



‘The Highest Epicurism’: Mary Astell’s Feminist Ethics and Late Seventeenth-Century Hedonistic Thought

ABSTRACT: *This essay situates Mary Astell’s understanding of women’s moral freedom in the context of her under-studied vocabulary of “Epicurism.” It foregrounds Astell’s engagement with two contemporaneous accounts of the will, both of which can be broadly characterized as hedonistic. On the first, developed by John Norris (1688, 1693), God ensures conformity between his will and the human will by endowing agents with a love of pleasure that moves them in his direction. On the second, delineated by John Locke (1690), human wills are motivated by a morally neutral desire for pleasure, which acquires moral significance only when agents exercise their power of freedom or bring their reason to evaluate the goods that give them pleasure. In her writings of the 1690s, Astell develops a feminist ethics that is far closer to Locke’s than has been recognized. Like Locke, and unlike Norris, she suggests that agents are themselves responsible for aligning their wills with God’s, and they must do so by cultivating reason and a taste for virtuous pleasures. In a distinctively feminist move, she maps how patriarchal society corrupts women’s wills by directing their desires to sense-based goods only, preventing them from achieving the happiness due to them as rational beings. While Astell is routinely characterized as a rationalist philosopher, she is a rationalist who, like Locke, is highly aware of the limits of reason, and deeply interested in the potential of agents to transform their likes and dislikes so that they find pleasure in the exercise of virtue.*

KEYWORDS: moral freedom, the will, pleasure, happiness, feminist philosophy

I. Introduction

While Mary Astell is widely viewed as a rationalist feminist philosopher (Smith 1982; Perry 1986 and 1990; Springborg 1995 and 2005; Bryson 1998), who built on a Christian-Cartesian tradition to argue for women’s equality with men as disembodied minds, Astell’s writings are peppered with intriguingly friendly references to the ancient hedonistic doctrine of Epicureanism. In the first part of her most polemically feminist work, the two-part *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694–1697), Astell urges women to retreat from patriarchal society to a female academy or “*Religious Retirement*” (Astell 2002, 73), where they can cultivate a piety that is “in truth the highest *Epicurism*”—one that “exalt[s] our Pleasures by refining them” (86). In *Proposal II*, she further conjoins religion and pleasure, suggesting that “Good Christians [are] indeed the truest *Epicures*, because they have the most tastful and



highest Enjoyment of the greatest Good” (221). And in her magisterial *The Christian Religion, As Professed by A Daughter of The Church of England* (1705, revised 1717), Astell worries that the Christian-feminist ethics she prescribes is so pleasurable that it might have “too much Epicurism in it” (Astell 2013, 233).

It might be tempting to interpret Astell’s references to “Epicurism” as mere rhetorical flourishes, harking back to long-standing Christian conceptions of blissful union with God in the afterlife. But such a reading is complicated by Astell’s emphatic characterization of this-worldly existence as intensely pleasurable, if lived in accordance with God’s will, and by her explicit endorsement of key hedonistic ideas. For example, in *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695), her published correspondence with John Norris, Rector of Bemerton, Astell observes that motivation trumps rules in ensuring moral rectitude—“our Prescriptions will do us but little Service till we have reformed our Love” (Astell and Norris 2005, 113)—and this is because “Pleasure...is the grand Motive to Action” (127). Moral disorder, she elaborates, is due, in large part, to “false Notions of Pain and Pleasure” (88). Building on her definition of pleasure in *Letters* as “that grateful Relish or Sensation, which every Faculty enjoys, in the regular Application of it self, to such Objects as are agreeable to its Nature” (103; original emphasis), Astell argues in *Proposal I* that patriarchal society limits women’s moral potential by teaching them to find pleasure only in worldly, sense-based goods. Hence, “She who has relish’d no Pleasures but such as arise at the presence of outward Objects, will seek no higher than her Senses for her Gratification” (Astell 2002, 91). Denied an education in reason, women are denied what Astell characterizes in *Proposal II* as the fully human happiness, or “true and proper Pleasure of Human Nature,” which “consists in the exercise of that Dominion which the Soul has over the Body, in governing every Passion and Motion according to Right Reason, by which we most truly pursue the real good of both” (211).

Can Mary Astell, who has been called “the first English feminist” (Hill 1986), also be deemed a hedonist of sorts? Why does she depict the mind’s dominion over the body as fundamentally pleasurable (the “true and proper Pleasure of Human Nature”)? What role, precisely, do pleasure and pain play in her understanding of women’s moral freedom, the grounding concept of her feminism? This essay develops a response to these questions by substantially reframing our understanding of the intellectual contexts in which Astell worked, and by situating her claims about women’s moral freedom in relation to what I will characterize as two instantiations of hedonistic ethics permeating the English intellectual scene in the 1690s.¹ The first of these is exemplified by the Christian-Cartesian tradition within which Astell’s writings are typically placed, especially as this tradition was developed by the so-called “English Malebranche” (McCracken 1983, 179), Astell’s correspondent and mentor, John Norris. The second, more influential, and more recognizably “hedonistic,” version, is instantiated by John

¹ By “hedonism” I mean an ethical understanding that centers pleasure in explanations of moral motivation or moral value or both. For an excellent overview of hedonism’s under-rated role in the development of seventeenth-century English moral philosophy, see Frykholm and Rutherford (2013).

Locke's writings, especially the chapter "Of Power" in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).²

Both hedonisms seek a response to the question of how incessantly pleasure-seeking human agents can lead lives of moral rectitude, in conformity with God's will and reason. Norris's answer, I will argue, minimizes the role of human freedom, owing to his acceptance of Malebranche's occasionalism, or the argument that God is the only true causal agent and that the human will, as Norris puts it, is merely "that continual Impression, whereby the Author of Nature moves [man] towards himself" (Astell and Norris 2005, 120). In contrast, Locke develops a more naturalistic account of the will, prioritizing custom and education over God as shapers of human desire, and creating room for agents to intervene in the process by which the will is determined—in other words, to exercise their powers of freedom. Astell's career-long commitment to women's self-improvement and their potential for self-governance, her suggestion that human beings can lay claim to a "true and proper pleasure" by governing "every Passion and Motion according to Right Reason," align her feminist ethical project with Lockean ethics in ways that remain obscured by Astell scholarship.

Indeed, to argue that Astell built on Locke's *Essay* is controversial since she is widely viewed as hostile to Locke, intellectually and even personally (Bryson 1998; Harol 2007; Perry 1986 and 1990; Springborg 1995 and 2005; Taylor 2001 and 2007).³ Astell's royalism has seemed to many to make her a natural critic not only of Locke's contractarianism but of his philosophy in toto, even though, as Mark Goldie (2007) notes, her references to the *Essay* are respectful, even admiring, and it is only in the *Christian Religion*—and in relation to Locke's suspiciously Socinian *Reasonableness of Christianity*—that her tone sharpens.⁴ As Goldie suggests, scholarly narratives about "the mother of feminism" battling "the father of liberalism" appear to have more to do with postmodernist feminism's ambivalence about liberalism than with Astell's attitude to Locke. Scholarly interpretations of this attitude through the lens of what Goldie characterizes as a "melodramatic" battle of the sexes sacrifices "textual and historical specificity" (65). I would add that the excision of Lockean ethics as a context for Astell's writings has led to a problematic obscuring of her omnipresent hedonistic vocabulary of pleasure, desire, and happiness, and even to a misunderstanding of her widely acknowledged rationalism.⁵ While Astell is rightly viewed as a rationalist, this essay

² The hedonistic aspects of Norris's ethical understanding have flown under the radar of Norris scholarship, though hedonism is acknowledged as a relevant context for Malebranche, upon whom Norris built. For a comparison of Locke's and Malebranche's ethical understandings, including their shared hedonistic assumptions, see Walsh and Lennon (2019).

³ See, however, Lascano (2023). Lascano's recently published interpretation of the Astell-Locke connection anticipates mine by arguing for the closeness of the two philosophers' understandings of the will. My more extended comparison follows Astell's and Locke's shared vocabulary not only of "uneasiness" and "suspension"—foregrounded by Lascano—but also of "relish" and "custom," situating this vocabulary in a wider landscape of late-century hedonistic thought.

⁴ Associated with the teachings of the Renaissance theologian, Faustus Socinus, Socinianism contested such traditional Christian doctrines as the Trinity and original sin. On "Socinianism" as an epithet leveled at Locke, see Marshall (2014).

⁵ Insofar as Astell's hedonistic language has received philosophical attention, it is seen as building exclusively on Descartes's theory of the passions. While the latter, especially as interpreted by Henry More in *Enchiridion ethicum*

underscores that she is a rationalist who, like Locke, is highly aware of the limits of reason and deeply interested in the place of human desire in ensuring moral rectitude (see McDonald 1994 for a discussion of Astell’s and Locke’s shared epistemological concerns).

The plan of this essay is as follows. In the next section, I put Norris’s and Locke’s ethical understandings into dialogue and unpack the implications for human freedom of their respective hedonistic assumptions. Section III outlines Astell’s initial response, in her correspondence with Norris, to the questions that arise when we compare Locke’s and Norris’s claims about the ethical significance of pleasure. I then turn, in Section IV, to *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*—first to *Proposal II*, where Astell provides her most systematic exposition of the will and moral freedom, highlighting the closeness of her account to Locke’s. Second, I unpack the implications of Astell’s understanding of moral freedom for her feminist critique of societal customs and her argument about female education in *Proposal I*. My focus throughout this essay is Astell’s three published writings of the 1690s—the two *Proposals* and *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. These lay out the feminist ethics that later works such as *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700, revised 1706) and the *Christian Religion* adapt in various ways, but without substantially changing Astell’s sense of how to improve women’s moral standing in the world.

II. Locke and Norris on the Ethical Significance of Pleasure

In some respects, John Locke and John Norris occupy clearly opposing poles of the English intellectual scene in the closing decade of the seventeenth century. Locke’s empiricist critique of innate ideas in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* shook the intellectual establishment, identifying him to some as Thomas Hobbes’s dangerously atheistic heir, and to others as a remarkable innovator, who managed—unlike the author of *Leviathan* (1651)—to reconcile Christian belief and a sense-based epistemology. In contrast, Norris, who began his career as an eclectic mixer of Cartesian, Platonist, and Augustinian ideas, had moved by the 1690s decisively towards Nicolas Malebranche’s occasionalism and his doctrine of “vision in God” (McCracken 1983). These differences between the two philosophers emerge in Norris’s respectfully critical *Cursory Reflections upon a Book Called An Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), which appeared within six months of the publication of the *Essay*. In his book-length study on Norris, W.J. Mander observes that “opposition to Locke’s system lies in the background of almost everything Norris wrote from 1690 onwards” (Mander 2008, 171).

Mander’s focus, like that of other commentators, has been Locke’s and Norris’s epistemological differences and their increasingly rocky personal relationship (see also Johnston 1958), and this has obscured the parallels that emerge when we shift attention to their writings on ethics. To begin with, both prioritize moral motivation

(1667), is clearly important to Astell, Descartes’s libertarianism stands at odds with Astell’s understanding of the will, as I explain below. On Astell and Descartes, see, especially, Broad (2007) and (2015); and Ahearn (2016). Relatedly, Harol (2007) argues that desire plays a role *Proposal II* (but not in Astell’s other writings) and makes a connection to Locke’s *Essay* but interprets Locke as committed to the repression of desire. Writing from a literary-critical perspective, Cole (2024) prioritizes pleasure in her discussion of Astell’s “queer religiosity.”

as the key to moral conduct, in sharp contrast to deontological ethics. Appeals to abstract moral rules, Locke argues throughout his oeuvre, are unlikely to change behavior because human beings are ineluctably happiness- or pleasure-seeking agents, whose choices are guided from moment to moment by the desire for the pleasure that follows from the removal of a pressing present “uneasiness” (Locke 1975, 2.21.36). Likewise, Norris characterizes his ethical understanding in *The Theory and Regulation of Love* (1688) as an ethics of love or desire because desire determines conduct: “As a Man Loves so is he...By this a Good Man is distinguish’d from Bad” (Norris [1688] 1723, 17). All human beings, good and bad, desire happiness—which Norris, in the *Theory*, distinguishes from, but aligns very closely with, pleasure—but the good man understands that his incessant desire for happiness is, essentially, a desire for God, the absolute Good, who gives all particular goods their character as good.⁶

In *A Measure of Divine Love* (1693), which builds on, but revises, key claims of the *Theory*, Norris interprets the ethical implications of human desire differently. Whereas in the earlier work, Norris suggests that desire, or what he calls “the love of desire,” is appropriately directed to various worldly goods—including, notably, sexual pleasure (Norris [1688] 1723, 93–94)—as long as they do not eclipse God, in the *Measure*, God becomes the only legitimate object of human desire; God’s creation (including other human beings) cannot be desired but merits only good wishes or the “love of benevolence.” Norris contends further that God is the only legitimate object of desire because he alone causes perfective pleasure in agents. As he explains, “we are to love nothing but what is lovely; nothing is lovely but what is our good; nothing is our Good, but what does us good; *nothing does us good but what causes Pleasure in us*; nothing causes Pleasure in us but God; therefore we are to love nothing but God” (Norris [1693] 1711, 40; my emphasis).

Norris’s suggestion that God is to be loved *because* he causes pleasure in agents has the curious effect of instrumentalizing God as merely a means to end of pleasure. It prompted Astell to write to him in 1693, shortly after the publication of the *Measure*. I will turn to Astell’s objections momentarily; for now, I want to focus on the question of how Norris’s hedonistic assumptions in the *Measure* and the *Theory* sit alongside his argument in both works that agents have the freedom or the ability to regulate love so as to lead truly Christian lives or lives of moral rectitude.

That agents need to regulate love is obvious, Norris observes, not least owing to the long shadow cast by the Fall: “The lower Life is now highly invigorated and awaken’d in us, *the Corruptible Body...presses down the Soul*, and the Love, which we have to Good in general, does now by the Corruption of our Nature almost wholly display and exert itself in the Prosecution of this one particular Good, the *Good of Sense*” (Norris [1688] 1723: 67–68). This acknowledgment of the waywardness of love stands at odds, however, with Norris’s interpretation of it as God’s special gift to his creation—as an endowment that *compels* agents, willy nilly, to move in God’s direction or conform to his will. The figurative language Norris uses in the *Theory* to

⁶ Norris’s descriptions of the love of happiness and the love of pleasure indicate their closeness. The first is one “to which our Nature is originally and invincibly determin’d; and consequently, cannot be morally obliged” (Norris [1688] 1723, 74). The second is “*Necessary and invincible*, implanted in us by the Author of our Nature, and which can no more devert our selves of, than we can of any the most essential Part of our constitution” (88).

depict the moral order is telling in this regard. Under one favored metaphor, the moral order is portrayed as a magnetic field, with God, “the Great and Supreme Magnet” (29), continuously drawing agents towards himself. Elsewhere, he characterizes love as exhibiting the same inevitability or regularity as the laws of motion: the loving soul moves towards God “with as much Necessity as a Stone falls downwards” (30). The soul has a “Moral Gravity...whence proceed all her actual Tendencies,” and these are caused “by the continual acting of God upon her by his attractive and magnetick Influences” (129-30).

All objects of love would appear to have normative value on Norris’s account since he invests love itself with normative value, as God’s mechanism for drawing agents towards his, and their own, perfection. The need for individuals to reflect on their pleasures and pains, to choose which desires to honor in their quest for happiness, is minimized owing to Norris’s theocentrism—a theocentrism that is deepened in the *Measure*, which figures God less as a magnet drawing his creation towards himself than as the only agent in a moral order where all created things, including human agents, lack the ability to generate meaningful change.

Like Norris, Locke believes that the love of, or desire for, happiness is the necessary starting point of ethical theorizing. It is a starting point, however, not for the reason Norris gives (because God has endowed agents with this desire to draw them towards himself). For Locke, the desire for happiness is important instead as an entirely naturalistic explanation of why agents act as they do: “Nature, I confess, has put into Man a desire of Happiness, and an aversion to Misery: These indeed are innate practical Principles, which (as practical Principles ought) do continue constantly to operate and influence all our Actions, without ceasing” (Locke 1975, 1.3.3). The will, Locke explains, is guided from moment to moment by the desire for an absent good, the absence of which is felt as pain or uneasiness: “’tis *uneasiness* alone operates on the will, and determines it in its choice” (2.2.1.36). On this understanding, agents habitually seek the pleasure that derives from the removal of a present uneasiness. They seek to maximize happiness or pleasure: “Happiness...in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of, and Misery the utmost Pain” (2.2.1.42).⁷

Whereas for Norris, pleasure perfects agents or does them good, for Locke, pleasure per se has no such normative value. Pleasure acquires moral significance only when it is a consequence of human choice. As Locke explains in his unpublished essay, “Of Ethic in General” (c. 1686-88?), “The difference between moral and natural good and evil is only this; that we call natural good and evil, which, by the natural efficiency of the thing, produces pleasure or pain in us; and that is morally good or evil which, by the intervention of the will of an intelligent free agent, draws pleasure or pain after it, not by any natural consequence, but by the intervention of that power” (Locke 1997a: 301).

⁷ Locke uses pleasure as a shorthand for happiness because happiness, on his understanding, denotes possession of a good, the absence of which is experienced as pain (Locke 1975, 2.20.2). Pleasure, for Locke, is ultimately a mental perception, even though it can be experienced as a physiological response: “By Pleasure and Pain, I must be understood to mean of Body or Mind, as they are commonly distinguished; though in truth, they be only different Constitutions of Mind, sometimes occasioned by disorder in the Body, sometimes by Thoughts of the Mind” (2.20.2).

In “Of Power,” the *Essay*’s longest and most heavily revised chapter, Locke builds on his earlier distinction between natural and moral good to differentiate true from false happiness. The former belongs to free rational agents, while the latter connotes a failure of reason and a form of subjection. The key here, Locke elaborates, is agents’ relation to the pleasures and pains driving the will. Most people, he suggests, are incapable of bringing reason to bear on their appetites, both because they are unable to resist present pleasure, and because they fail to reflect seriously on the ends of life and the meaning of “true and solid happiness” (Locke 1975, 2.21.51). Losing sight of “the infinite eternal Joys of Heaven” (2.21.37) to which they should aspire, and for which a virtuous life on earth is the best preparation, they are guided by “Fashion, Example, and Education” to pursue a second-rate happiness, as in the “itch after *Honour, Power, or Riches, etc.*” (2.21.45). Directing attention away from original sin, which Norris cites as a principal corrupting factor, Locke emphasizes custom: agents’ wills are profoundly shaped by the “fantastical *uneasiness*” and “thousand other irregular desires, which custom has made natural to us” (2.21.45).

For Locke, however, a benevolent God has not left humanity unaided in this context. He has endowed agents with the power to interrupt the prosecution of any given desire:

...though this general *Desire* of Happiness operates constantly and invariably, yet the satisfaction of any particular *desire* can be suspended from determining the will to any subservient action, till we have maturely examin’d, whether the particular apparent good, which we then desire, makes a part of our real Happiness, or be consistent or inconsistent with it. The result of our judgment upon that Examination is what ultimately determines the Man, who could not be *free* if his *will* were determin’d by any thing, but his own *desire* guided by his own *Judgment*. (Locke 1975, 2.21.71)

“Freedom,” as described here, refers to an agent’s ability to ensure that the desires determining her will are reflectively endorsed. Importantly, Locke’s is not a libertarian account since it accords freedom to agents rather than wills: “I think *the Question is not proper, whether the Will be free, but whether a Man be free*” (2.21.21). As I suggest elsewhere, Locke anticipates recent compatibilist accounts like Harry G. Frankfurt’s, in which free agents desire to have certain desires, and are able to make their second-order desires their volitions (Nazar 2017, 224; see also Frankfurt 1971).

Another important takeaway from the passage above is that the exercise of freedom does not require extirpating the desire for pleasure. No good, Locke underscores, will move an agent to act “till it has raised desires in our Minds, and thereby made us *uneasie* in its want” (Locke 1975, 2.21.46). Like the akratic alcoholic, whose desire for drink overrides his knowledge of its perils (2.21.35), the moral agent remains vulnerable to every passing uneasiness “till he *hungers and thirsts after righteousness*; till he feels an *uneasiness* in the want of it, his *will* will not be determin’d to any action in pursuit of this confessed greater good; but any other *uneasinesses* he feels in himself, shall take place, and carry his *will* to other actions”

(21.35). Elsewhere, Locke reinforces the argument that moral appetite must acquire the force of physical appetite when he observes that virtuous action is only possible when “men are made alive to virtue and can *taste* it” (Locke 1997b, 320; my emphasis).

For free moral choice to be possible, then, not only must agents routinely reflect on their desires, on the nature of their pleasures and their happiness, but they must also self-consciously cultivate a desire for certain pleasures over others. Locke speaks of a “relish” of the mind—“The Mind has a different relish, as well as the Palate” (Locke 1975, 2.21.55)—that can and should be changed so that agents take pleasure in the practice of virtue. His writings on education, such as *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1705), are integral to the account of freedom he develops in the *Essay* because habitual likes and dislikes, which take root in childhood, shape what the adult mind relishes (Nazar 2017 and 2021). In the *Essay*, Locke urges adults to break free of society’s impoverished understanding of happiness (the itch after honor, power, riches), and to change their tastes accordingly: “Fashion and the common Opinion having settled wrong Notions, and education and custom ill habits, the just values of things are misplaced, and the palates of Men corrupted. Pains should be taken to rectify these; and contrary habits change our pleasures, and give a relish to that, which is necessary or conducive to our Happiness” (2.21.69).

Locke’s and Norris’s ethical writings indicate that hedonistic assumptions significantly shaped late seventeenth-century understandings of moral agency and freedom. The difference between the two philosophers’ ethical understandings is not religion per se, since God—albeit in very different guises—remains important to both. But Locke’s naturalistic explanations attribute enormous causal efficacy to this-worldly forces—societal norms, customary practices, and agents themselves—in ways that Norris’s occasionalist beliefs do not. As such, Locke’s hedonistic ethics enables, in ways Norris’s does not, what Jerome B. Schneewind has described as the most significant development of seventeenth-century ethics: the shift from traditional understandings of “morality as obedience” to modern understandings of “morality as self-governance” (Schneewind 1998, 4). On the former, morality is viewed as “one aspect of the obedience we owe to God,” while the latter assumes that all of us “have an equal ability to see for ourselves what morality calls for and are in principle equally able to move ourselves to act accordingly” (4). I will now consider how Astell’s writings negotiate this shift.

III. The Proper Love of God: Astell and Norris

Mary Astell’s first recorded thoughts on the questions that emerge when we put Locke’s and Norris’s ethical understandings in dialogue—questions about the relationship between the human will and God’s will, and about the love of pleasure as a determinant of the will—appear in her yearlong correspondence with Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. Initiated by Astell, who identified herself as an avid admirer of Norris’s writings, the exchange was prompted by Norris’s argument in *Measure* that God is the exclusive object of agents’ love because he is the direct efficient cause of their pleasure. In her opening letter, Astell

raises the commonsensical objection that if God is to be loved because he causes our pleasure then he should be hated as causing also our pain. The ensuing letters clarify that for Astell there are better grounds for loving God than Norris's occasionalist explanation indicates, that occasionalism does disservice to God's created order by denying causality to bodies, and finally—and most significantly—that it diminishes the potential of individual moral choice and agency.

A rhetorically complex work, in which a young woman (an unpublished author when the correspondence began in September 1693) exchanges ideas with a revered public intellectual, *Letters* displays a curious blend of deference and resistance on Astell's part. Astell agrees with Norris that love is crucial to ethics because desire is the primary shaper of the will. She also appears to concede at various points that God has the exclusive right to the love of desire, though this concession remains ambiguous because, as she puts it, "it is a very difficult thing for me to love at all, without something of Desire" (Astell and Norris 2005, 80). Her sharpest disagreement, which emerges unequivocally only in her contribution to the appendix (that is, after she had agreed to publish the correspondence), has to do with Norris's occasionalist justification for loving God. This, she contends, is contrary to God's "Workmanship" and "Majesty" (131). First, occasionalism implies that God has created a varied world of bodies entirely in vain (131-32). Second, it diminishes God's majesty by ascribing to him actions that are well below his notice: "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" (132).

Against occasionalism, Astell clarifies that God is to be loved because he *will*s agents good rather than *causing* them good through the experience of pleasure:

And so say I, allowing that Bodies did really better our Conditions, that they did contribute to our Happiness or Misery, and did in some Sense produce our Pleasure or Pain, yet since they do not *will* it, do not act voluntarily but mechanically, and all the Power they have of affecting us proceeds intirely from the Will and good Pleasure of a superiour Nature...therefore they are not Objects of our Love or Fear. (Astell and Norris 2005, 132-33)

At stake here is a very different understanding of the moral order than the occasionalists', one in which God's will serves as a paradigm for the human will rather than as the causal force underpinning it. Whereas for Norris, the human will is merely an "Impression" (120) of God's, for Astell, the two wills need to be clearly differentiated. And they must be differentiated, she suggests, if individuals are to be considered responsible for their actions. Otherwise, God would be rightly viewed as the author not only of the human good but also of human evil. As she notes, "I think it is an unquestionable Maxim, that all our Good is wholly and absolutely from GOD, and all our Evil purely and entirely from our selves" (Astell and Norris 2005, 76-77). For her, individual moral responsibility matters in ways occasionalism elides.

Importantly, Astell questions Norris’s understanding not only of why agents should love God but also of how they should love him. Whereas for Norris, to love God wholeheartedly is to love only him, for Astell, loving God wholeheartedly means striving, wholeheartedly, to resemble him. Religion, she notes, aims:

... to new draw and perfect in our Souls that Beautiful Image of our Maker, which by our Sin and Errors we have defaced; in a word, to make us as Godlike as is consistent with the Capacity of a Creature... If then we love GOD intirely we shall with all the Powers of our Soul endeavour to be like him, and according to the Degree of our Love, so will be the Nearness of our Resemblance. For we cannot make GOD like our selves, if therefore we desire a Union, we must be conformed to the Divine Nature. (Astell and Norris 2005, 111)

The lover, Astell observes, seeks union with the beloved, and union implies similitude. To love God as one should, then, is to seek union with him, and to seek union with him is to become “as Godlike as is consistent with the Capacity of a Creature.” Whereas Norris contends that God requires nothing less than a total sacrifice of the “Heart of Man”—this must be “wholly burnt and consumed at his Altar” (58)—Astell argues that God commands agents to endorse their identities as deiform or godlike beings. Elsewhere, she implies that those who realize this potential are owed a love that is closer to the love of desire than the love of benevolence Norris reserves for fellow human beings: “the Soul of our Neighbour has the most plausible Pretence to our Love, as being the most Godlike of all the Creatures” (99). Revising Norris’s magnet metaphor, Astell suggests, “All true Lovers of GOD being like excited Needles... cleave not only to him their Magnet, but even to one another” (66-67). She dedicates *Letters* to her friend, Lady Catherine Jones, because “I cannot but pay a very great Respect to one who so nearly resembles [God]” (66).

In *Proposal II*, Astell further explains what it means to be a deiform being when she suggests that human beings are neither beasts nor angels—neither bodies alone, nor minds alone—but mind-body composites, whose perfection and happiness, or “true and proper Pleasure,” lies in an ordered unfolding of the whole self, so that the mind regulates the body, or “Right Reason” governs “every Passion and Motion” (Astell 2002, 211). It is, Astell adds, “a mistake as well of our Duty as our Happiness to consider either part of us singly, so as to neglect what is due to the other” (211). To affirm one’s identity as a godlike being is not to pretend to be a disembodied god or angel. Instead, it is to affirm one’s potential for self-governance *as* an embodied being. Astell offers her fullest account of this potential when she delineates her understanding of the will in chapter IV of *Proposal II*.

IV. Astell on the Will, Moral Freedom, and Education

Against Norris’s indifference, ultimately, to the potential of human freedom, Astell makes voluntary choice central to her ethical project. As she puts it early on in *Proposal II*, “as Irrational Creatures act only by the Will of him who made them, and

according to the Power of that Mechanisme by which they are form'd, so every one who pretends to Reason, who is a Voluntary Agent...must *Chuse* his Actions and determine his Will to that Choice by some Reasonings or Principles either true or false" (Astell 2002, 128). Moral responsibility, on this understanding, presupposes an agent capable of making deliberative choices. While Astell does not cite occasionalism directly, her censure of those agents who become indistinguishable from automatons because they act "according to the Power of that Mechanisme by which they are formed," functions as an implicit criticism of occasionalism's subsumption of the human will under God's. Eschewing Norris's theocentrism, Astell characterizes the will in broadly naturalistic terms, building on a variety of sources, including Descartes's and Henry More's accounts of the passions, and especially Locke's "Of Power." Below I will focus on Astell's use of several key terms from the latter: "uneasiness," "suspension," "custom," and "relish."

Like Locke, Astell identifies the will, which she views as one of the two faculties of the mind—the other being the understanding—as the power of "preferring." For Locke, the will is the "Power which the mind has, thus to order the consideration of any Idea, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, or *vice versâ* in any particular instance" (Locke 1975, 2.21.5). For Astell, it is "the Power of Preferring any Thought or Motion, of Directing them to This or That thing rather than to another" (Astell 2002, 205). While the understanding has the potential to influence the will, the will itself is virtually indistinguishable from inclination: "there are certain Motions [or] Inclinations inseparable from the Will, which push us on to the use of that Power, and determine it to the Choice of such things as are most agreeable to them" (205).⁸ These inclinations, Astell adds, can be loosely grouped together as the desire for happiness, "which Happiness we pursue by removing as far as we can from *that which is uneasie to us*, and by uniting our selves as much as we are able to some Good which we suppose we want" (206; my emphasis).

For Astell, as for Locke, the will is not "free" because it consistently pursues the happiness or pleasure that derives from the removal of "uneasiness," a key Lockean term. This movement of the will, Astell notes, is not in itself problematic since if the good that agents think they want is consistent with the happiness God wills them, all is well: "Good then is the Object of the Will, and hitherto one wou'd think there were no probability of our straying from the Will of GOD...because whenever we oppose our Wills to his, we change in a manner the very Constitution of our Nature and fly from that Happiness which we wou'd pursue" (Astell 2002, 206). Agents wills do, however, stray from God's because what makes most people happy—and, therefore, uneasy, when they are deprived of the goods that bring happiness—has little to do with reason or their real good. Whereas for Norris, agents fail in their quest for happiness owing to "the *Seducer, Eve*" (Norris [1688] 1723, 69), for Astell, as for Locke, the principal culprit in this context is "custom," a portmanteau term that includes socialization, inherited belief, and habit. Locke characterizes custom as "a

⁸ Springborg's edition of *Serious Proposal* mis-transcribes Astell's phrasing in the 1697 edition, substituting "Motions of Inclinations" for "Motions or Inclinations." I thank one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

greater power than Nature” (Locke 1975, 1.3.25), and Astell broadly agrees. Throughout her oeuvre, she forwards the fundamentally empiricist claim that custom reaches the innermost recesses of subjectivity: it shapes agents’ most cherished convictions, their likes and dislikes, so that “we generally take that Course in our search after Happiness, which Education, Example or Custom puts us in” (Astell 2002, 130). In *Proposal I*, Astell makes this point especially forcefully:

‘T wou’d puzzle a considerate Person to account for all that Sin and Folly that is in the World...did not Custom help to solve the difficulty. For Vertue without question has on all accounts the preeminence of Vice, ‘tis abundantly more pleasant in the *Act*, as well as more advantageous in the *consequences*, as any one who will but rightly use her reason...may easily perceive. ‘Tis Custom therefore, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our present interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future. (Astell 2002, 67-68)

The problem, Astell contends, is not that agents desire pleasure, since virtuous actions are more pleasurable than sinful ones, but that custom has corrupted agents’ sense of what is pleasurable. *Proposal II* explains that custom acquires this power because the will is exercised before reason matures. Children’s powers of reasoning are limited, and their choices are guided by their educators’ reason. But most educators are unfit mentors since they, themselves, are guided by reason-deficient societal customs. Astell suggests that as a result, children learn, early on, to choose false goods or pleasures, and “the frequent repetition of such unreasonable Choices makes them Customary to us, and consequently gives a new and wrong bias to our Inclinations” (206). The will, in other words, has a history, as Astell notes also in *Letters* when she asserts that society shapes agents’ tastes over time, creating a powerful love of “visible Objects” over God: “These we learn to covet and call our Goods, to value our selves upon, and be pleased in the Enjoyment of them. And as we grow up we see the generality of the World pursuing the same Method, and think it our Wisdom to strike in with the vulgar Herd” (Astell and Norris 2005, 117).

Astell underscores that adult agents can push back against their irregular desires owing to their ability to suspend desire. In a passage identifying her as a close reader of the *Essay*, she observes:

‘Tis true the Will does always pursue Good, or somewhat represented to it as such, but it is not always, or rather very seldom, determin’d to the Choice of what is in it self the greatest Good. And though I suppose we always Chuse that which in that Juncture in which it is propos’d seems fittest for our present turn, yet it is often such as we wou’d not prefer, did we impartially examin and observe the Consequences. But we will not do that, chusing rather to Act by the Wrong Judgments we have formerly made, and to follow blindly the Propensities they have given us, than to suspend our Inclinations as we both May and Ought, and restrain them from determining our Will, till we have fairly and fully examin’d and

balanc'd, according to the best of our Knowledge, the several degrees of Good and Evil present and future that are in the Objects set before us. (Astell 2002, 207)

Like Locke, Astell argues that agents can suspend the prosecution of any given inclination or desire and reflect on its compatibility with their true good or happiness.⁹ She characterizes agents as “free” not in the sense that their wills are free—the will, on her account, is a circumscribed power, constrained by past preferences and judgments, as well as by the lure of present pleasure—but because they can choose which desires to make actionable. While Astell refers at one point in *Proposal II* to “the Empire of our Reason and Freedom of our Will” (221), she is not a libertarian, as Jacqueline Broad, for example, has argued (Broad 2007, 105; Broad 2015, 84; Brown and Broad 2022, 410), because the will, as she describes it, belongs to an embodied and socially embedded agent, whose choices in the present are shaped by those in the past.¹⁰ Even the power to suspend, Astell cautions, has limits. This is because the desire to remove a pressing uneasiness is strong, because “the Short Pleasures of Sin” easily override “the Prospect of a Felicity Infinite and Eternal” that should motivate upright Christians (207). A “perverse Inclination,” she explains, “fixes our Thoughts on a Present Uneasiness which it says must be remov'd, and our Desires gratify'd at any rate, without suffering us to weigh the ill Consequences of doing so” (207).

For Astell, as for Locke, for agents to be truly happy they must exercise their powers of freedom, suspending the will's determination by desires they have not reflectively endorsed, and suspending also the pursuit of those “Butter flies and Trifles” (Astell 2002, 55) that conventional society confuses for true happiness. This is only possible, she argues, by educating both reason and desire. Educating reason is essential because only then can agents deliberate properly about means and ends. But also essential to Astell's moral vision is the transformation of desire, a shift in agents' habitual likes and dislikes. Astell observes:

...considering how weak our Reason is, how unable to maintain its Authority and oppose the incursions of sense, without the assistance of an inward and Spiritual Sensation to strengthen it, 'tis highly necessary that we use due endeavours to procure a lively relish of our true Good, a Sentiment that will not only Balance, but if attended to and improv'd, very much outweigh the Pleasures of our Animal Nature. (143-44)

⁹ Locke writes, “In this [the power to suspend] lies the liberty Man has; and from the not using of it right comes all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into, in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness; whilst we precipitate the determination of our *wills*, and engage too soon before due *Examination*. For during this *suspension* of any desire, before the will be determined to action...we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do” (Locke 1975, 2.21.47).

¹⁰ Notwithstanding my disagreements with Broad's interpretation of Astell's ethical understanding, I am indebted to her pioneering scholarship on Astell.

Just as for Locke an agent’s true good motivates when it ceases to be an object of reason alone, and becomes also an object of desire, here too the motivating power of desire is foregrounded. For Locke, we will recall, those who would be truly happy must take care to change the mind’s relish through a rigorous program of habituation: “The relish of the mind is as various as that of the Body, and like that too may be alter’d...A due consideration will do it in some cases; and practice, application, and custom in most... That this is so in Vertue too, is very certain” (Locke 1975, 2.21.69). Similarly, Astell observes that agents must endeavor to acquire “a lively relish of [their] true Good” (Cf. Sowaal 2017 for a different reading of “relish” in *Proposal II*).

But how do agents acquire “a lively relish” of so remote a good as God, who, Astell argues throughout her oeuvre, is humanity’s true good? Astell’s response in the two *Proposals*, as in the *Letters*, is that God is much closer to us than we recognize because we are deiform beings, made in his image. This is a different claim from Norris’s argument that God’s will is the source of the human will. It can also be distinguished from Locke’s argument that to change what the mind relishes requires changing one habit at a time. While changing individual habits is important to Astell, she is still more interested in the radical transformation of an agent’s habitual viewpoint, the position from which one sees oneself and the world. This is particularly pertinent to women, she suggests, because women are socialized to see themselves as man’s, not God’s, creatures. Astell urges them to recognize, as a deeply held conviction or matter of feeling, that they are placed on earth by their Creator to perfect themselves, to become “as Godlike as is consistent with the Capacity of a Creature” (Astell and Norris 2005, 111); only then will they be motivated to habitually conform their wills to his. As she puts it in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, “perhaps the great Secret of Education lies in affecting the Soul with a lively Sense of what is truly its Perfection, and exciting the most ardent Desires after it” (Astell 1996, 65). In *Christian Religion*, she makes a related point: “There is not a stronger inducement to avoid the shame of sin, and to aspire to the perfection of holiness, than a due sense of our dignity as rational creatures” (Astell 2013, 187). While self-love, Astell notes, is readily perverted into egotism, “yet rightly apply’d it is Natural and Necessary, the great inducement to all manner of Vertue” (Astell 2002, 211).

Self-love and self-esteem are crucial concepts in the proposal for women’s education that Astell develops in *Proposal I* (see also Ahearn 2016). That the author of that work esteems herself is implicit in its form or genre, since *Proposal I* is presented, audaciously, as nothing less than a rewriting of scripture—that is, as a revisionist seventeenth-century *Genesis*, which takes Eve, rather than Adam, as its protagonist (on Astell’s Edenic imagery, see also Cole 2024, 132). Identifying herself on the title page as “a Lover of Her Sex,” perhaps reinforcing her distance from Norris’s injunction to love God only, Astell suggests that seventeenth-century Eve has fallen in that her will has strayed far from God’s. But unlike “*Mother Eve*” (Astell 2002, 74), she is not herself the principal cause of this disorder, which is due instead to her socialization by “that Tyrant, Custom” (67). Denied an education in reason, Astell’s Eve disobeys God because she is unable to reflect on the desire for happiness structuring her will, and is entirely oblivious of “the true and proper pleasure” of self-governance, due to her as a rational, deiform being. Lost in an endless round of mundane pleasures—pretty dresses, her own reflection in the mirror, male sexual

homage—she has been reduced to a body only, without access to the pleasures of the mind. Briefly summoning Locke’s epistemological argument in the *Essay* about idea formation through sensation and reflection, Astell suggests that women are stuck at step one of the process: “the Mind being prepossess’d and gratefully entertain’d with those pleasing Perceptions which external Objects occasion, takes up with them as its only Good, is not at leisure to tast those delights which arise from a Reflection on it self, nor to receive the *Ideas* which such a Reflection conveys, and consequently forms all its Notions by such *Ideas* only as it derives from sensation” (90). Astell makes note especially of women’s deficient ideas of God, religion, “*Pleasure and Pain*,” and “*Honour and Dishonour*” (90; original emphases).

The saddest part of modern Eve’s fall, as Astell describes it, is her participation in her oppression. Women, she observes, are not only seen, but also see themselves, as bodies, as “Tulips in a Garden” (Astell 2002, 54), or eye candy for men. Astell enjoins her female contemporaries to rise to a higher self-estimate:

Let us learn to pride ourselves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion: 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. We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion; and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart. (55-56)

Anticipating modern feminist arguments about the deleterious consequences of the male gaze, Astell urges women to rethink both how the body relates to the mind, and how they, as mind-body composites, relate to men. She “dares” them “to break the enchanted circle Custom has plac’d us in” (55) by learning to “care about that which is really your *self*” or “that particle of Divinity within you” (53). Cultivating their God-given reason, women can and should aspire to the “Bravery and Greatness of Soul” characteristic of the self-governing agent, someone who “gives evidence that her Happiness depends not on so mutable a thing as this World; but, in a due subserviency to the Almighty, is bottom’d only on her own great Mind” (111). While God must be acknowledged as one’s greatest good, such an acknowledgment is only possible, Astell underscores, when one acknowledges one’s “own great Mind.”

Astell’s proposed antidote to custom’s tyranny is an education that teaches women to use their reason, and to become accustomed to the kinds of pleasures that derive from the proper use of their reason. This is only possible, she suggests, by creating an alternative to patriarchal society, a society governed by different laws or customs, so that women become fully habituated to different patterns of willing. Astell figures her female academy as a refurbished Garden of Eden, where women can please themselves uninterruptedly by expanding their faculties, nourishing both mind and body, loving God, and loving themselves:

All that is requir’d of you, is only to be as Happy as possibly you can, and to make sure of a Felicity that will fill all the capacities of your Souls!... Happy Retreat! which will be the introducing you into such a *Paradise* as

your Mother *Eve* forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures, that do not like those of the World, disappoint your expectations, pall your Appetites, and by the disgust they give you, put you on the fruitless search after new Delights, which when obtain’d are as empty as the former; but such as will make you truly happy *now*, and prepare you to *perfectly* so hereafter. Here are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain yourselves in these delicious Gardens. (Astell 2002, 74)

Astell’s Garden of Eden, which withstands comparison with Epicurus’s Garden, is not quite the one Eve was booted from since it is not only serpent-less but also Adam-less. Indeed, serpents and Adams are one and the same on Astell’s account, since men are repeatedly figured by her as tricksters or vendors of false goods, who flatter women with sexual homage only to keep them in bondage. In place of that relationship, Astell extols the pleasures of friendship with like-minded women, who are similarly committed to moral excellence. Friendship between two deiform beings produces “a holy combination,” with the friends “watch[ing] over each other for Good, to advise, encourage and direct, and to observe the minutest fault in order to its amendment” (100).

The goal of education, as outlined in *Proposal I*, is both happiness and self-governance. The two, as Astell’s account of the will’s determination in *Proposal II* clarifies, are flipsides of the same coin. The holy, virtuous life is a life of “the highest Epicurism” because it does not require repressing desire, only refining it so that Eve can unfold her faculties to the fullest, finally becoming her true deiform self.

V. Conclusion

I have argued that to understand Mary Astell’s claims on behalf of women’s moral freedom we need to take seriously her hedonistic vocabulary of pleasure, desire, and happiness. Astell’s use of this vocabulary is not decorative but speaks to her deep engagement with key debates of the 1690s about the ethical significance of pleasure. As framed by John Norris and John Locke, two philosophers Astell read with great interest and care, these debates revolve around the question of how habitually pleasure-seeking human agents can conform their wills to God’s. Astell’s response is closer to Locke’s than Norris’s because she perceives conformity to God’s will or “Right Reason” to result from the exercise of freedom, or the ability of agents to bring their reason to bear on their desire for pleasure. Like Locke, too, she underscores that the true happiness that flows from conformity to God’s will does not require extirpating desire, only directing it to the right goods and away from the false goods society values. For Astell, it is not original sin but “that Tyrant Custom” (Astell 2002, 67) that leads agents, and especially women, astray, by corrupting their wills or desire. And it is to “custom,” in the sense of a reason-friendly education, that Astell turns to heal the gap between the divine and human wills.

While this essay directs attention to the significant parallels that exist between Astell’s and Locke’s ethical understandings, it does not seek to identify her as a “Lockean,” as opposed to a “Cartesian” or “Malebranchean,” philosopher. Such

labels do not do justice to her eclecticism, which is amply displayed in her writings, and which has been reinforced by the recent discovery of a book collection belonging to her at Magdalene College, Cambridge (indicating, notably, an active interest in science; see Sutherland 2023). It is entirely understandable that scholars seeking to recover early modern women's voices would want to situate their work in relation to their already well-known male peers. But the work of situating or contextualizing women's writing needn't entail pigeonholing it into narrowly defined camps. The routine characterization of Astell as a Cartesian or Christian rationalist, who was unrelentingly opposed to Locke, obscures the importance of pleasure to her feminist project and obscures her feminist insight that women will never be happy until they become self-governing agents—and further, that to become self-governing agents they must cultivate a taste for pleasures compatible with their reason. Early feminist philosophy, as instantiated by Astell's feminist ethics, places itself securely on the trajectory away from morality as obedience and towards morality as self-governance. And it does so with a ringing endorsement of women's right to happiness.

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