

[Please note that this is an **earlier version** of a published paper: Jacqueline Broad, ‘Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom’, in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 165-179. Please cite the published version.]

## ASTELL, CARTESIAN ETHICS, AND THE CRITIQUE OF CUSTOM

Jacqueline Broad

In her final work, *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry After Wit* (1709), Mary Astell declares 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.<sup>1</sup>

Although there is no explicit acknowledgment, René Descartes is undoubtedly the “great Philosopher” to whom Astell refers, and the opinion in question comes from his final treatise, *Les Passions de l'Ame* (1649). In the 1650 English translation of this work, *The*

*Passions of the Soule*, Descartes defines self-satisfaction as “an inward satisfaction, which is the sweetest of all the Passions.”<sup>2</sup> The satisfaction gained from the performance of a good action is so sweet, he says, because it depends upon ourselves alone. For Astell scholars, the author’s obscure reference to the “great Philosopher” should come as no surprise: many have interpreted Astell as a “Cartesian philosopher” or as someone who grounds her feminist views on Cartesian epistemological principles.<sup>3</sup> From her first letter to the occasionalist John Norris in 1693,<sup>4</sup> to her last work in response to the third Earl of Shaftesbury in 1709, Astell reveals herself to be a strong supporter of Cartesian ideas. But perhaps it is surprising that here Astell refers to Descartes’s ethical theory of the passions – not to the familiar Descartes of the *Meditations* (1641), but to Descartes in his guise as a philosopher in search of happiness and the good life. Today we do not tend to interpret Descartes as a moral philosopher. Modern historians of philosophy examine Descartes’s legacy according to a rather narrow set of philosophical concerns – his skeptical challenge, his rationalist epistemology, and his dualist theory of mind and body, in particular. But recent scholarship suggests that we ought to revise our conception of Descartes as a thinker who is solely preoccupied with questions about knowledge and metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> In his 1996 essay on “Cartesian ethics,” John Cottingham points to evidence that Descartes conceives of the ultimate aim of his philosophical project to be human happiness. In the Preface to the French edition of his *Principles of Philosophy* (1647), Descartes says that “By ‘morals’ I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. Now just as it is not the roots or the trunk of a tree from which one gathers the fruit, but only the ends of the branches, so the principal benefit of

philosophy depends on those parts of it which can only be learned last of all.”<sup>6</sup> On this subject, far from challenging his ancient and scholastic forebears, Descartes accords with their traditional conception of a philosopher as someone who provides guidance on “how best to live.”

In the standard accounts of Astell’s debt to Cartesianism, the impact of Cartesian ethics has not been examined in full. Yet Descartes’s conception of the ethical character of the passions is a recurring theme in many of Astell’s works. In the final chapter of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (1697), Astell makes explicit reference to Descartes’s account of the passions,<sup>7</sup> and this discussion forms a crucial part of Astell’s feminist project to teach women how to lead useful lives of virtue and wisdom. In this paper, I examine Astell’s philosophy in light of her ethical theory of the passions in the second part of the *Proposal*. A proper understanding of Astell’s ethics, I maintain, might assist us in recognising the various interconnections and continuities between Astell’s works. In the past, scholars have highlighted Astell’s debt to Descartes’s egalitarian conception of reason, his mistrust of custom and unexamined prejudices, and his method of attaining clear and certain knowledge. But on these common interpretations, a tension inevitably arises between Astell’s philosophical stance and her conservative political outlook. In his recent study of the rise of modernity, Jonathan Israel maintains that Descartes’s philosophy played a significant role in the political upheavals of the early Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Several key aspects of Cartesianism are associated with the rationalization and secularization of opinions across early modern Europe – including its challenge to ancient tradition and authority, the doubting of past prejudices and assumptions, its reverence for natural reason, and its emphasis upon the individual mind.

Descartes's challenge to custom – his call for a revolutionary change in our customary ways of thinking – forms the basis of what Israel calls “the crisis of the European mind,” a crisis that prepared the way for a “Radical Enlightenment.”<sup>9</sup> The radical aspects of Cartesianism are directly opposed to Astell's core political values: her support for divine authority and absolute monarchy, her defence of traditional social hierarchies, her opposition to atheism, and her emphasis upon the importance of communal values, rather than individualism. If Astell were a faithful adherent to the “New Philosophy,” as many scholars represent her to be, then there would appear to be a striking tension between her political allegiances and her philosophical thought. I argue that such tensions disappear, however, if we interpret Astell as a Cartesian according to an ethical rather than an epistemological paradigm.

*i.*

In 1697, following the publication of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (1694), Astell published a second part outlining a method for “the Improvement of their Minds.” Although Astell's original work was well received, her central proposal – the founding of an academy or a “religious retirement” for single gentlewomen – failed to find active support. Astell wrote this second work in order to persuade women to improve their minds through their own efforts, till a seminary could be established. She specifically targets those women who are so inured to a life of ignorance and idleness that they are loath to begin a reformation: “they know not how to look into their Souls, or if they do, they find so many disorders to be rectified, so many wants to be supplied, that frighted with the difficulty of

the work they lay aside the thoughts of undertaking it.”<sup>10</sup> The second *Proposal* offers a method that will enable such women to overcome a purely sensuous and animal life, and to “procure such a temper of mind” as will make them “happy in all Conditions.”<sup>11</sup> The explicit aim of this work is not just to assist women in the attainment of truth, but to teach them how to attain happiness by leading lives of virtue.

For Astell, one of the greatest obstacles to obtaining true virtue is the influence of *custom* on one’s moral judgments. In the first *Proposal*, Astell says that “Ignorance and a narrow education lay the Foundation of Vice, and imitation and Custom rear it up. Custom, that merciless Torrent that carries all before it.”<sup>12</sup> The Cambridge Platonist Henry More defines custom as “a corporeal Impression, by which the Soul is extremely bent to judge of things, as true, good, or amiable; for no other Motive, but because it has been accustomed so to judge, and so to act.”<sup>13</sup> Though Astell occasionally equivocates, her use of the term “custom” generally accords with that of More. For Astell, custom inclines us to judge an action as right or wrong for no other reason than that such an action has been deemed right or wrong by long use and by the sanction of our forebears.<sup>14</sup> Custom thus constitutes a powerful but potentially irrational influence on our judgments about how we should or should not act. In the second *Proposal*, Astell observes that most women are “so little improved” because of “Ill-nurture, Custom, loss of time, the want of retirement, or of not knowing how to use it, so that by the disuse of our Faculties we seem to have lost them if we ever had any[,] are sunk into an Animal life wholly taken up with sensible objects.”<sup>15</sup>

One cause of this moral decay is that custom reverses the proper power relations between the *understanding* and the *will*. The understanding or the intellect is that faculty

of “Receiving and Comparing Ideas,” and the will is “the Power of Preferring any Thought or Motion, of Directing them to This or That thing rather than to another.”<sup>16</sup> Although the understanding ought to govern the will, under the influence of custom the will becomes a “head-strong and Rebellious Subject.”<sup>17</sup> Moral judgments are made when the will either accepts or rejects the intellect’s notion of “what is fit.” Such judgments can go wrong when the intellect is fettered by obscure and confused ideas, and the will is compelled to accept them anyway.<sup>18</sup> Astell observes that in our early life, before our reason has matured, the passions incite the will to make certain choices.<sup>19</sup> The will fixes our thoughts on a “present uneasiness which it says must be remov’d,”<sup>20</sup> and we fail to consider our future happiness. In later life, we become habituated to this way of thinking, and thus “we generally take that course in our search after Happiness, which Education, Example, and Custom puts us in.”<sup>21</sup> The key problem for Astell is to explain how ignorant, uneducated women are to overcome those early influences that set their inclinations on the wrong path.

First, Astell emphasizes that the will is free. Custom, she says, erects “a Tyranny over our free born Souls”<sup>22</sup> and makes it seem as though we are not at liberty to resist our inclinations. Yet this is simply an illusion: human beings, unlike animals, have the free capacity to regulate their will according to their understanding.

Because as Irrational Creatures act only by the Will of him who made them, and according to the Power of that Mechanisme by which they are form’d, so every one who pretends to Reason, who is a Voluntary Agent, and therefore Worthy of Praise or Blame, Reward or Punishment, must *Chuse* his Actions and determine his Will to that Choice by some Reasonings or Principles either true or false, and in proportion to this Principles and the Consequences he deduces from them he is to be accounted,

if they are Right and Conclusive a Wise Man, if Evil, Rash and Injudicious a Fool. If then it be the property of Rational Creatures, and Essential to their very Natures to Chuse their Actions, and to determine their Wills to that Choice by such Principles and Reasonings as their Understandings are furnish'd with, they who are desirous to be rank'd in that Order of Beings must conduct their Lives by these Measures, begin with their Intellectuals, inform themselves what are the plain and first Principles of Action and Act accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

Like many moral philosophers before her, Astell recognizes a vital connection between a creature's essence and its ultimate good. Following Aristotle, Astell maintains that a life of well being is a life lived in accordance with our intellectual nature. For rational creatures, it is essential to their nature to choose their actions through the exercise of reason. To emphasize this point, Astell highlights the crucial differences between women and mere mechanisms or animals. Whoever denies their liberty, she says, "denies that he is capable of Reward and Punishments," and simply turns himself into "a more curious piece of Mechanism."<sup>24</sup> She says that "till we are capable of Chusing our own Actions and directing them by some Principle, tho we move and speak and so many such like things, we live not the life of a Rational Creature but only of an Animal."<sup>25</sup> Astell thus urges women to embrace their essential humanity and to recognize that "Natural Liberty within" them.<sup>26</sup>

While Astell's use of the language of "custom," "tyranny," and "liberty" echoes the party political debates of her time,<sup>27</sup> her sentiments are firmly Cartesian. Astell subscribes to Descartes's view that we can esteem ourselves only on "the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions. For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will."<sup>28</sup> For Descartes too, the will

consists in our ability to affirm or deny, or to pursue or avoid something, and the understanding is that faculty by which we are able to apprehend or perceive ideas.<sup>29</sup> In his view, erroneous judgments are made because “the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I don’t understand.”<sup>30</sup> I can avoid error, however, if I am careful and self-disciplined, and let my understanding determine the will: “If ... I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error.”<sup>31</sup> In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes declares the key to acquiring virtue consists in “a firm resolution to make good use” of the will.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, for Astell, erroneous judgments can be avoided if we carefully follow a reliable method for thinking. Astell borrows her “rules for thinking” from Descartes’s followers, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the authors of *Logic, or the Art of Thinking* (first published in 1662). This work is a practical guide to rational thought, based on the manuscript of Descartes’s *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (first written in 1628), and his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason* (1637). The English translators of the *Art of Thinking* (also known as the *Port Royal Logic*) assert that their work is “no less Useful for the Conduct of Human Life, than to instruct and guide us wandring in the Labyrinths of Unsettled Reason.”<sup>33</sup> Although the *Art of Thinking* is not a book of ethics, the authors intend to provide a way of overcoming irregularities in all aspects of human life. They assert that “no one is exempted from forming judgments about good and evil, since these judgments are necessary for conducting our lives, directing our actions, and making ourselves eternally happy or

miserable.”<sup>34</sup> Arnauld and Nicole aim to correct the errors and defects of judgment, so that our judgments might be of value in everyday, practical life – and for the spiritual life to come.

Astell’s theory of judgment begins with the recommendation that we acquire a clear understanding of any terms or concepts to be used in our judgments. Like Arnauld and Nicole, she says that we should reason only about those things “of which we have clear and distinct ideas.”<sup>35</sup> Implicitly, this requires that we “Disengage our selves from all our former Prejudices, from our Opinion of Names, Authorities, Customs and the like, not give Credit to any thing any longer because we have once believed it, but because it carries clear and uncontested Evidence along with it.”<sup>36</sup> Our train of thought should proceed in a natural and logical order, beginning with the simplest ideas and moving by degrees to the more complex.<sup>37</sup> We must assure ourselves that we have not left any part of our subject unexamined, and divide our subject into as many parts as we can in order to understand it.<sup>38</sup> We must also keep the subject matter close in mind, avoiding a hasty and partial examination.<sup>39</sup> Then finally we must “judge no further than we Perceive, and not ... take any thing for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so.”<sup>40</sup> Sometimes this will mean that we cannot readily make a judgment about a particular subject. In this case, reason dictates that we must “suspend our Assent” and avoid judging of things we do not understand.<sup>41</sup> We ought to “suspend our Inclinations as we both May and Ought, and restrain them from determining our Will, till we have fairly and fully examin’d and ballanc’d, according to the best of our Knowledge.”<sup>42</sup>

Many scholars interpret this key section of the *Proposal* in terms of Astell’s epistemological commitments. Joan Kinnaird says that it is “little more than an elaborate

exposition of Descartes's *Discourse on Method*.<sup>43</sup> Hilda L. Smith describes the second *Proposal* as “primarily an elaboration of Astell's Cartesian epistemology.”<sup>44</sup> Smith says that

Her writings reveal that Astell was a dedicated Cartesian, but one of a particularly religious bent. She began with a philosophical doubt about all knowledge, and, working from the assumption that we know there is a God because we can imagine perfection in our minds, she, like Descartes, reasoned toward the truth of our own existence and on to a surety that God created us and we are obliged to follow his plan. Her works combined Christian faith with a sophisticated rationalist construction in a system that paralleled Descartes's ‘Discourse on Method.’<sup>45</sup>

In “Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women,” Ruth Perry similarly asserts that “Cartesian rationalism was the very cornerstone of [Astell's] feminism.”<sup>46</sup> These writers suggest that Astell bases her feminism on the Cartesian insight that all human beings – including women – are essentially thinking things. On this basis, they argue, Astell asserts that women are capable of attaining clear and certain knowledge provided that they follow the appropriate rules.

It is true that Astell's method closely resembles that of Descartes, even though she never explicitly refers to his *Discourse*. But when Astell's remarks are placed in their proper context – in the context of her design to effect a moral reformation in women – the standard descriptions are somewhat misleading. First, in the second *Proposal*, Astell does not articulate “a philosophical doubt about all knowledge,” or raise skeptical hypotheses

in order to challenge beliefs acquired through the senses. Nowhere does she advocate the “willful doubting of all previous knowledge” as a forerunner to an explication of Descartes’s *cogito* or *res cogitans*.<sup>47</sup> In the second *Proposal*, the inspiration behind Astell’s program is not “radical doubt,” but a theory of judgment – one that has an ethical objective, like that of Arnauld and Nicole. While the Port Royal Logic might provide a means for acquiring knowledge, for Astell, these “rules for thinking” are a way of attaining moral truths. This is evidenced by the fact that Astell’s two sample judgments are “that the Existence of an All-Perfect Being is Absolutely necessary”<sup>48</sup> and that “Riches and Happiness are two distinct things”<sup>49</sup> – two insights that are crucial to our happiness. To say that Astell is influenced by Cartesian epistemology *alone* fails to capture this ethical dimension of her feminist project. Astell endorses Descartes’s mistrust of custom and unexamined prejudices, as well as his method of attaining clear and certain knowledge, but she does so for a moral purpose.

Second, if we interpret Astell as offering an epistemological program alone, then this would not leave Astell with a practical theory of reform. The Cartesian method of attaining knowledge would not provide Astell with a remedy for those idle women who are sunk in an animal life, with almost no possibility of rectifying their behaviour. Oftentimes these women might be capable of judging what is good, but they do not have the inclination to pursue it. One must not, therefore, ignore Astell’s theory of the passions in the closing chapter of the second *Proposal*: here Astell proposes a remedy for *these* women. While the method of the early chapters provides women with a means of recognising the good, in the final chapter Astell proposes a way of overcoming the influence of custom on the passions, so that one might *do* what is good. “It is to little

purpose to guard our selves against the Sophisms of the Head,” Astell says, “if we lie open to those of the Heart. One irregular Passion will put a greater Obstacle between us and Truth, then the bright[est] Understanding and clearest Reasoning can easily remove.”<sup>50</sup> Astell therefore advocates the “Art of Prudence,” the practical art of governing and mastering the passions.<sup>51</sup> The pinnacle of Astell’s method of improvement for women is about rectifying “their false Ideas, [forming] in their Minds adequate conceptions of the End and Dignity of their Natures,” such that women “not only feel Passions, but be able to direct and regulate their Motions.”<sup>52</sup>

*ii.*

In the seventeenth century, several thinkers were engaged in an ongoing dispute about the proper place of the passions in a virtuous life. On the one hand, as Susan James observes, there was the Stoic position, in which the passions are intrinsically undesirable and something to be avoided altogether in the good life.<sup>53</sup> On the other, there was the Aristotelian tradition, in which the passions are desirable features of a moral life – so long as they are directed toward their proper objects. In this debate, Descartes occupies something like the Aristotelian position: he says of the passions that “they are all by nature good, and that we have nothing to avoid but their misuse or their excess.”<sup>54</sup> Like Descartes, Astell does not regard the passions as intrinsically bad in themselves. She says that “it appears that it is not a fault to have Passions, since they are natural and unavoidable, and useful too.”<sup>55</sup> We cannot receive any injury from the passions if we regulate them accordingly. After all, God has made the passions part of human nature, and “God being Infinitely Wise all his Judgments must be Infallible, and being Infinitely Good he can will nothing but what is best, nor prescribe anything that is not for our

advantage.”<sup>56</sup> A wise and benevolent God would not have given us passions, if he did not intend for them to contribute toward our good.

In his *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes says that “Even those who have the weakest souls could acquire absolute mastery over all their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them.”<sup>57</sup> First, we must recognize that the passions are simultaneously both physical and mental events – they are a product of the soul-body union. Although the soul and body are distinct substances, according to Descartes, my soul is “not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship.”<sup>58</sup> Instead, I am closely joined and connected to this body such that I feel pain when it is injured, hunger when it is famished, and so on. In the *Principles*, Descartes says that I experience certain “things which must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone. These arise ... from the close and intimate union of our mind with the body.” His list includes “the emotions or passions of the mind which do not consist of thought alone, such as the emotions of anger, joy, sadness and love.”<sup>59</sup> For Descartes, any remedy for the irregularity of the passions must take into account this close connection between the soul and body. While I am part of the soul-body hybrid, I will never be able to eliminate the passions – but I might be able to modify or reprogram them.<sup>60</sup>

Like Descartes, Astell affirms that “Humane Nature consists in the Union of a Rational Soul with a Mortal Body.”<sup>61</sup> She says

not to enter too far into the Philosophy of the Passions, suffice it briefly to observe: That by the Oeconomy of Nature such and such Motions in the Body are annexed in such a manner to certain Thoughts in the Soul, that unless some outward force restrain, she can produce them when she pleases barely by willing them, and

reciprocally several Impressions on the Body are communicated to, and affect the Soul, all this being perform'd by the means of the Animal Spirits. The Active Powers of the Soul, her Will and Inclinations are at her own dispose, her Passive are not, she can't avoid feeling Pain or other sensible Impressions so long as she's united to a Body, and that Body is dispos'd to convey these Impressions. And when outward Objects occasion such Commotions in the Bloud and Animal Spirits, as are attended with those Perceptions in the Soul which we call the Passions, she 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. All she can do is to Continue the Passion as it was begun, or to Divert it to another Object; to Heighthen or to let Sink by degrees, or some way or other to Modifie and Direct it. The due performance of which is what we call *Vertue*, which consists in governing Animal Impressions, in directing our Passions to such Objects, and keeping 'em in such a pitch, as right Reasons requires.<sup>62</sup>

While Astell's definition of virtue seems to come from Henry More,<sup>63</sup> her "remedy" for the passions is essentially that of Descartes. Like Descartes, Astell addresses the question of how we are to attain virtue as embodied creatures, and not just as immaterial minds. Any adequate theory of virtue must take into account the fact that we cannot avoid feeling passions or sensible impressions as long as we are part of the soul-body composite. In proposing a remedy for idleness and impertinence, we cannot just suppose that women can use their reason to direct their inclinations as a disinterested pilot might direct a ship. Such women are intimately associated and intermingled with their bodies –

as all human beings must be. But while we cannot prevent the passions from having an impact on the mind, we can direct or divert them to objects of greater worth by a process of transference or channelling. Astell says that “tho we may find it difficult absolutely to quash a Passion that is once begun, yet it is no hard matter to transfer it.”<sup>64</sup> In her moral theory, she does not attempt to suppress or deny the passions, but gives them a vital role in the attainment of virtue. Virtue consists in governing the animal impressions and re-directing the passions, not in obliterating them.

By making selective use of Descartes’s ideas, Astell follows the lead of her fellow Englishmen, the Cambridge Platonists Henry More and Ralph Cudworth. The Cambridge men are suspicious of the atheistic overtones of Cartesian mechanism and Descartes’s separation between spirit and extension. But they embrace the positive moral and theological aspects of Descartes’s philosophy, such as his arguments in favor of spiritual substance and the existence of God. In his *Treatise of Freewill* (probably written c. 1670-8), Cudworth appeals to Descartes’s theory of the will and understanding in his account of practical moral judgment.<sup>65</sup> In his Latin text, *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1667), More gives an account of the role that the passions might play in the virtuous life, an account that is heavily indebted to Descartes’s *Passions of the Soul*. Astell resembles these early English readers of Descartes in her recognition of the moral and spiritual aspirations of the Cartesian project. Not surprisingly, in her account of the proper objects of the passions, Astell draws on the 1690 English translation of More’s *Enchiridion Ethicum*, titled *An Account of Virtue*.<sup>66</sup>

Astell’s approach is similar to More’s in that they both emphasize the importance of regulating the passions in the service of a religious or “divine life.” Following More’s approach, Astell partakes in a long tradition of philosophical attempts to classify the

passions in terms of a few key or primitive passions.<sup>67</sup> In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes claims that there are *six* principal passions: admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness. Initially, Astell approves of More's contraction of these passions to three: admiration, love, and hatred. She confirms More's view that "Admiration gives Rise to all the Passions; for unless we were affected by the Newness of an Object, or some other remarkable Circumstance, so as to be attentively engag'd in the Contemplation of it, we shou'd not be any wise mov'd, but it wou'd pass by unregarded."<sup>68</sup> Astell's notion of love also strongly echoes that of More: while More defines love as a "Passion of the Soul, by which it is excited willingly to join it self unto Objects which seem grateful thereunto,"<sup>69</sup> Astell describes it as "*a motion of the Soul to joyn itself to that which appears to be grateful to it.*"<sup>70</sup>

But Astell departs from More in reducing all the passions to different modifications of *love*. Love, she says, is "at the bottom of all the Passions, one wou'd think they're nothing else but different Modifications of it, occasion'd by some Circumstance in the Subject or Object of this Passion."<sup>71</sup> In her analysis of love as the chief passion, Astell follows the Augustinian-Neoplatonic moral tradition.<sup>72</sup> In *The City of God* (c. 412-26), Augustine explains all the basic types of passion in terms of love, saying that love "desiring to enjoy what it loves is desire: and enjoying it, is joy: flying what it hates, it is fear; feeling it, it is sorrow."<sup>73</sup> Astell likewise reduces the passions to species of love: for her, desire is simply a love of future good, joy is the pleasure received from love, sorrow is occasioned by the absence of what we love, and "even Hatred tho it appear directly opposite to Love, may be referr'd to it, the very same motion that carrys the Soul towards Good, carrying her also from those things that wou'd deprive her of it."<sup>74</sup> The upshot of Astell's emphasis on love is to claim that "if therefore our Love be Right, the rest of our Passions will of course be so."<sup>75</sup> For Astell, as for Augustine, love is the key to leading a virtuous life. The passions are good when they are those that right

reason disposes us to, or when they are inclined towards their proper objects. The passion of love is well regulated when we have saved it for things of the greatest worth; and what could be worthier, she asks, than the love of God? We should, therefore, have “no Passion but for God’s service.”<sup>76</sup> The passions of esteem, veneration, love, desire, and so on, need not disturb us if they are directed toward our one true end: the glory of our maker.

To wind up all; The Sum of our Duty and of all Morality, is to have a Temper of Mind so absolutely Conform’d to the Divine Will, or which is the same in other words, such an Habitual and Intire Love to GOD, as will on all occasions excite us to the Exercise of such Acts, as are the necessary consequent of such a Habit.<sup>77</sup>

It is curious that, at this point, Astell does not explicitly refer to the work of her correspondent John Norris. First, Astell echoes Norris’s position in the *Theory and Regulation of Love* (1688), where he suggests a way of approaching ethics according to “the reduction of all Vertue and Vice to the various Modifications of Love.”<sup>78</sup> Second, Astell reiterates a central thesis in Norris’s “Discourse concerning the Measure of Divine Love,” the first essay in the third volume of Norris’s *Practical Discourses* (1693). In that essay, drawing from Nicolas Malebranche’s occasionalist philosophy, Norris argues that we love only that which brings us pleasure, and because God is the only true cause of our pleasure, God alone is truly deserving of our love. In her final letter to Norris (August 14, 1694), Astell says that even if material things were the true causes of our pleasure, God would still be the only deserved object of our love – because all our good is brought about solely by his will.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, in the second *Proposal*, Astell says that God “is the only proper and adequate Object of our Love.”<sup>80</sup> And “if we love GOD with *All* our

Soul,” then our passions will be naturally regular.<sup>81</sup> Third, Astell repeats Norris’s sentiments when she affirms that “Conformity to his Will” is “the Duty and Perfection of all Rational Beings.”<sup>82</sup> In the “Postscript to the First Discourse,” Norris adds that “if we would sincerely consult the Perfection of our Rational Nature, we should at least as much endeavour to conform our Wills to the Will of God, as to conform our Understanding to the Understanding of God.”<sup>83</sup>

It is possible that Astell is reluctant to name Norris out of fear of being branded a heretic. In a recent paper, Sarah Ellenzweig suggests that in the 1690s Astell may have distanced herself from Malebranche and Norris because their philosophy had been unfavourably associated with Spinozism and irreligion.<sup>84</sup> But whatever Astell thinks of occasionalism, she never abandons Norris’s central moral-theological claim that God ought to be the sole object of our love.

*iii.*

It is apparent, then, that Astell’s feminist project is based not on Cartesian epistemology alone, but also on Cartesian ethical principles. Descartes’ theory of the regulation of the passions plays an integral role in Astell’s philosophy. In the second *Proposal*, Astell intends for her project for reform to be a practicable one, something that ordinary women can put into practice. She recommends a program that will enable women to overcome bad habits and fortify their “minds against foolish Customs.”<sup>85</sup> For this purpose, it is not enough for Astell simply to assert that reason can triumph over custom; she also needs to explain *how* it can do so, despite the influence of the passions on the will. Toward this end, Astell develops a remedy for reprogramming or redirecting passions to their proper objects. Although Astell departs from Descartes in treating love as the predominant passion, she accords with his notion that the passions are not intrinsically undesirable in

themselves. Like Descartes, Astell regards a life of well being as a life in which the passions play an integral role.

An understanding of Astell's ethical theory of the passions, and of love as the predominant passion, can assist in our conception of Astell's philosophical project as a continuous whole. First, and most obviously, Astell's second *Proposal* is a natural continuation of the central thesis of *Letters Concerning the Love of God* – the notion that in order to attain true happiness, we must love and desire God alone. In this earlier work, Astell declares that “if Love which is the leading and Master Passion were but once wisely regulated, our Passions would be so far from rebelling against and disquieting us, that ... they would mightily facilitate the great Work we have to do.”<sup>86</sup> In the *Proposal*, Astell expresses some ambivalence about “seeing all things in God,”<sup>87</sup> but she still upholds Norris's Malebranchean view that a virtuous life is one devoted solely to the love of God. A true Christian must have “a true Notion of the Nothingness of Material things and of the reality and substantialness of the immaterial, and consequently contemn the present World as it deserves, fixing all their Hopes upon and exerting all their Endeavours to obtain the Glory of the next.”<sup>88</sup> A few years later, in *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), Astell once again provides women with a salient lesson about letting the misguided passions dictate their life choices. When a woman accepts a suitor's marriage proposal, Astell warns that she must not base her decision on “brutish Passion.”<sup>89</sup> A woman must marry for spiritual motives: if “the Soul be principally consider'd and regard had in the first Place to a good Understanding, a Vertuous Mind,”<sup>90</sup> then this will contribute a long way toward her happiness. But if a woman's decision is

blinded by improper lust, greed, or mistaken self-love, then it would be better if she did not marry at all.

In *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705), Astell continues to urge women to lead virtuous lives by regulating their passions according to their “noblest Objects”:

In a word, we judge and chuse amiss, because our Judgments are hasty and partial; 'tis 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 of all Ages have exclaim'd against Prejudices and Prepossessions, and advis'd us to get rid of them, but they have not inform'd 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.<sup>91</sup>

The good Christian woman must recognize that her happiness does not consist in the mutable things of this world. She must re-direct her passions from the love of sensible things to the love of an eternal and immutable God. “And how,” Astell says,

can a Life thus led but abound with *Self-satisfaction*? which as a Great Man who had throughly consider'd this Subject tells us, is *the sweetest of all the Passions*. None indeed but the Good Christian can have it, or enjoy that *Tranquility of Mind*

which is his Portion, both in the Nature of things, and by his Great Masters Promise. Which Tranquility he enjoys in the midst of all outward Troubles.<sup>92</sup>

Here again we see the significance of Descartes's ethical theory for Astell's wider philosophy. In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes says that "The satisfaction of those who steadfastly pursue virtue is a habit of their soul which is called 'tranquillity' and 'peace of mind'."<sup>93</sup> For Descartes, the path to happiness lies within our very own souls because it depends solely upon the exercising of our free will. Provided that a man always does what he judges to be best, "the most violent assaults of the passions will never have sufficient power to disturb the tranquillity of his soul."<sup>94</sup> Similarly, for Astell, the steadfast pursuit of virtue can lead to a calm and detached acceptance of outward circumstances.

This emphasis on "satisfaction" or "Tranquility of Mind" provides the key to understanding how Astell could embrace the Cartesian challenge to custom while at the same time occupying a conservative political position. In *Bart'lemy Fair*, her final sustained attack on Whiggism,<sup>95</sup> Astell once again extols the benefits of "self-satisfaction." In this tract, Astell responds to the *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), an anonymous work written by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury. In the *Letter*, Shaftesbury puts forward a novel suggestion for evaluating the worth of extreme theological positions. Rather than test such religious beliefs by the light of reason or truth, he proposes that we subject them to a test of public ridicule. If a certain belief is genuine and sincere, then it will stand the test of ridicule and laughter; if it is spurious, then it will be detected and exposed. Shaftesbury's wry suggestion stems from

his conviction that there can be no true “freedom of censure” (or, in modern terms, freedom of speech) if certain customs or opinions are exempt from criticism.

Astell sees this method as tantamount to exposing all religion to the contempt of the people.<sup>96</sup> “To Laugh ourselves out of the little Knowledge we have,” she says, “will be so far from being *Wit* and *good Humor*, that it will be the height of Folly and Madness.”<sup>97</sup> Shaftesbury’s freedom of censure, in her view, is the freedom to challenge and undermine the religious and political order. The logical extension of Shaftesbury’s “libertine” viewpoint is that “we shall never be a perfectly free Nation, till the Guards are remov’d, the Court Gates thrown open, and every body at Liberty to be as merry as they please with their Sovereign.”<sup>98</sup> Shaftesbury’s failure to treat sacred institutions with due reverence can lead to nothing but moral and political chaos. “To make Libertines,” Astell says, “is to make so many Beasts of Prey, Foxes and other vermin; and do all one can to reduce Mankind to a state of open Violence, or dissembled Malice, which some, taking the *Measure* from themselves, have falsly call’d a State of Nature.”<sup>99</sup>

Astell has a different conception of liberty: not a radical political one, but a strictly philosophical conception of liberty as freedom of the will. For Astell, the will is free either to choose to love the transitory things of this world, or to place our hopes on attaining “an eternal and immutable Crown of Glory” in the next.<sup>100</sup> To choose the latter course is the only sure means to peace and harmony. An understanding of religion helps to subdue “those Passions which imbitter Life; sets us above those little Designs, which make us angry with them who stand in our way; fills our Souls with the Noblest Hopes, and the most Regular Desires.”<sup>101</sup> By contrast, the libertine – a person who values material goods and shows nothing but contempt for religion and God – can never achieve

tranquillity. Astell points out that “Libertine Pleasures depend on limited and precarious Objects, which are often out of our Power, and which must be engross’d and many times destroy’d, are continual occasions of Solicitude, Disquiet, and Grief; so that the Pain they give is generally greater than the Delight.”<sup>102</sup> The Libertine is “a 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.”<sup>103</sup>

While the Radical Enlightenment might have found fuel in the Cartesian challenge to custom, Astell’s writings show that radicalism is not a necessary outcome of Descartes’s philosophy. Instead of promoting radical change, a pursuit of Cartesian ethical ideals might result in a calm acceptance of the status quo. While we cannot master our external circumstances – such as the cruel tyranny of an abusive husband or the despotism of an unjust prince – we can master our own inner aspirations. The culmination of our re-direction of the passions toward the love of God is an inner tranquillity and peace of mind, regardless of “what happens without us.” Astell’s challenge to custom, therefore, is not one that logically leads to the undermining of political authority. It is a challenge, rather, to our customary judgments of right and wrong, judgments that go astray because we allow our passions to be directed toward unworthy ends rather than the love of God.<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> René Descartes, *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), "Article 63," 52. It is possible that Astell refers to this translation. For a modern translation, see René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. I, section 63, 351-2. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent citations refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atherton, "Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 19-34; Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: the Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," *Genders* 1, no. 1 (1988): 24-39; Joan K. Kinnaird, "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism," *The Journal of British Studies* 19, no. 1 (1979): 53-75; Ruth Perry, "Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 18, no. 4 (1985): 472-93; Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 57-97; and Hilda L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 115-39.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Astell to John Norris, September 21, 1693; in Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris: Wherein his late Discourse, shewing That it ought to be intire and exclusive of all other Loves, is further cleared and justified* (London: J. Norris, 1695).

<sup>5</sup> See John Cottingham, "Cartesian Ethics: Reason and the Passions," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 195 (1996): 193-216; Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. chapter 3;

---

Susan James, "Reason, the Passions, and the Good Life," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. II, 1358-96.

<sup>6</sup> Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 186.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997), 165.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Astell, *Proposal I*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Henry More, *An Account of Virtue: Or, Dr. Henry More's Abridgment of Morals, Put into English*, trans. Edward Southwell (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>14</sup> On Astell's use of "custom," see Rebecca M. Mills, "'That Tyrant Custom': The Politics of Custom in the Poetry and Prose of Augustan Women Writers," *Women's Writing* 7, no. 3 (2000): 391-409.

<sup>15</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 90-1.

<sup>20</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 156.

<sup>21</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 82.

- 
- <sup>26</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 148.
- <sup>27</sup> See Mills, “That Tyrant Custom,” 395.
- <sup>28</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 384.
- <sup>29</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. II, 40.
- <sup>30</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. II, 40.
- <sup>31</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. II, 41.
- <sup>32</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 388.
- <sup>33</sup> Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic: Or, the Art of Thinking. In which, Besides the Common, are contain'd many Excellent New Rules, very profitable for directing of reason, and acquiring of Judgement, in things as well relating to the Instruction of a Man's self, as of others*, third edition (London: T.B., 1696), “The Translators to the Reader,” sig. A3v. For a modern edition, see Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, trans. and ed. Jill Vance Buroker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Subsequent citations are from this edition.
- <sup>34</sup> Arnauld and Nicole, *Art of Thinking*, 54.
- <sup>35</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 126; Arnauld and Nicole, *Art of Thinking*, 235.
- <sup>36</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 89.
- <sup>37</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 126-7; Arnauld and Nicole, *Art of Thinking*, 238.
- <sup>38</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 127; Arnauld and Nicole, *Art of Thinking*, 238.
- <sup>39</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 115.
- <sup>40</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 128; Arnauld and Nicole, *Art of Thinking*, 238.
- <sup>41</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 115, 128.
- <sup>42</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 155.
- <sup>43</sup> Kinnaird, “Mary Astell,” 62.
- <sup>44</sup> Smith, *Reason's Disciples*, 129.
- <sup>45</sup> Smith, *Reason's Disciples*, 119.
- <sup>46</sup> Perry, “Radical Doubt,” 491.
- <sup>47</sup> Perry, “Radical Doubt,” 479.
- <sup>48</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 131.

---

<sup>49</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 132.

<sup>50</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 133.

<sup>51</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 120, 162.

<sup>52</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 78.

<sup>53</sup> James adds that very few writers adopt the Stoic position without some qualification; a life entirely devoid of passion is generally held to be unattainable (James, "Reason, the Passions, and the Good Life," 1373-4).

<sup>54</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 403.

<sup>55</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 162. Here Astell echoes her position in the *Letters*, where she says "I am not for a *Stoical Apathy* ... The Fault is not in our Passions considered in themselves, but in our voluntary Misapplication and unsuitable Management of them" (Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 130).

<sup>56</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 348.

<sup>58</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. II, 56.

<sup>59</sup> Descartes, *Principles*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 209.

<sup>60</sup> On this topic, see Cottingham, "Cartesian Ethics."

<sup>61</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 158.

<sup>62</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 161.

<sup>63</sup> Henry More writes that "*Virtue is an intellectual Power of the Soul, by which it over-rules the animal Impressions or bodily Passions; so as in every Action it easily pursues what is absolutely and simply the best*" (More, *Account of Virtue*, 11).

<sup>64</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 169.

<sup>65</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise of Freewill*, in *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, with A Treatise of Freewill*, ed. Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>66</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 165.

<sup>67</sup> On this tradition, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4.

---

<sup>68</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 165; More, *Account of Virtue*, 44. More paraphrases the 1650 English translation of Descartes's *Passions of the Soule*, in which "Admiration" (*l'admiration*) is "the first of all the Passions" (Descartes, *Passions of the Soule*, 47).

<sup>69</sup> More, *Account of Virtue*, 84 [48].

<sup>70</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 166.

<sup>71</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 166.

<sup>72</sup> On this tradition, see James, *Passion and Action*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> St Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. J. Healey (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1962), 33.

<sup>74</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 166.

<sup>75</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 166.

<sup>76</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 171.

<sup>77</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 171.

<sup>78</sup> John Norris, *The Theory and Regulation of Love. A Moral Essay. In Two Parts. To which are added Letters Philosophical and Moral between the Author and Dr Henry More* (Oxford: Henry Clements, 1688), "To the Reader."

<sup>79</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 284-5.

<sup>80</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 166.

<sup>81</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 166.

<sup>82</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 173.

<sup>83</sup> John Norris, *Practical Discourses Upon several Divine Subjects* (London: S. Manship, 1693), vol. III, 340.

<sup>84</sup> Sarah Ellenzeig, "The Love of God and the Radical Enlightenment: Mary Astell's Brush with Spinoza," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 3 (2003): 387.

<sup>85</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 96.

<sup>86</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 117.

<sup>88</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 78.

---

<sup>89</sup> Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>90</sup> Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, 53.

<sup>91</sup> Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England. In a Letter to the Right Honourable, T.L. C.I.* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705), 283.

<sup>92</sup> Astell, *Christian Religion*, 286-7.

<sup>93</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 396.

<sup>94</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 382.

<sup>95</sup> For details, see Van C. Hartmann, "Tory Feminism in Mary Astell's *Bart'lemy Fair*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 28, no. 3 (1998): 243-65.

<sup>96</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 23.

<sup>97</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 123.

<sup>98</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 50.

<sup>99</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 90.

<sup>100</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 114.

<sup>101</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 124.

<sup>102</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 90.

<sup>103</sup> Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair*, 140.

<sup>104</sup> This essay was completed during my tenure as an Australian Research Council postdoctoral fellow in the School of Philosophy and Bioethics at Monash University, Melbourne. I am extremely grateful to the ARC for their financial assistance, and to Karen Green, for her helpful comments and suggestions.