

Cartesianism and its Feminist Promise and Limits: The Case of Mary Astell
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Feminism and the Seventeenth Century

Many feminists of the latter half of the twentieth century identify Cartesian dualism, his specific form of rational thought, his individualism and his mechanical natural philosophy as undermining, in various ways, women, women's ways of being in the world, or traits frequently codes as 'female' in opposition with male-coded traits.¹ Yet, 400 years earlier, thinkers like Mary Astell, the centrepiece of this essay, took the Cartesian project – especially the dualism and championing of rational thought at its core – as offering immense promise to women. To borrow Poulain's phrase, the immaterial mind as the seat of distinctively human rational thought 'has no sex', and so Cartesian dualism – one of the very features of Descartes' thought that twentieth century feminists find most troublesome – provides an ontological basis for the radical egalitarianism of women's and men's natures as well as their modes of reasoning. Cartesianism forms the foundation of many of Astell's most women-friendly philosophical innovations.²

At the outset of the introduction to his important volume *The Equality of the Sexes*, Desmond Clarke writes of the 'feminist egalitarianism' at the core of the philosophies of Marie le Jars de Gournay, Anna Maria van Schurman, and François Poulain de la Barre.³ Indeed, the idea that these seventeenth century thinkers are feminist is present in the subtitle of Clarke's volume: *Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century*. By classifying these three seventeenth-century thinkers and their work as feminist, Clarke invites his reader to think about

the nature of feminism and whether or not we can productively apply the term or the concept to figures writing 300 to 400 years ago. This is an especially interesting issue given the fluid – even contested – nature of the idea of feminism. Briefly recalling the reception of Descartes by feminists underscores the point that what appears as antithetical to feminists in one period may well be highly welcome by woman-friendly thinkers of another time period.

But is Astell a *feminist*? I can imagine a strict contextualist reading of the seventeenth century rejecting the idea that any thinker of that century could be termed a ‘feminist.’ The word itself, such an argument may go, did not enter the English language until near the end of the nineteenth century, when the British adopted it from the French ‘*féminisme*’, and the French word originated with Charles Fourier (1772-1837) sometime in the first half of the 1800s.⁴ And the absence of the term, a strict contextualist reading might hold, indicates the absence of a way of thinking or a practice that actually is robustly feminist. Challenges to the idea of feminism existing in the seventeenth century could come from more substantive motivations as well. Astell, a thinker dubbed the ‘first English feminist’,⁵ provides a perfect example of exactly the sorts of substantive motivations I have in mind. One may find her endorsement of wives’ rightful subordination to their husbands within marriage, or her belief that her ideas apply only to the ‘ladies’ and not to poor women and men, so antithetical to a recognizably feminist project that her philosophy falls too short of the mark to be thought of as feminist despite her fierce dedication to the betterment of some aspects of some women’s lives.⁶ Similarly troubling views on women’s situations can be found in the writings of many thinkers who are otherwise generally in favor of the betterment of women’s lives. Perhaps as a result of these considerations, some commentators, at least, have maintained that to speak of feminism 300 to 400 years ago is to commit a ‘vile anachronism.’⁷

However, another contextualist approach that is more promising starts with Nietzsche's famous (and parenthetical!) comment in *The Genealogy of Morals* that '[o]nly something which has no history is capable of being defined.'⁸ While much ink has been spilt over this evocative thought, one way of thinking about this claim is to note that a concept with a history will mean very different things throughout the lifetime of that concept precisely because of the different meanings brought to it by different historical *contexts*. This can be said of the *idea* – whether the word exists or not – of feminism. Recognizing this – that feminism, as a concept with a history, evades definition – is helpful in thinking about the early modern period and the women and men who wrote favourably about women in these centuries. For one regularly comes across early modern thinkers whose ideas about women, their minds, their liberties, their very selves, strike the modern mind as distinctively feminist, and yet who also embrace ideas that we find troublesome, precisely on feminist grounds. But drawing upon Nietzsche's idea expressed above, we might say that 'feminism' cannot be defined precisely because it is embedded in different historical contexts, and that we can recognize ideas from the past as being feminist ideas *for that time period*, or feminist ideas given *what they subsequently made possible* in the evolution of feminism. Our forebears who generated these forward-looking ideas are the giants upon whose shoulders contemporary feminists are currently standing. Given the expansiveness of this second contextualist approach, I think Clarke is right to think of these historical figures as feminist, and this paper is meant to defend that claim in the case of Astell.

This is a paper about Astell's feminism in two of its forms, and the relationship between her feminism and her philosophy of education. The first form of feminism is that mentioned at the outset of this paper, and it draws positively upon Cartesian philosophy. This is Astell's commitment to women's and men's equality in their rational essence. This feminism can be seen

an early example of a form of contemporary feminism now called ‘equality feminism’ within the broader category of ‘classical-liberal feminism’, albeit with a significant qualification, which I’ll mention shortly. Equality feminists take certain character traits that have been traditionally *coded* as those definitive of men to be precisely just that: coded. These traits are not essential to men and men alone, and women can exhibit these traits too. In fact, not only *can* women exhibit these trait; women *ought to* cultivate these traits for they will give women the sort of advantages in the world that have tended to be the province of men.⁹ The important qualification in the case of Astell is that, while she embraces equality when it comes to all humans’ essential rational natures, she is not in the *liberal* tradition, for neither women nor men have *rights*. Their rational natures entail equal *duties* that they all have toward God. But Astell does believe that women ought to cultivate the sort of rational nature typically associated with men for the theological advantages that will accrue to them as a result.

The second form of feminism I locate in Astell also has its roots in the early modern period, it also receives more fully-developed theoretical treatment in contemporary feminism, and with this form of feminism, Astell moves decisively away from certain features of Descartes’ philosophy. This is a feminism grounded in the recognition of the value – sometimes even the superiority – of traits typically associated with women, traits which are usually denigrated simply because of their association with women. Contemporary moral theories that focus on care are examples of this approach.¹⁰ A variety of this form of feminism appears in the early modern period, and it is also discussed briefly by Clarke in his introduction to *The Equality of the Sexes*. This form of feminism is manifest in one party to the *querelle des femmes*, namely those who argue for the superiority of the female sex.¹¹ One can think of male-coded and female-coded traits as being either essential to the sexes or socially-constructed and thus accidental.

There are suggestions of both possibilities in Astell. For she surely believes (as noted above) in the essential sameness across genders of the non-sexed immaterial soul.¹² As such, gender differences would seem to be for her socially-constructed, and this would apply to female-coded traits no less than to male-coded traits. On this model, men no less than women would benefit from adopting helpful female-coded traits, just as Astell urges women to develop their rational natures (erstwhile conceived of as a male trait). And indeed, there are places where Astell suggests that husbands should exhibit some of these traits typically associated with women for the betterment of marriage.¹³ At the same time, Astell knows that unsexed souls are nonetheless embodied in sexed bodies while we live on earth, and she believes that these bodies have an influence on the soul. She does sometimes seem to suggest that such embodiment can result in intrinsic, even if not essential, differences between men and women during their embodiment.¹⁴ These are not socially-constructed differences, even while they are not the most fundamentally essential features of people either. Whatever the source of the differences between men and women, traits typically coded as female – e.g. community, loving friendship, other-regardingness along side self-regard – are lauded by feminists of this second variety, and we see this in Astell, too. Importantly, we must also acknowledge that some female-coded traits result in Astell's believing that women have specific gendered duties (caring for children, for example),¹⁵ a belief that many contemporary thinkers would find troublesome from a feminist perspective. Without downplaying this troublesome aspect of her philosophy, it is also true that she finds traits typically associated with women to be highly valuable, and this is the feature of her thought I shall emphasize in this paper. The way in which this form of feminism moves away from Descartes is in its emphasis on *community*, which stands in contrast with the stark individual isolationism of Descartes' own life, which significantly informs aspects of his normative

philosophy.¹⁶ Both forms of feminism – equality feminism and feminism grounded in valuing, rather than denigrating, female ways of being in the world – work together in her philosophy of education to help women who have strayed from the true theological and moral path due to perverse social customs find their way back to their true, essentially rational natures, which they equally share with men.

II. Equality Feminism: Reason and a Woman's Mind

In her masterful book on Astell, Jacqueline Broad identifies in Astell's writings 'two types of woman or female characters – the one weak and dissatisfied, the other strong and at peace with the world.'¹⁷ The latter character type is as she is in effect because she has cultivated her true, essential nature in order to realize her true theologically-defined purpose of serving God.¹⁸ Broad captures a number of important traits that characterize this sort of woman, including:

Her happiness does not depend on... other people, material goods, and the variable opinions of men.... She is unmoved by both good and bad fortune.... She knows her happiness does not depend upon anything outside her own mind.... Above all, this woman lives her life in accordance with reason.... She does not see someone else's success as a cause for envy; she has too strong a sense of self-esteem to want to pull others down.... 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.... [H]er 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. *In short, this woman lives up to the dignity of her nature as a free and rational being.*¹⁹

This virtuous female type will serve as the focus of this section, in which I detail how Astell's vision of the virtuous female captures her commitment to the essential natural equality of women and men. As is underscored by many points in the above characterization, Astell's equality feminism is squarely rooted in Cartesian philosophy, broadly conceived.²⁰

Astell's equality feminism²¹ starts from a commitment to a Cartesian ontology of the human, specifically his dualism of soul and body²² according to which the thinking soul²³ is the mark of the divine within each of us and is our human essence.²⁴ While the soul may be embodied during our time on earth, it will eventually be free from the body after the latter's death.²⁵ Since sex attaches to bodies and not to souls, women's human essence is identical with – and thus equal to – that of men. This is the bedrock of Astell's feminism, and it informs her prescription for how women ought to treat themselves. For example: 'I suppose then that you're fill'd with a laudable Ambition to brighten and enlarge your Souls, that the Beauty of your Bodies is but a secondary care....'²⁶

Astell's Cartesian ontology encourages her to adopt a broadly Cartesian epistemology.²⁷ All humans have different 'Modes of Understanding' – faith, science and opinion, but '[k]nowledge in a proper and restricted sense' belongs to the scientific mode of understanding because it starts from premises clearly and distinctly known and reaches conclusions through deduction.²⁸ The scientific mode of understanding is starkly contrasted with the senses through which we may be conscious but through which *we do not know*.²⁹ Part of our tasks as knowers is to understand our various cognitive capacities, recognize our limits, and constrain ourselves therein,³⁰ another obviously Cartesian point.

From this taxonomy of cognitive abilities and their relation to knowledge an essentially Cartesian method for gaining knowledge follows, with the Cartesian-inspired Port Royal logic of

Arnauld and Nicole³¹ also playing a key role in Astell's method. She sums up her account with six rules, with the sixth being crucial for my purposes: 'To judge no further than we Perceive, and not to take anything for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so.'³² This rule commands us to accept as truth that which we believe through science or faith, but to reject as truth that which we believe through opinion. Astell also alerts us to various sources of error that normally derail us from the path to true knowledge, and crucial sources of error are the senses and related aspects of our embodied nature such as the passions.³³ She thus encourages us to 'withdraw ourselves as much as may be from Corporeal things, that pure Reason may be heard the better....'³⁴ Two feminist advantages emerge from Astell's epistemology and method. First, echoing a point central to Descartes, the certainty of science – that is, of starting from clear and distinct perceptions and reasoning step-wise through deduction to conclusions – is contrasted with the uncertainty of mere opinions, and the former mode of understanding is highly individualistic. This allows the individual to challenge traditional beliefs held by members of a society at large; that is, this allows a woman to challenge customary beliefs that undermine women, such that their beauty matters more than their intellects. Second, Astell strongly links rationality with human essence while also disengaging the passions from our human essence, and this applies equally to men and women alike. She thus rejects the traditional pairing of women with irrational passions and men with rationality, a rejection that has obvious benefit for women.

The way in which we develop our God-given rationality is to pursue a good education as opposed to a bad education.³⁵ Bad customs are those that pervert our natural selves, and bad education is one that does not develop our God-given rationality, thus robbing us of the means by which we attain our end of honoring and serving God. 'This Ignorance and a narrow Education lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up.'³⁶ Conversely, good

customs are those that cultivate our natural, God-given selves, and good education is one that develops and perfects our God-given rationality, thus enabling us to attain our end of honoring and serving God, including by helping others perfect their rationality.³⁷ Indeed, this last point is *the point of her *Serious Proposal** in which she lays out the details and foundations of a good education precisely, I suggest, to bring about better customs for generations after Astell's own.

Astell, like Descartes, thus connects two crucial elements in her philosophy. First, the ontology of the human, and the related epistemology and method which follow from this, allow one to rely upon her own God-given nature – especially her rational capacities – in order to reach whatever truths about the world she is able to reach. Second, developing one's rational capacities allows one to reject customs which her own rational nature tells her are wrong. These crucial elements contribute to what I have been calling Astell's equality feminism. Any woman who acknowledges the ontology of *all* humans, the subsequent ways of gaining truth, and the proper education one must follow to gain truth and cultivate her rational soul will realize her best nature as captured at the outset of this section in Broad's characterization of the virtuous woman. The goal of the second part of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is to offer a method by which women can cultivate and improve their minds so as to realize as fully as possible their rational natures. In principle, it is a method that could be practiced anywhere, by any individual capable to reading the book.

In practice, however, especially in the practical lives of seventeenth-century women, more is required. For unfortunately, most women find themselves receiving bad education, if any at all, and the negative role of bad customs in the formation of women's characters results in their becoming non-virtuous women. These women, more than any, will benefit from a specific features of the education institution which are not captured by Astell's *method* of rightly

developing one's reason. These features have to do with the exclusionary nature of the institutions in which Astell thinks women should receive their educations, and the relationships that can develop within these women-only educational institutions. These features also underscore the value of community and loving friendships, values more typically coded as female.

III. Feminism and Women's Communities

The description that Broad gives of Astell's 'weak and dissatisfied' – that is, non-virtuous – woman is striking to one familiar with the history of early modern philosophies of education. Here is part of Broad's description:

Her happiness depends upon other people, material things, and circumstances beyond her control. She is especially concerned with the opinions of men: she likes to hear herself complimented, she enjoys one man's attention, and she welcomes the gaze of others. 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.'³⁸

What is striking about this characterization is that this woman is governed by *amour propre* in the *negative* way that Jean Jacques Rousseau would characterize that passion a century later in his educational treatise, *Émile*.³⁹ The concept of *amour propre* – and the closely related passion, *amour de soi* – has an extended history in the early modern period, and Astell was certainly aware of the concept. The idea is found in the writings of Blaise Pascal, François de la Rochefoucauld, Pierre Nicole (likely Astell's source for the idea) and others. Astell writes about the two forms of self-love, the productive *amour de soi* (in Rousseau's eventual terminology)

and the destructive *amour propre* (as termed by Nicole, Rousseau and others) in the second part of *The Serious Proposal*.

Again Self-love, an excellent Principle when true, but the worst and most mischievous when mistaken, disposes us to be retentive of our Prejudices and Errors, especially when it is joyn'd as most commonly it is with Pride and Conceitedness.⁴⁰

Earlier, in the first part of the *Proposal*, Astell associates mistaken self-love with the weak character type identified by Broad. Astell writes:

... she who has nothing else to value herself upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase; and think herself 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.⁴¹

Finally, in a letter to John Norris, she makes explicit her belief that mistaken self-love (again, what is termed *amour propre* by her French counterparts in the early modern period) comes about when we regard ourselves in so far as we are in some sort of relation with others, rather than due to something intrinsically valuable within ourselves.

I cannot forbear to reckon it an Affection, and an Effect of vicious Self-love, to love any Person merely on the account of his Relation to us. All other motive being equal, this may be allowed to weigh down the Scale; but certainly no Man is the better in himself for being akin to me, and nothing but an overweaning Opinion of my self can induce me to think so.⁴²

In these passages, Astell focuses primarily on mistaken self-love, but she does recognize a valuable self-love, namely that which we hold for ourselves when we value our minds and virtue, and seek to improve these features of ourselves. It is a self-love that is not dependent upon what others think of us, and nor does it encourage us to cultivate bodily and other material advantages in order to gain the admiration of others.⁴³ Self-love is closely associated with self-esteem – self-esteem is the broader category, and when it goes wrong, it does so because of the dual character perversions of pride and mistaken self-love.

Reading Astell's treatment of good self-love and perverted self-love, alongside Rousseau's treatment of *amour de soi* and *amour propre* is especially valuable for two reasons at least. First, reading these two educational theories and the role of *amour propre* therein side by side presents a stunning example of what philosophers of the past few decades have called the difference between ideal and non-ideal theory. Second, both thinkers deal with these concepts in the context of their educational treatises, and the divergence in those treatise on how to deal with the negative *amour propre* underscores Astell's focus on female-coded traits of community and friendship rather than the male-coded trait of isolated individualism that is at the core of the first books of *Émile*. I detail some very basic elements of Rousseau's account of *amour propre* and some essential features of Astell's community of women in educational institutions first before turning to what Rousseau's theory, in contrast with Astell's, can tell us about Astell's feminism.

Rousseau's *Émile* can be profitably read as a proposed solution to an ill that he diagnoses in the opening pages of *The Social Contract*: 'Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains'⁴⁴. While the human is born to eventually take on his natural state of being free, equal, unprejudiced, self-sufficient and whole, living in the artifice of society results in the human becoming enchained by laws he plays no role in making, in relationships of inequality, full of

false opinions and superstitions, dependent, and split between his inclinations and desires on the one hand and his duties on the other hand. *Émile*, Rousseau's educational philosophy, is a treatise about the power of education to save man – one man as an example, namely *Émile* – from this latter state and to deliver him into adulthood in his rightfully natural state; it is a treatise on the education of the natural man.

One central, and for my purposes especially interesting, feature of *Émile*'s early education is the prevention of the rise of *amour propre*. *Amour propre* is a passion, and for Rousseau, the passions emerge in humans at an early age, unlike reason, which begins to emerge at only at adolescence⁴⁵. *Amour propre* is a kind of self-love, perhaps even self-esteem, that comes about as a result of regarding oneself through another's eyes. It is self-love placed in the context of another human: to have *amour propre* means one can love or esteem oneself only if others do too. This leads to living outside oneself and through the opinions and desires of others: one does what he believes others want him to do, he is what others want him to be, and he gains his sense of value through others' evaluations of him. As a result, *amour propre* results in one treating oneself as a means and not an end: he uses himself as a means to gain the approval of others. But he also treats others as means and not as ends so as to manipulate them to improve his position and not their own. Since *amour propre* depends upon comparing oneself with others in a competitive way, others must be prevented from making themselves better if at all possible. So *amour propre* results in everyone treating everyone else as a means to one's own end of attaining superiority over others. *Amour propre* is contrasted with *amour de soi*, a self-love and self-esteem that is good and healthy. *Amour de soi* is entirely self-focused and makes no reference to something or someone outside of the self. It is a selfish love in the sense of being without reference to another person: humans are born with this kind of self-love and it is natural

to us and hence good⁴⁶. The education of Émile is meant to suppress *amour propre* and to cultivate *amour de soi* until Émile reaches the age of puberty when *amour propre* can be profitably harnessed – and therefore has value – to introduce Émile to civil society, which he must enter for his adulthood⁴⁷.

Rousseau's suggested method for guiding Émile safely through childhood and the avoidance of *amour propre* produces a completely impossible and impractical educational theory. Émile is to be raised in the country, away from the corrupting influences of city life, under the care of a nameless tutor who manipulates Émile's natural environment so as to help Émile learn his lessons by negotiating the necessities of the natural world – and never by negotiating the will of another. If Émile can learn without seeing himself *vis-à-vis* others but rather *vis-à-vis* natural necessity, then Émile can learn without the opportunity for *amour propre* to take hold in his early years⁴⁸. If he can learn by overcoming natural obstacles, then he can value himself for feats he has accomplished by himself, and this *amour de soi* can take root. However impossible and impractical this educational ideal is, Rousseau's piercing insight into the damaging influences on young lives of *amour propre* and the empowering influence on young lives of *amour de soi* is an accomplishment in itself.⁴⁹ But his educational ideal remains impossible and impractical.

Like Rousseau a century after her, Astell also diagnoses an ill: women raised so as to exhibit precisely the kind of self-love – *amour propre* – that both Astell and Rousseau find so troublesome for healthy and full human development. Like Rousseau, Astell's proposed solution is a specific form of education. For women⁵⁰ – Astell's singular focus – good education should occur in a religious retreat, a women's-only educational institution. This is because *bad* customs are so wide spread in the world dominated by men 'who under pretence of loving and admiring

[women], really serve their *own* base ends,⁵¹ that women's true nature simply cannot be developed in that wider world – they will be too easily kept in a state of *amour propre*. A number of points about this religious retreat should be emphasized. First, it is a *religious* retreat, in keeping with Astell's overall theological purposes. The religious retirement will draw women's attention away from the this-worldly, bodily concerns that currently dominate their attention, cultivating mistaken self-love and it will turn women's attention toward the cultivation of her soul 'so that here's a vast treasure gain'd, which for ought I know, may purchase an happy Eternity.'⁵² Second, it is especially important for *women* to be afforded such a retreat because of the disproportionate burden women bear living in the world of bad customs.⁵³ Third, women-only retreats cultivate the value of true female friendship – 'a Vertue which comprehends all the rest.'⁵⁴ Female friendship is valuable not only for its own sake but because it helps women to develop the ability to withstand bad customs, that tempt them away from their God-given ends of self-perfection and perfection of others' souls, customs to which they will once again be exposed should they be forced to leave the retreat.⁵⁵ And women *will* have to leave the retreat. 'It is not my intention that you shou'd seclude your selves from the World, I know it is necessary that a great number of you shou'd live in it; but it is Unreasonable and Barbarous to drive you into't, e're you are capable of doing Good in it, or at least of keeping Evil from your selves.'⁵⁶

Pivotal to the success of her religious retreat is the power of female friendship. According to Astell, human creatures deserve the love of benevolence from one another; this is to be contrasted with the love of desire we owe to God.⁵⁷ Benevolence is the source of our friendship with others, and in the female-only religious retreat, it is a benevolence women feel toward one another. Such a friendship

has a special force to dilate [open] our hearts, to deliver them from that vicious selfishness, and the rest of those *sordid Passions* which express a narrow illiberal temper, and are of such a pernicious consequence to Mankind.... But by Friendship I do not mean any of those intimacies that are abroad in the world, which are often combinations in evil and at best but insignificant dearnesses.... But I intend by it the greatest usefulness, the most refin'd and disinterest'd Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to so or suffer for its Beloved; And makes no distinction betwixt its Friend and its self....⁵⁸

A true friendship cannot be developed hastily, for it requires that 'we look into the very Soul of the beloved Person, to discover what resemblance it bears to our own.' Astell underscores the purpose of such a friendship: 'The truest effect of love being to endeavour the bettering of the beloved Person,'⁵⁹ which for Astell must mean the cultivation of the friend's rational capacities so she can honor and serve God. Astell's account of female friendship rests upon an individual recognizing the subjectivity of others. This is supported by her belief that true friendship requires that we come to know the soul of another and to acknowledge the likeness of that soul to one's own; both are subjects. Indeed, true friendship 'makes no distinction' between the other and the self, showing that the true friend acknowledges the other's subjectivity just as we acknowledge our own. Education in such an institution will provide the strongest bulwark against women's fall into mistaken self-love – *amour propre* – and it will help them cultivate their minds and virtues so that they may strengthen their true self-love – *amour de soi*.

The contrasts between Rousseau's and Astell's educational philosophies is notable for two reasons. First, in recent years, much ink in philosophy has been spilt in the debate

surrounding ideal versus non-ideal theory. This debate has appeared in a different fields of philosophy, from political philosophy more generally, to feminist philosophy and philosophy of race, to philosophy of education. Applied to political theories of justice, for example, '[i]deal theory attempts to construct a model of what an ideally just society would look like, or what principles ideally just procedures would follow. It then identifies injustices in our actual world by measuring how our world falls short of the ideal.'⁶⁰ Applied to educational philosophy, ideal theory constructs a model of what an ideal educational system would look like. This is to be contrasted with non-ideal theory, which 'starts from a non-ideal state and seeks solutions to the problems identified in that state. Political philosophy[']s... task is to articulate the problems we face, then diagnose their causes, and finally to formulate solutions.'⁶¹ Applied to educational philosophy, non-ideal theory identifies problem with actual educational practices, diagnoses their causes and formulates solutions which are practicable within educational institutions. Given the degree of its implausibility, it is hard to imagine that Rousseau's educational philosophy is an example of an ideal theory, which we might assume could attain even if in the distant future; no educational system could ever replicate Émile's education for more than a small handful of children (were it even desirable for any child). But it is certainly meant to deliver ideal results with respect to Émile's self-esteem. At the very least, we can safely say that Rousseau's theory is far indeed from non-ideal theory. For rather than starting with the live problem of individuals suffering from *amour propre* and looking for philosophical ways to address this problem, Rousseau's theory is meant to keep that problem from ever arising in the first place.

By contrast, Astell's philosophy of education is a classical example of non-ideal theory: identify an ill (women's tendency to be dominated by mistaken self-love), identify the causes (living in the male-dominated world filled with customs that pervert women's true natures), and

formulate a solution (encourage women to retreat to a single-sexed educational institution in which women benefit from loving friendships with other women in their dismantling of mistaken self-love and replacement of it with true self-love). Astell's is a theory that addresses the lived experiences of real women in a way that is immediately practicable. One might imagine that Astell is led to her non-ideal theory of education precisely because of the urgency that women like Astell feel to rid themselves of their own highly non-ideal circumstances.

From a feminist perspective, a second general conclusion emerges from the contrast between Rousseau's and Astell's approaches to education and the problem of *amour propre*. Rousseau's solution is to go the route of rugged individualism taken to an extreme. Émile will be raised with as little meaningful human contact as possible. He will be kept from the world of men for as long as possible. He will be raised in accordance with the male-coded traits of self-reliance, independence, and extreme individualism. At the conclusion of his childhood and early youth – just before he is to be introduced to society – Émile 'considers himself without regard to others and finds it good that others do not think of him. He demands nothing of anyone and believes he owes nothing to anyone. He is alone in human society; he counts on himself alone.... *Amour propre*, the first and most natural of all the passions, is still hardly aroused in him'⁶². This isolated individualism captures much of the spirit of Descartes' normative theory, focused as it is on that which is fully within control of the individual.

Astell's women, by contrast both with Rousseau's Émile and with Descartes' prescription to rely as much on one's own self as possible, will retreat to a community of benevolent women who will love each other as generous souls ought to love one's fellow. They will care for each other's souls as if they were their own. They will hone their own virtue and help others in this quest as well. Astell's women will retreat to a world ruled in accordance with the female-coded

traits of community and interdependence, care, and concern for others. And these traits are highly valuable, according to Astell, because they will be the solution to the ill that has befallen women. This lauding of typically female-coded traits for the great good those traits can bring to people's lives is Astell's second form of feminism, alongside her first form based in human egalitarianism, and for all her flaws on other feminist issues, her strength on these two warrant our thinking of her as a feminist for her time.

¹ See, for example, Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman* (New York, 1965), Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York, 1980), Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis, 1984), Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany, 1987), and several essays in Susan Bordo (ed), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes* (University Park, 1999).

² For arguments in favor of the Cartesian foundations of Astell's feminism, albeit often with different aspects of Cartesianism serving as that foundation, see for example, Joan K. Kinnaird, 1979. 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism,' *Journal of British Studies* 19:1 (1976), 61-2; Eileen O'Neill, 'Women Cartesians, 'Feminine Philosophy', and Historical Exclusion,' in *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, edited by Susan Bordo (University Park, 1999), 232-257; Ruth Perry, 'Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18: 4 (1985), 472-93; Ruth Perry, 'Mary Astell's Response to the Enlightenment,' in *Women and the Enlightenment*, edited by Margaret Hunt, Margaret Jacob, Phyllis Mack, and Ruth Perry (Philadelphia, 1984); Hilde L. Smith, 'A New Path to Honor': English Feminists, 1690-1710,' in *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Indianapolis, 1982), 115-150; Jacqueline Broad, 'Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom,' in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Farnham, 2007), 165-79; and Jacqueline Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (Oxford, 2015).

³ Desmond M. Clarke, *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 2013), 4.

⁴ Karen Offen, 'On the French Origin of the Words Feminism and Feminist,' *Feminist Issues* 8: 2 (1988), 45-51.

⁵ Bridget Hill, 'Introduction,' in *The First English Feminist: Reflections Upon Marriage and other writings by Mary Astell*, ed. Bridget Hill, (Aldershot, 1986), 1-64.

⁶ I appreciate conversations with Grace Boey on this issue. I address Astell's feminism and her position on marriage in Karen Detlefsen, 'Custom, Freedom and Equality: Mary Astell on Marriage and Women's Education,' in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, eds. Penny Weiss and Alice Sowaal (University Park, 2016), 74-92. I consider Astell's status as a feminist further in my 'Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing' (under review).

⁷ Regine Janes, 'Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary, Or, Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared,' *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, volume edited by Ronald C. Rosbottom, 5 (1976), 121. See also Jane Duran, 2006. 'Mary Astell', in *Eight Women Philosophers: Theory, Politics, and Feminism* (Urbana, 2006), 86.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford, 2009), trans. Douglas Smith, Essay 2, Section 13. My appreciation to Quentin Skinner for his drawing this idea to my attention. I borrow this paragraph from my 'Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing' in *Women and Liberty 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁹ See, for example, Joan Kennedy Taylor, *Reclaiming the Mainstream: Individualist Feminism Rediscovered* (Amherst, New York, 1992); Karen Lehrman, *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex & Power in the Real World* (New York, 1997); and Wendy McElroy, *The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival* (Amherst, New York, Books, 1998).

¹⁰ Perhaps the most prominent early example in contemporary feminism is Carol Gilligan's rejection of male-biased theories of moral development as the single metric by which to measure such development, and her articulation of a theory that emphasizes women's moral traits. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

¹¹ Clarke, *The Equality of the Sexes*, 2-3.

¹² I should note that Astell believes that humans have different degrees of rational capacity, even while all humans have the same essential kind of nature. See the second part of her book, Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II. Wherein a Method is offer'd for the Improvement of their Minds* [1697], edited by Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON, 2002), 153 and 186. Nonetheless, Astell is adamant that individual differences in rationality are not sexed-based. It is a 'ridiculous Pretension', she writes, to believe that men and women have different intellectual differences solely due to their sex: 'that a Man is Wiser than a Woman merely because he is a Man!... he who has no more Understanding than to argue at this rate, must not take it amiss if he is Esteemed accordingly.' 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.* (R. Wilkin, 1705), 171.

¹³ For example, she urges husbands and wives to be friends and not just engaged in a sexually-based relationship. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* [1700]. In *Political Writings*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Cambridge, 1996), 37.

¹⁴ See, for example, the first part of Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest. By a Lover of her Sex*, op. cit. 57; Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 159-60; and Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 296.

¹⁵ For example, Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 202; and Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 296.

¹⁶ For a biography that underscores the isolation that Descartes cultivated in his own life, see Desmond M Clarke. *Descartes: A Biography* (Cambridge: 2006). For an example of how Descartes' own life informed the substance of his philosophy, and how the individualism at the core of some of his normative theories was found to be problematic by women of the seventeenth century, see Lisa Shapiro, 'Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist': The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy' (ms: under review).

¹⁷ Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, 1.

¹⁸ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 187-9 and 200.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3; emphasis added.

²⁰ As Broad emphasizes, the philosophies of the Cartesian- and Augustinian-inspired Nicolas Malebranche and John Norris are among the most notably influences on Astell. Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, 9.

²¹ Material from this and the following four paragraphs is culled from Detlefsen, 'Custom, Freedom, and Equality', 75-81.

²² Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 251.

²³ 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: 1695), 1-2.

²⁴ Alice Sowaal has a much more-well developed account of Astell's theory of mind and its relation to key points addressed in this essay. See Alice Sowaal, 'Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal*: Mind, Method, and Custom,' *Philosophy Compass* 2:2 (2007), 227-243.

²⁵ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part I, 52-3.

²⁶ *Ibid.* part II, 122; c.f. *Ibid.* part I, 54.

²⁷ I recognize that her epistemology is not fully Cartesian for as Broad points out, there is no commitment to radical doubt in Astell. Broad, 'Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom,' 171.

²⁸ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 149-53. As this description of the scientific mode of understanding makes clear, Astell's use of 'science' is, of course, different from our own. For Astell, as for others writing in the 17th century, 'science' derives from *scientia* and refers to certain knowledge such as the sort we might derive from indubitable first principles together with deductive reasoning.

²⁹ Ibid., 150.

³⁰ Ibid., 152.

³¹ Ibid., 166.

³² Ibid., 178.

³³ E.g. *ibid.*, 178.

³⁴ Ibid., 164.

³⁵ See John McCrystal's argument that women have an equal *duty* to educate their minds, not an equal *right* to education. Developing our minds through education is a duty to God as our proper end. John McCrystal, 'A Lady's Calling: Mary Astell's Notion of Women,' *Political Theory Newsletter* 4 (1992) 156-70. C.f. Sharon Achinstein, 'Mary Astell, Religion, and Feminism: Texts in Motion,' in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Farnham, 2007), 17-30. On this point, he diverges from those who believe Astell thinks good education is a woman's *right*. See, for example, Penny Weiss, 'Mary Astell: Including Women's Voices in Political Theory,' *Hypatia* 19:3 (2004), 65.

³⁶ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part I, 67.

³⁷ Astell's educational theory is thus at one and the same time, a perfectionist theory in so far as it requires that we perfect our rational capacities, and a functionalist theory, in so far as perfecting our rationalist capacities permits us to take on specific functions such as serving God, including by taking on gendered social roles. See Patricia Ward Scaltsas for an argument that Astell is motivated by perfectionist principles. Patricia Ward Scaltsas, 'Women as Ends – Women as Means in the Enlightenment,' in *Women's Rights and the Rights of Man*, edited by A.J. Arnaud and E. Kingdom (Aberdeen, 1990), 139 and 141-2). See Joan K. Kinnaird who acknowledges the functionalist role of education in Astell's philosophy. Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution', 72-3.

³⁸ Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, 1. Broad cites Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part I, 92 in this passage.

³⁹ It is crucial to note that Rousseau identifies positive uses and instances of *amour propre* as well as the negative elements highlighted here. My focus on the negative elements is not intended to suggest there are *only* these negative elements.

⁴⁰ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 135-6.

⁴¹ Ibid., part I, 62-3.

⁴² Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 130.

⁴³ See, for example, Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 211, and *The Christian Religion*, §203. For an extended account of Astell's theory of love, including self-love in both its forms, see Broad *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, chapter 6, 'Love', 107-125.

⁴⁴ *The Social Contract* and *Émile* were both published in 1762, and so the relation suggested here may be better thought of as a conceptual relation. The human predicament that Rousseau identifies in *The Social Contract* is one he had in mind for some years before the publications of these two texts, for he gives a history of the human's fall from his natural state to the state of being in chain in his 1754 *On the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*. On the following brief sketch of Rousseau, I have benefitted from Allan Bloom, 'Introduction,' in *Émile, or On Education*, introduction, translation and notes by Allan Bloom (New York, 1979). See also Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford, 2008).

⁴⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, introduction, translation and notes by Allan Bloom (New York, 1979), 89.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 92, 115.

⁴⁷ *Émile*'s so-called 'negative' education, which includes the suppression of *amour propre*, is the subject of Book I through III of Rousseau's text, while Book IV details the how this passion is exploited for the positive project of integrating *Émile* into society.

⁴⁸ Bloom, 'Introduction', 11-14.

⁴⁹ I take it that much contemporary developmental and educational psychology is uncovering precisely the effects of these two forms of self-esteem in the young. The work of Carol Dweck, who first introduced the ideas of fixed and malleable intelligence, with her experiments showing children trying to disguise their supposed intellectual weaknesses from the gaze of others so that they may earn the esteem of others, incorporates the core insight at play in this material from Rousseau.

⁵⁰ Material from this and the following paragraph is culled from Detlefsen, 'Custom, Freedom, and Equality', 79 and 87-8.

⁵¹ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part I, 74.

⁵² Ibid. 89.

⁵³ Ibid. 56-73, *passim*.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 98.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 100.

⁵⁶ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part II, 231.

⁵⁷ Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 282-5. On this aspect of Astell's philosophy, see Jacqueline Broad, 'Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange,' *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 1 (2003), 123-49; Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-20; Alice Sowaal, 'Mary Astell,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed December 12, 2006, §3.1; Catherine Wilson, 'Love of God and Love of Creatures: The Masham-Astell Debate,' *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21: 3 (2004), 281-98.

⁵⁸ Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, part I, 99.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Anderson, 'Toward a Non-Ideal, Relational Methodology for Political Philosophy: Comments on Schwartzman's 'Challenging Liberalism',' *Hypatia* 24: 4 (2009), 135.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Rousseau, *Émile*, 208.