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Mary Astell's Malebranchean Concept of the Self

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Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to examine the metaphysical concept of the self at the heart of Mary Astell's feminist philosophy. Astell (1666–1731) is now best known as one of the first English feminists, as well as an astute critic of John Locke, a Tory political pamphleteer, and an Anglican apologist. She was also a philosopher. In her feminist works, she urged her female readers to think deeply about the nature of the self and its relationship to the external world. Some scholars have suggested that Astell upholds an orthodox Cartesian idea of the self as a non-bodily thing, whose essence consists solely in thinking. In what follows, I draw on textual evidence to challenge that view. I argue instead that Astell has a notion of the self more in keeping with the unorthodox Cartesianism of her contemporaries, the French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche and his English follower John Norris.

The self features as a central concept in Astell's first feminist treatise, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (originally published in 1694 and 1697 respectively). The key strategic goal of this work is to encourage women to take the time for self-improvement through proper training, meditation, and study. To effect this, she recommends the establishment of an all-female academic retreat removed from the hurry and noise of everyday life. In this retreat, she says,

No solicitude in the adoration of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your *self*, and do not neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect when it's [*sic*] unsuitable and much inferiour Companion is mouldring into Dust (Astell 2002: 52–3).

This religious notion of the self features in Astell's calls for her fellow women to cultivate proper *self*-love; it is present in her advice about how to achieve spiritual *self*-preservation; and it is there in her recommendations about how to attain justified *self*-esteem. On the whole, it is only through careful *self*-reflection, she suggests, that women can gain knowledge of what is truly good for them—and thereby attain happiness both in this world and in the afterlife.¹

Despite the prominence of Astell's concept of the self, few scholars have attempted to define it or to spell out her theory of the mind or the soul. (I will follow Astell's usage here by treating the 'self', 'mind', and 'soul' as interchangeable terms.) Some commentators have pointed to the fact that Astell's feminist philosophy is predicated upon Cartesian dualism and a commitment to the Cartesian idea of the self as a thing whose essence consists solely in thinking.² But few have noted that Astell radically departs from the orthodox Cartesian position by denying perfect knowledge of the self. In his Sixth Meditation, Descartes declares that 'simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing' (1984: 54). Contrary to Descartes, Astell explicitly says that we cannot have a distinct idea of the entire essence or nature of the self. In her first publication, the *Letters Concerning the Love*

¹ On Astell's ethical thought more generally, see Broad 2015.

² See Bryson 1998; Gallagher 1988; Kinnaird 1979; Perry 1985; Perry 1986; Sowaal 2007; Sowaal 2009; and Springborg 2005.

of God (originally published 1695), she says ‘I have no clear Idea of that which is properly my self’ (Astell and Norris 2005: 88). In the second part of her *Proposal*, she further declares that ‘we can’t Know the Nature of our Souls Distinctly’ (Astell 2002: 173). Then, in her longest work, *The Christian Religion, as Profess’d by a Daughter of the Church of England* (originally published in 1705), she says that the mind ‘can’t give me a full and satisfactory account of my own nature’ (Astell 2013: §17). Even though Astell modifies and refines her position in various texts, she consistently denies the Cartesian view that we can have a distinct idea of the self as a thing whose essential nature consists solely in thinking.

The following questions thus arise: what *is* the self, according to Astell? Does she adopt a coherent position on the nature of the self? Or do her core feminist insights—her recommendations concerning self-love, self-preservation, and self-esteem—depend upon a hopelessly obscure and indeterminate metaphysical concept?

I propose to answer these questions by carefully examining Astell’s notion of the self and the role that it plays in her feminist arguments. I will demonstrate that despite her denial that we can have a distinct idea, like Malebranche and Norris she allows that we can have direct awareness of the self and its operations through immediate consciousness. I maintain that while Astell’s Malebranchean notion of the self is not a wholly adequate metaphysical foundation for her theological views concerning the soul’s immateriality, immortality, and freedom of will, it nevertheless suffices for the practical moral and feminist purposes of her *Proposal*. On the whole, I think that a close examination of Astell’s notion of the self is valuable for showing that she holds a far more subtle, sophisticated, and surprisingly modern concept than scholars have hitherto acknowledged.

i. Astell's concept of the self

In the 1970s, Joan Kinnaird emphasised that Astell's feminism was indebted to 'a radical consciousness of self' founded in Cartesian metaphysics (Kinnaird 1979: 61). From this new philosophy of the 'thinking self', she says, Astell was able to derive a 'new conception of the mind's essential independence', one that enabled her to argue in favour of women's natural moral and intellectual competence (Kinnaird 1979: 62, 60). In the 1980s, Catherine Gallagher likewise argued that Astell was one of many seventeenth-century women who were inspired by Descartes' dualism 'to assert their intellectual equality with men; for if, as Descartes argued, mind has no extension, then it also has no gender' (Gallagher 1988: 34). Gallagher points out that Astell sees the mind 'in explicitly Cartesian terms' as 'a matterless substance identical with the subject' (Gallagher 1988: 34). Along similar lines, Astell biographer Ruth Perry notes that Astell's 'belief in an immaterial intellect which had no gender and which was the essential feature of all human nature, was the base upon which she built all the rest' (Perry 1985: 491). With the rise of Cartesian dualism, Perry observes, 'nothing could be argued from physiology' and 'women's reproductive capacity could no longer be held against them' (Perry 1985: 473). Then, in the 1990s, Cynthia Bryson maintained that Astell's feminism was 'grounded on her understanding of Cartesian dualism' (Bryson 1998: 40). Bryson asserts that Astell was attracted to Descartes because 'he clearly separates the gendered body from the nongendered "disembodied mind", which Astell identifies as the true "self"' (Bryson 1998: 54). In the twenty-first century, similar views have persisted in the literature.³

On the whole, I think these commentators are right to note that Astell regards the mind or the soul as the self. In her view, the thing that I refer to as 'me', 'myself',

³ See Sowaal 2007 and 2009. I have also discussed Astell's concept of the self (in brief) in Broad 2002, Chapter 4; Broad and Green 2009, Chapter 12; and Broad 2015, Chapter 4.

or ‘I’ is undoubtedly a thinking thing. She frequently calls on other writers to be ‘either Philosophers or Christian enough to take the *Soul for Self*’ (Astell 1704: 24), or to recognise that ‘the mind ... is truly the self’ (Astell 2013: §274). In response, however, I would like to propose two qualifications.

First, I think it is important to note that, for Astell, in this lifetime the soul or the mind is always intimately united and joined to a living human body. ‘Human nature is indeed a composition of mind and body,’ she says, ‘which are two distinct substances having different properties, and yet make but one person’ (Astell 2013: §272). We can be certain *that* this is so, even if we cannot know *how* these two substances are conjoined, because we can know and feel their union within us.⁴ In this lifetime, moreover, it is apparent that our minds can never attain complete *separation* from our gendered bodies and the bodily influences of sensations, passions, and appetites.⁵ According to Astell, then, we are always subject to the vagaries of our bodies and we can never attain the ideal of a ‘disembodied’ mind.

Second, it is important to recognise that while Astell thinks that we can have knowledge of the *existence* of something in us that thinks—she sometimes calls this ‘Spiritual or Thinking Substance’ (Astell 2002: 183)—she denies that we can have knowledge of the entire *essence* of that thing.⁶ Astell markedly diverges from Cartesian orthodoxy in this respect. Descartes maintains that we can have a clear and distinct idea of the self or soul as a thing whose essence consists solely in thinking, but Astell explicitly denies that we can have a clear and distinct idea of the whole

⁴ In her *Proposal*, Astell says that: ‘We know and feel the Union between our Soul and Body, but who amongst us sees so clearly, as to find out with Certitude and Exactness, the secret ties which unite two such different Substances, or how they are able to act upon each other?’ (Astell 2002: 148). 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 joined, though I am sure that so it is’ (Astell 2013: §62).

⁵ On this topic, see Broad in press; Broad 2015: 85; O’Neill 1999: 242; and Atherton 1993: 30.

⁶ In her *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on Astell, Alice Sowaal is one of the few scholars to concede this point. She notes that ‘Astell differs from Descartes ... in maintaining that we have clear but not distinct (or perfect) ideas of God and souls. She holds that though we can know some of the attributes of these substances, we cannot know their true natures’ (Sowaal 2009).

essence or nature of the self. In short, although she never says so in precisely these terms, she is committed to the view that we cannot know that thought is our only essential property, for we do not have a distinct idea of our essence.

The main textual evidence for this viewpoint can be found in Astell's second *Proposal*. But her earliest remarks on the topic appear in her correspondence with the Malebranchean philosopher John Norris from 1693 to 1694. In her third letter to Norris, dated 12 December 1693, Astell confesses 'I have no clear Idea of that which is properly my self, nor do I well know how to distinguish its Powers and Operations: For the usual Accounts that are given of the Soul are very unsatisfactory' (Astell and Norris 2005: 88). Norris responds in wholehearted agreement: 'We do not know our Souls here by any Idea of them,' he says, '(as not seeing them yet in *GOD*) but only by Consciousness or interiour Sentiment, which is the reason that the Knowledge we have of them is so imperfect' (Astell and Norris 2005: 94). While God grants us knowledge of the essence of bodies through our clear and distinct ideas, our knowledge of our own souls is confined to what we experience occurring within them. This is the case because if God had given us a clear and distinct idea of the soul's essence, we would be so enraptured and preoccupied with it that we would neglect our bodies and fail to preserve them. Yet God did not made human beings to think of nothing but themselves.

In explication of these views, Norris provides Astell with translations of relevant passages about the soul from Nicolas Malebranche's *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* [*Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*] of 1683. He also refers her to Malebranche's views in his *De la recherche de la vérité* [*Search after Truth*] of 1674-5 (see Astell and Norris 2005: 94-6). In Book Three, Part II, Chapter 7 of the *Search*, Malebranche says that 'if we had an idea of the soul as clear as that which we

have of the body, that idea would have inclined us too much to view the soul as separated from the body. It would have thus diminished the union between our soul and body' (Malebranche 1997: 239).⁷ Instead, he says,

we do not know [the soul] through its idea—we do not see it in God; we know it only through *consciousness*, and because of this, our knowledge of it is imperfect. Our knowledge of our soul is limited to what we sense taking place in us. If we had never sensed pain, heat, light, and such, we would be unable to know whether the soul was capable of sensing these things, because we do not know it through its idea (Malebranche 1997: 237).

In the *Letters*, Norris relates these same Malebranchean ideas to Astell. He tells her that all the modifications of our spirit must be learnt by 'inward Sentiment' and 'can no more be made known by Words to those that have not felt them than Colours can be described to a Man that is blind' (Astell and Norris 2005: 95). If we did know our souls perfectly, then we could know what modifications they were capable of simply by inspecting our idea of the soul, without need of experience; but we cannot. Like Malebranche, Norris holds that we can have only an inner sensation or an intuitive grasp of the soul. This direct, immediate experience informs us that the self is whatever it is that thinks, wills, imagines, senses, and feels.⁸

In response to Norris, Astell says 'I am exceedingly pleas'd with *M. Malbranch's Account of the Reasons why we have no Ideas of our Souls*' (Astell and Norris 2005: 103). Not surprisingly, in her later works, she reiterates both Norris and

⁷ For further details on Malebranche's concept of the soul, see Schmaltz 1996; Pyle 2003; and Jolley 2000.

⁸ 'How ignorant soever she may be of her self,' Norris says in Part II of his *Essay*, the soul 'cannot but be conscious of what passes within, of what she does, or of what she feels done to her, of Thoughts and Sentiments' (Norris 1704: 279).

Malebranche's views concerning our lack of self-knowledge.⁹ In her first *Proposal*, published at the same time as the *Letters* in 1694, she echoes Norris and Malebranche when she tells her readers that if they had but 'a clear Idea' of the soul, then 'as lovely as it is, and as much as you now value it, you wou'd then despise and neglect the mean *Case* that encloses it' (Astell 2002: 54).

In the second part of the *Proposal*, however, somewhat contrary to her earlier remarks, Astell declares that 'we may have a Clear, but not a Distinct and Perfect Idea ... of our own Souls' (Astell 2002: 173). At this point, we might wonder why Astell goes from declaring that we can have *no* idea or no *clear* idea of our souls, to the view that we *can* have a clear idea but not a distinct one? An answer can be found in Astell's formal definition of an idea in general, and then in her definition of clear and distinct ideas, first put forward in the second part of her *Proposal*.

Generally speaking, according to Astell, an idea can be defined as simply an 'immediate Object of the Mind, whatever it Perceives' or whatever it is thinking. But in a stricter sense, an idea can be taken to mean 'that which represents to the Mind some Object distinct from it' (Astell 2002: 168). On this stricter, narrow understanding of 'idea', it follows that we can have no idea of the self, because we can never represent the self as an object distinct from itself. So when Astell says that 'we may have a Clear, but not a Distinct and Perfect Idea ... of our own Souls' (Astell 2002: 173), I think she is affirming that we can have only a clear idea of the self in that first general sense of an idea as an 'immediate Object of the Mind, whatever it Perceives'. She allows that some of the properties and attributes of the soul 'may be Certainly and Indubitably Known', given our immediate awareness or consciousness of them within us (Astell 2002: 173). But she denies that we can have an idea of the

⁹ In her *Proposal*, Astell does not explicitly acknowledge their views about lack of self-knowledge, but she does refer to their works. For references to Norris, see Astell 2002: 77–8; to Malebranche, see Astell 2002: 24. She also cites verbatim from Malebranche's *Search after Truth* in Astell 1996a: 21–2.

self in the restricted sense of an idea as ‘that which represents to the Mind some Object distinct from it’ (Astell 2002: 168). In short, I interpret Astell as saying that from our internal subjective perspective, we are always going to have a limited and impoverished understanding of what the soul is—we will only ever get those phenomenological experiences of thinking, willing, feeling, and sensing—we can never step outside the self and get the complete picture, as it were.

This reading is confirmed by Astell’s subsequent appeal to Descartes’ notion of clear and distinct ideas in his *Principles of Philosophy* of 1644 (Astell 2002: 172). In this work, Descartes defines a clear idea as that which is ‘present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility’ (Descartes 1985: 207–8). Likewise, Astell suggests, just as objects are seen clearly when they are present to our sight and our eyes are disposed to focus on them, so too do we have a clear idea of ourselves to the extent that we are ‘present’ to our selves and disposed to bestow our attention on its properties and attributes.¹⁰ We can certainly know, according to Astell, that we have certain faculties within us that possess certain powers and capacities. Our faculty of understanding has the capacity for ‘Receiving and Comparing Ideas’ (Astell 2002: 205); while the faculty of the will has a ‘deliberative and directive Power’ for preferring and pursuing certain thoughts, or avoiding and denying others (Astell 2002: 80). We learn this from direct personal experience of these powers and capacities. But we do not have a distinct idea of the entire essence of the self, in Astell’s view, because in order to do so we would have to have an idea ‘which is so Clear, Particular, and *Different from all other things*, that it contains not any thing in it self which appears not manifestly to him who considers it

¹⁰ More specifically, in her *Proposal II*, she notes ‘we say we see Objects Clearly, when being present to our Eyes they sufficiently Act on ‘em, and our Eyes are disposed to regard ‘em’, and then in her next sentence she affirms we may have a clear but not a distinct idea of our souls (Astell 2002: 172–3).

as he ought' (Astell 2002: 172; my italics). That is to say, we cannot have a particular idea of the self as a distinct thing that can be abstracted from our thinking, willing, feeling, sensing, and so on, about every other object in our minds. And so this is why she says that 'we can't Know the Nature of our Souls Distinctly' (Astell 2002: 173).

I think this line of reasoning is ingenious for taking Descartes' own criteria of certainty—clear and distinct ideas—and turning them against his assertion that we can know the entire nature of our souls distinctly. To be consistent, Astell implies, Descartes ought to have conceded that we can never have a distinct idea of the soul as a thing whose essence consists solely in thinking, given that by his own lights a distinct idea is a perception that is 'so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear' (Descartes 1985: 207–8). We never have a perception of the self that is 'so sharply separated from all other perceptions'.

Of course, here a Cartesian might point out that all our ideas differ in terms of their 'objective reality'—their representational content or intentional objects—so a Cartesian might think that we could have a distinct idea of the self with a different objective reality or representational content to that of our other ideas: it's just the idea of the thing that's doing the thinking, we might say. From a Malebranchean standpoint, however, I think that Astell would reply that we never really have a representation of 'what the soul is' over and above our thinking, willing, feeling, and sensing about its objects. This is what she means when she says we have no distinct idea of the soul.

Following her denial that we can have a distinct idea of the soul, Astell further remarks that

where our Knowledge is Distinct, we may boldly deny of a subject, all that which after a careful Examination we find not in it: But where our Knowledge

is only Clear, and not Distinct, tho' we may safely Affirm what we see, yet we can't without a hardy Presumption Deny of it what we see not (Astell 2002: 173).

It follows from these claims that Astell thinks even though we may safely affirm all that we 'see' of the soul—that it is a thinking, willing, feeling, and sensing thing—we are in no position to determine dogmatically about the entire nature of the soul or about what the soul *is not*. In short, we are not entitled to affirm that 'absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing' (Descartes 1984: 54). Later in the *Proposal*, Astell reaffirms that we cannot have a complete idea of the soul's essence when she claims that prying into God's essence is 'an insufferable presumption in Creatures who are ignorant of their own' (Astell 2002: 210). In *The Christian Religion*, Astell likewise claims that her mind 'can't give me a full and satisfactory account of my own nature' (Astell 2013: §17). In a section headed '*Knowledge of ourselves and the world*', she suggests that to know ourselves, we must be 'acquainted with the weaknesses and the excellencies of human nature' (Astell 2013: §225). But in the next section she warns that our knowledge of that nature will only ever be imperfect, given that 'we have no idea of the noblest part of us' (Astell 2013: §226).

And thus we can see that Astell has a rather thin or weak metaphysical concept of the self. Of the experienced self, we can affirm that it has certain capacities and powers—that it is capable of perceiving, willing, feeling, sensing, and so on—but we cannot affirm anything about its entire essence or about what it is *not*. This limited notion introduces some significant problems for the moral theology underlying Astell's feminist proposal. In particular, it raises a concern about whether or not her core feminist insights—about self-love, self-preservation, and self-esteem—depend

upon a hopelessly obscure and indeterminate idea. Astell herself says that we should not ‘make use of any Word, which has not a Distinct Idea annex’d to it’, and we should be wary of those words that have only ‘loose and indeterminate’ ideas joined to them (Astell 2002: 171). The *self* would appear to be such a word in her philosophical vocabulary. By drawing heavily upon the concepts of self-love, self-preservation, and self-esteem, there is the danger that Astell undermines her own feminist arguments. To address this difficulty, let us now turn to those arguments.

ii. Self-love, self-preservation, self-esteem

Throughout her works, Astell is careful to distinguish between excellent and proper self-love, on the one hand, and vicious, mistaken, and improper self-love, on the other (see Astell 2002: 63, 98, 135, 164, 185, 227). The custom of the world, she says, deceives women into thinking they should be in love with their bodies—the animal, mechanical part of their human persons—and not their minds. As a consequence, women throw a great deal of time away on dressing themselves, on looking in the mirror, and on concerning themselves about fleeting outward appearances. In the *Proposal*, Astell’s main purpose is to get women to look inward and to think about improving their true selves—their immaterial souls—for the sake of attaining virtue and everlasting happiness. We must ‘divest our selves of mistaken Self-love’ (Astell 2002: 164), she says, and learn ‘what is truly to Love our selves’ (Astell 2002: 211). To do this, we must wish well toward *our minds*—we must bestow good upon them and not our bodies. This involves engaging in meditation and study in order to cultivate a virtuous disposition toward the true and the good. From Astell’s viewpoint, the woman who has proper self-love strives to make herself a better person, to

improve her understanding, and to attain excellence of character. She does not bestow her love and attention on the material aspects of her nature.

Nevertheless, if we cannot affirm anything about the soul's complete essence, or about what it is *not*, we might wonder if Astell is too quick to urge women to turn from the love of their bodies. Without a distinct idea of its entire nature, we cannot affirm with any certainty that the self is *not* essentially human, both a mind and a body; and, for all we know, the soul could be metaphysically dependent upon the body for its very existence.

In a crucial section of her *Christian Religion* (§229), Astell attempts to refute a similar viewpoint—Locke's famous 'thinking matter' hypothesis—with an argument for the claim that the mind and body are distinct. Her argument closely resembles Norris's probabilistic argument for the real distinction in his *Theory of the Ideal and Intelligible World* (1704). Like Norris, Astell appeals to a complete idea of the body as extended being and then argues that we can have a complete idea of thinking being that has no dependence upon this idea of extended being. She points out that we have 'no way to judge of things but by their ideas, or to distinguish *this* from *that*, but by the distinction and difference of ideas' (Astell 2013: §229). It therefore follows that because we can conceive of a thinking being (my mind) existing at the same time that we can conceive of an extended being (my body) *not* existing, we may conclude that thinking being and extended being are distinct and of different natures.

It is evident, however, that Astell is not really entitled to assert that we can have a 'complete idea' of thinking being insofar as 'complete' is opposed to merely

‘partial’.¹¹ It is true, I may have a rather clear intuitive grasp or inward consciousness of my self—I might have an ‘idea’ in that looser, wider sense that Astell employs to refer to any perception or thought in the mind. I might have vivid phenomenological experiences of my self perceiving some truth, or willing some good to my self, and feeling both pleasure and pain. But by the lights of Astell’s own philosophy, from the inner consciousness of these experiences, I can only ever become aware of *part* of my nature, I can never have a distinct idea of my self separate and distinguished from all other perceptions. Because I do not have a distinct idea of the self, there is much that is still hidden from me; in short, I have only an imperfect knowledge of my nature or essence. It is possible, therefore, that I might turn out to be essentially human, and that I might be justified in loving both my mind and my body.¹²

Similar difficulties arise for Astell’s concept of self-preservation. According to Astell, John Locke’s moral-political law of self-preservation is indeed a ‘Fundamental Law of Nature’, but only if we ‘take the *Soul* for *Self*’ (Astell 1704: 24). She urges her readers to be wary of ‘the bare *meaning*’ of self-preservation, ‘at least if you have any regard to real Self-Preservation, and think your Souls of greater moment than your Lives or Estates’ (Astell 1996b: 141–2). In a significant passage of *The Christian Religion*, she specifically directs her remarks against Locke’s *Two Treatises* definition, asking her readers:

What then is *self-preservation*, that fundamental law of nature, as some call it,¹³
to which all other laws, divine as well as human, are made to do homage? And

¹¹ In the relevant passage of her *Christian Religion*, Astell stipulates that a complete idea is ‘opposed to abstraction, or a partial consideration of an idea’ (Astell 2013: §229).

¹² To be fair to Astell, in *The Christian Religion*, she does offer further arguments in favour of the mind-body distinction (see Astell 2013: §§226–31), some of which comport better with her denial of perfect self-knowledge. I thank an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention. Here my purpose is only to demonstrate that her Malebranchean concept of the self undermines a crucial premise of her §229 real distinction argument against Locke.

¹³ In his *Two Treatises*, Locke defines self-preservation as ‘this fundamental, sacred, and unalterable law’ (Locke 1988: II.149). My references to the *Two Treatises* are to treatise and section number.

how shall it be provided for? Very well; for it does not consist in the preservation of the person or “composite,” but in preserving the mind from evil, the mind which is truly the self, and which ought to be secured at all hazards. It is this “self-preservation” and no other, that is “a fundamental sacred and unalterable law” (Astell 2013: §274).

In Astell’s opinion, it’s important to preserve the mind from evil, because this is the true self that God will eventually hold morally accountable for its actions. Because the mind is an immaterial being, we can know that it is naturally immortal: it is without parts and therefore by its own nature incorruptible, ‘it must always be the same individual being, and can never cease to be’ (Astell 2013: §229). Depending upon its actions, then, the soul might be bound for either eternal misery or eternal happiness. It follows from the law of self-preservation, according to Astell, that women as well as men have a right to preserve their immaterial and immortal souls from eternal misery—from sin and damnation—through their own efforts. For this reason, they must be given the support they need to improve their reasoning skills and to hone their capacity for practical moral judgment.

Once again, however, it is not clear that Astell’s stance here is justified. If we cannot deny of the soul ‘all that which after a careful Examination we find not in it’ (Astell 2002: 172–3), it would appear that we cannot affirm with any metaphysical certainty that I am *not* essentially human and therefore not liable to corruption and decay. In short, if we have no idea of the self as wholly immaterial by nature, then it is not clear that Astell is entitled to argue against Locke’s concept of self-preservation as the preservation of life, limb, liberty, and estate. The self might turn out to be mortal and perishable after all.

Finally, Astell's Malebranchean notion of the self also has consequences for her all-important moral concept of self-esteem. In her view, even the 'Humblest Person that lives has some Self-Esteem' (Astell 2002: 233). Self-esteem is that feeling that arises whenever we value or admire ourselves on the basis of some good qualities we possess. If we value or admire those qualities that do not truly belong to the self—such as our outward beauty, our wealth, or our material possessions—then this is not true self-esteem. Once again, the problem for women is that the custom of the world teaches them to value themselves on their outward accomplishments alone. In response, Astell says: 'Let those therefore who value themselves only on external accomplishments, consider how liable they are to decay, and how soon they may be depriv'd of them, and that supposing they shou'd continue, they are but sandy Foundations to build Esteem upon' (Astell 2002: 111). She calls on her fellow women to cultivate *justified self-esteem* instead: 'since we *will* value our selves on somewhat or other,' she says, 'why shou'd it not be on the most substantial ground?' (Astell 2002: 232–3).¹⁴ For her, justified or legitimate self-esteem involves valuing ourselves upon something that *truly* belongs to our souls—those accomplishments that depend upon the free exercise of our will.¹⁵ She thus urges women to 'assert [their] Liberty', and to use their wills to acquire a 'Firmness and strength of Mind' through their intellectual efforts (Astell 2002: 120, 121). 'It is in your power to regain your Freedom,' she says, 'if you please but t'endeavour it' (Astell 2002: 121).

The difficulty, however, is that without a distinct idea of the entire essence of the self, we can never know whether or not we *are* free to will the things that we do. For all we know, this partially hidden, mysterious self might be controlled and determined by equally mysterious outside forces; our strong internal sense of our

¹⁴ On Astell's notion of justified self-esteem (also known as 'generosity'), see Broad 2015: 95–101; and Ahearn 2016.

¹⁵ On a similar emphasis in Descartes' writings, see Shapiro 2008.

freedom of will could turn out to be deceptive. God, for example, might necessitate everything that I choose, affirm, pursue, reject, deny, and avoid; even though it might feel as if I am the one in control of these everyday operations of the will, that could be an illusion.¹⁶

iii. The self's natural powers and capacities

And so we might ask: does Astell's Malebranchean notion of the self undermine the main feminist purpose of her *Proposal*? If there is no substance (literally) underlying her key notions of self-love, self-preservation, and self-esteem, do her feminist arguments collapse as a result?

I think the answer to both questions is No. While Astell's limited notion of the self is rather lacking in strong metaphysical support, it nevertheless suffices for the practical purposes of her feminist treatise. In the *Proposal*, as we have seen, Astell's main practical goal is to get women thinking about their true selves in order to cultivate a disposition toward virtue and happiness. Toward this end, she encourages every woman to begin with the one indubitable truth about themselves—that they are capable of thought. 'All may *Think*,' she says, everyone 'may use their own Faculties rightly, and consult the Master who is within them' (Astell 2002: 168).¹⁷ By looking inward, women will come to see that they have 'the best Director' for their moral conduct in their own minds—that is, in their capacity for natural reason. 'I call it natural,' Astell says, 'because I shall not send you further than your Own Minds to

¹⁶ Andrew Pyle raises similar objections against Malebranche's assertion that his inner consciousness of self provides 'enough to demonstrate its immortality, spirituality, freedom' (Malebranche 1997: 239). Pyle doubts that these ontological theses can be founded on phenomenological experience alone, noting that 'Malebranche's departure from Descartes leaves him wide open to sceptical attack. If my notion of the soul is just "whatever it is in me that thinks and feels", even if I can show that it is non-material, it is hard to provide plausible grounds for the orthodox theological conclusions' (Pyle 2003: 207).

¹⁷ Later, in her *Christian Religion*, Astell likewise says 'That we all *think*, needs no proof' (Astell 2013: §229).

learn it' (Astell 2002: 166). Even the most dull and foolish of women can ask herself: 'Can [I] Think and Argue Rationally about a Dress, an Intreague, an Estate? Why then not upon better Subjects? The way of Considering and Meditating justly is the same on all Occasions' (Astell 2002: 160).

One of the main purposes of Astell's female academy is to take women out of the hustle and bustle of the external world, in order to look inward and recognise that they have this natural capacity. 'Nature teaches us Logic,' she says, 'which all who reflect on the Operations of their own Minds will find out 'em selves' (Astell 2002: 189). In this retreat, she says, 'by that Learning which will be here afforded, and that leisure we have, to enquire after it, and to know and reflect on our own minds, we shall rescue ourselves out of that woful incogitancy we have slipt into, awaken our sleeping Powers and make use of that Reason which God has given us' (Astell 2002: 95). The academy's curricula will help women to think more clearly, to follow careful rules for thinking, and to purify their minds from the passions, and from the love and desire of material things. Its main purpose will be to 'fix all our Attention on ... things of the greatest moment', so that our minds are not busied or struck with '*little things*' (Astell 2002: 218).

In sum, even though a woman might not have a distinct idea of her self, she can nevertheless have direct internal awareness of her own powers and capacities. The crucial act of awakening 'our sleeping Powers' requires only an inner awareness that we *have* those powers; it is not necessary to have a distinct idea of the essence of the self as a wholly thinking thing. Using these powers, a woman might then proceed to improve her natural capacity for reason through training and study. Every woman can maintain the 'Empire of [her] Reason', according to Astell, simply through an exercise of the will: a decision to focus her attention on the right things (Astell 2002:

218, 221). By attentively engaging in the search for the true and the good, a woman might perfect her capacity for practical moral judgment and come to cultivate a virtuous disposition of character.

At this point, a persistent critic might object: but what if a woman is convinced that she is essentially human, and that her preservation consists in sleeping, eating, and drinking her life away? And what if she strongly believes that the soul is *not* immortal? Why should she love and esteem only her thinking self? Why shouldn't she also eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow she will die? Along similar lines, we might also doubt the mind's capacity to freely bestow its attention upon 'things of the greatest moment'. It might turn out to be the case that all my thoughts and actions are necessitated by external forces over which I have no control. What then becomes of that 'Natural Liberty' within us (Astell 2002: 201): perhaps it is merely a chimera? It would appear that without a full-blooded metaphysical concept of the soul—as a wholly essentially immaterial, immortal substance—Astell's consciousness-raising loses some of its prime motivational force.

In response, Astell would say every reasonable woman must act upon the conjectural probability that she *is* an immaterial, immortal being, capable of exercising her free will. In this lifetime, she points out, when it comes to the matter of attaining virtue and happiness for our selves, we are frequently obliged to act on the basis of moral rather than metaphysical or 'Mathematical Certainty' (Astell 2002: 150). Metaphysical certainty provides us with an indubitable, self-evident, 'scientific' demonstration of what is the case; whereas moral certainty provides us only with truths that are simply 'unreasonable' to doubt, though we might be psychologically capable of doubting them (Astell 2002: 150).

The assertion that ‘I have free will’ is a case of moral certainty: I might be able to doubt that I am really free, but I nevertheless feel this freedom within me. ‘We are conscious of our own Liberty,’ Astell says, ‘who ever denies it denies that he is capable of Reward and Punishments, degrades his Nature and makes himself but a more curious piece of Mechanism’ (Astell 2002: 148). It is therefore unreasonable to doubt our freedom of will. Likewise, it would appear that we cannot have metaphysical certainty of the immortality of the self. Yet, when it comes to the matter of attaining everlasting happiness for our souls, we are necessarily obliged ‘to Act presently’, according to Astell (Astell 2002: 178–9). The case of self-preservation is one of those ‘Cases in which we may sometimes be forc’d to Act only on Probable Grounds’ (Astell 2002: 179). We *must* choose, as Pascal would say, because to *not* make a choice is tantamount to risking the destruction of the soul.¹⁸ A reasonable person must see that the most prudent course of action is to behave as if the real self were an essentially immortal, immaterial thing, capable of living beyond the death of the body.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that Astell’s metaphysics of the self raises certain difficulties for her ideas concerning the soul’s natural immortality and freedom willfully to pursue the good. But her concept of the self is nevertheless remarkable for its subtlety and sophistication. As we have seen, Astell’s claim that ‘we cannot know the nature of our souls distinctly’ follows logically and consistently from Descartes’ notion of clear and distinct ideas. It also anticipates David Hume’s conception of the self in his *Treatise of Human Nature* of 1738. ‘For my part, when I enter most intimately into

¹⁸ These ideas are further spelt out in Astell 2013: §41, in the context of discussing whether or not to accept the Bible as the word of God. On Astell and Pascal, see Broad 2015: 57–60.

what I call *myself*,' Hume says in that work, 'I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pleasure or pain. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception' (Hume 2014: 165). In Hume's observation that 'I never can catch *myself*' and 'nor have we any idea of *self*' (Hume 2014: 165, 164), we find echoes of Astell's own Malebranchean sentiments. Writing several decades before Hume, Astell's main innovation on this thesis was to show her fellow women that, despite their limited, imperfect knowledge of the self, they could still use an internal awareness of their powers and capacities to raise themselves toward perfection.¹⁹

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