

## Custom, Freedom, and Equality

Mary Astell on Marriage and  
Women's Education

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vide evidence throughout for the assumption—that we can acknowledge a sort of protofeminism in early thinkers who did indeed challenge some constraints that seventeenth-century women encountered. Astell is, according to this approach, one of the earliest feminists—perhaps the first English feminist (Hill 1986)—even if a conservative one (Kinnaird 1979; c.f. Hartmann 1998), a conservatism that has led to much ink being spilt over serious tensions found within her philosophy on women (e.g., Duran 2000, 148; 2006, 77; Hill 1986; Kinnaird 1979, 55; and Smith 1982a, 117).

In this chapter, I focus on one specific tension. Astell believes that women enjoy natural equality with men based on the fact that both have unsexed rational souls, which share an essential humanity; women, no less than men, are made by God to be rational creatures. On the other hand, Astell also believes that women are socially unequal to men, with perhaps the most troublesome example being her belief that wives are subordinate to their husbands within marriage. Because of her socially and politically conservative views, including her beliefs about marriage, there has recently been a suggestion that we reject Cartesian epistemology as the source of whatever feminism we might find in Astell (Broad 2007). For while Cartesianism might give rise to Astell's thoughts on male-female equality, she does not go so far as to subscribe to Descartes's radical skepticism regarding custom, as is evidenced by her acceptance of social and political practices that are deleterious to women. I argue that there is no tension between Astell's views on male-female natural equality and social inequality, and that no less than Descartes, her epistemology leads her to urge humans to radically question custom. It's just that much less falls into the sphere of custom for her than for Descartes; specifically, Astell does not believe that some very conservative social-political relations that rightly give feminist pause are customary. I also argue that the most promising way of lessening (albeit not eliminating) the antifeminism of Astell's thoughts on marriage is to focus on her Cartesian epistemology, for it can lead to a recognizably feminist theory of freedom in Astell, a theory that eases some of the burden on women of their social inequality. Before turning to these two related goals, I give a brief overview of Astell's Cartesianism, how others have noted that she uses it for feminist ends, and the precise nature of the tension I will thereafter examine.

Astell's Cartesianism: Ontology, Epistemology, Education

Perhaps the majority of commentators identify Astell's Cartesian roots as the source of her feminism (e.g., Kinnaird 1979, 61–62; O'Neill 1999, 242;

Few suppose that feminism in the seventeenth century was as sophisticated and advanced as are the feminisms of today, or that our seventeenth-century forebears could have imagined as fully as we do women's emancipation in all the forms we imagine it. But is it the case that to speak of feminism three to four hundred years ago is to commit a “vile anachronism” (Janes 1976, 121; cf. Duran 2006, 86)? Or is speaking of feminism an appropriate recognition of the fact that some thinkers of the 1600s were indeed concerned with women, men, and their social roles precisely so as to push back against at least some of the constraints women experienced simply because of their sex? It is certainly worthwhile to carefully consider the nature and meaning of feminism, and how feminism might have evolved over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in this essay on Mary Astell's related views on marriage and education, I assume—and indeed will pro-

Perry 1984, 22–23; 1985, 473–91; and Smith 1982a, 119). According to this approach, Astell has a roughly Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology, and these, together with a commitment to the logic and method of Port Royal, lead to her own feminist philosophy of education. In this section, then, I give a brief overview of these elements of her philosophy to show the points of overlap and divergence with Descartes's thought, and to draw out the feminist character of her Cartesianism.

Astell's feminism starts from a commitment to a Cartesian ontology of the human, specifically Descartes's dualism of soul and body (e.g., CR, 251), according to which the thinking soul (L, 1–2) is the mark of the divine within each of us and is our human essence.<sup>2</sup> While the soul may be embodied during our time on earth, it will eventually be free from the body after death (SP I, 52–53). Since sex attaches to bodies and not to souls, women's human essence is identical with—and thus equal to—that of men. This is the bedrock of Astell's feminism, and it informs her prescription for how women ought to treat themselves. For example, she says to women, “I suppose then that you're fill'd with a laudable Ambition to brighten and enlarge your Souls, that the Beauty of your Bodies is but a secondary care” (SP II, 122; cf. SP I, 54). Astell departs, however, from Descartes on the issue of individual differences. While Descartes believes that the powers of reason are “naturally equal in all men” (AT VI, 2; CSM I, 111) and quite possibly women as well,<sup>3</sup> Astell believes that humans have different degrees of rational capacity (e.g., SP II, 153, 186), even though all humans have the same essential kind of nature. Nonetheless, she is adamant that individual differences in rationality are not sex-based. It is a “ridiculous Pretension” to believe that men and women have different intellectual differences solely due to their sex: “that a Man is Wiser than a Woman merely because he is a Man! . . . [H]e who has no more Understanding than to argue at this rate, must not take it amiss if he is Esteemed accordingly” (CR, 171).<sup>4</sup>

Astell's Cartesian ontology encourages her to adopt a broadly Cartesian epistemology.<sup>5</sup> God created souls with finite rational capacity (SP II, 152), but they nonetheless contain some truths communicated by God, truths which are “clear and distinct” (SP II, 146). All humans have different “Modes of Understanding” (including faith, science, and opinion [SP II, 149]), but “knowledge in a proper and restricted sense” (SP II, 149) belongs to the scientific mode of understanding because it starts from premises clearly and distinctly known and reaches conclusions through deduction (SP II, 149–53).<sup>6</sup> Astell contrasts science with opinion and faith variously: “Now tho there's a great difference between Opinion and Science, true

Science being immutable but Opinion variable and uncertain, yet there is not such a difference between Faith and Science as is usually supposed. The difference consists not in the Certainty but in the way of Proof” (SP II, 150). Truths understood through faith are no less certain than those understood through science. The scientific mode of understanding is starkly contrasted with the senses, through which we may be conscious but not obtain certain knowledge (SP II, 150). Part of our task as knowers is to understand our various cognitive capacities, recognize our limits, and constrain ourselves therein (SP II, 152), another obviously Cartesian point.

From this taxonomy of cognitive abilities and their relation to knowledge follows an essentially Cartesian method for gaining knowledge, with the Cartesian-inspired Port Royal logic of Arnauld and Nicole (SP II, 166) also playing a key role. Astell sums up her account with six rules, the sixth being crucial for my purposes: “To judge no further than we Perceive, and not to take anything for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so” (SP II, 178). This rule commands us to accept as truth that which we believe through science or faith, but to reject as potentially not true that which we believe through opinion. Astell also alerts us to various sources of error that normally derail us from the path to true knowledge; crucial sources of error are the senses and related aspects of our embodied nature, such as the passions (SP II, 154–55). She thus encourages us to “withdraw ourselves as much as may be from Corporeal things, that pure Reason may be heard the better” (SP II, 164). Two feminist advantages emerge from Astell's epistemology and method. First, echoing a point central to Descartes, the certainty of scientific method—that is, of starting from clear and distinct perceptions and reasoning stepwise through deduction to conclusions—is contrasted with the uncertainty of mere opinions, and the scientific mode of understanding is highly individualistic. Astell thus allows the individual to challenge traditional beliefs held by members of a society at large. In other words, a woman can challenge customary beliefs that undermine women, such as the belief that their beauty matters more than their intellect. Second, Astell strongly links rationality with human essence while also disengaging the passions from our human essence, and this applies equally to men and women alike. She thus rejects the traditional pairing of women with irrational passions and men with rationality, a rejection that has obvious benefit for women.

The purpose of Astell's general Cartesian ontology, epistemology, and method is much more clearly articulated by Astell in her formal works than it is by Descartes, whose purposes, including laying metaphysical foundations for a new physics, are more clearly laid out in private correspondence

(AT III, 298; CSMK, 173). Astell's purpose is resolutely theological (much more so, I would venture, than is Descartes's): to prepare the soul for the afterlife (SP II, 187–89, 200), and to serve God in this life at least in part by helping others perfect their souls. This latter point alerts us to one aspect of the tension within Astell's feminism. Astell believes that in this life, women ought to serve God in a specific, gendered way; by having knowledge, a woman finds “very great use of it, not only in the Conduct of her own Soul but in the management of her Family. . . . Education of Children is a most necessary Employment [and] . . . should be laid by the Mother, for Fathers find other Business” (SP II, 202; cf. CR, 296). Astell clearly believes that while human nature is unsexed and therefore equal, humans have gendered roles to play, at least insofar as we find ourselves in specific social settings. I return to this tension in the next section.<sup>7</sup> At this juncture, I underscore the religious element of Astell's thought thus far explicated: God, and serving God, is our end (e.g., SP II, 142–44).

Developing our God-given rationality is the means by which we attain our end of serving God, and the way in which we develop our God-given rationality is to pursue a good education.<sup>8</sup> Let us suppose that education belongs properly to the sphere of custom; Astell herself often connects education and custom (e.g., SP I, 67, 77, 94–95). I follow Jacqueline Broad in her view that, for Astell, “custom inclines us to judge an action as right or wrong for no other reason than that such an action has been deemed right or wrong by long use and by the sanction of our forebears” (Broad 2007, 168). Given Astell's constant refrain *against* custom and in *favor* of our true nature, most notably in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (e.g., SP I, 55, 67–68, 77, 94, 101; SP II, 126, 130, 133, 139–40, 170), it would seem that she is opposed tout court to the customary ways of humans. And this is, by and large, a fair interpretation of her reaction to the empirical facts of her time. But while Astell does find much fault in the majority of contemporary customs, it is not necessarily custom *per se* that is at fault. For customs, and thus education, can be good or bad depending upon how well they are aligned with, or serve, our true, God-given nature. Bad customs are those that pervert our natural selves, and bad education is one that does not develop our God-given rationality, thus robbing us of the means by which we attain our end of honoring and serving God. “This Ignorance and a narrow Education lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up” (SP I, 67). Conversely, good customs cultivate our natural, God-given selves, and good education develops and perfects our God-given rationality, thus enabling us to attain our end of honoring and serving God, including by helping others perfect their rationality.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this last

point is *the* point of Astell's *Serious Proposal*, in which she lays out the details and foundations of a good education precisely, I suggest, to bring about better customs for generations after Astell's own.

For women—Astell's singular focus—good education should occur in a religious retreat, a women-only educational institution. This is because *bad* customs are so widespread in a world dominated by men “who under pretence of loving and admiring [women], really serve their *own* base ends” (SP I, 74), that women's true nature simply cannot be developed in that wider world. A number of points about this religious retreat should be emphasized. First, it is a *religious* retreat, in keeping with Astell's overall theological purposes. The religious retirement will draw women's attention away from the worldly, bodily concerns that currently dominate their attention, and it will turn women's attention toward the cultivation of her soul “so that here's a vast treasure gain'd, which for ought I know, may purchase an happy Eternity” (SP I, 89). Second, it is especially important for women to be afforded such a retreat because of the disproportionate burden women bear living in the world of bad customs (SP I, 56–73 *passim*). Third, women-only retreats cultivate the value of true female friendship—“a Vertue which comprehends all the rest” (SP I, 98). Female friendship is valuable not only for its own sake but because it helps women to develop the ability to withstand bad customs that tempt them away from their God-given ends of self-perfection and perfection of others' souls, customs to which they will once again be exposed should they be forced to leave the retreat (SP I, 100). And women *will* have to leave the retreat: “It is not my intention that you should seclude your selves from the World, I know it is necessary that a great number of you should live in it; but it is Unreasonable and Barbarous to drive you into't, e're you are capable of doing Good in it, or at least of keeping Evil from your selves” (SP II, 231).

Astell, like Descartes, thus connects two crucial elements in her philosophy. First, the ontology of the human, and the related epistemology and method which follow from this ontology, allow a woman to rely upon her own God-given nature—especially her rational capacities—in order to reach whatever truths about the world she is able to reach. Second, developing one's rational capacities allows a woman to reject customs which her own rational nature tells her are wrong. And yet, in Astell, this connection of two crucial elements is not, seemingly, fully realized. Some social relations that we might justifiably think are positively detrimental to women are relations that she at worst lauds, and at best, does not challenge. I hinted at this above when noting her acceptance of special gendered duties that women seem to bear. For the remainder of this essay, I

address this issue by focusing on Astell's views on marriage as articulated in her *Some Reflections upon Marriage*.

In keeping with the exposition of her views thus far, Astell argues in that work that women are not *naturally* inferior to men (e.g., *RM*, 14–15). Nonetheless, and due to humanity's fallen state in which we are not guided by reason, women must be *socially* subordinated to men in private families so as to maintain stability (*RM*, 15). In perhaps the most (in)famous passage in her oeuvre, Astell writes:

She who Elects a Monarch for Life [in marriage], who gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it, who puts her Fortune and Person entirely in his Powers . . . had best stay till she meet with one who has the Government of his own Passions, and has duly regulated his own desires, since he is to have such an absolute Power over hers. . . . And Covenants [contracts] betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force; the Will of the Sovereign is all in all. (*RM*, 48–49, 52)

So, Cartesian epistemology should lead to a radical intellectual independence, which in turn should lead to the radical challenging of customs. Yet, contrary to this logical trajectory, Astell espouses traditional social and political values. For this reason, Broad has suggested that we downplay Astell's Cartesian epistemology as the grounds for Astell's feminism, such as it is (Broad 2007, 167). I take it there are two related issues with Cartesian epistemology. First, Astell cannot be a fully committed Cartesian with respect to epistemology; if she were, she would espouse much more radical attitudes toward traditional social and political relations than she actually does. Second, because of the limits to her Cartesian epistemology, we have to turn to some other aspect of Astell's philosophy to locate a source for a viable feminism. Broad suggests we turn instead to Astell's Cartesian ethics (Broad 2007) as the more likely and promising source of that feminism. In focusing on Astell's ethics, I think Broad accurately captures Astell's most explicit response to the social inequalities between women and men. But from a feminist perspective, I think there is more hope in Astell's Cartesian epistemology than that which is to be found in her ethics. In the remainder of this chapter, I first make sense of Astell's seemingly contradictory approach to custom—both constantly deriding it and yet seeming to embrace some customs that are most detrimental to women. I do so by underscoring the fact that these social relations are not (human) customs for Astell but rather are divinely instituted. I then argue that the best way

of easing the blow to feminism of Astell's embrace of women-unfriendly social relations in fact stems from her Cartesian epistemology and method, for these are the source of a decidedly feminist strain of freedom implicit in her philosophy. Further, this freedom will be most effective in rooting out women-unfriendly social relations, which Astell so astutely recognizes are rampant in her time.

### Custom and Nature: Astell's Ambivalent Feminism

In examining Astell's views on marriage, I start with a caveat: *Reflections* is dripping with irony (Lister 2004, 63–64), and as a result, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain Astell's true beliefs therein.<sup>10</sup> That said, I think the following is a defensible interpretation of Astell's thinking. Human relations, such as male superiority over women in marriage, have come about due to the Fall, and these relations ensure stability, where otherwise there would be chaos (e.g., *RM*, 15). This situation leaves the sanction of the hierarchical marriage relation unclear in Astell's thought. Sometimes, Astell seems to suggest that husbands' power over their wives is simply a factual description of what men, through a power grab, have usurped for themselves, without the further prescriptive judgment that this unequal relation is right. "And Covenants [contracts] betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force; the Will of the Sovereign is all in all. Thus it is in Matter of Fact, I will not answer for the Right of it" (*RM*, 52; cf. *RM*, 26, 30, 33). On other occasions, Astell seems to assert that the inequality between men and women in marriage is right, not because of divine sanction, but rather because of the civil stability such a hierarchy can afford (e.g., *RM*, 15).<sup>11</sup> According to either of these first interpretations, the hierarchical relation between men and women in marriage would indeed be a case of human custom. Yet, at still other times, Astell seems to indicate that the unequal marriage relation is sanctioned by God, such that husband-wife inequality is both descriptively actual and prescriptively good, with the highest degree of ratification for that goodness. This view is strongly implied by her claim that marriage is a "Christian Institution" in which women have gendered roles such as the education of children (*RM*, 37) and implying that men also have gendered roles therein. Astell also explicitly acknowledges what she takes to be the truth of the biblical claim that wives ought to "submit themselves to their own Husbands" (*RM*, 20).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, both the bulk of her claims and the nature of her religious commitments favor this last interpretation, and so

I accept it as capturing Astell's beliefs: the marriage relation, characterized as it is by the husband's power over the subordinate wife, is authorized by God.

Given this interpretation, Astell's acceptance of the structure of marriage, a structure that has traditionally been deleterious to women as wives, is nonetheless entirely coherent despite her repeated sharp criticisms of customs that are harmful to women. In other words, *marriage, with its attendant hierarchy, is not a custom*. God made human beings, all of whom are equal insofar as all have rational capacities which are intrinsic and essential to them. Any custom, such as bad education, that undermines the natures that God has given humans should be actively worked against. God also made the marriage relation, within which husbands (as husbands) are superior to wives (as wives), all the while preserving the natural equality of men (as men) with women (as women). God ordained the husband-wife relationship, but this relationship is not intrinsic to men's or women's nature; what is intrinsic to human nature is their shared rationality. Outside the marriage bond, women can freely choose whether to enter into marriage. Once within a marriage, a wife has consented to subordinate herself to her husband socially, but not to thereby consider herself to be inferior in her nature. Within marriage, how a husband chooses to behave is up to him. He can choose whether or not to follow the God-given purposes that, as a man, are intrinsic to him. Likewise, he can choose whether or not to contribute positively to his wife's attempts (should she be so inclined) to follow her God-given purposes that, as a woman, are intrinsic to her. When a husband cultivates his own rational nature as a man, when he acknowledges and contributes to the cultivation of his wife's rational nature as a woman, and when a wife cultivates her own rational nature as a woman, then individuals within marriage do not need to take on conflicting roles, such as an individual taking on the conflicting roles of a rational woman and of a wife treated as less than fully rational by her husband. Moreover, a marriage without such conflicts will be a happy one.

However, when a husband does not cultivate his own rational nature as a man, when he does not acknowledge and contribute to the cultivation of his wife's rational nature as a woman, or when a wife does not cultivate her own rational nature as a woman, then individuals within marriage will take on conflicting roles. But an individual taking on the role, for example, of mistreated wife (mistreated because treated as less than fully rational), does not take away from her intrinsic nature as a fully rational human. She can be, at one and the same time, both subordinated, mistreated wife and equal, rational woman; the former role is extrinsic to her and follows from

her relation with her husband, while the latter role is intrinsic to her and follows from her own treatment of herself. The marriage bond, in which there is a rift between the role of wife and the role of woman, is a bad one. Nonetheless, having consented to enter into this divinely instituted relation, a woman cannot leave it. At the same time, Astell notes two factors that she believes mitigate the challenges of such marriages. First, and in keeping with her Cartesian ontology, epistemology, and method, no matter how badly treated a wife might be, if she has cultivated her God-given rationality through excellent education before entering into that bond, she can continue to develop and find comfort in her rational, contemplative nature even within that bond. Her God-given nature as a rational being ensures that this is within her own power. Second, as wife, enduring a bad marriage is an excellent testing ground for Christian virtues, helping to cultivate and develop those virtues through the endurance of the bad marriage (e.g., Duran 2006, 91).

Five points from the above deserve emphasis. First, to the degree that one can find a strain of feminism in Astell's account of women, it is squarely grounded in Cartesian ontology and epistemology. A woman's essential nature is her unsexed rational soul, and she can develop and use this rationality equally with men (nongendered, individual differences aside). Furthermore, this view leads to the conclusion that customs, such as unequal education, which violate God-given human rationality are customs which ought to be opposed.

Second, to the degree that one can find strains of antifeminism in Astell's account of wives, it does seem to be due to a departure from Cartesian epistemology. That is, certainty that marriage is divinely instituted comes neither from what Astell would call science (which proceeds from clear and distinct perceptions and deduction) nor from opinion (which could not secure the certainty of the claim), and so must come from faith (cf. Duran 2006, 82). Moreover, beliefs from faith depend not upon the self but upon testimony of a person we believe (SP II, 151). Indeed, Astell's turning to biblical evidence to shore up this belief indicates that faith is the source of that belief. And so, faith delivers fairly substantial beliefs for Astell, including the certain belief that wives are socially subordinate to their husbands in marriage, whereas for Descartes, the role that faith plays in delivering beliefs is radically more constrained.<sup>13</sup>

Third, this antifeminism is, however, not as strong as it might initially seem. For while the institution of marriage, together with the unequal relationship between the husband and wife therein, are divinely instituted, I take it that the way men and women choose to conduct themselves within

that institution is merely customary and can be changed if their behavior is bad. This flexibility can mitigate the negative impact upon women who find themselves within a marriage. In the final section, I argue that the way men and women improve their behavior within marriage is firmly grounded in Cartesian epistemology, which gives rise to a feminist-friendly account of freedom.

Fourth, for the feminism identified in the first point above and for the cultivation of good behavior identified in the third point above to be realized, women must be educated prior to marriage. If they are not, then their intrinsic and equal rational nature will not be developed and they will fail to realize their God-given nature as women within marriage, should the marriage be bad. Marriage is not a custom but a divinely instituted relation; human rationality is no less divinely made. To pay due heed to God, both human rationality and marriage must be fully respected. Entering into marriage without first having developed the resources to withstand its tumults and protect one's God-given nature will necessarily result in an injury to God; either a woman will break the God-instituted marriage bond in order to put herself into a more tolerable situation such as one in which she can cultivate her God-given rationality, or a woman will respect the God-instituted marriage bond and in doing so, will fail to cultivate her God-given rationality. Excellent education prior to marriage is essential for equipping women to fully respect God by both staying within marriage and being able to maintain their essential rational nature therein, no matter the quality of that marriage. Astell's call for excellent women's education, then, is not only for a woman's sake but also a call meant to pay due heed to God.<sup>14</sup>

Fifth, Astell's position is nonetheless limited from a feminist point of view. For even if women do enjoy the sort of education that allows them to paid due heed to their nature as rational beings, it is women who are nonetheless subordinated in marriage and who will therefore bear the largest burden should the marriage be bad. Further, Astell assumes a psychologically unrealistic split between women's inner and outer lives. For even if a woman has been well educated before marriage such that she has realized her rationality—the very inner quality that she must continue to cultivate even after marriage—the outer conditions of marriage may be so exacting that she simply cannot realize her duty to God to continue to focus on her rational capacity, and expecting her to do so is both unrealistic and unfair.

Broad's suggested solution to the threat to feminism articulated in this fifth point is to turn to Astell's ethics, specifically, "a pursuit of Cartesian ethical ideals [which] might result in a calm acceptance of the status quo.

While we cannot master our external circumstances, including "the cruel tyranny of an abusive husband," Broad interprets Astell as saying, "we can master our own inner aspirations. The culmination of our re-direction of the passions toward a love of God is an inner tranquility and peace of mind, regardless of 'what happens without us'" (Broad 2007, 179). It may well be that Astell herself suggests this approach. But it is an approach that is inherently limited from a feminist point of view, for it disproportionately burdens the woman with the consequences of men's poor treatment of them, and it encourages a quietism on behalf of women in the face of socially debilitating conditions, a quietism that cannot bring about change.<sup>15</sup> So in the next section I suggest an alternate solution to the threats to feminism. It is a solution both strongly implicit in Astell's philosophy and grounded in her Cartesian ontology and epistemology.

### Reason and Freedom

Astell has, I will argue, the seeds of a recognizably feminist theory of freedom, a theory that goes a long distance—even if not the whole distance—in mitigating some of the less women-friendly elements of her social-political philosophy. Moreover, it is a theory that relies foundationally upon her broadly Cartesian epistemology, which favors the cultivation of the rational capacities that are definitive of our souls. I start with a general account of Astell's theory of freedom, and then draw out its feminist potential.

Astell directly links the development of one's rationality with the ability to freely choose how one will behave, and to choose from one's own undetermined will rather than from the determination by another's will: "If then it be the property of Rational Creatures, and Essential to their very Natures to Chuse their Actions, and to determine their Wills to that Choice by such Principles and Reasonings as their Understanding are furnish'd with, they who are desirous to be rank'd in that Order of Beings must conduct their Lives by these Measures, begin with their Intellects, inform themselves what are the plain and first Principles of Action, and Act accordingly" (SP II, 128, my emphasis; cf. CR, 278). A well-developed intellect or rational capacity will allow a woman to formulate clear, rational principles of behavior, and this in turn will allow her will to pursue those principles. This will save her from pursuing a course of action that is in accord with custom and against rational principles. Astell associates the pursuit of customary forms of behavior (presumably those that are bad customs) with the absence of freedom: "Why should we not assert our Liberty, and not

suffer every Trifler to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Custom on us?" (SP II, 120). Finally, Astell connects men's mistreatment of women to women's reduced rational capacity and consequently reduced freedom, and she locates women's ability to push against this reduced freedom in their good sense, or within their own minds: "I dare say you understand your own interest too well to neglect it so grossly and have a greater share of sense, whatever some Men affirm, than to be content to be kept any longer under their Tyranny in Ignorance and Folly, since it is in your Power to regain your Freedom, if you please but t'endeavour it" (SP II, 121). Astell's account of human, and therefore women's, freedom is squarely grounded upon Cartesian first principles, namely the fact that all humans are essentially characterized by their souls, which are free, indeed, increasingly more free the more the soul is guided by intellect and not by custom.<sup>16</sup> So in her plan for women's education, Astell it is not just motivated by the fullest possible realization of women's *rational* essence; she is also motivated by the fullest possible realization of women's freedom allowed by that development of reason.

This general account of human (and women's freedom) based in Cartesian principles can be developed into a recognizably feminist account of freedom. To show this, I lay out a brief account of some crucial contemporary ideas on freedom and then turn to Astell's conceptual position in this account.<sup>17</sup> In somewhat recent feminist theory, there has been a great deal of opposition expressed toward the ideal of the free or autonomous agent (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 3). The ideal of autonomy with which these feminists take issue assumes a self-sufficient, independent, and "atomistic" agent, and is thus seen as exalting hyperindividualism. Because this ideal of autonomy distances itself from emotional commitments such as care, it is also seen as hyperrationalistic. This conception of autonomy is further seen to be masculinist because historically the traits of self-sufficiency, independence, nonconnectedness, and rationality have been associated with men, while interdependence, reliance on social communities, trust and care, and thus emotions and passions, have been associated with women. So, according to this feminist line of thought, any theory of freedom which lauds the former list of traits and portrays them as central to a fully and freely lived human life, and which disparages the latter list of traits, is a masculinist theory.

Lately, a number of feminist theorists, including Marilyn Friedman, Nancy Hirschmann, Diana Tietjens Meyers, and Natalie Stoljar, to name a few, have argued forcefully that we should recognize the critical importance of freedom for feminist ends.<sup>18</sup> Without women and men being free

or autonomous agents, it is unclear how we can engage in the project of pushing against and overcoming oppression of women. Yet these theorists are still mindful of the important feminist criticisms levied against the ideal of autonomy sketched above. And so, recent theorists suggest we "refigure" rather than reject the concept of the autonomous or free individual. Central to one such refiguring is the acknowledgment that we just are in social relations, and that these relations are crucial to how we understand our freedom because of the range of human actions that our relations can permit or disallow. The kind and quality of our relations are important in understanding freedom or autonomy, according to these thinkers, insofar as agents just are "intrinsically relational because their identities or self-conceptions are constituted by elements of the social context in which they are embedded," and insofar as social relations shape the range of options open to people (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 22). Many have dubbed this feminist account of freedom or autonomy "relational autonomy." According to this theory, we can give a feminist account of freedom if we expect that women and men alike acknowledge the subjectivity and projects that others wish to pursue, and that women and men alike modulate their behavior in their relationships so as to allow others the freedom to pursue their projects, even if this requires the individual to curb one's own freely pursued projects.

I contend that we find such an account of freedom in Astell. To make my case, I turn to one of the crucial features found within her religious retreat: the power of female friendship. According to Astell, human creatures deserve the love of benevolence from one another; this is to be contrasted with the love of desire we owe to God (L, 282–85).<sup>19</sup> Benevolence is the source of our friendship with others, and in the female-only religious retreat, it is benevolence women feel toward one another. Such a friendship

has a special force to dilate [open] our hearts, to deliver them from that vicious selfishness, and the rest of those *sordid Passions* which express a narrow illiberal temper, and are of such a pernicious consequence to Mankind. . . . But by Friendship I do not mean any of those intimacies that are abroad in the world, which are often combinations in evil and at best but insignificant dearnesses. . . . But I intend by it the greatest usefulness, the most refined and disinterested Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved; And makes no distinction betwixt its Friend and its self. (SP I, 99)

A true friendship cannot be developed hastily, for it requires that "we look into the very Soul of the beloved Person, to discover what resemblance it bears to our own" (SP I, 100). Astell underscores the purpose of such a friendship: "The truest effect of love being to endeavour the bettering of the beloved Person" (SP I, 100), which for Astell must mean the cultivation of the friend's rational capacities so she can honor and serve God.

Two elements of Astell's account of female friendship encourage the belief that she holds, at least implicitly, the seeds of the theory of relational autonomy in contemporary feminism. First, her account of female friendship rests upon an individual recognizing the subjectivity of others. This is supported by her belief that true friendship requires that we come to know the soul of another and to acknowledge the likeness of that soul to one's own; both are subjects. Indeed, true friendship "makes no distinction" between the other and the self, showing that the true friend acknowledges the other's subjectivity just as we acknowledge our own. Second, acknowledging the other's subjectivity requires one to modulate one's own behavior toward the other precisely so as to allow the other to better herself by developing her mind, which in turn, as we saw above, increases her freedom.

Thus far, my account of Astell's implicit endorsement of relational autonomy does not go far enough to tease out a feminist account of freedom from Astell's works. For Astell's relational autonomy, thus far presented, simply applies to women's freedom outside the unequal marriage bond. Once condemned to marriage, women will continue to suffer the burdens of marriage in a way men will not. Nonetheless, Astell imagines that her prototheory of relational autonomy could hold not only among women in the religious retreat but also between a woman and a man in the marriage bond. This harks back to my discussion of the good marriage outlined in the previous section. My readers will recall that there I suggested that, for Astell, a good marriage would be one in which, among other things, a husband acknowledges and contributes to the cultivation of his wife's rational nature as a woman. This view bears both marks of the relational autonomy that, I suggested, we find in Astell's account of friendship: it requires that a man recognize a woman's subjectivity (the fact that she is a rational creature), and it requires that a man modulate his own behavior so as to allow the woman to freely cultivate that nature (he cannot, for example, behave in any way he wishes lest his behavior stand in that way of the woman's project to develop her mind).

And indeed, in *Reflections*, Astell does characterize a good marriage as one in which the woman and man are friends. She explicitly rejects more traditional reasons for marriage. So, for example, one should not marry for

the other's estate (RM, 38), or "that the Family must be kept up, the ancient Race preserv'd" (RM, 43). Rather, a woman should marry a virtuous man "who has the Government of his own Passions, and has duly regulated his own desires, since he is to have such an absolute Power over hers" (RM, 49). Moreover, Astell explicitly notes that a man's contributing to a woman's rational development is crucial to a happy marriage: "Men ought really for their own sakes to do what in them lies to make Women Wise and Good, and then it might be hoped they themselves would effectually Study and Practise that Wisdom and Vertue they recommend to others" (RM, 45). And finally, a woman and man in marriage should be friends:

Is it the being ty'd to *One* that offends us? Why this ought rather to recommend Marriage to us, and would really do so, were we guided by Reason, and not by Humour or brutish Passion. He who does not make Friendship the chief inducement of his Choice, and prefer it before any other consideration, does not deserve a good Wife, and therefore should not complain if he goes without one. Now we can never grow weary of our Friends; the longer we have had them, the more they are endear'd to us; and if we have *One* well assur'd, we need seek no further, but are sufficiently happy in Her. (RM, 37)

Taken together, Astell's pronouncements on what a good marriage should look like contain the seeds for an account of husband-wife relations based on the ideal of relational autonomy, an ideal very promising from a feminist point of view. It is also an ideal which is, in Astell's works, based ultimately on the development of the human's God-given rationality—a Cartesian epistemic principle at the core of Astell's fundamental philosophy. In developing one's rationality, both man and woman will recognize the damage that can be done to husbands and wives by following customary reasons for marriage choices and customary treatment by men of women within marriage. That is, this very promising feminist seed in Astell's work requires a Cartesian epistemology that leads to the radical questioning of customary features of human behavior within the marriage bond, a questioning that is truly Cartesian. Interestingly, the individual's development of his rationality along Cartesian lines leads him to acknowledge the importance of good communal relations, relations which are anything but the highly individualistic person we find in Descartes. So ultimately, Astell's feminism is based upon an acknowledgment of our essential, communal interrelatedness.<sup>20</sup>



Admittedly, Astell seems to hold out little hope for this happy account of marriage—or of happy female-male relations in general—obtaining in her day. She seems understandably skeptical of men's ability to change (e.g., *SP I*, 56), and women are left with the lion's share of the work in changing the current situation. And yet, without men making changes in their own behavior at least as radical as those that Astell urges women to make in themselves, the seeds of a relational autonomy that are found in Astell simply cannot develop into a full-grown theory. Perhaps for this reason, Andrew Lister interprets Astell *not* as advocating a feminism grounded in women's rights, but rather as espousing a feminism grounded in a rejection of misogyny (Lister 2004, 46 and 72). Certainly, Astell is committed not to human rights at all but to human duties to God to perfect our natures. But she believes women and men have equal duties on this score. Given this, if I am correct in my reading of a nascent relational autonomy in Astell's account of male-female relations, then not only is her feminism based in a rejection of misogyny (as with Lister), but it is also based in an acknowledgment of a woman's equal duty to develop her God-given rational nature and to be aided in that endeavor by men who are willing to subordinate their base passions in order that their wives may develop their minds. It is a much fuller account of feminism than either the form that focuses only on misogyny or the form that encourages women to develop their virtuous characters in order to better endure a burdensome marriage. Instead it is a feminism that requires some social change—namely, that men allow women greater freedom to flourish as rational beings.

Astell's feminist promise should not be overstated. For a seventeenth-century woman, she was remarkably advanced both in her understanding of women, men, and their social roles, on the one hand, and in her prescriptions for women's education and attitude toward marriage, on the other. Still, even were men and women to achieve the friendship-based relationship within marriage that I contend would lead to increased freedom for women due to men's recognizing women's subjectivity and allowing them to flourish as a result of that recognition, the *institution* of marriage itself would remain an unequal one by Astell's lights. The negative effects of women's subordination to men within marriage may be eliminated in the best of friendships, but the possibility that such effects could always arise again remains, and should such effects of subordination be reasserted, then women would have no recourse to change those effects. That is, the nascent relational autonomy to be found in Astell allows for some social change, but social change that is not particularly far-reaching. Her theology, together with its tenet that marriage is an unequal relationship between men and

women instituted by none other than God, precludes a more far-reaching feminism. But since that same theology is the seat of her feminist beliefs, namely her belief in female-male natural equality and her belief in men's duty being to perfect their own souls, which will permit them to see the like duty in a wife (the crucial step in her relational autonomy), this is as radical a feminism that we can hope to find in her philosophy.

### Abbreviations

- AT René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vols. I–XII (1996) (cited by volume and page number)  
 CR Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705) (cited by page number)  
 CSM René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. I–II (1985) (cited by volume and page number)  
 CSMK René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III (1991) (cited by page number)  
 L Mary Astell, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695)  
 RM Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (1996)  
 SP I Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I* (2002)  
 SP II Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (2002)

### Notes

1. Melissa Butler, for example, thinks the study of historical figures like Astell “calls twenty-first century scholars to reexamine those categories [of contemporary feminism]” (Butler 2009, 736).
2. Alice Sowaal has a much more well-developed account of Astell's theory of mind and its relation to key points addressed in this essay (Sowaal 2007).
3. This is not to deny that Descartes's approach fails to recognize the special conditions of women's lives, conditions which might well prevent women from maximizing their rational capacity along the lines Descartes himself suggests. See Ruth Perry (1985), for example, on this point.
4. I must acknowledge one potential worry with Astell's approach, namely that unsexed souls are nonetheless embodied in sexed bodies, which have an influence on the soul (e.g., *SP II*, 159–60). This is a worry worthy of closer treatment, but here let me just pass over it by noting that Astell uses the embodiment of souls to women's advantage, arguing, for example, that women as embodied souls are more suited for the speculative life, which, as we shall see, better perfects human nature (e.g., *SP I*, 57; *CR*, 296).
5. I recognize that her epistemology is not fully Cartesian, for, as Broad points out, there is no commitment to radical doubt in Astell (Broad 2007, 171).
6. As this description of the scientific mode of understanding makes clear, Astell's use of “science” is, of course, different from our own. For Astell, as for others writing in the seventeenth century, “science” derives from *scientia* and refers to certain knowledge such as the sort we might derive from indubitable first principles together with deductive reasoning.
7. John McCrystal reads Astell as defending women's roles against disparagement and thus offering another form of feminism (McCrystal 1992, 157).
8. See McCrystal's argument that women have an equal duty to educate their minds, not an equal right to education. Developing our minds through education is a duty to God as our proper end

(McCrystal 1992, 165; cf. Achinstein 2007). On this point, he diverges from those who believe Astell thinks good education is a woman's right (e.g., Weiss 2004, 65).

9. Astell's educational theory is thus at one and the same time a perfectionist theory, insofar as it requires that we perfect our rational capacities, and a functionalist theory, insofar as perfecting our rational capacities permits us to take on specific functions such as serving God, including by taking on gendered social roles. See Patricia Ward Scaltsas for an argument that Astell is motivated by perfectionist principles (Scaltsas 1990, 139, 141–42), and Joan K. Kinnaird, who acknowledges the functionalist role of education in Astell's philosophy (Kinnaird 1979, 72–73).

10. See Patricia Springborg's writings for an interesting argument that reading Astell's comments on marriage alongside her comments on the monarch-subject relation alerts us to her true goal, which is to challenge the contract political theories of her contemporaries, especially John Locke (Springborg 1995; 1996; 2005, 113–42). Springborg's position is in opposition to that held by, for example, Kathleen M. Squadrito, who believes that Astell rejects arbitrary power in marriage and uses this to suggest that we also ought to also reject arbitrary power in the state (Squadrito 1991, 94).

11. Weiss argues against this interpretation since in marriage, half the population (women) are in a state of insecurity, not security or stability (Weiss 2004, 72–73).

12. On marriage as a divinely instituted bond, see arguments by Kinnaird and Andrew Lister (Kinnaird 1979, 66ff.; Lister 2004, 66). Springborg also argues that God authorizes the institution of marriage, specifically with men empowered to rule over women therein, even while individual men and women can consent or not to enter into this divinely authorized institution (Springborg 1996, xxiff., xxviiiiff.).

13. At the same time, the radical individualism of Descartes's method might not necessarily lead to a more promising conclusion on the social role of women in marriage than we find in Astell, for his radical challenge of custom was aimed more clearly at the customary acceptance of Aristotelian physics and the metaphysics which grounds it.

14. To be sure, Astell believes that the next best approach would be for women to self-educate. But as Sowaal points out, this underestimates "the degree to which custom has manacled women's wills" (Sowaal 2007, 233), and thus this second best strategy may have little hope of success. Astell herself recognizes that some women are not naturally strong and virtuous (SP I, 104), and if so, they will likely fail at self-education.

15. Looking at Astell's poetry, Claire Pickard notes that quietism shifts one's focus to the after-life, and therefore, to human souls, where women enjoy equality with men. She understands this sort of approach to go hand in hand with Astell's feminism (Pickard 2007).

16. In pushing this account of freedom, I do not deny the claim that women are always embodied in this life, and that we must take account of that embodiment in our understanding of women's freedom. That said, while it may not be the case that the freedom of the *disembodied* mind for self-determination (Bryson 1998, 45) motivates Astell, it is still the case that the soul is the source of freedom for Astell, and in developing one's intellect in order to be better able to set rational principles for free action, one is developing the reasoning power of one's soul.

17. Material from this paragraph is from my "Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes on Freedom, Education, and Women" (Detlefsen 2013, 162).

18. For example, see papers collected in Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000).

19. On this aspect of Astell's philosophy, see works by Broad, Sowaal, and Wilson (Broad 2002, 11–20; 2003; Sowaal 2005, §3.1; Wilson 2004).

20. For those who acknowledge and develop in various ways this focus on community over individualism in Astell, see Broad (2007, 167); Hartmann (1998, 246); Perry (1990); Sowaal (2005, §1.2); and Sowaal (2007, 237).