must suspend our assent and avoid making judgments about things that we do not understand.

While the method of the early chapters provides women with a means of recognising the good, in the final chapter of the second *Proposal* Astell proposes a way of overcoming the influence of custom on the passions, so that women might *do* what is good. “It is to little purpose to guard our selves against the Sophisms of the Head,” Astell says, “if we lie open to those of the Heart. One irregular Passion will put a greater Obstacle between us and Truth, then the bright[est] Understanding and clearest Reasoning can easily remove” (*Proposal II*, 133). Astell therefore recommends a method of governing and mastering the passions.

Like Descartes, Astell does not regard the passions as intrinsically bad in themselves. She says that “it appears that it is not a fault to have Passions, since they are natural and unavoidable, and useful too” (*Proposal II*, 162). We cannot receive any injury from the passions if we regulate them accordingly. God has made the passions part of human nature, and such a wise and benevolent God would not have given us passions if he did not intend for them to contribute toward our good. Like Descartes, Astell affirms that “Humane Nature consists in the Union of a Rational Soul with a Mortal Body” (*Proposal II*, 158). For this reason, we must address the question of how we are to attain virtue as embodied creatures, and not just as immaterial minds. In proposing a remedy for idleness and impertinence, we cannot just suppose that women can use their reason to direct their inclinations as a disinterested pilot might direct a ship. Such women are intimately associated and intermingled with their bodies—as all human beings must be. But while we cannot prevent the passions from having an impact on the mind, we can direct or divert them to objects of greater worth by a process of transference or channelling. In her moral

theory, Astell does not attempt to suppress or deny the passions, but gives them a vital role in the attainment of virtue. Virtue consists in governing the animal impressions and re-directing the passions, not in obliterating them.

Unlike Descartes, Astell reduces all the passions to different modifications of love. Love, she says, is “at the bottom of all the Passions, one wou’d think they’re nothing else but different Modifications of it, occasion’d by some Circumstance in the Subject or Object of this Passion” (*Proposal II*, 166). For Astell, desire is simply a love of future good, joy is the pleasure received from love, sorrow is occasioned by the absence of what we love, and “even Hatred tho it appear directly opposite to Love, may be referr’d to it, the very same motion that carrys the Soul towards Good, carrying her also from those things that wou’d deprive her of it” (*Proposal II*, 166). The upshot of Astell’s emphasis on love is to claim that “if therefore our Love be Right, the rest of our Passions will of course be so” (*Proposal II*, 166). For Astell, love is the key to women leading virtuous lives and attaining salvation for their souls. The passions are good when they are those that right reason disposes us to, or when they are inclined towards their proper objects. The passion of love is well regulated when we have saved it for things of the greatest worth; and the worthiest object of all must be an infinitely perfect being—that is, God. Women should, therefore, have “no Passion but for God’s service” (*Proposal II*, 171). The passions of esteem, veneration, love, desire, and so on, need not disturb women if they are directed toward their one true end: the glory of their maker.

4.3 *Some Reflections upon Marriage*

In *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), Astell provides a general assessment of marriage, and offers advice to both single and married women. In this work, Astell

continues the main themes of the *Proposal*: she rejects the idea that women are naturally mentally inferior to men; and she once again emphasises the importance of women improving their minds—this time, in order to attain happiness within marriage.

In the preface to the third edition of her *Reflections*, Astell spells out her explicit position on the subject of women's political subordination to men. In this preface, as in the main work, Astell is sympathetic toward unhappily married women, and especially those women who must cope with abusive or tyrannical husbands. But she does not advocate divorce, or recommend that wives "Resist" or "Abdicate" their spouses in order to retrieve their liberty (*Reflections*, 9). Far be it from her, she says, "to stir up Sedition of any sort, none can abhor it more" (*Reflections*, 8). In general, Astell maintains that subjects owe an unquestioning obedience to authority in both the public and private spheres. As a committed Tory, Astell claims that no-one has a right of resistance against lawful political authority; she denies that political society originates in a voluntary agreement between human beings; and she rejects the Lockean contractarian view that the prince gains his authority from the consent of the people. In her view, we owe our unquestioning allegiance to political authority because the Bible enjoins us to practice obedience toward the lawful powers that God has set over us. But there are also pragmatic reasons why passive obedience is the most desirable course of action. Astell says that in every society, as a matter of practical necessity, there must be "a last resort" or a supreme authority with the power "to determine the Affairs of that Society by an irresistible sentence" (*Reflections* p. 15). If there were no such authority, then there would be a perpetual contention about who has the final say in matters of practical statecraft. And just as there must be a "last resort" in political society, there must be a last appeal in private families. Astell

concedes that, having the “least Bodily strength”, women are obliged to obey men for the sake of their “Quiet and Security” (*Reflections*, 15).

In his *Two Treatises* (1689), John Locke also touches upon the practical necessity of wifely submission. But he implies that a woman owes subjection to her husband because of the man’s superior understanding as well as his greater bodily strength. Astell strongly rejects Locke’s view: for her, the greater bodily strength of men does not imply that they are naturally superior to women in terms of their understanding. Furthermore, she says, if it were a law of nature that every man is superior to every woman, then “the greatest Queen ought not to command but to obey her Footman” (*Reflections*, 9). But clearly it is the case that some women are superior to some men; and occasionally—as in the reign of Queen Anne (the period during which Astell wrote)—one woman is allowed to be superior to all men. Though the bulk of women might happen to be in a position of political subjection to men, in terms of their natural intellect, they are always on an equal footing. Women possess all the liberty they need in order to serve God and attain happiness; and, for Astell, this is all that matters.

In her *Reflections*, therefore, Astell once again emphasises the importance of women cultivating their minds, recognising their true selves, and embracing the true source of their happiness. Astell says that she aims to retrieve the “Native Liberty, the Rights and Privileges of the Subject” (*Reflections*, 8). The “Subject” of her discourse is a woman who is either married or contemplating marriage; her “Liberty” is the liberty of all human beings—the freedom to pursue or not to pursue the good of her soul; and her “Right” is the “Natural Right of Judging for her self” (*Reflections*, 10), especially about religious matters. Astell’s main point is that, prior to marriage, women ought to improve their capacity for judgement in order to make the best

decision possible. Liberty of judgment for women is absolutely essential for their happiness in the marriage state. A woman who marries, she says, “Elects a Monarch for Life” (*Reflections*, 48) and cannot recall his God-given power, even if her husband abuses it. If a woman must marry at all, then she should make a prudent decision based upon reason rather than passion.

4.4 *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church*

In her largest work, the *Christian Religion*, Astell also continues her project of female emancipation. This work aims to convince women (as well as men) that they must study the content of the Scriptures for themselves and familiarise themselves with the foundations of their religious beliefs, rather than simply believe without knowing why. Astell emphasises that “if God had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason, He wou'd not have given them any” (*Christian Religion*, 6). Once again, she advocates a withdrawing from those who have “usurp'd an empire over our Understandings” and the exercising instead of “that most valuable Privilege, and indefeasible Right, of judging for our selves where God has left us free to do so” (*Christian Religion*, 289). Her main emphasis is that a blind faith—or a blind submission to the religious judgment of men—is one of the greatest threats to a woman's lasting happiness.

Though Astell does not introduce any radically new ideas in this work, she does offer some of her most detailed philosophical arguments about the existence of God, the correct path to knowledge, the true nature of the self and liberty, and the true source of human happiness. She emphasises that God has made all human beings free agents, and that a woman's self-destruction or self-preservation is entirely in her own hands, no matter what her social condition might be. But freedom consists in an

internal power of self-determination, not in a “bare power to do what we Will” (*Christian Religion*, 278). Astell says that “the difference between a Free and a Necessary Agent consists in this, That the Actions of the former, or more properly the Motions of his Mind, are in his own power” (*Christian Religion*, 86). God “has not put the Liberty of his Creatures in any ones power but in their own” (*Christian Religion*, 279). In order to obtain salvation, therefore, women must not blindly follow the religious dictates of men—they must exercise their own capacity for judgment.

5. Bibliography

5.1

- Christian Religion Astell, Mary: *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 1705.*
- Reflections Astell, Mary: *Reflections Upon Marriage. In Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg, Cambridge 1996, 7-80.
- Proposal I, II Astell, Mary: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg, London 1997.

5.2

5.2.1

- Perry, Ruth 1986: *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist*, Chicago.
- Springborg, Patricia 2005: *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination*, Cambridge.

5.2.2

Kolbrener, William/Michelson, Michal (eds.) 2007: *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, Aldershot.

5.2.3

Kinnaird, Joan K. 1979: *Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism*. *The Journal of British Studies* 19 (1979), 53-75.

Sowaal, Alice 2007: *Mary Astell's Serious Proposal: Mind, Method, and Custom*. *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007), 227-43.

Taylor, E. Derek 2001: *Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Matter*. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001), 505-22.

5.2.4

Atherton, Margaret 1993: *Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason*, in: Antony, Louise M./Witt, Charlotte (eds.): *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Boulder and Oxford, 19-34.

Broad, Jacqueline 2007: *Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom*, in: Kolbrener, William/Michelson, Michal (eds.): *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, Aldershot, 165-179.

Goldie, Mark 2007: *Mary Astell and John Locke*, in: Kolbrener, William/Michelson, Michal (eds.): *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, Aldershot, 65-85.

O'Neill, Eileen 2007: *Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation*, in: Kolbrener, William/Michelson, Michal (eds.): *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, Aldershot, 145-164.

Weil, Rachel 1999: *Mary Astell: The Marriage of Toryism and Feminism*. In Weil, Rachel: *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680-1714*, Manchester and New York, 142-59.

Jacqueline Broad

Honorary Research Associate

School of Philosophy and Bioethics

Monash University, Melbourne, Australia