

Jacqueline Broad

The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-19-871681-5)
Reviewed by Lisa Shapiro, 2017

Mary Astell, for some time now, has been championed by a specialized group of philosophers and political theorists as an early feminist thinker. In particular, her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part I (1694) provides a polemical critique of coquettish culture and an exhortation to women to value their minds, and so demand a proper education. Part II of that work (1697) sets about outlining the principles of any education, including that of women. Similarly, her essay "Reflections on Marriage" provides a blistering critique of the institution of marriage as it exists and in particular how it subverts the autonomy of women. Patricia Springborg's edition of Astell's *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1996) brings this essay together with other of her writings on the essential features of a well-organized and democratic state, and presents her chiefly as a critic of Locke. Jacqueline Broad's *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue*, while not denying Astell's feminism, looks at her work through a different lens, one that captures not only these works but also her other writings, including especially her *Letters concerning the Love of God*, a published exchange with the Malebranchean philosopher John Norris, and *The Christian Religion*. Broad reads Astell as a systematic moral philosopher, one with metaphysical and epistemological commitments that feed into a virtue ethics that in turn grounds her political commitments.

It is hard to properly appreciate the ambition of Broad's project. Astell herself does not signal her systematic thought, and the philosophical scholarship on Astell in recent times has focused on one work or another, and highlighted her feminism, though it has also occasionally focused on her views about God, as well as situating her within the intellectual context of the period. Broad's work not only is committed to making sense of the whole corpus of Astell's writings, but also to interpreting those writings through the lens of authors Astell read, and with whom she interacted. The research Broad has undertaken is truly impressive, but the work does not read as a scholarly tome. And that is because this extensive research is not the end in itself but rather is leveraged in support of Broad's argument for the unity of Astell's philosophical project. This lucid articulation of Astell's unified philosophical position is a genuine achievement. Broad presents her reading in a way that is accessible both to nonspecialist scholars and to students, both undergraduate and graduate, and so provides the resources for Astell's philosophy to enter the mainstream.

On Broad's reading, Astell is first and foremost a virtue theorist, concerned with articulating the nature of a good human life and its relation to human happiness. As Broad presents it, Astell's account of virtue rests on a theory of knowledge. That account of knowledge in turn allows for us to know God, who serves as a kind of foundation for our good. We know our good, however, by having a proper understanding of ourselves, and that self-understanding rests on a grasp of metaphysics--the nature of soul and body. Realizing our God-given good, however, is not simply a matter of knowing what it is. To be good, we need to develop the proper habits of acting, both for ourselves and in community with others. For Astell, this process of proper habituation begins at the individual level, with the regulation of the passions achieved through our love of God. This self-regulation through love of the divine is then mirrored at the human level, so that our interpersonal relationships ought to be guided by

love, thereby lending primacy to friendship and community. These norms guiding human relationships are then leveraged to criticize the relationship between men and women in society, and in particular in marriage, as systematically in violation of them. They are, however, also used to defend the monarchy.

Broad's book proceeds to build up this picture chapter by chapter. In chapter 2 (the first chapter after the introduction), Broad lays out Astell's account of knowledge. Astell appropriates from Cartesian philosophy that clarity and distinctness are criteria of truth, that judgment is the source of error, that rules for thinking are a way to avoid error. But she also holds that thinking well involves a kind of purity--an inoculation against forces, both internal and external, that can compromise judgment--resulting from a proper contemplation of God.

Chapter 3 expands on this last point, explicating Astell's arguments for the existence of God, as well as her pragmatic argument for believing in God.

Chapter 4 turns to consider another pillar of Astell's philosophy: proper self-esteem. Valuing ourselves properly involves properly understanding what we are, and for Astell this involves a dualist metaphysics: we properly grasp our good in understanding that we are minded creatures.

In chapter 5, we are presented with Astell's account of the passions, and the importance of keeping violent passions in check. As with Descartes, for Astell, the cultivation of virtue rests with generosity, and happiness is achieved concomitant with virtue.

The actualization of virtue, for Astell, is achieved through the cultivation of a proper love, detailed in chapter 6. Proper love begins with the love of God, a love of desire, through which we want to be one with God. Broad argues that this love is distinct from the love of benevolence, which we hold for other human beings. Broad presents these two species of love as if they are wholly distinct, or at best that the former is a psychotherapeutic technique through which we can cultivate the latter. I wonder, however, whether there is not a tighter connection between the two kinds of love. Why could not Astell hold that the love of God is that through which our other passions can be regulated, including our love of worldly things, and in particular other human beings, toward whom we ought to cultivate a benevolence? Benevolence, for Astell, provides the basis for human beings to live in community with one another, promoting their shared humanity.

In chapters 7 and 8, Broad shows how this view about human social relationships is leveraged to Astell's political philosophy, first, in her scathing critique of the private institution of marriage, which regards the husband's ownership of his wife as a species of tyranny, and second in her positive view of public institutions, articulated in her political pamphlets, that hinges on a concept of moderation, which involves our valuing things in accord with their worth.

This structure lends itself nicely to those less interested in engaging with Astell's whole view. For instructors who want to introduce more women into their early modern survey courses, Broad's chapters align well with some of the central topics explored in those surveys. If one is interested in teaching the philosophical theology of the period, Broad's chapter on Astell's arguments regarding God are easily accessible in isolation and lay out nicely Astell's position on some key issues. If one is interested in teaching views on the mind-body distinction and the nature of self, Broad's chapter on soul and body will point the novice to the relevant elements of Astell's view. In this way, Broad's book is an excellent resource for instructors, as

well as upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

However, this same aspect of Broad's book is also a source of frustration. Broad wants to situate Astell's philosophy within the dominant narrative of early modern philosophy, but to do this she leans heavily on interpretations of canonical figures, especially Descartes and Locke, and newly elevated figures like Malebranche, that may be the bread and butter of the oversimplified narratives that structure curriculum but are far less nuanced than the interpretations emerging in current scholarship. Let me just indicate two examples. Descartes's causal argument for the existence of God, which serves as the lynchpin of the Third Meditation, is characterized as a cosmological argument. There is a certain sense in which that is true, insofar as our ideas are the evidentiary starting point of the argument, but it is also the case that the argument starts not from some observed facts about the world but rather from our ideas, which importantly, at this point in the *Meditations*, maybe not be about the world at all. This is an essential feature of Descartes's argument in the *Meditations* as a whole, and to miss it importantly distorts Descartes's views. Similarly, the characterization of both Descartes's and Malebranche's views on the passions, against which Astell's is situated, makes each thinker's account of the regulation of the passions seem straightforward, when in fact it is still highly contested how to understand these figures. In the case of Descartes, it is unclear whether his conception of the human good is more Augustinian, grounded in God's goodness, or more Spinozist, grounded in facts about the situation of human beings in the world. In the case of Malebranche, although he certainly thinks that we are all sinners and so are tainted by the passions, he also recognizes just how much of human social interaction is shaped by our passions (he devotes two full books of the *Search after Truth* to considerations of the passions, after all).

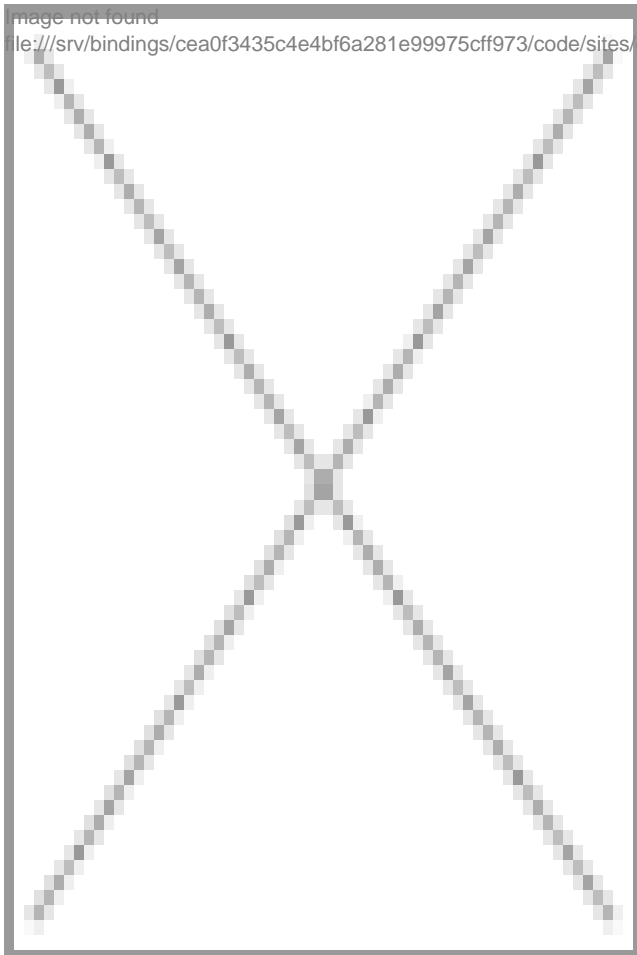
These oversimplifications color the interpretation of Astell, but Broad's subject is not the canonical figures, but Astell. And the reading of Astell that Broad presents here is a compelling one, and one that gives readers a way into an array of texts written in a variety of styles. Perhaps the biggest issue with these sorts of oversimplifications is that reading the well-known philosophical figures in a more nuanced way makes Astell a more interesting thinker. So, for instance, in Broad's discussion of Astell on generosity, she brings to light an English appropriation of Descartes's notion (by John Somers's 1693 *A Discourse concerning Generosity*), but that discussion also shows just how Astell's egalitarian concerns shape her appropriation of the philosophy of her near contemporaries.

This point, however, brings me to another challenge of this systematic presentation of Astell's philosophy. Astell clearly has political ends--she is an advocate for women, for their education, for their autonomy, and as far as a monarchist can be, their equality. However, in reading her through the lens of the canonical narrative of philosophy, an important question about the degree to which her philosophical system is at the service of these ends is masked. The systematicity of the Astell that Broad presents us with raises an interesting question: Are the epistemological and metaphysical commitments made on their merits or because they are the assumptions that are most effective at promoting the political ends? One can, it is worth noting, ask a similar question about Spinoza: Are the definitions that drive his philosophy forward real or nominal? Is his ethics derived from first principles? Or are the first principles articulated in service of the ethical system? These questions about Spinoza and Astell are important ones, for they remind us that philosophy is not an idle exercise but one undertaken in a specific social context, one in which the foundational assumptions one makes matter in affecting the community of which we are all a part.

Broad has worked the ground for future readers of Astell, and planted seeds for what can be

rich and textured scholarship of Astell's philosophical programme in relation to that of her contemporaries.

Lisa Shapiro is a professor of philosophy at Simon Fraser University. Her research focuses on accounts of mind and moral psychology, with particular attention to the passions, of the early modern period. She has written extensively on Descartes and Spinoza and is the translator and editor of *The Correspondence of Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes* (Chicago, 2007). She is principal investigator of the SSHRC funded project New Narratives in the History of Philosophy. (www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net)



"Broad reads Astell as a systematic moral philosopher, one with metaphysical and epistemological commitments that feed into a virtue ethics that in turn grounds her political commitments."

Hypatia Reviews Online
editor@hypatiareviews.org

Website supported by Michael Digital

Source URL: <https://www.hypatiareviews.org/reviews/content/28>