

Please note that these are earlier versions of the Introduction and Chapter 5 to my published work: Jacqueline Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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Introduction

Mary Astell (1666–1731) was an early modern philosopher who lived in an age of philosophical greats, such as John Locke, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Benedict Spinoza, and George Berkeley. Like these men, she asked questions concerning the foundations of knowledge, the existence of God, the nature of soul and body, and our duties and obligations as moral and political subjects. Unlike these men, she was preoccupied with the concerns of women: their lack of education, their subjection in marriage, and the general absence of freedom in their lives. In a number of her works, she developed a moral theory designed to help the female sex attain lasting wisdom, virtue, and happiness. Toward those ends, she often distinguished between two types of woman or female character—the one weak and dissatisfied, the other strong and at peace with the world. In this book, I examine Astell’s moral project to bring about an awakening in her fellow women so that they might become

the second character type. More specifically, I examine the epistemological, theological, metaphysical, ethical, and political principles underlying her project of reformation.

Let me begin by spelling out the different character types.

The first woman, according to Astell, has a ‘weak and injudicious’ mind; she is someone who ‘lives at Random without any design or end’.¹ Her happiness depends on other people, material things, and circumstances beyond her control. She is especially concerned about the opinions of men: she likes to hear herself complimented, she enjoys one man’s attention, and she welcomes the gaze of another. Because her pleasures arise from ‘the constant flattery of external Objects’, she is ‘perpetually uneasy’, and she is anxious about ‘the great uncertainty and swift vicissitudes of worldly things’.² She mourns the loss of youth and beauty. To distract herself, she plays card games, she visits the theatre, and she reads the latest novels and romances. Her humour must be ‘cocker’d and fed with Toys and Baubles to still its

¹ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 93. Hereafter the first and second parts of this work are referred to as *Proposal I* and *Proposal II* respectively.

² Astell, *Proposal I*, 92.

frowardness ... like the crazy stomach of a sick Person'.³ In her quasi-intellectual pursuits, she skips from one subject to the other, never penetrating a topic to its depths, nor ever achieving anything but a superficial understanding. In her personal relationships, she is fickle and inconstant. She imagines that someone will make her happy, and when her passion cools and the object of her desire no longer pleases her, she feels empty and dissatisfied—and resentful. According to Astell, such women

are always in extreams, they are either violently good or quite cold and indifferent; a perpetual trouble to themselves and others, by indecent Raptures, or unnecessary Scruples; there is no Beauty and order in their lives, all is rapid and unaccountable; they are now very furious in such a course; but they cannot well tell why, and anon as violent in the other extream.⁴

By contrast, the second type of woman has 'a sort of Bravery and Greatness of Soul'. Her happiness does not depend on 'so mutable a thing as this World'—other people, material goods, and the variable opinions of men.⁵ She does not waste her time daydreaming about the

³ Ibid., 93.

⁴ Ibid., 71–2.

⁵ Ibid., 111.

acquisition of a wealthy husband, a lavish estate, or ‘a well-chosen Pettycoat’.⁶ She is unmoved by both good and bad fortune: she is neither ‘corrupted by the one’ nor ‘deprest by the other’.⁷ She knows that her happiness does not depend on anything outside her own mind, and that what really matters is that she is a good and virtuous person. Above all, this woman lives her life in accordance with reason. She comprehends the rational principles underlying her actions. She conducts her life with purpose and order, with the true good always in mind. She is always cheerful, always ready with a smile and a kind word for others.⁸ She does not see someone else’s success as a cause for envy; she has too strong a sense of self-esteem to

⁶ Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, ed. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 80.

⁷ Astell, *Proposal I*, 111.

⁸ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, ed. Jacqueline Broad, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series* (Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing, 2013), §§161, 255.

Unless otherwise noted, all my subsequent references to *The Christian Religion* are to subsections in this modernized edition. The subsection numbers (§§) in this volume correspond exactly to those in the 1717 second edition, available in *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (by subscription).

want to pull others down.⁹ Similarly, she has the mental fortitude to stand firm in the face of opposition, such as ridicule and criticism from others. In her close friendships, she is loving, loyal, and unselfish: she desires her friends' well-being for their own sakes and not for her own pleasure or profit. She watches 'all opportunities', attacks 'all avenues', and calls in 'all assistances to serve them [her friends] in their most important interest'.¹⁰ On the whole, she leads 'a cheerful and pleasant life, innocent and sedate, calm and tranquile'.¹¹ She cannot avoid feeling the passions on some occasions; she would hardly be human, if she did not feel love, desire, or joy every now and then. But her passions are always reserved for things that merit them: she loves those who steadfastly pursue virtue, she has a desire to see good prevail, and she feels joy when a friend triumphs.¹² In short, this woman lives up to the dignity of her nature as a free and rational being.

In her writings, Astell highlights the fact that seventeenth-century custom encourages women to cultivate the first set of character traits. The usual practices and fashions of society, she says, encourage the female sex to become irrational and foolish. Women are given so little

⁹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §§152–60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §208.

¹¹ Astell, *Proposal I*, 112.

¹² Astell, *Christian Religion*, §254.

training in reason and argument that they are incapable of recognizing the true source of their happiness. But their disposition to ignorance and folly is ‘acquired not natural’, and can be overcome with proper study and self-discipline.¹³ Astell therefore calls for the establishment of an academy where women can receive a proper education in religion and philosophy, so that they might see that happiness comes from doing ‘that which is fit to be done’ or ‘what is really proper for Rational Creatures to do’.¹⁴ In her view, no woman is necessarily condemned to have a weak disposition of character—every woman is capable of moral and intellectual improvement.

Scholars have yet to examine this ethical dimension of Astell’s writings in full.¹⁵ In the 1980s, commentators approached Astell as one of the earliest English feminists. They highlighted her call for the higher education of women in her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694; 1697), as well as her criticisms of the injustices of married life in *Some Reflections*

¹³ Astell, *Proposal I*, 59.

¹⁴ Astell, *Proposal II*, 206.

¹⁵ For an overview of Astell scholarship to date, see Jacqueline Broad, ‘Mary Astell’, *Oxford Bibliographies* [online bibliography], ed. Margaret King (2014)

<<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>> accessed 30 September 2014.

upon Marriage (1700).¹⁶ In the 1990s, scholars started to investigate Astell's wider political thought.¹⁷ She was interpreted as a critic of the contractarian philosopher John Locke and as a

¹⁶ See Joan K. Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism', *The Journal of British Studies*, 19/1 (1979), 53–75; Hilda L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 115–39; Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Bridget Hill, introduction in Mary Astell, *The First English Feminist: 'Reflections on Marriage' and Other Writings by Mary Astell*, ed. and intro. Bridget Hill (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), 1–62.

¹⁷ See Ruth Perry, 'Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 23 (1990), 444–57; John McCrystal, 'Revolting Women: The Use of Revolutionary Discourse in Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared', *History of Political Thought*, 14/2 (1993), 189–203; Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell (1666–1731), Critic of Locke', *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1995), 621–33; Patricia Springborg, 'Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics', in Hilda L. Smith, ed., *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105–25; Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell and John Locke', in Steven Zwicker, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650 to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 276–306; Van C. Hartmann, 'Tory Feminism in Mary Astell's

strident opponent of the Whig theories of liberty, resistance, and toleration, especially in her 1704 political pamphlets: *Moderation truly Stated*, *An Impartial Enquiry*, and *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*.¹⁸ Commentators puzzled over how Astell could be both a feminist and a

Bart'lemy Fair', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 28/3 (1998), 243–65; Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 142–60; Patricia Springborg, 'Republicanism, Freedom from Domination, and the Cambridge Contextual Historians', *Political Studies*, 49 (2001), 851–76; and Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell, Critic of the Marriage Contract/Social Contract Analogue', in Anita Pacheco, ed., *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 216–28. Springborg's articles are republished in Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ [Mary Astell], *Moderation truly Stated: Or, A Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitul'd, Moderation a Vertue. With a Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Aveanant, Concerning His late Essays on Peace and War* (London: J. L. for Rich. Wilkin, 1704); [Mary Astell], *An Impartial Enquiry Into The Causes Of Rebellion and Civil War In This Kingdom: In an Examination of Dr. Kennett's Sermon, Jan. 31, 1703/4. And Vindication of the Royal Martyr* (London: E. P. for Richard Wilkin, 1704); republished in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge:

High-Church Tory: they noted that her support for women's freedom of mind seemed to be inconsistent with her support for a political party that opposed freedom of conscience, the right to resistance, and other perceived threats to church and sovereign. More recently, in the past decade or so, Astell has been interpreted as a rhetorician, an eloquent and skilled defender of women in print.¹⁹ She has also been described as an Anglican apologist,²⁰ and as an avid defender of the Protestant right to make one's own judgments about religion,²¹ as

Cambridge University Press, 1996); and [Mary Astell], *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* (London: E. P. for Richard Wilkin, 1704), also republished in *Astell: Political Writings*.

¹⁹ Christine Mason Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary, AB: The University of Calgary Press, 2005).

²⁰ Hannah Smith, 'Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), and the Anglican Reformation of Manners in Late-Seventeenth-Century England', in William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, eds., *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 31–47. See also Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell', 73.

²¹ Sarah Apetrei, "'Call No Man Master Upon Earth": Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and an Unknown Correspondence', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41/4 (2008), 507–23; and Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

seen in her *Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705), and a 1705 correspondence with the Nonjuring bishop George Hickee.²² In various philosophical articles, scholars have also interpreted Astell as a metaphysician,²³ an epistemologist,²⁴ and a philosopher of the mind.²⁵

²² [Mary Astell], *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705); and 'The Controversy betwixt Dr. Hickee & Mrs. Mary Astell', in 'The Genuine Remains of the late Pious and Learned George Hickee D.D. and Suffragen Bishop of Thetford', Lambeth Palace Library, London, MS 3171, fols. 171–205.

²³ Kathleen M. Squadrito, 'Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 25/3 (1987), 433–9; Kathleen M. Squadrito, 'Mary Astell', in Mary Ellen Waithe, ed., *A History of Women Philosophers*, 4 vols (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), iii, 87–99; E. Derek Taylor, 'Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Matter', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62/3 (2001), 505–22; and Eileen O'Neill, 'Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation', in William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, eds., *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 145–63.

²⁴ Deborah Boyle, 'Mary Astell and Cartesian "Scientia"', in Judy Hayden, ed., *The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99–112.

In what follows, I interpret Mary Astell first and foremost as a moral philosopher. I interpret her, that is, as a philosopher in the classical sense of someone who is concerned with practical and theoretical questions about how we should live.²⁶ In doing so, I do not challenge the prevailing scholarly interpretations of her philosophy. On the contrary, I hold that Astell is all the things that commentators have seen her to be: she *is* a feminist, a political theorist, a Tory pamphleteer, a rhetorician, an Anglican apologist, a devout Protestant, a metaphysician, a Cartesian rationalist, and a dualist. But I do maintain that by interpreting her primarily as a moral philosopher—as someone who asks the questions ‘what is the good life?’ and ‘how can we be happy?’—all the separate strands of her thought come together as a united and

²⁵ Cynthia Bryson, ‘Mary Astell: Defender of the Disembodied Mind’, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 13/4 (1998), 40–62; and Alice Sowaal, ‘Mary Astell’s *Serious Proposal*: Mind, Method, and Custom’, *Philosophy Compass*, 2 (2007), 227–43.

²⁶ Here I develop an interpretive stance I take in two previous essays: Jacqueline Broad, ‘Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom’, in William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, eds., *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 165–80; and Jacqueline Broad, ‘Mary Astell and the Virtues’, in Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell, Re-reading the Canon* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming).

consistent whole. It is my central thesis that Astell's moral theory lies at the heart of a philosophical system that includes a theory of knowledge (the subject of my chapter two), a theology based on reason and revelation (chapter three), a metaphysics of mind and matter (chapter four), a philosophy of the passions or emotions (chapter five), and a theory of love, friendship, and community (chapter six). I also argue that the same moral outlook grounds her critique of the tyranny of men over women in marriage (in chapter seven), and her views about the importance of moderation and obedience in political subjects (chapter eight).

I think it makes good sense to interpret Astell as a moral philosopher because she herself highlights the moral purpose underlying her works. In her second *Proposal*, Astell says that 'it is to little purpose to Think well and speak well, unless we *Live well*, this is our Great Affair and truest Excellency'.²⁷ 'Rational Creatures,' she says,

shou'd endeavour to have right Ideas of every thing that comes under their Cognizance, but yet our Ideas of Morality, our Thoughts about Religion are those which we shou'd with the greatest speed and diligence rectifie, because they are of most importance, the Life to come, as well as all the Occurences of This, depending on them. We shou'd

²⁷ Astell, *Proposal II*, 199.

search for Truth in our most abstracted Speculations, but it concerns us nearly to follow her close in what relates to the Conduct of our Lives.²⁸

Here Astell makes no distinction between our ‘Ideas of Morality’ and ‘our Thoughts about Religion’. To her way of thinking, moral philosophy and moral theology are interchangeable. True happiness comes from living in conformity with the will of God, or in accordance with the divine law as revealed through reason and scripture. In this respect, Astell upholds a divine law conception of ethics: she maintains that it would be morally wrong for someone not to fulfil a duty required of them by God.

Throughout this book, however, I interpret Astell’s project largely in terms of her theory of *virtue*, rather than her theory of duty.²⁹ I do not deny that she highlights the moral agent’s

²⁸ Ibid., 169–70.

²⁹ Readers should note that I do not claim that Astell has a *virtue ethic*. This is because, strictly speaking, a virtue ethicist treats virtue or the moral character as the primary principle of moral evaluation, whereas Astell regards our duties—to God, to ourselves, and to other people—as paramount. I therefore characterize her views about moral character as a *virtue theory*, an account of virtue incorporated into a wider ethical theory. On the distinction between virtue ethics and virtue theory, see Rosalind Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics’, *The*

obligation to follow the divine law, or to act in accordance with duty. She is a Christian deontologist, to be sure, in so far as she holds that certain acts toward God, ourselves, and our neighbours are right or obligatory. But in my view, Astell is deeply concerned with cultivating the agent's *disposition* to follow the divine law. For her, it is not enough for agents simply 'to stick to God's rules', so to speak; they must also have the right motives, feel the appropriate emotions, and choose and act accordingly in any given situation. I therefore associate her philosophy with that ethical approach that places character, rather than rules or actions, at the centre of moral theory.³⁰ I do so because Astell strongly urges the

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online encyclopedia], ed. Edward Zalta (Fall 2013) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/>> accessed 1 August 2014.

³⁰ There has been a recent revival of interest in virtue ethics as an attractive alternative to Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, two ethical approaches that have dominated modern moral philosophy since the turn of the eighteenth century. For recent work in virtue ethics, see Roger Crisp, ed., *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Christine Swanton,

cultivation of those admirable character traits known as ‘the virtues’, such as love (or benevolence), generosity (or greatness of soul), courage, prudence, and moderation. Like Plato and Aristotle,³¹ and later Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, she maintains that a good person is someone who lives her life in accordance with the virtues. More specifically, in her view, a virtuous agent has a habitual disposition to feel, choose, or act in accordance with right reason (natural reason informed by revelation). An agent does not become virtuous simply by performing one or two virtuous actions. To cultivate lasting virtue, Astell says, an

Virtue Ethics, A Pluralistic View (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Daniel C. Russell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³¹ Astell’s understanding of these ancient philosophers likely comes from contemporary sources, such as René Rapin’s *Comparison of Plato and Aristotle* (1673), since she was unable to read Latin and Greek. Rapin’s work is cited in notes that Astell made toward a second edition of *Proposal II*. For details, see E. Derek Taylor, ‘Mary Astell’s Work Towards a New Edition of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part II’, *Studies in Bibliography*, 57 (2005–6), 197–232.

agent must be in the habit of performing her actions upon the right principles, for the right ends, with the right intentions, and in the right manner.³²

Importantly, according to Astell, the acquisition of virtue requires a certain wisdom or knowledge. It requires knowledge of the right ends and principles on which to base our actions; it also demands a certain self-knowledge, or an understanding of our own worth and abilities; and it requires knowledge of the best means to bring about the right end in different times and places. This is why, according to Astell, women should be formally educated in philosophy and religion. To acquire virtue, women need to learn about the existence and nature of God (the divine lawgiver), about the existence and nature of the soul (an immortal, immaterial substance), and about how to regulate the passions in accordance with reason. They must learn to be above the world and its petty concerns (to have generosity of spirit) and to have a disinterested goodwill (a love of benevolence) toward their fellow human beings. They must not behave like tyrants by selfishly desiring others purely for their own gratification, or by treating others as slaves to their will. Rather, they must feel and behave toward other people in the right way, for the right reasons, depending on the circumstances (they must be moderate, in Astell's sense of this term).

³² Astell, *Christian Religion*, §327.

On the whole, as we will see, Astell emphasizes that the acquisition of virtue is the only true means to a woman's happiness: 'tis Virtue only,' Astell says, 'which can make you truly happy in the world as well as in the next.'³³ Because virtue relies on the individual's capacity for judgement, a woman's happiness ultimately depends on herself alone: 'Happiness is not *without* us,' according to Astell, 'it must be found in our own Bosoms.'³⁴ This is not happiness in the sense of a momentary conscious state of pleasure and delight. It is, rather, a continuous state of peace and well-being: 'a sedate and solid thing, a tranquility of mind, not a boisterous and empty flash'.³⁵ Once a woman has obtained this tranquillity of mind, her moral reformation is complete.

1.1 Influences

In developing this moral outlook, Astell appropriates certain ideas and concepts from ancient and modern philosophical sources. In a letter to her friend Ann Coventry, Astell refers approvingly to the Stoic thinker Marcus Aurelius (121–80) and his view that we should not

³³ Astell, *Proposal I*, 111.

³⁴ Astell, *Proposal II*, 225.

³⁵ Astell, *Proposal I*, 123.

depend ‘upon Foreign Supports, nor beg [our] Happiness of another’.³⁶ In his *Meditations*, Marcus emphasizes the importance of emotional detachment from worldly concerns. From his perspective, passionate anger in the face of life’s difficulties is both absurd and unhelpful; it is also inconsistent with the nature and dignity of a rational creature. The attainment of happiness, on this view, requires a calm acceptance of that which cannot be changed. Astell’s theory of happiness is Stoic in so far as it relies on these same insights: that external objects are outside of our control, and that true happiness arises from our inner life alone, something that *is* in our power.

Astell also articulates an Epicurean idea of happiness in so far as she holds that the greatest pleasure in life is a certain ‘tranquillity of mind’, or freedom from mental anxiety and perturbation, as well as freedom from bodily pain (*ataraxia* in the Epicurean philosophy). The Epicureans maintain that unhappiness comes from striving to fulfil desires that are

³⁶ Astell says ‘Marcus Antoninus I know reproaches me for what he calls “depending on Foreign supports, & begging our Happiness of another”’ (see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 373). She quotes from Marcus Aurelius, *The Emperor Marcus Antoninus His Conversation With Himself. ... Translated into English from the Respective Originals. By Jeremy Collier, M.A. The Second Edition Corrected* (London: Richard Sare, 1708): ‘Let your Air be chearful; depend not upon Foreign Supports, nor beg your Happiness of another’ (190).

unnatural, or by fixing our desires on objects that are potentially unattainable. Astell observes that there is almost ‘too much Epicurism’ in her moral thought, since ‘by living ... according to nature’ we are capable of taking delight in the simplest things, and so happiness is ‘in almost everyone’s power’.³⁷ She does express some ambivalence toward Epicureanism, however: she is especially dismissive of the ‘world of absurdities’ arising from Epicurean atomism, and she is deeply suspicious of any metaphysical theory that denies the immateriality and immortality of the soul (the Epicureans hold that the soul is both corporeal and mortal).³⁸ She thus distinguishes her Christian theory of virtue from the Epicurean approach by referring to it as ‘in truth the highest *Epicurism*’, or by branding good Christians as ‘the truest *Epicures*’.³⁹

Above all, Astell’s philosophical works are reflective of the ‘new way of ideas’ in her time. Of the early modern figures, she has most in common with the French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1714) and his English follower John Norris (1657–1711), two seventeenth-century thinkers who develop a sophisticated synthesis of Cartesian and Augustinian principles in their texts. Astell’s writings include direct citations from Richard

³⁷ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §312.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, §81.

³⁹ Astell, *Proposal I*, 86; *Proposal II*, 221.

Sault's 1694–5 English translation of Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité* (*Search After Truth*, originally published in French in 1674–5),⁴⁰ as well as numerous references to John Norris's *Practical Discourses* (1693), his *Theory and Regulation of Love* (1688), his *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* (1690), and his *Theory of the Ideal and Intelligible World* (1701–4). Like these men, Astell is indebted to the philosophy of René Descartes (1596–1650). Following Descartes, she adopts a rationalist epistemology, as well as ontological arguments for the existence of God, a dualist metaphysics of mind and body, and a moral theory of virtue and the passions. On more than one occasion, she cites from English translations of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) and his *Passions of the Soul* (1649), and she appropriates the method of his followers Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the authors of *Logic, or the Art of Thinking* (1662). She also refers to popularizations of Descartes' moral ideas in the works of Englishmen such as Henry More and John Somers.

But while Astell is a firm Cartesian, she also follows Malebranche and Norris in denying that we can have clear and distinct ideas of the soul and of God, and she is not a supporter of

⁴⁰ See Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (1706), in *Astell: Political Writings*, 21–2; and Nicolas Malebranche, *Malebranche's Search After Truth, or, A Treatise of the Nature of the Humane Mind and of its Management for Avoiding Error in the Sciences*, trans. Richard Sault, 2 vols (London: J. Dunton and S. Manship, 1694–5), ii, 359.

innate ideas. Like these men, she is deeply Augustinian in terms of her moral and epistemological commitments. She is especially committed to St Augustine's view that all created beings are dependent on God, for what they know as well as for what they are. According to Augustine, the human mind is capable of understanding whatever it understands only by means of God's 'light' or epistemic 'illumination'. Along similar lines, Astell declares that 'reason is one sort and degree of divine revelation, for it is from the father of lights that we derive our illumination of any kind'.⁴¹ 'Tho' we are Naturally Dark and Ignorant,' she says, 'Yet in *his Light we may hope to see Light*.'⁴² More significantly, Augustine's theocentrism informs several crucial aspects of Astell's moral philosophy, including her suggestion that the soul naturally desires union with the divine, her claim that we ought to 'use' other people (but not 'enjoy' them), and her conviction that virtue depends on the right regulation of the love of God and his creatures. Like Augustine, Astell emphasizes that a virtuous agent is someone who has cultivated rightly ordered love.

⁴¹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §22.

⁴² Astell, *Proposal II*, 165. On the metaphor of light in Astell's writings, see Guyonne Leduc, 'Femmes et images de lumière(s): émancipation intellectuelle et sens de la vie chez Mary Astell', *XVII–XVIII. Bulletin de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Vie, formes et lumière(s). Hommage à Paul Denizot*, 38 (1999), 21–40.

Throughout this study, I examine Astell's place in the key philosophical debates of her time, her criticisms and appropriations of other philosophers in her day, and those principles in her moral thought that have had continuing relevance in philosophy as a discipline. I thus privilege the philosophical dimensions of Astell's moral thinking over the religious ones. Having said that, while I sometimes downplay Astell's religious outlook, I do not ignore it. Like Augustine himself, and his followers Malebranche and Norris, Astell's philosophy is always put to the service of Christian theology. Readers should therefore bear in mind that she tends to accept or reject an author's insights depending on their compatibility with her religious principles. Religion is the touchstone by which she judges the worth of any particular philosophical position, and the Bible is by far the most frequently cited text in her writings.

Finally, it must be noted that Astell builds on a growing tradition of feminist thought in her time. Though she rarely acknowledges predecessors, her writings implicitly develop the ideas of thinkers such as Anna Maria van Schurman, Hannah Woolley, Bathsua Makin, François Poulain de la Barre, and other defenders of women in the seventeenth century. These writers were also committed to showing that women were naturally capable of moral and intellectual improvement. In her *Dissertation on the Natural Capacity of Women for Study and Learning* (originally published in Latin, 1641), the Dutch scholar Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–78) called for the education of women—not only so that they might meet their domestic

duties, but so that they might live up to the dignity and perfection of their nature as human beings.⁴³ In *The Gentlewomans Companion* (1673), the English writer Hannah Woolley (1622?–c.1674) observed that most people thought a woman was ‘learned and wise enough if she [could] distinguish her Husbands Bed from anothers’; but in her view, a woman’s soul had ‘its efflux from the same eternal Immensity’ as a man’s, and was ‘therefore capable of the same improvement, by good Education’.⁴⁴ In her *Essay To Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), Bathsua Makin (1600–c.1675) likewise insisted that a learned

⁴³ See Anna Maria van Schurman, *Dissertatio de Ingenii muliebris ad Doctrinam, & meliores Litteras aptitudine* (Leiden: Elsevier, 1641). In 1659, this text was published in English as *The Learned Maid; Or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar?* (London: John Redmayne, 1659). For recent English translations, see Anna Maria van Schurman, *Whether a Christian Woman Should be Educated and Other Writings from Her Intellectual Circle*, ed. and trans. Joyce L. Irwin, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Desmond M. Clarke, trans. and ed., *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewomans Companion; Or, A Guide to the Female Sex: Containing Directions of Behaviour, in all Places, Companies, Relations, and Conditions, from their Childhood down to Old Age* (London: A. Maxwell for Dorman Newman, 1673), 1.

education could help women ‘to imploy their Lives to those noble, and excellent Ends for which the Omnipotent and all-wise Creator made them’.⁴⁵ These writers argued that women possessed all the necessary psychological traits to be morally responsible for their choices and actions. To support their claims, they appealed to historical examples of wise and virtuous women: they cited figures from the scriptures, as well as famous names from Giovanni Boccaccio and Cornelius Agrippa’s works, and from various Greco-Roman sources. They also valorized the works and deeds of contemporary women, such as the philosophers Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Margaret Cavendish, the duchess of Newcastle. In doing so, these writers adopted an argumentative strategy that harkened back to the fifteenth-century *querelle des femmes*, an ongoing historical debate about the moral and intellectual competence of women.

In her own writings, Astell continues the spirit of the *querelle*. But she also follows in the footsteps of a feminist who shunned appeals to ancient authority and historical sources—the

⁴⁵ [Bathsua Makin], *An Essay To Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen, In Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues. With An Answer to the Objections against this Way of Education* (London: J. D. to be sold by Tho. Parkhurst, 1673), 7. For a modern edition, see Frances Teague, *Bathsua Makin, Woman of Learning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated Presses, 1998).

French Cartesian Poulain de la Barre (1647–1723). In his *Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes* (originally published in French, 1673), Poulain critically examines the widely held belief that women are intellectually inferior to men and ought to be treated as social inferiors.⁴⁶ In his Cartesian-inspired critique, he finds that this opinion is merely an ill-grounded prejudice rather than a well-established truth, and that many female defects can be attributed to poor education rather than innate deficiency. In his

⁴⁶ François Poulain de la Barre, *Discours physique et moral de l'égalité des deux sexes* (Paris: Jean Du Puis, 1673). In 1677, this work was published in English as *The Woman as Good as the Man: Or, The Equality of Both Sexes* (London: T. M. for N. Brooks, 1677). For a modern French edition, see François Poulain de la Barre, *De l'égalité des deux sexes. De l'éducation des dames. De l'excellence des hommes*, ed. Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin (Paris: J. Vrin, 2011). For recent editions in English, see François Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man; Or, the Equality of Both Sexes*, ed. and intro. Gerald M. MacLean (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988); François Poulain de la Barre, *Three Cartesian Feminist Treatises*, intro. and ed. Marcelle Maistre Welch, trans. Vivien Bosley, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and François Poulain de la Barre, *A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes*, in Clarke, ed. and trans., *The Equality of the Sexes*. My quotations are taken from the last text.

view, women naturally possess the mental competence needed to engage in advanced studies—‘the mind has no sex’,⁴⁷ he says—and so women are perfectly capable of reflecting on their own natures, the nature of their bodies, and the nature of God. The only obstacle in their path is an acquired tendency to make hasty judgments—but this can be overcome. With proper attention and training, women might learn to think clearly and to arrange their thoughts in a natural order. They might come to comprehend the rules of conduct in wider society and fulfil their moral duties to God, themselves, and other people. Though there is no explicit evidence that Astell was familiar with Poulain’s text,⁴⁸ she raises many similar points in her own writings. In particular, like Poulain, Astell employs Cartesian ideas to show that women have all the necessary abilities to attain virtue and knowledge.

1.2 Life and works

To support the central thesis of this book, I draw material from all of Astell’s published works—with special emphasis on the *Proposals*, the *Reflections*, and *The Christian*

⁴⁷ Poulain de la Barre, *Physical and Moral Discourse*, 157.

⁴⁸ In England, Poulain’s *De l’égalité* enjoyed its greatest popularity only after Astell’s death, when it was repeatedly translated and plagiarized in English in the mid to late eighteenth century (see Clarke, introduction in *The Equality of the Sexes*, 12–13).

Religion—as well as her correspondences,⁴⁹ and various other surviving manuscripts. These sources reveal that Astell’s attention to the subject of how we should live was a career-long project. The same distinctive moral voice can be heard to some extent in all her writings. It is even present in an early manuscript of religious poetry from 1689.⁵⁰

Astell began writing these poems shortly after she left her native Newcastle-upon-Tyne to pursue her fortunes in London. Born in 1666, she was the only daughter in a respectable and

⁴⁹ In particular, Astell and Norris, *Letters*; ‘The Controversy betwixt Dr. Hicces & Mrs. Mary Astell’; and Mary Astell, ‘Letters to Ann Coventry’, in appendix C in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 366–99. I am extremely grateful to Prof. Perry for answering my recent queries about the current whereabouts of the original Astell-Coventry manuscripts. They are in the private collection of His Grace the Duke of Beaufort, at Badminton House in Gloucestershire, England.

⁵⁰ [Mary Astell], ‘A Collection of Poems humbly presented and Dedicated To the most Reverend Father in God William By Divine Providence Lord Archbishop of Canterbury & c’, 1689, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Rawlinson MSS Poet. 154, fols. 50–97. For transcriptions, see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 400–54. Astell’s collection is dedicated to the Nonjuror William Sancroft, archbishop of Canterbury.

well-to-do family with strong royalist ties.⁵¹ Her father was a gentleman and a member of the Company of Hostmen, a coal merchants' guild with considerable power and influence in the Newcastle township. In her early years, Astell received some tuition from an uncle, Ralph Astell, a clergyman who attended Emmanuel College at the height of Cambridge Platonism. It is likely that she also received a typical gentlewoman's education in the feminine accomplishments. Following her father's death in 1678, however, the family fell upon hard times. For a period, Astell's mother relied principally upon charity and loans for income. Then, following her mother's death, Astell moved to the city as 'a poor unknown', and embarked upon her writing career, seemingly without assistance. She would remain unmarried and childless all her life. In one of her early poems, she begins:

What shall I do? not to be Rich or Great,
 Not to be courted and admir'd,
 With Beauty blest, or Wit inspir'd,
 Alas! these merit not my care and sweat,
 These cannot my Ambition please,

⁵¹ For biographical details, see Florence M. Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916); Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*; and Jacqueline Broad, 'Mary Astell (1666–1731)', *Dictionary of Literary Biography, 252: British Philosophers, 1500–1799*, ed. Philip B. Dematteis and Peter S. Fosl (2002), 3–10.

My high born Soul shall never stoop to these;
 But something I would be that's truly great
 In 'ts self, and not by vulgar estimate.⁵²

In her later published works, Astell elaborates on these same Christian-Stoic themes of being above the world and attaining a sense of self-esteem despite lowly circumstances.

Soon after completing her manuscript of poems, Astell initiated an intellectual correspondence with John Norris, the rector of Bemerton and the main English disciple of the French philosopher Malebranche.⁵³ In their letters, from 1693 to 1694, Astell and Norris discuss the questions 'how should we love God?' and 'how should we love other people?' —

⁵² 'In emulation of Mr. Cowleys Poem call'd the Motto page I' (1688), in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 402.

⁵³ Though John Norris is often described as a 'Cambridge Platonist', this is a misnomer. Norris was an Oxford-educated man who held a number of moral and metaphysical views that were radically distinct from those of the leading Cambridge Platonists, Henry More and Ralph Cudworth. On Norris, see Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton (1657–1712)* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim, 1979); and W. J. Mander, *The Philosophy of John Norris* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

perhaps the most important recurring questions in all of Astell's writings.⁵⁴ To address these queries, the two writers draw on a distinction between the love of desire and the love of benevolence. According to this distinction, a love of desire (or concupiscence) is a general tendency of the soul to unite with, or to possess, its beloved object; while a love of benevolence (or charity) is a tendency of the soul to wish well toward the thing it loves. Astell and Norris agree that it is permissible to wish well toward other people, but they add that our love of desire must be reserved for God alone; we must never selfishly desire to possess our fellow human beings.

In November 1694, Astell and Norris's *Letters concerning the Love of God* appeared in print at the same time as Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*.⁵⁵ Astell published a second part

⁵⁴ These questions also struck a chord with the reading public. As late as 1732, 'a question in Mrs. Astell's letters to Mr. Norris' was still a topic of discussion at John Henley's 'Oratory' on the corner of Lincoln's Inn Fields. See the advertisement 'At the Oratory', *Daily Journal*, 3676 (14 October 1732).

⁵⁵ See Edward Arber, *The Term Catalogues, 1668–1709 A.D.; with a Number for Easter Term, 1711 A.D.*, 3 vols (London: Professor Edward Arber, 1903–6), ii, 518. Though the title page of Astell and Norris's *Letters* records the publication date as 1695, the *Term Catalogues*

to the *Proposal* in 1697.⁵⁶ While the first *Proposal* details Astell's plans for an all-female academy, the second offers 'a method of improvement' for women to practice at home. These works contain all the essential ingredients of Astell's moral philosophy: her guidelines for women concerning the attainment of wisdom, virtue, and happiness, her advice on perfecting one's capacity for practical judgment, her theory concerning the role of the passions in moral action, and her views about the moral significance of friendship.

These works also continue the themes of Astell and Norris's *Letters*. The view that we are obliged to love other people with a disinterested (that is, non-self-interested) love deeply informs Astell's project to further the moral and intellectual advancement of women. We should put aside petty prejudices and interests, she says, and recognize that all our fellow human beings are 'members of one body', or interdependent parts of the whole. For this reason, every human being—women as well as men—should be encouraged to be useful to themselves and to others. This is why women should receive a thorough education in reason and religion.

report that this work appeared in Michaelmas term (i.e., November) in 1694, together with the *Proposal*.

⁵⁶ Like all her works, both the first and second *Proposals* were published anonymously.

Together with the *Letters*, the first and second *Proposals* established Astell's reputation as an *ingénue* among the London intelligentsia. She was celebrated in her day, her books became bestsellers, and she was openly admired by the likes of John and Mary Evelyn, Daniel Defoe, John Dunton, and George Hicke. At the height of her fame, it appears that Astell also acquired the patronage and friendship of several wealthy gentlewomen, including Lady Catherine Jones, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Ann Coventry, and Elizabeth Hutcheson. These women provided invaluable financial and emotional support for Astell in the years to come. They also, to some extent, represented the target audience for her works: they were all devout, well-to-do gentlewomen with a strong interest in moral and religious subjects.

In 1700, Astell published her most popular feminist work, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*. In this work, Astell reflects upon the unhappy marriage of Hortense Mancini, the duchess of Mazarin, as a pretext for a broader examination of the moral dangers of marriage in her time. Here again Astell's emphasis is on the importance of women cultivating a certain greatness of mind and a disposition toward happiness, regardless of their external circumstances. But in this work, she also targets the questionable motives and brutish conduct of married men. Her point is that early modern marriages would be much happier if men married out of a love of benevolence toward their wives, rather than a selfish desire to possess their money and physical beauty.

In 1706, Astell published the third edition of her *Reflections* with a long preface defending the work's original design 'to Correct some Abuses, which are not the less because Power and Prescription seem to Authorize them'.⁵⁷ This new preface reflects the vocabulary of topical political debates in the early reign of Queen Anne. A few years earlier, Astell herself had entered those debates with three political pamphlets on the 'occasional conformity' controversy, a heated dispute concerning the practice of some Protestant dissenters who would occasionally take communion in Anglican churches solely in order to qualify for public office. In her tracts, Astell takes the side of High-Church Anglicans and the Tory political party, firmly against the Whig ideology of religious toleration and liberty of conscience. In her first and longest pamphlet, *Moderation truly Stated*, Astell applies her core moral theory to the 'hypocritical' actions of the occasional conformists. She concludes that these men do not exhibit the virtue of moderation—they do not proportion their esteem and value to the true worth of things. If they did, then they would acknowledge that being deprived of public office is a benefit, because it enables them to concentrate on spiritual affairs. In short, as we will see, Astell places the cultivation of virtue, and the extirpation of vice, at the centre of her arguments against occasional communion.

⁵⁷ Astell, *Reflections*, 7.

Astell's longest and most mature work of philosophy, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*, represents a continuation of the same feminist themes as the *Proposals*. Scholars agree that this work is the crowning achievement of Astell's career. At its heart lies a moral theology designed 'to put women upon thinking, upon an examination of their principles, the motives and grounds of their belief and practice, and the frame and temper of their minds'.⁵⁸ Toward this end, in a series of numbered, heavily annotated paragraphs, Astell presents reasoned arguments for the existence of God and for mind-body dualism, as well as counter-arguments to Locke's assertion that matter might possibly think. She also provides justifications in favour of loving other people with goodwill rather than selfish desire, and she recommends techniques for purifying the mind and regulating the passions, those disturbing mental states that occur as a result of the mind-body union. Above all, Astell offers advice on how a woman can learn to judge for herself about the true source of her happiness, and come to live up to the dignity of her nature as a free and rational being. *The Christian Religion* thus represents the completion of Astell's project to bring about the moral and intellectual advancement of the female sex.

In her final work, *Bart'lemy Fair*, Astell provides a critique of *A Letter concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), an anonymous work by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of

⁵⁸ Astell, *Christian Religion*, 45.

Shaftesbury.⁵⁹ In his *Letter*, Shaftesbury suggests that religious enthusiasts should be subjected to trials of public ridicule rather than punished and persecuted. In response, Astell declares that Shaftesbury's method is tantamount to exposing all morality and religion to public contempt. More specifically, she interprets his *Letter* as the work of an atheistic libertine, someone who values only the material world and fails to show due reverence to God and religion. Here again her focus is on exposing the flaws in a particular kind of moral character.

1.3 Legacy

When Astell died of breast cancer in May 1731, her literary reputation still preceded her: one obituary notice described her as 'a Gentlewoman much admir'd for several ingenious Pieces'.⁶⁰ There is some evidence that these 'several ingenious Pieces' were known to major philosophers of her day, including Leibniz, Locke, and Berkeley. In a 1697 letter to Claude Nicaise, Leibniz expresses his admiration for Astell's part in the epistolary exchange with Norris, describing her as 'a young English lady of 20' who had 'written admirably well'

⁵⁹ [Mary Astell], *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit; In which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, To my LORD **** (London: Richard Wilkin, 1709).

⁶⁰ *The Historical Register, Containing an Impartial Relation of all Transactions, Foreign and Domestick* (London: S. Nevill, [1731]), xvi, 26.

about the love of God. He adds with approval that ‘it is reasonable that ladies should be the judges of questions of love, for we must form a conception of it which conforms to the love of reasonable creatures’.⁶¹ Because women are especially subject to the passion of love, he implies, it is desirable that they form a reasonable conception of *how* they should love. In a 1697 letter to Sophie, electress of Hanover, Leibniz repeats this sentiment, noting that ‘Of all the matters of Theology there are none about which ladies have more right to judge than this one [i.e., the love of God], because it concerns the nature of love’. To form sound judgments about such matters, according to Leibniz, women ought to emulate admirable women, such as

⁶¹ Leibniz to Nicaise, 28 May 1697; in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols (Berlin: Georg Olms Hildesheim, 1960), ii, 569. Leibniz himself does not appear to have read the *Letters*, since he gets Norris’s views wrong (he implies that Norris supports a love of benevolence for God), and simply paraphrases the earlier praise of another correspondent. In a letter to Leibniz (4 May 1697), Thomas Burnet calls Astell ‘Miss Ash, a young girl of 20 years’ who has ‘has written marvellously well on the subject [of our love of desire for God]’ (Leibniz, *Philosophischen Schriften*, iii, 199). I am extremely grateful to Paul Gibbard and Jillian Britton for their assistance in the translation of these passages.

either Madeleine de Scudéry or ‘the English Lady Miss Norris [i.e., Astell], of whom it has been said that she has recently written so well on disinterested love’.⁶²

The extent of Locke’s familiarity with Astell’s writings is difficult to determine. He owned a copy of the first edition of Astell’s *Some Reflections upon Marriage*,⁶³ and one journal entry dated 22 December 1694 indicates that he purchased copies of Astell’s *Proposal* and possibly the Norris-Astell *Letters* for his good friend, Damaris Masham:

To Oates,

Delivered to my Lady Masham

M^{rs} Astels Proposal to y^e Ladies

⁶² Leibniz to Sophie, (fall?) 1697; in *Leibniz and the Two Sophies: The Philosophical Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Lloyd Strickland, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series* (Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing, 2011), 175–6.

⁶³ See John Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1965), 185: ‘1914. MARRIAGE. Some reflections upon Marriage occasion’d by the Duke & Dess: of Mazarines case [By M. Astell].’

M^r Norris's letters.⁶⁴

Locke ascribes the newly published *Proposal* to 'M^{rs} Astel', despite the fact that the work was issued anonymously (signed only 'By a Lover of her Sex'), and at that stage her authorship was not widely known. But while Masham alludes (somewhat disparagingly) to Astell in one of her published works,⁶⁵ Locke never mentions Astell again in any of his writings.

There are, however, good reasons to think that Berkeley was well acquainted with Astell's moral project. In 1714, a three-volume compilation titled *The Ladies Library* appeared in print, containing 'General Rules for Conduct in all the Circumstances of the Life of Woman'.⁶⁶ The selected works include several passages taken (without acknowledgement) from the works of some of the 'greatest Divines', men such as Jeremy Taylor, Richard

⁶⁴ 'Journals of John Locke', Bodleian Library, Oxford, Locke MS f. 10, fol. 251. Both *Letters Concerning the Love of God* and *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* were available in print in November 1694 (see Arber, *Term Catalogues*, ii, 518).

⁶⁵ See Damaris Masham, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1696). Masham refers to Norris's correspondent as 'a young Writer, whose Judgment may, perhaps, be thought Byassed by the Affectation of Novelty' (78).

⁶⁶ *The Ladies Library*, 3 vols (London: [Jacob Tonson], 1714), 'Preface', A6v.

Allestree, and François Fenélon.⁶⁷ In the first volume of this work, in a chapter on ‘Ignorance’, there are several long passages (approximately 20,000 words) reprinted verbatim from Astell’s first and second *Proposals*.⁶⁸ The passages contain Astell’s recommendations to women for acquiring a capacity for sound practical judgment. They include her distinction between knowledge, faith, and opinion, her criteria of truth and certainty (clear and distinct ideas), her six rules for thinking, and her ontological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God, among other topics. Though the title pages declare that *The Ladies Library*

⁶⁷ *Ladies Library*, ‘Preface’, A6r. In this period, copyright laws and citation practices were rather different to what they are today. Despite this, however, one publisher did accuse Steele of violating ‘the Right and Property every Bookseller hath to his Copies’; see Richard H. Dammers, ‘Richard Steele and *The Ladies Library*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 62/4 (1983), 530.

⁶⁸ Compare *Ladies Library*, 435–522, and Astell, *Proposal I*, 64–72; *Proposal II*, 144–97. Greg Hollingshead notes that the third volume of the same work includes unidentified passages on ‘the importance of mothering and of education by the mother’ (*Ladies Library*, iii, 205–19). See Greg Hollingshead, ‘Sources for *The Ladies’ Library*’, *Berkeley Newsletter*, 11 (1989–90), 1–9 (9). These passages have certain Astell overtones, but they are in fact from Damaris Masham, *Occasional Thoughts, In Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1705), 176–97.

is 'Published by Mr. Steele', George Berkeley was in fact the original compiler of the three volumes.⁶⁹ A contract dated 13 October 1713 bears witness to the fact that

The Reverend Mr. George Berkley Hath made a Comon place or Collection out of the best English Authors w^{ch} He hath agreed to print with Jacob Tonson Jun^r in two or more Vols in 8^o or 12^o & w^{ch} is to be Intituled the Ladys Library &c for w^{ch} Collection or Comon place the s^d Jacob Tonson hath paid & satisfy'd the said George Berkley.⁷⁰

It is therefore likely that Berkeley recommended Astell's *Proposal* for inclusion, and that Berkeley was the editor who excised Astell's approving comments about Malebranche's

⁶⁹ In the second edition of her *Bart'lemy Fair*, Astell seems to hold Steele responsible for the plagiarism. See [Mary Astell], *An Enquiry After Wit: Wherein the Trifling Arguing and Impious Raillery Of the Late Earl of Shaftsbury, In his Letter concerning Enthusiasm, and other Profane Writers, Are fully Answer'd, and justly Exposed* (2nd edn, London: John Bateman, 1722), A2v. For the claim that Berkeley was the true originator of the compilation, see Stephen Parks, 'George Berkeley, Sir Richard Steele, and the Ladies Library', *The Scriblerian and the Kit-Cats*, 13/1 (1980), 1–2.

⁷⁰ Parks, 'George Berkeley', 2. The transcription is taken from a manuscript in the James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Yale University, New Haven. For a photographic reprint of the letter, see E. J. Furlong and David Berman, 'George Berkeley and *The Ladies Library*', *Berkeley Newsletter*, 4 (1980), 4–15 (4).

theory ‘that we see all things in God’.⁷¹ (In his own works, Berkeley was at pains to deny the Malebranchean doctrine of vision in God.) But Berkeley seems to have been supportive of Astell’s plans to bring about a moral reformation in women through an institute of higher education. One recent scholar suggests that Astell’s proposal to educate women had a discernible impact on Berkeley’s Bermuda project to provide the ‘savage’ Americans with an academic (rather than a merely practical) education.⁷²

Astell’s feminist ideas also had a strong and immediate impact on other women in early modern England. At the start of the eighteenth century, a number of women either praised or emulated Astell in manuscript and print, including Mary Chudleigh,⁷³ Mary Evelyn,⁷⁴

⁷¹ Compare *Ladies Library*, 476, and Astell, *Proposal II*, 165–6.

⁷² See Nancy Kendrick, ‘Berkeley’s Bermuda Project in Context’, in Bertil Belfrage and Richard Brook, eds., *The Continuum Companion to Berkeley* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming). I am extremely grateful to Prof. Kendrick for providing me with a draft of this paper.

⁷³ See Margaret J. M. Ezell, introduction in Mary Chudleigh, *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, ed. Margaret J. M. Ezell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xxviii–xxx; and Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 106–8.

Elizabeth Thomas,⁷⁵ Mary Wortley Montagu,⁷⁶ the anonymous ‘Eugenia’,⁷⁷ Elizabeth Elstob,⁷⁸ and Sarah Chapone.⁷⁹ Mary Chudleigh (1656–1710), in particular, seems to have

⁷⁴ In a letter to Ralph Bohun, dated 7 April 1695, Mary Evelyn says ‘I suppose Mr Norrises letters to the Seraphick Lady with her answers and the same Ladyes proposalls to the Ladyes in a litle treatise are not unknowne to you’. In a later letter to John Evelyn, dated 2 November 1695, Mary Evelyn then says of Astell that ‘the woman has a good Character for virtue and is very litle above twenty which adds to her praise, to be so early good and knowing’. For these letters, see British Library, London, the ‘Evelyn Papers’ (uncatalogued).

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Thomas wrote a poem addressed ‘To Almystrea, on her Divine Works’. See [Elizabeth Thomas], *Miscellany Poems On Several Subjects* (London: Thomas Combes, 1722), 218–9. ‘Almystrea’ is an anagram of ‘Mary Astel[I]’.

⁷⁶ See Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 108.

⁷⁷ Eugenia urges her readers to pursue true knowledge and follow the example of ‘Mr Norris’s *Correspondent*’. See Eugenia, *The Female Advocate; Or, A Plea for the just Liberty of the Tender Sex, and particularly of Married Women* (London: Andrew Bell, 1700), vii.

⁷⁸ See Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 106, 109.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 82. See also Susan Paterson Glover, ‘Further Reflections Upon Marriage: Mary Astell and Sarah Chapone’, in Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, eds., *Feminist*

had the greatest sympathy for the moral philosophy underlying Astell's feminism. She seems to have known Astell personally and even dedicated a poem to her ('To Almystrea', an anagram of Mary Astel[l]).⁸⁰ Chudleigh was the author of *The Ladies Defence* (1701), a work with a preface blaming the irrationality and foolishness of women on the inadequacies of their education. She also wrote *Essays upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse* (1710), a collection of papers upon various moral subjects, such as the proper regulation of the passions, the virtue of friendship, and the best way to lead a good life. While she never mentions Astell's works, there are several notable similarities between Astell's moral views and those of Chudleigh in this text.

A few years after Astell's death, an anonymous work titled *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* (1735) appeared in print. This seventy-page treatise was the work of Sarah Chapone (1699–1764), a feminist thinker who later assisted George Ballard with his *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), a work that contains the first Astell

Interpretations of Mary Astell, Re-reading the Canon (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming).

⁸⁰ See Chudleigh, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703), in *Poems and Prose*, 66–7.

biography.⁸¹ Chapone's letters to Ballard attest to her familiarity with Astell's *Proposals* and her *Letters* to Norris. Chapone's close friend John Wesley, a founder of the Methodist religion, also recalls discussing Astell's *Proposal* with Chapone one night in 1731. In a letter to Ann Granville, Wesley reports 'the pleasure' that he and his friends had recently in Stanton, Chapone's hometown in Gloucestershire: 'nor was it a small share of it which we owed to Mrs. Astell,' he says,

Our dear Sappho [i.e., Chapone] showed us her *Proposal to the Ladies*, which gave us several agreeable conversations. Surely her plan of female life must have pleased all the thinking part of her sex, had she not prescribed so much of those two dull things, reading and religion. Reading, indeed, would be less dull, as well as more improving, to those who, like her, would use method in it; but then it would not rid them of so much time, because half a dozen books read in course would take up no more of that than one or two read just as they came to hand.⁸²

⁸¹ George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain (Who have been Celebrated for their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts and Sciences)*, intro. and ed. Ruth Perry (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 382–92.

⁸² John Wesley to Ann Granville, 17–18 June 1731; in *The Works of John Wesley*, xxv: *Letters I, 1721–1739*, ed. Frank Baker, Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 285–6. Baker notes that 'Wesley's diary shows that on May 29 he

But it appears to have been Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage*, and not the *Proposal*, that had the greatest impact on Chapone's feminist thought. Chapone's *Hardships* is an appeal to King George II and both houses of parliament 'for an Alteration or a Repeal of some Laws, which, as we conceive, put us [i.e., married women] in a worse Condition than *Slavery* itself'. In particular, Chapone calls for the establishment of reasonable and just safeguards for a wife's personal and real property, and property in her children. In this respect, she builds on the critique of marriage at the heart of Astell's *Reflections*.⁸³

It is likely that Astell's works had some influence on subsequent generations of women. Berkeley's *Ladies Library* was tremendously popular and reissued several times in the

"read Mrs. Astell to V[aranese] and M. G." (apparently Miss Nancy Griffiths of Broadway), and his accounts for that month indicate that he bought two copies (selling them separately in 1732); he read the book carefully June 7–9' (*Works of John Wesley*, xxv, 285–6 n.). Wesley evidently inspired Granville to read the *Proposal* as well. In a letter to Wesley, dated 29 September 1731, Granville writes: 'I have been much delighted with Mrs. Astell. I wish I had read her books sooner, and I would have endeavoured last winter to have been acquainted with her. For alas! among the many I am obliged to converse with how very few give anyone either pleasure or improvement!' (*Works of John Wesley*, xxv, 316–17).

⁸³ See Glover, 'Further Reflections'.

eighteenth century—women would have read his selected passages from the *Proposal* well into the enlightenment period. Some scholars speculate that Astell’s feminist writings may have had a notable impact on the novelists Samuel Richardson and Sarah Scott.⁸⁴ Astell’s reputation was also kept alive through Ballard’s account of her life and works in his *Memoirs*. In 1803, Mary Hays included Ballard’s entry on Astell in her *Female Biography; or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries* (1803), a six-volume history of learned women. Hays herself was a feminist thinker. In her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798), she examines whether or not the superiority of men is a result of the eternal and immutable laws of nature. Like Astell, she concludes that if women are intellectually inferior, then this is only because men deny them the means to improve their natural abilities.

⁸⁴ See Derek Taylor, ‘Clarissa Harlowe, Mary Astell, and Elizabeth Carter: John Norris of Bemerton’s Female “Descendants”’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 12/1 (1999), 19–38; Jocelyn Harris, ‘Philosophy and Sexual Politics in Mary Astell and Samuel Richardson’, *Intellectual History Review*, 22/3 (2012), 445–63; and Johanna Devereaux, ‘A Paradise Within? Mary Astell, Sarah Scott and the Limits of Utopia’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32/1 (2009), 53–67.

In the late nineteenth century, in the period known as ‘the first wave’ of feminism, Astell’s ideas were familiar to at least one key member of the suffragist movement, Harriett McIlquham (1837–1910).⁸⁵ McIlquham was a feminist author in her own right and strongly committed to defending the political rights of married women both to vote and to serve in office.⁸⁶ In the 1890s, while still politically active, she published two articles on Astell in the *Westminster Review*.⁸⁷ Demonstrating a strong familiarity with Astell’s writings, McIlquham declares that ‘Mary Astell must be regarded as the pioneer of the modern “Women’s Rights”

⁸⁵ In 1881, McIlquham was an organizer for the Birmingham Grand Demonstration for a woman’s right to vote; in 1889, she was a founding member of the Women’s Franchise League in London; then in 1892 she joined the Women’s Emancipation Union. For details, see Linda Walker, ‘McIlquham, Harriett (1837–1910)’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online edition] (2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/41213>> accessed 13 November 2013.

⁸⁶ On this topic, see Harriett McIlquham, *The Enfranchisement of Women: An Ancient Right, A Modern Need* (London: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1891).

⁸⁷ Harriett McIlquham, ‘Mary Astell: A Seventeenth-Century Advocate for Women’, *Westminster Review*, 149/4 (1898), 440–9; and Harriett McIlquham, ‘Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Mary Astell’, *Westminster Review*, 151/3 (1899), 289–99.

movement'.⁸⁸ In her 1902 essay 'Marriage: A Just and Honourable Partnership', McIlquham follows in Astell's footsteps by presenting a critique of marriage. In one passage, she echoes Astell's *Reflections* when she says of the marriage vows that 'the most ignorant man knows when he utters them that such a promise means next to nothing', and that a wife is expected to be subservient 'not only to the proper wishes, but even to the wrongdoing of the husband'.⁸⁹ This leads some men to think that 'they had only to marry, and then their wives become their slaves'.⁹⁰

In the early twentieth century, Astell was also remembered as a feminist pioneer. In 1916, in her first book-length biography, Florence Smith supports the view that Astell was 'the first defender of "the rights and privileges of her sex"', at least to the extent that she endeavoured to bring in a new era for women.⁹¹ In her *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf admires Astell as a woman who fought for female education 'in spite of all the impediments that

⁸⁸ McIlquham, 'Mary Astell', 445.

⁸⁹ Harriett McIlquham, 'Marriage: A Just and Honourable Partnership', *Westminster Review*, 157/4 (1902), 433–42 (436).

⁹⁰ McIlquham, 'Marriage', 440. Here McIlquham repeats the words of a local police magistrate.

⁹¹ Smith, *Mary Astell*, 164, 165.

tradition, poverty and ridicule could put in its way'.⁹² Later, in the period known as 'the second wave' of feminism, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) Germaine Greer includes a mistaken reference to 'Astell's' argument for female intellectual abilities.⁹³

In her recent, authoritative biography, Perry concludes that Astell's 'most significant and lasting contribution to the history of ideas has been her feminism, the by-product of her experiences as a woman in the Age of Reason. *She* would have been surprised to know what posterity has made of her, for she considered herself more a metaphysician than a projector, more a philosopher than a crusader.'⁹⁴ I agree with Perry that Astell is tremendously important for her contribution to feminism. In this book, however, I regard Astell 'the metaphysician and philosopher' and Astell 'the feminist projector and crusader' as one and the same. In what follows, I demonstrate that her philosophy was purposively designed to

⁹² Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), 47, 275–6.

⁹³ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1971), 101. The quotation is in fact from Judith Drake, *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696), a work that is sometimes mistakenly attributed to Astell. On the *Essay*, see Johanna Devereaux, '“Affecting the Shade”: Attribution, Authorship, and Anonymity in *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 27/1 (2008), 17–37.

⁹⁴ Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 12.

bring about changes in the practical lives of women—to influence how they lived and how they conducted themselves in wider society. To the extent that future thinkers were influenced by Astell’s feminism, they were also influenced by her philosophy.

1.4 Outline of the work

This study proceeds in thematic order, from Astell’s epistemology to her theology and metaphysics, to her ethics, and then to her politics. In the next chapter, ‘Knowledge’, I explain the Cartesian-Neoplatonist epistemological foundations of Astell’s moral theory. I provide an insight into her method for acquiring knowledge, her recommendations concerning purity of mind, and her stance on the Malebranchean doctrine of ‘seeing all things in God’.

I then show that Astell’s theory of knowledge provides crucial support for two core presuppositions of her moral theory: her arguments for the existence of God and for the immateriality of the soul. In chapter three on ‘God’, I examine Astell’s ontological and cosmological arguments for the claim that an infinitely perfect being exists, and I analyse Astell’s argument for believing that the Bible is the word of God on grounds that closely resemble those of Pascal’s Wager. I show that these arguments provide valuable support for her view that a virtuous person lives her life in accordance with the will of God.

In chapter four on ‘Soul and Body’, I examine Astell’s argument for the real distinction between soul and body, an argument that borrows crucial precepts from Cartesian dualist arguments of the period. I also examine the question of whether or not Astell was an occasionalist with respect to body-soul causation (the causation of sensation). I explain that Astell’s arguments concerning the true nature of the soul ground her moral views about the cultivation of proper self-esteem and self-love.

In chapter five on ‘Virtue and the Passions’, I move from examining the foundations of Astell’s moral theory to the heart of that theory itself. I examine Astell’s philosophy of the passions or emotions, those perceptions that arise in the mind as a result of its close intermingling with the body. I demonstrate that, for Astell, the regulation of the passions is the key to attaining virtue, a disposition to feel and act in the right manner, toward the right ends, in accordance with right reason. I highlight the special significance of the passion of generosity, a feeling of justified self-esteem, for the ultimate attainment of happiness.

In chapter six on ‘Love’, I show that the passion of love occupies an exalted place in Astell’s moral philosophy. I examine her theory of love in the context of her project to bring about a moral reformation in women. By cultivating a genuine goodwill and loving kindness toward others, she says, a woman can obtain moral advancement on a personal level. In addition, this

attitude of disinterested benevolence toward others can also lead to the advancement of women as a social group.

In chapter seven on ‘Marriage’, I examine the ethical underpinnings of Astell’s views concerning marriage in light of her theory of love. I show that if we pay attention to the basic moral message of her *Reflections*, then it amounts to a critique of a particular kind of character exemplified by some married men—that is, a tyrannical disposition to indulge excessive, unregulated passions, to act from selfish desires rather than benevolent motives, and to degrade other members of society. I follow up the implications of Astell’s critique of male tyranny in the home for her views about political tyranny in the state.

In chapter eight on ‘Moderation’, I show that Astell extends her moral views about virtue and happiness to her political arguments about the maintenance of peace and security in civil society. I show that she opposes the occasional conformists because these Protestant dissenters fail to exhibit moderation in the normative Aristotelian sense of the term. That is to say, they do not demonstrate a virtuous capacity to determine the most proportionate response to their circumstances. In her view, the toleration of occasional conformity thus threatens to lead England back to rebellion, civil war, and tyranny. I end this chapter by spelling out the implied lessons for women in Astell’s political pamphlets.

In the final chapter, I highlight those aspects of Astell's moral philosophy that might hold interest and relevance for feminist philosophers today. I conclude that there are some significant implications for writing Astell back into the history of philosophy. Her work shows (i) that recent feminist philosophizing about moral freedom has a strong historical precedent in the early modern period; and (ii) that when we incorporate a woman's thought into the history of ethics, that history need not be seen as a narrative of stereotypically masculine concepts and theories.

5

Virtue and the Passions

In light of Astell's arguments concerning the immateriality of the soul, we might expect that she would have little to say about the role of the material body in the good life. Some recent commentators have taken this view. According to one scholar, Astell suggests that women must 'repress the body in order to release the mind'.⁹⁵ Another notes that Astell's philosophy depends 'upon a mind-body separation and upon a veneration of reason and the mind over the body'.⁹⁶ And yet another makes the point that for Astell 'the body was unimportant to philosophy; for her and other Cartesians, all that really mattered was the "freedom" of the disembodied mind for "self"-determination'.⁹⁷ But it must be said that, when it comes to Astell's moral thought, these claims are not strictly true. By and large, Astell acknowledges

⁹⁵ Catharine R. Stimpson, foreword in Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xii.

⁹⁶ Corrinne Harol, 'Mary Astell's Law of the Heart', in William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, eds., *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 87–97 (88).

⁹⁷ Cynthia Bryson, 'Mary Astell: Defender of the Disembodied Mind', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 13/4 (1998), 45.

that her fellow women must learn to negotiate practical moral situations as *embodied* subjects—as a substantial union of soul and body—and not just disembodied minds. In her moral philosophy, then, there is no such thing as the freedom of the disembodied mind. Nevertheless, Astell does say that women can use their freedom of the will to attain mastery over the body. In fact, she advises that in order to attain virtue, women must first learn to use their will to govern and regulate those mental disturbances known as the passions.⁹⁸

For Astell, the passions are perceptions that arise involuntarily in the soul as a result of its close intermingling with the human body. They consist in emotions such as love, hatred, desire, hope, fear, jealousy, sadness, and so on. More specifically, they are perceptions that correspond to certain actions in the body, such as disturbances and commotions in the blood

⁹⁸ On this topic, see also Jacqueline Broad, ‘Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom’, in William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, eds., *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 165–80; and Jacqueline Broad, ‘Mary Astell and the Virtues’, in Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell, Re-reading the Canon* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming).

and animal spirits.⁹⁹ Astell's characterization of the passions closely resembles that of Descartes in his final work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649).¹⁰⁰ In this text, Descartes is not

⁹⁹ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 213.

¹⁰⁰ There is now an extensive literature on Descartes and the passions. See, for example, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments', *Philosophy*, 57 (1982), 159–72; Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'Cartesian Passions and the Union of Mind and Body', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), 513–34; Paul Hoffman, 'Cartesian Passions and Cartesian Dualism', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 71 (1990), 310–33; Paul Hoffman, 'Three Dualist Theories of the Passions', *Philosophical Topics*, 19/1 (1991), 153–200; Derk Pereboom, 'Stoic Psychotherapy in Descartes and Spinoza', *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), 592–625; John Cottingham, 'Cartesian Ethics: Reason and the Passions', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 195 (1996), 193–216; Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially chapter five; Byron Williston, 'Descartes on Love and/as Error', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58/3 (1997), 429–44; John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially chapter three; Susan James, 'Reason, the Passions, and the Good

Life', in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, eds., *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ii, 1358–96; Byron Williston, 'Akrasia and the Passions in Descartes', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 7/1 (1999), 33–55; Lisa Shapiro, 'Princess Elizabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 7/3 (1999), 503–20; Lilli Alanen, *Descartes's Concept of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), chapter 6; Lilli Alanen, 'The Intentionality of Cartesian Emotions', in Byron Williston and André Gombay, eds., *Passion and Virtue in Descartes* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), 107–27; Paul Hoffman, 'The Passions and Freedom of the Will', in Williston and Gombay, eds., *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, 261–99; Lisa Shapiro, 'Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* and the Union of Mind and Body', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 85 (2003), 211–48; Lisa Shapiro, 'The Structure of *The Passions of the Soul* and the Soul-Body Union', in Williston and Gombay, eds., *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, 31–79; Amy M. Schmitter, 'The Passionate Intellect: Reading the (Non-)Opposition of Intellect and Emotion in Descartes', in Joyce Jenkins, Jennifer Whiting, and Christopher Williams, eds., *Persons and Passions: Essays in Honor of Annette Baier* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), 48–82; Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Sean Greenberg, 'Descartes on the Passions: Function, Representation and Motivation', *Noûs*, 41/4 (2007),

the strident advocate of the pure intellect over the emotions, as he is commonly depicted today.¹⁰¹ Rather, his central concern is to explore the nature of the passionate mind and to explain the passions themselves, ‘those perceptions, sensations or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to it, and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some

714–34; Amy M. Schmitter, ‘How to Engineer a Human Being: Passions and Functional Explanation in Descartes’, in Janet Broughton and John Carriero, eds., *A Companion to Descartes* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 426–44; Lisa Shapiro, ‘Descartes’s Ethics’, in Broughton and Carriero, eds., *Companion to Descartes*, 445–63; Amy M. Schmitter, ‘Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Theories of Emotions’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online encyclopedia], ed. Edward Zalta (Winter 2010) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/emotions-17th18th/>> accessed 13 November 2013; Shoshana Brassfield, ‘Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide: Descartes and the Role of the Passions’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 20/3 (2012), 459–77; and Amy M. Schmitter, ‘Passions and Affections’, in Peter R. Anstey, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 442–71.

¹⁰¹ On the common caricature of Descartes as someone who has ‘little use for the affective dimensions of thought’, see Schmitter, ‘The Passionate Intellect’, 48–51.

movement of the [animal] spirits' in the body.¹⁰² Not surprisingly, Astell appears to have been intimately acquainted with Descartes' text. In the final chapter of her second *Proposal*, she cites the *Passions of the Soul* in the margin.¹⁰³ Then in her *Christian Religion*, she closely follows Descartes' enumeration of the passions in part two of his work: she mentions his six primitive passions of admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness, and then names several other passions that derive from them.¹⁰⁴ In her final piece, *Bart'lemy Fair*, she refers (without explicit acknowledgement, however) to the same treatise once again.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–91), i, article 27, pp. 338–9.

¹⁰³ Astell, *Proposal II*, 218. Astell cites Descartes' '*Passions de l'Ame*' alongside Henry More's *Account of Virtue* (1690). On More's indebtedness to the Cartesian theory of the passions, see Christopher Tilmouth, 'Generosity and the Utility of the Passions: Cartesian Ethics in Restoration England', *The Seventeenth Century*, 22/1 (2007), 152–7 (esp. 155). On the wider influence of Descartes' philosophy of the passions in early modern Britain, see Schmitter, 'Passions and Affections'.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, ed. Jacqueline Broad, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series* (Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing, 2013),

In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes emphasizes that the passions serve an important function in so far as they aid in the preservation of the soul-body composite.¹⁰⁶ The passion of fear moves the soul to flee from danger, the passion of courage motivates it to fight, and certain desires urge it to pursue things that are vital to bodily health.¹⁰⁷ But while the passions might be useful for the purposes of preservation, they also frequently cloud and obscure the understanding. The problem is that the passions cause us to dwell on thoughts that do not really require our attention, and they often motivate us to perform actions that are foolish and

§254. Astell's wording here indicates that she was most likely familiar with a 1650 English translation of Descartes' work titled *The Passions of the Soule In three Books. The first, Treating of the Passions in Generall, and occasionally of the whole nature of man. The second, Of the Number, and order of the Passions, and the explication of the six Primitive ones. The third, of Particular Passions. By R. des Cartes. And Translated out of French into English* (London: A.C., 1650). She follows his taxonomy of the passions in part II, articles 53–67, of this work.

¹⁰⁵ [Mary Astell], *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit; In which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, To my LORD **** (London: Richard Wilkin, 1709), 140.

¹⁰⁶ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, art. 52, p. 349.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 40, p. 343; art. 137, p. 376.

contrary to reason. ‘The passions almost always cause the goods they represent, as well as the evils, to appear much greater and more important than they are,’ according to Descartes, ‘thus moving us to pursue the former and flee from the latter with more ardour and zeal than is appropriate.’¹⁰⁸ The soul cannot easily control or suspend its strong and violent passions because they are accompanied by equally strong and violent disturbances in the body. When we are in the grip of such passions, we cannot easily exert our will to stop their perturbing effect on the soul. But as a remedy, Descartes does not advise that we suppress or eradicate the passions altogether. In his opinion, some of the most exquisite pleasures in life consist in being deeply moved by the passions. He emphasizes that the passions ‘are all by nature good, and that we have nothing to avoid but their misuse or their excess’.¹⁰⁹

Like Descartes, Astell agrees that the passions can be beneficial, they can have ‘both their Use and Pleasure’.¹¹⁰ ‘It is not a fault to have Passions,’ she says, ‘since they are natural and unavoidable, and useful too.’¹¹¹ In particular, they dispose the body to act according to the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., art. 138, p. 377.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., art. 211, p. 403.

¹¹⁰ Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, ed. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 99.

¹¹¹ Astell, *Proposal II*, 214.

determinations of the mind—they are great motivators to action in situations that call for a quick response. But the passions also ‘discompose’, ‘disquiet’, and ‘rebel against’ us, they ‘get Mastry of the Mind’ and ‘hurry it on to what objects they please’.¹¹² They place us ‘all in a ferment’ such that it is impossible to ignore or avoid them.¹¹³ She observes that the ‘Condition of our present State ... in which we feel the force of our Passions e’re we discern the strength of our Reason, necessitates us to take up with such Principles and Reasonings to direct and determine those Passions as we happen to meet with ... not [those] right Reason disposes us to’.¹¹⁴ As a result, the passions typically lead us headlong into sin and folly—they encourage us to make poor moral decisions.

Unlike Descartes, Astell is seemingly ambivalent about the best way to remedy the disordering effect of the passions on the soul. On the one hand, in keeping with his approach, she expressly rejects those Stoic-inspired techniques that aim to eradicate or extirpate the passions altogether.¹¹⁵ In a letter to Norris, she says ‘I am not for a *Stoical Apathy*, I would

¹¹² Ibid., 217, 214; Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 99.

¹¹³ Astell, *Proposal II*, 222, 214.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 136.

¹¹⁵ Susan James notes that in the seventeenth century there are few advocates of an extreme Stoic position—most concede that a life free from passion is unattainable or even

not have my Hands and Feet cut off lest they should sometimes Incommode me. The Fault is not in our Passions considered in themselves, but in our voluntary Misapplication and unsuitable Management of them'.¹¹⁶ Christian morality, in her view, does not teach us to extirpate the passions, 'it only teaches us to place them upon their proper objects'.¹¹⁷ Once a passion is directed toward the right object in accordance with right reason, then that passion is no longer an obstacle on the path to virtue and happiness. The passions cannot hurt us, no matter how 'brisk' or 'active' they might be, provided that they are fixed upon appropriate things.¹¹⁸

On this view, the virtuous person is not dispassionate or unfeeling about other people or unfortunate circumstances. Rather, she has a disposition to feel the right way in proportion to the circumstances and toward those ends or objects that are truly worthy of her concern. Astell says that virtue consists in the mind governing the body and directing its emotions toward the right objects, with the right degree of intensity (or 'pitch'), according to right

inconceivable (James, 'Reason, the Passions, and the Good Life', 1373–4). Yet many philosophers still refer to the Stoics as targets against which they define their views.

¹¹⁶ Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 99.

¹¹⁷ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §337.

¹¹⁸ Astell, *Proposal II*, 218.

reason.¹¹⁹ The virtuous person might sometimes have strong or violent passions—she might be tremendously angry or sad, for example—but provided that her feelings are guided by right reason, and toward the right ends, then they are good and proper.

On the other hand, Astell sometimes expresses the view that we ought to *eradicate* the passions of pride, anger, hatred, and overwhelming sorrow (excessive grief or mourning). This position is explicitly articulated in her replies to the religious writings of an Irish clergyman named Charles Hickman (1648–1713), the author of a work titled *Fourteen Sermons* (1700).¹²⁰ In one passage of her *Christian Religion*, she emphasizes that the above passions are sins that the Bible urges us to eliminate in order to attain salvation. It is true, she says, addressing Hickman,

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹²⁰ See Astell, *Christian Religion*, §§327, 334–44. Though Astell does not mention Hickman by name, her numerous quotations are taken verbatim from Charles Hickman, *Fourteen Sermons Preach'd, at St James's Church in Westminster* (London: James Orme, 1700). On Hickman, see S. J. Connolly, 'Hickman, Charles', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online edition] (May 2008) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13210>> accessed 20 January 2012.

that “God has not bid a man put off all his passions,”¹²¹ taking passion in a strict and proper sense, exclusive of those vices into which our natural passions too often hurry us; for Christianity does not extirpate the passions, it only teaches us to place them upon their proper objects, as has been already said. But if anyone by passions will needs understand sins, such as *pride, anger, hatred, and overwhelming sorrow*, and so on, it is very certain that the gospel commands us “to put off all these” [Colossians 3:8] of what kind so ever, assuring us that such sinful “flesh and blood can’t inherit the kingdom of God” [1 Corinthians 15:50].¹²²

So it would seem that Astell departs from Descartes’ philosophy of the passions in this respect. For her, there are *some* passions that are not useful and that ought to be discarded in the pursuit of virtue and happiness.

¹²¹ Hickman, ‘Sermon Ninth’, in *Fourteen Sermons*, 263.

¹²² Astell, *Christian Religion*, §337. Astell is being a little disingenuous here: Colossians 3:8 refers only to anger and hatred, not pride and overwhelming sorrow (‘But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth’).

Malebranche expresses a similar ambivalence about the passions.¹²³ On the one hand, he supports Descartes' positive assessment of the passions as useful and beneficial to the body; but on the other, he adopts Augustine's strongly negative views about their disordering effect on the human mind.¹²⁴ Malebranche emphasizes that as a result of the Fall, human passions have become degraded and corrupted. The body 'tyrannizes' the mind, he says, and 'tears it away from God, to whom it should be inseparably united, and it unceasingly applies the mind to the search after sensible things'.¹²⁵ The bodily passions 'dominate, or rather, tyrannize

¹²³ For recent English-language commentaries on Malebranche and the passions, see Hoffman, 'Three Dualist Theories', 182–94; James, *Passion and Action*, 108–23; Tad Schmaltz, 'Malebranche on Natural and Free Loves', in Gábor Boros, Herman De Dijn, and Martin Moors, eds., *The Concept of Love in 17th and 18th Century Philosophy* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press; Budapest, Hungary: Eötvös University Press, 2007), 95–111; Sean Greenberg, 'Malebranche on the Passions: Biology, Morality and the Fall', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 18/2 (2010), 191–207; and Schmitter, 'Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Theories'.

¹²⁴ See Greenberg, 'Malebranche on the Passions', 191–2.

¹²⁵ Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, trans. and ed. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 339.

reason',¹²⁶ they enslave us and lead us away from our true good. Echoing Malebranche, Astell observes that it is 'the misery of our depraved nature to be too fast tied to sensible things, to be strongly, and in a manner wholly affected with them; and whatever loosens this tie and weans us from them, does us a very considerable service'.¹²⁷ Regardless of our fallen human state, she claims, we must assert our freedom of will and overcome 'the dominion of passion'.¹²⁸

At this point, then, we might ask: how can Astell affirm that *all* the passions are good if directed to their right ends, while at the same time affirming that *some* are sinful and ought to be eliminated? The solution to this difficulty, I believe, can be found in a careful examination of Astell's views concerning the relationship between the passions, the virtues, and the attainment of happiness. In the first part of this chapter, I highlight the importance that Astell places on the role of right reason in the regulation of the passions and the pursuit of virtue. In the second part, I spell out the significance of the passion-cum-virtue known as generosity (or 'greatness of soul') in terms of Astell's project for the moral advancement of women. Then, in the third and final part, I explain the connection between a woman's cultivation of

¹²⁶ Malebranche, *Search After Truth*, 415.

¹²⁷ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §264.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, §249.

generosity and her ultimate attainment of happiness. In this way, I aim to show that Astell takes a consistent approach to the passions, and to affirm that, in her opinion, women do not necessarily have to repress the body in order to lead a happy and virtuous life.¹²⁹

5.1 Virtue

Generally speaking, for Astell a passion is a certain passive receptivity on the part of the soul. She agrees that when the passions are violent, there is little that we can do to control them: the soul ‘can’t be insensible of or avoid ‘em, being no more able to prevent these first Impressions than she is to stop the Circulation of the Bloud, or to hinder Digestion’.¹³⁰ But the soul also has an active capacity—it is capable of volition or the exercising of free will. Consequently, even in the midst of overwhelming passion, there are courses of action that we might take: we might either allow the passion to continue until it has subsided, or we might direct it to another object.¹³¹

¹²⁹ In this chapter, I emphasize the philosophical rather than the religious aspects of Astell’s theory of the passions. On the religious underpinnings, see Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 95–116.

¹³⁰ Astell, *Proposal II*, 214.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

These observations correspond to those of Descartes. He too advises that, while in the grip of an excessive passion, we can ‘distract ourselves by other thoughts until time and repose have completely calmed the disturbance in our blood’.¹³² He also offers more long-term techniques of governance. According to Descartes, with the proper guidance and training, it is possible to strengthen our souls such that we can learn to ‘conquer the passions and stop the bodily movements which accompany them’.¹³³ Toward this end, he advises that we use our reason to determine what is truly good and what truly evil, ‘so as not to take the one for the other or rush into anything immoderately’.¹³⁴ Souls can be judged as strong or weak ‘according to their ability to follow these judgments more or less closely and resist the present passions which are opposed to them’.¹³⁵ For Descartes, the passion of desire provides a salient example of how judgments formed on reasonable grounds can help to control the passions. The passion of desire is good and useful when it avoids excess and ‘proceeds from true knowledge’.¹³⁶ Toward this end, it is important that we desire only those good things that

¹³² Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, art. 211, p. 403.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, art. 48, p. 347.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 138, p. 377.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 49, p. 347.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 141, p. 378.

depend on us. Vain desire, or desire for those things that are independent of our capacity to satisfy them, can lead only to feelings of dissatisfaction. For Descartes, as we will see in section 5.2, the passion of generosity offers an apt remedy for these vain desires: it teaches us to value ourselves on the exercise of our will, which is entirely in our power.

Like Descartes, Astell also claims that in order to regulate the passions it is important to acquire knowledge of the right ends. In her *Proposal*, she advises women that they must reason only according to their pure non-sensory perceptions, or those clear ideas of the intellect, if they wish to attain knowledge.¹³⁷ They must reason in a logical, orderly manner from simple to complex ideas; they must avoid being drawn into irrelevant considerations; and they must never judge anything to be true that is not clearly known to be so. The problem, however, is that one ‘irregular Passion will put a greater Obstacle between us and Truth, than the bright Understanding and clearest Reasoning can easily remove’.¹³⁸ The Cartesian rules for thinking can only get us so far. To acquire a capacity for sound judgment, Astell advises that a woman must also purify her mind. Purity of the mind, it will be recalled, comes by withdrawing from the senses, regulating the passions, and overcoming desire for material things and other people.

¹³⁷ On this topic, see chapter two, section 2.2, in this volume.

¹³⁸ Astell, *Proposal II*, 185.

At this point, it might seem that Astell's method for governing the passions is disturbingly circular.¹³⁹ In order to regulate our passions, she says, we must engage in the search for truth and knowledge of the right ends. To search for truth and knowledge, however, it is first necessary to regulate our passions, because wayward passions typically present obstacles to seeing the truth. Her method for regulating the passions, in other words, seems to require that we have already regulated our passions. To dispel this difficulty, we might recall that Astell is committed to the Neoplatonist idea that truth and virtue are mutually interdependent.¹⁴⁰ Like Norris, she points out that 'Ignorance disposes to Vice, and Wickedness reciprocally keeps us Ignorant, so that we cannot be free from the one unless we cure the other'.¹⁴¹ Accordingly, for Astell, it does not matter where her readers begin — all that matters is that they turn their attention, at some point, to their moral and intellectual improvement. They must endeavour to gain '*some* Clearness of Head' and '*some* lower degrees of Knowledge', at least as much as excites them to gain more.¹⁴² Following this, once they have obtained 'a competent measure' of purity and knowledge, the two will 'mutually assist' one another:

¹³⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reader for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁴⁰ On this topic, see chapter two, section 2.3, in this volume.

¹⁴¹ Astell, *Proposal II*, 127.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 131; my italics.

‘the more Pure we are the clearer will our Knowledge be, and the more we Know, the more we shall Purify.’¹⁴³

To achieve mastery over her passions, then, the female reader is advised simply to begin by focussing her attention. She is advised to withdraw herself from the hurry and noise of the everyday world, and to immerse herself in a life of contemplation. ‘Pure speculations of any kind,’ Astell says, ‘do us service by withdrawing our minds from sense, whereby they moderate our passions, and bring them into subjection to reason, which those speculations enlarge and fortify.’¹⁴⁴ More particularly, she advises her readers to meditate upon their own natures, the nature of material beings, and the nature of God, for ‘it is thro the mistake of some of these that our Inclinations take a wrong bias’.¹⁴⁵ Through meditation and study, a woman can learn to make sound judgments about matters of moral and religious significance. She can come to the judgment that an infinitely perfect being exists and that she is obliged to live in conformity with his will, a will that corresponds to the law of reason. She can also judge that her soul is immaterial and immortal by nature, and she can determine that material

¹⁴³ Ibid. On this topic, see Alice Sowaal, ‘Mary Astell’s *Serious Proposal*: Mind, Method, and Custom’, *Philosophy Compass*, 2 (2007), 227–43 (230).

¹⁴⁴ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §263.

¹⁴⁵ Astell, *Proposal II*, 210.

things, including her body, are essentially corruptible and perishable.¹⁴⁶ For Astell, these rational judgments, together with a belief in revelation, form the basic tenets of Christianity. In her view, study of the Christian religion enables a woman to recognize those objects that demand her intense emotional commitment, including her love, admiration, esteem, desire, and so on. Astell says

In a word, we judge and choose amiss, because our judgments are hasty and partial; it is our passions for the most part that make our judgments thus precipitate and defective, we suffer passion to lead when it ought to follow; and sensible things, the love of this world, and present pleasure, is that which moves our passions. Wise men in all ages have exclaimed against prejudices and prepossessions, and advised us to get rid of them, but they have not informed us how, nor enabled us to do it, Christianity only does this. And it does it by stripping sensible things of their deceitful appearances, and finding us nobler objects of our passions than any this world affords.¹⁴⁷

In sum, by following a certain method of judgment, by purifying her mind, by attending to the Christian religion, and by contemplating her immortal soul and God, the moral agent can determine where her passions ought to lie. In this way, she will attain *virtue*.

¹⁴⁶ On these topics, see chapters three and four in this volume.

¹⁴⁷ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §253.

In Astell's view, virtue 'consists in governing Animal Impressions, in directing our Passions to such Objects, and keeping 'em in such a pitch, as right Reason requires'.¹⁴⁸ To perform a virtuous action, we must perform it with the right intentions, for the right reason, and with the proper end in mind. 'Some virtues and some vices bear a great resemblance in the mere outward act,' she says, 'so that they are not to be distinguished but by the intention, the reason, and the end of the action.'¹⁴⁹ In a lengthy passage of her *Christian Religion* (§254), Astell maintains that Christianity reveals those things

which are truly worthy of our *admiration*. It proposes to us the *love* of God, an infinite good; and the *hatred* of sin, the greatest of all evils. It convinces us that our *desires* will not labor in vain, when they put us upon pursuing the one, and avoiding the other. So that *despair*, whose business is by the pain it gives, to admonish us that felicity is not in worldly enjoyments, is superseded here, for whatever our lot may be in this world, we are carried on by an active and vigorous *hope* of the next ...¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Astell, *Proposal II*, 214. In Springborg's edition, this line reads 'as right Reasons requires' (my italic). In the 1697 edition, however, this line simply reads 'as right Reason requires'. See [Mary Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II: Wherein a Method is Offered for the Improvement of their Minds* (London: Richard Wilkin, 1697), 240.

¹⁴⁹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §303. See also §§300 and 327.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, §254.

Astell then proceeds to mention almost every passion in the second part of Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, including admiration, esteem, generosity, pride, humility, veneration, disdain, love, hatred, desire, hope, fear, jealousy, security, despair, irresolution, courage, boldness, remorse, joy, envy, pity, satisfaction, repentance, gratitude, indignation, glory, shame, and sorrow.¹⁵¹ Her main point in this passage, and in a strikingly similar passage in the *Proposal*,¹⁵² is that we can 'hallow' or purify our passions by placing them upon their proper objects. The passion of hatred can be directed toward our sins, the passion of anger can be directed at injustice and wickedness, the passion of pride can be felt for our wilfully

¹⁵¹ See Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, arts. 53–67. In addition to these passions, Astell also mentions presumption, firmness, despising, favour, delight, thankfulness, regret, emulation, rashness, caution, and grief. These additions suggest that Astell also compiles her list with one eye on Henry More's taxonomy of the passions in *An Account of Virtue: Or, Dr. Henry More's Abridgment of Morals, Put into English*, trans. Edward Southwell (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1690; facs. edn, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 43–54. More says that he is indebted to Descartes' ordering of the passions (47), but he also adds a few extras and uses his own idiosyncratic terminology (e.g., 'cupidity' instead of 'desire'). On the similarities between Astell and More's theories of the passions, see Broad, 'Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom', 173–5.

¹⁵² Astell, *Proposal II*, 219–20.

good actions, and the passion of sorrow can be directed toward past offences. Such passions *become virtues* when they are intentionally directed to the right ends in accordance with right reason.

Accordingly, virtuous persons are in the habit of having the correct emotional responses in any given situation. They have a standing disposition to feel or act in the right measure, toward the right ends, in accordance with right reason. Such persons are masters of the art of prudence, ‘the being all of a Piece, managing all our Words and Actions as it becomes Wise Persons and Good Christians’.¹⁵³ They are capable of accommodating the many vicissitudes of life, because their ‘Reason is always on her Guard and ready to exert her self’, and so they ‘chuse a right End’, they ‘proportion the Means to the End’, and they ‘rate ev’rything according to its proper value’.¹⁵⁴ Though virtuous persons might sometimes exhibit extreme or excessive emotion, their feelings are always appropriate and proportionate to their circumstances.

Let us now turn to Astell’s claim that some passions, including the aforementioned emotions of anger, hatred, pride, and (overwhelming) sorrow, ought to be eliminated. Astell makes this

¹⁵³ Ibid., 170. On Astell and prudence, see Broad, ‘Astell and the Virtues’.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 215; *Proposal I*, 64.

point in response to Hickman's 'Sermon Ninth' on Acts 14:15, 'We also are men of like passions with you'. In this text, Hickman observes that there are 'two famous Sects of Philosophers of old': one that favours the governing of the passions (presumably he means the Aristotelian approach), and another that requires the passions to be abolished or 'rooted out' (the Stoic tradition).¹⁵⁵ In his view, the Stoic approach is to be shunned because it is impracticable. God has made human beings such that their constitution naturally inclines them toward the passions. Even the Bible reflects the fact that no one is perfect and that we are all naturally subject to the distempers of our passions. The scriptures are replete with examples of passionate men: Moses is subject to anger, David is transported by hatred, and

¹⁵⁵ Hickman, 'Sermon Ninth', in *Fourteen Sermons*, 251. Susan James notes that 'Seventeenth-century writers were heirs to a long-standing dispute over this issue between the advocates of two traditions, one Stoic, the other Aristotelian. According to the Stoics, it is possible to overcome the passions altogether; the struggle between the rational and emotional aspects of human nature can be so thoroughly won by reason that we no longer experience any passions at all. By contrast, Aristotle held that, even if it were possible, it would be undesirable to quell the passions completely. Instead, reason should control them in such a way that our emotions are appropriate to their objects' ('Reason, the Passions, and the Good Life', 1373–4).

even Christ himself is ‘overwhelm’d with sorrow’.¹⁵⁶ According to Hickman, this indicates that God will pardon us for those sinful passions that we are unable to control. Anger is therefore morally permissible on some occasions, and ‘what has been said of Anger, may in great part be applied to Hatred, Disdain, and Pride’, as well as sorrow.¹⁵⁷ It is important to develop an attitude of acceptance toward such passions, he says, because ‘All Men must needs despise a Religion that is not consistent with Humanity, and when they find its Precepts are not practicable, they will believe its Author is not True’.¹⁵⁸

By contrast, Astell emphasizes that we must strive to conquer our infirmities. Hickman’s complacency strikes at the heart of her project to bring about a moral awakening in the lives of women. As a necessary part of this project, women must be made conscious of their natural power to rise above their vices and attain virtue—they must be made aware of their freedom of will.¹⁵⁹ In Astell’s view, women cannot afford to remain complacent about their

¹⁵⁶ Hickman, ‘Sermon Ninth’, in *Fourteen Sermons*, 250.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 275, 278.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁵⁹ This accounts for the high consciousness-raising tone of Astell’s feminist works, as well as her use of rhetoric. On the latter, see Christine Mason Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary, AB: The University of Calgary Press, 2005).

shortcomings because their happiness in both this life and the next depends on it. She therefore rejects Hickman's implication that human beings are necessarily determined to be vicious and sinful. In her view, it is not impracticable or inconsistent with human nature for moral agents to extinguish the passions of anger, hatred, pride, and overwhelming sorrow. These emotions are voluntary or 'wilful' sins and transgressions.¹⁶⁰ We are subject to them only in so far as we misuse our freedom of the will, not because they are a necessary part of our constitution. A virtuous agent must not rest content in the thrall of such passions—she must strive to conquer them.

In terms of her approach to the passions, then, Astell seemingly upholds two inconsistent positions: on the one hand, she claims that some passions are sinful and must be eliminated, and on the other, she holds that all the passions are good provided that they are governed by right reason and directed toward their right ends. Does she contradict herself? To address this difficulty, let us examine a passion that plays a pivotal role in Astell's moral project—the passion of generosity. In my view, this passion provides the key to putting a charitable interpretation on Astell's remarks.

5.2 Generosity

¹⁶⁰ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §342.

In her works, Astell frequently reflects on the ideas of ‘generosity’, being ‘generous’, and having a ‘great and generous soul’. There is a crucial difference between her early modern usage of the concept (derived from Descartes) and our present-day understanding of generosity as munificence or liberality. In the seventeenth century, the term generosity means something like ‘greatness of soul’, or a ‘well-founded high regard for oneself manifesting as generosity of spirit and equanimity in the face of trouble’ (*OED*). On this understanding, ‘being generous’ is not so much the performance of an action, such as giving money to charity, but rather the possession of a character trait or a disposition to feel and behave a certain way.

For Descartes, the passion of generosity (*generosité*) plays an important role in the cultivation of the virtues, those ‘habits in the soul which dispose us to have certain thoughts’.¹⁶¹ If we can train ourselves to arouse the passion of generosity, he says, then this

¹⁶¹ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, art. 161, p. 387. On Cartesian generosity, see Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 188–209; Lisa Shapiro, ‘Cartesian Generosity’, in *Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes*, ed. Tuomo Aho and Mikko Yrjonsuuri, *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 64 (1999), 249–75; Patrick R. Frierson, ‘Learning to Love: From Egoism to Generosity in Descartes’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 40/3 (2002), 313–38; and Tilmouth, ‘Generosity and the Utility of the Passions’, 144–67. On Astell and

might provide us with ‘a general remedy for every disorder of the passions’.¹⁶² Generally speaking, for Descartes, generosity is a species of esteem, a passion that we naturally feel whenever we consider an object to be worthy or valuable.¹⁶³ Esteem derives from the primitive passion of admiration, that wonder or surprise we feel whenever our attention turns to something new (regardless of whether that thing is valuable or contemptible).¹⁶⁴ More narrowly, generosity is a species of self-esteem, since it involves considering *ourselves* as wonderful or admirable in some way. Generosity differs from vanity because the latter consists in having an unwarranted good opinion of ourselves, whereas generosity consists in having a well-founded self-esteem.¹⁶⁵ According to Descartes, generosity has two components: (i) it consists in knowing that we ought to be praised or blamed only for those actions that depend upon our free will (because only our will is entirely in our power); and

generosity, see Alice Sowaal, ‘Mary Astell and the Development of Vice: Pride, Courtship, and the Gendered Human Nature Question’, in Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell, Re-reading the Canon* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶² Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, art. 161, p. 388.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, art. 149, p. 383.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 150, p. 383.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 160, p. 387.

(ii) it consists in feeling within ourselves ‘a firm and constant resolution’ to use our freedom to do what is best.¹⁶⁶ Generosity is a legitimate form of self-esteem because it involves valuing ourselves upon something that is truly worthy—our ‘absolute control over ourselves’ or the correct exercise of our free will.¹⁶⁷

In a 1714 letter to her friend Ann Coventry, Astell enclosed ‘a little Book’ on the Cartesian notion of generosity which she described as ‘a Favorite of mine this 20 years’.¹⁶⁸ The book is almost certainly John Somers’ *A Discourse concerning Generosity* (1693), a short tract that is openly indebted to ‘the Learned and ingenious Des Cartes’.¹⁶⁹ In his book, Somers observes

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., art. 152–3, p. 384.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., art. 203, p. 400. To be a generous soul, in Descartes’ view, it is not necessary to make correct judgments about what is best. Provided that we never lack the will to perform what we judge best, then in his opinion we are ‘pursuing virtue’ (ibid., art. 170, p. 391; art. 153, p. 384).

¹⁶⁸ Mary Astell to Ann Coventry, 26 July 1714; appendix C in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 370. To make these letters more accessible to the modern reader, in my subsequent quotations I have removed the thorn symbol and spelt out abbreviated words.

¹⁶⁹ *A Discourse concerning Generosity* (London: H. Clark for James Adamson, 1693), ‘The Preface’, A5r. According to the *English Short Title Catalogue*, the author of this work is

that women and people ‘of effeminate and feeble Spirits’ are most likely to lack the principle of generosity.¹⁷⁰ They have a kind of impotence, he says, that keeps them ‘servilely under the power of Custom and Prepossession; and renders them unable to quit those Errors which are fixt in them by Custom, Education, or the Power of fancy and corporeal Impression’.¹⁷¹ They act purely by chance and cannot give a rational account of the reasons why they act. By contrast, he associates the passion of generosity with a certain manliness or masculinity of character: generosity arms the moral agent with ‘Masculine Firmness of Mind’, ‘Masculine Resolution’, and a ‘fortitude or manliness of Spirit’.¹⁷² Despite this male bias, Somers nevertheless affirms that *all* human beings are born with a natural principle of self-esteem. The main argument of his book is that since the passion of self-esteem is present in all human

Baron John Somers (1651–1716). Astell tells Coventry that she cannot regard the ‘Discourse’ as ‘more so’ her favourite since she has discovered the identity of the author. This remark is understandable if we consider the fact that Somers was a Whig and Astell a Tory. On Somers, see Stuart Handley, ‘Somers, John, Baron Somers (1651–1716)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online edition] (May 2008)

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26002>> accessed 19 July 2010.

¹⁷⁰ *Discourse concerning Generosity*, 59–60.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 77, 80, 104.

beings, and since the passions are great motivators to action, then we should be sure to have *just* self-esteem—we should value ourselves upon something worth valuing. Ignoring Somers' gendered language, Astell applauds his egalitarianism. The author handsomely proves, she says, that generosity is 'not unsuitable to the lowest Rank of Rational Creatures'.¹⁷³ In the same spirit of equality, in her own works, she endeavours to show that generosity is not unsuitable to the female sex. In this respect, Astell follows in the footsteps of the Frenchman, François Poulain de la Barre, another Cartesian defender of the female sex. In his *Equallity of Both Sexes*, he argues 'that the Mind is no less capable in *Women*, than in *Men*,' of exhibiting the Cartesian virtue of generosity, 'a firm and constant Resolution, of doing that which we judge, the best'.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Mary Astell to Ann Coventry, 26 July 1714; appendix C in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 370.

¹⁷⁴ See François Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man; Or, the Equallity of Both Sexes, Written Originally in French, And Translated into English by A.L.* (London: T. M. for N. Brooks, 1677), 156, 155. If Astell knew Poulain's writings, it is likely she would have been familiar with this 1677 English translation. Thus far, however, there is no explicit evidence that Astell had ever read Poulain's work. On Astell and Poulain, see the introduction to this current volume.

If we trace Astell's interest in generosity back 'this 20 years', this brings us to the first *Proposal* of 1694. This work contains only a few explicit references to being 'generous',¹⁷⁵ but the concepts of self-esteem and 'living up to the dignity of one's nature' are central preoccupations of the text. Astell observes that women are particularly likely to have two degenerate forms of self-esteem—pride and mistaken self-love:

she who has nothing else to value her self upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase; and think her self mightily oblig'd to him, who tells her she has those Perfections which she naturally longs for. Her inbred self-esteem and desire of good, which are degenerated into Pride and mistaken Self-love, will easily open her Ears to whatever goes about to nourish and delight them ...¹⁷⁶

Custom, education, and authority have made the cultivation of well-founded self-esteem particularly difficult for women. Most women do not rightly understand wherein the

¹⁷⁵ Astell proposes to excite in her readers 'a generous Emulation to excel in the best things' and she urges them to be 'so generous then Ladies, as to do nothing unworthy of you' (Astell, *Proposal I*, 51, 56). She tells them that their pride and vanity is 'nothing else but Generosity degenerated and corrupted' (ibid., 62). The female students of her institution will have 'Dispositions ... to be Generous', and their teachers will aim 'to form a generous temper' in their minds (ibid., 87, 103).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 62–3.

perfection of their nature consists. As a result of their upbringing, they are kept in ignorance and so they take up with the first objects that offer themselves as plausible sources of perfection—such as outward beauty, fashionable clothes, and other material objects. This is how a woman’s natural self-esteem becomes corrupted and deformed. Astell observes that

When a poor Young Lady is taught to value her self on nothing but her Cloaths, and to think she’s very fine when well accoutred. When she hears say that ’tis Wisdom enough for her to know how to dress her self, that she may become amiable in his eyes; to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lay out her Industry and Money on such Accomplishments, and sometimes extends it farther than her misinformers desires she should?¹⁷⁷

Like all the passions, this pride could be transformed into a virtue if only women would ‘pride themselves in somewhat truly perfective of a Rational nature’.¹⁷⁸ While pride and vanity are in themselves ‘bad Weeds’, they are ‘the product of a good Soil’—they are degenerated forms of the virtue generosity.¹⁷⁹ If these women had been properly nourished

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

with learning and knowledge, then their natural self-esteem would have grown strong and hardy. Astell observes that

She who makes the most Grimace at a Woman of Sense, who employs all her little skill in endeavouring to render Learning and Ingenuity ridiculous, is yet very desirous to be thought Knowing in a Dress, in the Management of an Intreague, in Coquetry or good Houswifry. If then either the Nobleness or Necessity of our Nature unavoidably excites us to a desire of Advancing, shall it be thought a fault to do it by pursuing the best things? and since we *will* value our selves on somewhat or other, why shou'd it not be on the most substantial ground?¹⁸⁰

In her view, it is important to return to the original soil, that natural principle of self-esteem within us, and strive to yield a better harvest—to cultivate generosity and not pride and vanity.

In the second *Proposal*, Astell urges the cultivation of generosity as a remedy to the supposed feebleness of the female mind. Once again, she affirms that the ‘Humblest Person that lives has some Self-Esteem, nor is it either Fit or Possible that any one should be without it’.¹⁸¹ But in this work, generosity also becomes a tool in the service of female emancipation from

¹⁸⁰ Astell, *Proposal II*, 232–3.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

custom. According to Astell, it is necessary for women to acquire the virtues of both generosity ('Generous Resolution') and courage in order to 'throw off Sloth' and 'Conquer the Prejudices of Education, Authority and Custom'.¹⁸² These same virtues can also give us the strength of mind to continue on an unconventional path, despite 'Inconveniences'. She says that

the Author of our Nature to whom all the Inconveniences we are liable to in this earthly Pilgrimage are fully known, has endow'd us with Principles sufficient to carry us safely thro them all, if we will but observe and make use of 'em. One of these is *Generosity*, which (so long as we keep it from degenerating into Pride) is of admirable advantage to us in this matter.¹⁸³

Generosity is especially advantageous because it enables women to cultivate certain feelings of indifference to worldly opinion. In the letter to Coventry, Astell muses that there may be so few generous souls because 'it requires all that Firmness of Mind they possess, to get above Vulgar Prejudices, to make an estimate of themselves and others by their intrinsic Value, and not by the Measures that are commonly taken'.¹⁸⁴ She points out that scorn and

¹⁸² Ibid., 140.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁸⁴ Mary Astell to Ann Coventry, 26 July 1714; appendix C in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 370.

contempt are ‘to be submitted to, I had almost said Gloried in, by all who make a Right use of their Liberty, endeavouring to do always what is Best’.¹⁸⁵ She admires ‘the truly Generous’, she says, because ‘It is indeed essential to the Character of the Generous that they govern themselves by Right Reason, and not by Example, or the received Maxims and Fashions of the Age’.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, in her second *Proposal*, Astell indicates that ‘a Generous neglect’ of other people’s opinions is a vital ingredient in the moral development of women.¹⁸⁷ Educated women must learn to withstand ‘being Censur’d as Singular and Laugh’d at for Fools, rather than comply with the evil Customs of the Age’ — they must have the disposition of mind to stand strong in the face of criticism.¹⁸⁸ The cultivation of generosity can help them to continue in a singular lifestyle, because generous souls are ‘above it all’ — they are ‘above the Hope or Fear of vulgar breath’.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 371. Astell makes a similar point in a letter to Norris: ‘I suppose ‘tis scarce possible to command our selves, and arrive at a true generosity of Temper, till we are perfectly mortified to Praise and Dispraise as well as to other things’ (Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 65).

¹⁸⁶ Mary Astell to Ann Coventry, 26 July 1714; appendix C in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 370.

¹⁸⁷ Astell, *Proposal II*, 141.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

How does generosity enable a woman to ‘throw off Sloth’ and to withstand the censure and ridicule that comes with defying custom? Here it must be recalled that generosity involves recognizing that our moral worth consists in exercising our will alone (because only the will is truly in our power), as well as a feeling of strong resolution always to do our best. So, first of all, a woman’s generosity consists in her recognition that she has such a freedom, or that she *can* direct her mind ‘this way or that’ according to her own pleasure.¹⁹⁰ She is therefore attentive to the fact that she does not have to continue on the conventional path that her forefathers and foremothers took; she might follow the dictates of her own natural reason instead. Second, a generous temper of mind consists in moral constancy or firmness of mind—a resolve to use this inward power of self-determination for good. Generosity thus leads a woman to ‘abhor and disdain a vile action’ and it spurs her on ‘to the highest attainments’.¹⁹¹ A woman with a generous disposition does not care what the outside world thinks because her self-approbation does not depend on other people’s opinions, it is a matter between herself and her conscience. Provided that her conscience is clear—that she has

¹⁹⁰ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §78. On this aspect of Cartesian generosity, see Shapiro, ‘Cartesian Generosity’, 257–8.

¹⁹¹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §237.

sincerely strived to do her best and lived up to the dignity of her nature—then she has nothing to reproach herself with.

Astell believes that the Christian religion can help to facilitate the cultivation of a generous disposition. She says that the word of God provides instructions on how ‘to have a great and *generous* mind without *pride*, by showing us what is valuable and what contemptible’.¹⁹² The Christian religion teaches us that rational creatures must distinguish themselves not by their outward circumstances—their clothes, their money, their title, and so on—but by making ‘a due use of their liberty’.¹⁹³ The problem with a woman’s upbringing is that it encourages her to place her self-esteem in objects that are beyond her control. A woman can never have any real power over her outward beauty—it might fade with time, she might be blighted by disease, she might not be able to afford the latest fashions, or the best milliner and tailor. As a remedy, Astell proposes that those ‘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’.¹⁹⁴ The study of Christianity can help a woman in this respect, by focusing her attention on

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, §254.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Astell, *Proposal I*, 111.

internal accomplishments (the exercise of her virtuous will) and those things that will never perish (her immortal soul). In short, Astell maintains that with a proper moral education, women can learn to purify their minds—to withdraw from the senses, the bodily passions, and their desire for material goods—and thus acquire a generous indifference toward the world and its petty concerns.

5.3 Happiness

Further reflection on Astell’s concept of generosity can help to dispel some of the seeming inconsistencies in her approach to the passions. In Descartes’ view, as we have seen, generosity provides a remedy for all the disorders of the passions. Generous persons have ‘complete command over their passions’, and especially over their wayward desires, ‘because everything they think sufficiently valuable to be worth pursuing is such that its acquisition depends solely on themselves’.¹⁹⁵ This generous disposition of character naturally promotes the agent’s happiness:

For if anyone lives in such a way that his conscience cannot reproach him for ever failing to do something he judges to be best (which is what I here call “pursuing virtue”), he will receive from this a satisfaction which has such power to make him

¹⁹⁵ Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, art. 156, p. 385.

happy that the most violent assaults of the passions will never have sufficient power to disturb the tranquility of his soul.¹⁹⁶

Descartes declares that this feeling of tranquillity or self-satisfaction is the ‘sweetest of all the passions’.¹⁹⁷

Astell’s own concept of happiness closely resembles that of Descartes. She too promotes a rather Christianized-Stoic ideal of happiness as that satisfaction or equanimity of mind that can be achieved independently of external circumstances. In her view, the soul already has everything it needs for its happiness within itself—it need not seek it elsewhere. ‘Happiness is not *without us*,’ she says, ‘it must be found in our own Bosoms.’¹⁹⁸ She urges her readers to ‘secure your Grandeur by fixing it on a firm bottom, such as the caprice of Fortune cannot shake or overthrow’.¹⁹⁹ They must come to see that ‘he who places his happiness only in God and in a good conscience, is out of the reach of all sublunary things, and enjoys a peace that this world can neither give nor take away’.²⁰⁰ But Astell’s idea of happiness is also somewhat

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., art. 148, p. 382.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., art. 63, p. 352.

¹⁹⁸ Astell, *Proposal II*, 225.

¹⁹⁹ Astell, *Proposal I*, 110.

²⁰⁰ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §244.

Epicurean, since it consists in the highest form of pleasure—the soul’s freedom from vexation or disturbance (*ataraxia*).²⁰¹ In the *Proposal*, she affirms that strictly speaking the Christian religion ‘is the highest *Epicurism* exalting our Pleasures by refining them; keeping our Appetites in that due regularity which not only Grace, but even Nature require, in the breach of which, tho’ there may be transport, there can be no true and substantial delight’.²⁰²

Along similar lines, Astell extols the Cartesian passion of self-satisfaction in at least three of her works. First, in the *Proposal*, she says that only the Christian religion can provide that ‘Joy and Satisfaction of the Mind’ that results from the right use of our reason, and enables us to taste ‘a Pleasure which the World can neither give nor take away’.²⁰³ She adds that ‘He who is Happy is satisfied with his Condition and free from Anxious Cares and Solitude’.²⁰⁴ Second, in *The Christian Religion*, she observes that the virtuous religious life abounds with

²⁰¹ On this aspect of Descartes’ notion of happiness, see Donald Rutherford, ‘On the Happy Life: Descartes vis-à-vis Seneca’, in Steven K. Strange and Jack Zupko, eds., *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 177–97 (181).

²⁰² Astell, *Proposal I*, 86. See also Astell, *Christian Religion*, §312.

²⁰³ Astell, *Proposal II*, 220.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

self-satisfaction, ‘Which as a great man who had thoroughly considered this subject [i.e., Descartes] tells us, is “the sweetest of all the passions”’.²⁰⁵ The good Christian is capable of enjoying such tranquillity of mind, even ‘in the midst of all outward troubles’, because the love of God is a source of never-ending joy—both in this mortal life and the life to come. Then in *Bart’lemy Fair*, Astell once again touches on the value of feeling self-satisfaction. She asks: what greater ‘Satisfaction and Glory can a Man enjoy in this present Life, than the Approbation of his own Mind, of Wise and Good Men, and even of GOD himself’?²⁰⁶ Astell says that

A Man who lives by Principle, is steady and consistent with himself, Master of his Passions, and therefore free from the Torment of opposite Inclinations and Desires impossible to be Gratify’d; always at ease in his own Mind, whatever happens without him; enjoying Self-satisfaction, which, in the Opinion of a great Philosopher, is the sweetest of all the Passions. And as such a Man is beyond all Comparison Wiser, so must he needs be Happier than the Libertine who is the Reverse of all this, always a

²⁰⁵ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §254. She does not acknowledge Descartes explicitly, but her words are taken from the *Passions of the Soul*, art. 63, p. 352.

²⁰⁶ Astell, *Bart’lemy Fair*, 133.

Slave to his Appetites, and for this reason to every Thing without him; uneasy to himself, as well as to every one who happens to stand in his way.²⁰⁷

The libertine's pleasures depend on limited and precarious objects that are often beyond his control. For this reason, he is subject to 'Solicitude, Disquiet and Grief'.²⁰⁸ By contrast, a good and virtuous person is much more cheerful because she has subdued all those passions that embitter life: she is filled with 'Rational Pleasure, that Solid Joy, that Peace and Satisfaction of Mind'.²⁰⁹

In the Cartesian philosophy, generosity plays an important role in the attainment of happiness. Generosity enables the moral agent to acquire a disposition such that those passions that embitter life need never arise and disturb her equanimity. Like Descartes, Astell

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 140.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 90.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 124. In Astell's view, this person does not live with 'a Stoical Apathy, but a Rational Conviction, that they are under the All-wise Government, Conduct, Care of Infinite Goodness which will provide better for them than they can for themselves. The Religious Person being what the *Stoics* vainly boasted of in their Wise Men: Not through an Insensibility of Pain, and other Inconveniences, but by finding a Support and Pleasure that does more than Counter-balance them' (ibid., 137).

proposes that generosity can be a remedy to bitter feelings of anger and vengefulness. In her *Christian Religion*, she emphasizes that a generous soul never seeks to exact revenge, however much she is provoked or however great the injury. She knows that revenge degrades the soul by setting her on a level with her adversaries—it is an admission that they have discomposed or harmed her in some way. By contrast, ‘a generous neglect and forgiveness’ raises her above other people.²¹⁰ In those cases where her adversaries are beyond amendment, the generous soul does not take revenge, but rather accepts that all her goodness has been lost upon them, and that she can offer only her compassion and prayers.²¹¹ The generous soul recognizes that such enemies do not warrant her anger.²¹²

Likewise, Astell emphasizes that the ‘great mind’ cultivates the virtues of humility and modesty in the place of pride.²¹³ A great mind has a large understanding, and a strong resolution to do what is best, such that it always has an idea of excellence and perfection in view. This produces a humble disposition, because the great mind recognizes that its performances will always fall short of such excellence and perfection: ‘it is rather mortified

²¹⁰ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §241.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, §242.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*, §290.

through consideration of what it wants, than exalted with any attainment.’²¹⁴ Those individuals who are subject to pride and vanity (unwarranted self-esteem) become more easily carried away with anger. They have a mistaken, inflated sense of their own self-importance, and so their wrath is quickly aroused by the smallest slights and injuries. They are easily offended. By contrast, a noble soul does not feel resentment at someone else’s success, but rather ‘a generous Resolution’ to repair her ‘former neglects’ by ‘future diligence’.²¹⁵ The generous soul does not attempt to pull down her neighbours, because she has too strong a sense of her own merit ‘to envy or detract from others’.²¹⁶

Similarly, the great mind rarely feels envy, hatred, or spite toward her neighbours. Astell observes that the person with a ‘truly great and generous mind’ will not despise the failings of others—she will have compassion and esteem for her fellow human beings.²¹⁷ This is because the generous person will be more aware of her own shortcomings, and be intent upon correcting them; she will not be at leisure to observe her neighbours’ faults. Rather, she will assume that other people deserve equal respect until they give a ‘demonstration to the

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Astell, *Proposal II*, 122.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §303.

contrary'. Even then, her love of virtue will lead her to feel pity rather than hatred toward them.²¹⁸ The generous soul is capable of feeling true compassion for other people's misfortunes, and true benevolence toward others, because her feelings are not tainted by petty, selfish, or competitive interests. The great mind is 'free from selfish narrowness, humane and compassionate to all who need our help, and offensive to none'.²¹⁹ In addition, a woman with a truly virtuous disposition of mind, according to Astell, will not indulge in unnecessary or excessive mourning for the loss of external things that are beyond her control.

In sum, in the great and generous soul, cheerfulness replaces *overwhelming grief*; pity and forgiveness replace *anger*; humility and modesty are substitutes for *pride*; and love, benevolence, and charity (an attitude of loving kindness) are cultivated in the place of *hatred*. Generosity helps to give a woman the right disposition of character such that those feelings need never arise. In their place are the pleasurable feelings of joy, tranquillity, and peace—all the key ingredients of self-satisfaction.

At the start of this chapter, I observed that there appeared to be some confusion in Astell's thinking about the best remedy for the passions. On the one hand, she claims that all the

²¹⁸ Ibid., §290.

²¹⁹ Ibid., §288.

passions are useful and beneficial in themselves, provided that they are intentionally directed at their right objects in accordance with reason. On the other, she recommends extirpating or extinguishing some passions—the passions of pride, anger, hatred, and overwhelming sorrow—for the sake of happiness. I think we are now in a position to dispel the confusion and to show that the two approaches need not be contradictory. I propose that these remedies are compatible if we see the first as a short-term technique of governance, or an immediate strategy that we might employ while in the grip of such intense feelings, and the second as a more long-term strategy toward acquiring an enduring disposition of character.

In the first case, when we are overcome with emotion, Astell suggests that we must strive to meditate upon what is truly good, and use our free will to channel our passions toward the right objects in accordance with reason. In short, we must remind ourselves of what is truly valuable in life: we must contemplate God, our immortal, immaterial souls, and the souls of our fellow human beings. In this way, we might possibly avoid the destructive outcomes of our emotions on particular occasions. Of course, in the short term, this approach may not always work—our emotions might get the better of us. But in the long run, if we steadfastly endeavour to improve our knowledge, to purify our minds, and to perfect our capacity for sound judgment, then we might acquire a fixed disposition toward virtue. We might acquire

the habit of directing our passions to the right ends, ‘in such a pitch, as right Reason requires’.²²⁰

Astell’s second claim, that we ought to extirpate the passions of anger, hatred, pride, and overwhelming sorrow, can be interpreted in light of her recommendations for women to bring about a change in their habits of mind, such that they might attain a generous disposition of character. According to Astell, the strong and violent passions pose a problem for the acquisition of happiness in the long term, especially as happiness signifies ‘true Joy ... a sedate and solid thing, a tranquility of mind, not a boisterous and empty flash’.²²¹ These passions typically arise from things that are beyond the power of the will. The cultivation of a generous disposition, or a generous indifference to the petty concerns of *this* world, helps us to avoid feeling such passions altogether. Generosity or greatness of soul is a remedy to our feelings of anger, hatred, pride, and overwhelming sorrow about material circumstances beyond our control.

It does not follow that the generous temper of mind is one of Stoic *apatheia*. On the contrary, the woman who attains generosity strongly experiences certain positive passions: she is

²²⁰ Astell, *Proposal II*, 214.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

capable of wonder, joy, delight, and love (directed at their proper objects, that is, in accordance with reason). Strictly speaking, then, we can affirm that Astell does not require the repression of the body as a necessary precondition for human happiness. There are certain passions that arise in the mind as a result of the mind-body union that are crucial to living a happy life. In the next chapter, we will see that there is one passion in particular that lies ‘at the bottom of all the Passions’ such that ‘one wou’d think they’re nothing else but different Modifications of it’.²²² Without a doubt, this passion occupies the most exalted place in Astell’s moral philosophy—it is the passion of love.

²²² Ibid., 219.