

Mary Astell

Mary Astell was one of the foremost defenders of women in late seventeenth-century England. In a time when women were seen as intellectually deficient, she embraced Descartes' philosophy in support of arguments for the equal rational capacities of the sexes, and she used those arguments to oppose the inferior education bestowed upon women. For this reason, Astell is typically regarded as a Cartesian. Hilda Smith describes Astell as 'a dedicated Cartesian, but one of a particularly religious bent';¹ Ruth Perry believes that 'Cartesian rationalism was the very cornerstone of her feminism';² Margaret Atherton defends Astell's 'Cartesian conception of reason';³ and others emphasise that Descartes' account of subjectivity enables Astell to see the soul, rather than the body, as her true self.⁴ At first glance, then, the consensus opinion would appear to place Astell in opposition to modern feminist critics of Cartesianism who allege that Descartes' rationalist philosophy implicitly excludes women by idealising a conception of reason that is stereotypically masculine. If one accepts this view, then Astell's feminist arguments are somewhat limited: despite valorising female rationality, they depend upon a conceptual framework that precipitates women's exclusion from the intellectual sphere.

In this chapter, I show that Astell's feminism is clearly indebted to Descartes, but I also examine the ways in which her metaphysical views diverge from the 'modern Cartesians' of her time. This divergence is most evident in her letters to the 'English Malebranche', John Norris, who published their correspondence in 1695 as *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris*. In the

¹ Smith, *Reason's Disciples*, p. 119.

² Perry, 'Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women', 491.

³ Atherton, 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', pp. 27–32.

⁴ Gallagher, 'Embracing the Absolute', 34, 35. See also Joan K. Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism', *The Journal of British Studies* 19:1 (1979), 62.

final part of this exchange, Astell puts forward a non-Cartesian theory of soul–body interaction, influenced by Descartes’ early English critics, the Cambridge Platonists. The philosophical themes arising from this correspondence, and developed in Astell’s later works, provide evidence that Cartesianism is not the only significant influence in Astell’s thought. For this reason, modern feminist criticism of Astell’s writings may not be entirely justified.

I

Although only four years separate the publication of Conway’s *Principles* and Astell’s first treatise, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), the two philosophers belong to completely different generations. Whereas Conway’s early education was influenced by the rise of Cartesianism and the Platonic renaissance in mid-seventeenth-century England, Astell’s first foray into philosophy was in the late-seventeenth century, and her most common target is John Locke.⁵ Nevertheless, both Astell and Conway have Cambridge Platonism as a common source of inspiration. While Conway gained her philosophical education through a correspondence with More, Astell was educated by her uncle, Ralph Astell, a curate who was a student of Emmanuel College in the heyday of Cambridge Platonism.⁶ Born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 12 November 1666, Mary Astell was the first child of Mary Errington and Peter Astell, a gentleman and member of the Company of Hostmen. From an early age she faced an uncertain and possibly dismal future. Her father’s death in 1678 left the family in financial straits, and without a reasonable dowry Astell could not expect to marry someone of her own social standing. She apparently decided on a writing career as an alternative to marriage (she remained single all her life), and after her mother’s death in 1684, she moved to London, probably with the intention of pursuing this ambition.⁷

⁵ For Astell’s criticisms of Locke, see Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton* (1657–1712) (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1979), p. 238; Ruth Perry, ‘Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism’, *Eighteenth Century Studies* 23 (1990), 444–57; Patricia Springborg, ‘Mary Astell (1666–1731), Critic of Locke’, *American Political Science Review* 89 (1995), 621–33; Patricia Springborg, ‘Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics’, in Smith (ed.), *Women Writers*, pp. 105–25; Kathleen M. Squadrito, ‘Mary Astell’s Critique of Locke’s View of Thinking Matter’, *Journal of History of Philosophy* 25 (1987), 433–9; and Kathleen M. Squadrito, ‘Mary Astell’, in Waithe (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 111, pp. 87–99.

⁶ On Ralph Astell and the Cambridge school, see Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 49–51.

⁷ This account of Mary Astell’s life is taken from my article ‘Mary Astell (1666–1731)’, *British Philosophers, 1500–1799*, edited by Philip B. Dematteis and Peter S. Fosl, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 252 (2002), 3–10.

Astell was saved from hardship by the financial support and friendship of a group of gentlewomen, including Lady Ann Coventry, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, and Lady Catherine Jones. From the 1690s onward, Astell lived near her friends in Chelsea, where she spent her time, like a true Cartesian, teaching herself the basic principles of philosophy and religion. Unable to read French,⁸ Astell's understanding of Descartes was derived from English translations, popularisations, and commentaries on his work. She almost certainly read Henry More's *The Immortality of the Soul* and *An Account of Virtue* (1690). She probably also read More's correspondence with John Norris in *The Theory and Regulation of Love* (1688).⁹ In all of Astell's writings,¹⁰ there are impressions left by these English works: **she is critical of those philosophers who denigrate the spiritual or rational aspects of human beings**; like Cudworth and More, she opposes any form of 'atheistic' materialism in which the material world is entirely disconnected from the spiritual; and she upholds a providentialist interpretation of the natural world.

Astell's earliest venture into serious philosophical writing is with 'the last of the Cambridge Platonists', John Norris. Their epistolary exchange, initiated by Astell on 21 September 1693 and concluded one year later, was privately published at Norris's suggestion. The principal focus of the *Letters* is on the Malebranchian view that one must desire and love God above everything else. Astell's part of the correspondence was highly praised by her contemporaries. Leibniz and Thomas Burnet of Kemnay both expressed their admiration,¹¹ the bluestocking Sarah Chapone regarded the work as Astell's most 'sublime',¹² and Mary Evelyn recommended 'Mr Norrises letters to the Seraphick Lady' to Ralph Bohun¹³

⁸ In a letter to Norris, dated 15 February 1693, Astell says that 'I am exceedingly pleas'd with *M. Malbranch's* Account of the Reasons why we have no Ideas of our Souls, and wish I cou'd read that ingenious Author in his own Language, or that he spake mine' (Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 149).

⁹ John Norris encourages Astell to read this work (see Norris to Astell, 13 November 1693; in *ibid.*, p. 73).

¹⁰ Astell's works are (in order of publication): *A Serious Proposal To the Ladies* (1694); *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695); *A Serious Proposal To The Ladies, Part II* (1697); *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700); *Moderation truly Stated* (1704); *A Fair Way With The Dissenters And Their Patrons* (1704); *An Impartial Enquiry Into The Causes Of Rebellion and Civil War In This Kingdom* (1704); *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (1705); and *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit* (1709).

¹¹ Gerhardt (ed.), *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. II, pp. 569–70, and vol. III, p. 199.

¹² See Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 82.

¹³ Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 7 April 1695; in the British Library, London, the 'Evelyn Papers' (uncatalogued). She says that 'I suppose Mr Norrises letters to the Seraphick Lady with her answers and the same Ladyes proposalls to the Ladyes in a litle treatise are not unknowne to you.' I am grateful to Dr Frances Harris in the MSS Department for referring me to Evelyn's letters.

Mary Astell

and her son. ‘Not that I recomend them from my owne judgment or liking,’ Evelyn says, ‘but the witts and those of the clergy think them worth reading, I confesse the Notions in the letters are so refined I dare not give my oppinion the woman has a good Character for virtue and is very litle above twenty which adds to her praise, to be so early good and knowing.’¹⁴

These epistles incorporate many of Astell’s central philosophical beliefs. In one letter to Norris, dated 31 October 1693, Astell gives an indication of her later feminist concerns. ‘Fain wou’d I rescue my Sex,’ she says,

or at least as many of them as come within my little Sphere, from that Meanness of Spirit into which the Generality of ‘em are sunk, perswade them to pretend some higher Excellency than a well-chosen Pettycoat, or a fashionable Commode; and not wholly lay out their Time and Care in the Adornation of their Bodies, but bestow a Part of it at least in the Embellishment of their Minds, since inward Beauty will last when outward is decayed.¹⁵

Prior to the publication of the *Letters*, Astell realised this ambition with the anonymous *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Written by ‘a Lover of her Sex’, the proposal is a carefully reasoned argument for the establishment of a female academic institute. According to her biographers, Astell’s college did not materialise due to the suspicion that it was a call for the restoration of Catholic nunneries.¹⁶ A wealthy woman, who might have been Princess Anne of Denmark (later Queen Anne), was willing to contribute £10,000 to Astell’s plan, but was dissuaded by Gilbert Burnet, the Bishop of Salisbury, who warned her that it looked like preparing a way for popery. *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies Part II* (1697) is dedicated to the princess and emphasises that the institute would be more academic than monastic. Disappointed that no one was roused to build her college, Astell wrote this work to provide a philosophical method for women to practise at home.

In both the first and second parts of the *Proposal*, Astell’s arguments are based on ideas borrowed from Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method*, *Principles of Philosophy*, and *Passions of the Soul*. Her sources of inspiration include Descartes’ view that reason is by nature equal in all human beings, his challenge to ancient authorities, his mistrust of custom and

¹⁴ Mary Evelyn to John Evelyn, 2 November 1695; in the British Library, London, the ‘Evelyn Papers’ (uncatalogued).

¹⁵ Astell to Norris, 31 October 1693; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 49.

¹⁶ Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, p. 383.

unexamined prejudices, his emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the mind, and his rigorous method of thought.

Astell was not the first writer to apply Descartes' philosophical approach to the issue of women's education. In 1673, a Frenchman named François Poulain de la Barre published a work titled *De l'Égalité des Deux Sexes* (translated into English as *The Woman as Good as the Man* in 1677).¹⁷ In this work, Poulain de la Barre argues that common opinions about the intellectual inferiority of women are based on ill-grounded prejudices and the authority of the ancients. Following Cartesian method, he submits these unexamined opinions to the 'Rule of Verity', the notion that whatever we can clearly and distinctly perceive is true. He points out that the soul is of one and the same nature in all human beings; the spirit itself has no sex, so the difference between the sexes cannot be on these grounds. Furthermore, men and women are *also* equal in terms of the disposition of their sensory organs: the 'impressions of sense', he says, are almost identical in both sexes.¹⁸ Hence women (like men) must also have minds capable of knowing truth, and 'ought to put themselves in condition of avoyding the Reproach, of having stifled a Talent, which they might put to use'.¹⁹

There is no evidence that Mary Astell read Poulain de la Barre's work,²⁰ but it is likely she was familiar with his ideas – there are striking similarities both in the language and content of their arguments. Astell draws on Descartes' egalitarian concept of reason in her first letter to Norris, dated 21 September 1693. Justifying her own incursions into philosophy, she says: 'For though I can't pretend to a Multitude of Books, Variety of Languages, the Advantages of Academical Education, or any Helps but what my own Curiosity afford; yet, *Thinking* is a Stock that no Rational Creature can want, if they but know how to use it.'²¹ In

¹⁷ On Poulain de la Barre, see Madeleine Alcover, *Poullain de la Barre: une aventure philosophique* (Paris-Seattle-Tubingen: Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1981); Michael A. Seidel, 'Poulain de la Barre's *The Woman as Good as the Man*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35:3 (1974), 499–508; Marie Louise Stock, *Poullain de la Barre: A Seventeenth-Century Feminist* (PhD diss.: Columbia University, 1961); Siep Stuurman, 'Social Cartesianism: François Poulain de la Barre and the Origins of the Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997), 617–40; and Siep Stuurman, 'From Feminism to Biblical Criticism: The Theological Trajectory of François Poulain de la Barre', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33:3 (2000), 367–82. Other related works by Poulain de la Barre are *De l'éducation des dames* (1674) and *De l'excellence des hommes* (1675).

¹⁸ Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man*, p. 103. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁰ See Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution', 60, n. 27; Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, pp. 71–2, n. 36; and Florence M. Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), p. 177.

²¹ Astell to Norris, 21 September 1693; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 2.

the *Proposal*, she repeats this notion to urge other women to take up intellectual studies. She says that ‘All have not leisure to Learn Languages and pore on Books, nor Opportunity to converse with the Learned; but all may Think, may use their own Faculties rightly, and consult the Master who is within them’.²² If women can reason about a dress or an estate, then they can also reason about more serious matters.

In her arguments against stereotypical views of women, Astell finds support in Descartes’ mistrust of custom. Like Poulain de la Barre, she points out that **common beliefs about women’s innate irrationality are ill founded**. If women are intellectually slow, she says, it is only because custom has prevented them from sharpening their natural intelligence. Ignorance and a poor education lay the foundation of women’s vices, and imitation and custom perpetuate them. She observes that

Women are from their very Infancy debar’d those Advantages, with the want of which, they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them. So partial are Men as to expect Brick where they afford no Straw; and so abundantly civil as to take care we shou’d make good that obliging Epithet of *Ignorant*, which out of an excess of good Manners, they are pleas’d to bestow on us!²³

Astell argues that women have to look only within themselves to see that they possess a rational faculty. If they were educated to improve their reason, then they would not appear to be so intellectually deficient. Women’s ‘Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural; and none of their Follies are so necessary, but that they might avoid them if they pleas’d themselves.’²⁴ A transformation, Astell maintains, can easily be effected through study and discipline.

Also in the spirit of Cartesianism, Astell encourages women to value their intellectual natures, rather than their bodies. There are no arguments in Astell’s *Proposal* for the view that women’s souls are wholly distinct from their bodies.²⁵ But she upholds what Alison Jaggar calls a ‘normative dualism’: an extreme reverence for human rationality.²⁶

²² Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, edited by Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), p. 119.

²³ Astell, *Proposal I*, p. 10. ²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Astell does present a version of the real distinction argument in her 1705 work, *The Christian Religion*. Her formulation is impressive for the fact that it anticipates Margaret Wilson’s ‘epistemological’ interpretation of Descartes’ argument. On this topic, see O’Neill, ‘Astell, Mary (1666–1731)’, in Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1, p. 528; Astell, *The Christian Religion*, p. 250; and Wilson, *Descartes*, p. 189.

²⁶ Alison Jaggar, ‘Liberal Feminism and Human Nature’, in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), p. 40.

Astell urges women to consider the welfare of their ‘true selves’, their *souls*, and she rails against the ‘unthinking mechanical way of living, when like Machins we are condemn’d every day to repeat the impertinencies of the day before’.²⁷ She encourages her female readers to break with tradition and history, and to rely on their own introspective capacities to acquire knowledge. ‘Let us learn to pride ourselves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion,’ she says, ‘And not entertain such a degrading thought of our own *worth*, as to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men.’²⁸ In a later work, *The Christian Religion*, Astell upholds the same theme, saying that

it can never be suppos’d that GOD Created us, that is our Minds, after His own Image, for no better purpose than to wait upon the Body, whilst it Eats, Drinks, and Sleeps, and saunters away a *Useless Life*; . . . GOD, whose Works are all in Number, Weight, and Measure, cou’d never form a Rational Being for so trivial a purpose; since a little more Mechanism than what He has bestow’d upon some Brutes, wou’d qualifie us sufficiently for those Employments.²⁹

In the second part of the *Proposal*, Astell expounds Cartesian rules of thought for the improvement of women’s minds.³⁰ Her method is borrowed from Descartes’ contemporaries, Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) and Pierre Nicole (1625–95), the co-authors of the highly influential *Logic or the Art of Thinking* (1662).³¹ This treatise, also known as the *Port-Royal Logic*, is designed for those who have never studied formal logic. Arnauld and Nicole stress the importance of cultivating good judgement in practical, everyday life, and the need to exercise reason (as well as faith) in religious matters. Their emphasis is not on teaching the rules of valid inference, so much as how to avoid reasoning from false premises. Toward this end,

²⁷ Astell, *Proposal I*, p. 32. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁹ Astell, *The Christian Religion*, p. 114. *The Christian Religion* is a 418-page treatise in the form of a letter to Catherine Jones. Regarded as the definitive statement of Astell’s religious and philosophical views, this work is designed to acquaint women with the rational principles behind their religious convictions. Astell also aims to meet common threats to religious orthodoxy. Her main targets are Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), his ‘letters’ to Edward Stillingfleet, the Bishop of Worcester, as well as Masham’s *Discourse*, and the anonymous *The Ladies Religion* (1697). There is no modern edition of *The Christian Religion*.

³⁰ Irish philosopher George Berkeley plagiarises whole passages from this part of the *Proposal* in his 1714 work *The Ladies Library*.

³¹ Astell seems to have read the 1693 English translation of this work (see Springborg’s comments in Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 183, n. 17). For a modern edition, see Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, translated and edited by Jill Vance Buroker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

they provide a method for attaining truth, taken almost verbatim from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*.³²

Whereas Astell is concerned in part I of the *Proposal* that women be educated in a formal institution, in part II she is more concerned that women be able to educate themselves. She says: 'Can you be in Love with servitude and folly? Can you dote on a mean, ignorant and ignoble Life? An Ingenious Woman is no Prodigy to be star'd on, for you have it in your power to inform the World, that you can every one of you be so, if you please your selves.'³³ Like Arnauld and Nicole, Astell believes that **self-education is necessary for the sake of one's spiritual welfare**. Women must gain an understanding of the principles behind their religious beliefs for themselves, and this requires some knowledge of the 'art of thinking'. In a later work, she points out that 'A Blind Obedience is what a Rational Creature shou'd never pay, nor wou'd such an one receive it did he rightly understand its Nature. For Human Actions are no otherwise valuable than as they are conformable to Reason, but a blind Obedience is an Obeying *without Reason*, for ought we know *against it*.'³⁴

Astell's rules of logic are paraphrased from the fourth part of the *Art of Thinking*. Her methodology does not require any specialised training, only the exercising of one's natural reason. She teaches women that they must begin by defining the terms of the question under consideration and by putting aside all irrelevant matters. They must reason only about things of which they have clear and distinct ideas, making sure that they have cut themselves off from 'all our former Prejudices, from our Opinion of Names, Authorities, Customs and the like'.³⁵ She stresses that 'Knowledge in a proper and restricted Sense and as appropriated to Science, signifies that clear Perception which is follow'd by a firm assent to Conclusions rightly drawn from Premises of which we have clear and distinct Ideas.'³⁶ Drawing directly on the *Art of Thinking*, she maintains that a good philosopher always conducts her thoughts in an orderly manner, from the most simple to the most complex, judging no further than she perceives, and taking nothing for truth that is not evidently known to be so.³⁷

³² For Astell's explicit references to Descartes, see *Proposal I*, p. 24; and *Proposal II*, pp. 123, 165.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁴ Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, p. 75. Shortly after the second part of the *Proposal*, Astell published her second most popular feminist work, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700), written in response to the unhappy situation of her Chelsea neighbor, Hortense Mancini, the Duchess of Mazarin. In this work, Astell offers a general assessment of marriage, and laments that the institution has been defiled by the 'ill Choice' and 'foolish Conduct' of men and women.

³⁵ Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 89. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–8.

In sum, these are the views that have led scholars to regard Astell as first and foremost a Cartesian. Like Descartes and his followers, Arnauld and Nicole, Astell formulates a method whereby certainty can be achieved only by detaching oneself from the senses, the imagination, and the passions. Truth, according to Astell, consists in clear and distinct perceptions grasped by the pure intellect alone.

By contrast, late twentieth-century feminists are extremely critical of these aspects of Cartesian thought. Cartesianism has been attacked for its emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the mind, the radical separation between the mind and body, and the denigration of the senses, body, matter, and nature. In the context of pre-existing associations between women and matter, Descartes' philosophy is seen as having further negative consequences for stereotypes of femininity. Genevieve Lloyd believes that, with the advent of Cartesianism,

The way was thus opened for women to be associated with not just a lesser presence of Reason, but a different kind of intellectual character, construed as complementary to 'male' Reason. This crucial development springs from the accentuation of women's exclusion from Reason, now conceived – in its highest form – as an attainment.³⁸

If one accepts Lloyd's view, then Astell's feminist arguments appear to be defective: despite championing female reason, she relies on concepts that lead to women's exclusion from intellectual discourse. Far from overthrowing prejudices about women, Astell's writings (it would appear) are complicit in maintaining the status quo. She valorises the self-sufficiency and autonomy of the mind, she criticises and shuns a life devoted solely to the body, and she distinguishes between the inferior, untrained reason of most women, and the superior reason achieved by disassociating the mind from the senses.

II

Nevertheless, Astell's letters to John Norris show that, despite her reverence for reason, she is extremely critical of his theory of soul–body relations. Although Norris has been called a Cambridge Platonist, this label is something of a misnomer given that he was an Oxford-trained advocate of Nicolas Malebranche's philosophy. Malebranche was one of the leading French disciples of Cartesian philosophy in the seventeenth

³⁸ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, p. 50.

century. His theory of causation, known as *occasionalism*, is a rather unorthodox blend of Cartesianism and Augustinian theology, according to which there is no genuine interaction between the soul and body. The Cambridge Platonists, on the other hand, claim that there is a ‘vital congruity’ or a ‘plastic nature’ between the soul and body that enables the two substances to interact. Although Norris was initially supportive of the Platonist theories, from 1688 he was an avowed occasionalist.

Like Anne Conway and Margaret Cavendish, Norris develops his metaphysical views in response to the Cartesian conception of matter. All three writers, like Elisabeth of Bohemia, acknowledge that if matter consists only in extension, then it is inconceivable how it could cause any effect in a thinking substance. But they come up with different solutions to this difficulty. Cavendish and Conway see the problem as grounds for rejecting dualism and for accepting the view that matter is alive and intelligent. Norris, like his mentor Malebranche, accepts dualism and maintains that there is no real causal interaction between soul and body. Material things, Norris says, are completely without power or force, and all bodies are utterly disconnected from souls. Instead he believes that there is a perfectly harmonious *correlation* between the soul and body, orchestrated by God.³⁹

Norris gives his reasons for this view in an essay titled ‘A Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love, with the Natural and Moral Grounds upon which it stands’, in the third volume of his *Practical Discourses* (1693).⁴⁰ It is a common belief, he says, that bodies have some inherent qualities that are analogous to our sensations. But there is no more reason to suppose that ‘there is such a Quality as Heat, resembling what you feel in Fire, then you have to conclude *Pain* to be in a *Needle*’.⁴¹ There is nothing conceivable in bodies but magnitude, figure, and motion, so they cannot possibly have any other essential qualities. This is a view held by many seventeenth-century thinkers, including Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, and Locke. But these men are mistaken, Norris says, in supposing that material objects still have the power to cause our sensations in some way, because ‘the very same Reasons which prove that

³⁹ On Norris’s philosophy, see Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris*; Charles McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 156–79; and Flora Isabel MacKinnon, *The Philosophy of John Norris* in *Philosophical Monographs* (Baltimore: Psychological Review Publications, 1910).

⁴⁰ John Norris, *Practical Discourses Upon several Divine Subjects* (London: S. Manship, 1693), vol. 111, pp. 1–83.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Bodies have not any Qualities in them like our Sensations, do also prove that they do neither produce Sensations in us'.⁴² If bodies are mere magnitude, figure, and motion, then they cannot produce 'sentiments of the mind'. This is because there is no proportion or affinity between the cause and the effect: a material thing cannot 'produce an Effect more Noble and Excellent and of an Order so very much higher than it self'.⁴³ Furthermore, he says, bodies affect each other through impact and resistance.⁴⁴ But the body cannot move the soul in the same way, since the soul is penetrable: 'And therefore since Spirits make no resistance against Bodies, it is not possible that Bodies should have any Action, or make any Impression upon Spirits.'⁴⁵

Norris believes instead that we must look to forces outside of bodies to explain apparent causal relations between the body and soul. Only a being of infinite wisdom and power could produce all things by the immediate efficacy of will. Hence **Norris believes that God must be the only causal agent**, and the only efficient cause of all sensations is divine intervention. Material things, on the other hand, are merely the *occasions* for that intervention. When the sun shines in my eyes, it is God who gives me the sensations of heat and light. 'Tis not the most delicate Fruit, or the richest Perfume, that delights either our Tast or our Smell,' he says, 'but 'tis God alone that raises Pleasure in us by the Occasion of these Bodies.'⁴⁶ Similarly, when I will my leg to kick, my volition is merely the occasion for God to intervene and make my leg move.

Norris promotes this theory in his letters to Astell. While material objects may be the conditions or occasions of our sensations, he says, they are not necessary conditions. In a letter of 13 November 1693, he writes that

though according to the Law of this State Pain be always occasioned by some Motion or Change in the Parts of the Body, yet since 'tis the Soul that truly feels it, and GOD that truly raises it, I can easily conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, raise the Sensation of Pain in her though no Change be made in the Body, nay though she had no body at all. That GOD for instance can raise

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 32. ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Norris markedly differs from Malebranche on this point. Malebranche's occasionalism is just as much a theory about body-body relations as soul-body interaction (see Steven Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 4). For Norris, however, occasionalism applies *only* to soul-body relations, and not to body-body relations; one body can be the efficient cause of motion in another body through impact. On Norris's position, see John Norris, *An Essay Towards the Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World . . . Part II* (London: S. Manship, 1704), pp. 223-4, 231-3; Norris, *Practical Discourses*, vol. III, pp. 34-5; and McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, p. 172, n. 52.

⁴⁵ Norris, *Practical Discourses*, vol. III, p. 34. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

the Sensation of Burning in the Soul without any Impression of Fire upon her Body.⁴⁷

Even if the material world did not exist, we could still have the sensations and ideas we currently have. In fact, Norris believes that we can never really know that there are actual bodies outside our souls causing or ‘occasioning’ our sensations.

Norris uses this philosophical basis to argue that God must be the sole object of our love. He maintains that we love only that which brings us pleasure, and because God is the only truly causally efficacious being, only he can be the cause of our pleasure. Consequently, God alone is deserving of our love.⁴⁸ After all, no causally inefficacious being could be ‘a fit or reasonable object of love’ if it never really causes our pleasure. The following passage from Norris’s later work, *An Essay Towards the Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World* (1704), aptly illustrates these moral and metaphysical views:

Reflect then first of all, what a dead unactive thing Matter is, and withal, how poor and empty the Material is in comparison of the intellectual World. And accordingly, whether such an unactive empty Being, that is so without Power or Force, and without Form and Void, can be a fit or reasonable Object of thy Love? . . . ’tis plain that Bodies cannot act upon our Souls, nor cause in them the least Pleasure or the least Pain, the lowest Taste, or the faintest Smell, or any other Sensation . . . Those Odours, those Savours, nay, even that *Light* and those *Colours* which are imagin’d to be in Bodies, are really not in them, but in our selves. And yet we Court them and Commend them, and say that one shines, and another has a fine Perfume, &c. But they, poor Creatures, have none of those Finenesses, Excellencies, or Beauties (*Figure* only excepted) which we think we see in them, and for which we admire them, but are, as it were, mere *Caput Mortuum*, or *Terra Damnata* in the Language of the Sons of Hermes, utterly void and destitute of all those agreeable Prettinesses, those charming Graces which the Poetical imagination of Philosophers, like the Passion of Lovers, has confer’d upon them, and the *Blushes* of the Morning are as much a Fiction as *Aurora* it self. Indeed ’tis all Fiction, Complement, Fallacy, Dream, Imposture and Man walks in a *vain shew*, among Cheats and Delusions, empty Representations, and false Appearances, and the World is to him as some *enchanted Place*, where he is abused by resemblances of things that are not, and is imposed upon by all his Senses. For in short, the Perfections of material Beings are the mere Creatures of his Fansie; those Beauties which he thinks he perceives without, are really in himself, and he carries about him the World that he admires.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Norris to Astell, 13 November 1693; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ More accurately, Norris says that God alone deserves a love of *desire*, whereas creatures deserve only a love of *benevolence*.

⁴⁹ Norris, *Essay Towards the Theory II*, pp. 252–5.

Here it is significant that Norris expresses not only a contempt for the material world, but a symbolic alignment of femaleness with matter. In Lloyd's view, this passage would not be an isolated instance of sexist metaphor, but part of a tradition in which philosophers advocate a transcendence of natural or material things, and in which the feminine is associated with what must be transcended or excluded. Those men who with 'the passion of lovers' court sensual delights with praises of 'fine perfumes', are warned that they will soon be disappointed. In reality, Norris says, they are destitute of all those 'agreeable prettinesses' and 'charming graces'. The philosopher must regard his 'beloved' with disdain. The object of his admiration is likened to the mythical goddess 'Aurora', a type of *belle dame sans merci* who bewitches and enchants unwary men. In short, the same values that enable Norris to hold the material world in contempt, are implicitly directed toward women when he characterises that material world as female. Women do not really belong to the intellectual world, and without 'form' can never hope to aspire to such. **The truly rational man, Norris suggests, must overcome the body, matter, and femaleness.**

It is fitting, therefore, that Astell challenges these particular aspects of Norris's philosophy: the view that God is the only efficient cause of our sensations, the idea that matter is worthless and causally impotent, and the claim that there is no real interaction between the soul and body.

Although Astell's early objections are not directed at Norris's occasionalism, one can detect seeds of dissent throughout their exchange. In her first letter, Astell expresses a difficulty she found when reading volume three of Norris's *Practical Discourses*.⁵⁰ She points out that if God is the only true cause of all our sensations, then he is also the only true cause of our pain. Yet we do not love that which causes us pain, and thus 'if the Author of our Pleasure be upon that account the only Object of our Love, then by the same reason the Author of our Pain can't be the Object of our Love'.⁵¹ For, Astell says,

if we must Love nothing but what is Lovely, and nothing is Lovely but what is our Good, and nothing is our Good but what does us Good, and nothing does us Good but what causes Pleasure in us; **may we not by the same way of arguing say, That that which Causes Pain in us does not do us Good, (for nothing you say does us Good but what Causes Pleasure) and therefore can't be our Good,**

⁵⁰ Although Astell does not name 'A Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love', her comments indicate that she is referring to this essay in particular.

⁵¹ Astell to Norris, 21 September 1693; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 5.

and if not our Good then not Lovely, and consequently not the proper, much less the only Object of our Love?⁵²

According to Astell, Norris's argument leads to the paradox that the cause of our sensations is both the object of our love and of our aversion. To avoid the inconsistency, she suggests that 'that which Causes Pain does us Good as well as that which Causes Pleasure',⁵³ and that we ought to love God because he alone does us good, not merely because he is the author of our pleasure. Pain is not inflicted needlessly or callously, but for the sake of what is best.

In his reply of 13 October 1693, Norris concedes that we must love God in spite of, not because he causes our pain, and that pain comes from God 'only indirectly and by Accident'.⁵⁴ But in her next letter, of 31 October 1693, Astell plays down the 'accidental' part, saying that 'though Pain considered abstractedly is not a Good, yet it *may* be so circumstantiated, and always *is* when God inflicts it as to be a Good'. Thus we ought to love God because, in his infinite wisdom, he 'designed Pain as well as Pleasure in order to our Happiness'.⁵⁵ According to her moral theory, it is not enough to love God simply because he is the cause of our pleasure. We must love him even though he inflicts pain, because he intends for these sensations, like pleasurable ones, to contribute to our overall good.

The basis of Astell's criticisms of Norris is her conception of God. Like Conway and the Cambridge Platonists, Astell holds a type of intellectualist theology. While Norris emphasises God's causal power, Astell maintains that God's omnipotence is constrained by his wisdom and goodness: a supremely rational and perfectly benevolent being could cause pain only to bring about good. In the *Proposal*, Astell spells out the same idea: 'GOD being Infinitely Wise, all his Judgments must be Infallible, and being Infinitely Good he can will nothing but what is best, nor prescribe any thing that is not for our Advantage.'⁵⁶ And in *The Christian Religion*, she says that 'when we say that GOD cannot do a thing, we do not at all question Almighty Power, or set any sort of *limits to Infinite Wisdom*; we only question the fitness of the thing to be done, and mean no more than that such a thing is not suitable to the Perfection of the Divine Nature'.⁵⁷ Astell believes that God always does what is 'best and most becoming His Perfections, and cannot act but according to the essential

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5. ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 6. ⁵⁴ Norris to Astell, 13 October 1693; *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Astell to Norris, 31 October 1693; *ibid.*, pp. 33, 34. ⁵⁶ Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 153.

⁵⁷ Astell, *Christian Religion*, p. 416.

Nature and Reason of things'.⁵⁸ 'There are no arbitrary features, such as pain, in God's universe: he uses his supreme wisdom to create the 'best of all possible worlds'.

Astell's notion of infinite wisdom is responsible for her eventual rejection of Norris's occasionalism. Six weeks after the correspondence had officially ended, Astell launched an attack on the central premise of Norris's philosophy: the view that God is the only efficient cause of our sensations. Astell's letter and Norris's reply appear as an appendix to the published volume of the correspondence. In her letter, dated 14 August 1694, Astell objects 'First, That this Theory renders a great Part of GOD's Workmanship Vain and Useless' and 'Secondly, That it does not well comport with his Majesty'.⁵⁹ For the first, Astell argues that if external objects are not able to produce our sensations, then these objects cannot serve any relevant purpose. Yet, if this is so, then Norris's theory is contrary to the idea that an infinitely wise being creates nothing in vain: it would be unnecessary for God to give us the inclination to believe that material things cause our sensations when he himself causes them:

That this Theory renders a great Part of *GOD's* Workmanship vain and useless, it may be thus argued. Allowing that Sensation is only in the Soul, that there is nothing in Body but Magnitude, Figure and Motion, and that being without Thought itself it is not able to produce it in us, and therefore those Sensations, whether Pleasure or Pain, which we feel at the Presence of Bodies, must be produced by some higher Cause than they; yet if the Objects of our Senses have no natural Efficiency towards the producing of those Sensations which we feel at their Presence, if they Serve no further than as positive and arbitrary Conditions to determine the Action of the true and proper Cause, if they have nothing in their own Nature to qualifie them to be instrumental to the Production of such and such Sensations, but that if *GOD* should so please (the Nature of the things notwithstanding) we might as well feel Cold at the presence of fire as of water, and heat at the Application of Water or any other Creature, and since *GOD* may as well excite Sensations in our Souls without these positive Conditions as with them, to what end do they serve? And then what becomes of that acknowledged Truth that *GOD* does nothing in vain, when such Variety of Objects as our Senses are exercised about are wholly unnecessary?⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95. ⁵⁹ Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 278.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–80. This objection anticipates John Locke in his 'Remarks Upon some of Mr. Norris's Books, Wherein he asserts F. Malebranche's Opinion of Our Seeing all things in God', in *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Locke*, second edition (London: R. Francklin, 1739). Locke's essay was written in 1693 and first published in 1720. He observes that 'if the perception of colours and sounds depended on nothing but the presence of the object affording an *occasional cause* to God Almighty to exhibit to the mind, the Ideas of figures, colours and sounds; all that nice and curious structure of those organs is wholly in vain' (p. 48).

An infinitely wise being, Astell suggests, would not permit such superfluous features in his design. Norris's idea of a God who could make us feel cold at the presence of fire offends Astell's belief in a supremely rational deity. In *The Christian Religion*, this same principle is the basis for her claim that 'not the least Particle of Body doth totally Perish'. She believes that it does not 'consist with the Wisdom and Majesty of the Great Creator to Annihilate His Works. For He does nothing in vain, and can't be Suppos'd to Make a Creature with a design to Destroy or Unmake it'.⁶¹

Astell's second objection is that Norris's theory does not comport well with God's majesty. She implies that **it would be beneath a perfect being to be constantly intervening in earthly events, when he could simply create an instrument to enact his will.** Instead Astell asks

Why therefore may there not be a *sensible Congruity* between those Powers of the Soul that are employed in Sensation, and those Objects which occasion it? Analogous to that vital Congruity which your Friend Dr. More (*Immortality of the Soul*, B. II. Chap. 14. S. 8.) will have to be between some certain Modifications of Matter, and the plastick Part of the Soul, which Notion he illustrates by that Pleasure which the preceptive Part of the Soul (as he calls it) is affected with by good Musick or delicious Viands, as I do this of *sensible* by his of *vital Congruity*, and methinks they are so symbolical that if the one be admitted the other may. For as the Soul forsakes her Body when this vital Congruity fails, so when this sensible Congruity is wanting, as in the Case of Blindness, Deafness, or the Palsie, & c. the Soul has no Sensation of Colours, Sounds, Heat and the like, so that although Bodies make the same Impression that they used to do on her Body, yet whilst it is under this Indisposition, she has not that Sentiment of Pleasure or Pain which used to accompany that Impression, and therefore though there be no such thing as Sensation in Bodies, yet why may there not be a *Congruity* in them by their Presence to draw forth such Sensations in the Soul? Especially since in the next place, it seems more agreeable to the Majesty of God, and that Order he has established in the World, to say that he produces our Sensations *mediately* by his Servant Nature, than to affirm that he does it *immediately* by his own Almighty Power.⁶²

Astell implies that there is a natural efficacy in bodies to produce sensations in the soul. She accepts Norris's claim that sensations do not reside in the material objects themselves. But against Norris, she suggests that there is something in the body, a 'sensible congruity', that promotes its interaction with the soul, and enables the body to cause sensations. Insofar as material bodies are connected to, or have a correspondence with,

⁶¹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, pp. 247–8.

⁶² Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, pp. 280–2.

certain plastical powers in the soul, they do ‘really better our condition’, they do ‘contribute to our happiness or Misery’, and they do ‘in some sense produce our Pleasure or Pain’.⁶³ God’s ‘Servant nature’, according to Astell, acts as a causal agent in the natural world, making material things ‘necessary Instruments’, rather than mere ‘occasions’.⁶⁴

Astell’s theory of a sensible congruity between ‘certain Modifications of Matter, and the plastick Part of the Soul’ owes its origins to More’s doctrine of the spirit of nature and Cudworth’s theory of plastic nature. Like Astell, Cudworth believes that ‘it seems not so agreeable to Reason . . . that Nature as a Distinct thing from the Deity should be quite Superceded or made to Signific Nothing, God himself doing all things Immediately’.⁶⁵ Instead, Cudworth tries to strike a balance between mechanistic and occasionalist-style philosophies, claiming that

since neither all things are produced Fortuitously, or by the Unguided Mechanism of Matter, nor God himself may reasonably be thought to do all things Immediately and Miraculously; it may well be concluded, that there is a *Plastic Nature* under him, which as an Inferior and Subordinate Instrument, doth Drudgingly Execute that Part of his Providence, which consists in the Regular and Orderly Motion of Matter.⁶⁶

This plastic nature is a spiritual intermediary between spirit and matter that gives material things life and activity, when they would otherwise be dead and passive. Henry More likewise claims that the union between spirit and matter cannot be explained in mechanical terms, but only in terms of a ‘vital congruity’ between the plastic part of the soul and the body.⁶⁷ Astell refers to a passage in *The Immortality of the Soul* (book 2, chapter 14, section 8) where More claims that this congruity is ‘chiefly in the *Soul* it self’, but that it can also be in matter. More says that

it is termed *Vital* because it makes the *Matter a congruous* Subject for the Soul to reside in, and exercise the functions of life. For that which has no *life* it self, may tie to it that which has. As some men are said to be tied by the teeth, or tied by the ear, when they are detained by the pleasure they are struck with from

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁶⁴ Norris objects by saying that ‘even Instruments belong to the Order of efficient Causes, though they are less principal ones, and ’tis most certain that God has no need of any, since his Will is efficacious itself’ (Norris to Astell, 21 September 1694; *ibid.*, pp. 306–7). This counter-objection is not very strong, because one might still ask: if God has no need of material objects, and ‘his Will is efficacious itself’, then why do such objects even exist?

⁶⁵ Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, p. 150. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ On the topic of vital congruity, see Hutton, ‘Anne Conway Critique d’Henry More’.

good Musick or delicious Viands. . . Now as we see that the *Perceptive* part of the Soul is thus vitally affected with that which has no life in it, so it is reasonable that the *Plastick* part thereof may be so too; **That there may be an Harmony betwixt Matter thus and thus modified, and that Power that we call *Plastick*, that is utterly devoid of all Perception.** And in this alone consists that which we call *Vital Congruity* in the prepared Matter, either to be organized, or already shaped into the perfect form of an Animal.⁶⁸

In the same chapter, More calls the spirit of nature the ‘*Inferiour Soul of the World*’,⁶⁹ and says that matter enjoys a vital congruity with this part of the soul. Likewise, in an earlier letter to Norris (31 October 1693), Astell explains her theory of sensation with reference to the ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ parts of the soul.⁷⁰ The inferior part, she says, corresponds to sensible objects, it feels sensations of pain, colour, and so on; whereas the superior or intellectual part, comprised of the understanding and will, is capable of knowing abstract truths.⁷¹

There are also similarities between Astell’s views and those of Anne Conway. Conway emphasises that every created thing has a spiritual dimension, and that there can be no such thing as dead matter. ‘For suppose that this dead matter, or body, has assumed all forms and has changed into all kinds of shapes, both the most regular and precise. What use is this body or matter since it lacks life and perception?’⁷² Conway believes instead that every particle of matter has the ability to perfect itself. Though Astell does not espouse a thoroughgoing perfectionism or monistic vitalism, **she too highlights the spiritual *telos* of material things.** Astell’s main criticisms of Norris rely on pointing out the final, as well as the efficient, causes of material things: their *purpose* in God’s grand design. In her objections to Norris, she **emphasises that God created material things for a reason; if his philosophy fails to account for the purposefulness of matter, it is therefore inadequate.**

Overall, there are significant differences between Astell’s metaphysical views and those of Norris. Astell advocates a theory of causation in which she reinstates the causality of the body and re-affirms its connection with the soul. **She believes that the body is capable of a sympathetic interaction with the soul and that material things are necessary, not**

⁶⁸ More, *Immortality of the Soul*, pp. 263–4. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁷⁰ Although Astell borrows this notion from Norris’s *Christian Blessedness*, she takes the distinction more literally than he intended. In a letter dated 13 November 1693, Norris claims that he cannot form a ‘clear Idea of any such Parts’, and he only meant for the distinction to be a figure of speech (*Letters*, p. 60).

⁷¹ Astell to Norris, 31 October 1693; *ibid.*, p. 37. ⁷² Conway, *Principles*, ch. 7, sect. 2, p. 46.

arbitrary features of the created world. Norris, on the other hand, advocates a transcendence of material bodies, while at the same time associating matter with femaleness. This matter is rendered unnecessary, causally impotent, and incapable of affecting the soul. In Astell's metaphysics, however, material things *do* serve a purpose, and they *can* act as true causal agents. It is not the case, as Norris says, that they are mere 'empty representations' – they have the capacity to produce those 'finenesses' and 'those excellencies' that he denies them. In these respects, Astell's views resemble the orthodox Cartesian position on soul–body interaction, according to which the soul and body *are* capable of influencing one another. But with her theory of a 'sensible congruity', Astell goes beyond the typical Cartesian stance: her theory not only empowers and enlivens matter (when it would otherwise be dead and inert), but also avoids an extreme form of dualism. The doctrine of plastic nature to which she appeals introduces a 'middle way', an intermediary sphere that bridges the gulf between spiritual and material substances. As John Passmore says, 'once such an intimate communion between reason and matter is admitted to be possible, the sharp edge of dualism is blunted'.⁷³ In Astell's metaphysical outlook, the polarities that make the female–male symbolism appropriate for Norris to express the relations between the soul and material bodies, are thus undermined.

Of course, Astell's final objections to Norris's theory of causation are only tentative. She does not go on to formulate a detailed theory of the 'sensible congruity' between the soul's sensations and the material objects that cause them. There is no mention of any 'plastick part of the soul', for example, when she details the relationship between the soul and the body in the second part of the *Proposal*. Here she simply writes:

not to enter too far into the Philosophy of the Passions, suffice it briefly to observe: That by the Oeconomy of Nature such and such Motions in the Body are annex't in such a manner to certain Thoughts in the Soul, that unless some outward force restrain, she can produce them when she pleases barely by willing them, and reciprocally several Impressions on the Body are communicated to, and affect the Soul, all this being perform'd by the means of the Animal Spirits. The Active Powers of the Soul, her Will and Inclinations are at her own dispose, her Passive are not, she can't avoid feeling Pain or other sensible Impressions so long as she's united to a Body, and that Body is dispos'd to convey these Impressions.⁷⁴

⁷³ John Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 28.

⁷⁴ Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 161. Here Astell's interpretation of soul–body interaction may have been influenced by More's *Account of Virtue* (see *Proposal II*, p. 165).

Nonetheless, in this passage Astell deliberately avoids an occasionalist interpretation (there is no mention of God's causal agency), and she does say that the body is 'dispos'd to convey' sensible impressions to the soul. In her later works, Astell apparently decides to suspend her judgement on the matter, for example, when she says in the second part of the *Proposal* that 'We know and feel the Union between our Soul and Body, but who amongst us sees so clearly, as to find out with Certitude and Exactness, the secret ties which unite two such different Substances, or how they are able to act upon each other?'⁷⁵ Likewise, in *The Christian Religion*, she says 'neither do I comprehend the Vital Union between my Soul and Body... though I am sure that it is so'.⁷⁶ For Astell, like Descartes in the correspondence with Elisabeth, the issue of soul-body relations is a subject that the human intellect cannot penetrate. But this eventual agnosticism on the topic does not mean that we should discount Astell's criticisms of Norris – especially when they are consistent with her central philosophical and theological beliefs.

III

There are, moreover, significant continuities between Astell's feminist and metaphysical views. It is important to remember that when Astell values rationality over the body, she is reacting against stereotypical views of women as *mere* material objects or 'machines' devoid of reason. 'For if we do not live like Machines', she says, 'but like Reasonable Creatures, that is if we Observe, Examine and Apply whatever comes under our Cognizance, every Turn in our own and our Neighbours Life will be Useful to us.'⁷⁷ In both the *Letters* and the *Proposal*, Astell's objectives are the same: to re-affirm the worth of a part of God's creation that has been rendered purposeless by re-affirming its connection with the spiritual-intellectual realm.

In fact, the same principle that leads Astell to reject an utter separation between the soul and body – the dictum that *God creates nothing in vain* – also leads her to reject the view that women are not fully rational. In the second part of the *Proposal*, Astell says that 'GOD does nothing in vain, he gives no Power or Faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to Mankind a Rational Mind, every individual Understanding ought to be employ'd in somewhat worthy of it.'⁷⁸ In *The Christian Religion*, she says that the author of our being would

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷⁶ Astell, *Christian Religion*, p. 51.

⁷⁷ Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 163.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–19.

not allow any superfluities in his supremely intelligent design; thus, 'If GOD had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason, He wou'd not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain.'⁷⁹ Astell warns that when a woman is taught that her duty is to serve men, or to live a life devoted solely to the body, she is taught to disregard her obligations to God. Astell stresses instead that women must be educated so that their rationality is exercised toward higher virtues, and not neglected as vain and useless. 'For unless we have very strange Notions of the Divine Wisdom,' she says, we must admit that 'Our Powers and Faculties were not given us for nothing.'⁸⁰

This theological aspect to Astell's feminist arguments clearly distinguishes her writings from those of Poulain de la Barre. In *The Woman as Good as the Man*, Poulain de la Barre does not expand on the religious significance of women's education. Yet even when propounding the Cartesian method in the second *Proposal*, Astell's examples of self-evident principles reflect her strong religious and moral beliefs. 'If it be farther demanded what these Principles are?' she says, 'no body I suppose will deny us one, which is, *That we ought as much as we can to endeavour the Perfecting of our Beings, and that we be as happy as possibly we may.*'⁸¹ She emphasises that women must use their rational faculties to move closer toward perfection and God, 'the Supream and Universal Reason':⁸²

For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs? Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of one, as well as from the enjoyment of the other?⁸³

'A desire to advance and perfect its Being,' she says, 'is planted by GOD in all Rational Natures, to excite them hereby to every worthy and becoming Action.'⁸⁴ A supremely rational God would not have given women this desire unless he required them to act on it. Therefore, she says, women must be educated to use their reason to raise themselves toward perfection.

⁷⁹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, p. 6.

⁸² Astell, *Christian Religion*, p. 13.

⁸⁰ Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 149.

⁸³ Astell, *Proposal I*, p. 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

This ‘theological’ outlook brings Astell closer to her scholastic predecessor, Anna Maria van Schurman.⁸⁵ In her *Dissertatio*, Schurman presents a series of syllogisms in favour of women’s aptitude for study.⁸⁶ Like Astell, she urges women to pursue knowledge, not for the sake of intellectual endeavour alone, but to move closer to God and the salvation of the soul. In her second syllogism, Schurman argues that ‘Whoever has a desire for sciences and arts is suited to study sciences and arts. But women by nature have a desire for arts and sciences. Therefore [all arts and sciences are fitting to women].’⁸⁷ In defence of the first premise, Schurman appeals to the notion that ‘nature makes nothing in vain’; if human beings have this desire by nature, it is there for a reason.⁸⁸ In defence of the second, she draws on Aristotle’s view that every human being has a natural desire for knowledge, and that ‘what belongs to the whole species also belongs to single individuals’.⁸⁹ In other arguments, Schurman relies on a conception of human beings as created by God for a specific purpose, and the idea that ‘their own highest perfection is proper to all creatures and that toward that end it is necessary to struggle with all their strength’.⁹⁰ These same scholastic and theological principles are reflected in Astell’s arguments.

In sum, Astell’s criticisms of Norris stem from her convictions about God’s supreme wisdom. She argues that **if the material world serves no purpose (is unable to affect our souls), then God will have created something in vain; but a supremely wise being does nothing in vain; therefore the material world must serve some purpose** (it is able to affect our souls). Astell applies the same teleology in her arguments for women’s education that she uses in her criticisms of Norris. She points out that if women are endowed with a rational faculty that serves no purpose, then God will have created something in vain; but God does nothing in vain;

⁸⁵ Astell also anticipates the theological arguments of eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft holds the view that God’s omnipotence is limited and regulated by his wisdom. Women, she says, partake in this divine wisdom, in so far as they are rational and immortal beings. Therefore, according to Wollstonecraft, women’s morals must be ‘fixed on the same immutable principles as those of man’ (Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited with an introduction by Miriam Brody (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 88). Against Rousseau, she says that ‘if . . . there were to be rational creatures produced, allowed to rise in excellence by the exercise of powers implanted for that purpose; if benignity itself thought fit to call into existence a creature above the brutes, who could think and improve himself, why should that inestimable gift . . . be called, in direct terms, a curse?’ (*ibid.*, p. 94). For other similarities between Astell and Wollstonecraft, see John McCrystal, ‘Revolutionary Women: The Use of Revolutionary Discourse in Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared’, *History of Political Thought* 14 (1993), 189–203.

⁸⁶ On the significance of Schurman’s choice of form, see van Eck, ‘The First Dutch Feminist Tract?’

⁸⁷ Schurman, *Whether a Christian Woman*, p. 28. ⁸⁸ *Ibid.* ⁸⁹ *Ibid.* ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

therefore women are endowed with a rational faculty that must serve some purpose. In both cases Astell regards created things as purposeful and there for the sake of some greater goal. These features of the created world contribute toward, and are evidence of, God's supreme design. Astell's teleological beliefs further lead to a re-establishing of connections between the material and spiritual: **to be purposeful, material things must have a sympathetic interaction with spiritual beings; similarly, women must be more than mere bodies to fulfil their divine purpose.**

Finally, these beliefs also inform Astell's conception of reason. In her article on 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', Margaret Atherton notes that while Astell gives a high evaluation to reason, she does not believe that the rational mind can completely transcend or exclude the body. Astell, she says, does not regard a life based on reason as a *rival* to a life based on the body; human beings, in her view, can be neither pure cogitation nor pure mechanism. Like Elisabeth of Bohemia, Astell sees bodies as making a contribution to human life that cannot be ignored. In the second part of the *Proposal*, Astell says it is a mistake 'of our Duty as our Happiness to consider either part of us singly, so as to neglect what is due to the other. For if we disregard the Body wholly, we pretend to live like Angels whilst we are but Mortals; and if we prefer or equal it to the Mind we degenerate into Brutes.'⁹¹ Despite the fact that Astell believes the soul should govern the body, she says that it is actually impossible for humans to lead a life that is identified solely with the soul. We cannot live like those 'few Scrupulous Persons' who neglect the body for ascetic reasons; to do so is 'inconsistent with a Human Frame'.⁹² In this sense, Astell does not wholeheartedly support **a conception of reason that opens the way for femininity to be associated with a lesser type of thought. Neither does she advocate that the soul can be completely autonomous, or that we can completely ignore the body.**

It is clear that Cartesianism is not the only significant feature of Astell's thought. On the one hand, Astell undoubtedly finds support in Cartesian ideas for her plan to establish a female academy. On this philosophical basis, she dismisses customary perceptions about female intellectual deficiency, and exhorts women to exercise their natural reason. When her proposal is ignored, Astell advocates Cartesian method as a course of study that women can pursue at home. Anybody can attain knowledge, she argues, so long as they begin with self-evident ideas in the mind, and proceed from simple to complex ideas in an orderly, rigorous manner.

⁹¹ Astell, *Proposal II*, p. 158.

⁹² *Ibid.*

In this way, all women can examine the rational principles behind their moral beliefs for themselves. These arguments are indebted to various Cartesian philosophers, including Descartes himself, Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, and probably also Poulain de la Barre. Yet although Astell is a strong advocate for Cartesian reason, there are other equally relevant principles at work in her writings. Like Anne Conway, Astell demonstrates that she has thought consistently about what God's attributes imply for his creation. If one were to sum up her guiding philosophical principle, it would most likely be that 'there is not a greater boldness and *presumption* than in *affirming* that God does any thing in vain'.⁹³ In short, Astell argues that God has designed a harmonious order in which each part is suited to its end, and there is no waste or lost labour. She opposes any view of women in which their reason is denied, neglected, or made redundant: a supremely wise being, she says, would not have endowed women with a rational faculty if he had not wished them to use it. Thus, she says, they must not be encouraged to act as though they were mere mechanical bodies. Similarly she believes that matter is not without purpose or connection to the spiritual world. Astell rejects Norris's conception of matter as without power or force and supports a theory of causation in which matter is revitalised and its connection with the spiritual world re-established. On this interpretation, Astell supports a metaphysical framework that allows her to avoid some of the gender-biases modern feminists identify in Cartesianism. Her philosophy raises the ontological status of those stereotypically 'feminine' categories of matter, nature, and the body.

⁹³ Astell, *Christian Religion*, p. 405.