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Selfhood and Self-government in Women's Religious Writings of the Early Modern Period

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Abstract: Some scholars have identified a puzzle in the writings of Mary Astell (1666–1731), a deeply religious feminist thinker of the early modern period. On the one hand, Astell strongly urges her fellow women to preserve their independence of judgement from men; yet, on the other, she insists upon those same women maintaining a submissive deference to the Anglican church. These two positions appear to be incompatible. In this paper, I propose a historical-contextualist solution to the puzzle: I argue that the seeming inconsistency can be dispelled through a close examination of (i) the concepts of selfhood and self-government in Anglican women's devotional texts of the period, and of (ii) the role that these concepts play in Astell's feminist arguments.

Keywords: Mary Astell; Elizabeth Burnet; selfhood; self-government; feminist theories of autonomy; agency

Some scholars have identified a puzzle at the heart of the philosophy of Mary Astell (1666–1731), an ardent feminist and devout High-Church Anglican of the early modern era. On the one hand, from her writings, it would appear that Astell strongly urges her fellow women to preserve their independence of judgement from men; yet, on the other, she insists upon those same women maintaining a submissive deference to the established church. Scholars have asked: how can Astell espouse complete submission to the teachings of the Church of England, while at the same time urging women to maintain their autonomy in judging what is

best? (See Zook 2016, 110). In philosophical terminology, Astell's writings seem to give rise to an 'inconsistent triad':

1. Women should preserve their independence of judgment from men.
2. Women should maintain a submissive deference to the established church.
3. Independence of judgment and submissive deference are incompatible.

To make sense of Astell's philosophy, we must not say that she regards all three propositions as true together: if she affirms any two, the third must be denied. As a potential solution, for example, we might affirm that Astell holds both 2 and 3, but denies 1. Along these lines, Hannah Smith has suggested that while Astell's ideas about 'liberating' women might seem to be radical, they are in fact rather orthodox contributions to the Anglican 'reformation of manners' movement of her time; she does not strictly advocate a feminist theory of autonomy or independence of mind (H. Smith 2007).¹ Another solution might be to affirm that Astell holds propositions 1 and 3, but never really subscribes to 2. In keeping with this approach, Sarah Apetrei has argued that Astell is more radically anti-clerical than she at first appears to be; she never in fact endorses unquestioning submission to the Church (Apetrei 2008, 2010).

In this paper, I put forward an alternative solution. I suggest that a close examination of the concept of agency in Anglican women's devotional texts of the period, and of the crucial role this concept plays in Astell's feminist arguments, can help to dispel the seeming inconsistency. By situating Astell's ideas in their historical-religious context, we might see that, from Astell's viewpoint, independence of judgment and submissive deference to the church need not be incompatible; it is proposition 3 that is false.

In the seventeenth century and early 1700s, England witnessed a proliferation of religious advice manuals designed to help Anglicans identify their spiritual shortcomings and then

rectify them through study, prayer, and meditation. A core message of all these works is the importance of maintaining a careful watch over the self, to ensure that the daily exercise of self-examination becomes habitual and life-long rather than haphazard and short-lived. The Anglican writer Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet's *Method of Devotion* (1708) provides an excellent case in point. In this work, Burnet (1661–1709) provides practical strategies for her readers to overcome the attractions of present pleasure for the sake of attaining long-term spiritual rewards. Her advice is steeped in the early modern language of moral agency. She proposes to teach her readers how to 'keep you within yourself, and in your own Power,'² to establish 'a true Dominion over your self,' to maintain 'the Sovereignty of your rational Faculties' (*MD* 190), and to 'lose not the Government of your self' (*MD* 133). The same language of agency can be found (to varying degrees) in Anne Douglas's *The Countess of Morton's Daily Exercise* (1666), Susannah Hopton's *Daily Devotions* (1673), Hopton's *A Collection of Meditations and Devotions in Three Parts* (1717), Frances Norton's *The Applause of Virtue in Four Parts* (1705), Norton's *Memento Mori: Or, Meditations on Death* (1705), Anne Coventry's *Meditations, and Reflections* (1707), and the anonymous *A Help to Devotion ... Collected by a Gentlewoman* (2nd ed., 1710), among others (for details, see Botonaki 1999; Wallace 1997). Together these texts form a unique group of Anglican devotional works in this era written by women and in some cases *for* women.³ Nearly all of them follow in the footsteps of the Anglican devotional classic *The Whole Duty of Man* (1657), written by Richard Allestree but once thought to be by a woman, Lady Dorothy Pakington (see Mendelson 2012). Like Allestree's follow-up work *The Ladies' Calling* (1673), the women's devotional writings are designed to get women thinking about the longer-term interests of the self, and to engage in careful self-scrutiny and self-correction.

In what follows, I defend two claims. In the first part, I maintain (i) that through their emphasis on habitual self-examination and long-term self-improvement, the Anglican

devotional texts promote a view of a woman's self as a free and rational being capable of projecting itself into the future and capable of acquiring the self-government necessary to attain future-oriented goals, such as divine forgiveness and eternal salvation. To support this claim, I draw primarily on ideas concerning female agency in Burnet's *Method of Devotion*; but, where appropriate, I also highlight similar themes in the works of her devotional contemporaries, to show that cognate ideas about female agency can be found across the genre. In the second part, I maintain (ii) that these popular ideas about female selfhood and self-government re-emerge as core premises in Astell's feminist arguments. They lie at the heart of her claims that women ought to be permitted the freedom to engage in critical reflection on their long-held beliefs and values, as well as the freedom to make choices based on the interests of their true selves; women ought to be permitted the conditions for autonomy. In part three, I conclude by demonstrating how the concept of agency from women's devotional texts can help to show that autonomous agency—conceived by Astell as independence of judgment—need not be incompatible with submissive deference to the church.

1. Selfhood and self-government: Burnet and Anglican devotional writing

Burnet's *Method of Devotion* was first published anonymously in 1708, and then republished posthumously with her name on the title page in 1709, 1713, and 1738. The work seems to have been composed together with a private diary, portions of which still survive in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, together with Burnet's personal letters to the philosopher John Locke.⁴ In her manuscript diary, Burnet says that 'The occasion of writing my rules for devotion was my one infermities, it was put together when I was but two or three and twenty tho altered and enlarged as I thought would be most useful to me' (*RD* 140). This places the initial writing of the *Method* during her first marriage to Robert Berkeley of Spetchley and

her time living abroad in The Hague (c. 1684–89).⁵ According to Timothy Goodwyn's 'Account of her Life,' Burnet also worked on a draft during the period of her widowhood (1694–1700), prior to her second marriage with the prominent Whig theologian Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury (Goodwyn 1709, xiii). This places the re-drafting of the work during Burnet's residency in London when she was a near-neighbour of John Locke at Lincoln's Inn Fields. There is evidence that Burnet was familiar with Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) as well as his published exchanges with Edward Stillingfleet, the Bishop of Worcester. As we will see, some of Locke's ideas concerning the self play a potentially significant role in her devotional works.⁶

In her *Method*, Burnet places a typical Protestant emphasis on the importance of individual self-examination. In post-Reformation England, as Effie Bottonaki observes, 'the removal of the Catholic confessor who had listened to, scrutinized, and evaluated the Christian's conduct did not result in the elimination of surveillance but in its replacement by a similar mechanism: self-surveillance' (1999, 14). Like a number of Anglican devotional works in this period, Burnet's book is designed to help its readers become their own confessors or spiritual judges: to keep themselves under 'a constant Self-observation and Watchfulness' (*MD* 55). She emphasizes that individuals must assume responsibility for their own salvation through the careful reading of Scripture and the proper exercise of reason. In her opinion, the Holy Bible is the most authoritative guide to Christian doctrine and practice as well as 'the best Prayer-Book' (*MD* ix); it comes at the very top of her recommended 'Catalogue of some BOOKS for a private Study' (*MD* 391). For Burnet, it is up to individuals to come to their own interpretation of what the Christian religion demands of them—to use their own judgment in combination with Scripture. She maintains that 'humane Authority has no Right to impose their Explanation as the Rule of your Faith' (*MD* 253).

Like other Anglican writers of her time, however, Burnet also evinces an awareness that without proper informed guidance, individuals might ‘get it horribly wrong,’ so to speak: that an over-heated imagination or an extreme passion might lead them into ‘enthusiasm,’ a religious faith based on fancy and imagination rather than reason. For Burnet, it is important that readers learn to make rational judgements, but it is equally important that they use their reason to temper, moderate, and regulate any *strong feelings* they might have about religion. Toward this end, as we will see, Burnet promotes a conception of the self as a ‘conscious principle’ that is freely capable of exercising its will to overcome the disturbing influence of the physical body: the senses, the appetites, the passions, and the imagination. In particular, she suggests a number of well-known psycho-therapeutic techniques, including classic pre-commitment strategies (akin to Ulysses’ famous ‘tie me to the mast’ idea), the making of frequent short-term resolutions, as well as daily reading, reflection, meditation, and prayer. From this advice, it is possible to discern a theory of agency (of actions performed for reasons), and an implicit conception of the self as a conscious thinking thing.

To begin with, Burnet advises that the first and last thoughts of the day should be devoted to religion. The reader should wake up praising God for his mercy in providing yet another day for repentance, and then go to sleep with expressions of thankfulness toward God for his continued preservation of the world. Whilst dressing in the morning, the reader should think about any sin that has been committed since her last self-examination (*MD 7*), and then consider whether or not the day will offer any further temptation to sin. Will I be faced with this obnoxious person again, for example? Or encounter this awkward proposal in conversation? As a result of her morning examination, the reader should then make firm resolutions to resist any temptations and to practice particular virtues during the day (*MD 8*). She should think about the best means to avoid the foreseen temptation to sin or, failing that, the best way to overcome the temptation. In preparation, the reader should engage in certain

meditations or reflections on why avoiding and overcoming sin is crucial to her happiness. To assist in these reflections, she should plan to spend a portion of each day in prayer or in reading relevant passages of Holy Scripture. In the evening, the reader should reflect back on her day and ‘observe what Sins have been committed in Thought, Word, or Deed’ (*MD* 25). Burnet urges her reader to ‘let Conscience have full Liberty to accuse and represent your faults. Permit not your Passions to put false Glosses on your Actions, or to excuse their own Rebellion; but consider impartially how far Temptations have been yielded to’ (*MD* 26). Consider, for example, ‘These wandring Eyes, those straying Thoughts, these inconsiderate Words: should I have been angry for so slight a Cause?’ (*MD* 26). ‘Thus, by a penitent Humiliation,’ Burnet says, ‘you may retract and undo whatsoever has been done amiss, before frequent Repetitions give Strength to your Sins, and they become habitual’ (*MD* 27). The regular use of a spiritual diary is crucial to achieving these ends. As she herself did with her own journal (*RD*), Burnet advises her reader to note down the ‘greater and more frequent Faults and Defects,’ and also to write down any vows or promises in order to make amends (*MD* 28).

Similar advice can be found in numerous other Anglican devotional manuals of the period. Like Burnet’s *Method*, the anonymously published *A Help to Devotion* recommends daily rituals of self-examination: ‘What have I Done this Day for God and his Glory ...? What were my first Thoughts in the Morning?’; ‘Have I avoided my usual Faults, and checked the Vices I am most inclin’d to?’, and so on (Anonymous 1710, 15, 16). In *The Countess of Morton’s Daily Exercise*, Anne Douglas recommends that ‘Every day, let the first thing you do, and the first word you speak, tend to the worship and acknowledgment of Almighty God’ (Douglas 1666, sig. A[6r]). At the end of the day, her readers are to think about ‘what good or evil Actions you have done, and what bad Inclinations you have resisted or amended.’ She includes meditations, lessons, confessions, rules, prayers, hymns, reading,

and other regular daily practices, so that her reader's 'Heart may be set to attain everlasting Salvation, and my Affections may surely there be fixed where true Joys are to be found' (Douglas 1666, sig. C[6r]). Even Frances Norton, whose *Applause of Virtue* does not strictly conform to the Anglican 'daily' devotional model, quotes Seneca's advice approvingly: 'Let us examine, watch, observe, and inspect our own Hea[r]ts ... We should every Night call our selves to an Account, What Infirmity have I mastered to Day? What Passions opposed?' (Norton 1705, 108). This 'calling to account' is a common refrain in these Protestant texts: every adult human being—female as well as male—must be morally *accountable* for their actions; no individual is capable of transferring responsibility for their salvation to anyone else.

In terms of their theory of agency, the Anglican devotional works of this era seem to support a straightforward reward model of motivation. On this model, agents always act in order to attain maximum pleasure and minimal pain: they are motivated to choose the action with the greatest anticipated pay-off (Kennett and McConnell 2013, 472). The Anglican writers espouse the view that we should bring future rewards to the forefront of our minds, so that we are motivated to act in order to maximise expected benefits. They offer techniques that appear purposefully designed to ensure that a Christian's ultimate reward—her eternal life and everlasting union with God—will not be forgotten in the weighing and comparison of 'smaller sooner' (SS) and 'larger later' (LL) rewards. The authors frequently lament that distant long-term rewards are ignored or discounted, while 'the attraction of what is present' betrays their readers into sin and folly (*MD* 69).

Throughout her *Method*, however, Burnet also acknowledges the inherent limitations of the reward model. She frequently observes that some human beings knowingly 'rebel against ... their own Happiness' (*MD* 34). Though Burnet does not say so explicitly, she alludes to the classic problem of *akrasia*: the puzzling notion that agents sometimes act

contrary to their better judgement about what they ought to do.⁷ Burnet highlights the fact that a number of Christians are fully convinced that there are LL-rewards to be had in the future, yet they perversely choose to pursue SS-rewards instead. Why is that? It cannot just be a failure of understanding or an ‘incogitance,’ she says (*MD* 35): it cannot be a matter of ignorance about the long-term rewards of virtue (though this might account for a few cases; see *MD* 34). Many sinners know that their actions will lead to the worse outcome, and yet they pursue those actions anyway. ‘The most besotted Sinner,’ Burnet observes, ‘who is not quite possest by evil Spirits, will own that none of the false Pleasure he expects from the Gratification of Passion and Sensuality, will make Amends for those dismal Consequences that always do in Whole, or in Part, attend Sin’ (*MD* 39). It is implausible to suggest that this ‘besotted’ or hardened sinner thinks that pursuing these immediate pleasures is the more rewarding course of action, all things considered, when this has such terrible consequences; yet the sinner still returns to his sins.

Burnet also rejects the idea that people act contrary to their better judgement because they are simply incapable of doing otherwise: because their emotions over-power them, or because they are psychologically compelled to do so.⁸ She asserts that, like all human beings, the sinner is ‘capable of governing his Senses by Thought and Freedom,’ yet he ‘rather employs his Thought to establish a more absolute Subjection under the Tyranny of his Senses and Passions’ (*MD* 35). These ideas are repeated in her ‘Religious Diary’: ‘in young and precepitate [precipitate] persones,’ she says, ‘many vices are committed because passion is foolishly thought erisistible, when tis only the fault of the will that neglects to use the proper means or remove from the temptation. Every day shows us the mighty power of the will and resolution’ (*RD* 140v). Sinners are perfectly capable of exercising their will power, she suggests—when it suits them. And hence Burnet concludes that ‘The violence of passion is in great part voluntary’ (*RD* 143v). If people do act contrary to their better judgement, this is not

because they are psychologically incapable of doing otherwise: a free agent is always capable of resisting her passions.

So how does Burnet account for the fact that people so commonly ‘rebel against their happiness’ and make choices that do not lead to the highest expected reward? On my reading, Burnet suggests that an agent’s *conception of the self* plays a crucial role in motivating her akratic actions. That is to say, she suggests that deeply-engrained prejudices about the self can distort an agent’s expectations about what she *can* do, despite her better judgement about what she *ought* to do. To bring out this point, it is useful to draw parallels between Burnet’s observations about ‘besotted sinners’ and a recent study of hardened drug addicts by Jeanette Kennett and Doug McConnell.⁹ In ‘Explaining Addiction’ (2013), Kennett and McConnell find that, like most people, hardened drug addicts place great value on stable relationships, good health, a successful career, and secure accommodation. Yet these subjects are not motivated to make choices in order to attain these goods, even when the consequences of long-term drug addiction become painfully and tragically obvious. So, the investigators ask: how do we account for the fact that addicts are just not motivated by LL rewards, even when they recognise them as greater? They come to the conclusion that ‘people are motivated to act in ways that accord with their self-conceptions independently of reward’ (2013, 484).

Kennett and McConnell note that,

Just as we form expectations of how others will behave in a variety of circumstances given our understanding of their character dispositions and history, so we also form expectations about how we ourselves will behave given our history and self-conception. These expectations or predictions about what we will do, are ... motivating. (2013, 484)

In their view, negative self-conceptions can motivate actions that are ‘grossly suboptimal’ or that adversely affect our attitude toward greater rewards that should motivate us. The hardened drug addict recognises the LL rewards of stable relationships, good health, a successful career, and so on, but they cannot see *themselves* attaining those goods because that does not fit with their self-conception.

Along similar lines, Burnet suggests that while an agent’s negative conception of self does not *force* her to act contrary to her better judgement, it still plays a crucial role in *motivating* her actions. In her *Method*, she emphasizes the need for individuals to correct a mistaken conception of themselves, and to gain knowledge of ‘what is truly the self,’ in order to be motivated to pursue salvation. In her ‘Advertisement,’ she says that her chief design is to have her readers observe the ‘true Ends and Motives of your Actions,’ to provide methods that ‘prevent any gross Ignorance of our selves,’ to bring her reader ‘to the sincere Knowledge of your self, which is the foundation of all true Wisdom and Virtue,’ and to teach ‘the Knowledge of our selves’ (*MD* iv, vi, viii). She maintains that this knowledge of the self will help her readers to avoid ‘Hypocrisie’ (*MD* vi): that is, to avoid professing certain beliefs about what it is best to do, and then acting contrary to those beliefs.

What, then, is our mistaken self-conception? In Burnet’s view, it is a notion of the self as necessarily joined to the corruptible body, so much so that this notion shapes and informs our identity, our conception of who we are, and our expectations about what we can achieve in this lifetime. In her ‘Religious Diary,’ Burnet says that the body-caused passions (emotions or feelings) disorder the mind, and that the ‘passions and sensible objects we see often so fell the Mind that reason is as it were chained down or blindfolded, under such Tyranny’ (*RD* 153). In her *Method*, Burnet likewise says that ‘Hurry and Confusion of Thoughts disorders the Passions and Affections, and they the Understanding; so the Will executes weakly, and the Mind is as ‘twere wrap’d in Clouds, which interpose between it and Heavenly things,

makes the distance so great, and the Prospect so minute and uncertain, that they lose their Force' (*MD* 130). This is why people become inveterate sinners: their sense of their own weakness makes them 'apt to prefer a present Satisfaction, tho' never so trivial, to any far greater' that is out of their sight and future (*MD* 103). They come to see themselves as chained down by the 'fettors of matter,' and wholly determined by the 'clockwork of the body' (*RD* 152v).

Burnet's positive notion of the self is of something only *contingently* joined with the particular body that it has right now. While she provides no explicit definition of the self in the *Method*, in her 'Religious Diary' she refers to 'that self con[s]cious principle which alone is properly us or our selves' (*RD* 145). Like Locke, she suggests that the self is constituted by consciousness or a 'conscious principle' that is capable of reflecting on itself, especially with respect to its moral actions. In the same work, she refers to 'reason and the self cons[c]ious principle' as capable of rising above the influence of the bodily senses (*RD* 139v) and as being 'separable from the senses' (*RD* 149v). In a 1699 letter to Locke, she affirms that following the death of the body, the soul is not 'shut up in a long state of ignorance and inactivity' but rather continues in 'an uninterrupted self cons[c]iousness.'¹⁰ In the same letter, she also rejects the idea that the operation of the rational mind depends on the body. In her *Method*, Burnet likewise suggests that the 'I' could exist in separation from the body following the death of my corruptible form and leading to my (re)union with my newly glorified incorruptible body at the resurrection. She says that at death, the 'Body is left as an old tattered Garment, to be put on again all bright and glorious' (*MD* 307, 308). While it would be hasty to conclude that Burnet has a full-blooded Lockean conception of the self,¹¹ she nevertheless maintains that the self consists in a continuing consciousness that is not necessarily determined by, or conjoined to, the body.

Burnet's *Method* encourages a certain consciousness-raising in her readers: she promotes an awareness that anyone might take themselves in hand and follow their better judgement, if only they exert themselves. Her practical strategies offer ways of transforming her reader's conception of the self into that diachronic self, the conscious self who persists through time and will ultimately stand before God. By observing those daily rituals, the reader is told, they will develop an enduring disposition of character that motivates them to act with an exalted idea of the free and rational self foremost in mind. Above all, this requires the reader to regulate her body-caused passions, Burnet says, to keep 'your Heart in a good Frame, and your Passions composed, and in your Power, that you may judge rightly' (*MD* 132). Once the reader has developed a habitual disposition toward virtue by routinely practising her devotional exercises, she will see that 'to secure a greater good or more lasting, *it is reasonable* to dispise present pleasure and to undergo reall pains; their may be joy in the Mind for good doing when the body is on a rack' (*RD* 139v; my italics). Under the heading 'General Rules for Thinking or Recollection' in her *Method*, Burnet says:

The Advantages of this Recollection are many; it will keep you within yourself, and in your own Power; for if you lose the Government of your Passions and Affections, it will much indispose you for Devotion or Business, hurt the Health of your Body, as well as the Quiet of your Mind. This is often occasioned by ... any thing that draws away the Heart too much, or clouds the Understanding, as all Passions do, and so deprives the Soul of a lively Sense, Relish, and willing Disposition to spiritual Things ... (*MD* 89)

Burnet's *Method* is largely about providing practical advice that will enable her readers to 'lose not the Government of your self' and the 'Government of your own Mind' (*MD* 133,

334). She advocates a conception of the self as *not* necessarily determined by its bodily impulses, and reminds her reader to ‘govern your self by sound Reason and God’s Laws’ (*MD* 304).

Similar advice can be found in other Anglican devotional manuals of the period. In her *Applause of Virtue*, Frances Norton emphasizes the importance of cultivating a virtuous disposition of character. She says:

Nor is there any Trial of Patience that may not be endured; nor any Passion which may not be overcome ... What a Spectacle is it, to see a Man overcome Adversity with Patience; to be a Master over himself, who walketh according to God the Level of God, who prefers Conscience before Riches, and Virtue before Honour. (Norton 1705, 8)

Norton adds that ‘Patience makes them their own Men, and Lords of their own Interests and Persons’ (1705, 22). She advises ‘Think not that you have anything yours, but your Self’ (1705, 38). She also quotes the Roman Stoic Seneca who regards ‘*No Man Happy, but he that needs no other Happiness than what he hath within himself; no Man Great or Powerful that is not Master of himself*’ (1705, 180). The author of *A Help to Devotion* also urges her readers ‘to raise in thy Mind such suitable Dispositions, as may qualifie thee for obtaining these inestimable Advantages,’ to keep worldly cares from diverting their thoughts and distracting their intentions, and to avoid being ‘discomposed with Passion’ (Anonymous 1710, 5, 6, 7). In her *Collection of Meditations*, Hopton beseeches God to ‘Give me such Dominion over my Passions, that I may be beneficent unto all’ and also asks that God ‘alienate my Mind from earthly to heavenly things’ (1717, 9, 73). She emphasizes that ‘the Soul, tho’ it be in the Body, hath no Dependence on the same’; it has the faculties of understanding, will, and

memory, and it is most like God in its ‘noble Freedom,’ which makes it capable of taking itself in hand (1717, 83).

2. Female agency and feminist autonomy: Astell

I turn now to my claim that these ideas about female moral agency in Anglican devotional manuals provide some of the key premises of Mary Astell’s feminist arguments. In this part, I focus specifically on the arguments in Astell’s *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (originally published in 1694 and 1697) and her own Anglican devotional manual *The Christian Religion, as Profess’d by a Daughter of the Church of England* (originally published in 1705).¹² Like Burnet, Astell is clearly indebted to Allestree’s devotional ‘bible,’ *The Whole Duty of Man*: she approvingly cites this work and Allestree’s *Ladies’ Calling* in both her texts (see *SPL* 222; *CR* §§1, 187).¹³ Astell also uses the same standard tropes and devices as other Anglican devotional manuals for women in this period.¹⁴ Like Burnet (and others), she emphasizes the importance of her readers being motivated by a positive conception of themselves: not as fatalistically determined, mind-wandering, slavishly carnal beings, but rather as rational thinking subjects capable of using their will to master their passions and other bodily disturbances. She encourages women to determine their own life paths in accordance with a conception of the enduring self. More so than Burnet, however, Astell addresses the problem that women *as a social group* are conditioned to accept a negative self-image, one in which they are the helpless slaves of their bodily passions.

Alice Sowaal makes a similar point when she emphasizes that, according to Astell, the perception that women are morally and intellectual incompetent is ‘not just a harmless view held by a few people,’ but rather ‘a pervasive social force’ (2016, 61). As part of their enculturation, women are taught to internalize the ‘Woman’s Defective Nature Prejudice,’ the essentialist idea that a woman is prone to sin and error by virtue of her female body and its

irresistible influence on her mind (Sowaal 2016, 60; see also Sowaal 2007, 229–33). As a collective group, women are duped into thinking they are incapable of perfecting their spiritual natures; while at the same time, they are encouraged to perfect their bodies and their physical attributes, for the sake of attracting men. As a result, women come to pride themselves on extrinsic things that have no real worth or value; and they come to doubt their intrinsic capacity to control their passions (Sowaal 2016, 68–9; see also Detlefsen 2016, 82–3). In short, they value themselves on contingent, corruptible attributes alone, and fail to revere the necessary, enduring characteristics of the self, such as rationality and free will.

To overturn this negative self-conception, in her first *Proposal* Astell puts forward a plan for an all-female academy or a university college in which young women will be taught the basic principles of religion and philosophy. For Astell, some form of higher education is necessary for women to reverse the effects of custom, and to develop and perfect their God-given natures (Detlefsen 2016, 78). In her college, Astell says:

No solicitude in the adoration of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your self, and do not neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect when it's [sic] unsuitable and much inferiour Companion is mouldring into Dust. (*SPL* 52–3)

In this earthly state, Astell tells her readers, it is apparent that our minds will never attain the ideal of complete disembodiment: we will always be subject to the distracting influence of our sensations, passions, appetites, and imagination. Nevertheless, we can set about transforming our conception of ‘what is truly the self,’ by stripping ‘our selves of mistaken Self-love’ (*SPL* 164), and by learning ‘what is truly to Love our selves’ (*SPL* 211). Like

Burnet and other Anglicans, Astell recommends daily meditation, prayer, and study to get women looking inward and constructing a diachronic conception of the self, for the sake of acquiring an enduring virtuous disposition and everlasting happiness. Astell says: ‘Let those therefore who value themselves only on external accomplishments, consider how liable they are to decay, and how soon they may be depriv’d of them, and that supposing they shou’d continue, they are but sandy Foundations to build Esteem upon’ (*SPL* 111). She calls on her fellow women to cultivate justified self-esteem: ‘since we will value our selves on somewhat or other,’ she says, ‘why shou’d it not be on the most substantial ground?’ (*SPL* 232–3). For her, justified or legitimate self-esteem involves valuing ourselves upon something that truly belongs to our souls: those accomplishments that depend upon the free exercise of our will in combination with the understanding (see Ahearn 2016; Broad 2015, 95–105). For her, the self is above all *the mind*. She urges women to ‘assert [their] Liberty,’ and to use their wills to acquire a ‘Firmness and strength of Mind’ through their intellectual efforts (*SPL* 120, 121).

Astell also urges the value of *self-preservation*. In her *Christian Religion*, in an attack on Locke’s notion of self-preservation, Astell asks her readers:

What then is self-preservation, that fundamental law of nature, as some call it, to which all other laws, divine as well as human, are made to do homage? how shall it be provided for? Very well; for it does not consist in the preservation of the person or ‘composite,’ but in preserving the mind from evil, the mind which is truly the self, and which ought to be secured at all hazards. (*CR* §274)

In Astell’s opinion, it is important to preserve the mind from evil, because this is the true self that God will eventually hold morally accountable for its actions. In the end, she says, ‘We must judge finally for ourselves ... because if we determine amiss *we* must answer for it.’ For

this reason, it is morally necessary ‘to improve our understandings to the utmost, that so they may serve us to all those purposes for which God designed them’ (*CR* §257). We must enlarge our understandings and we must make the best use of the mind by ‘furnishing it with such qualities and dispositions as may enable it to judge according to the eternal reason of things’ (*CR* §257).

From these starting points, Astell develops a feminist theory of autonomy: a theory that for women to acquire true self-determination in their moral choices and actions, they must be permitted the conditions that enable careful self-examination and self-government. It follows from the law of self-preservation, according to Astell, that women as well as men have a right to preserve their immaterial and immortal souls from eternal misery—from sin and damnation—through their own efforts. On behalf of women, Astell calls for that ‘most valuable privilege, and indefeasible right, of judging for ourselves’ and the ‘just and natural’ right of ‘abounding in our own sense’ (*CR* §§256, 3). In her *Christian Religion*, she declares that liberty is not the freedom to do whatever we will, rather ‘true liberty ... [consists] in making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgements free, and our integrity unspotted’ (*CR* §249). According to Astell, a free agent must have independence of judgment as a crucial condition for moral responsibility and accountability. To be responsible and accountable, she must engage in choices and actions that are, in some sense, *her own*, and not merely those that others have foisted upon her. To claim ownership of those choices and actions, a woman must be permitted the freedom to examine and evaluate her long-held beliefs and values, independently of others; she must be permitted the freedom to affirm or deny those beliefs and values as she sees fit.¹⁵

3. A solution to the puzzle

Now the question arises: does this theory of autonomy fit with Astell's injunction that women must render utmost submission to the Church of England? Let us revisit the puzzle from the beginning: Astell's assertion that we must act on motives and ends that are in some sense our own, and yet we must also act in submissive deference to established church practices and doctrines. Melinda Zook points to 'a constant tension between Astell's insistence on deference to the Church and her assertion that women must liberate themselves from the dictates of men' (2016, 110). As I noted, there have been at least two approaches to resolving the inconsistent triad this generates. Some have rejected the idea that Astell has a feminist theory at all, or that she ever wholeheartedly affirms proposition 1, that 'Women should preserve their independence of judgment from men,' while others have pointed to a surprising anti-clericalism in Astell's unpublished writings, and her apparent rejection of proposition 2, that 'Women should maintain a submissive deference to the established church.' Hannah Smith is representative of the first approach. She claims that Astell's seemingly radical feminist ideas about 'liberating women's minds' can be regarded as conservative contributions to the Anglican 'reformation of manners' movement of her time (see H. Smith 2007). In her view, Astell's plans for a female academy are consistent with an orthodox Anglican push to maintain the Church's monopoly on religious worship in late seventeenth-century England. For Smith, Astell's educational project is about pre-programming female minds to ensure the Church's ongoing influence in English society, rather than teaching individual women to think as autonomous agents for themselves. What appears to be radical feminist zeal in Astell is just a form of Anglican 'social evangelism' (H. Smith 2007, 41). By contrast, Sarah Apetrei argues that Astell may have been a more radical religious thinker than scholars have previously thought (Apetrei 2008, 2010, 117–52). She grounds this view on the discovery of a correspondence between Astell, George Hickes, and an anonymous devout woman. In this three-way correspondence, the unknown woman wants

to know if she can, in good conscience, attend services at her local parish church despite the fact that it is ‘schismatic.’ The woman asks Hickee to request Astell’s advice about the matter. In response, Astell advises the woman to rely principally on her own capacity for reflection and judgment about religious matters, because ‘I would have women as well as men to see with their own eyes as far as they will reach, and to judge according to the best of their own understandings’ (Hickee and Astell 1705, fol. 197). Similar ideas can be read back into Astell’s writings, including *The Christian Religion* and her *Reflections upon Marriage* ([1706] 1996), both of which repeat the injunction to ‘call no man master’ on earth.

In response, I propose a more conciliatory approach to the central puzzle: I maintain that Astell’s feminist theory of autonomy is perfectly compatible with women showing obedience to God and to the Church; propositions 1 and 2 can be reconciled. This is because Astell’s views concerning women’s autonomous agency are entirely consistent developments from ideas concerning female agency in the Anglican devotional works. In simplified form, her general argument might be outlined as follows. To attain salvation, she says, women ought to act on motives and ends that accord with a positive self-conception and with their capacity for self-government. Here she echoes the common message of the Anglican devotional texts, as exemplified in the works of Burnet and others. But then Astell goes one step further: if women ought to act on motives and ends that accord with a positive self-conception and their capacity for self-government, she suggests, then naturally women ought to be permitted the *internal* and *external conditions* that would enable them to do so. While Astell does not forcefully demand a woman’s political right to these conditions, she does suggest that women are *entitled to them* by virtue of being God’s creatures. And what do these enabling conditions consist in? In the *Proposal*, as we have seen, she suggests that a higher education in philosophy and religion would provide the internal conditions that would enable women to act on motives and ends that accord with a positive conception of the self.

To overturn a culturally-conditioned negative self-image, women must be given the educational support they need to improve their reasoning skills and hone their capacity for practical moral judgment. In her *Reflections upon Marriage*, she further suggests that to act on motives and ends that are in some sense *their own*, women require freedom from the tyranny of men in the marriage state (see Broad 2014). This is because, in her view, early modern marriages inhibit women from self-examination, self-correction, and self-government; wives are taught to subsume their will and their interests to those of their husbands. For women to live up to the dignity of their natures—to act on a positive self-conception and to exercise self-government, in other words—they require freedom from the domestic tyranny of men. Toward this end, Astell recommends educating women to consider not marrying at all, if they can avoid it (see Lister 2004; Broad 2014, 17–20).

In her writings, Astell defends a feminist theory of self-determination: she argues that women ought to be granted the conditions that will enable their self-examination, self-correction, and self-government to be effective *in practice*. A woman counts as an autonomous agent, on her view, only when she is capable of living her life in her own way, according to her own beliefs and values. Importantly, these are not beliefs and values that a woman has just blindly submitted to, or taken for granted as a result of her upbringing; these are beliefs and values she has subjected to careful critical examination. They have been affirmed as beliefs and values that somehow correspond to her enduring self, or in some sense reflect the true nature of her self. This is what makes them *her* beliefs and values.

Astell's ideas concerning female autonomy are a natural development of ideas concerning selfhood and self-government in the Anglican devotional manuals of the period. These ideas are entirely compatible with submission to the Church, provided that such submission is made after a careful process of critical reflection on past beliefs and values. Astell affirms that an agent is truly autonomous when her choices and actions are motivated

by a positive conception of the self, or when she lives her life in accordance with the beliefs and values of her enduring self. In her view, an agent can (and should) exercise her autonomy when choosing to render passive obedience to any religious authority. Astell's viewpoint thus challenges the idea that self-government and obedient submission are somehow mutually exclusive; an agent can be both autonomous and yet act in obedience to the dictates of the Church.¹⁶

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Notes

¹ Other scholars, such as Ruth Perry (1986), Hilda L. Smith (2007), and Patricia Springborg (2005), similarly emphasize that despite Astell’s cries of ‘liberty for women,’ she did not seriously uphold that women ought to reject or call into question the authority of their religious leaders.

² Burnet 1708, 89. Hereafter I use in-text parentheses to refer to this work as *MD*.

³ Though Burnet does not explicitly address her *Method* to women, there are a number of references in the text that suggest her target audience of ‘young and ignorant Persons’ is predominantly female (see *MD* iv, 96, 112, 99–100, 103). Melinda Zook also affirms that Burnet’s *Method* is ‘intended for women’ and ‘aimed at women’ (see Zook 2016, 110, 112).

⁴ Hereafter I use in-text parentheses to refer to Burnet’s ‘Religious Diary’ (n.d.) as *RD* followed by folio numbers. For Burnet’s letters to Locke, see Broad 2019, 231–64.

⁵ For biographical details on Burnet, see Ballard 1985, 345–351, 433–434; Kirchberger 1949; Harris 2008b.

⁶ Locke’s discussion of persons and personal identity was first added to the 1694 second edition of his *Essay*.

⁷ For helpful overviews on this problem, see Steward 1998; Stroud 2014.

⁸ This is R.M. Hare’s proposed solution to the problem of akrasia (see Steward 1998).

⁹ Here I wish to avoid any suggestion that hardened drug addicts *are* sinners; the parallels I draw relate to their similar dispositions to akratic action alone.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Berkeley to John Locke, 17 October 1699 (Broad 2019, 256).

¹¹ Burnet does not distinguish, as Locke does, between the man (human being), person, and soul, and there is little evidence that she endorses his ideas about substance and essence. On the contrary, there is evidence that Burnet may have been critical of certain aspects of Locke's views. For these points, I am grateful to Ruth Boeker.

¹² The modern editions are Astell 2002, 2013. Hereafter I use in-text parentheses to refer to these works as *SPL* and *CR* respectively.

¹³ For Burnet's references to Allestree, see *MD* 149, 391. There is some evidence that Burnet had read the *Proposal* and might have sought out Astell's acquaintance on the strength of her reputation for piety. For details, see Harris 2008a. For comparative studies of Burnet and Astell, see Zook 2013, 2016.

¹⁴ On Astell's debt to the Protestant tradition more generally, see Apetrei 2008, 2010, 117–152.

¹⁵ For recent philosophical discussions on Astell and freedom, see Broad 2015, 170–184; Sowaal 2017; Detlefsen 2016, 2017. Detlefsen proposes that Astell upholds a nascent conception of 'relational autonomy,' because she acknowledges that supportive social relations, such as female friendships, play an important role in the realisation of autonomous agency (see Detlefsen 2016, 86–89; 2017, 28–31). For the sake of brevity, I discuss only autonomous agency in general here.

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