

Article

Mary Astell on Neighborly Love

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Abstract: In discussing the obligation to love everyone, Mary Astell (1666–1731) recognizes and responds to what I call the theocentric challenge: if humans are required to love God entirely, then they cannot fulfill the second requirement to love their neighbor. In exploring how Astell responds to this challenge, I argue that Astell is an astute metaphysician who does not endorse the metaphysical views she praises. This viewpoint helps us to understand the complicated relationship between her views and those of Descartes, Malebranche, Henry More, and John Norris, as well as her sophisticated approach to biblical interpretation and theology. Attending to theocentrism opens up new avenues of research in the study of early modern philosophy. It also helps us to see connections between Astell and other theocentric philosophers such as Spinoza and Anne Conway.

Keywords: Mary Astell; John Norris; theocentrism; egocentrism; benevolence; occasionalism; causation; Spinoza; Anne Conway

1. Introduction

Mary Astell details a vision for institutions that would support female friendship and education in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (Astell 1694, 1697). In *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (Astell 1700), she investigates the foundations, purposes, and mistreatments of spousal relationships. These texts focus on those with whom one is already entwined or with whom one can develop close friendships. In the burgeoning philosophical scholarship on Astell, less attention has been paid to how she thinks we should treat those humans with whom we are not close friends, whether actually or potentially. Perhaps this is because she clearly endorses the dictum to “love one’s neighbor” in her letters with John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (Norris and Astell 1695). Scholars have noted the thorny interpretive questions of whether she endorses Norris’ metaphysical account of *why* we should love our neighbors. Fewer still have addressed her treatment of neighborly love in *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (Astell 1705).

This essay partly rectifies this neglect by drawing out the keen philosophical problems with which Astell grapples in *Letters* and *The Christian Religion*. These problems are mostly due to what I call *theocentrism*, the view that we ought to love God entirely. Such a view threatens to undermine the love of humans, as Astell points out to Norris in *Letters*. How can we love any human if the entirety of our love is directed toward God? Astell and Norris share a problem but posit different solutions in their correspondence. In *The Christian Religion*, Astell continues her sincere biblical interpretation and seemingly metaphysical theorizing, while finding new ways to argue that we should love all humans with whom we may come into contact. Astell’s proposed solutions to the question of why we should love our neighbor reveal a major issue in early modern ethics that has received far less attention than egocentrism, the view that one’s own well-being is to be valued more than others’ well-being.

Recognizing Astell’s responses to theocentrism opens up new research areas in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ethics and metaphysics. Approaching her writings with a focus on this issue also reveals a thorny interpretive question. Astell seems to endorse very bold metaphysical views, such as that God is the cause of everything (or,



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at the very least, of all our pleasurable sensations) and that we cannot distinguish one person's good from another's because, from God's point of view, there is no distinguishing one person from another. I argue that while she praises these metaphysical views, she does not endorse them. This speaks to an unnoticed aspect of Astell's philosophical thought: while endorsing claims in ethics and theology, she declines to endorse some metaphysical views (e.g., Norris' theory of causation) that she believes to be the best at supporting the ethical and theological views she does endorse.

Sections 1 and 2 of this article explore the issue of theocentrism in Astell and Norris. Sections 3 and 4 interpret the relationship between theocentrism, neighborly love, and theories of causation in Astell's letters to Norris, providing a new approach to the agreements and disagreements in the secondary literature. Section 5 lays out the ways in which she approaches the question of neighborly love in *The Christian Religion*. In the concluding section, I note the similarities between Astell's approach and two other theocentric philosophers (Spinoza and Anne Conway), while emphasizing an important difference: Spinoza and Conway endorse metaphysical systems, while Astell does not.

Throughout this essay, I focus on the issue of neighborly love, which looks beyond the questions of self-improvement and friendship that have dominated the burgeoning literature on Astell. Love of a neighbor includes love for those with whom we are friends, those with whom we are becoming friends, and those to whom we have only a tenuous connection, including co-citizenship, interactions across class divides, and mere coexistence. As Allaren Forbes (2021, p. 3) puts it, "friendship is a subspecies of love of benevolence," which (as we shall see) is the term Astell reserves for the love of a neighbor. While friendship is the focus of *A Serious Proposal*, it is in the *Letters* and *The Christian Religion* that we best see her approach to neighborly love.

2. The Theocentric Challenge in Astell and Norris

Philosophers and theologians have often claimed that there is a moral obligation to love everyone. For Christians like Norris and Astell, this is grounded in Jesus' statement that the two greatest commandments are "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–40; cf. Leviticus 19:17–18). Who counts as one's neighbor is an ancient debate (cf. Luke 10:25–37) but, frequently, this has included obligations to those people who are outside of one's immediate circle of family and friends. There are two common counters to the claim that we ought to love everyone: we ought to aim for our own good only or primarily (egocentrism), or that we ought to love God only and entirely (theocentrism).

Philosophers today are well aware that *egocentrism* was a contemporaneous view to which many early modern thinkers proffered a response. The strongest form of egocentrism is *ethical egoism*, the view that the *only* good one should aim for is one's own. Ethical egoism is sometimes supported by a further claim that this is all one *can* aim for (psychological or motivational egoism), or that this is all one can *rationaly* aim for (rational egoism). Egoism is sometimes, controversially, attributed to Thomas Hobbes, to Baruch Spinoza, and to Bernard Mandeville.¹ Not all versions of egocentrism are as strong as egoism. Other agent-relative theories claim that the agent (or the agent and their closest family and friends) is *more* morally valuable than others; these are weaker versions of egocentrism. If, as was often claimed, love of neighbor meant treating others as being equal to oneself, both in the theorizing of moral value and in decision-making, then egocentrism is a challenge to neighborly love.

The second challenge to the claim that *we ought to love everyone* is less well known today. According to theocentrism, God is the worthiest object of our love. In the most extreme version, God is the *only* worthy object of our love, and so it would be wrong to love anything other than God, including other people. The motivation for theocentrism typically comes from a metaphysical or evaluative gap. The metaphysical gap between God and everything else is so great (for some relevant aspects, such as being, power, or goodness), that only God is worthy of love. This worthiness-of-love gap is often joined to

an evaluative claim that nothing else can satisfy our deepest desire. Thus, either because of God's metaphysical superiority or because of God's unique adequacy at fulfilling our deepest desires, we should only love God. It is this less well-known challenge that becomes central to the Norris–Astell correspondence and that continues to receive attention from Astell in *The Christian Religion*. The following sections explore Norris' extreme version of the problem, Astell's response in her letters, and the view that emerges in her later works.

3. Norris' Extreme Theocentrism

John Norris embraces a strong version of theocentrism, which is important for understanding his philosophical development in the 1680–1690s. In his 1683 essay, "An Idea of Happiness," he claims that in the most general sense, happiness is "an Enjoyment of any Good" (3). There are varying degrees of enjoyment in this life, but they are always finite and few in number (17). The highest sort of enjoyment (which he calls "the full and intire Fruition of God") can only be found in God and, even then, not in this lifetime (17). There are two schools of thought about what exactly this happiness is. The Thomists, leaning on the objective aspect, say that it resides in an operation of understanding ("vision"). The Scotists, leaning on the formal aspect, say that it consists of an act of the will ("love"). Norris intends to "take the middle way and resolve the perfect Fruition of God partly into *Vision* and partly into *Love*" (21). Norris argues that happiness can only be found in enjoying God, who is, therefore, the only proper object of our love.

At some time between writing this essay (Norris 1683) and writing the *Theory and Regulation of Love* (Norris 1688), Norris first read Malebranche (Mander 2008, p. 10). In (Malebranche 1700), Norris found a way to explain how God alone is worthy of our love and is the only source of goodness and happiness.² However, as seen in the earlier 1683 essay, this commitment to God's unique worthiness of human love was already present when he read Malebranche. He came to the study of metaphysics because of a theological and ethical core commitment.

Norris' major conclusions in the *Theory and Regulation of Love* are aptly summarized by Astell in her first letter to Norris and Astell (1695, pp. 69–70): 1. "That GOD is the only efficient Cause of all our Sensations" and 2: "That GOD is not only the Principal, but the sole Object of our Love". She then gives Norris' reason for accepting claim 2: "Because he is the only efficient Cause of our Pleasure". After reading Malebranche, Norris' central argument is that God is the only appropriate object of our love because God is the only efficient source of our pleasure. This turns on a premise, endorsed by Malebranche (*The Search after Truth* 6.3), that we ought only to love that which has power or authority (including, but not limited to, causal power) over us. In Malebranche's system, Norris had found a metaphysic that gave him the ethical–religious conclusion he had been pursuing since his early twenties, when he became convinced that he could only find true happiness by loving God above all else. Jacqueline Broad (2003a, 2003b) has, for good reason, framed the Malebranchian turn in Norris as being a "break with Platonism," for reasons having to do with his uneasy classification as a Cambridge Platonist. However, his turning to Malebranchian metaphysics was a way to support his commitment to the Augustinian view that only God is the proper object of our love; therefore, we can also see this Malebranchian turn as being partly a fulfillment of his Christian Platonism.

4. Theocentrism in the Letters

Norris, at Astell's prompting, further elaborates on his theory of love in the *Letters*. It takes a few attempts for Norris to recognize the quality and force of Astell's multiple inquiries into his position, and she must sometimes wait until a later letter to press a point, after Norris has grasped one problem and worked through possible solutions with her.

There are two key components to the proposed theory of neighborly love, as discussed by Norris and Astell and ultimately endorsed by Norris. First, we are obligated to love the source of our good "and make him the Term and Object of our whole Love" (Norris. 6.96). God is the only source of our good. Therefore, we should only love God. This is supported

by—but does not require—the Malebranchian account of why God is the only source of our good: because God is the only cause. Whether God is the source of only our pleasure or also of our pain is one of the main points on which Astell queries Norris in the first half-dozen letters.

Second, part of Astell's proposed solution, which Norris quickly accepts, is that there is a difference between "love of desire" and "love of benevolence". Astell waits until letter seven to press the point that Norris' way of understanding the first commandment (to love God) is "*prejudicial to the second*" (to love one's neighbor) (Norris and Astell 1695, 7.100). Once we distinguish the two kinds of love, there is no *contradiction* between the commandment to love God and to love humans. God can be the sole object of our love if we distinguish the love we have for God from the different kinds of love we have toward any other thing. *Desiring* anything but God is ludicrous, both because nothing else is capable of fulfilling our desire and because God alone is the cause of our being and of our pleasure. Reserving desire-love for God leaves open a benevolence-love toward humans, provided that this benevolence-love does not require any enjoyment in the fulfillment of this love. These are the two components of Norris' ultimate view in the *Letters*. It is an open question in Astell scholarship whether or not she affirms the metaphysical story that Norris gives to underpin these two points. This scholarly disagreement often focuses on Astell's apparent recantation of occasionalism in a final letter, written as the correspondence was going to press.

Before turning to this debate in the secondary literature, let us consider the various ways in which Norris and Astell clearly agree and disagree. First, they agree that God is supreme in metaphysical rank and moral goodness. As Jane Duran (2006, pp. 88–89) details, "Norris and Astell share a belief in the importance of faith, the authority of the divine, and the extent to which arguments can be made that the visible world hinges upon the divine". Second, Astell adopts Malebranche's theory of the will (with some additional Norris flourishes), including the view that the will is determined to love the universal good, but that it can withhold its assent in particular when considering particular goods (see Broad 2012). Third, in agreement with Malebranche, we do not have an idea of the soul, although we do have an awareness of it (see Broad 2018). Third, resolving the apparent contradiction between "love God entirely" and "love your neighbor" requires distinguishing desire-love from benevolence-love. Fourth, we should only desire-love God. As Nancy Kendrick (2018, p. 54) notes, "With respect to [a longing for completeness], both Astell and Norris hold that the yearning that marks desiring love can be satisfied only if it is directed to its proper object—that is, to God". They also share, as Kendrick appreciates, a strongly Augustinian framework for conceiving of this desire for love and its fulfillment. Fifth, we should desire God alone *because* humans are not capable of fulfilling our desire. Astell (7.99) describes the reasoning thusly:

The Boundlessness of Desire is a plain indication to me that it was never made for the Creature; for what is there in the whole Compass of Nature that can satisfy Desire? What but he who made it can replenish and content it? I need not bring Arguments for the Proof of this, every one has Experience enough to confirm it.

Sixth, the closest thing to satisfying our desire is the "Soul of our Neighbour". However, what is closest is still far. "Indeed the Soul of our Neighbour has the most plausible Pretence to our Love, as being the most Godlike of all the Creatures, but since 'tis as indigent as our own, how can it supply our Wants, or consequently be the proper Object of our Desires?" (Astell 7.99). And later, "Tis true, a Sister Soul may give somewhat better Entertainment to our Love than other Creatures can, but she is not able to fill and content it" (Astell 7.100). Seventh, loving God (with a love of desire) enables loving creatures (with a love of benevolence).

These many points of agreement should not lead us to miss the ways in which the two disagree, even before Astell's alleged recantation of occasionalism in her final letter. First, they disagree about the ways in which God could be said to be the author of pain and, relatedly, of evil. Second, Norris' view of love and happiness is an attempt to reconcile

intellectualist and voluntarist theories of the will and of love, as we noted earlier. Astell leans much more heavily toward intellectualism, which takes some attention to see in the letters but emerges more clearly in the appendix to the *Letters* and in *A Serious Proposal*. This might suggest that Astell is indebted to Henry More and Ralph Cudworth in ways Norris is not (see Broad 2003a). Third, she does not clearly endorse the view that we should only desire God *because* God alone is the cause of our being and our pleasure. As Broad (2003a) correctly summarizes, “Mary Astell agrees with Norris that we ought to love and desire God alone. But she believes that this claim holds up *whether or not* occasionalism is true”. (We will return to this issue later.) Fourth, Norris seems to believe that the problems regarding the love of other humans go away once a distinction between love of desire and love of benevolence has been drawn (and perhaps with the further claim that they have distinct objects). Astell does not think that this is enough. Kendrick (2018, p. 56) has shown that this is a point of agreement between Astell and Masham, who both think that Norris’s response is inadequate.

In summary, in the *Letters*, Astell’s answer to the theocentric challenge regarding loving one’s neighbor is to draw out of Norris (usually by making suggestions that he adopts) a metaphysical system that would make sense of the ethical–theological positions that she accepts. She improves Norris’ metaphysics for him. However, as suggested here and elaborated in the next section, she stops short of endorsing the metaphysical view (God is the cause of all our sensations) that provides (according to her!) the best account of why we should desire-love God alone.

5. Astell’s Purported Occasionalism

In Astell’s letter to Norris of 21 September 1694, as the correspondence was going to print, she either retracts her earlier agreement with Norris or clarifies her position. To understand Astell’s response to theocentrism, we must survey the scholarly debate about Astell’s possible embrace and retraction of occasionalism.

Perhaps Astell was an occasionalist who recognized the weaknesses of occasionalism. This is suggested in Squadrito’s (1991) claim that “Astell agrees with Norris that God is the only efficient cause of all our sensations and that God is the sole object of our love. However, she contends that unacceptable conclusions follow from his principles”. In her brief remarks, I take Squadrito to mean that Astell deals with the unfavorable consequences of occasionalism in ways that do not lead her to reject occasionalism.

According to Derek Taylor (2001) and William Kolbrener (2016), at the time of her writing the *Letters*, Astell is an occasionalist. Beginning with *A Serious Proposal* and the final letter appended to the *Letters*, she is not one, perhaps because she was trying to triangulate a position that either anticipated or accepted certain Lockean criticisms without accepting Lockean political theory. Then, she returns to occasionalism in *The Christian Religion*. Sarah Ellenzweig (2003) finds the same departure and return to occasionalism in Astell; however, after the conclusion of the letters, Astell came to equate occasionalism with pantheism and Spinozism, and so she rejected it. Ellenzweig also suggests that the departure was “likely a tactical rather than an intellectual move” (390). Patricia Springborg (2005) summarizes Taylor and Ellenzweig’s positions and seems to endorse a departure-return view.

Some, though, have argued that she was never an occasionalist. Ruth Perry (1986, p. 78) focuses on the “basic agreement with Norris that God is the only efficient cause of all sensation” without endorsing the view that Astell believed all events or things to be caused by God. Jacqueline Broad (2003b, p. 102) writes, “Although Astell’s early objections are not directed at Norris’s occasionalism, one can detect seeds of dissent throughout the exchange”. She later adds (104ff), “Astell’s notion of infinite wisdom is responsible for her eventual rejection of Norris’s occasionalism” (which we first see in the appendix, written six weeks later). So, too, Eileen O’Neill (2016, p. 158) says, “I read Astell in *Letters* as endorsing Descartes’s view that there are only two created substances, mind and body—a view that she will continue to hold throughout her writings. She aligns herself with More, over against Norris, on the issue of whether bodies may be partial efficient causes of sensation,

despite the fact that bodies do not formally have sensations". This is a Cartesian "middle way" between bodies being the proper causes of sensations and being mere occasions. Sarah Hutton (2015, p. 217) similarly summarizes, "Thus, while generally in sympathy with Norris's Malebranchian disposition, Astell's metaphysics in fact owes more to the Cambridge Platonists than Malebranche". Kathleen A. Ahearn (2016, p. 38) suggests that throughout their correspondence, Astell is "suspicious" of Norris' claim that God can cause a sensation in us without leaving an impression on the body. Charles J. McCracken (1983, p. 158) claims that Astell was "well impressed" by Malebranche's account of the love of God but that "she balked at the Occasionalist theory that sensations are not caused by material objects . . ." and preferred More's account. Catherine Wilson (2004, p. 284) goes the farthest in disassociating Astell from Norris regarding the metaphysics of causation, claiming, "It is apparent that Astell does not subscribe to the metaphysical principle that Creatures are inefficacious".

This debate has insufficiently appreciated Astell's interesting and consistent phrasing across her writings. She repeatedly says, across many works, that the Norris-Malebranche system is the *best way* to show our dependence on God, who is the proper object of our love. That is not the same as endorsing it as the *true system*. A further step is needed, and it is one that she consistently does not take. Her strongest language in support of occasionalism comes from the opening letter to Norris (1.69): "Methinks there is all the reason in the World to conclude, *That GOD is the only efficient cause of all our Sensations*". That we have "all the reason in the World to conclude" might not mean much to someone who, for instance, thinks that our reasoning is not very good on metaphysical issues or who thinks that the reasons assembled fall short of what is required for certainty or even belief. Thus, even her clearest statement falls short of an explicit endorsement of occasionalism. It also falls short of being occasionalism, as God being the efficient cause of our sensations does not automatically entail that God is the efficient cause of everything that happens or exists, which would be full-fledged occasionalism. Scholars have focused on the latter issue: does she endorse *occasionalism*? I will focus on the former: does she *endorse* occasionalism?

Throughout the *Letters*, Astell is interested in the ethical and theological consequences of appreciating our dependence on God, especially in the ways in which God is ultimately responsible for our experiences. She explores, without endorsing, a metaphysical view that is attractive because it would lead one to a theological and ethical position that she does endorse. Put differently, Astell accepts the following two claims:

1. Occasionalism (or its weaker variant, that God is the only cause of our pleasurable sensations) is the metaphysical system that best shows our dependence on God.
2. Showing our dependence on God is of the highest importance for understanding our religious and ethical duties.

However, she does not explicitly state, on the basis of these two claims, that occasionalism (or the weaker variant) is *true*. We are also not justified in attesting that she is (perhaps unwittingly) committed to a metaphysics of causation, as (1) and (2) do not logically commit her to the truth of any position in metaphysics without some third claim, such as:

3. We should endorse the metaphysical system that best helps us to understand our religious and ethical duties.

There are various reasons why she might not accept (3). One set of reasons would be that she has metaphysical, theological, or ethical objections to the theory. This is the tack taken by Broad (2003a, 2003b), Hutton (2015), and O'Neill (2016). However, another possibility that makes sense of her philosophical approach across the decades is that she does not believe we need to make endorsements in metaphysics to support the ethical and theological commitments that are of the highest importance. This restraint marks her contrast with Norris. Earlier, I quoted from Norris' early essay, "An Idea of Happiness", to show that he was interested in demonstrating the supremacy and worthiness of God before he discovered Malebranche. Astell shares this goal. However, while Norris accepted

Malebranche's metaphysics because he found in it a way to express and support his broadly Augustinian ethical vision, Astell admired but never openly endorsed either the occasionalist or the Morean, semi-occasionalist, underpinnings of this ethical vision, either because of philosophical objections or because she does not think we need to make endorsements of metaphysical theories to appreciate the value of those theories.

In exploring the ethical puzzles raised by theocentrism, Astell stopped short of fully endorsing a metaphysical system in the *Letters* that would generate the theological and ethical views she prioritizes. Her answers are primarily ethical in nature, not metaphysical.

6. Astell's Justification of Neighborly Love in *The Christian Religion*

Thus far, I have argued that even when speaking favorably of specific theocentric metaphysical views in the *Letters*, Astell does not endorse a particular metaphysical theory, but she does endorse a particular theocentric code of ethics. In this section, I argue that Astell continues to entertain bold metaphysical viewpoints in support of endorsed ethical claims, without ever endorsing those bold metaphysical viewpoints in her major work a decade later, *The Christian Religion*. We might call her approach in both texts *metaphysical caution*: endorse an ethical-religious claim; praise the metaphysical view that best supports the ethical-religious claim; stop there. As detailed earlier, scholars are divided as to whether Astell endorsed occasionalism or whether she endorsed a Morean account of sensation. I argue that even her strongest statements in the *Letters* fall short of endorsement and that none required a commitment to a particular view. This scholarly divide also applies to the less-discussed *The Christian Religion* (TCR), wherein she defends occasionalism against the attacks by Damaris Masham in *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (Masham 1696); I again argue that she does not endorse these views. However, there is an additional nuance to the metaphysical approach in TCR that is worth our attention.

The Christian Religion focuses, more than the *Letters*, on the question of why we should love other humans at all. The first challenge of theocentrism, to which she adequately responded in the letters with Norris, was that the duty to love one's neighbor is incompatible with the duty to love God. Her answer was that these are different senses of the word love: desire-love and benevolence-love. The second challenge of theocentrism is that by designating the love of one's neighbor as benevolence-love, there is no particular reason for that love to be directed toward all people (or all people who meet the broad designation of "neighbor", if that category is a proper subset of all human persons). It is this problem that she confronts in *The Christian Religion*, having given it scant attention in the *Letters* (however, see 7.100).

Astell claims in TCR that we ought to love everyone because each person's good is inseparable from another person's good. There are many possible reasons to support such a claim, such as the argument that it is our purpose to support others' well-being or that it is in our self-interest to do so, or that it is divinely commanded. One reason that she actually offers is that the rejoicing in heaven will be greater if we love our enemies on earth now (TCR 3.213, 173). While this entails a commitment to a future state, it does not speak to the metaphysics of persons, which is my focus here. Astell's most commonly given reason for why I should love my neighbor, which she states in various ways that have various strengths, is that my good is inseparable from my neighbor's good because my neighbor and I are not distinct. Sometimes she says that we are "members of one another" (cf. Romans 12:5). Sometimes she views it through the lens of how God perceives humans. However, the salient point is the same: you and I are not fully distinct; we are, therefore, mistaken if we treat our goods as being completely separate. In this section, I examine whether she is actually committing herself to a bold metaphysical thesis by examining the section on neighborly love (TCR 3.168-222) and the appendix (TCR 5.370-385), in which Astell presents three variations of the claim that a human agent should be concerned with all others' well-being: *same nature*, *divine perspective*, and *parts of a whole*.

6.1. *The Same Nature*

Astell's "same nature" argument takes two forms. Both forms appear in the following passage:

He who has never heard of Christianity, is obliged to love his neighbors because they partake of the same nature. But Christians are under a further and higher obligation, the duty they owe to one another being founded on their mutual relation to Christ their head. And therefore, since everyone is, or may be a member of Christ, he is to be treated with brotherly affection. (TCR 3.169, 151)

The obligation to love one's neighbor is due to "partaking" in the "same nature". This is ambiguous. Astell could mean that they are multiple distinct beings who have a common nature, where such a nature is shareable (think: "humanity"). Conversely, she could mean that there is a single nature that seemingly multiple individuals, in fact, share (think: haecceity). I will assume the former, weaker disambiguation.

Astell makes a second claim that Christians have a special duty to one another "founded on their mutual relation to Christ their head," drawing on the metaphor from 1 Corinthians:12. However, the preceding sentence is clearly a metaphysical claim ("they partake of the same nature"), which suggests that we should read the second sentence as more than metaphorical. As we are incapable of distinguishing someone who is actually a Christian, Christians should adopt the posture of treating everyone "with brotherly affection". While the stated second duty is founded on Christian doctrine (providing a "further and higher obligation"), it is the metaphysics of persons that serve as the key premise in this argument.

The metaphorical and the metaphysical are further muddled three sections later. "Christians are members one of another, and therefore the good of my neighbor is not to be separated from my own good, but to be estimated with it" (TCR 3.172, 153). Again, "members of one another" could be read in a purely metaphorical sense, but—given that it serves as a premise for the conclusion about the inseparability of each individual human's welfare—it would be better to consider what sense could be given the premise to explain why the conclusion would follow. Again, for the conclusion to follow, the premise cannot be read only as a metaphor but instead as expressing a truth about the nature of human beings. Given the accumulated evidence, we should see this passage as presenting a reading of the biblical passage in which being members of one another requires treating human goods as inseparable because human beings are themselves inseparable.

6.2. *The Divine Perspective*

The second argument is also irreducibly theological but in a different way. The argument follows the previous one by a few sections:

Therefore it is not reasonable, and consequently not best, that my neighbor should endure an evil to procure me a good not equal in degree to that evil; or that I should refuse pain or loss to procure for another a good that outweighs it. Much more am I obliged to deny myself a little good, in order to obtain a great one for my neighbor; and also to suffer a less evil, to keep him from a greater. Nor shall I in the main, and taking the future into the computation, be a loser by giving my neighbor in these cases, and for the present, the preference. For to act thus is in reality to pursue my own greatest good, which they, and they only provide for, who conform themselves in all things to the will of God, who is no respecter of persons, and therefore does not, absolutely speaking, will a good to any one of His creatures that tends to the greater evil of another; but who by prerogative of His nature, always wills, what upon the whole, all circumstances considered, is the greatest good. (TCR 3.175, 154–55)

Astell's previously discussed biblical reference was more than a convenient metaphor for social obligations. The same theory applies here. That God "is no respecter of persons" refers to two biblical passages. In Acts 10, Peter says that God is "no respecter of persons"

upon his having a vision that he interprets to mean that God has come to both Jews and Gentiles, an interpretation affirmed by Cornelius, to whom he is speaking. In Romans 2, Paul writes that there is no respecting of persons with God because all are the same before the law; the context makes it clear that he means both Jews and Gentiles. In both cases, God not respecting persons means treating both Jews and Gentiles the same in some respect. The language of God not respecting persons has been applied more widely to questions of categorical distinctions between human persons. For instance, the same language was used by abolitionists in the nineteenth century.

Nothing in this passage suggests that Jew/Gentile is a relevant distinction. More importantly, Astell is not talking about categories or groups of persons at all. Her argument only works if we understand her to mean that God does not respect the distinction between individual persons. This is a radical application. She is denying that I should pursue my own greatest good. Why? Because God is no respecter of persons; therefore, God does not will good to any one person that would entail a larger detriment to the whole or to another individual. God, of course, cannot be wrong, she assumes. Given that I am to conform myself to the will of God, I should take the same approach. Therefore, it would be wrong of me to seek my own good when considered in isolation from the good of others.

A similarly bold claim appears in the Appendix to TCR, in which she defends the *Letters* against Masham's attacks.

The relation we bear to the wisdom of the father, the son of His love, gives us indeed a dignity which otherwise we have no pretense to. It makes us something, something considerable even in God's eyes. And in this respect and upon this account, the creation and chiefest good of man is a design worthy of God, I know not how we shall be able to prove it so on any other. (TCR 5.369, 280–81)

Astell accepts that the divine perspective toward persons is the correct way of proceeding. Moreover, understanding persons, their worth, and the relations of persons to each other and to God can only happen by adopting this perspective. When we do so, we find that we have dignity we would otherwise not have because God's seeing us as having worth is what gives us worth. (She takes the less common answer to the Euthyphro dilemma on this point.) When we do things that are to our own advantage and to others' disadvantage, or when we show any favoritism at all, we do an injustice to God, who shows no such respecting of persons.

6.3. *Parts of a Whole*

The third move to undermine individuality regards the parts of a whole. As she often does, Astell provides both an exclusively Christian and a non-exclusive version. The weaker, exclusive version: "... But Christians are under a further and higher obligation, the duty they owe to one another being founded on their mutual relation to Christ their head". (3.169, 151). Again, the biblical reference (1 Corinthians 12, again, but this time including Christ as the head) can serve any number of purposes. However, her non-exclusive version makes it clear that this "mutual relation" should be taken to represent a metaphysically real relation, not merely a convenient metaphor:

I consider myself therefore as a part of one great whole, in the welfare of which my own happiness is included. And without regarding any particular or separate interest, endeavor always to pursue that which in itself and absolutely speaking, is the most public, universal, and greatest good; and to avoid that which absolutely in itself is the greatest evil. Which principle rightly understood and strictly pursued, will at once fill up all the offices of justice and charity, and every other obligation. (TCR 3.170, 152)

Astell advocates for viewing ourselves not as singular individuals but as parts of a whole. In following this recommendation, I am required to treat my own happiness as part of a greater happiness. This perspective requires me to promote overall happiness rather than my own.

This language is informative. If we take “I consider myself . . . ” to be stating a commitment to a vision of the universe (rather than a motivational “I find it helpful to think of myself . . . ”), then, in this passage, she is denying an atomistic individualism that one could quite plausibly have assumed she had in the background since at least *A Serious Proposal*.³ So should we adopt this bold, metaphysical reading of these passages from *The Christian Religion*?

The lessons of her metaphysical restraint in *Letters* should inform our reading here. In the *Letters*, she praised the metaphysics approach of Malebranche and Norris for its ability to support her ethical and theological views, without clearly endorsing their views as her own. In *The Christian Religion*, she again praises their occasionalist metaphysics without endorsing it (TCR 5.378, 288–89). When we look carefully at the bold metaphysical claims that she considers in TCR when responding to the second challenge of theocentrism, we see a similar restraint. “I consider myself as . . . ” (TCR 3.170, 152) “. . . that hypothesis and what is built upon it, gives a better answer than any hypothesis I have met with . . . ” (TCR 5.369, 280) Astell’s wording is always careful to endorse the theological and ethical views she holds and to make it clear where a metaphysical view would well support her theory, without ever endorsing the metaphysics.

To investigate the metaphysics of love in *The Christian Religion* is also to examine how Astell interprets scripture, as her views are deeply entwined with her readings of specific passages. I have argued that the way in which she draws conclusions from specific passages requires treating certain scriptural statements as having metaphysical import about questions such as what a person is. How is this attitude consistent with what I earlier called her “metaphysical caution”?

Astell’s clearest statement of her overall approach comes from her discussion of a then-important debate about “mysteries” in religion. Her approach can be summarized as follows: there are truths revealed in the Bible that Christians must affirm (TCR 1.58–60, 77–78); these are as clear as the subject matter allows, given our ability to reason about them (TCR 1.60, 78). An individual’s reason is not the sole standard by which to judge whether something is reasonable (TCR 1.59, 78); this approach can lead to believing things for which one cannot give a “philosophy,” such as the union of the divine and human natures in Jesus (TCR 1.62, 80). This might make it seem as though Astell is claiming that we ought to endorse metaphysical positions we do not understand, but this is not the way she sees the matter. As she sees it, the divine nature (for instance) is “incomprehensible,” by which she means that we do not have “a complete and perfect knowledge,” which is a very high standard (TCR 1.63, 81). When she endorses believing in mysteries (in a circumscribed sense), she does so out of metaphysical caution, which I earlier described as endorsing an ethical–religious claim, praising the metaphysical view that best supports the ethical–religious claim, and stopping there. As she later says, accepting a “mystery of faith” is beneficial because “. . . The mysteries of Christianity tend to the improvement of our morals” (TCR 1.64, 81). We are to accept the mystery of, for instance, the union of divine and human natures in Jesus because doing so is compatible with a profound respect for our reasoning ability and its limits and because doing so tends to facilitate our improvement.⁴

For a philosopher who has rightly been read as having great respect for the intellect, she consistently stops short of endorsing metaphysical positions, even when they lead to the ethical and theological doctrines that she most cherishes. This stretches from her first letter to Norris to her discussions of mysteries and neighborly love in *The Christian Religion*. She sees metaphysical consequences, she recognizes nuanced metaphysical distinctions, and she praises metaphysical doctrines but, unlike many of her contemporary metaphysicians, she declines to let metaphysical disputes distract her from the ethical and theological positions she cares most about. While other interpreters have focused on whether she endorsed either Malebranchian occasionalism or the semi-occasionalism of the Cambridge Platonists, I have argued that she does not, in fact, endorse any view.

7. Conclusions

I have argued in support of two claims under the banner of Astell's "metaphysics of love". The first is that Astell does not mean to commit herself to Norris' occasionalism when she endorses it as the best support for the ethical and religious views that she does endorse. Nor does she avoid doing this solely because she prefers a different account, such as the ones proffered by Descartes or More. The second is that she undermines atomistic conceptions of the individual human being in the neighborly love passages from *The Christian Religion*. She does so in ways that appeal to surprisingly strong readings of biblical passages and point to broader metaphysical considerations, without fully endorsing metaphysical claims. While not endorsing the metaphysical systems she seems to prefer, we can see a major theme at the intersection of Astell's ethics and metaphysics: she embraces theocentrism, recognizes its potential problems, and works on solutions.

To be clear, in saying that Astell does not endorse these metaphysical approaches, I am not offering a "charitable" reading of a historical figure that amounts to denying they made bold or surprising claims, in order to make the figure more palatable to our contemporary sensibilities. If we were to insist on treating Astell's metaphysical interests as endorsements, she has what I consider to be radical views of the self, its value, and the wider world. Diluting this in the name of charity does her no favors. We should read Astell carefully, which includes following her lead regarding when she expresses commitment to a view and when she praises but does not commit herself to a view. I have argued that this should lead us to conclude that she endorses views in theological ethics and that she both praises and defends but does not endorse certain metaphysical theories. This speaks to a prioritizing of the theological-ethical over the metaphysical in our philosophizing, even as she works out and praises subtle metaphysical positions.

To underline how bold Astell's preferred metaphysical positions really are, consider the following comparison: all three metaphysical considerations (same nature, divine perspective, and parts of a whole) in *The Christian Religion* are also endorsed by Spinoza in response to the problem of how to ground concern for other humans. First, human beings (in their rational nature) either (modest reading) share a common nature or (bold reading) are not distinct; therefore, we should care about all humans' good (*Ethics* 4p35, 4p35d, 4p37d2). Anne Conway, as seen in *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* 7.3, is another theocentric metaphysician who argues that love is grounded in the unity of nature (Yenter 2018). Second, when viewed from the perspective of eternity, God is not at all concerned for the "good for me", so it would be incorrect for a rational being to be so concerned (*Ethics* 1.App). Third, anthropocentric perspectives that would prioritize humans' perspectives regarding their individual value are mistaken and should be substituted with divine perspectives, which see humans as parts of a larger whole (Letter 32, *Ethics* 1.App). I do not point out these parallels because I claim or even suspect that Spinoza is influencing Astell on this point. Rather, for heavily theocentric philosophers such as Spinoza, Conway, and Astell, there are a set of tools to respond to problems such as: *why love others?* Astell differs from Conway and Spinoza in not attempting a metaphysical system that supports her views about the love of God and the love of humans. This does not mean that she is metaphysically neutral. She pointedly responds to Masham's criticisms of Malebranche and Norris. Rather, her approach to metaphysics is to keep it subordinate to ethics by not endorsing any metaphysical view beyond what she absolutely needs.

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Notes

- ¹ Regarding Hobbes, as Sharon A. Lloyd and Sreedhar (2020) state, “The formerly dominant view that Hobbes espoused psychological egoism as the foundation of his moral theory is currently widely rejected . . . ” However, there is still debate about the particular kind of egocentrism that Hobbes does endorse. As for (Spinoza 1677, *Ethics* 3p9) (and the theory of the conatus generally) seems egoistic. However, he also says in 4p20 that, to some degree, a less than fully virtuous person “neglects one’s own advantage,” which seems to deny some strong forms of egocentrism. It is possible that Spinoza is committed to rational egoism; however, this is complicated by his account that rational people “agree in nature” (*Ethics* 4p35), which leads them to act to each other’s advantage. Mandeville presents the most straightforward case for an early modern egoist, although, unlike the other two mentioned, he wrote after Astell and Norris.
- ² A third Norris text from this period, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* (Norris 1689), has received almost no attention. In his sermon on John 21.15, Norris addresses the grounding of love in a different way to that he uses elsewhere. Because we love Christ, he claims, we will love what he loves, which includes other human beings. Secondly, in loving Christ, we are loving not only his divine nature but also his human nature, which entails our loving humanity. I do not see him appealing to this Christocentric reasoning elsewhere, even when it might be relevant to do so.
- ³ I am not the first to wonder about Astell’s conflicted individualism. Joanne Myers (2013) has argued that the Astell–Masham debate turns on the differing conceptions of sociability and the charge of enthusiasm. Sometimes Myers’ discussion focuses on the ways in which Astell seems concerned with the (specifically female) “subject whose choices are and must be governed by a concern for and a recognition of the claims of others” (535). However, sometimes, Myers seems also to be making a claim about the nature of the self, not merely as constrained by the choices of others but also as a relational entity of which we could not draw sharp distinctions between it and other selves. For example: “From this perspective, Astell’s texts appear ‘enthusiastic’ to the extent that they imagine the self as bound to and sometimes even indistinguishable from others” (Ibid.) This stronger argumentative strand would be an alternate way of arguing for a conclusion similar to my own.
- ⁴ For more on the context of Astell’s championing of reason and how it is still less confident than some of her peers, including the Cambridge Platonists, see Sarah Apetrei (2010, pp. 125–29). I agree with Apetrei’s interpretation of Astell on the power and limits of reason and the ways in which it is not an *individual’s* reason that concerns Astell; however, my reading pushes Astell more towards the monists than Apetrei allows, in part because Apertei believes that the mystics are opposed to monism and I do not, as both tend to deny a distinction between persons.

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