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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies, develops, and argues for an interpretation of Mary Astell's understanding of self-government. On this interpretation, what is essential to self-government, according to Astell, is an agent's responsiveness to her own reasoning. The paper identifies two aspects of her theory of self-government: an 'authenticity' criterion of what makes our motives our own and an account of the capacities required for responsiveness to our own reasoning. The authenticity criterion states that when our motives arise from some external source without validation by our own understanding of the reasons supporting them, then they are not our own. The capacities requisite for responsiveness to our own reasoning are those of examining and evaluating our own motives and of resisting the social pressure to conform to others' opinions. An upshot of this interpretation of Astell's theory of self-government is that it reveals her insights into the ways 'custom' can undermine an individual's ability to govern oneself.

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Mary Astell (1666–1731) was highly attuned to an issue that has received considerable recent philosophical attention: what is it to live a life in which an individual is the authority of the motives and principles that govern it? That is, what is it to be a self-governing agent? And if a person (in particular, a woman) is not a self-governing agent, how does she become one? Though the issue of self-government is often discussed in the philosophical literature today,[1] the notion of self-government as applied to individuals was not widespread until the eighteenth century. Astell does not use the term 'self-government', though she uses language of 'government' and 'authority' in

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[1]The notion of self-government is often referred to as 'autonomy' in the present-day literature. Commentators distinguish between various notions of autonomy employed in moral and political philosophy; the target concept of this paper is often referred to as 'personal autonomy' or 'individual autonomy'. I use the term 'self-government' because we find related notions in Astell's works and to forestall expectations of continuity with the Kantian conception of autonomy.

describing decision-making. What she does speak of is 'liberty' and 'free agency', and these remarks, as I shall show in this paper, should be seen as part of her theory of self-government. I begin the paper by showing how an alternative way of making sense of Astell's remarks on liberty and free agency, as an account of free will, is unsatisfying and leaves out fundamental aspects of Astell's understanding of the concepts at issue (Section 1).

Though I motivate the idea that Astell has a concept of self-government (Section 2), the suggestion that in her works Astell puts forward a theory of self-government, often referred to in the secondary literature as 'autonomy', is not new. Patricia Springborg, in her notes on Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, attributes to Astell "a classical theory of freedom as autonomy … : the capacity to elect a rule of conduct and follow it" (*Serious Proposal*, 67, note 5).[2] In a recent paper, Jacqueline Broad says that "Astell develops a feminist theory of autonomy: a theory that for women to acquire true self-determination in their moral choices and actions, they must be permitted the conditions that enable careful self-examination and self-government" ("Selfhood", 724). But the requisite capacities and necessary conditions for self-government have not yet been detailed.

This paper has two central aims. The first is to fill the gap in the literature: I identify, develop, and argue for the details of the theory of self-government in Astell's work.[3] On the interpretation I present (Section 3), Astell holds that to be self-governing, an agent must be responsive to her own reasoning. There are two aspects of this interpretation I develop: first, an 'authenticity' criterion that specifies what makes our motives 'our own', and second, an account of the capacities involved in being responsive to our own reasoning. The second aim of the paper is to show that when we see Astell as putting forward this theory of *self-government*, the connections between her remarks on liberty, free agency, and custom become clear – especially her account of how custom constitutes a significant threat to (women's) self-government (Section 4). I end the paper with an assessment of the limitations and strengths of the account (Section 5).

1. 'Liberty' as a conception of free will

Some might see Astell's remarks on 'liberty' and 'free agency' as solely putting forward a conception of free will. Sometimes when Astell talks about liberty

[2]I use the following abbreviations of Astell's works: *SP I* = *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part 1*; *SP II* = *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*; and *CR* = *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*. References to *SP I* and *SP II* are to page numbers, and references to *CR* are to section numbers. Unless otherwise noted, emphases in quoted texts are Astell's own. I present references to Locke's *Essay* by book, chapter, and section.

[3]In so doing, this project complements and builds on other recent discussions of freedom, individual autonomy, and relational autonomy in Astell by Jacqueline Broad (*Mary Astell*; "Selfhood"; "Merger of Wills"), Karen Detlefsen ("Custom"; "Liberty and Feminism"), and Allauren Forbes ("Relational Autonomy"). See Section 5.2 for how my interpretation diverges from those who conceive of her view of self-government primarily in terms of relational autonomy.

or free agency, she contrasts it with various kinds of determinism. But in discussions where determinism is raised in contrast to liberty, Astell either is reticent or seems to be concerned with an altogether different issue.

One form of determinism Astell seems to have in mind is theological determinism. She says:

> We are conscious of our own Liberty, who ever denies it denies that he is capable of Reward and Punishments, degrades his Nature and makes himself but a more curious piece of Mechanism; and none but Atheists will call in question on the Providence of GOD, or deny that he Governs *All*, even the most Free of all his Creatures. But who can reconcile me these? Or adjust the limits between GOD's Prescience and Mans Free-will?
>
> (*SP II*, 148)

Here, Astell raises the problem of reconciling divine preordination with free will in the context of her claim that we are aware of our own liberty. But she has little to say about it.

Astell also sometimes contrasts liberty with mechanism, as in the passage quoted above, where she says that if we deny that we have liberty, this makes us a "piece of mechanism". Elsewhere, however, it appears that her concern with those who act according to mechanism in this way is that they are "irrational":

> 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 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.
>
> (*SP II*, 128)[4]

The contrast between mechanism and voluntary agency here reflects a concern not with determinism, but with the issue of whether one governs oneself by one's own reasoning or by another's – that is, I shall argue, the issue of self-government.[5]

It is possible that even if Astell is not explicitly positioning liberty within the framework of the relation between free will and determinism, she still understands liberty solely as a conception of free will. Many thinkers in Astell's day conceive of liberty as whatever faculty or power is involved in

[4]Astell here echoes Descartes' distinction between mechanism and reason. She seems to endorse Descartes' view that what distinguishes humans from machines (including animals) is the distinctively human ability to reason. See *SP II*, 129 for Astell's contrast between the "Life of a Rational Creature" and that of "an Animal" and Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* Vol. 1, 139–41, for his statement about the difference between animals and humans from the *Discourse*. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for discussion of this point.

[5]Astell also characterises a "mechanical way of living" as an "unthinking" one (*SP I*, 94).

free decision or choice.[6] Astell too employs a faculty model of the mind, according to which faculties are mental powers or capacities. Like others, she takes the mind to have two main faculties, understanding and will, and she presents a conception of those faculties similar to that of Locke, where "the Capacity which we find in our selves of Receiving and Comparing Ideas is what we call the Understanding, so the Power of Preferring any Thought or Motion, of Directing them to This or That thing rather than to another is what we mean by the Will" (*SP II*, 205).[7] In one passage in *The Christian Religion*, she explains liberty in terms of a mental faculty:

> Now the difference between a free and a necessary agent consists in this, that the actions of the former, or more properly the motions of his mind, are in his own power. He has ability, as everyone of us is sensible, to determine them this way or that, according to his own pleasure, and as he is affected by the supposed agreeableness of the objects he pursues. This power or faculty is what we call liberty, which distinguishes a free from a necessary agent; for this last does not determine itself, has no command over its own motions, but is absolutely governed by a foreign cause.
>
> (*CR*, 78)

Though Astell here provides a conception of liberty centred on the faculties, her remarks are disappointing as an account of free will because of their under-determination on issue of determinism.[8] Two aspects of this passage suggest that Astell is an incompatibilist and that liberty requires that we not be determined by anything but ourselves. First, she contrasts "free agents" with "necessary agents", which aligns with the incompatibilist view that there is an opposition between freedom and necessity. Second, her explanation of what makes an agent free might be seen as aligning with

[6]See Descartes's Fourth Meditation, where he identifies the faculty of will with freedom of decision (*arbitrii libertas*) (*Philosophical Writings* Vol. 2, 40), and Locke's discussion of liberty as a power (e.g. *Essay*, II.xxi.15). Locke objects to understanding powers as "faculties" (*Essay*, II.xxi.17), but his divergences from the faculty tradition and his specific objections lie beyond the scope of this paper.

[7]For Locke, the understanding is the power of perception, where "perception" includes the perception of ideas in our mind and the perception of "the agreement or disagreement" between our ideas (*Essay*, IV.i.2). The will is the power of the mind "to order the consideration of any idea, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and vice versa, in any particular instance" (*Essay*, II.xxi.5). Descartes and Malebranche, well-noted influences on Astell, also employ the dual faculty model of the mind, but Astell's characterizations more closely resemble Locke's. Descartes and Malebranche also conceive of the intellect as the faculty that perceives, or receives, ideas, but they do not attribute to the intellect a power of comparing ideas (Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* Vol. 2, 39; Malebranche, *Search*, 2). Descartes and Malebranche diverge from them even more substantially on the will: Descartes defines the will in part as "our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid)" (Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* Vol. 2, 40), whereas Malebranche says that the will is the faculty "of receiving inclinations" (Malebranche, *Search*, 2). See Broad, "Impressions in the Brain", 383–5, for discussion of the similarity between Astell's and Malebranche's conceptions of the will and freedom.

[8]The secondary literature on this issue reflects the lack of clarity in the primary texts: some do not discuss Astell's stance on this aspect of free will (e.g. Springborg, *Serious Proposal*, 28–9), others interpret her as a compatibilist (Broad, *Mary Astell*, 184), and still others suggest that she is an incompatibilist (Detlefsen, "Custom", 85).

incompatibilism. Astell says that "the motions" of a free agent's mind "are in his own power" and "according to his own pleasure", which could suggest that freedom requires that an agent's choice be completely "up to him" in the sense that no other causal factor determines his choice.[9]

But this passage is also consistent with interpreting Astell as a compatibilist. Free agents have the ability to determine the motions of their minds, she says, "as [they are] affected by the supposed agreeableness of the objects [they pursue]." What makes an agent free, it seems, is that he has the ability to act in accordance with his perception of the goodness of things – a seemingly compatibilist conception of free will. In her treatment of the will in *A Serious Proposal*, Astell says that "there are certain Motions or Inclinations inseparable from the Will, which push us on to the use of that Power, and determine it to the Choice of such things as are most agreeable to them" (*SP II*, 205). Insofar as those inclinations, which Astell clarifies are "towards Good in general" or towards God ("our True Good" (*SP II*, 205)) "push" and "determine" the will to its choice, the liberty involved in free agency appears to be compatibilist.[10] I, however, think the point Astell wants to highlight in the passage just cited is that the difference between a free and a necessary agent is self-determination, but it is unclear whether that self-determination should be understood in an incompatibilist or a compatibilist way.

Though Astell certainly puts forward a conception of liberty as a power to determine one's choice, which is part of the concept of free will,[11] in the end, this conception looks less central to her account of liberty than the passages I have discussed so far suggest. Astell explains, much later in *The Christian Religion*, that "true liberty" is not a power to do what we will, but a matter of using reason properly and thereby ensuring our freedom of judgement:

> True liberty … consists not in a power to do what we will, but in making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgements free, and our integrity unspotted, which sets us out of the reach of the most absolute tyrant.
>
> (*CR*, 249)[12]

[9]Sarah Hutton holds that the liberty Astell is discussing in the cited passage is a conception of free will ("Liberty of Mind", 135–6). I depart from Hutton in holding that the contrast between necessity and freedom is illuminated not by the concepts of determinism and free will but, instead, by the notion of self-government. See Section 2 on this.

[10]See note 43 on the relation between our perception of the good and God's determination of the good.

[11]Jacqueline Broad highlights a different conception of free will that Astell possesses, what she argues is the Malebranchean conception of freedom as the power to suspend our assent to particular goods. See her "Impressions in the Brain", for her comparisons between Astell and Malebranche and the argument that the Malebranchean conception is central to Astell's feminist project of liberating women from male tyranny.

[12]Astell has two senses of "right reason": using reason in the right way, that is, according to the Cartesian-inspired principles of the sort she outlines in Part 2 of *A Serious Proposal* (e.g. *SP II*, 166ff), and also a particular conception of "reason", which she elsewhere calls "right Reason" (e.g. *SP II*, 211; *CR*, 249; and *Reflections*, 1706 Preface, 15). Sarah Apetrei shows that Astell's conception of reason may have been informed by the Cambridge Platonist conception of *recta ratio*, through which human beings bear God's image and allows the possibility of union with God and attendant perfection (both moral perfection and perfection in understanding), although she disagrees with the association

True liberty in this sense, Astell says, insulates us from the power of "the most absolute tyrant".[13] In other words, true liberty, I argue, preserves our ability to govern ourselves.[14]

2. Suggestions of a concept of self-government: three contrast cases

I have suggested that Astell's discussions of liberty and free agency are consistent with a concept of self-government. To further motivate my contention that she is concerned with self-government, I will highlight three cases in which we *lack* it (cases in which she says we lack "liberty" or "free agency").

One contrast case, as we have seen, is the case of necessary agents. We have seen that Astell characterises a necessary agent (as opposed to a free agent) as one that "does not determine itself, has no command over its own motions, but is absolutely governed by a foreign cause" (*CR*, 78). What is characteristic of an agent that is not free, then, is that it is not self-determining and is instead "absolutely governed by foreign causes" – causes outside itself. In other words, a necessary agent is one that is not self-governing.[15]

A second contrast case, also seen above, is that of "irrational creatures". The difference between the irrational creature and the rational or "voluntary agent" is that 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", in contrast with the rational agent, who "must Chuse his Actions and determine his Will to that Choice by some Reasonings or Principles and the Consequences he deduces from them" (*SP II*, 128). The difference between the irrational creature and the voluntary agent, according to Astell, is whether one's action occurs by one's own will (in concert with one's reason) or only by the will of another.[16]

some Platonists make between right reason and masculinity. See *Women, Feminism, and Religion*, 96–113. Thanks to anonymous reviewers for clarification on this point and the reference to Apetrei.

[13]Astell makes a similar point in *Reflections*: "the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the reach of the most absolute Tyrant" (*Reflections*, 56). This conception of true liberty as limited to the mind's freedom (and not freedom of action) limits the prospects of her view for feminist ends. See Detlefsen, "Custom", 83–5, for a helpful discussion of this point.

[14]See Sowaal ("Astell on Liberty") for discussion of a different aspect of "true liberty": how "true liberty" understood as what Sowaal calls "internal liberty" mitigates the force of external constraints.

[15]The question might arise about what counts for Astell as a "foreign" cause or a cause outside oneself. In my view, this question is tied to the question of what makes motives one's own for Astell, which I address in Section 3.1. See, also, Section 5.1. on how Astell conceives of an agent's being self-governing as compatible with following God's commands.

[16]For Astell, there are two main candidate 'wills' a women might substitute for her own: God's will and her husband's. But, as I will discuss, Astell holds that an agent aligning her will with another's is not giving up her self-government as long as what she does is supported by her own understanding of the reasons for her choices and actions. See Sections 3.1. and 5.1 on the relation between self-government and God's will and Section 4 for ways in which marriage might undercut a woman's ability to be self-governing.

Astell's language in discussions of custom's effects on us also are suggestive of a concept of (a lack of) self-government. Custom, which in Astell's view is one of the main sources of constraint on human agency, is a "tyrant" (*SP I*, 67), which some "impose [as] a Yoke … on us" (*SP II*, 120); it "manacle[s] the will" (*SP II*, 139), "has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority" (*SP II*, 95), and "enslaves the very Souls of Men" (*SP II*, 140). In short, Astell conceives of custom as an external force that imposes its authority illegitimately on us – in other words, something that takes away our self-government. I return to Astell's conception of custom and its relation to self-government toward the end of the paper.

3. Astell's account of self-government

One theory of self-government in the present-day literature proposes that what is essential to self-government is an agent's responsiveness to her own reasoning. On such accounts, 'responsiveness to reasoning' is understood as involving various capacities that allow an agent to examine, evaluate, and revise her own motives.[17] This kind of view captures the intuition that situations in which individuals have been indoctrinated or manipulated in such a way that the indoctrination or manipulation affects their ability to reflect on and evaluate their own motives would not truly be governing themselves (Buss and Westlund, "Personal Autonomy"). In such cases, it would seem, the motives individuals act on would be the product of outside forces, and not their own in any real sense.

Astell, I posit, holds this kind of view of self-government. To develop Astell's version of the view that what is essential to self-government is an agent's responsiveness to her own reasoning, I begin by identifying Astell's conception of an 'authenticity' criterion for our motives – that is, what it means for our motives to be 'our own', rather than external to us.[18] I argue that she holds that when our motives arise from some source without validation by our own understanding of the reasons supporting them, then they are not our own. I then outline the capacities I take Astell to hold to be requisite for such validation.[19]

[17] See Buss and Westlund ("Personal Autonomy", Section 2), for a general characterization of what they call 'responsiveness-to-reasoning' accounts, and Christman, "Autonomy and Personal History", for an example of such a view.

[18] In her discussion of the aspects of relational autonomy we find in Astell's conception of friendship, Allauren Forbes notes that self-governance for Astell requires authenticity in the sense I describe, but she does not specify what Astell thinks makes motives our own ("Relational Autonomy", 497).

[19] The account I develop in this section is concordant with the account of freedom Jacqueline Broad attributes to Astell in "Merger of Wills": "a woman is free to the extent that she is a rational creature capable of exercising her will in accordance with reason, and of raising objections or passing critical judgments on the unreasonable commands of others" ("Merger of Wills", 75). I extend Broad's discussion in arguing that the "mind's freedom" in the cited passage (*Reflections*, 56) is a central element of Astell's account of self-government and by specifying the relevant capacities.

A note about the term 'motives' before I turn to Astell's account. By 'motives', current-day theorists refer to a range of motivational states – beliefs, desires, volitions, intentions, evaluative judgements, emotional states, and so on – involved in the production of choice or action.[20] Astell likewise sometimes refers to various "motives" that play that role (e.g. *SP II*, 163 and *SP I*, 67); other times she speaks of the "Principles and Reasonings" (e.g. *SP II*, 128, 136) and "Maxims" (*SP II*, 140) that do. In what follows, I use 'motives' in the general sense to refer to any of the motivational states that Astell holds lead to choice or action.

3.1. The authenticity criterion for motives

Astell's criterion for what makes motives external to us as opposed to 'our own' emerges from several discussions set in different contexts. Astell explains why we, as rational creatures, do not always follow the proper procedures of reasoning:

> The Condition of our present State … in which we feel the force of our Passions e're we discern the strength of our Reason, necessitates us to take up with such Principles and Reasonings to direct and determine these Passions as we happen to meet with, tho probably they are far from being just ones, and are such as Education or Accident not right Reason disposes us to; and being inur'd and habituated to these, we at last take them for our own, for parts of our dear beloved selves, and are as unwilling to be divorced from them as we wou'd be to part with a Hand or an Eye or any the most useful Member.
>
> (*SP II*, 136)

When our motives arise from education or happenstance and we become habituated to them, she says we mistakenly "take them for our own, for parts of our dear beloved selves". By this, I take Astell to emphasise the authority *we wrongly* take these motives to have. But these externally generated motives are not really our own because they are not corroborated by the proper use of our rational capacities: they do not arise from "right Reason".[21]

Relatedly, when we simply follow what the passions direct us to without the use of reason, our motives are not our own. But we have the ability to moderate or direct the passions by using our own "Authority":

> The Soul can if she please and if she makes use of her Authority in time, divert the Course of the Spirits, and direct 'em to a new Object, by Limiting or Extending her Ideas, and by laying aside those Passions excited and entertaining new ones.
>
> (*SP II*, 214)

[20] I have in mind discussions on personal autonomy, moral motivation and in the philosophy of action. See Buss and Westlund, "Personal Autonomy", Rosati, "Moral Motivation", and Piñeros Glasscock and Tenenbaum, "Action", for general overviews.

[21] See note 12, above, on Astell's conception of 'right reason'.

Our authority stems from our nature as "Creatures endued with Reason", and involves moderating our passions by directing them to appropriate objects with the appropriate degree of intensity "as right Reason requires" (*SP II*, 214).[22]

In another context, Astell tries to motivate her contention that reasoning well is not an arcane interest irrelevant to women but has practical benefits. To this end, she advances a view that her readers would have found uncontroversial: that living well involves living in accordance with the dictates of Christianity. She points out, though, that:

> it cannot be thought sufficient that Women shou'd but just know whats Commanded and what Forbid, without being inform'd of the Reasons why, since this is not like to secure them in their Duty. For we find a Natural Liberty within us which checks at an Injunction that has nothing but Authority to back it; And tho Religion is indeed supported by the Strongest Reasons, and inforc'd by the most powerful Motives, yet if we are not acquainted with 'em, tis all one to us as if it were not.
>
> (*SP II*, 201)[23]

Here, Astell holds that for our motives to be our own, it is not sufficient to know what Christianity prescribes. Instead, we must also understand the underlying reasons supporting "whats Commanded and what Forbid".

Astell clarifies that without possessing our own understanding of those reasons, we lack self-government:

> Unless we Understand our Duty and the Principles of Religion, we don't perform a Rational Service, it is but by Chance that we are Good or so much as Christians. We are their Property into whose hands we fall, and are led by those who with greatest Confidence impose their Opinions on us; Are as moveable as the different Circumstances that befall us; or if we happen to be Constant in our first way, it is not Reason but Obstinacy that makes us so.
>
> (*SP II*, 200)[24]

We do not govern ourselves when we lack understanding of the moral and religious principles that, according to Astell, should guide our actions.

[22] Astell's conception of the passions, or emotions, is similar to Descartes's understanding of the passions of the soul. States of the mind that we possess in virtue of being embodied creatures, the passions are useful for our preservation, but if not moderated by reason, disruptive, and worse, the cause of "the most grievous and ignominious" of all slaveries (*CR*, 249). See Broad, *Mary Astell*, 84–106, on Astell's views on the passions and their relation to virtue.

[23] I take the "Natural Liberty" Astell mentions in this passage to be what she refers to later in *The Christian Religion* as "true liberty" (*CR*, 249), which, as I discussed in Section 1, is neither free will nor freedom of action, but enables freedom of judgement, which allows us to govern ourselves.

[24] In fact, God always provides the reasons underlying his commands. In contrast with men, who sometimes require a "blind Obedience", "an Obeying *without Reason*", God always provides reasons for our obedience: "he lays before us the goodness and reasonableness of his Laws" (*Reflections*, 75). Even if there is something we do not understand, ultimately, God's nature provides "this clear and sufficient Reason on which to found our Obedience, that nothing but what's Just and Fit, can be enjoyed by a Just, a Wise and gracious God, but this is a Reason will never hold in respect of Men's Commands, unless they can prove themselves infallible and consequently Impeccable too" (*Reflections*, 75). See, also, the related discussion in Section 5.1.

Without validation of those principles by our own understanding, if we act accordingly, it is either by chance or obstinacy. Alternatively, we may be swayed by the opinions of others and thereby become their "Property".[25]

Lastly, in a discussion of custom, Astell states, "Custom cannot Authorise a Practice if Reason Condemns it" (*SP II*, 139). The key point for present purposes is that Astell characterises custom as an external authority whose authority is legitimate only when validated by reason.

Astell thus holds that when our motives arise from some external source – whether custom, religion, education, or "accident" – and we do not understand and endorse the reasons underlying what the motives direct us to, then they are not our own.

3.2. The capacities required for self-government

Astell identifies and discusses many different capacities involved in reasoning. In her discussions of proper reasoning and the failures thereof, she emphasises the role of our capacities of examining and evaluating our own motives, which I suggest she holds are necessary for self-government.[26]

The importance of the capacities of examining and evaluating our own motives emerges in her discussions of right action. Regarding our propensity to make rash and precipitate judgements that serve as the basis of our actions, she says that "did we calmly and deliberately Examine our Evidence, and how far those Motives we are acted by ought to Influence, we should not be liable to this Seduction" (*SP II*, 163). Part of the explanation for why we act in ways that do not promote our happiness is our failure to examine the reasons underlying our choices:

> We Will e're we are capable of examining the Reasons of our Choice, or of viewing our Ideas so exactly as we must if we wou'd Judge aright. And the frequent repetition of such unreasonable Choices makes them Customary to us, and consequently gives a new and wrong bias to our Inclinations, which upon all occasions dispose the Will to the Choice of such things as we suppose, tho by mistake, to contribute to our Happiness.
>
> (*SP II*, 206)

When we fail to examine the reasons underlying our choices, and we make those same choices over again, they take on the force of custom. This then

[25] Similarly in *The Christian Religion*, Astell calls those who are "without any rule or judgement of our own, carried on by what our company, or any assuming person has the assurance to impose" "mere properties" (*CR*, 288).

[26] In her discussions of reasoning well and acting properly (which she thinks follows from reasoning well), Astell also emphasises the capacities involved in prudential reasoning, which include those of attention (*SP II*, 161–3, 169), means-end reasoning, properly weighing the value of our options, and examining the consequences of our choices (*SP I*, 64). Though our proper use of these capacities is necessary for acting rightly, I do not take them to be essential to her understanding of what it is to be a self-governing agent.

only reinforces our tendency to make those same "unreasonable choices". Astell mentions various causes of the failure to examine the reasons underlying our choices: for instance, we may have not yet developed the capacity to do so, as in the passage above. But sometimes the failure is due to our own haste and obstinacy: we choose to "Act by the Wrong Judgements we have formerly made, and to follow blindly the Propensities they have given us". This "neglect", Astell says, is "Our Fault in that we precipitate our Choice, refusing to Consider sufficiently to rectifie our Mistakes" (*SP II*, 207).[27]

The capacities of examining and evaluating our own motives, strictly speaking, require the proper use of both understanding and will.[28] Examining the evidence for our judgements is part of the proper use of the understanding (*SP II*, 163), about which Astell provides Cartesian-inspired guidance in the Second Part of *A Serious Proposal*.[29] Suspending our inclinations until we have sufficiently examined the reasons underlying our choices is required for proper use of the will (*SP II*, 207).

Another capacity that for Astell is significant for self-government is that of resisting the social pressure to conform to others' opinions: "Firmness and strength of Mind will carry us thro all these little persecutions, which may create us some uneasiness for a while, but will afterwards end in our Glory and Triumph" (*SP II*, 121). Astell also refers to the "courage" involved and remarks on "how strong a resolution" is necessary to exercise this capacity (*SP I*, 95). The pressure on women to conform is a particular concern for Astell because of the tension between her project of improving women's minds and British early modern aristocratic conceptions of women's nature and appropriate role in society.[30] She recognises that the prescriptions to develop their intellectual capacities might strike some of her (female) readers as out of the norm: "And pray what is't that hinders you? The singularity of the Matter? Are you afraid of being out of the ordinary way and therefore admir'd and gaz'd at?" (*SP II*, 120). But since, she acknowledges, the social consequences of rejecting typical womanly concerns and behaviours are potentially so negative, she

[27] Self-deception and hubris are other causes: see *SP II*, 207–8.

[28] See Sowaal ("Astell's *Serious Proposal*") for a detailed account of Astell's conception of the faculties and her philosophy of mind in general.

[29] Astell's rules for thinking include acquainting ourselves with the "State of the Question" (*SP II*, 176), having a distinct notion of the subject and the terms we use in inquiry; reasoning only with clear ideas; conducting our thoughts in order, beginning with the simplest objects; examining all parts of the subject; and so on (*SP II*, 176–9). They are clearly influenced by Descartes's discussions from the *Discourse* and the *Rules* as well as Antoine Arnauld's *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*. See Broad for discussion of the Cartesian and neo-Platonic influences on Astell's formulation of the rules (*Mary Astell*, 31–6) and ways in which Astell's method departs from Descartes's ("Cartesian Ethics", 171–2).

[30] Patricia Springborg notes that "Astell's project … was aimed at rescuing the upper classes from their frivolous morals and mores and not at bettering the condition of the poor" (Astell, *A Serious Proposal*, 103, note 1). On the question of whether Astell intended the educational institutions to be for all women or only 'ladies', see Sowaal, "Astell's *Serious Proposal*", 240–1, note 14.

considers that women might need to withdraw from everyday society ("retire") to find refuge in institutions set up specifically for the purpose of educating women to reform their minds (*SP II*, 95).[31]

4. How "Custom" undermines self-government

Thus far, I have argued that Astell views the capacities of examining and evaluating our own motives and of resisting the social pressure to conform to other's opinions as necessary for self-government, and that when our motives arise from some external source without our validating them by those capacities, they are not our own. This conception of self-government, I now show, is both supported by and illuminates her remarks on "custom". Custom, for Astell, is a central example of what may undermine an individual's self-government.[32]

Astell primarily uses the term 'custom' to refer to a particular subset of practices, implicit beliefs (manifest in the form of expectations), and explicit beliefs derived from her social and cultural context. Astell is particularly concerned with the customary practices and beliefs that harm women in many different ways – what is referred to as 'bad custom' in recent discussions of Astell.[33] Bad custom, Astell says, involves women in a "cloud of Ignorance" (*SP I*, 77), has placed women in an "enchanted Circle" (*SP I*, 55), and has "put Women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection" (*Reflections*, 1706 Preface, 10).

One key manifestation of bad custom is the widespread conception of women as possessing a defective nature,[34] which, according to this conception, makes them prone to certain "Feminine Vices" (*SP I*, 62) such as pride and vanity and as "naturally incapable of acting Prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly" (*SP I*, 58). This prejudice is particularly insidious because it undermines women's self-government by affecting their own conceptions of themselves: it substitutes an erroneous conception of women's nature for an accurate one – the rational soul as the "true" self (*SP I*, 53), which I will discuss in the next section of the paper. Internalizing the limiting beliefs, expectations, and values tied to the idea that they

[31] See the 'competency approach' Diana Meyers develops for a twentieth-century account of personal autonomy that addresses a very similar concern to Astell's: to explore how traditional feminine socialization can undermine personal autonomy ("Personal Autonomy").

[32] Custom is also a significant obstacle for acquiring virtue, which I cannot discuss in this paper. See note 26, above, on the capacities that are necessary for acting rightly, and Broad, "Cartesian Ethics", 168–72, on how custom affects one's moral judgements and Astell's prescriptions for overcoming its influence.

[33] Karen Detlefsen points out that Astell distinguishes between 'good customs', which are aligned with our God-given nature as rational creatures, and 'bad customs', which are not. I focus in this paper on bad custom and follow Detlefsen's usage of the term. See Detlefsen ("Custom", 78) for the distinction, and Forbes ("Bad Custom") for a discussion of how bad custom leads to a kind of epistemic injustice.

[34] See Sowaal ("Astell's *Serious Proposal*", 231) for a detailed discussion of this example of bad custom, which she calls the "Women's Defective Nature Prejudice".

possess a defective nature, women then view themselves as incapable of improving their minds and developing the rational capacities required for self-government: "[looking into their Souls,] 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" (*SP II*, 124).

Furthermore, internalizing the widespread view that they are, by nature, intellectually inferior to men (*Reflections*, 54, 66, and 1706 Preface, 9), women may accept low expectations of what they are capable of (*Reflections*, 61–2; 1706 Preface, 29–30), and believe that marriage is the only desirable option open to them (*Reflections*, 60, 65). By marrying, Astell warns, women will put themselves in a position in which they are legally and morally bound to submit, in all things, to their husbands:[35]

> She Who Elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it, who puts her Fortune and Person entirely in his Powers; nay even the very desires of her Heart according to some learned Casuists, so as that it is not lawful to Will or Desire any thing but what he approves and allows.
> (Astell, *Reflections*, 48)[36]

Astell disagrees with the "Casuists'" view that in marrying, a woman is duty-bound to substitute her husband's motives for her own; even in marriage, a woman retains the right to think for herself, the "Natural Right of Judging for her self" (*Reflections*, 1706 Preface, 10).[37] But, particularly in bad marriages, women might find it difficult to develop and exercise the rational capacities involved in self-government, either because "vicious and foolish Men", who "afraid he shou'd not be able to Govern them were their Understandings improv'd" (*Reflections*, 76) actively work against their intellectual development, or because, consistently aggrieved and oppressed, "to have Folly and Ignorance tyrannize over Wit and Sense; to be contradicted in everything one does or says, and bore down not by Reason but Authority" (*Reflections*,

[35]It is clear that Astell does not conceive of the hierarchical structure of marriage as an instance of bad custom, because it is authorized by God. There are interesting interpretive issues about which aspects of marriage Astell might conceive of as customary, which I cannot take up here. See Detlefsen, "Custom", for the view that Astell does not hold that the hierarchical marriage relation is customary because it is instituted by God, but that the particular ways husbands and wives choose to conduct themselves within the institution are ("Custom", 81–85). Astell advocates passive obedience to political authority not only in the context of civil government (of subjects to their sovereigns) but also in marriage (of wives to their husbands). This raises questions, which I cannot address here, about Astell's purposes in comparing the condition of women in marriage to slavery. See Broad, "Marriage", on this issue.

[36]Broad points out that in this passage, Astell is quoting verbatim from John Sprint's pamphlet "The Bride-Woman's Counsellor", and so might have him in mind as one of her targets in *Reflections* ("Merger of Wills", 74–5).

[37]Broad and Detlefsen emphasize the importance of education in enabling women to retain their freedom of judgement even in marriage – to avoid "the condition of mental slavery within the matrimonial state" (Broad, "Marriage", 736; see Detlefsen, "Custom", 84).

33), they give up the attempt entirely and turn instead to other, condemnable means of relief.[38]

A second type of bad custom consists in the typical concerns and behaviours that dominate the attention and time of women in Astell's social circle. Throughout *A Serious Proposal*, Astell admonishes her potential (female) reader for wasting her energies on frivolous concerns: "pursuing Butter flies and Trifles" (*SP I*, 55) and "intrigues" and "vain Diversions" (*SP II*, 123). She specifically singles out women's concerns with clothing and appearance, criticizing those who "spare neither Money nor Pains t'obtain a gay outside and make a splendid appearance" (*SP II*, 121) while neglecting their God-given rational capacities and their moral character. These bad customs are harmful not only because they take up women's time and attention, but because they create arbitrary expectations for how women should act. The anticipated negative response if they do not meet these expectations can lead women to unthinkingly comply with them. Astell asks her readers, "Why won't you begin to think, and no longer dream away your Time in a wretched incogitancy" (*SP II*, 120), and provides a detailed answer, part of which I presented earlier in the paper:

> And pray what is't that hinders you? The singularity of the Matter? Are you afraid of being out of the ordinary way and therefore admir'd and gaz'd at? Admiration does not use to be uneasy to our Sex; a great many Vanities might be spar'd if we consulted only our own conveniency and not other peoples Eyes and Sentiments: And why shou'd that which usually recommends a trifling Dress, deter us from a real Ornament? Is't not as fine to be first in this as well as in any other Fashion? *Singularity is indeed to be avoided except in matters of importance*, in such a case Why shou'd not we assert our Liberty, and not suffer every Trifler to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Customs on us?
>
> (*SP II*, 120–1, my emphasis)

Here, Astell diagnoses women's fear of being "singular" as a significant factor in preventing them from pursuing what their own rational capacities would otherwise direct them towards. It takes significant psychological fortitude, the use of the capacity to resist the pressure to conform, to combat the "yoke" of bad customs.

Bad customs can also undermine a person's ability to govern herself when they become a "motive" in making decisions:

> Tis Custom, therefore, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our *present* interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future. We think it an unpardonable mistake not to do as our neighbours do, and part with our Peace and Pleasure as well as our Innocence and Vertue, meerly in complyance with an unreasonable Fashion.
>
> (*SP I*, 67–8)

[38] Astell describes, as an example of this, the notorious case of Hortense Mancini, duchess of Mazarin, whose separation from her mentally unstable husband and ultimate escape by becoming a courtesan of King Charles II was widely discussed (*Reflections*, 32–5).

Custom, as a motive, operates through habituation (*SP I*, 94). The habituation to choices motivated by custom bypasses the processes involved in reasoning: this explains why the choices that custom leads us to are irrational and not prudential. The operation of custom as a motive is particularly insidious because habituation to customary choices occurs, in the typical case, without any deliberation or intention on our part. Astell holds that if we used all of our rational capacities properly, we would not make such irrational choices.[39] But when we act from custom alone in this way, we substitute external motives for our own and thereby cede our authority over our choices to the authority of those around us. Custom becomes a "tyrant" and exerts an oppressive "power" and "force" over us (*SP II*, 139).

Despite its tyranny, custom can be overcome. Astell holds that women have the ability to resist it: she says, "it is in your Power to regain your Freedom, if you please but t'endeavour it" (*SP II*, 121). The key to overcoming custom is the liberty all possess:

> [Brave Spirits know no Conquest] so difficult, as that which is obtain'd over foolish and ill-grounded Maxims and sinful Customs; What wou'd they not do to restore Mankind to their Lawful Liberty, and to pull down this worst of Tyrannies, because it enslaves the very Souls of Men?
>
> (*SP II*, 140)

This "true liberty", for Astell, as we have seen,

> consists not in a power to do what we will, but in making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgements free, and our integrity unspotted, which sets us out of the reach of the most absolute tyrant.
>
> (*CR*, 249)

The liberty women can use to free themselves from custom's influence requires developing and using the capacities required for self-government, the capacities of examining and evaluating our own motives and of resisting the social pressure to conform. For Astell, then, in contrast with those who are enslaved by the tyranny of custom, when we develop and properly use those capacities, we live lives in which *we*, not others, are the authority of the motives that govern it.

5. The limitations and strengths of Astell's account of self-government

I turn, lastly, to assessing the limitations and strengths of Astell's account as an account of self-government, by elaborating on Astell's conception of the self and its relation to God, and then drawing out some implications of the interpretation I have developed in the paper.

[39]See note 26, above.

5.1. The grounding of the authority of the self: its relation to god

The conception of self-government I locate in Astell's thought ultimately derives from her views on the self. There are two significant notions of the self in Astell's philosophy, the embodied (and thereby sexed) self and the divinely created rational soul (or mind). Though Astell holds that human beings are necessarily embodied (*SP II*, 210) and so we should not neglect the good of the body (*SP II*, 211), she assigns priority to the rational soul, which has "Dominion … over the body" (*SP II*, 211).[40]

It is in virtue of possessing a rational soul that all human beings possess rational capacities.[41] Any incapacity in reasoning that seems characteristic of women, she says, is "acquired not natural" (*SP I*, 59), due in large part to the deficiencies – intentional or inadvertent – in their educations (*SP I*, 60, 61–2, *SP II*, 126, and *Reflections*, 65). Early in *A Serious Proposal*, Astell entreats her female readers:

> Employ your care about that which is really your *self,* and do not neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect when it's unsuitable and much inferiour Companion is mouldring into Dust.
>
> (*SP I*, 53)

Because the rational soul is "that which is really your *self*", or the "true" self, women should pay special attention to its health and improvement rather than neglecting it by focusing on their bodies and outward appearances (*SP I*, 120–2). And, since the rational soul is the true self, agents govern themselves by using the capacities of that self properly. Thus, the capacities required for self-government ultimately derive their authority from an external source, God (e.g. *SP II*, 142), and their use is, in the end, for the contemplation and enjoyment of God (*SP II*, 146, 212–13) and for God's glory (*SP II*, 154).

Not only do our rational capacities ultimately derive from God, but some of the rules by which we should govern ourselves also come from God: Astell says, "God's Will is the Rule of ours" (e.g. *SP II*, 205). But then, in response to the question of how we know God's will, she says:

> The Answer is ready, that the Eternal Word and Wisdom of God declares his Fathers Will unto us, by *Reason* which is that Natural and Ordinary Revelation by which he speaks to every one; and by that which is call'd *Revelation* in a stricter Sense, which is nothing else but a more perfect and infallible way of

[40]Whether Astell's conception of the self aligns more with Descartes's conception or with Malebranche's is the focus of recent debate. The issues on which this debate hangs, however, are beyond the scope of this paper. On this, see Broad, "Malebranchean Concept".

[41]That is not to say that everyone's intellectual capacities can be developed in the same way. Astell rightly notes the variability in the intellectual capacities that actual human beings possess which she takes to be fitted to their particular circumstances and interests (*SP II,* 153–4).

> Reasoning, whereby we are Clearly and Fully instructed in so much of God's Will as is fit for us to know.
>
> (*SP II*, 208)[42]

We acquire the knowledge of the will of God through reasoning, and even special revelation is understood in terms of reasoning. So, ultimately, the proper development and use of our rational capacities, Astell thinks, are sufficient for adequately understanding God's commands.[43]

Though Astell's account of self-government is grounded in her religious metaphysical commitments because the self and the rules by which we ought to govern ourselves come from God, the authenticity criterion she provides and her account of the capacities required for self-government could be endorsed by someone not sharing those commitments. What matters, in the end, for a person to govern herself is that she understands that her rational soul is her 'true' self and accordingly, that she develops and uses the capacities of that self. One could, in theory, hold this conception of self-government even if one did not hold that God is the origin of the self and its capacities.[44]

5.2. Implications of Astell's account

On Astell's account of self-government, as I have presented it, in virtue of possessing a rational soul and its capacities, all persons have the potential to be self-governing. This is not to say that the path to becoming a self-governing agent is easy. Because of the pervasiveness and force of bad custom, Astell thinks that joining an educational institution like her proposed "Religious Retirement" with other like-minded women provides the best opportunity for women in her day to develop the capacities required for self-government. A woman should also think carefully about who to marry, and even whether to marry at all, since, as I have discussed, the institutional requirements and restrictions of marriage can affect a wife's ability to be self-governing.

Social relations and conditions, then, may, on the one hand, facilitate developing the requisite capacities for self-government (as in her envisioned educational institution for women) and, on the other, undermine an individual's ability to become self-governing (as with bad custom and within

[42] In *The Christian Religion*, Astell says there is no opposition between reason and revelation and describes reason and revelation as on a continuum: "There being a difference between reason and revelation such as is between the less and the more, but no sort of opposition in any respect" (*CR*, 22).

[43] Astell also holds that the will tends toward the good, and that our preferences and evaluative judgements, when generated properly, align with God's will because God's infinite wisdom and goodness leads to a match between our perception of the good and God's determination of the good (*SP II*, 205). Our misuse of our rational capacities, as discussed earlier in the paper, is largely responsible for our not acting toward the good (*SP II*, 206). See section 3.2, above, on this issue.

[44] The view thus modified would not be Astell's own view, and a different justification for the nature of the true self would have to be provided.

marriage). Thus, there is a significant relational element to Astell's account of self-government, as some have argued.[45] Yet, on the interpretation I have presented, a woman could theoretically develop the capacities Astell holds are necessary for self-government on her own, as Astell herself seems to assume in her Part II of *A Serious Proposal*, which she subtitles as "Wherein a Method is offer'd for the Improvement of their Minds" (*SP II*, 113).[46] Astell's account, in my view, rightly emphasises the social relations individuals bear to others while not holding the prospects of self-governing captive to an optimal set of social conditions.[47]

The account of self-government, it should be noted, does not require a metaphysically demanding account of truth or value.[48] As long as our motives are validated by our own understanding of the reasons underlying them through the proper use of the relevant capacities, they are our own. This account thus allows for the possibility that we could be mistaken about the reasons for our motives in a particular situation and still be a self-governing agent.

Astell's focus is on her female readers, and the particular content of 'bad custom' is derived from her particular social and cultural context. But a final strength of her account is its general applicability, particularly her analysis of bad custom, its effects, and her view on how to overcome it. Astell's account of how the development and use of the capacities involved in self-government provide a way to overcome bad custom is not limited to the situation of women in her day. Her views can be generalised to other groups in other contexts, where the content of 'bad custom' is determined by a given individual's identity and his or her particular social and cultural context.

6. Conclusion

On the account I have developed and attribute to Astell, a free agent, possessing 'true liberty', is one who is the authority of the motives that govern her life – a self-governing agent. Astell holds that what is essential to self-government is an agent's responsiveness to her own reasoning. To be responsive to our own reasoning, our motives must be 'our own' in the sense that they must be validated by our own understanding of the reasons supporting what they direct us to. Furthermore, we must be able to examine and evaluate our own motives and resist the social pressure to conform to others' opinions.

[45] See Detlefsen ("Custom") and Forbes ("Relational Autonomy") on how Astell's remarks suggest an early conception of relational autonomy, and the latter for development of the idea that friendship is a significant aspect of Astell's understanding of autonomy.

[46] See note 29 for discussion of the rules for thinking that Astell provides as part of the method.

[47] Thanks to Allauren Forbes for encouraging me to clarify my understanding of the role of social relations in the interpretation of self-government I attribute to Astell.

[48] Astell has one, of course: she holds that God is the source of the good. See note 43, above, on this issue.

This interpretation of Astell's theory of self-government aligns with Astell's conception of 'true liberty' as an internal liberty, as a matter of how we use our minds, rather than a power of acting. For Astell, an agent is free and self-governing when, regardless of her ability to act on her motives, her motives are self-authorized in the sense that she has examined and endorsed them.

This interpretation also makes sense of why determinism, the standard threat to free will, seems not to be a serious concern in her discussions of liberty. The main threat in her discussions, instead, is to self-government: it is thus anything that undermines an agent's ability to examine, evaluate, and revise her motives and thereby authorize them as her own.

Lastly, on this interpretation, we see why Astell considers bad custom to be so potent: bad custom serves as an obstacle to reflection and revision of one's motives at two levels. Bad custom exerts external (social) pressure on an individual to conform to the beliefs, expectations, and practices surrounding her, regardless of the reasons for them. Bad custom also can operate internally within an agent, in ways of which one is not consciously aware. The interpretation of Astell's theory of self-government as an agent's responsiveness to her own reasoning thereby brings together and illuminates the connections between Astell's remarks on liberty, free agency, and custom.

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