

Toward a feminist ethic of the self in dialogue with
Mary Astell and Michel Foucault.

Simone Webb

University College London

Gender Studies PhD

Declaration

I, Simone Webb, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis puts the later work of Michael Foucault (1926-1984) into dialogue with the early-modern feminist philosopher Mary Astell (1666-1731). I read Astell's key texts through the framework of care of the self and ethic of the self which Foucault develops in his later lectures, interviews, and other texts. I show how she is situated within the same tradition which Foucault identifies in the history of philosophy while at the same time gendering that tradition and turning it to feminist ends.

Through my reading of the two philosophers I consider what they can offer a modern feminist ethic of the self. I draw out the potential of Astell's regimen for women in the modern world, using its limitations as opportunities to interrogate and develop. My argument is that we could, today, benefit from a feminism which focuses on women's ethical selves, and a structured *askesis* to facilitate self-transformation.

The thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter One reads Astell's *Serious Proposal* through Foucault's lens of "care of the self", arguing that Astell presents a feminist ethic of care for the self. Chapter Two examines Astell's "practices of the self", attending especially to her bodily practices and her practices of withdrawal and meditation. Chapter Three concerns philosophy as a spirituality and critical practice of the self in Astell's work. Chapter Four addresses the relationship between self and other in Astell and Foucault, focusing particularly on the role of friendship as fundamental to an ethic of the self. Chapter Five considers the role of religion in Astell's ethic of the self. Each chapter considers the relationship between Astell's ethic and comparable modern experiences.

I conclude by considering a possible model for a feminist ethic of the self drawn from Astell's regimen, and by offering a critique of the project as a whole.

Impact statement

This PhD thesis and the research I have undertaken to write it will deliver impact both inside and outside academia. Inside academia, my thesis contributes to two major fields of scholarship, on both Mary Astell and Michel Foucault. It brings these two philosophers into dialogue for the first time. Doing this, I provide a new reading of Astell's ethics through Foucault's ethical framework as well as a feminist critique of and addition to Foucauldian ethics using Astell's thought. Additionally, I contribute a model for modern feminist ethics which could be further expanded and built on. In terms of my methodology, I integrate first-person reflections with textual analysis and philosophical argument in a way which provides new insights into Astell's regimen for women and its potential relevance today.

This impact will be brought about partly through journal articles: I have already published two journal articles based on research undertaken during my PhD, and have plans to develop chapters of my thesis for journal submission. I have also contributed through conference presentations I have delivered on my research: I have presented on Astell and Foucault at the "Philosophy as a Way of Life in the History of Philosophy" conference at KCL in 2019 as well as at the annual Society for European Philosophy conference in 2018.

My research has already had public impact. I have written about Astell for popular outlets such as *The Philosopher Queens* (2020), and online venues such as *1000 Word Philosophy* and *The View*, a magazine by and for women in prison. I have also led discussions on Astell and Foucault outside academic contexts: I have presented on both philosophers at the Stuart Low Trust Philosophy Forum, for instance, and led a teach out session on Mary Astell during the UCU strikes in 2018. I am working on a book proposal for a popular book about Mary Astell's ethics of the self. Finally, I have been interviewed about both Astell and Foucault for popular philosophy podcast *Embrace the Void*.

Acknowledgements

I have been very fortunate to be able to undertake and complete a PhD, and I have benefitted from a great deal of personal and institutional support throughout which enabled me to do so.

Financially, I am grateful to have received UCL's Graduate Research Scholarship which funded three years of my PhD. I also want to thank the Royal Institute of Philosophy: my receipt of a Jacobsen Studentship was invaluable in helping me to complete my final year.

My supervisors, Dr. Angus Gowland and Professor Helen Hackett, have been supportive and constructively critical of my work throughout, and have provided both guidance and the latitude to change my mind and explore new directions in my thesis.

I also want to thank the Stuart Low Trust Philosophy Forum: my volunteering with them has proved to be among the most fulfilling part of my philosophical life over the last three years. Several insightful comments made by participants when I presented a session on Mary Astell have stayed with me and guided my thoughts on the topic. The organisation has shown me what public and community philosophical engagement can be.

I am very lucky to have several close friends, old and new, who have taken my mind off my research when need be and added to my life immeasurably: especially Sophie, Lyman, Rebecca, and Alex. My parents, Simon and Gill, have been behind me every step of the way.

Two years into my PhD I met my partner, Joe. This was the best thing that could have happened to me, and my writing up year would have looked very different without him being by my side.

Note on the text

Translations of Foucault's writing and interviews use both "ascesis", unitalicized, and "*askesis*", in italics, to refer to the same concept: I have used both versions of the word when quoting Foucault directly, but made my own use consistent. I use "*askesis*" throughout.

I use "they" as a singular pronoun in cases where gender is either unspecified or when referring to someone who uses they/them pronouns.

List of abbreviations

LG: Mary Astell, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695)

CR: Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion* (1717)

FW: Mary Astell, *A Fair Way With the Dissenters and Their Patrons* (1996b)

RM: Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (1996a)

SP I: Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I* (2002)

SP II: Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (2002)

ECCO: Eighteenth Century Collections Online

EEBO: Early English Books Online

Table of contents

Declaration.....	3
Abstract	5
Impact statement.....	7
Acknowledgements	9
Note on the text	11
List of abbreviations	11
Table of contents	13
Introduction.....	17
The deaths of Mary Astell and Michel Foucault.....	17
Thesis and methodology.....	20
Who was Mary Astell?	24
Astell's philosophy	26
Situating Astell's ethics.....	30
Astell's feminism	32
Astell's religion	34
Astell's politics.....	37
Who was Michel Foucault?.....	38
Foucault's later thought.....	39
Astell and Foucault's key writings.....	45
Astell in the twenty-first century	46
What is a woman?.....	49
Astell, Foucault, and the "self".....	52
Resistance, freedom, autonomy	55

Surveying the field of scholarship	56
Thesis and <i>askesis</i> : the doctorate as practice of the self	61
Thesis outline	65
Chapter One - Mary Astell and care of the self	69
Foucauldian care of the self	72
Mary Astell and care of the self	78
Astell, gender and care of the self.....	90
Women's self-care today	101
Conclusion	107
Chapter Two - Practices of the self: discipline and freedom	109
What are practices of the self?.....	111
Practices and autonomy in Astell studies	117
Astell on disciplinary practices	118
Astell's practices of the self.....	122
Astell, <i>askesis</i> and practices of freedom.....	147
Practising the self today	149
Conclusion	151
Chapter Three - Philosophy as practice of the self: spirituality and critique ..	153
Foucault on philosophy.....	155
Astell and philosophy.....	157
Philosophy as practice of the self	158
Philosophy as spirituality.....	162
Philosophy as critique	166
Philosophy and feminist freedom.....	171
Reflections on philosophical practice and feminism.....	177

Conclusion.....	188
Chapter Four - Care of the other: friendship, love, community	191
Isolation and autonomy.....	193
Love and friendship	196
Community and political action.....	219
Feminist love, friendship, and community today.....	228
Conclusion.....	234
Chapter Five - Religion, the divine, and the ethic of the self.....	237
Tensions between Christianity and a feminist ethic of the self.....	239
Feminist theology and philosophy of religion.....	242
Foucault and religion	244
Astell, feminism, and Christianity.....	251
Spiritual practices beyond Christianity.....	275
Conclusion.....	283
A critical conclusion - Failure and curiosity	285
Bibliography	293

Introduction

The deaths of Mary Astell and Michel Foucault

In May 1731 Mary Astell died in Chelsea. She was sixty-four, and had had an operation two months earlier to remove breast cancer: at that time a “fairly crude” procedure liable to inflict great “suffering and pain” (Perry 1986, 322, 320) on the patient. Despite her suffering, Astell is reported to have “ended an exemplary life with an exemplary ... death” (324). Treating her death as an opportunity to be united with God, she spent the time prior to her demise contemplating the divine and preparing for her imminent end. After her death, Astell passed swiftly into obscurity. Only in the last thirty years or so have philosophers and academics turned their attention once more to the woman whom Bridget Hill (1986) would term “the first English feminist”.

Just over two hundred and fifty years later, in June 1984, Michel Foucault died from complications caused by AIDS in the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière, Paris. Like Astell, Foucault did not imbue death with a wholly negative valence. In one interview he linked death to pleasure: “I always have the feeling that I do not feel *the* pleasure, the complete total pleasure and, for me, it’s related to death” (Foucault 1990f, 12). Referring to an occasion when he was struck by a car, he says that “for maybe two seconds I had the impression that I was dying and it was really a very, very intense pleasure” (12). He returns to the theme as the interview progresses: “And maybe I will be saved. Or maybe I’ll die but I think that is the same anyway for me [*Laughter*]” (14). Younger at his death than Mary Astell, at fifty-seven, Foucault has had a more illustrious afterlife: he has been claimed as the single most-cited scholar in the humanities (Ranking Web of Universities, 2020) and his ideas remain influential in multiple disciplines. He is known as a distinctive personality as much as anything else: it is possible to buy T-shirts emblazoned with his face, mugs decorated with his quotes and pictures, and even a Foucault finger-puppet.¹

¹ I in fact own all the aforementioned items, although two of them were gifts.

Salvation through death: Astell refers to herself in a letter to her friend Lady Ann Coventry in 1715 as “[o]ne who thinks a Happy Death the Cheif [sic] Blessing of Life, as [that which] puts an end to our Labour & Warfare, & secures our Reward” (Perry 1986, 373). A devoted Anglican, she was committed to the belief that the death of a virtuous person was the gateway to an eternity in heaven. Death may not be *equated* to salvation, as Foucault implies, but you certainly cannot obtain salvation in the next world without dying in this one first.

These approaches toward death have their roots in ancient philosophical traditions: the practice of death has been conceived since antiquity as a philosophical one. Costica Bradatan, writing an account of philosophical deaths from ancient philosophy to recent times, writes that “[w]hat philosophy as an art of living often boils down to is, paradoxically, learning how to face death – an art of dying” (Bradatan 2015, 5). In the Stoic tradition as Bradatan describes it, “the practice of philosophy presupposes a certain positioning in relation to one’s body: ... Since death is defined as the separation of the soul from the body, it is precisely through such a practice of detachment that the philosopher acquires a full understanding of what death is” (42). Before Stoicism, we find the death of Socrates himself, perhaps the originator of this tradition of philosophical death: Bradatan claims that of “all the books he (never) wrote in his life time, Socrates’ death is definitely his bestseller – his true philosophical masterpiece” (Bradatan 2013, 589). The Stoic, Platonic, and later Christian detachment of the soul from the body seems to be what Astell was practising towards the end of her life.

Later in Bradatan’s account, he writes that “within the philosopher’s self-fashioning project, death is not only an integral part of biography, but it may end up being as important as life itself” (195). This is true of James Miller’s controversial biography of Foucault: Miller structures his account of Foucault’s life through his death and perceived longing for death. Miller writes of “what at first glance must seem among the most startling and farfetched of Foucault’s apparent convictions: that a man’s manner of dying, as the capstone

of his ‘whole life,’ may reveal, in a flash, as it were, the ‘lyrical core’ of his whole life – *the* key to a writer’s ‘personal poetic attitude’” (Miller 1993, 19). This is remarkably resonant with Bradatan’s account. Both Astell and Foucault, arguably, approached death as part of their philosophical practice and deliberate self-cultivation.

Despite harmonies in their approach to death, Astell and Foucault may appear an implausible pair of figures to bring together. On the one hand, we have an early-modern English woman, deeply devoted to her Anglican faith and, despite her feminist philosophy, concerned with upholding traditional social hierarchies. She is, furthermore, committed to a moral framework in which there is *one* way of living well which will lead to virtue and salvation. Foucault, on the other hand, springs from the philosophical milieu of France in the 1950s and 60s. He is no particular friend to state religion, urges resistance to hierarchy and domination, and rejects the notion of moral frameworks imposed by intellectuals, philosophers, or religious figures. From another angle, Astell is committed to the well-being of women, with an acutely gendered analysis of social structures. Foucault acknowledges the domination of women by men, but often passes over the topic, more concerned with other problems. In these senses, the two thinkers appear not merely at odds but diametrically opposed.

I contend, however, that despite their evident divergences Astell and Foucault have important things to say to each other, and to us. The harmonies between their approaches to death point towards a deeper similarity, a similarity I will elaborate throughout the course of this thesis. This is their shared ethical emphasis on the self, practices of the self, and philosophy understood as a critical mode of existence. Both philosophers take up aspects of ancient philosophical thought and practice. Foucault uses ancient philosophical work, particularly Stoicism, to build a framework of ethics as revolving around the self, care for the self, and philosophy as a critical practice of the self. Much of Astell’s ethical thought and recommended practice fits into this framework: unlike Foucault, however, and most of the ancient philosophers which

preceded her, she takes it up for women specifically. She reworks care of the self and ethics of the self as a useful feminist approach.

Thesis and methodology

In this thesis, I aim to show how Astell's and Foucault's work can inform each other in productive ways, as well as how they can inform a feminist political project today. I offer three central arguments. Firstly, that Astell's writings contain an ethic of the self which is readily illuminated by a Foucauldian framework; secondly that she genders this ethic of the self, showing how it can be wielded to feminist ends; finally, that Astell's feminist ethic of the self may be appropriable by modern feminists.

It is worth establishing what I am not attempting to do in what follows. I am not undertaking a conventionally historical project, one which attempts to reconstruct Astell's philosophical enterprise, or indeed Foucault's, as rooted in its historical context. Much work has already been done to explicate Astell thus. Nor is this thesis comparative: the point is not to present similarities and resemblances between Astell's thought and Foucault's. Nor, finally, am I claiming that Astell anachronistically anticipated Foucault, or that she is revealed as a surprising forerunner of Foucauldian ideas.

Rather, I am undertaking a philosophical intervention in the thought of both, and attempting to set them in dialogue: a conversation which is not *bound* by historical concerns, but is nonetheless sensitive to them. By providing an account of Foucault's ethical project, and his idiosyncratic reading of the history of philosophy, I am equipping myself with a lens *through which* to interpret Astell's texts. This is a reading of Astell's feminism, a drawing-out of aspects of her project through the mesh of Foucauldian ethics, rather than a complete reconstruction of her ethics. The picture I paint of Astell's feminist ethics is deliberately partial. It will be incomplete but not, I hope, inaccurate: partial but not distorted.

This is no one-way process, but a dialogue: after interpreting Astell through a Foucauldian framework, I then turn my reading of Astell back on Foucault. By

showing how Astell's philosophy reveals itself in the context of a Foucauldian framework, I am also drawing out how Astell can supplement and critique that same framework. This critique is gendered: Astell's texts offer to us, and to Foucauldian ethics, an account of how women might interact with the ethics of the self which Foucault advocates. On the one hand, Astell can demonstrate the value of an ethics of the self for women in a misogynistic society: on the other hand, she points to the challenges women face in undertaking such a project.

Not only can Astell and Foucault speak to each other, but I also contend that they can speak to us, here and now. I want to make the case that the feminist ethic of the self which I identify in Astell, and the practices she advocates, can be drawn on and reworked in a modern context. This may seem like a dubious prospect: Astell is addressing a different time, a different society, and different women. Her very understanding of what a woman is would be rightly challenged by many modern feminists. I do not suggest that either Astell or Foucault can be retrieved wholesale for use in a modern feminist context. Foucault is cautious of a similar project regarding ancient ethical thought, observing that "you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people" (Foucault 1997b, 256). He is, nonetheless, concerned with ways in which ancient thought *can* be taken up afresh, arguing that this can only be done "by each time taking into account differences of context and by indicating those aspects of the experience which could perhaps be salvaged and those which could, on the contrary be abandoned" (Foucault 1990g, 249). This project should not, however, be undertaken with any predetermined programme or limits on what one might find: rather, it is a kind of "fishing around" (249). As Foucault "fished around", and as early modern moral philosophers "fished around", in ancient thought, indicating aspects to be salvaged or abandoned as useful, so too my project is a "fishing around" in the ethical philosophy of Mary Astell and Foucault to find useful material for feminism today.

Tensions in Astell's work will become evident throughout the thesis. By bringing Astell and Foucault into conversation with modern feminist thought, I will ask what can be used in our moment, and what both thinkers can offer women seeking an ethical, feminist mode of existence. In this process, tensions and contradictions will emerge, some of which can be resolved, and some of which will indicate aspects of Astell and Foucault alike which need to be discarded if such a project is to succeed.

I am not arguing that Astell is anticipating Foucault. What makes this project useful and possible is that Astell is situated in *the same* historical philosophical traditions from which Foucault draws his own frameworks for understanding philosophy and ethics. They share a conceptual orientation rooted in these ancient Greek and Roman ethical projects. As well as Astell's philosophy having a distinctly Christian-Platonist bent, she refers with varying degrees of approval to Stoicism and Epicureanism across her texts. Indeed, Astell is hardly unique in her own time for participating in an ethic focused largely on the self and its care: as I will show, this approach is also visible in the philosophers with whom she is in dialogue. What is interesting about Astell in this respect is her appropriation and reworking of the tradition to be an ethic for women.

My take-up of both Foucault and Astell for use today is intentionally eclectic. My models for this project can be found firstly in early modern moral philosophy: "extremely (and sometimes overtly) eclectic ... acutely aware that they were not ancients at the same time that they appropriated from the ancient schools" (Garrett 2013, 232). Seventeenth-century moral philosophers, Aaron Garrett explains, were not necessarily concerned with a rigorous reconstruction and application of ancient thought to their context, but instead drew on it where useful, in combination with other sources and methods: "modern lives, modern science, modern politics, modern learning, etc" (232). I am drawing also on Foucault's approach to using older ethical frameworks and modes of existence in the modern world. On the one hand, he emphasizes that they are *not* the same and cannot be taken up wholesale: after all, from "a

strictly philosophical point of view the morality of Greek antiquity and contemporary morality have nothing in common” (Foucault 1990g, 247). That is not to say that we *cannot* take up aspects of Greek thought: “European thinking”, he suggests, “can take up Greek thinking again as an experience which took place once and with regards to which one can be completely free” (249). One implication of this approach is that I will take up Foucault’s own thought as eclectically as Astell’s, looking for aspects which could be abandoned or salvaged.

My approach is clarified by means of contrast with what Cynthia Freeland calls traditional history of philosophy, which is “sober and serious”, seeking to “recapture or reconstruct an author’s intentions, construed in the most favourable way for maximum coherence, before evaluating their plausibility, consistency, and impact on subsequent theorists” (Freeland 2000, 386). Instead, I am taking on something closer to Freeland’s account of Luce Irigaray’s interventions in the history of philosophy: playful, personal readings of texts. Irigaray, Freeland suggests, “pursues another way of viewing canonical texts, one that is more circuitous and less respectful of the standard norms of historical scholarship” (389). While there is much in Irigaray’s philosophical attitudes which I would be wary of borrowing, the notion of a playful and personal intervention in philosophical texts is highly appealing.

Similarly, and closer to the kind of project I am undertaking, we find Alexander Nehamas, at the end of his book about Socrates, *The Art of Living*, engaging in self-reflection concerning what he has written. He had originally considered that the lectures constituting the book would “belong to the history of ideas ... a work of clarification, standing slightly to the side of its subject” (Nehamas 1998, 187). As he progressed, however, he realised that his “own choice of sources for understanding Socrates has been at least eclectic, if not actually manipulative” (188). He concludes that he has written “partly a work of classics, partly of philosophy, partly of literary criticism, full of quotations acknowledged and deformed, indebted to various and perhaps not always compatible approaches. These are all combined here in a manner I

cannot justify explicitly, apart from presenting this book to its readers” (188). While I cannot claim to have achieved the stylistic flair of Nehamas or Irigaray, and the constraints of the PhD thesis limit to some extent the possibilities for unbridled playfulness in my textual engagement, these quotes indicate the spirit of my project.

Throughout this thesis, finally, I draw on personal reflections and experiences to think through the issues I raise. A project centred on an ethic of the self, a way of living, cannot remain speculative and theoretical: it must be grounded in life itself. I take inspiration in this regard from feminist writers such as Michèle Le Doeuff, Cressida Heyes, and Ladelle McWhorter, all of whom incorporate their subjectivities and experiences in their philosophical work. When thinking about the applicability and feasibility of Astell’s feminist project to feminist lives today, I look first to my own life.

In the rest of this introduction, I first establish Astell’s and Foucault’s lives and philosophy in more detail, explaining some points of connection and tension. I then attend to some issues which need to be aired before embarking on the project, such as the relationship between Astell’s historical moment and our twenty-first century moment, how I am understanding “woman” throughout this thesis, and the nature of the “self” for Astell and Foucault. I conclude by considering the role the doctorate has played for me as a “practice of the self”, drawing on Foucault’s account of his academic practice, before outlining the structure and individual chapters of the thesis.

Who was Mary Astell?

The fullest biographical account of Astell can be found in Ruth Perry’s early work of Astell scholarship, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (1986). A brief précis will situate her work as a philosopher. Born in Newcastle in 1666 to a family of coal merchants, Astell was probably tutored as a child by her uncle, Ralph Astell. Ralph Astell had studied at Cambridge, and possibly transmitted the key tenets of the so-called Cambridge Platonists to his niece, instilling ideas she would work with later in her life. After the death of her father, and either

unwilling or unable to marry, Astell sought her fortune in London as a young woman of twenty-one. She received some assistance from the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, William Sancroft (1617-1693), who gave her financial gifts as well as probably helping her make social connections.

It was not long before she started writing and publishing with the bookseller Rich Wilkin. He published her first book, Part I of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, in 1694, when Astell was twenty-eight. In the meantime she had been corresponding with John Norris (1657-1711), the English philosopher who helped bring the thought of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) to England. These letters to and from Norris were published shortly after Astell's first book, as *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695). Other works, such as Part II of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697) and *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), soon followed, and Astell was well on her way to eking out her living as a writer.

Throughout her life, Astell made connections with, and relied on the patronage of, wealthy women who took up her thought with enthusiasm. She lived a life of "irreproachable respectability, in spite of being a writer, in the high society of her day" (Perry 1986, 268). Indeed, Perry argues that Astell "virtually created the role" of "the female wit" (268), later to be represented by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), and other eighteenth-century "bluestockings". Perry, perhaps a little exaggeratedly, describes her as "the first woman to live alone publicly without forfeiting her respectability" (329): she never married, devoting her emotional attention instead to other women.

Despite the renown Astell possessed during her life, she "was forgotten almost immediately, with a rapidity which is surprising" (324). The biographer George Ballard included her in his project *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), but other than that she was all but forgotten until the late twentieth century, when feminist historiography worked to re-discover female writers of the past.

Despite Astell's firm position in the recently developed canon of early modern women philosophers and the extensive range of scholarship which now exists on her life and thought, she has not infiltrated the popular imagination.² To most people, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is still the first feminist: it is she for whom people call to be memorialised in a statue or on banknotes.³ Perhaps Astell is too abstractly philosophical and too Platonist; perhaps she is too overtly devout for public uptake. Throughout this thesis, however, I hope to demonstrate the value of Astell's thought for modern feminist projects.

Astell's philosophy

Astell's philosophical project incorporates an epistemology, a metaphysics, a philosophy of religion, and an ethics. This thesis elaborates my interpretation of her ethics through the lens of a Foucauldian ethics of the self: here it is appropriate to provide a sketch of her position in other areas. I will also set up her ethics in the context of her seventeenth-century intellectual milieu as well as the ancient traditions from which she was drawing. I draw heavily in this section on Jacqueline Broad's comprehensive account of Astell's philosophy in *The Philosophy of Mary Astell* (2015).

In many areas, Astell can be aligned with a Cartesian rationalism, which she sets explicitly against John Locke's (1632-1704) empiricist epistemology. Broad characterises her thus: "Following Descartes, she adopts a rationalist epistemology, as well as ontological arguments for the existence of God, a dualist metaphysic of mind and body, and a moral theory of virtue and the passions" (Broad 2015, 9). She also aligned herself with John Norris, and in some respects Nicolas Malebranche himself, as well as the Port Royal school of

² It is worth mentioning her inclusion in two recent trade books about historical women: *Roaring Girls: The Forgotten Feminists* (Kyte 2019) and *The Philosopher Queens* (Buxton and Whiting 2020). Since I contributed the chapter on Astell to the latter book, however, I am not sure this constitutes an exception to my claim.

³ The fundraising website for this statue describes *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) as "the first book in English arguing for the equality of women and men" (*Mary on the Green*, n.d.), entirely overlooking *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, published nearly a century previously.

logic.⁴ Along with her challenge of Locke, she turned a critical eye on the writing of Damaris Masham (1658/9-1708), a fellow philosopher and Locke's friend.

Her epistemology is Platonist as well as Cartesian, drawing strong influence from the Cambridge Platonists, an English philosophical grouping whose most prominent members were Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) and Henry More (1614-1687). She is heavily influenced too by Augustine (354-430), with Broad describing her as “deeply Augustinian in terms of her moral and epistemological commitments” (Broad 2015, 10), before going on to reference Astell's distinctly Augustinian belief that “[a]bove all things we must be thoroughly convinced of our entire Dependence on GOD, for what we *Know* as well as for what we *Are*” (*SP II*, 165).

Unlike Locke, Astell does not see our sense impressions as the source of our knowledge. “Knowledge”, she writes, “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” (*SP II*, 149). This scientific knowledge is to be distinguished from opinion, in the case that “the Nature of the thing be such as that it admits of no undoubted Premises to argue from ... or that the Conclusion does not so necessarily follow as to give a perfect satisfaction to the Mind” (149). It is also to be distinguished from faith, if “the Medium we make use of to prove the Proposition be Authority ... when the Authority is GOD's a Divine Faith” (149). She then observes that in “this enumeration of the several ways of Knowing, I have not reckon'd the Senses ... because that Light which we suppose to be let unto our Ideas by our Senses is indeed very dim and fallacious, and not to be relied on till it has past the Test of Reason” (150). The Cartesian influence is evident here both in her reference to “clear and distinct Ideas”, a phrasing straight from Descartes, and in her criticism of sensory knowledge.

⁴ The Port Royal Logic (1662) (originally titled *La Logique ou l'art de penser*) was a highly influential logic textbook written by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, springing from a heavily Cartesian background.

In addition to rejecting the senses as a proper source of knowledge, Astell links the ability to know with moral purity, a move strongly associated with the Neoplatonists of the period. The “more Pure we are the clearer will our Knowledge be, and the more we Know, the more we shall Purify,” (*SP II*, 131) she writes: this accords with Platonic frameworks, in which in “order to ascend ... and finally be united with the divine, the human being must become purer and more knowing” (Wilde 2013, 13). Furthermore, it is by divesting ourselves of the trappings of the physical world that we can access knowledge using our souls. As Broad explains, “the attainment of purity” for Astell is the same as the “disengagement from the senses, the passions, and the love (or more accurately, the desire) of material things” (Broad 2015, 35). For instance, “we shou’d endeavour to render Spiritual and Future things as Present and Familiar as may be”, Astell writes, “and to withdraw as much as we can from sensible Impressions” (*SP II*, 217). This emphasis on withdrawal from the world around us was heavily criticised by Masham, as well as being viewed with suspicion by more modern feminists.

Astell inherits much of her epistemology from the Augustinian tradition, as Broad explains. This is evident in her explanation of the link between God and truth, marking a key difference between her thought and that of Descartes, and an alignment with Norris and Malebranche. Norris and Malebranche “reject key aspects of Descartes’ thought, such as his theory of the divine creation of eternal truths, our clear and distinct ideas of both the soul and God, and the Cartesian theory of innate ideas” (Broad, 37). Rather, as Augustine proposes, truth and God are in fact to be *equated*: they are one and the same thing. Since “truth consists in perfection – it is uncreated, immutable, eternal, and above all things” (37), it can *only* be God, who is the only possible being to possess such perfections. Astell implies in *A Serious Proposal*, and states in *The Christian Religion* (1705), that God and truth are identifiable. “For to know is to Perceive Truth”, she writes, “and the Perception of Truth is a Participation of GOD Himself who is *the Truth*, and the Participation of GOD is the Perfection of the Mind” (*CR*, 208). We see here the

recursive effect of participation in “Truth” on the transformation of the mind or self.

Astell’s epistemology is linked to her feminism. In this she goes beyond, for example, Norris’s critique of Locke. Norris “claimed that Locke’s empiricism can account only for perceptions relating to the body and not higher order metaphysical notions of truth, justice, order and good” (Springborg 2002, 25). Astell, however, observes that if “in fact the reception of ideas is largely dependent on environmental conditions, what Locke trumpets as Reason amounts to no more than custom” (26). Empiricism has the effect of “sanctioning custom, that aggregate of material conditions which chains women to their posts” (26). Custom, as we will see, is one of the most pointed targets of Astell’s ire, as responsible for much of the vice which women are prone to. For Astell, empiricism holds women back in the world of sensory impressions and social norms: the transformation of women requires a rationalist attention to the world of the mind and God.

“Custom” is a key component of Astell’s social philosophy and is also important for grasping the motivation behind her feminist project. I expand on the concept in Chapter One. For now it is necessary to know that custom is the force of social habit: we behave in ways detrimental to ourselves and others because we “think it an unpardonable mistake not to do as our neighbours do, and part with our Peace and Pleasure as well as our Innocence and Vertue, merely in compliance with an unreasonable Fashion” (*SP I*, 68). “Custom, that merciless torrent”, Astell argues, accounts for “all that Sin and Folly that is in the World” (67): vice may have nothing in itself to recommend it, but the pressure to do what others in one’s social setting are doing is often strong enough to counter the impulse towards virtue. While custom can have generally detrimental effects, Astell identifies it as particularly pernicious for women, whom custom teaches to devalue their own selves and to place their worth in bodily appearance. Furthermore, it constrains their will, making it difficult to act freely. Much of Astell’s feminist project involves finding ways for women to break free of the tyrannous grip of sexist custom.

Situating Astell's ethics

I want to situate Astell's ethics in the context of seventeenth-century moral philosophy – a somewhat overlooked sphere of study in comparison to early modern metaphysics on the one hand, and later ethics on the other, as Garrett (2013) points out.⁵ Garrett interestingly observes, however, that “many of the best-known works by seventeenth-century moral philosophers read like self-help manuals buttressed with psychology, speculative law, and religion” (Garrett 2013, 229–30). This observation leads to the insight that “self-help was a (or even *the*) central issue for a lot of early-modern moral philosophy” and that much “early-modern ethics ... focused on counsels, techniques, justifications, and in some sense foundations for the happiness, care, and cultivation of the self in order to have the best and (normally) happiest life” (230). As I argue throughout this thesis that Astell presents an ethic of the self which is targeted toward women, I consider her to be part of this tradition Garrett identifies.

Garrett draws on Foucauldian ethical terminology in his analysis of seventeenth-century philosophy. He also demonstrates how seventeenth-century ethicists present “not a strange lull but rather the continuation of many of the themes of ancient and Hellenistic philosophy” (230). Garrett is not imposing a modern framework on early-modern ethical thought but rather showing that it situates itself in an ancient tradition. This influence from ancient ethical thought, he argues, was self-consciously taken up by philosophers, who “gave unity to their enquiries by casting them in terms of the Greek, Latin, and Hellenistic philosophical schools” (231). This uptake, however, does not represent “an unbroken and continuous philosophical tradition from Socrates to Shaftesbury” (231), but is eclectic and picky, giving rise to “sophisticated, self-conscious, and often ambiguous or even ironic thinking” (232). This eclectic uptake is something which this thesis itself

⁵ Having said this, significant work has been done in this area: see in particular Schneewind's classic collection of source material *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (2002); James 1997 on the role of the passions in seventeenth-century philosophy; Wilson (2008 and elsewhere) on Epicureanism in the early-modern period; Sellars 2016, 2017a on Stoic influences on the Cambridge Platonists; and Cottingham 1998.

instantiates in its positive ethical project, drawing on Astell, Foucault, and various feminist philosophers to argue for a modern feminist ethic of the self.

On Garrett's account of seventeenth-century ethical thought, it marked a long moment in which moral philosophy was "a school of counsel, self-help, and cultivation patterned on the ancients and circumventing religious conflict" (Garrett 2013, 272) which "fell by the wayside" with the progression of eighteenth-century thought. In the works of "Butler, Hume, Rousseau, Smith, Kant, and many others" (276), different ethical questions began to prevail: the "idea of philosophy as ... being about lives or techniques at all, began to fade" (276).

For Astell, as for many of her early-modern contemporaries, a large part of becoming a virtuous ethical subject consists in appropriately regulating the passions. The passions indicate the unification of soul and body: as Astell explains, "by the Oeconomy of Nature such and such Motions in the Body are annexed 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" (*SP II*, 213).⁶ What Astell terms the passions are "those Perceptions in the Soul" (214) occasioned by movements in the body: "Commotions in the Bloud and Animal Spirits" (214). Virtue, Astell writes, "consists in governing Animal Impressions, in directing our Passions to such Objects, and keeping 'em in such a pitch, as right Reasons requires" (214). It may not be "a fault to have Passions" (214), but it is indeed a fault to "suffer 'em too often to get the Mastery of the Mind" (214). Astell's stance on the passions corresponds with many earlier accounts, but is especially resonant with the Cambridge Platonists', for whom the "practice of virtue involves harnessing rather than subduing or neutralizing the passions" (Hutton 2015,

⁶ The notion of "animal spirits" dates back to Aristotle, but a stronger influence for Astell is probably the early modern and Cartesian notion, which Kathryn Tabb summarises as "a subtype of the blood that is uniquely light and quick, able to pass through the less 'subtle' matter of the body in order to animate it" (Tabb 2014, 47). For more detail on how animal spirits function for Descartes, see James 1997.

147). To be ethical consists of becoming master over our own passions, she insists, drawing too on a classical ethical ideal.

Astell's feminism

Astell's position as a feminist has been queried. Perry claims that she "would have been horrified by the implied radicalism of the label 'feminist'" and that whoever "reads Astell carefully will not find a feminist heroine of the past with whom it is easy to identify" (Perry 1986, 13). Springborg, defending her claim that Astell *was* a feminist, acknowledges that "Astell's feminism is not uncontentious" (Springborg 2005, 3), and that scholars have taken issue with her characterisation of Astell. Is it "problematic to call Mary Astell a feminist" (13), as Perry worries, even anachronistic? I think not.

By feminism, I intend a minimal definition: a recognition and analysis of the differing conditions between men and women, a judgement that these different conditions are undesirable or unjust, and advocacy or actions being taken to alter those conditions. This framework allows for the three components to be fleshed out in variable ways. It makes no comment on the specific desired outcome of altered conditions, nor the kind of conditions to be altered. That Astell does not advocate for women's legal or political rights does not disqualify her from being a feminist: she is nonetheless concerned to change women's condition as ethical subjects and their education. Regarding the first two criteria, this definition does not specify *how* different the conditions between genders are taken to be, nor *how* undesirable they are: thus it includes the mildest of liberal equality feminism alongside the most radical forms.

As will become clear, Astell fits the bill on this definition: her analysis of women's subjugated position in comparison to men is acute; she is forthright on its undesirability and injustice; and offers a programme for women to alter the situation, albeit not in a conventionally political sense.

Astell is indeed frequently considered to be one of the earliest English feminists.⁷ She goes well beyond simply acknowledging the injustices and harms experienced by women, providing both a systematic analysis of social inequality and a project for rectifying the situation. What is interesting about Astell on my interpretation is that her emphasis is not on legal and political inequality between men and woman, nor on the infringement of women's rights or property. Astell's feminism is rooted in a concern about women's ethical self-development: she contends that women are *morally* warped by the society in which they find themselves, their miseducation leading them towards ethical vices such as vanity. Without appropriate care and attention, she argues, women cannot constitute themselves as ethical subjects. This warping of women's selves is not intrinsic to their being women: it is on her account entirely socially constructed.

In Part I of *A Serious Proposal*, Astell's two-part feminist treatise, she both sets out her analysis of the negative effects on women and their causes and proposes an all-female educational and religious institution as a way to address the problems. By secluding women from the norms of mainstream society, she argues, and providing them with alternative modes of living, they can develop intellectually and morally. In Part II of the treatise, she presents an individual educational programme for women, which they can follow regardless of whether such an institution could ever be established.

Some Reflections Upon Marriage is Astell's second most prominently feminist text. In this tract, she takes the disastrous marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Mazarine as her starting point for a thoroughgoing critique of marriage's effects on women. Given the behaviour of most men, she argues, marriage is disastrous for women; its only value in many cases is the opportunity it gives women to develop their virtue under trying circumstances. As in *A Serious Proposal*, and perhaps even more acutely, she identifies the structural differences in men's and women's education and offers these differences as the major cause of the "faults" often found in women.

⁷ See for instance Perry 1986; Broad 2003; Detlefsen 2017.

Astell's feminism also makes itself known in her consistent commitment to and alignment with women. Despite publishing anonymously, as did many contemporary female writers, she is not shy of identifying herself as a woman throughout her texts. In *A Serious Proposal*, she early on refers to "Instruction from a Womans Pen" (*SP I*, 56), distinguishing herself from "the Men" who "divert themselves with *our* Miscarriages [my italics]" (56). "My earnest desire", she writes movingly, "is, That you Ladies, would be as perfect and happy as 'tis possible to be in this imperfect state; for I Love you too well to endure a spot upon your Beauties" (56). In *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, similarly, Astell refers to herself as author with female pronouns, again separating herself from men: "she humbly confesses, that the Contrivance and Execution of this Design, which is unfortunately accus'd of being so destructive to the Government, of the Men I mean, is entirely her own" (*RM*, 8). Rather than writing with a careful gender neutrality which could align her with male authority and gain greater respect for her work – a tactic pursued by Masham in her published work – Astell instead writes confidently that "she was ignorant of the *Natural Inferiority* of our Sex" (9). The alignment with, and call to, women is echoed by many later feminist writers: Audre Lorde (1934-1992), for instance, both addresses women and identifies herself as a woman, writing that as "women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different" (Lorde 2007, 89). Astell exists in a feminist tradition of identification with womanhood and female experience.

She has not been received as unproblematically feminist, however. I will be addressing the tensions between her project and many feminist desiderata throughout the thesis. For now, I will point to her religious and political commitments.

Astell's religion

Astell's overt religiosity is a plausible factor to be considered in accounting for her lack of modern uptake as a feminist foremother, and has been approached

with caution by many interpreters.⁸ She is dedicated to Anglican Christianity as the *only* legitimate religion, even constructing a strange speculative account whereby even “an African, converted by the Christian Slaves” (*CR*, 37) could come to discover the truth of the Anglican church: “Thus might I have become a Member of a particular National Church, and of the Episcopal Church in this Kingdom, even without the good fortune of being born in *England*” (41). Furthermore, her religious commitments are intertwined with her feminist project, rendering it very much one of Christian feminism.

The complexity of Christianity, both in institution and belief, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England should not be underestimated. The situation is explained well by Springborg. Not only was Astell an Anglican, she was High Church, which term refers to “that group within the Church of England that stressed its historical continuity with the Catholic Church, placing great importance on the authority of the church, the claims of the episcopate and the nature of the Sacraments” (Springborg 2005, 37). High Church Anglicans were deeply affected by the Glorious Revolution of 1688: “High Churchmen who had prospered under the reigns of Charles I and under his Stuart successors ... now found their position compromised by the crowning of William III ... which broke the line of succession to which their oaths committed them” (37). Some churchmen, including Archbishop William Sancroft – to whom Astell first appealed on her move to London – chose to refrain from taking oaths of allegiance to William and Mary, becoming “non-jurors”. High Church Anglicans were often accused of supporting the Pope and being aligned with the Roman Catholic church: something Astell was careful to try to avoid, although not always successfully.

As well as the division *within* the Anglican church occurring in the late seventeenth century, Protestant groups which “did not conform to the doctrines or practices of the established Church of England” (38) – such as Baptists, Presbyterians or Quakers – were also the subject of vigorous debate.

⁸ Broad, for instance, writes that it is “difficult for the modern reader to embrace [Astell’s] moral philosophy”, both because “it is exceedingly religious” and because “it seems both practically impossible and morally undesirable” (Broad 2015, 109).

The existence of these “dissenters” had severe “constitutional ramifications”: “the very role of the monarch as head of the established church was liable to make all forms of religious dissent not only heretical but even treasonable, a view with which Astell concurred” (38). Indeed, some of Astell’s political pamphlets target dissenters and non-conformists. As Springborg aptly remarks, Astell is no friend to free speech or a free press, and equates non-conformity to the established Church to treason.

Theologically, too, English Christianity was complex and diverse. While this is not the place to provide a full account of the intricacies of the theological positions at the time, it is important to grasp the sheer variety of stances available. Springborg identifies Arminianism and Latitudinarianism as two particularly significant theological movements. The former “emphasized good works as an omen of faith, and ... rejected Aristotelian psychology for the Stoic unitary psyche” (Springborg 2005, 43): the latter, who “could be said to be united only in their rejection of the Arminian label” (47), had “a tendency to natural theology, to rational Christianity and to ‘toleration’” (46). Sarah Apetrei highlights Socinians, who “disputed core doctrines on the basis of their congruency with Reason and plain Scripture” (Apetrei 2010, 97). Astell, on the contrary, is largely an orthodox member of the Church of England.

It is important not to make too sweeping a judgement about the relationship between Astell’s Christian commitments and her feminist ethics. Nonetheless, by placing church and bible as ultimately authoritative, and prioritising obedience to and union with a male God, Astell may be seen as undermining feminist aims of female autonomy. This is made particularly evident in *Reflections upon Marriage*, in which Astell advocates women’s acceptance of bad, even abusive, husbands for the sake of virtue in the afterlife, endorsing marriage as a divine institution despite her recognition of its detrimental effects on women. Apetrei writes, in relation to Astell’s religion and politics, that “some have simply seen her as inconsistent and double-headed, while other suggest that her conservative instincts were distracting” (Apetrei 2010, 137). This is no straightforward question, however: we can also point to a long

tradition of women drawing upon Christianity and institutions such as convents to live in separation from or opposition to dominant cultural expectations of womanhood. Astell too wields her Christian commitments at times to surprising and radical ends.

I dedicate the last chapter of this thesis to a consideration of Astell's Christian commitments in relation to a feminist ethic of the self, where these concerns will be unpacked in detail.

Astell's politics

Astell's politics have also been seen as in considerable tension with her feminist bent. Throughout her writing, but particularly in her overtly political tracts such as *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* (1704) and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion* (1704), she espouses a Tory politics which reinforces existing power structures. She is a committed royalist, "a defender of sacral monarchy and hereditary right" (Springborg 1996, xix) who believes that each person should accept the station in which they find themselves and give no thought to rebellion. Even in her less directly political texts, this stance finds a voice: "'tis better that I endure the Unreasonableness, Injustice or Oppression of a Parent, a Master, &c. than that the Establish'd Rules of Order and good Government, shou'd be superseded on my account," (CR, 138) she writes. She urges her readers to "remember our Characters, the Rank and Station GOD has plac'd us in" (270), insisting that "the Commands of our Lawful Governors are to be Actually Obey'd, if they are not inconsistent with the Laws of GOD; or if they can't be Obey'd they must be patiently Submitted to" (272). Even while Astell seeks to challenge the subjection of women, she is careful to reinforce and shore up social hierarchy elsewhere, framing any challenge to social order as actively ungodly and irreligious.

Astell's political commitments mark another area where she is at odds with Foucault, again rendering a Foucauldian interpretation of her work potentially surprising. Whereas Astell is dedicated to hierarchy and order, Foucault places

high value on resistance to structures of domination and on questioning given orders and social systems.

Who was Michel Foucault?

Foucault, while living far closer in time to us than Astell, is in some ways more slippery to grasp. He was reticent about his personal life, and often irritably challenged interviewers who expressed interest, such as during his debate with Noam Chomsky in 1971. He insisted that his “personal life [was] not at all interesting” (Foucault 1990f, 16), and was continually critical of the notion that the life and personality of an intellectual was of overriding value in interpreting their work.⁹ This was partly a resistance, I think, to the very idea of a self which could be pinned down and understood: throughout his life and work, he challenged such a concept, pushing instead for an unending process of self-creation and change. To explain himself, to reveal himself, would perhaps be too much a fixing of the self which he wanted constantly to develop.

However, while he sought not to let his personality come to the fore, he was not always secretive regarding the basic details of his life. In the interview published as “The Minimalist Self”, for instance, Foucault is quite open about his childhood “in a Catholic milieu just before or during the Second World War” (Foucault 1990f, 3), his departure from France in the mid-50s, and his years at the Hôpital Ste. Anne studying psychology. Stephen Riggins, conducting his interview, remarks on “the monachal austerity in which [Foucault] live[s]”, noting that his “apartment in Paris is almost completely white” and that he frequently wears “clothes as simple as white pants, a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket” (11-12). Foucault’s life may seem to be a contradictory combination of the austere and the hedonistic: just a little further on, he explains that “some drugs are really important for me because

⁹ See, for instance, his resistance to the “author function”. Foucault identifies the “author” as “the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (Foucault 1998b, 222), and suggests that the author function will disappear as society changes.

they are the mediation to those incredibly intense joys that I am looking for” (12). He was also open about his enjoyment of a varied, kink-inclusive sex life. However, austerity and hedonism were not at odds for him. Taking drugs and having sadomasochistic sex were for Foucault part of his own ethic of the self. Regarding what was then widely referred to as S&M (sadism and masochism), Foucault states that what “interests the practitioners of S&M is that the relationship is at the same time regulated and open. It resembles a chess game in the sense that one can win and the other lose” (Foucault 1990d, 299). For him, sexual practices which others have regarded as debauched and self-indulgent were on a continuum with the self-discipline and intellectual challenge of chess. Given all of this, it is hard to credit his statement that “I’m so boring in my everyday life ... It’s a bore to live with me” (Foucault 1990f, 13).

Foucault’s later thought

Foucault’s body of work is wide-ranging in substance and style, addressing multifarious concerns across his active decades: madness, prisons and punishment, the history of science and knowledge, and sexuality. There are, however, lines of thought which link his extensive collection of writings. Despite the changes as his work and life progressed, it is possible to interpret his texts, speech and thought as part of a cohesive larger project.

In “The Subject and Power” (2002), first printed in English in 1982, Foucault articulates the “goal of [his] work during the last twenty years” (Foucault 2002, 326). This goal has been to “create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (326). While he has been understood as *turning* to the subject in his later writing, on Foucault’s own account this was always his concern: “it is not power, but the subject, that is the general theme of my research” (327). The “turn” in his later career should be conceived less as a turn *to* the subject, than as a turn to the subject’s self-constitution, as opposed to its constitution by external forces.

Madness and Civilisation (1961 [1964]), *Discipline and Punish* (1975 [1977]), and *The Will to Knowledge* (1976 [1978]) (the first volume of *The History of*

Sexuality) all tell the history of something that has become “given” in our society.¹⁰ In each case, the contingency of the “given” is demonstrated through the story which Foucault tells. In *The Use of Pleasure*, he characterises these projects thus: “The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault 1985, 9). Nehamas characterizes Foucault’s stance in this regard as being that “most of the situations in which we find ourselves are products of history, although we are convinced they are natural facts. This prevents us from seeing that our particular views, habits, and institutions are contingent” (Nehamas 1998, 169). In other words, by presenting a history of certain things, Foucault provides the space to think anew about those things: to challenge how they are constituted and presented to us.

These projects are linked to Foucault’s insistence on the ethical value of curiosity, “stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science” (Foucault 1997d, 325). For Foucault, curiosity marks “a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way” (325). In *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, he presents the criminal justice system precisely as strange and odd, as something which is no transhistorical necessity but borne of specific historical circumstances, almost accidental. This is one instantiation of what Nehamas describes as his “uncanny ability to discern history and contingency where others had seen only nature and necessity” (Nehamas 1998, 170): he shows how our “familiar way” of thinking of prisons, as spaces for reforming criminals, is not in alignment with their historical development.

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault presents this historical exercise as a *philosophical* project. Foucault is using a specific understanding of philosophy, one which he developed in his later thought and which emerges as more

¹⁰ Here, and below, when first referring to major texts by Foucault I cite the date of the original French publication followed by the date of the first English translation in square brackets. Any texts from which I directly quote refer solely to the date of the edition which I am using and which will be the edition included in the bibliography.

positive than his earlier account of the discipline. In this conception, philosophy is the “assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes ... an ‘ascesis,’ *askesis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (9). This is contrasted with the philosophical discourse which “tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it, or when it works up a case against them in the language of naïve positivity” (9). This was his assessment of philosophy for much of his career, as McWhorter describes: “an institutionalized and bureaucratized academic discipline that maintains itself by producing theories with no practical effects except for that of reinforcing disciplinary control and reproducing the status quo” (McWhorter 2016, 25). It was only in the latter part of his life that Foucault began to reconceive philosophy as a critical practice of the self, something with the potential to transform oneself and the world around us.

In his later years, Foucault turned from examining how the subject has been constituted by *external* forces to a concern with “the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject” (Foucault 2002, 327). He describes this shift in attention in *The Use of Pleasure*: “It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject” (Foucault 1985, 6). As indicated, Foucault understood this change of focus as continuous with his earlier projects.

I am most interested in Foucault’s writing on the care of the self, techniques of the self, and an ethics of the self. His work in this area is influenced by that of Pierre Hadot (1922-2010), a French scholar who proposed that much ancient philosophy should be understood as a “way of life” or set of “spiritual exercises”. Philosophical *argument*, or what Hadot would describe as written philosophical discourse, formed only one component of “philosophy” more broadly on Hadot’s account. In its “original aspect”, Hadot writes, philosophy is “a method of training people to live and to look at the world in a new way” (Hadot 1995, 107). Drawing on Stoic and Epicurean philosophy in particular, Hadot provided an influential account of ancient philosophy as a mode of

being in the world: a mode of being which Hadot intimated could be taken up again today.

Hadot and Foucault should not be too closely aligned: Hadot was critical of the way in which Foucault took up his thought. The “description M. Foucault gives of what I had termed ‘spiritual exercises’ ... is precisely focused far too much on the ‘self,’ or at least on a particular conception of the self” (Hadot 1995, 207), Hadot complains. He recognises that Foucault is not merely undertaking an historical study of philosophical antiquity, but that “his description of the practices of the self” is “a tacit attempt to offer contemporary mankind a model of life” (208), as indeed he himself is doing. Hadot is concerned, however, that “M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is *too* aesthetic” (211): a concern which many critics of Foucault share. In recent years, much effort has been expended on delineating the differences between Hadot and Foucault in their understanding of ancient philosophy (see for instance Irrera 2010; Banicki 2012; Testa 2016). Regardless of the differences, Hadot’s influence is key in Foucault’s new vision of the potential of philosophy.

Foucault’s approach to an “ethics of the self” took the form both of historical analysis, arguing for the way in which ethics was constituted in ancient philosophy in particular, and of an endorsement of a modern-day ethic of the self. His historical argument traces the way in which the self, and techniques of the self, have been constituted and understood throughout Western history. The story he tells traces the self from ancient philosophy, particularly Stoicism, into the changes wrought by early Christianity. He shows how ancient thought presented ethics as largely a matter of transforming and working on the *self* (as opposed to obeying certain rules or codes), and how in a specific, extended historical moment in antiquity it was the *care* for that self which was prioritised. Certain practices and techniques of the self, Foucault argues – practices which are somewhat analogous to Hadot’s “spiritual exercises” – are *how* the care for the self was exacted. These are things that one

does to change the self in some way: a written record of one's actions, for instance, or receiving spiritual guidance from a friend.

At the same time, Foucault puts forward his notion of how an ethic of the self could be reworked for his time. Drawing partly from ancient thought and partly from Charles Baudelaire's (1821-1867) dandyism, Foucault proposed an aesthetics of existence: a way of living one's own life as a work of art. This was no *mere* aesthetics, however, devoid of moral or political content: despite criticisms from Hadot, Chomsky, and others, Foucault emerges as far more morally and politically minded than he is often portrayed. His aesthetics of existence, the ongoing process of self-creation and making oneself and one's life beautiful, is linked to practices of liberation and resistance against domination. By living one's life differently and creatively, one is resisting the modes of living imposed by insidious, dominating modes of power. One is able to do otherwise.

Foucault's most overtly normative ethical and political work appears in his later thought. Drawing heavily on ancient philosophical thought and practice, we find him speaking with feeling about his ethics and politics. The urgency and clarity with which Foucault sets out his ethics is frequently overlooked by scholars who pay insufficient attention to his interviews and other publicly focused writing. In "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual" (1988), an interview conducted by Michael Bess in 1980, Foucault defines himself as "a moralist, insofar as I believe that one of the tasks, one of the meanings of human existence – the source of human freedom – is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile". He presents a personal moral system with three key elements: "refusal, curiosity, innovation". Running through his later thought is the notion of an ethics of invention: refusing what is given, looking for what is new and original. While he repeatedly insisted that the role of the philosopher or intellectual should not be to dictate morality to others, his personal set of ethical principles is consistent and apparent.

Foucault's unwillingness to dictate the "good" to others, and his rejection of the role of the intellectual in doing so, formed part of his political activism. His work with the Prisons Information Group in France in the 1970s indicated his concern to magnify the voices of those other than intellectuals. The GIP (*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*) was "an activist organisation committed to amplifying the voices of those with first-hand knowledge of the prison, thereby creating a space for articulations and assessments *from below*" (Zurn and Dilts 2016, 1). McWhorter identifies Foucault's work with the GIP as integral to his changing understanding of philosophy, informed as it was by Hadot's work. On McWhorter's account, "the lesson Foucault learned from what he saw as the GIP's failure and from continued meditation on philosophy as a discipline and practice was that the political work that he *could* do effectively was that of a specific intellectual ... It was as an activist that he was a philosopher and as a philosopher that he was an activist" (McWhorter 2016, 34). This relationship between philosophy and political engagement and resistance is taken up in Chapter Three.

While throughout Foucault's work he is concerned with the marginalised and the voiceless - the mad, the prisoner, the homosexual - women receive only the occasional off-hand comment rather than the sustained analysis he directs elsewhere. This emerges as a particular concern in *The History of Sexuality*. The occasional reference to women notwithstanding, the focus in these texts remains steadily on the constitution of male sexuality throughout Western history. I do not think, however, as some commentators have intimated, that Foucault was in fact a misogynist (Carrette 1999, 8), or certainly not in such a way that it structurally affected his thought. Where Astell is concerned with and focuses on women's experience and subjectivity, Foucault's primary concern regarding gender is homosexual masculinity. Some of the negative responses to his writing, I suggest, verge on homophobic in their lack of appreciation of Foucault's oppressed position as a gay man in mid-to-late twentieth-century France. As I outline later, many feminist scholars have taken up his work to valuable effect.

Both Astell and Foucault contain lines of thought which I find profound, thought-provoking, and moving. Astell's commitment to women, and her consistent belief in women's capacities, along with her sharp and biting critique of the misogynistic society to which she was witness; Foucault's ethics of resistance and innovation. It should also be apparent, however, after the accounts I have given of their separate projects, that a great deal separates the two thinkers. Where Foucault advocates resistance as a key part of his ethics, Astell insists on order and hierarchy; where Astell exhorts her readers to Anglican devotion, Foucault is largely critical and suspicious of mainstream Christianity. Foucault refuses to dictate "the good" to anyone: Astell spends a great deal of time doing just that.

What brings Astell and Foucault together, despite this gulf, is their shared concern with the self (or the subject), and the potential transformation of that self using techniques or exercises. They draw, furthermore, on a shared philosophical heritage: Astell shows a familiarity throughout her writing with the same classical philosophical tradition that Foucault is working with.

Astell and Foucault's key writings

From Astell's wide-ranging body of work, I draw primarily from *A Serious Proposal*. This is the cornerstone of her feminist writing, and where her distinctly gendered ethic of the self is most clearly presented. In addition to *A Serious Proposal*, I frequently use *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* in my analysis. I also draw on occasion from *The Christian Religion, as profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*, Astell's major work explicating Christian moral and philosophical doctrines, particularly for women, and her correspondence with Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. I will not be engaging, in general, with her overtly political tracts, nor her poetry and unpublished correspondence. These, particularly the political tracts, bear far less on her ethics of the self, although her poetry and correspondence do contain some suggestive material.

I am largely using work from Foucault's later life. This can be understood as the period after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976 [1978]): the period in which much of his attention turned to the subject, the subject's techniques upon itself, and ancient philosophy. These themes are apparent in the second two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, *The Use of Pleasure* (1984 [1985]) and *The Care of the Self* (1984 [1986]), and also in the series of lectures which Foucault gave at the Collège de France, particularly those published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005). His seminar published as "Technologies of the Self" (1988) is also valuable in understanding practices of the self.

Of equal importance are the extensive interviews Foucault gave in the later part of his life, many of which are compiled in *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (1990) and *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997). Foucault's thought cannot be properly understood without attention to these interviews, which set out with remarkable consistency his ethical and political stance. They are also expressed with a clarity that his published work is sometimes said to lack. Two interviews which I return to repeatedly are "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (1997) and "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" (1997).

In addition to the later writings and interviews, I sometimes draw from Foucault's earlier work on power, which complements and reinforces his theories of the subject. When considering Astell, Foucault, and religion, I also use Foucault's journalism and interviews on the Iranian Revolution, at the end of the 1970s. His earliest writing, however, such as *Madness and Civilization* (1961 [1964]) and *The Order of Things* (1966 [1970]) is less important to my project.

Astell in the twenty-first century

I do not claim that Astell's project can be reused wholesale in the twenty-first century. There are, however, very striking similarities between aspects of Astell's historical moment as she presents it and ours, as far as women are

concerned. On her account, as I shall set out in detail in the thesis, women are encouraged by social custom to concern themselves with their outward appearance: their beauty, their clothes, and how they appear in the eyes of men. She is far less concerned with any infringement of women's rights or their legal position than with the damage done to women's ethical selves by the obsession with external appearances which social forces endorse. Women are hindered from understanding what is genuinely important, attending instead to external markers of wealth and beauty.

In the context of twenty-first century Britain, women largely have the political and legal equality with men that was lacking in Astell's period. This is not to say that feminist struggles are wholly won in those arenas: we can point to the gender pay gap, the continuing absence of women from leadership roles in many organisations, abortion laws, maternity leave and discrimination, the criminalization of sex work, and the incarceration of pregnant women, among other legal and political concerns which deserve attention. All these problems notwithstanding, however, women have gained many of the legal and political rights which were once ardently sought. It is not so evident, however, that there has been an equal advance in the domain of women's selves. The preoccupation with image, signifiers of class status, and being visually appealing to men has, if anything, intensified in the modern world.

The current stage of capitalism has escalated the drive to be seen and desired. The resources required for women to present themselves as desirable are commodities which can be bought; the razors for shaving the hair which should not be present; the hairdryer or straightener for beautifying the hair that should; the skincare products; the make-up; the clothes. Commodification extends even to that which is not overtly about physical appearance: a recent article for *Vice* observed, with regard to spirituality and wellness, that "as with so much of what we buy, we're meant to assume that higher cost means better quality. What's the endpoint of that logic when you're accessing spirituality?" (Ewens 2020). Women in particular, the article argues, pay increasingly large amounts for the trappings of inner peace and

wellness. The things which Astell would have identified as *truly* valuable – women’s selves, their constitution as ethical beings – cannot be commodified in this way.

Worse, perhaps, the discourse of feminism has been co-opted in support of the concern for appearance. A make-up artist writes in the *New York Times* that make-up “empowers a woman to present herself in exactly the way she chooses” (Roncal 2013), while Christa D’Souza claims in *The Telegraph* that high heels are “intensely empowering” (D’Souza 2017) and that there is “something assertive about the way they click on a floor”. These kinds of arguments almost invariably point towards the choice which individual women have to use make-up, heels, shapewear, or whatever else is at stake, claiming any power to choose as feminist. “The point is, shapewear is my choice, in the same way somebody criticising me directly for wearing it would infringe that,” (2019) argues Helen Wilson-Beevers in *Glamour*, not clarifying how criticism constitutes an infringement of choice.

Such claims fail to grasp what both Astell and Foucault, in different ways, understood so clearly: the individual subject is shaped and constrained by networks of external forces. They also fail to tackle what Astell is concerned with. Even *if* the choice to be concerned with bodily appearance is as much a free choice as it is claimed, that does not validate it as an ethical choice. For Astell, there is something wrong with a woman who devotes herself to beauty, fashion and appearance: she is not engaging with what *really matters*. Foucault too, while he was not so concerned as Astell with a vision of what “really” matters or some ultimate truth, can speak to these issues. His ethic of curiosity, of constant self-creation and transformation, should encourage women to question and critique the conventions of beauty and female value which are presented to them. The ethical values of refusal and innovation point the way towards rejecting the frameworks which are imposed on us and finding new ways to be as women.

What is a woman?

Our concept of what a “woman” is has changed since Astell was writing.¹¹ Astell doesn’t set out what she understands a woman to be, taking it perhaps as an uncontentious question. While she thinks that individual souls and minds can differ, she does not suggest any intrinsic gender dichotomy between the nature of women’s souls and the nature of men’s. In this she is not unconventional: the rational soul was, particularly in the wake of Descartes, not understood as “sexed” or gendered (although many feminist historians of philosophy have argued that the valorization of certain modes of reason is implicitly masculine).¹² Where she admits gender distinctions, she presents them primarily as social in nature: “acquired, not natural” (*SP I*, 59) is her stance on women’s incapacity for “acting Prudently” (58), if such an incapacity is accepted to exist. While she states that “Women have no business with the Pulpit, the Bar or *St. Stephens Chapel* [Parliament]” (*SP II*, 196), it is not clear that this is due to any more than divine fiat, rather than being grounded in any inherent unsuitability on women’s part.

Indeed, most of Astell’s characterisation of women hinges on how they are treated and construed by social convention. While she does refer to the general disparity of strength between men and women, she is scornful of the suggestion that this indicates any mental difference, writing sarcastically: “Strength of Mind goes along with Strength of Body, and ’tis only for some odd Accidents which Philosophers have not yet thought worth while to enquire into, that the Sturdiest Porter is not the Wisest Man! As therefore the Men have the Power in their Hands, so there’s no dispute of their having the Brains to manage it!” (*RM*, 77). This passage is interesting too in its characterisation of men as the possessors of power, a position continuous with much later conceptualisations of gender as a power relation.

¹¹ Or, on some accounts, our *understanding* of the concept has changed and developed. This difference doesn’t concern me here, but see Haslanger and Saul 2006 for clarification and further discussion.

¹² See, for instance Lloyd 1993; Duran 2006.

In both *A Serious Proposal* and *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell dwells on how women are shaped and damaged by their education and by social custom. “For according to the rate that young Women are Educated”, she writes, “they are destin’d to Folly and Impertinence, ... they are blam’d for that ill Conduct they are not suffer’d to avoid, and reproach’d for those Faults they are in a manner forc’d into” (*RM*, 65). The way women are treated as they grow up “serves to weaken and corrupt their Minds ... to disturb, not to regulate their Passions; to make them timorous and dependant” (65). These are not qualities intrinsic to womanhood, but are instead socially constructed.

This is not to say that Astell would have accepted the notion that “being a woman” is a social kind, or a matter of power relations. On her understanding, to be a woman is at least partly to have a body of a certain kind. Her emphasis on the power dynamic between genders, however, and the socially formed features of women, is useful when considering the relationship between her thought and feminist writing today. Power relations and social constructivism are both frequently invoked in philosophical accounts of what it means to be a woman. Simone de Beauvoir, introducing *The Second Sex*, defines women as that class of people relegated to otherness and inferiority by men and their own selves (De Beauvoir 2009, 38). “One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble of them is made to feel superior,” she argues, and in a similar turn of phrase to many of Astell’s observes that “the most mediocre of males feels himself as a demigod as compared to women” (33). As Astell does, Beauvoir challenges the *existence* of female inferiority as an argument *for* such inferiority: “Yes, women in general *are* today inferior to men; that is, their existence provides them with fewer possibilities, The question is: must this state of affairs be perpetuated?” (33). Beauvoir too points toward a socially constructed womanhood in her famous phrase “one is not born, but becomes, a woman”. The resemblance between Astell’s analysis of gender and Beauvoir’s shows these concerns to be long held in the history of feminism.

What we understand by gender and being a woman is particularly important given my aim to bring Astell and Foucault into dialogue with today's feminism. If I hope to suggest the relevance of a feminist ethic of the self to women today, some clarity regarding the scope of "woman" is desirable. This issue is especially acute given the current controversy, most markedly in UK feminism and media discourse, around transgender women's social and legal status. My ethical commitments to defending transgender people's own avowal of their genders means that any understanding of womanhood which is intrinsically linked to biological or physical features would be a problem for my project. I am concerned to use an understanding of what it is to be a woman which is compatible both with a version of Astell's feminist project and with my avowed ethical and political commitments. If such an understanding were not attainable, any analysis of Astell would be limited to historical concerns.

My own understanding of what it is to be a woman, for the sake of this thesis, is broadly along the lines Karen Vintges describes. "[W]hen I speak of 'women'", she writes, "I refer to those who, in virtue of being defined as women by their societies, are subjected to oppressive cultural and legal rules, ... and I also refer to those who, if less affected by the broad discourses on gender within their societies, commit themselves by way of an ethos to this identity" (Vintges 2004, 294). By defining women by reference *both* to the effects of social gender systems *and* to the individual commitment to womanhood as a "way of life", Vintges provides a space for a multitude of ways of being a woman. In particular, this understanding is inclusive of trans women in both respects, a vital feature for any definition of womanhood I am to adopt. Furthermore, Astell too sees gender through the lens of oppressive cultural rules, while at the same time choosing to commit herself and align herself with womanhood, pointing to positive construals of what it means to be a woman. It is possible to discard her problematic biological gender essentialism and adopt a new understanding of gender which is nonetheless harmonious with her overall project.

Astell, Foucault, and the “self”

Given that I am reading Astell as offering a gendered “ethic of the self”, and that I want to advocate a similar ethic as a feminist project today, it is necessary to touch on the notion of the self. Astell and Foucault have indisputably different understandings of what the self is.

For Foucault, there is no essential self to be discovered prior to its construction by social forces and techniques of the self. There is “no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere” (Foucault 1990a, 50). This understanding of the self, on Foucault’s account, originates in “the Christian technologies of the self” in which “the self is like a text or like a book that we have to decipher, and not something which has to be constructed by the superposition, the superimposition, of the will and truth” (Foucault 1999a, 168–69).¹³ At the end of the piece in which he says this, Foucault suggests that “maybe the problem is not to discover a positive self or the positive foundation of that self. Maybe our problem now is to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history” (181). In this way, Foucault’s project emerges as being to dissolve the self as we often understand it, rather than to *discover* it.

The creation of the self, Foucault claims, is inextricable from the implementation of power: it is “a form of power that makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 2002, 331). For Foucault, the self is interchangeable with the “subject”: he parenthetically refers to the self as “the thinking subject” (Foucault 1988b) in his 1988 seminar “Technologies of the Self”. The subject “is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty” (Foucault 1990a, 50). Rather than power and forms of subjection being enacted *on* an already-existing subject, Foucault regards the subject as the creation *of* certain practices. Indeed, he explicitly links “subject” as a noun to “subject” as a verb: “There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and

¹³ In this thesis, I am taking “technologies of the self”, “practices of the self” and “techniques of the self” to be broadly interchangeable.

dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to” (Foucault 2002, 331).

Foucault’s conviction that the self is not prior leads directly to his ethics: “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Foucault 1997b, 262). Because we are not provided with a ready-made self, we can and must create our own selves. Doing so, enacting techniques of the self on our selves for the purposes of self-formation, can function as a liberation; rejecting our subjectivation through forms of domination and substituting instead our own subjectivation.

Astell, conversely, does believe in a pre-existing self that can be discovered. She equates the self, the soul and the mind, as was common in seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy: in the preface to Part I of *A Serious Proposal* she moves between references to “an immortal Mind” (*SP I*, 51), “deformed Souls” (51), “your Minds” (52), “your selves” (52) and “that particle of Divinity within you” (53). She urges women not to “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 ... We value [men] too much, and our *selves* too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion” (55). In this passage, Astell distinguishes between on the one hand the self, the soul, the mind, and on the other hand the body, which she repeatedly separates from the *true* self. She identifies the mind with the self in *The Christian Religion*, writing that self-preservation “does not consist in the Preservation of the Person or *Composite*, but in preserving the Mind from Evil, the Mind which is truly the Self, and which ought to be secur’d at all hazards” (*CR*, 217). The self is unequivocally the mind for Astell, and it is not *our* creation but God’s.

Furthermore, the self on Astell’s account can be observed and discovered. Broad emphasizes Astell’s radical limitations on how much of the self can be known, pointing out that “Astell explicitly denies that we can have a clear and distinct idea of the whole essence or nature of the self” (Broad 2018, 215).

While this is true, and the self is not transparent or *wholly* knowable on Astell's account, she nonetheless advocates "observing the bent and turn of our own Minds, which way our Genius lies and to what it is most inclin'd" (*SP II*, 153). Human beings have "a variety in Minds" (153) on Astell's account, possessing "different Abilities which the Wise Author of all things has endow'd us with" (153). We have a duty then to *discover* the capacities which God has given us: "To help us to the Knowledge of our own Capacities, the Informations of our Friends, nay even of our Enemies may be useful" (156). Presenting a self which can be discovered and revealed, with individual characteristics which God has granted us, Astell appears at odds with Foucault's emphasis on the *constitution* of the self by techniques of governmentality and self-creation.¹⁴

I want to suggest that the two models are reconcilable at least as far as an ethic of the self is concerned. Despite Astell's commitment to immortal souls, given and individuated by God, there is still expansive room on her account for transformation or warping of those already given selves. There may be *limits* on individuals' capacities, and tendencies towards certain strengths or weaknesses which individuate subjects, but there is nonetheless a great deal which can be done to transform the self which you start out with. This can be negative in effect or positive: either the detrimental effect of social custom or vicious actions taken by the self, or a virtuous effort of self-transformation.

Astell proposes varying methods for addressing and transforming individual's faults: "Volatileness of Thought", for example, "is a fault which People of warm Imaginations and Active Spirits are apt to fall into" (160). To remedy this, Astell suggests that "perhaps it will be necessary to apply to the body as well as to the Mind ... a serious perusal of such Books as are not loosly writ, but require an Attent and Awakened Mind" (161, 162); and steady and focused meditation "be on what Object it may" (162). If Astell's methods are attended to, "we shall prevent Rashness and Precipitation in our Judgments" (162). This passage demonstrates that despite individual tendencies towards certain

¹⁴ See below for further discussion of Foucault's understanding of "governmentality".

defects, the self can be altered, worked on, and constructed *differently* by concerted effort.

Resistance, freedom, autonomy

Another theme which I shall be taking up is that of freedom and autonomy within structures of oppression or domination. The work on the self elaborated and advocated by both Astell and Foucault is also, I argue, a way of enacting freedom and instantiating resistance against external subjugating forces.

For Foucault, this is very explicit. In “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom” (Foucault 1997c) he draws together ethics and freedom, asking “what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*reflechie*] practice of freedom?” (284). Freedom should not so much be understood as a final state to be achieved, or a condition that will be accessed after certain structures are removed, but instead as certain “practices of liberation, of liberty” (Foucault 1990a, 50). The ethics of antiquity from which he draws are, on his account, “a practice, a style of liberty ... an attempt to affirm one’s liberty and to give to one’s own life a certain form” (49). Furthermore, the practice of freedom is a political practice, and a political freedom. One of the aims of ethics, and of practices of the self, is to “play ... games of power with as little domination as possible” (Foucault 1997c, 298): this is the “hinge point of ethical concerns ... and research in ethics that seeks to ground individual freedom” (298). While it is not the only point of resistance to “political power – understood ... as a state of domination”, the “relationship of the self to the self” (300) is one aspect of what Foucault calls governmentality. Governmentality covers “the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other” (300): in this lens, practices of the self and the ethics of the self emerge as both individual and fundamentally political, and individual freedom is at the same time political.

The notion of “practices of freedom” as part of the ethics of the self has been picked up on repeatedly by feminists drawing on Foucault: McWhorter argues that we should “conceive of feminism as transformative practices of freedom” (McWhorter 2013, 54), while Vintges seizes on “freedom practices” as providing potential for a universalistic, cross-cultural feminist ethics (Vintges 2004). Philosophy itself, as we will see in Chapter Three, becomes a freedom practice on Foucault’s account: a way of critiquing the world that is given to us and living differently.

Astell too is concerned that women should access a kind of freedom through work on their selves. At the beginning of Part II of *A Serious Proposal* she addresses her female readers, urging them that “it is in your Power to regain your Freedom, if you please but t’ endeavour it”: they need not be “kept any longer under [men’s] Tyranny in Ignorance and Folly” (*SP II*, 121). Astell wants women to resist the detrimental effects of social custom by following her regime of self-reflection and philosophical activity: this way they can become free. She develops “a feminist theory of autonomy: a theory that for women to acquire true self-determination in their moral choices and actions, they must be permitted the conditions that enable careful self-examination and self-government” (Broad 2019, 724). The ethic of the self which Astell proposes is situated in the context of male domination and the pernicious effects of sexist social custom: it constitutes a way to practise freedom within that context. Throughout the thesis, I will consider how the aspects of Astell’s work I am drawing out function as practices of freedom, asking whether and how they could work for a modern feminist project.

Surveying the field of scholarship

Astell is one of the most closely studied early modern women philosophers. She has been approached within a variety of disciplines including philosophy, political theory, women’s history and literature. Fortunately, we are no longer in the position that Springborg described in 2005, in which “Astell, like other early modern feminists, has been largely the monopoly of literary scholars and early modern historians” (Springborg 2005, 2): she is increasingly studied by

philosophers and historians of philosophy. As well as the established names I discuss below, I want to acknowledge too other doctoral students or early career academics such as Allauraen Forbes, Michaela Manson and Maks Sipowicz, who are forming part of a new generation of Astell scholars. Here, I am concerned with providing an overview of the landscape regarding scholarship on Astell's philosophy, although I will also touch upon other relevant areas.

My research has been influenced by the work of Jacqueline Broad and Alice Sowaal. Broad, the author of the only book length treatment of Astell's philosophy, provides a well contextualised account of Astell as a theorist of virtue. As in my work, Broad presents Astell as offering a *transformative* philosophical regimen for women to follow, and links Astell's thought to that of modern feminists such as Marilyn Friedman. She has also written on Astell and the self (Broad 2018, 2019), usefully informing my account of Astell's ethics of the self. Alice Sowaal has emphasized the role of Astell's philosophical method in altering the self of the woman who uses it, as well as pointing to Astell's advocacy of meditation to obtain a "sage-like state" (Sowaal 2017, 191). This thesis builds on the work that Broad and Sowaal have undertaken by situating Astell's ethics in the historical tradition identified by Foucault. Broad, however, is putting forward an account of Astell's thought in which "all the separate strands ... come together as a united and consistent whole" (Broad 2015, 5): her aim is to provide a coherent account of Astell's moral philosophy. Sowaal in her essay on "Mind, Method, and Custom" in *A Serious Proposal* (2007) takes a conventional analytic approach to reconstructing Astell's arguments. This thesis takes neither approach: my appropriation of Astell's texts as well as the philosophical frameworks which I am using is very different from the studies of Broad and Sowaal.

An earlier book length treatment of Astell, Springborg's *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (2005), focuses on Astell's political theory, arguing for Astell as an important critic of Locke's contractarianism and, as the title indicates, a theorist of freedom from domination. While my thesis is

less engaged with the details of political philosophy and the historical disputes in which Astell participated, Springborg's work is valuable in situating Astell in her milieu, providing a wealth of detail which usefully illuminates any reading.

Aside from the scholarship of Broad, Sowaal and Springborg, who have all attended to multiple areas of Astell's thought, we can identify several main topics with which literature on Astell tends to engage. In recent years, several essays and articles have engaged with Astell's philosophy of friendship (Kolbrener 2007; Broad 2009; Anderson 2012; Kendrick 2018), for instance, on which I will be drawing in Chapter Four of this thesis. The attention to friendship is a component of a broader attempt to understand the social dimension to Astell's philosophy. This includes work which seeks to understand her attitude towards marriage (Detlefsen 2016) or her account of women's trauma and its remedy (Moser 2016).

The literature which draws on Astell's religious positioning is relevant for my final chapter, where I consider the relationship between Astell's Christianity and an ethic of the self. In this area we find both scholarship directly focused on Astell's philosophy of religion (Ellenzweig 2003; Broad 2015; Lascano 2016) and work which considers her religious beliefs and practices in their historical and political context (Springborg 1998; Apetrei 2010; Alvarez 2011). Related to Astell's Christianity as well as to her social philosophy, Joanne Myers has addressed the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century issue of "enthusiasm", bringing Astell into dialogue with figures such as Damaris Masham and Shaftesbury (Myers 2013, 2014).

The current overlap between Foucault and Astell scholarship is minimal, confined to Penny Weiss's invocation of Foucault's work on power in "From the Throne to Every Private Family': Mary Astell as Analyst of Power" (2016). Weiss argues forcefully that "feminists have been urging us down many of the paths Foucault has more recently and much more famously traveled regarding power, but, as many women know, it often takes a man expressing your ideas for them to be heard" (Weiss 2016, 130). Weiss here is less applying a

Foucauldian understanding of power to Astell than demonstrating how Astell's incisive analysis of power anticipates later writers on power including Foucault. Weiss's analysis is valuable in showing how Astell acutely understands power, although I do not share her "Foucault fatigue". Related work which considers Astell's stance on power, autonomy and freedom again includes Broad and Sowaal (Broad 2015; Sowaal 2017).

The literature on Foucault is vast: my attention here is first to its early-modern application; secondly feminist uptake or reaction against Foucault; and thirdly work on Foucauldian ethics and philosophy as a way of life.

Foucault's later work has been applied occasionally to early modern thought: useful in this regard is Christopher Davidson's "Spinoza as an Exemplar of Foucault's Spirituality and Technologies of the Self" (2015). This essay, which provides a valuable framework for part of Chapter Three, situates Spinoza's ethics in a Foucauldian framework. In Jeanette Bloem's "The Shaping of a 'Beautiful' Soul: the Critical Life of Anna Maria van Schurman" (2004), we find a rare instance of Foucauldian thought applied to an early modern woman. This article is useful for its attention to Van Schurman's religious commitments, with Bloem asking whether "the religious context of Van Schurman's ethical self-care allows itself to be identified so easily with the late-Foucauldian approach?" (Bloem 2004, 20). This is a question I address later in relation to Astell. Finally, John Sellars – who works extensively on philosophy as a way of life and Stoicism – draws on Foucault in his essay on "Shaftesbury, Stoicism, and Philosophy as a Way of Life" (Sellars 2016).

There has also been work on early modern philosophy more broadly inspired by Foucault and Hadot, even if they are not always directly cited. I have already shown how Garrett interprets seventeenth-century ethical thought as primarily to do with self-transformation and self-cultivation. In a more historical vein, Sorana Corneanu – drawing explicitly on Hadot – has argued that "early modern English experimental philosophers" (Corneanu 2011, 2) such as Locke and Boyle understood their epistemological and scientific projects as part of a transformative discipline affecting the soul. This work,

along with Garrett's, is useful in situating Astell as part of an early modern tradition, rather than a lone voice in the wilderness.

Foucault's late work has been engaged with at great length by feminist thinkers. A good account of the state of the field in 2013 is provided by Heyes for *Foucault Studies* (Heyes 2013): given the extent of the literature I will be providing a truncated overview. There is a division between those such as Lois McNay who criticize what they see as a masculinist, atomistic ethics devoid of the collective power needed for feminist organising (McNay 1992, 1994), and feminists such as McWhorter or Jana Sawicki who find Foucauldian technologies of the self a valuable complement to broader liberatory practices (McWhorter 2004, 2013; Sawicki 2013). Many other scholars take an intermediate stance: Amy Allen, for instance, acknowledges the feminist limitations of Foucault's later account of the self but urges the productive value of exploring those limitations. Helen O'Grady, similarly, argues that Foucault's "emphasis on the type of ethical relationship we have with ourselves" (O'Grady 2004, 110) can be extremely valuable for women, but that McNay's criticisms of Foucault are pertinent and require addressing. I have found Bartky and Heyes to provide some of the most stimulating applications of Foucault to feminist issues: Heyes, for instance, draws on Foucault's late work and applies it fruitfully to Weightwatchers and dieting practices, among other feminist issues of concern (Bartky 1990b; Heyes 2007). While I position myself more with writers like McWhorter, the feminist critiques of Foucault are vital to engage with, particularly as I contend that Astell's writing can provide useful responses.

There is a useful body of material on Foucault's ethics and concept of philosophy, some of which reads Foucault as advocating a philosophical mode of existence and links his ethics to Hadot's work. Again, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive account of the literature in this space, but important accounts of Foucauldian ethics have been put forward by Timothy O'Leary (2002), Arnold Davidson (2005) and James Bernauer and Michael Mahon (2005). Several essays and articles put Foucault into dialogue with Hadot,

drawing out their points of contact and tension (Irrera 2010; Testa 2016; Sellars, n.d.) or otherwise attend to Foucault's use of ancient philosophy (Ure 2007). Martha Nussbaum provides a critical account of Foucault's appropriation of ancient philosophical ethics: she charges Foucault with neglecting the *rational* nature of philosophy and failing to distinguish philosophy adequately from magical or religious practices (Nussbaum 1994).

Finally, I draw throughout from a variety of feminist philosophy. My engagement with feminist philosophy more broadly – as opposed to Foucauldian feminism in particular – is eclectic: rather than attempting a comprehensive engagement with such a wide-ranging field, I instead draw with spontaneity on work I find interesting for my project. The material I have used has sprung up organically from my personal reading, ranging from French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff's book length essay on the relationship between women and philosophy, *Hipparchia's Choice* (Le Doeuff 1991) to Grace Jantzen's feminist philosophy of religion, *Becoming Divine* (Jantzen 1998). I draw too from public and popular feminist discourse and non-academic feminist writing.

While my work in this thesis draws from and benefits hugely from Astell, Foucault, and feminist scholarship that has gone before me, it is unique in its approach, style, and interpretive framework. It provides an important addition both to Astell research and Foucauldian feminism, as well as contributing to modern feminist ethical philosophy.

Thesis and *askesis*: the doctorate as practice of the self

For Foucault, writing was itself a means to transform himself, to think himself differently. "When a piece of work is not also an attempt to change what one thinks and even what one is, it is not very amusing ... for me, to work is to try to think something other than what one had thought before," (Foucault 1990e, 255–56) he stated in an interview which appeared shortly before his death. He insisted that "I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation" (Foucault 1990f, 14). To *be* an

academic on Foucault's account is "to try to manipulate a type of knowledge and analysis that is taught and received in the universities in such a way as to alter not only others' thoughts, but also one's own" (Foucault 1990e, 263). The importance which Foucault accorded writing as a technique of the self is visible throughout his later work, perhaps most evidently in "Self Writing" (1983). While this is overtly concerned with "Greco-Roman culture during the first two centuries of the empire" (Foucault 1983a), it is no stretch to link Foucault's analysis of writing in this context with his own understanding of academic writing.

There is a sense in which the process of researching and writing this thesis has functioned for me as an *askesis*. The transformation which undertaking a PhD has effected on my thoughts and my self extends much further than the work committed to these pages. The work I have undertaken to write this has led me, through varied means, to the following: a dedication to community philosophical practice, in particular through my work with the Stuart Low Trust Philosophy Forum; a commitment to prison abolition (along with the rest of the criminal justice system, and indeed the state); a sense of the importance of individual moral self-fashioning, and the value of individual acts of resistance and disruption in systems of oppression and exploitation; and taking love, and loving encounters with the other, to be at the heart of my ethics and politics. In my feminism, Astell's approach has drawn me towards attention to the self, and the way in which women are damaged by misogynistic norms. Astell has also drawn me towards a certain sense of moral austerity. Some of these elements appear in what follows: others do not.

What is called a PhD extends beyond the covers of the thesis: even developments which seem to belong to the realm of my personal life have been influenced and influence in turn the intellectual labour I have been undertaking. While this is doubtless the case for many PhDs, the nature of my topic contributed considerably to the effect. By being able to work on this project, I have been given the space to develop as a person, not merely as an academic.

There are broader issues at hand too. I have intermittently been troubled by concerns over the value of a project like this in a world which is suffering in many and acute ways. This is hardly suffering which takes place at a distance. Sodexo, the company which provides outsourced catering at UCL, is also responsible for the management of five of the UK's private prisons. In one of these, HMP Bronzefield, a new-born baby died in October 2019 after a woman gave birth alone in her cell (Devlin and Taylor 2019). At this prison, four women have died since July 2016, with an inquest jury finding that neglect and systematic failings had contributed to the death of one of them, Natasha Chin. Simultaneously, as a student and an employee of UCL, I have been devoting myself to the work of the author of *Discipline and Punish*, which acutely observes that “there is no outside” (Foucault 1977, 301) to the carceral network. There is an uncomfortable tension here.

Philosophy can be used to harm; it can function as a tool of discipline as well as a technique of self-transformation. The last few years have seen transmisogyny run rife in academic philosophy: the tools of philosophical argument have been wielded to intensify the oppression faced by a vulnerable section of society.¹⁵ Trans women have written of being forced out of academic philosophy: one anonymous writer explains how “because of the very subject matter that constitutes philosophy, I am expected to tolerate constant public discourse about the nature of my gender identity, whether I ‘count’ as a woman, and what rights I am due in virtue of my gender” (“t philosopher” 2019). “There is no dignity for me as an academic philosopher,” she writes: the very norms of academic philosophical argument appealed to by philosophers such as Kathleen Stock are what function to dehumanize and delegitimise trans women in the academy.¹⁶

In this sense, Foucault's earlier stance on philosophy holds considerable weight. In McWhorter's account of this position, philosophy “[reinforces] disciplinary control and [reproduces] the status quo” (McWhorter 2016, 25).

¹⁵ Transmisogyny is the hatred of and prejudice against transgender women. Transgender women are women who were assigned male at birth.

¹⁶ Stock's position on trans women will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Furthermore, “to the extent that it has these conservative and even repressive material effects, it disavows them by shrouding itself in the mantel of theoretical objectivity and universal rationality” (25). Trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher says something similar regarding the appropriate philosophical methodology for discussing the lived experienced of oppressed groups: “I’m afraid there’s a tendency among some philosophers to suppose that philosophical investigations into race, gender, disability, trans issues and so forth are no different methodologically from investigations into the question whether tables really exist” (Bettcher 2018). “To invite me to a philosophical forum in which I prove my womanhood is to do something far different from inviting me to share my views on mathematical Platonism,” she urges. “Do you understand the *risks*?” Like Foucault, Bettcher sees academic philosophy – a discipline in which she makes her living – as something which can reinforce subjugation of the oppressed and marginalised.

I would like to conceptualise this thesis as a work of academic philosophy, but at the same time am possessed with the acute ambivalence towards the discipline expressed by Bettcher and Foucault. The philosophy of academic institutions can on the one hand appear useless: on the other hand, actively harmful. Whatever personal effects my philosophical project may have wrought on me, I am anxious not to fall into either pit. I believe that there is hope, however.

McWhorter concludes her essay with a question: “If we take Foucault’s work seriously, the question for our present is: Where is philosophy livable? And how?” (McWhorter 2016, 36). I am strongly inclined to agree with her suggestions that “philosophy [might] be better served if its academic avatar were abolished ... if conservative, increasingly corporatized academic institutions no longer held it under their control” (36). After all, “the practice of philosophy, philosophy as a way of life, has no essential tie to academic institutions” (36). Nor, I want to emphasize, does Astell’s philosophical regimen aimed at women. While she advocates the establishment of an educational institution for women, the work on the self which she urges

women to undertake can be accomplished sitting in a bedroom reflecting carefully.

Indeed, she is critical of much of the educational system developed by men; she is concerned that the women she instructs should not “turn over a great number of Books, but take care to understand and digest a few well chosen and good ones” (*SP I*, 78). In *Reflections upon Marriage*, she heaps scorn on “your grave Dons, your Learned Men, and ... your Men of Sense as they wou’d be thought” who “stoop so low as to make Invectives against the Women” (*RM*, 58). That men of learning and academics “shou’d waste their Time, and debase their good Sense which fits them for the most weighty Affairs ... to render those poor Wretches more ridiculous and odious who are already in their Opinion sufficiently contemptible, and find no better exercise of their Wit and Satyr than such as are not worth their Pains, ... this indeed may be justly wondered at!” (59), Astell exclaims. Instead, she advocates *true* learning, *true* philosophy: something which is intimately bound up in our moral selves; something which functions to resist power structures and social norms rather than reinforcing them. “Truths merely Speculative” (*SP II*, 143), she sneers, “and which have no influence upon Practice, which neither contribute to the good of Soul or Body, are but idle Amusements, an impertinent and criminal wast of Time”. This is merely “the *Knowlege that puffeth up*, in the Words of the Apostle”.

Both Astell and Foucault can help respond to these concerns. Philosophy undertaken in academia need not be “academic philosophy”: the knowledge that puffeth up. If it is not to be so, however – if it is to serve to critique, resist, or to develop us as moral subjects – it must look outwards. It must not be inert. My hope throughout this project is to suggest ways in which Foucault and Astell can be active in our lives and struggles today.

Thesis outline

The structure of the thesis is as follows. My first chapter introduces Foucault’s framework of the “ethic of the self” and the concept of *care* of the self which he

draws from ancient philosophy. In Astell's texts, I argue, particularly *A Serious Proposal*, we can identify such an ethic of the self, centred around the care for the self. For Astell, however, the care of the self is gendered in important ways. Not only do women require greater attention to their own selves than men, due to sexist social structures and "custom", but they require specific conditions and criteria to *practise* care of the self.

My second chapter addresses practices of the self. These practices that people undertake to effect change in their selves need not be elements of care for the self: they can also be harmful ways of imposing discipline on the self. I look at both the bodily and the mental, meditative practices of the self that Astell endorses for women. I argue that despite their double-edged nature, and the potential for discipline and self-surveillance which Astell offers, they should nonetheless be understood as "freedom" practices which disrupt conventional power relations. I situate Astell's set of practices as part of an *askesis*, drawing her into conversation with Heyes' feminist appropriation of Foucault.

In my third chapter I argue that Astell presents philosophy itself as a practice of the self, and draw Astell's use of philosophy into dialogue with Foucault's analysis of philosophy as a spirituality. I put both Astell and Foucault into dialogue with Le Doeuff, who questions what the appropriate relationship between women and philosophy should be, given how philosophy has been wielded toward women's subjugation. For Astell, I argue, philosophy becomes a feminist spiritual practice of critique, integral for women to unknot the customs which are so detrimental to their ethical selves.

My final two chapters address issues of concern for both Astell and Foucault. In my fourth, I consider the relationship with "the other": relationships of friendship, romantic and sexual relationships, and relationships with the community and political action. I argue that criticism of Astell and Foucault on grounds of individualism and lack of relationality are ill-founded. Reading Astell in conjunction with Foucault's account of a homosexual *askesis*, I argue that while she rejects heterosexual relationality, she proffers friendships between women as an important part of her feminist ethic of the self.

Furthermore, her focus on individual women's improvement is part of a pragmatic strategy in the face of apparently insurmountable systems of domination, rather than a wholesale rejection of political resistance.

Finally, I address religious commitments and practices. I show in this chapter how Foucault's attitude towards religion is more complicated than is sometimes acknowledged. I argue that Astell's Christian practices and commitments can and do function for her as part of her feminist freedom practices, but that they do nonetheless present serious tensions with a modern ethic of the self.

Throughout all these chapters, I interweave personal reflections and thoughts on the prospect for an Astellian ethic of the self in modern feminism. In my conclusion I synthesise these thoughts into a tentative proposal for how such an ethic could function today.

Chapter One

Mary Astell and care of the self

"Self-care" has become a ubiquitous expression in recent years: a *New Yorker* article dates its rise as "collective social practice" to 2016 (Kisner 2017), although the term was in common parlance well before that.¹⁷ It is used to refer to the ways in which people do or should look after themselves: that which they do *for themselves* rather than for others. Meditating can be self-care, as can yoga practice, taking a hot bath, going for a walk or a run, or watching a diverting TV show. One article on *Vice* enthusiastically proclaims that helping yourself "in any conscious way is self-care" (Som 2019). Encouragement to practise self-care abounds online: a quick search for the "#selfcare" hashtag on Instagram brings up over 24 million posts, and suggestions for other hashtags such as "#selfcaresunday", "#selfcaretips" and "#selfcarehacks". Largely, although not exclusively, self-care is targeted at and practised by women.

The concept is sometimes attributed to Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, who stated unapologetically that "[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde 1988, 130).¹⁸ Lorde positioned caring for herself as part of her struggle as a Black gay woman: taking care of a self which was devalued and diminished by American society's racism, misogyny and homophobia. In mainstream accounts and analyses of self-care, Foucault is rarely mentioned: a *Guardian* article nods to him, writing that the "roots of the current ideas about self-care are to be found in a book by the intellectual historian, Michel Foucault" (Spicer 2019), while the *New Yorker* provides a couple of lines also referring to volume 3 of *The*

¹⁷ The *OED* provides examples of the term dating back to the sixteenth century (*OED Online* 2020).

¹⁸ It is less often acknowledged that Lorde wrote this in the context of pursuing homeopathic treatment for her cancer: the extent to which this embracing of pseudoscientific healthcare as purported care for the self and political warfare might trouble the claim would be interesting to address, although not here.

History of Sexuality, titled *The Care of the Self*. Foucault, however, was key in identifying and conceptualising the notion of “care of the self” throughout the history of thought, as well as advocating its uptake in some renewed form in his own day.

In antiquity, Foucault argues, “we have ... an entire ethics revolving around the care of the self; this is what gives ancient ethics its particular form” (Foucault 1997c, 285). The care of the self is a central theme in Foucault’s later thought: as well as the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, the concept appears and reappears throughout the many interviews, lectures and essays which constitute his last body of work. Foucault interprets ancient – and to some extent early Christian – ethical culture as revolving around caring for the self and also suggests, albeit cautiously, that “the same advice given by ancient morality can function differently in a contemporary style of morality” (Foucault 1990c, 247). I believe that Astell advocates an ethic of the self which inhabits the same tradition of care of the self which Foucault identifies in ancient ethics.

In this chapter I argue that the care of the self is central to the ethics of *A Serious Proposal*, and that Astell identifies care of the self as a disproportionately gendered need. Whereas Foucault acknowledges, but fails to grapple with or challenge, the way in which the “Greek ethics were linked to a purely virile society ... in which the women were underdogs” (Foucault 1997b, 256), Astell links the need for self-care to women’s gendered subjugation. She also draws out the implications of this gendered requirement of care of the self for its practice and consequences, particularly in her recommendation of an all-female educational environment in which women can appropriately care for their selves. In so doing, she provides valuable resources for re-imagining women’s self-care in the modern world.

First, I explain Foucault’s analysis of “care of the self”. I outline how the concept fits into his ethical framework, the use he makes of care of the self in his analysis of ancient ethical thought and his narrative of its development and

decline, and finally highlight his suggestions for a renewed care of the self for the modern ethical moment. Then I touch on some key aspects of its reception from contemporary feminist thinkers who have critiqued or appropriated the concept. This section of the chapter provides the interpretative framework for my subsequent reading of Astell.

Having clarified the nature of care of the self, I consider its place in Astell's writing. This section shows how *A Serious Proposal* advocates an ethic of care of the self and reads *A Serious Proposal* through Foucault's framework. I show how Astell genders this ethic. Turning Astell's project back on to Foucault's analysis, I argue that Astell demonstrates women's particular need for care of the self, due to the way in which social structures warp their selves, and that the causes of women's need for self-care have serious implications for the way in which they can and should practise it. I also introduce Astell's use of care of the self as a form of feminist praxis: this will be developed further in my chapter on Astell's practices of the self.

Finally, I draw my Foucauldian reading of Astell into dialogue with contemporary feminist responses to Foucault, considering whether an Astellian care of the self can address some of the concerns which feminists have raised about Foucault's care of the self. In conjunction with this discussion I explore how Astell's care of the self can offer useful tools or insights to contemporary feminism.

Attention to Astell's texts provides us with resources for gendering Foucault's framework of care of the self on several levels: from its need to its obstacles, practice and consequences. Astell's thought can be put in juxtaposition with modern feminist responses to and critiques of Foucault to provide depth and historical perspectives on the Foucauldian debate, as well as drawing attention to the existence of a female voice and perspective on care of the self in the Western philosophical tradition. Astell's presence disrupts Foucault's narrative of the development of care of the self, and his interpretation of Christianity's influence on the tradition.

On the other hand, the framework of care of the self is also significant in providing a new way to approach Astell. By showing how she participates in the philosophical tradition of care of the self, I am situating her in a hitherto unobserved context, opening new avenues for analysis. My reading connects with interpretations of Astell that have noted “acts of domination [which] lead to ... moral impediments” (Sowaal 2016, 192), women’s need for “improvement at all levels of their being” and the necessity of forging a “new self ... within community”, drawing them together in a coherent framework.

Foucauldian care of the self

Ethics for Foucault concerns “the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct” and a history of ethics is thus concerned with “the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self” (Foucault 1985, 29). While all moralities have this ethical component, the stress on and the nature of the relationship to the self varies. In some moralities, for instance, “the main emphasis is placed on the [moral] code” (29). In the moralities with which Foucault is most concerned, however, the “forms of relations with the self” (30) are the central focus: these are ethics-oriented, as opposed to code-oriented, moralities.

In some of these ethics-oriented moralities Foucault identifies the *care* of the self as the key way in which the self relates to itself, most prominently in the morality of the ancient Western world. While this is an ancient tradition, it is with Hellenistic and Roman thought that “the exhortation to care for oneself became ... a truly general cultural phenomenon” (Foucault 2005b, 9). From the fifth century B.C., through Greek, Hellenistic and Roman philosophy, as well as Christian spirituality, roughly speaking ending in early Christian asceticism, Foucault identifies “a body of work defining a way of being, a standpoint, forms of reflection, and practices” (11) which constitutes the “event in thought” (9) of care of the self. In this long-lasting ethical moment Foucault believes that the care of the self is the fundamental form of the self’s relation to the self.

An ethics which centres the care of the self is one which advocates an attention to and concern for the *self* first and foremost, as opposed to other things that might seem worthy of attention. It is striking that care of the self is “ethically prior” to the care for others (Foucault 1997c, 287). While caring for oneself properly will result in appropriate relationships with others, and “implies complex relationships with others” (287), care of the self is not intended as preparatory for caring for others: “One takes care of the self for oneself, and this care finds its own reward in the care of the self. In the care of the self one is one’s own object and end” (Foucault 2005b, 177). Foucault suggests that such a principle “is a bit disturbing for us” (12) in the modern world. The various principles of care of the self, such as “caring for oneself”, “retiring into the self”, “finding pleasure in oneself”, “devoting oneself to oneself” (12) are at odds, he claims, with modern traditions which see such a focus on the self as egoistic or, perhaps, “melancholy and sad” (13). In the world as Foucault saw it in the 1980s, attention to the self carried a negative valence: in the ancient thought with which he was concerned, however, it was a universally positive motif. Today, an orientation toward the self is once again more positively received, if the preponderance of material directed towards self-care is anything to go by.

Foucault is at pains to clarify that care of the self goes far beyond “simply being interested in oneself” or “having a certain tendency to self-attachment” (Foucault 1997b, 269). The Greek phrase *epimeleia heauton*, which Foucault translates with an acknowledgment of inadequacy into “care of oneself”, “describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique” (269). Caring for the self entails a *labour* on the self: it is “not a rest cure” (Foucault 1986, 51). This distinguishes Foucauldian care of the self from some of the mainstream popular discourse today, which frequently lapses into a passive mode of making the self feel good, often through a purchase, rather than moulding and labouring on the self. Self-care recommendations on the popular website *Buzzfeed*, for example, include “[t]ry a pillow spray” (Malone, 2017) and “[w]atch your favorite childhood movie” (Hayes, 2018): very different

modes of attention to the self from the often austere practices which Foucault identifies. Foucault distinguishes the ancient care of the self from what he terms “the Californian cult of the self” (Foucault 1997b, 271), a modern valorisation of “one’s true self” which is “diametrically opposed” to the ancient culture of the self (271). In the Californian cult of the self, “one is supposed to discover one’s true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it” (271): in ancient thought, conversely, Foucault argues that one’s mode of engagement with the self was one of *creation*, not of uncovering.

Foucault identifies a modern discomfort with care of the self as something which “signifies for us either egoism or withdrawal” (Foucault 2005b, 13). Modern ethical thought and modern Christian culture, he argues, have taken up many of the “austere rules” and principles associated with ancient care of the self but placed them instead within “a morality of non-egoism” (13). Not only did the care of the self become subject to suspicion and negative connotations, but the theme has been neglected by historians, Foucault proposes. In particular, historians of philosophy have emphasised and elevated as central the Delphic injunction to “know thyself” and marginalised and discredited the *epimeleia heauton*, or “care of the self”.¹⁹ Foucault assigns the blame for this distorted narrative of the history of philosophy and ethics, “the reason why the place occupied by this principle [of care of the self] for nigh on one thousand years has been obliterated”, primarily to the “Cartesian moment” (14). While admitting that this is “a bad, purely conventional phrase” (14), and further acknowledging that “we must not forget that Descartes wrote ‘meditations’ – and meditations are a practice of the self” (Foucault 1997b, 278), Foucault broadly argues that Descartes placed knowledge of the self, as opposed to its care and transformation, as the foundational source of access to truth. The relationship between philosophy and spirituality is elaborated in Chapter Three. The point to note here is Foucault’s claim of a post-Cartesian

¹⁹ The Delphic injunction, or *gnothi seauton*, is not unrelated to the care of the self: on Foucault’s interpretation of ancient philosophy, care of the self is what frames and provides the foundation for “the necessity of knowing oneself” (Foucault 2005b, 8). Self-knowledge is *part* of care of the self, and should not be elevated above it.

suppression and discrediting of the care of the self, which has led subsequent thinkers to overlook its presence throughout the history of thought. By drawing it out in Astell's project, I am contributing to its reinstatement as an important ethical thread throughout the history of philosophy.

Foucault does not claim that the care of the self is non-existent following the Cartesian moment. While he doesn't give its development in latter periods the same attention as he does its role in ancient thought and early Christian culture, he refers to "a reaffirmation of its autonomy" in the Renaissance (Foucault 1997b, 278) and identifies Spinoza and Kant as showing continued evidence that "the structures of spirituality have not disappeared ... from philosophical reflections" (Foucault 2005b, 28). Nineteenth-century philosophy, he proposes, is a "kind of pressure to try to rethink the structures of spirituality" within philosophy and "without saying so, rediscovers the care of the self" (28). While the care of the self has not constituted the same "event in thought" that Foucault claims for ancient ethical culture, it has nonetheless persisted throughout philosophical history.

Foucault saw his twentieth-century ethical moment as bearing resemblances to the ancient ethical moment: when asked whether the classical concept of care of the self ought to be updated in the context of modern thought, Foucault replied "[a]bsolutely, but I would certainly not do so just to say, 'We have unfortunately forgotten about the care of the self; so here, here it is, the key to everything'" (Foucault 1997c, 294). A return to the care of the self would result something *new* for the present era. The necessity for care of the self to be reformulated to answer the specific problems of an historical moment should be borne in mind both when interpreting Astell's texts and when considering their value to a contemporary feminism.

The contemporary relevance of care of the self is particularly striking when considering its relationship to politics and freedom. While foregrounding concern for one's own self as an ethical priority seems to risk an atomised disconnection from broader political concerns, the converse is true on Foucault's interpretation. Rather, Foucault claims, in "the Greco-Roman

world, the care of the self was the mode in which individual freedom – or civic liberty, up to a point – was reflected [*se réfléchie*] as an ethics” (Foucault 1997c, 284). This freedom, furthermore – which is the very condition for any kind of ethics – is “inherently political” (286). Care of the self is linked on this model to a political mode of freedom. For the Greeks, Foucault claims, not “to be a slave (of another city, of the people around you, of your own passions) was an absolutely fundamental theme” (285): these forms of non-domination, whether by self or others, are bound together. Not being dominated by others is a condition for individual ethical freedom – “a slave has no ethics” – and the model is also political “insofar as being free means not being a slave to oneself and one’s appetites, which means that with respect to oneself one establishes a certain relationship ... of mastery” (285). This political component has been lost from much contemporary self-care material, although not from Lorde’s writing, which links her self-care in her struggle against cancer to the struggle against racism. On my reading, Astell too offers a politicised mode of self-care for women, linked inextricably to women’s individual freedom.

Feminist responses to Foucauldian care of the self fall broadly into two categories, which are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, there is a critique of Foucault’s exclusive attention to men’s care of the self, and his lack of consideration of how women have practised or could practise care of the self. Foucault was aware of the gendered nature of the traditions from which he was drawing. Greek ethics, he states, “was an ethics for men: an ethics thought, written, and taught by men, and addressed to men ... A male ethics, consequently, in which women figured only as objects ... it was an elaboration of masculine conduct carried out from the viewpoint of men in order to give form to *their* behaviour” (Foucault 1985, 22–23). Despite this recognition, he fails to “problematize themes of heroization and self-mastery” and thus “implicitly relies on a conventional notion of the sovereign self, which in turn rests on an unexamined fantasy of male agency” (McNay 1994, 149). Lois McNay argues that “there is no guarantee that care of the self would not lead to the domination and marginalization of the other” (McNay 1992, 172): on her

reading, Foucault fails to embed ways of caring for the self in structures of inequality and oppression, leaving it inadequate “as a way in which to resist and overcome the government of individualisation in contemporary society” (174).

Connected to this is a feminist critique of Foucault’s notion of the self being “abstract and individualistic” in a way which renders it “characteristically masculine” (Allen 2004, 237). His understanding of care of the self on this reading is insufficiently relational, lacking the emphasis on “communication, reciprocity, [and] mutuality” (245) which many feminists want to foreground. In Chapter Four, I challenge the reading of Foucault’s ethics as lacking mutuality: nonetheless, the question is raised here whether care of the self can be useful in a feminist context, or whether its roots in an explicitly male and misogynistic system of thought render it beyond salvage. In response, I will show how Astell uses the same tradition of care of the self as involving the self-mastery which McNay critiques, but wields it to gendered and feminist ends, situating it in a community of women.

Secondly, there have been positive responses to care of the self which seek to appropriate the concept for feminist purposes. Helen O’Grady has suggested that Foucault’s “emphasis on the ethical relationship we can have with ourselves offers a framework for redressing the imbalance in many women’s lives between care for others and care for the self which contributes to the power of self-policing” (O’Grady 2004, 92). Women choosing to care for their selves, she argues, can challenge ingrained self-policing technologies of the self and counteract the lack of attention to the self which “can render women vulnerable to exploitation or abuse” (102). Likewise, McWhorter explores the idea that a Foucauldian care of the self might provide a more open and creative avenue than what she regards as implicitly conservative “woman-affirming” practices of the self (McWhorter 2004, 156). She pushes back against the interpretation of care of the self as individualistic and anti-social.

On the one hand we have critiques of Foucault’s care of the self as masculinist: on the other feminists advocate the use of the concept as potentially beneficial

for women's selves. By and large, however, little attention has been paid to women-authored or women-directed advocacy of care of the self in historical traditions. Foucault's narrative of the care of the self is rooted in the "virile" notion of Greco-Roman culture, and he draws exclusively from male writers and thinkers when evidencing the history of the idea. Writing on historical female understandings of care of the self is also scarce in responses to Foucault, with a few interesting exceptions (Bloem 2004; K. E. Ferguson 2004; Barber 2004; Lefebvre 2016). Reading Astell's thought through the care of the self framework provides an example of an important woman philosopher contributing to this ancient tradition. Furthermore, she does so with a keen awareness of the significance of structures of gender to the concept and its practice, and so can be used to illuminate feminist engagement with Foucauldian care of the self.

Mary Astell and care of the self

Given Astell's familiarity with the Hellenistic philosophy that Foucault identifies as key to care of the self as a "cultural event", it is neither unlikely nor surprising that she may also have drawn from it the concept of caring for the self. The phrase and concept was in use at the time Astell was writing in reference to ancient philosophical lives and texts: the English translation of André Dacier's *Life of the Emperour Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* (1701), for instance, refers to Marcus Aurelius's "Vigilance, and Care of himself" (p. lix). Astell was aware of the work of "the famous *Madam D'acier*" (*SP I*, 83): Anne Dacier being André Dacier's wife and co-translator and commentator of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* into French. By suggesting that *A Serious Proposal* can be understood as advocating care of the self, I am identifying Astell's intellectual heritage from and situatedness in *the same* tradition of care of the self which Foucault identifies.

Overview

"No solicitude in the adoration of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your *self*," (*SP I*, 52-53) Mary Astell

advises female readers in the opening pages of *A Serious Proposal*. By referring to “adornment”, she contrasts the adornment of the physical self with clothes or jewels with the adornment of the real self, or soul. Her concern that women should turn their attention on their “own Minds” (52) and “Souls” (54) is a recurring motif in *A Serious Proposal*. From the first page, Astell directs women towards the benefits to their selves of what she is about to propose:

Its aim is to fix that Beauty, ... which Nature with all the helps of Art cannot secure: ... An obliging Design, which wou'd procure them inward Beauty, to whom Nature has unkindly denied the outward; and not permit those Ladies who have comely Bodies, to tarnish their Glory with deformed Souls. ... Not suffer you to take up with the low thought of distinguishing your selves by any thing that is not truly valuable; and procure you such Ornaments as all the Treasures of the Indies are not able to purchase. (51)

While Astell refers to women’s “Vertue” at the beginning of the text, the ethical emphasis here is entirely on their *selves* rather than their duties to others or to a set of moral rules. Surely, she writes, “you cannot be so unkind to your selves, as to refuse your *real* interest” (52). As far as other people are concerned, she criticises too great an attention to them in one respect. It is degrading to women, she suggests, to be concerned with “attract[ing] 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” (55). Women’s time is better spent working on and improving their own selves than on endeavouring to be pleasing to “vain insignificant men” (56). *A Serious Proposal* is oriented from the beginning to persuading women to be concerned for their selves, and this is expressed as a gendered concern. Women are advised to take genuine care for their selves rather than to turn their attention towards men’s opinions and desires.

The orientation towards the self as an ethical concern is not limited to *A Serious Proposal*’s opening sallies. Part I’s concluding passages, following Astell’s presentation of detailed plans for an all-female educational institute,

reinforce the message of the opening pages by exhorting female readers to “a sort of Bravery and Greatness of Soul” which “consists in living up to the dignity of our Natures” (111).²⁰ A “wise and good woman”, says Astell, is “she who chiefly attends the *one thing needful*, the *good part which shall not be taken from her*” (112): in other words, her self. Astell presents the concern for the self here as the appropriate object of one’s chief concern: not as a supplementary or transitional matter.

The introduction to Part II of *A Serious Proposal* consists of “a farther Perswasive to the Ladies To endeavour the Improvement of their Minds” (*SP II*, 119), urging readers with even greater vigour towards work on the self. If “it is not worth while to procure such a temper of mind as will make us happy in all Conditions, there’s *nothing* worth our Thoughts and Care [my italics]” (121), Astell writes: the reader’s attention to her own mind is evidently paramount. Similarly, she writes with reference to “the rooting out of ill-habits ... [and] the fortifying our Minds against foolish Customs” (141) that this should become “our main Design and Business” (142). As in the beginning of Part I, Astell makes no reference to moral codes or duties to those around us. She instead expects her reader to be “fill’d with a laudable Ambition to brighten and enlarge your Souls” (122), and the remainder of Part II of *A Serious Proposal* is devoted to providing such a reader with the means for doing so.

Not all Astell’s writing is as centred on women’s selves. *The Christian Religion* is considerably more duty- or rule-oriented than *A Serious Proposal* in its ethical focus. Much of this text is taken up with setting out “the Practical Duties of Christianity” (*CR*, 66), consisting of our duties to God first, then our neighbours, and only finally our own selves. While *A Serious Proposal*, I claim, articulates what Foucault would consider an ethics-oriented morality, we observe the simultaneous expression of a more code-oriented morality in Astell’s writing. To use terminology from Anglo-American ethical theory, she

²⁰ “Greatness of Soul” is a reference to the virtue of magnanimity. This originated with Aristotle, but was also taken up by the Stoics and developed by Descartes and others as “generosity”. For detail on magnanimity, see Vasalou 2019 for an edited volume on its philosophical history: for an account of the importance of generosity to Astell, see Broad 2015.

draws from “virtue theory and deontological ethics” (Sowaal 2016, 199). Even *The Christian Religion*, however, contains elements of care of the self: what God requires of us is “only a sincere and constant endeavour after our own Perfection” (CR, 68). In Section IV, “Of our Duty to our Selves”, Astell advocates “Reverence of our Selves, or rather of the Holy Spirit of GOD who dwelleth in us” (185).²¹ The relationship implied here between our selves and God will be further explored shortly, when discussing the challenges to interpreting *A Serious Proposal* as a manual for care of the self.

While Foucault does not put forward a set of criteria for care of the self, Alexander Lefebvre draws out three defining features from Foucault’s later writings. I will work with these while building my interpretation of Astell, as Lefebvre does with his illuminating reading of Mary Wollstonecraft. The distillation of Foucault’s analysis of care of the self necessarily involves much simplification, given his meticulous tracing of the way the concept changes even *through* the Greco-Roman context (Foucault 2005b), but serves for the sake of this analysis.

The three features of care of the self that Lefebvre identifies “concern the purpose, object, and mode of care of the self”, and it is “these three features [which] make the care of the self a genuine event in the history of subjectivity” (Lefebvre 2016, 181). First, the purpose of caring for the self is to *transform* the self: “one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures the self” (Foucault 2005b, 11), writes Foucault in a discussion of the techniques of care of the self. Lefebvre notes that within this tradition “the subject is not seen as a fixed substance or given essence” (Lefebvre 2016, 181): the issue of whether or how Astell’s notion of “self” conforms to this tradition, and what is at stake in the question, has been addressed in the introduction. Secondly, the object of care of the self *is* the self, as discussed earlier. Caring for the self is not a preparation for caring for others, but is its own end. This is not so straightforward in *A Serious Proposal*; Astell’s dedication to Christianity complicates the issue. Thirdly, the *mode* of care of the self is voluntary: it “is

²¹ See C. Taylor 1989 for a clear and detailed account of this notion of the self in Augustine.

not prescribed by law or rule”, and in fact “presupposes the freedom and choice of the individual undertaking it” (181). It is not undertaken for fear of punishment, as in a juridical model, but because the individual caring for their self *wants* to improve and transform their self.

The purpose of elaborating Astell using these three features is not to claim that she precisely instantiates Foucault’s account of care of the self, any more than Lefebvre or Jeanette Bloem claim likewise regarding Mary Wollstonecraft or Anna Maria van Schurman. Rather, the three components of care for the self function as a heuristic to gain a new clarity of perspective on Astell’s project. Bloem, likewise, aims to use Foucauldian self-care to draw out “a more accurate image of Van Schurman ... as opposed to the more limiting, traditional psychological reading of her life” (Bloem 2004, 17). Lefebvre uses the framework of care of the self to draw out a new understanding of how human rights function for Wollstonecraft. My aim here is to use Foucault’s concept of care of the self to draw out Astell’s own advocacy of care of the self, which is not identical.

Scholars have noted the attention to self-cultivation and character in Astell’s writing: Broad, for instance, interprets her primarily as a virtue theorist, one who places “character, rather than rules or actions, at the centre of moral theory” (Broad 2015, 7), and the themes of self-improvement and self-education have been drawn out in much secondary material (Sowaal 2016).²² Kathleen Ahearn refers to “self-care” (although not “care of the self”) when writing about Astell’s account of feminine self-esteem, proposing that “Astell’s method puts women’s self-care in conflict with societal expectations concerning feminine capacities and wifely duties” (Ahearn 2016, 37). By using Foucault’s account of care of the self, however, I can provide a new framing for Astell’s project as well as putting her readily into conversation with modern advocacy of self-care for women.

²² Connections have also been drawn between virtue ethical theory and Foucauldian ethics of the self (Levy, 2004).

Transformation of the self

The transformative purpose of care of the self, which Foucault links to “the set of conditions of spirituality” (Foucault 2005b, 17) that provide “access to the truth, ... which fulfils or transfigures [the subject’s] very being” (16), is evident in *A Serious Proposal*. Transformation is offered to readers from the start: the care for the self which Astell advocates has as its “only design ... to improve your Charms and heighten your Value” (*SP I*, 51) (again, an ironic contrast with the adornment of the *physical* self); it would “help you to surpass the Men as much in Vertue and Ingenuity, as you do in Beauty; that you may not only be as lovely, but as wise as Angels” (51). Many women concern themselves with care for their bodies alone, she laments: these become “like a tarnish’d Sepulchre, which for all its flittering, has nothing within but Emptiness or Putrefaction”, their souls being “suffer’d to overrun with Weeds, lye fallow and neglected, unadorn’d with any Grace!” (54). Astell’s hope, however, is that women will turn their attention to their selves: if they do so, they can become “as perfect and happy as ’tis possible to be in this imperfect state ... live up to the dignity of your Nature, and express your thankfulness to GOD for the benefits you enjoy by a due improvement of them” (56-7). “The Soil” that Astell uses as a metaphor to refer to a woman’s self or soul “is rich and would, if well cultivated, produce a noble Harvest” (60). In the secluded all-female educational institute she proposes, women’s sole task will “to be as Happy as possibly you can, and to make sure of a Felicity that will fill all the capacities of your Souls ... to adorn your Souls, with such tempers and dispositions, as will at present make you in some measure such holy and Heavenly Creatures” (74). The retirement from the world which enables women to devote their attention to their selves – as opposed to the distractions and temptations of everyday life – “will not only strengthen and confirm our Souls ... but likewise so purify and refine them” (105).

The transformative effect of the attention to and work on the self is reiterated throughout Part II. In the introduction, Astell entices her readers with a description of the changes that will come over them if they follow her regime:

“you now begin to throw off your old Prejudices ... Wisdom is thought as better recommendation than Wit ... Solitude is no more insupportable; ... you know very well that true Joy is a sedate and solid thing, a tranquillity of mind, not a boisterous and empty flash” (*SP II*, 122-3). The exercises of Part II will assist women in obtaining purity of heart (131), conquering “the Prejudices of Education, Authority and Custom” (140), directing the “will” to its appropriate object (144), perfecting their rational capacities as far as possible (168), gaining perfect happiness (213), regulating their passions (214) and, ultimately, endeavouring to become perfect (236). The woman who cares for and works on herself will alter in many desirable ways.

A key component of the self’s transformation for Foucault, and the way in which individual subjects care for themselves, is the extensive set of *practices* which subjects undertake. These are what shape, transform, and purify the self. “[E]*pimeleisthai* does not only designate a mental attitude, ... *Epimeleisthai* refers to a form of vigilant, continuous, applied, regular, etcetera, activity,” (Foucault 2005b, 84) he writes, “[and] in the Christian vocabulary of the fourth century you will see that *epimeleia* commonly has the meaning of exercise, of ascetic exercise” (84). The transformative feature of care of the self “always designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self ... a series of practices” such as “techniques of meditation, of memorization of the past, of examination of conscience, of checking representations which appear in the mind, and so on” (11). I explore in detail Astell’s techniques and practices of the self in the next chapter. For now, I merely show that Astell advocates *work* and practices on the self as a means of its care and transformation. “[God] sent us hither to pass our Probation, to Prepare our selves ... And how shall this be done but by Labour and Industry?” (*SP II*, 132), she asks: “Is it the difficulty of attaining the Bravery of the Mind, the Labour and Cost that keeps you from making a purchase of it?” (121).²³ Astell conceptualises women’s concern for their selves as entailing active work

²³ A comment which bears comparison with Foucault’s discussion of “the test (the *probatio*)” becoming “a general attitude in life” (Foucault, 2005, 437) – in Christianity most extensively, but also earlier in Stoic texts.

on the self. Her concern in the introduction to Part II of *A Serious Proposal* is with women who “know not how to look into their Souls, or if they do, they find so many disorders to be rectified, ... they lay aside the thoughts of undertaking it” (124): the purpose of the second half of the text is “to lay down ... some more minute Directions” (126) for women to follow to work on their selves with transformative care. This is congruent with readings by Sowaal, who identifies *A Serious Proposal*’s philosophical arguments as “meditative exercises” which help the individual female reader to “cure her diseased understanding and her will” (Sowaal 2007, 230), and Broad, who refers to Astell’s “techniques for purifying the mind and regulating the passions” (Broad 2015, 16). Astell clearly advocates transformative *activity* on the self, beyond a simple reorientation of *attention* to the self.

Self as its own object

On Foucault’s analysis, caring for the self is its own end: it is not preparatory for caring for others. The “end of the conversion [to self] and the final goal of all the practices of the self” is a specific “relation to self” (Foucault 1986, 65). Foucault contrasts this Hellenistic form of self care with what he characterizes as a Christian version which presents “salvation as occurring beyond life, in a way [which] upsets or at least disturbs the balance of care of the self” (Foucault 1997c, 289). Although in this Christian framework “to seek one’s salvation definitely means to take care of oneself”, the key difference is that “the condition required for attaining salvation is precisely renunciation” (289) of the self. The centrality of Astell’s Christian framework to her writing complicates the end of caring for the self, but not by straightforwardly advocating self-renunciation.

Before considering the Christian context, I want to address some implications in *A Serious Proposal* that women’s attention to their selves is for the sake of serving others. For instance, we find Astell justifying a woman’s knowledge and education “not only in the Conduct of her own Soul but in the management of her Family, in the Conversation of her Neighbours and in all

the Concerns of Life” (*SP II*, 202). Women’s self-cultivation is of vital importance to the “Education of Children” which “at least the foundation of it, ... shou’d be laid by the Mother” (202), and even she who has no children can find “opportunities of doing good” (203). Her proclamation that “surely it is worth your while to fit your selves for this: Tis a Godlike thing to relieve even the Temporal wants of our Fellow Creatures ... but it, is much more Divine, to *Save a Soul from Death!*” (204) might give the impression that for Astell the care of the self is in fact preparatory for the service of others. These comments are, however, plausibly interpreted as expressions of the Christian virtue of charity: the benevolent good will towards others which is related, on Broad’s account, to generosity (Broad 2015, 117). Astell offers “Christianized-Stoic arguments in favour of viewing all human beings as parts of one great whole” (121), and thus being charitable towards them. This being so, we can read Astell’s focus as being on producing a *self* which is benevolent towards others, as part of her broader project of care of the self for women. As Broad puts it, “Astell’s primary ethical goal was to bring about a *change of character* in her readers, such that they would develop a loving, charitable disposition of mind towards others [my italics]” (126): this does not seem in conflict with the notion of self-care as its own end.

The justification of self-care with reference to women’s usefulness to others is tempered further by passages such as the following: “But the men if they rightly understand their own interest, have no reason to oppose the ingenious Education of the Women, since ’twou’d go a great way towards reclaiming the men; ... a good and prudent Wife wou’d wonderfully work on an ill man” (*SP I*, 106). It is clear that Astell is presenting the benefits for men of women’s improvement not as the *end* of such improvement, but as a response if “any object against a Learned Education, that it will make Women vain and assuming” (105). This holds for many of Astell’s comments regarding the benefits to children’s education, for instance, of women’s improvement: these are an argumentative strategy to be used against those who are not convinced that women should pursue self-transformation *for its own sake*. As it happens,

if women care for their selves, they will also benefit those around them: it does not follow, however, that the care of their selves is not a worthy objective in itself. Elsewhere, we find a hint that the situation is almost reversed. Although Astell states that “we were not made for our selves”, she continues by saying that there is no way more effective to “do good to our own Souls” than by “doing Offices of Charity and Beneficence to others” (76). Here the implication is that the care for others might in fact function as means towards the care of the self.

The relationship between God and care of the self complicates the picture more for Astell. Women’s relationship to God and the Christian religion is central to her project; the *telos* of self-care consists, at least partly, in a particular orientation towards God and His service. In Part I of *A Serious Proposal*, in fact, Astell states regarding her separated female community that “Religion ... is indeed its *main*, I may say its *only* design” (76). Is this antithetical to the care of the self being its own end and objective? I argue not; on my reading, the care of the self and the love of God turn out, for Astell, to be one and the same thing. This is so in two senses.

First, loving and serving God is what brings genuine happiness, for “Happiness is not *without* us, it must be found in our own Bosoms, and nothing but a Union with GOD can fix it there” (*SP II*, 225). She writes that “th’ *Enjoyment* of a GOD is what we aspire to [my italics]” (220): by transforming ourselves and devoting ourselves to God, “with what *Joy* and *Satisfaction of Mind* shall we proceed in every step of this! How pure and exalted is that Pleasure ... which results from the right use of our Faculties, and Fruition of the Sovereign Good! [Astell’s italics]” (220). The love of God is part of the care of the self: it is what brings “a Happy Mind, whose Temper and Constitution is Heavenly” (220). Astell links her conception of religious practice back to the ancient school of Epicurus, “Good Christians being indeed the truest *Epicures*, because they have the most tastful and highest Enjoyment of the greatest Good” (221). The theme is picked up elsewhere: it is by “keeping GOD’s Commandments, we get such a sound and strong Constitution of Soul, as leads us naturally to our True

Good” (209). As is the case with the care for others, the love of God is partly *constitutive* of the care for the self.

Secondly, Astell’s picture of Christian practice involves a “Union with God” (225), as referenced above. The good Christian not only does what God wants, but replaces her will and desires *with* those of God, “the chief business being to obtain a divine and God-like temper of Mind” (*SP I*, 85). A regular will, Astell insists, “consists ... in Conformity to the Will of GOD” (*SP II*, 205). She emphasises the divinity that characterises our true selves: “we’re endow’d with many excellent Faculties, which are capable of great Improvement, such as bespeak in us somewhat too Divine” (211). At the same time as she recommends that women “employ your care about that which is really your *self*” (*SP I*, 53), she urges them not to “neglect that particle of Divinity within you” (53). By uniting ourselves to God, and cultivating “a Temper of Mind so absolutely Conform’d to the Divine Will” (*SP II*, 225), to love God essentially becomes the same thing as to love and care for our selves. The ideal humble woman for Astell “values her self only for GOD’s sake” (233), but this is still to value her self due to the divinity which she is united with and conformed to. The care of the self for its own sake and service to God are not antithetical but one and the same thing. This reading is similar to Lascano’s, who argues that for Astell, “in perfecting one’s mind, one participates more fully in the perfection of God” (Lascano 2016, 170). So, by caring for the self “we perfect and glorify God, and the two-way relationship we have with God is complete” (Sowaal 2016, 201). I can best conclude this argument with a quote from Part II:

The business of our Lives will be to improve our Minds and to stretch our Faculties to their utmost extent, that so we may have the fullest enjoyment our Nature will admit, of this ever satisfying and yet ever desirable, because an Infinite, and our True, Good. (*SP II*, 213)

This true good is God, and by loving and serving God we are enacting care for the self – which is, as Astell writes, the “business of our Lives”.

Astell's Christian framework complicates her conception of care of the self. However, I think that she provides a challenge to Foucault's understanding of Christian care of the self as fundamentally involving self-renunciation. While aspects of self-renunciation appear in Astell's thought, a more central theme is that of caring for the self *as part of* service to and union with God. It is by caring for our selves and developing them to their fullest degree, Astell proposes, that we can fulfil our true nature and duty towards our creator – and, at the same time, devotion to God functions as part of that self-development. I explore the relationship between Astell, Foucault and Christianity in depth in Chapter Five.

Voluntariness of care of the self

The third feature of care of the self is its voluntariness. As Foucault argues regarding its ancient practice, “this work on the self with its attendant austerity is not imposed on the individual by means of civil law or religious obligation, but is a choice about existence made by the individual. People decide for themselves whether or not to care for themselves” (Foucault 1997b, 271). As remarked, Foucault understands freedom as “the ontological condition” (Foucault 1997c, 284) of care of the self, and, conversely, care of the self as one of the ways in which freedom expresses itself.

Astell is clear that women are free either to take up her challenge and devote themselves to self-cultivation or, instead, “be in love with servitude and folly” and “dote on a mean, ignorant and ignoble Life” (*SP II*, 120). If women “allow [men] the preference in Ingenuity”, she writes, “it is not because you *must* but because you *will*” (120). The urgency with which she calls women to work on themselves is indicative of the choice they have to do so or not: it is not law or command which causes them to do so, but their own desire, stimulated by Astell's persuasion. “For tho I desire your improvement never so passionately, tho I shou'd have prov'd it feasible with the clearest Demonstration, ... if you *will* believe it impossible, ... I'me like to go without my Wishes” (121). In Part I, describing the female monastic environment she hopes to establish, she writes

that every “act of our Religious Votary shall be voluntary and free, and no other tye but the Pleasure, the Glory and Advantage of this blessed Retirement to confine her to it” (*SP I*, 89). This institution, which functions to enable women’s care for their selves, shall contain “no Vows or irrevocable Obligations, not so much as the fear of Reproach to keep our Ladies here any longer than their desire” (89): after all, “Inclination can’t be forc’d, (and nothing makes people more uneasy than the fettering themselves with unnecessary Bonds)” (89). It is plain that *A Serious Proposal* presents women’s cultivation of the self as voluntary, because they desire to perfect themselves, rather than externally imposed by law or obligation.

Astell, gender and care of the self

I have touched on Foucault’s acknowledgement of, but lack of engagement with, the strongly gendered structure of the ancient tradition of care of the self. While he acknowledges the gendered character of ancient care of the self, considerations of gender appear absent from his thoughts concerning a modern reinvention of care of the self (Foucault 1983b). By attending to Astell’s detailed and acute analysis of gender, on the other hand, we are presented with a variety of ways in which gender affects and structures care of the self, some of which we should take forward into modern considerations of its practice.

First, Astell shows women as particularly in need of care of the self. Secondly, and strongly linked to this first point, she argues that women are particularly prevented from caring for their selves. Thirdly, these first two points have important implications for how women should practise care of the self. Finally, the *effects* of caring for the self have feminist consequences.

Women particularly require care of the self

In *A Serious Proposal*, Astell concedes to her opponents that “Women are unprofitable to most, and a plague and dishonour to some Men,” (*SP I*, 61) and that there are “Feminine Vices” (62) to which women are particularly inclined,

such as pride and vanity. Unlike some of her contemporary writers, however, she refuses to accept that women “are naturally incapable of acting Prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly” (58): instead, she proposes, the “Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural” (59). This point, that women’s deficiencies are due to “Neither God nor Nature” (59), is key to Astell’s advocacy of care of the self: the secluded environment and the regimen she proposes is intended to rectify the problems with women’s selves. Yet it is indeed the case that women’s selves are not what they should be. They are corrupted and warped, rendered incapable of virtue. Astell suggests that this is due to gendered social processes.

The two main social processes which cause women to require care of the self to a greater degree than men are education (both the *lack* of appropriate education and the *presence* of education in bad principles) and custom. The effects of poor education are especially responsible for corrupting women’s nature: “if from our Infancy we are nurs’d up in Ignorance and Vanity; are taught to be Proud and Petulent, Delicate and Fantastick, Humorous and Inconstant, ’tis not strange that the ill effects of this Conduct appear in all the future Actions of our Lives” (61).²⁴ These are some examples of how women are educated in the *wrong* things: they are inculcated in the idea that they should be fickle and variable, rather than virtuous and constant. Women are also *denied* education in the correct use of their rationality: they have a “want of understanding to compare and judge of things, to chuse a right End, to proportion the Means to the End, and to rate ev’ry thing according to its proper value” (64). This lack of training in how to think rationally leads directly to the faults to which women are especially prone. Because they don’t know how to judge things accurately and to discern what’s really important, they “quit the Substance for the Shadow, Reality for Appearance” (64): “Were it not for this delusion, is it probable a Lady who passionately desires to be admir’d, shou’d ever consent to such Actions as render her base and

²⁴ For discussion of the education available to women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Whitehead 1999 and Charlton 1999. The latter focuses on the religious context.

contemptible? ... Wou'd she be so silly as to look big, and think her self the better person, because she has more Money to bestow profusely, or the good luck to have a more ingenious Taylor or Milliner than her Neighbour?" (65). If women are not educated in what is really valuable, then of course they will be inclined to value "Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase" (62). Ignorance and bad education are key to the warping of women's selves and the perversion of good attributes such as "self-esteem and desire of good" into their degenerated versions of "Pride and mistaken Self-love" (62-3).

To what extent is this a gendered phenomenon? Does Astell simply happen to be talking about women's corruption, or does her analysis also apply to men who are miseducated? In fact, Astell identifies two gendered elements of the process of miseducation. Firstly, the distribution of proper education is gendered, a point Astell makes with force in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*: "Boys have much Time and Pains, Care and Cost bestow'd on their Education, Girls have little or none," (*RM*, 28) she states baldly. Whereas men "have all imaginable encouragement" throughout their education, women and girls "are restrain'd [and] frown'd upon" (28). A similar point is made in *A Serious Proposal*: "Were the Men as much neglected, and as little care taken to cultivate and improve them, perhaps they wou'd be so far from surpassing those whom they now dispise, that they themselves wou'd sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality" (*SP I*, 57). Men, therefore, have a less urgent need in adulthood for care of the self because attention has been paid since their childhood to their cultivation and education. Women, on the other hand, have been actively discouraged from the education which is a fundamental part of self-care.

The second gendered component of miseducation lies in who is *responsible* for it. It is true that Astell disapproves of adult women who refuse to take up the project of their own education: "She who forsakes the Path to which Reason directs is much to blame," (*SP II*, 120) she asserts, asking her readers with severity "If you *approve*, Why don't you *follow*? And if you *Wish*, Why shou'd you not *Endeavour*?" (120). However, the blame for women's initial

miseducation is largely placed at the door of men, who are “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!” (*SP I*, 60). Women’s deficiencies are “not so much to be regretted on account of the *Men*, because ’tis the product of their own folly, in denying them the benefits of an ingenuous and liberal Education” (61-2). Returning to *Reflections Upon Marriage*, Astell writes that “Learning is what Men have engross’d to themselves,” adding, with bitter sarcasm, that “one can’t but admire their great Improvements!” (*RM*, 21). The processes of miseducation to which women’s defective selves are attributed are distributed according to gender, and *by men* to preserve their “Tyranny shall I say, or ... superior Force” (23). Together these result in a situation where women desperately need to turn their attention to their selves and address the problems which miseducation has caused.

The second cause of women’s deficiencies is *custom*, which for Astell is responsible for “all that Sin and Folly that is in the World” (*SP I*, 67). Custom has two key components. Firstly, it involves the “habituating our selves to Folly” (94); the regular practice of poor behaviour accustoms us to it, meaning that “having inur’d ourselves to Folly, we know not how to quit it; we go on in Vice” (68). As well as this individual component – essentially the getting into bad habits – custom involves the influence of societal forces. We “think it an unpardonable mistake not to do as our neighbours do, and part with our Peace and Pleasure as well as our Innocence and Vertue, merely in compliance with an unreasonable Fashion” (68). This social aspect gives custom its force: “Custom has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority, that she who would endeavour to put a stop to its Arbitrary Sway and reduce it to Reason, is in a fair way to render her self the *Butt* for all the Fops in Town to shoot their impertinent Censures at” (95). Astell associates custom with tyranny and domination: it “manacle[s] the will” (*SP II*, 139) and we need deliverance from “its slavery” (139). As with miseducation, custom has bad effects on both sexes, but it is nonetheless a gendered phenomenon: “the Custom of the World has

put women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection” (*RM*, 10). In her analysis of how social disapprobation keeps women from improving their selves – “Laughter and Ridicule ... [being] set up to drive them from the Tree of Knowledge” (28) – Astell prefigures modern feminist analyses of the ways in which subtle social forces, not just legal barriers, keep women in check and guide their behaviour.²⁵

Astell does not identify *all* social custom as bad. Part of the motivation for her advocacy of an educational institution for women is the establishment of *good* customs (Detlefsen 2016, 79): customs which, I suggest, are conducive to rather than barriers to care of the self.²⁶ Nevertheless, the customs of the everyday social world inhibit women’s rationality and self-improvement: a woman who concerns herself with philosophy or rational religion instead of fashion, money, and gossip will be the object of mockery, and this is a strong inducement to “ignorance, either feigned or real” (Sowaal 2016, 192). Custom both warps women’s selves in such a way that they *require* care of the self, and – as I elaborate below – acts as an *obstacle* to care of the self.

Astell’s account of how women’s selves are damaged and warped by gendered social custom might be read as a forerunner to Sandra Lee Bartky’s account of psychological oppression in which “women ... are psychologically conditioned not to pursue the kind of autonomous development that is held by the culture to be a constitutive feature of masculinity. The truncated self I am to be is not something manufactured out there ... it is inside of me, a part of my self” (Bartky 1990a, 25). Bartky writes that to “be denied an autonomous choice of self ... is to be cut off from the sort of activities that define what it is to be human” (31), arguing that oppression “is ordinarily conceived in too limited a fashion ... [placing] undue restrictions both on what our understanding of

²⁵ To take one example, Sandra Lee Bartky discusses how the constraints upon and subordination of women’s bodies are not enforced by “formal public sanctions”; instead, the “disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky, 1990, 76, 74).

²⁶ For some context on the use of custom and habit in early modern philosophy, including its moral component, see Wright 2011. As Wright observes, early modern philosophers “recognized the power of habit to improve both our intellectual abilities as well as our moral characters” (20).

what oppression itself is and on the categories of persons we might want to classify as oppressed” (29). Astell’s account of the ways in which women’s selves are damaged and in need of care harmonises with Bartky’s account of women’s psychological oppression, something brought to the fore by this Foucauldian analysis.

Women are prevented from caring for the self

In addition to the ways in which women’s selves are warped, rendering them in greater need of care for their selves, Astell presents a selection of ways in which women are prevented from undertaking the work on their selves which they urgently require. Key among these is “loss of time, the want of Retirement, or of knowing how to use it” (*SP II*, 126). On Astell’s account, being immersed in the “hurry and noise of the World, which does generally so busy and pre-engage us, that we have little time, and less inclination to stand still and reflect on our own Minds” (*SP I*, 68) is a significant obstacle to women’s ability to turn their attention to their selves. Women are surrounded by “impertinent Amusements” which “constantly buz about our Ears, that we cannot attend to the Dictates of our Reason” (68): in other words, they are distracted by superficial external objects which draw their time and attention away from their selves.

We can invoke here Foucault’s discussion of the *stultus* – the person in ancient philosophy who “has not cared for himself”(Foucault 2005b, 131) - as someone who is “blown by the wind and open to the external world ... prey to the winds of external representations” (Foucault 2005b, 131). Immersion in the social world exposes women constantly to “vain Poms and Pageantry ... empty Titles and Forms of State ... the Chat of insignificant people ... [and] the froth of flashy Wit” (*SP I*, 74) and teaches them that these things are important and worthwhile. When the mind is “prepossess’d and gratefully entertain’d with those pleasing Perceptions which external Objects occasion”, it is “not at leisure to tast those delights which arise from a *Reflection on it self* [my emphasis]” (90). In addition to drawing women’s attention away from their

selves and towards the deceptive representations of the senses, the social world also robs women of *time*, “a Treasure whose value we are too often quite ignorant of” (94). If women’s time is spent in social affairs, gossip, etc, “we are so busied with what passes abroad, that *we have no leisure to look at home*, nor to rectify the disorders there [my italics]” (94).

Living in the everyday world also leaves women open to the threat of “feigned lovers” (*SP I*, 74) and “the rude attempts of designing Men” (102), a prominent theme in the fiction of the period. Here is another obstacle to care of the self: heterosexual relationships. This theme is prominently identified in *Reflections Upon Marriage*, which targets marriage itself as a barrier to self-cultivation. While she does refer to an unhappy marriage as providing an opportunity for women to exercise their virtue (*RM*, 34-5, 39, 40), the intrinsically hierarchal nature of the institution on Astell’s account means that most women submit themselves to the government of men who exercise their authority badly, thus hindering their wives’ attention to their own selves. “She who Elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority she cannot recall ... had need be very sure that she does not make a Fool her Head, nor a Vicious Man her Guide and Pattern,” (48-9) Astell cautions. The detrimental effects of marriage on women’s selves will be fully explored in Chapter Four. Astell’s critique of heterosexual relationships feels radical even to a modern reader: along with her identification of men as *responsible* for women’s miseducation and thus the warping of their selves, the implication is that if women are to care for their selves, they cannot engage with men and male-created social structures in customary ways.

Implications for practising care of the self

We come now to the implications of Astell’s analysis for the *practice* of care of the self. I have shown how she presents women as both in greater need of care of the self and facing specific barriers to care of the self. One of the major solutions she offers, and the one for which she is best known, is a retreat from the everyday social world, including a retreat from men specifically. The first

part of *A Serious Proposal* is largely dedicated to elaborating Astell's scheme of a "Religious Retirement", which will function as "a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage" (*SP I*, 73). This institution, solely inhabited by women, "shall ... expel that cloud of Ignorance, which Custom has involv'd us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge, that the Souls of Women may no longer be the only unadorn'd and neglected things" (77). We can see the religious retirement as an environment designed to facilitate women caring for their selves.

Women's separation from the world is not intended to be permanent. Astell refers to the time "when we return into the World" (*SP I*, 100): the monastic institution she seeks to establish is a temporary retreat in which women can develop the "tender Vertues who need to be screened from the ill Airs of the World" (104). Once women attain "establish'd Vertue and consummated Prudence" (104), their souls will be strengthened and confirmed (105), allowing them to re-enter the everyday world with their selves guarded against the detrimental external forces already discussed. Before "we may safely venture out" (*SP II*, 232), "it is fit we Retire a little, to furnish our Understandings with useful Principles, to set our Inclinations right, and to manage our Passions" (232): before women can engage appropriately in the world around them, they are advised to withdraw to a space designed to care for their own selves.

Astell's women's retirement is intended to counter the negative social influences on women's selves. It functions as "a convenient and blissful recess from the noise and hurry of the World" (*SP I*, 73), allowing women to "gain an opportunity to look into themselves, to be acquainted at home and no longer the greatest strangers to their own hearts" (73). Instead of being distracted with worldly cares, they can focus their intention on the "improvement of their own Minds" (73). They will undertake the education which is customarily denied women and encouraged in men, undergoing "a serious enquiry after necessary and perfective truths ... which tends to their real interest and perfection" (78). Among other women of a religious bent, the residents of the community will not feel the pressure to alter or adorn their bodies for the sake

of male eyes: “She who truly loves her self, will never waste that Money on a decaying Carkass ... No perfume will be thought so grateful as the Odour of Good Works” (86). Bodily imperfections will become irrelevant: “what Decays she observes in her Face will be very unconcerning” (87).²⁷ Retirement will deliver women from custom’s “Tyranny” (94): instead of being constrained by worldly customs, a separate community of women will be able to establish their own, *positive* customs which encourage attention to and work on the self. This is, finally, a space in which women will be protected from the aforementioned amorous men: “She will not here be inveigled and impos’d on, will neither be bought nor sold, nor be forc’d to marry for her own quiet, when she has no inclination to it” (102).

Astell’s community provides an apparently ideal space for women to work on rectifying the damage done to their selves by gendered social forces, isolating them from their effects and establishing positive forces in their stead. One such positive force which I will expand on in Chapter Four is friendship between women. Astell identifies such friendship both as a key aspect of her community and as vital to the care of the self: “tis without doubt the best Instructor ... and a most excellent Monitor to excite us to make payment as far as our power will reach” (99). My later chapter explores in depth the “care of the other” in Astell’s writing: for now, note Astell’s advocacy of a female friendship practice as a vital means for women to care for their selves.

Astell’s all-female retirement functions as a space in which women are more able to care for their own selves. On the one hand, we can situate this project among other early-modern models of female communities such as Margaret Cavendish’s (1624-1674) earlier play *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) or Sarah Scott’s (1723-1795) later novel *A Description of Millennium Hall* (1762), both of which imagine spaces in which women can retreat from men for their own benefit. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, for instance, Cavendish has a character

²⁷ Astell’s account is remarkably similar to the phenomenon of women “in radical lesbian communities ... [rejecting] hegemonic images of femininity” (Bartky 1990a, 82). Bartky points to how such twentieth-century separatist communities “overcome the oppressive identification of female beauty and desirability with youth” (82).

state that “Men are the only Troublers of Women”, who are “mad to live with Men, who make the Female sex their Slaves” (7). This is a precursor to the establishment of a “convent”: not “a Cloister of restraint, ... [but rather] a place for freedom” (7). Cavendish recognises the value for women of secluding themselves from “the incumbred cares and vexations, troubles and perturbation of the World” (6), particularly those influenced by men. Developing this insight, Johanna Devereaux proposes that both Astell and Scott explore the economic and social agency that women might adopt if removed from the courtship and the marriage market” (Devereaux 2009, 59).

On the other hand, Astell can be read as a precursor to later feminist separatist movements. For Radicalesbians, a lesbian feminist group based in New York City in 1970, “women focusing on other women offered a strategy for women to discover their ‘authentic selves,’ which they believed had been ‘obscured’ by patriarchy” (Enszer 2016, 182), while the separatist collective The Furies positioned separatism as a means “to escape the debilitating effects of being with one’s oppressor ... to build pride and self-dependence away from those who downgrade or ignore you” (Bunch 1972, 3). The radical feminist separatists of the 1970s also frame separation from male-dominated society as vital for women to rediscover or reshape their selves and rectify the damaging effects of – in modern terms – hetero-patriarchy. The idea that women should *separate* from men to practise effective self-care is one which is less seen in contemporary mainstream self-care discourse but which Astell and later radical feminists argued for fervently.

Does Astell think that female separatism and seclusion from the everyday world is a *requirement* for women to be able to care for their selves? Not wholly. She responds to the challenge: “But some will say, May not People be good without this confinement? may they not live at large in the World, and yet serve GOD as acceptably as here?” (*SP I*, 104). Her reply is that “truly wise and virtuous Souls” (104) will manage without secluding themselves, but that many women are not so strong in their selves as to avoid being corrupted by worldly temptations and the society of bad people. It is always prudent to

engage in a “devout retirement ... that [our souls] be not infected by the worlds Corruptions” (105). Care of the self for women is not *impossible* outside a secluded all-female environment, but it is difficult.

The implications of the gendered need for care of the self, and the gendered barriers to care of the self, are a specific environment for *practising* care of the self. It is safest and wisest for women to undertake the care of the self by separating themselves from the harmful gendered social forces of the everyday world, including men and male-dominated institutions. Astell’s recommendations on this front bear comparison with more recent movements towards feminist separatism as a temporary or permanent measure for coping with patriarchal mainstream society.

Effects of care of the self

A Serious Proposal describes many benefits which accrue from appropriate labour on the self, including unutterable serenity, joy and happiness (*SP II*, 220), increased ability to save and serve others (204), appropriate emotional regulation (126), and genuine, virtuous friendships with other women (*SP I*, 100). I want to highlight two key effects which have feminist implications.

First, caring for the self will provide women with internal freedom from male tyranny. Astell identifies the liberation from men’s “Tyranny in Ignorance and Folly” (*SP II*, 121) as a consequence of “our Endeavours” (121). Where women are subjugated morally and intellectually by male-dominated social custom, turning their attention to their selves and cultivating their relationship with their selves will provide them with freedom: “Why shou’d we not assert our Liberty, and not suffer every Trifler to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Customs on us? ... it is in your Power to regain your Freedom, if you please but t’endeavour it” (120, 121). While Foucault too connects attention to the self with freedom, we see Astell linking concern for self with a *gendered* freedom for women from *male* domination.

Secondly, the women who care for their selves will become *virtuous*. This may seem less obviously to be a feminist consequence of self-care. For Astell,

however, “’tis Virtue only which can make you truly happy in the world as well as in the next” (*SP I*, 111) and due to women’s mis-education they are prone to certain vices, as already explained. Virtue is a feminist issue. If women are systematically hindered from developing ethically, with men “[using] all the artifice they can to spoil, and deny us the means of improvement” (57), then attending to the self and *becoming* virtuous is a means of resisting male domination. Astell’s insight here, that the ability to be a virtuous subject is disproportionately gendered, is underappreciated in current feminist thought.²⁸

Women’s self-care today

It has become a commonplace that “self-care” has been diluted and commodified, untethered from the political. André Spicer notes in the *Guardian* that the “once radical idea is being stripped of its politics to make it more palatable to a mass market” (2019), and Adebé DeRango-Adem levies a similar critique in *Flare*: “If we are to believe the Gwyneth Paltrows of the world, self-care should be indulgent. If life throws us lemons, we should juice our troubles away” (2017). The point which Lorde was pressing, that self-care “was a way to insist to a violent and oppressive culture that you mattered, that you were worthy of care” (Kisner 2017), has seemingly been lost among gentle reminders to “[f]ill a pretty basket with some of the things that make you feel special ... nail polish, gummy frogs, coconut lotion, treasured photos, or a new pair of socks” (Kohr 2015).

Lorde’s politicization of self-care sprang from her position as a Black lesbian: gender, race, and sexuality constituted the *reason* that care of the self was radical for her to undertake. Mainstream self-care discourse, however, discreetly declines to acknowledge the ways in which axes of oppression and marginalisation structure the need for, and consequences of, caring for the self. It becomes a wholly individualised practice. Inna Michaeli argues that

²⁸ For a modern account making a similar case, see Lisa Tessman’s *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (2005), which argues that “the self under oppression can be morally damaged, preventing from exercising or developing some of the virtues” (4).

mainstream self-care has been co-opted by neoliberalism, which privatises responsibility, obscures “the social, economic and political sources” of “distress and exhaustion” and has “deeply depoliticizing” effects (Michaeli 2017, 53).

Astell’s analysis of how women’s selves are damaged by sexist custom has not yet been made irrelevant. I am conscious as a woman of how my self has been detrimentally affected by custom, and am painfully aware of it in other women also. While there is research which provides evidence for women’s disproportionate lack of self-belief, self-confidence, or bodily self-esteem, it is a less tangible instantiation of sexism than the gender pay-gap, equal representation, or other measurable feminist concerns.²⁹ The damage to women’s selves can perhaps be best conveyed by vivid personal accounts rather than statistical research or theoretical discussion. I can bear witness to my own fraught relationship with food, weight-loss and my body, and the challenge of shaking off deeply seated beliefs that desirability lies in an ever-dwindling thin body. Women I have known find it nearly impossible to leave the house without covering their faces with make-up: time that could be spent, as Astell would have it, far more profitably. Bafflingly, given my long-standing feminist commitments, I have observed myself assume that a man will be more capable than me at certain activities, even when this is proven false. These things damage *who women are*: rather than just limiting what they can do, our very selves are “truncated”, to use Bartky’s terminology. We need to care for them better.

Astell provides several pointers to our modern understanding of self-care: first, she presents it as a rigorous work on the self, not something to be undertaken passively or indulgently.³⁰ Self-care is always work: neither Foucault nor Astell will permit us to forget that. For women, however, this work is harder, as

²⁹ One recent piece of research, for instance, has shown how gender stereotypes detrimentally affect women’s own beliefs about what they are capable of (Bordalo et al. 2019). We can think of such stereotypes as modern versions of what Sowaal describes as the Women’s Defective Nature prejudice, which Astell seeks to dismantle.

³⁰ Much modern self-care discourse emphasises work on and attention to the body as part of self-care for women, which often involves extensive and difficult dietary and exercise regimens. While these forms of self-care are not passive, they are also not focusing on what really matters as far as Astell is concerned: the actual self, soul, or mind.

Astell shows. Secondly, she embeds her ethic of self-care in a detailed account of social structures which affect women's selves. Thirdly, she indicates the usefulness of separation from mainstream society, and men in particular, for practising care of the self.

I want to address the latter point. Where Astell should give us the greatest pause for thought is her stance that caring for the self is difficult to undertake in the context of society as it is. Enszer remarks that "in contemporary discourses, feminists often mock and ridicule lesbian separatism" (Enszer 2016, 180).³¹ She is right to note that politically-motivated or feminist separatist movements are not in vogue, particularly in mainstream media feminist discourse. Rather, the emphasis is frequently on the capacity of feminism for including men and relations with men, as some feminists seek to distinguish themselves from the supposedly too radical feminism of the past. The argument that men and male-dominated social custom can actively hinder women from looking after their own selves is not exactly rejected by popular feminism, but it rarely translates into advocacy for separation from men.

The issue is complicated by the current association between women-only spaces and spaces which exclude trans women. The organisation Woman's Place UK, for instance, while ostensibly campaigning for the "principle of women-only spaces to be upheld" (*Women's Place UK* n.d.), was formed in response to government plans to amend the Gender Recognition Act, making it easier for trans people to alter their legal sex. Their concern is primarily the maintenance of spaces for cisgender women exclusively.³² In this milieu, trans-inclusive feminists shy away from advocating separatism, although in fact a separatist stance need not exclude trans women at all.

Another concern is the issue of race and other axes of oppression: as Carmen Rios writes, "the structures of separatism in the 70's dismissed the need for

³¹ By drawing on Enszer's analysis of lesbian separatism, I am not identifying Astell's advocacy of secluded separation for women as part of the same lesbian movement: rather, I am claiming parallels between the purpose of Astell's advice and the purposes behind more modern separatism.

³² To be "cisgender" is simply not to be transgender: to inhabit the same gender as one was assigned at birth.

racial justice for women of color and ignored the plight of communities of color which included men” (2015). Advocating for women to separate from men to care for their selves may also mean asking Black women, for instance, to separate from Black communities and men who are also affected by “custom” in a different way. We cannot assume that women who are subject to multiple axes of oppression will want to prioritise the way in which gendered structures, rather than race, class, or sexuality, affect their selves.

The urge to separate from society and from men for the sake of self-care has evidently not been lost, however: all-female yoga or wellness retreats, often advertising the prospect of “empowerment”, abound. The comparison between such experiences and what Astell advocated is not superficial: on such retreats, women undertake an ordered, regimented set of activities aimed at benefitting their selves – often with a spiritual, quasi-religious dimension – while separated entirely from men and other outside influences. The reasons given for going on such retreats can echo Astell’s remarkably: references to “the craziness of the ‘real world’ ... the projects and deadlines, whatever you’re normally caught up doing” (*BookRetreats* n.d.) align with Astell’s commentary on the busyness of ordinary life. Even while political, long-term separatism is disparaged, short-term retreats for women focused on self-care are popular. Many companies which advertise yoga or wellness retreats include women-only retreats as separate sections on their websites.³³

Unlike the care of the self which Astell advocates, such retreats – and those who recommend them – largely fail to address the circumstances which make retreats so desirable for women. Shani Jay, writing of “The Powerful Benefits of Attending a Women’s Wellness Retreat”, does acknowledge that “as a woman you probably find yourself taking on the role of a caretaker or a giver – always looking after the people around you, and never prioritizing yourself” (2018). The causes of women’s caretaking are not identified, however. Like Astell, Jay presents a women’s retreat as a space free of the distractions of daily life:

³³ See for instance <https://www.theretreatcompany.com/topics/retreats-for-women-only> and <https://bookretreats.com/s/yoga-retreats/womens-retreats>.

unlike Astell, she does not acknowledge the role which men and male-dominated social structures play in detrimentally affecting women's selves. Nor, for Jay, do women's retreats have any political consequences; it is unclear, on her account, why a *women's* retreat is called for, other than a "shared feminine energy as women". From Jay's article, and others like it, I want to pose three key areas of inadequacy in this kind of highly commercialised women's self-care space.

First, many such retreats take an essentialist approach to gender which posits intrinsic differences between men and women. Jay, for instance, refers to a "sixth sense of intuition" which "helps us understand one another, when men don't". Another website references "the divine feminine in everyone and everything" (*retreat.guru* n.d.). As discussed in the introduction, while Astell understands womanhood as having a body of a certain kind, and is to that extent essentialist, she challenges the notion of intrinsic differences between men's and women's souls, instead showing how gender differences are caused by social conditioning.

Secondly, there is often a focus on women's *bodies* and their health or appearance. The website *Bookretreats* writes that women's retreats "honor the female body" and that most "will have an element of exploring the female form" (*BookRetreats* n.d.). Some women's retreats include HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training) workouts, which are usually aimed at burning calories and weight-loss. Some retreats, such as the UK-based Body Retreat, are explicitly focused on weight-loss, even while using the language of self-care and wellness (*the Body Retreat* n.d.). Other kinds of retreat place an emphasis on women's menstrual cycles and hormones, some including practices of "womb yoga". Such retreats, by emphasising the shape and health of women's bodies, reinforce rather than challenge social custom. They miss the important ways in which women's selves need care, locating the problem instead in women's bodies.

Thirdly, few of these retreats contextualise women's self-care with respect to broader structural concerns: they neither recognise societal sexism and male

domination as a cause for women's need for self-care, nor do they recognise the feminist consequences of caring for the self. While we find the occasional reference to "a male oriented world" or the pressures of "the husband, the kid, the school work, the HOUSE work" (*Book Retreats* n.d.), such comments are not situated in any larger framework of analysis. The effects of self-care retreats may include peace, transformation, or nourishment – but not the freedom from male tyranny over women's selves which Astell promises. Nor is any major attention paid to the *ethical* dimension of women's care of the self: while Astell's purpose is at least partly women's self-constitution as ethical, virtuous subjects, women's wellness retreats advertise the creation of "rituals in your life that enable you to sit in your power and live your potential fully" (*Ibiza Retreats* n.d.).

Feminist separatism is not popularly taken up, and faces the challenges of intersectionality: many women experience interlocking oppressions, problematising the separation of women from men for the purposes of self-care. More popular women's self-care or wellness retreats, while targeting some of the problems which cause women to require attention to their selves, are inadequate in a variety of ways. Given that women's separation faces both practical and theoretical problems, how can women effectively attend to their own selves, given the pervasive social customs which act to warp them?

The popular website for lesbian, bi and trans women, *Autostraddle*, has a piece "On Building a Better Separatism" (Rios 2015), which presents the possibility of acknowledging "where separatism went wrong in the past without disavowing the idea of sharing time, space, and our lives around people who affirm and echo our identities". "There is a freedom", writes Rios, "in escaping, even for a moment, the weight of oppression and the burden of society's expectations for who we should be". There are echoes of Astell here, urging women's seclusion from mainstream society so that they can attend to their own selves and find freedom.

What this could look like in practice is harder to address. I have been struggling with this question with no solution in sight: I have no new proposal

to offer as a reworking of Astell's. Foucault claimed that "the idea of a program of proposals is dangerous. As soon as a program is presented, it becomes a law, and there's a prohibition against inventing" (Foucault 1997a, 139): he was wary of putting forward rigid projects which could themselves limit freedom. Rather, we must live in an ongoing attitude of experimentation and reinvention, albeit an attitude which can be guided by principles or values. We can draw from Astell many insights regarding women's care for their selves: but perhaps we cannot put forward a new programme on the page. Rather, I suspect, we must experiment in our lives to find out how to do this, trying, failing, and retrying. We are "always in the position of beginning again" (Foucault 1983b), Foucault insists, and that is how this work must be done.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *A Serious Proposal* advocates an ethic of care of the self. I have shown how Astell genders care of the self, in terms of its need, obstacles, its practice and its effects, and suggested that *A Serious Proposal* provides tools for modern feminist critique and appropriation of Foucault. I have also argued that Astell's work can provide important guidance when considering self-care as women today. In my next chapter, I look at the *practices* of the self which Astell advocates as part of caring for the self, drawing on Foucault's work on techniques of the self and *askesis* to continue my analysis.

Chapter Two

Practices of the self: discipline and freedom

In any given week, I participate in a variety of activities. Some of these activities are externally directed: I play board games with my partner, go shopping to buy food for dinner, Hoover the bathroom, or watch a film. These activities may incidentally affect how I feel, but their aim is not to change, alter, or maintain myself in any significant way. They may entertain me (or bore me, in the case of Hoovering), but I am largely the same afterwards as I was before. Other activities I undertake have a different sense of purpose. I spend ten to fifteen minutes a day meditating, with the aim of becoming more relaxed and less attached to fleeting thoughts or feelings. I run three times a week, with the aim of maintaining and extending my physical capabilities, as well as developing my mental stamina. These practices have as their intended aim my own change or development: they are a means of working on my self. The practices of this kind which I enact on myself have shifted over the years: in the past, I shaved my legs to make myself supposedly more physically appealing; I also counted the calories in the food I ate to make my body smaller.

These “practices of the self”, as Foucault calls them, are what I pick up in this chapter: the “forms of *elaboration*, of *ethical work* ... that one performs on oneself, not only to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour” (Foucault, 1985, 27). *A Serious Proposal* is run through with practices of the self and advocates an *askesis*, or set of such practices, for women to undertake.

Throughout *A Serious Proposal*, Astell repeatedly discusses things which women can *do* which affect their selves. Some of these have negative effects: “by a continual application to Vanity and Folly”, for instance, “we quite spoil the contexture and frame of our Minds” (*SP I*, 68), while a “Lady who passionately desires to be admir’d” may, ironically, “consent to such Actions as

render her base and contemptible” (65). Other things, however, are actions which facilitate the concern for and attention to the self which Astell advocates. Within her proposed educational community, for instance, “a Religious Retirement and holy Conversation” will assist women in gaining “a more serious Temper, a graver Spirit” (96). Part II of *A Serious Proposal* is full of “more minute Directions” (*SP II*, 126) for women to “enlarge their prospect, rectify their false Ideas, form in their Minds adequate conceptions of the End and Dignity of their Natures ... not only feel Passions, but be able to direct and regulate their Motions” (126). By doing the sorts of thing Astell advises, women will supposedly become virtuous, happy beings, while by doing the wrong sorts of thing they will be unhappy, contemptible, and subject to emotional fluctuations instead of achieving a rationally founded autonomy.

In Chapter One, I explored the gendered nature of care of the self in Astell’s writing. Care of the self requires work: it requires *practices* which those caring for their selves must undertake to effect the necessary transformation of their selves. In this chapter I argue that Astell’s austere and somewhat restrictive practices of the self are in fact practices of freedom. This is because of, rather than despite, their austerity. First I explain Foucault’s framework of practices of the self, showing how such practices can be disciplinary or liberatory, and sometimes both at once. To do this, I explicate Foucault’s account of discipline on the one hand and freedom, and freedom practices, on the other. In general, however, I put Astell more into conversation with feminist development of Foucault than Foucault himself. Drawing on writers such as McWhorter, Heyes and Vintges who propose the centrality of practices of the self for a feminist ethics, I ask how Astell’s practices function in this context.

I argue that for Astell they are key for women’s development of autonomy within the damaging social milieu ruled by custom. First I attend to her somatic practices, suggesting that the minimal nature of Astell’s attention to the body is of feminist value. Secondly, I look at her practices of meditation, emotional regulation, examination of representations, and withdrawal from the senses and the world, arguing that they constitute a feminist *askesis* aimed

at cultivating women's autonomy and resistance to the detrimental effects of custom.

Throughout the chapter, I consider the applicability of Astell's practices of the self to modern feminism. I argue that thinking with Astell's practices can provide us with a sense of austerity and moral content which is often missing from mainstream feminism, but which can be extremely valuable. As is the case more broadly in this thesis, my aim is first to read Astell through the framework of Foucault, and Foucauldian feminism, before asking what Astell could have to say to that strand of feminism. In this way I construct a dialogue between the two.

What are practices of the self?

Foucault's turn in his later period to the analysis of practices or techniques of the self has been interpreted as a counterbalance to his earlier emphasis on techniques of domination (McNay, 1992, 49): whereas his earlier work elaborated the ways in which disciplinary power created subjects, his later period emphasised instead subjects' own self-creation through certain practices. In his lecture "Technologies of the Self", Foucault identifies "four major types" of "technologies", which are "specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves": technologies of production, sign systems, power and the self, saying that it is "the last two, the technologies of domination and self, which have most kept my attention" (Foucault 1988b). He goes on to acknowledge his prior focus on technologies of domination and power, and his increasing interest in "the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self" (Foucault 1988b). Whereas techniques of domination are practices which are enacted on others to "submit them to certain ends ... an objectivizing of the subject" (Foucault 1988b), technologies of the *self* are things which individuals do to effect their *own* change, transformation or self-creation.

In “Technologies of the Self”, Foucault traces the techniques which were used to effect the care of the self. Writing, for instance: “One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed” (Foucault 1988b). Specific Stoic techniques of caring for the self which Foucault identifies are “letters to friends and disclosure of self; examination of self and conscience” (Foucault 1988b). These Stoic practices of the self are only one set of techniques for working on the self, with their own specific end and desired relation of self to self. Superficially similar practices of the self, such as daily self-examination, can on Foucault’s account be wielded to very different ends and different modes of self-relation.

The concept of practices of the self can appear worryingly broad: much as with self-care in the last chapter, nearly anything I do might be claimed as a self-creating practice with a little effort. Running, reading, meditating – perhaps even my daily practice of cooking interesting and nutritious food – are all ways in which I train myself and effect change on myself. Perhaps the sheer breadth of applicability of the concept signals less its diminished usefulness, and instead indicates the extent to which we *do* work on ourselves, consciously or otherwise, using a dizzying variety of practices. However, practices of the self are nonetheless more useful when linked to systems of power and domination. In this respect, we can broadly divide them into two kinds: disciplinary practices and practices of freedom.

The disciplinary is one of the best-known of Foucault’s ideas (if not always, perhaps, the best understood), and has been discussed at length in scholarship. I intend to give only a brief account here, expanding on it later as necessary.³⁴ As is well known, Foucault understands power as ubiquitous:

³⁴ While returning to *Discipline and Punish* in order to write this account, I was reminded that Foucault’s presentation of disciplinary power and panopticism includes several pages analysing a plague lockdown in the seventeenth century as an archetypal example of disciplinary power. Coincidentally, this took place at the beginning of the UK’s Coronavirus lockdown, leading to a curious sense of resonance between my research and the world outside.

“power is always present” and such “power relations are ... mobile, reversible, and unstable” (Foucault 1997c, 292). Disciplinary power is a specific *mode* of power: a mode which “insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied” (Foucault 1977, 220), which increases their capacities while decreasing its own inconveniences. Disciplinary power is a kind of power which *trains*: it “makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power which regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (170). In this sense, it is productive, rather than being simply oppressive or repressive.

While Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power tends to be linked to “the operation of specific institutions, e.g., the school, the factory, the prison” (Bartky 1990a, 75), feminist responses have pointed to “the extent to which discipline can be institutionally *unbound* as well as institutionally bound” (75). On this interpretation, disciplinary modes of power can be dispersed throughout society, imposed anonymously – an account particularly relevant, argues Bartky, for considering women’s bodies and the production of femininity.

Disciplinary practices of the self are practices which “increase capacities but simultaneously increase docility (obedience, inhibition, etc.)” (McWhorter 2013, 70): they create and train the self which undertakes them, but simultaneously have the function of rendering it docile and obedient. For Foucault, disciplinary power is primarily concerned with the *body*, and rendering the *body* docile. When considering disciplinary practices of the self, thinkers such as Bartky and Susan Bordo have put forwards as archetypical the practice of dieting for weight loss, most often undertaken by women; an analysis extended and developed by Heyes (2007). We may also think about practices such as working out for the sake of toning the body, or – although they less straightforwardly fit the minutiae of Foucault’s framework of discipline, which centres classification, ordering, and differentiation – the daily application of make-up or the removal of body hair.

On the one hand, discipline: on the other, freedom. For Foucault, freedom is implicit in the very idea of power: “power relations are possible only insofar as

the subjects are free” (Foucault 1997c, 292). Power relations, he insists, *necessarily* contain the possibility of resistance: without that possibility, there is no power relation at all. Sometimes, however, power relations become ossified: in such power relations, there is a “shrinking space for freedom of action” (O’Leary 2002, 158). When power relations become static, they become forms of *domination*.³⁵ It is domination that must be resisted and challenged. We can do this by acquiring “the morality, the *ethos*, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible” (Foucault 1997c, 298).

For Foucault, we can resist domination through “practices of freedom”.³⁶ This idea of *practising* freedom is distinct from the notion of achieving liberation, of which he is consistently sceptical: “one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that has been ... concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in or by mechanisms of repression,” he cautions, ever suspicious of the pre-existing self. Rather than liberating an imprisoned self, Foucault suggests that we do things which enact liberty. For him, practices of freedom are largely those which resist domination and creatively transgress current norms and rules: “the source of human freedom – is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile” (Foucault 1988a). Practices which challenge that which is currently given, which create and invent new ways of being: these are practices of freedom. In Foucault’s ethics, there is frequently an association between pleasure and freedom practices: discussing homosexuality, he states that “[w]hat we must work on ... is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure” (Foucault 1997a, 137). By creating new forms of pleasure, new forms of affective relation, new practices of the self, we can resist domination and practise freedom by going beyond the constraints and limits which we thought we were subject to.

³⁵ McWhorter (2013) very usefully links Foucault’s analysis of domination with Marilyn Frye’s account of oppression.

³⁶ There is much to be said regarding Foucault’s understanding of freedom, and I am going to say relatively little of it here. For more detail, see Oksala (2005) or O’Leary (2002).

By practising liberty, the subject is able to constitute itself: “the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty” (Foucault 1990a, 50). And indeed, part of the significance of practices of the self is the opening they provide for resistance to the all-pervasive disciplinary power which seemed so inescapable in much of Foucault’s earlier work. Practices of the self appear to restore agency to the subject: “while some practices of the self are disciplinary and constraining, others are more autonomous” (O’Grady, 2004, 92). Through individual practices, “Foucault proposes a way out of this inevitable cycle where resistance is transformed into domination, through a process which involves the adoption of an attitude of self critique and the exploration of new modes of subjectivity” (McNay, 1992, 87).

The potential which practices of the self provide for agency in networks of domination has not gone unappreciated by feminist interpreters of Foucault. McNay, for instance, sees Foucauldian practices as a challenge to a strand of feminist ethics which focuses on “a distinct and cohesive ‘feminine’ identity” to consider instead “what women might become if they intervene in the processes that shape their lives” (115). Practices of the self provide opportunities for women to draw on existing cultural practices in ways which can transform and empower, rather than disenable, them. Vintges uses the notion of practices of the self as the basis for a universalist, multicultural feminist ethics of freedom (2004), while McWhorter articulates from a personal perspective the appeal of Foucauldian practices of self-becoming as a less “risky” alternative to reifying feminist practices of woman-affirmation (2004).

Those practices of the self which are taken up by feminists tend to be those creative and transgressive practices which Foucault was keen to instantiate. Sawicki draws on practices of freedom to call for “a queer feminism aimed at opening up possibilities for thinking and being, testing the limits of the possible” (Sawicki 2013, 87); McWhorter, also arguing for a feminism rooted in freedom practices, claims that doing so is to “emphasise feminism’s positive,

transformative, and creative aspects” (McWhorter 2013, 72). She writes that in Foucault’s analysis, she recognizes herself “as a self who will always surpass what I have been, who will never be identical with myself from moment to moment” (McWhorter, 2004, 155). She hears Foucault calling her “to find and cultivate practices that will militate against reification”, setting such “affirmation of the free play of becoming, difference, and otherness” (156) in opposition to what she describes as “woman-affirming” feminist practices which may ultimately be conservative in nature. Oksala argues that “Foucault’s ethics-as-aesthetics should be understood primarily as a continuation of his permanent questioning of the limits of subjectivity and the possibilities of crossing them ... an attempt to seek ways of living and thinking that are transgressive” (2005, 167). The way in which practices of the self function as resistance, Oksala suggests, “is by shaping one’s self and one’s lifestyle creatively: by exploring possibilities for new forms of subjectivity, new fields of experiences, pleasures, relationships, modes of living and thinking” (168).

This is not universally or necessarily the case, however: Vintges understands a “feminism oriented to freedom practices” as one which “opposes domination in any field” and creates “alternative ways of living to that which is deemed the life of ‘normal woman’ by the predominant culture” (Vintges 2004, 294). Doing this, I argue, can take place through more subtle ways than overt transgression and creativity. Astell’s practices show us, in fact, the value that austerity, order and rigour can have for women.

Disciplinary practices and freedom practices are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the same practice can be interpreted as both disciplinary and an act of freedom. Soile Ylivuori shows how the practice of “politeness” in the eighteenth century functioned on the one hand as “a disciplinary power producing docile bodies” (2014, 171) and on the other hand as something which individuals enacted on themselves. Women’s use of politeness as a technique of the self, Ylivuori argues, can be read *both* as an internalising of the disciplinary practice of domination, liable to have an “immobilizing” effect,

and as something which “could bring to women the experience of power that was traditionally viewed as a masculine prerogative” (183). This double nature of many practices of the self must be borne in mind.

First, I show how Astell recognises the existence of disciplinary practices of the self which lead to women’s domination and subjugation. Next, I outline the range of practices of the self which she advocates, arguing that they constitute something close to what Foucault identified as an *askesis*. I further suggest that, while they do not have as their end the free aesthetic self-creation which Foucault advocated, the practices Astell sets out are nonetheless freedom practices.

Practices and autonomy in Astell studies

Although Astell has not been read through the Foucauldian lens of practices of the self, there is a strand of scholarship which foregrounds the role of exercises and meditations in her work. Sowaal’s work is fruitful here (2007, 2017). She identifies what she terms Astell’s “Inward Strategy” – the meditative exercises of Part II of *A Serious Proposal* – as enabling women to overcome a prejudice detrimental to their development, well-being and virtue: the “Women’s Defective Nature Prejudice” (Sowaal 2007). Astell’s project, Sowaal argues, is to “provide meditative exercises to aid women in gaining ... correct lower degrees of knowledge, and thus to avoid harmful prejudice and custom” (230). Elsewhere, Sowaal highlights meditation’s role for Astell in “gain[ing] internal liberty” (Sowaal, 2017, 180), situating it in a woman’s “project of self-determination and emancipation from personal and cultural biases” (180). On this account, Astell’s meditation is “a therapeutic exercise” (Sowaal, 2007, 238) which has the function in the case of women of freeing them from the negative, and sexist, effects of custom. Sowaal’s account is extremely useful in understanding the detail and function of Astell’s meditative exercises.

Broad also attends to Astell’s “techniques for purifying the mind and regulating the passions” (Broad, 2015, 16). Broad, furthermore, highlights how, for Astell, “a woman must methodically exercise her freedom of will” (42): a

comment resonant with Foucault's remarks on "practices of freedom". Like Sowaal, Broad notes that the purpose of Astell's practices is the attainment of internal liberty: Broad, however, fleshes this out in terms of autonomy and agency. In a recent article, she situates Astell's writing in the context of early-modern women's religious writings and devotional manuals aimed at promoting "a view of a woman's self as a free and rational being capable of projecting itself into the future and capable of acquiring the self-government necessary to attain future-oriented goals" (Broad 2019, 715). On Broad's account, Astell develops "a feminist theory of autonomy: a theory that for women to acquire true self-determination in their moral choices and actions, they must be permitted the conditions that enable careful self-examination and self-government" (725). Detlefsen, too, argues that Astell advocates a form of feminist autonomy: she claims that "Astell holds, at least implicitly, the seeds of the theory of relational autonomy in contemporary feminism" (Detlefsen 2016, 88). Both Broad and Detlefsen link Astell's writing to modern feminist work on autonomy such as that of Marilyn Friedman.

Astell literature has examined many of her advocated practices and linked them to women's attainment of autonomy. By linking this strand of Astell literature to Foucault's analysis of practices of the self and feminist appropriations and use thereof, Astell can be drawn into a modern conversation about feminism and practices of the self. In what follows I aim to build on the existing Astell scholarship by using Foucault, and Foucauldian feminism, to examine how Astell's practices can be read as practices of liberty or discipline. I also aim to bring Astell into more immediate dialogue with modern practices, asking how she can inform our feminist practices today.

Astell on disciplinary practices

In her Foucauldian analysis of the disciplining of women's bodies, Bartky remarks that, in the modern world, "it is women themselves who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies" (Bartky, 1990, 80). While Bartky does not explicitly invoke techniques of the self, they are clearly at play in her

study. Women “punish themselves too for the failure to conform” (76): the practices of domination from without are reinforced by internalizing debilitating practices of the self. By internalizing disciplinary practices of the self aimed at producing an appropriately “feminine” body, Bartky argues, “discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity ... While its imposition may promote a larger disempowerment, discipline may bring with it a certain development of a person’s powers” (77). Practices of the self frequently possess this double aspect: internalized discipline on one hand, and tool of self-empowerment on the other.

All human beings, Astell thinks, have an urge to work on their selves to become of greater value and to develop their self-esteem. Astell means something beyond the general meaning the term “self-esteem” has now of something like “self-worth”. She presents a type of self-esteem which “features self-preservation, generosity, toward the self and others, and a concept of self that is independent of societal pressures” (Ahearn 2016, 36). Ahearn unpacks Astell’s concept of “feminine self-esteem” in detail: the most salient points are that “developing healthy self-esteem in women is complicated” (53), and that “women have been habituated to base their self-worth on ... others or on external, unearned qualities” (53). In other words, women often found their self-esteem on false grounds, such as male opinion or their own beauty.

Astell demonstrates her awareness of the practices women undertake on themselves which simultaneously disempower by diverting attention from that which is really important and yet also provide women with a sense of identity and skill.

When a poor Young Lady is taught to value her self on nothing but her Cloaths, and to think she’s very fine when well accoutred. When she hears say that ’tis Wisdom enough for her to know how to dress her self, that she may become amiable in his eyes; to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lay out her Industry

and Money on such Accomplishments, ... ? When she sees the vain and the gay, making Parade in the World ... no wonder that her tender Eyes are dazled with the Pageantry; and wanting Judgement to pass a due Estimate on them and their Admirers, longs to be such a fine and celebrated thing as they! (*SP I*, 69)

In this passage, Astell identifies practices which young women undertake to make themselves more valuable in the eyes of the world and of men in particular. She highlights the effort and money which many women put into dressing in certain ways, earlier urging her readers: "Let us learn to pride ourselves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion" (*SP I*, 55). Here, as in Bartky's analysis, Astell presents a situation in which women do not simply have discipline *imposed* on them: they are not dressed by others against their will, or threatened with formal sanctions if they don't put effort into wearing fashionable clothes. Rather, women undertake this work apparently voluntarily: "she who has nothing else to value her self upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase" (62).

Furthermore, the practices which women enact on their bodies and appearances become central to their self-worth: not understanding where their real value lies, women place it in their material wealth or bodily appearance, and are "so silly as to ... think her self the better person, because she has more Mony to bestow profusely, or the good luck to have a more ingenious Taylor or Milliner" (65). Many women, Astell writes, are "very desirous to be thought Knowing in a Dress, in the Management of an Intreague, in Coquetry or good Housewifry" (*SP II*, 232-3) due to the "Necessity of our Nature" which "unavoidably excites us to a desire of advancing" (233). Too often, women place their value in things which contribute to their subjection. Connecting Astell's concept of self-esteem to discipline, Astell shows how women's use of disciplinary practices is rooted in their natural desire to develop their self-esteem: however, the practices they use leave their self-esteem ill-founded.

It is clear that for Astell these disciplinary techniques, while in one sense voluntarily practised by women without formal sanctions, in another sense have their origins “as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination” (Bartky, 1990, 75). This is evident in the attention she pays to “custom”, which has the character of a disciplinary force in Astell’s writing: “For Custom has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority, that she who would endeavour to put a stop to its Arbitrary Sway ... is in a fair way to render her self the *Butt* for all the Fops in Town to shoot their impertinent Censures at” (*SP I*, 95). Custom both provides women with the disciplinary practices of the self which Astell deplores and delivers sanctions in the form of mockery and social disapproval if women do not undertake such practices. While the connection between custom and discipline is analogous rather than a direct correlate, it is useful to illuminate Astell’s rejection of certain practices.

In a striking passage, Astell takes aim at bodily self-control for the sake of femininity.

Indeed an affected Ignorance, a humorous delicacy and niceness which will not speculate a notion for fear of spoiling a look, nor think a serious thought lest she shou’d damp the gaiety of her humour; she who is so top full of her outward excellencies, so careful that every look, every motion, every thing about her shou’d appear in Form, as she employs her Thoughts to a very pitiful use, so is she almost past hopes of recovery, at least so long as she continues this humour. (*SP II*, 125)

Bartky, by comparison, describes how a woman’s “infantilized face must accompany her infantilized body, a face that never ages or furrows its brow in thought. The face of the ideally feminine woman must never display the marks of character, wisdom, and experience that we so admire in men” (Bartky, 1990, 73). Regarding the comportment of the body which Astell argues women concern themselves with so that they “appear in Form”, Bartky too identifies practices with which women discipline their own bodies for the sake of feminine “movement, gesture, and posture” which “must exhibit not only

constriction, but grace as well, and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty” (Bartky, 1990, 68). Astell recognises, long in advance of Bartky’s Foucauldian interpretation of women’s self-discipline, women’s bodily practices of the self which require modification of their facial expressions and body language to be appropriately feminine.

Weiss aims to demonstrate that “feminists have been urging us for several centuries down many of the paths Foucault has more recently and much more famously travelled regarding power” (Weiss 2016, 130). I likewise hold it to be important to show how his insights on disciplinary practices have a precedent in Astell’s writing. Astell shows herself to be highly aware, although using a different terminological framework, of how women become “committed to a relentless self-surveillance” (Bartky, 1990, 80) concerning their body, fashion, and facial appearance, and furthermore how the “control of the body has gained a ... hold over the mind” (81): Astell is clear that when women’s minds are occupied with fashion and bodily comportment, they will not *also* be able to concern themselves with what is really important. That is the care of the self and its constitution as an ethical subject.

Astell’s practices of the self

Astell contrasts the practices of the self of which she disapproves with an alternative set of exercises. “Your *Glass* will not do you half so much service as a serious reflection on your own Minds,” (*SP I*, 52) she writes, setting a practice focused on appearance-modification against a mental technique. She draws a similar comparison in Part II, asking her readers “[w]ere not a Morning more advantageously spent at a Book than at a Looking Glass, and an Evening in Meditation than in Gaming?” (*SP II*, 204). The looking glass, I suggest, is representative of the bodily practices of the self which custom provides to women and which prevent them from paying attention to their true selves.

In this section, I explore some of the practices of the self Astell advocates. In particular, I address her somatic practices and her practices which form part of what Foucault terms an *askesis*. I consider the role these practices play as

practices of freedom and resistance on the one hand, or alternative modes of discipline on the other, setting them in conversation with modern discussions of feminist practices of the self. This is not an exhaustive account: I will explore some of Astell's other practices elsewhere, such as philosophy, friendship, and religious practices.

Somatic practices

A significant strand of Foucauldian feminism is primarily concerned with women's bodies, whether it be their disciplining through weight loss dieting, skin care and make-up regimes, or whether it be liberating bodily practices such as yoga.³⁷ The chapter on "Female Freedom" in *Foucault on Freedom* (Oksala 2005) is largely taken up with the female body. McWhorter provides a moving account of why this should be: since women "believed we were stinking and filthy because profit-makers told us so through every medium available" (McWhorter 2004, 146), the feminist exposé of this messaging "made it possible to imagine a culture in which female bodies would be celebrated and valued rather than denigrated" (147). Through her feminist bodily practices, McWhorter writes, she found herself "rethinking bodily existence" (148). In a context where women's bodies have been devalued, restricted, and disciplined, the motivation behind positive, freeing, feminist bodily practices of the self is clear.

Astell, on the other hand, advocates limited bodily practices. The women who would live in her community "will be more than ordinarily careful to redeem their time, spending no more of it on the Body than the necessities of Nature require" (*SP I*, 84). This is because "Bodily Exercise profiteth but a little, the chief business being to obtain a divine and God-like temper of Mind" (85). To work on the body is to miss the point: women ought to be labouring on their minds. Those practices which Astell does recommend regarding the body appear, at first sight, austere in nature: residents of her community will

³⁷ For detail on how yoga can function as a liberating bodily practice in some cases, see Heyes 2007.

“consider it as a special part of their Duty to observe all the Fasts of the Church” (85) and, as far as clothes are concerned, “content themselves with such things as are fit and convenient” (86). After all, “neither Meat nor Cloaths commend us unto GOD” (86). She goes so far as to term the body “a decaying Carkass” (86): decomposing matter, set in contrast with the everlasting soul, in line with early Christian tradition.³⁸

In Part II, Astell recommends subduing the body to cure a fault of the mind: “Volatileness of Thought ... is a fault which People of warm Imaginations and Active Spirits are apt to fall into. ... To cure this distemper perfectly perhaps it will be necessary to apply to the body as well as to the Mind” (*SP II*, 160-161). This involves ensuring that the “Animal Spirits”, which circulate in the brain and assist the operations of the mind, are not “unnaturally and violently mov’d by such a Diet, or such Passions, Designs and Divertisments as are likely to put ’em in a ferment” (161). To undertake the mental, spiritual and emotional practices Astell sets out “requires a Governable body” (161). Again, the initial impression here is of an austere, self-denying attitude to the body, particularly as Astell follows these comments up with an injunction to “withdraw our Minds from the World” (161). The remark about a “Governable” body may be particularly concerning to us now in the light of Foucault’s analysis of docile, disciplined bodies.

It is understandable that some feminists have approached Astell’s stance on the body with suspicion, suspecting her participation in a Cartesian dualistic system within which “the mind is favoured and is associated with what is rational, active, cultural, dominant, masculine, and European, whereas the body is denigrated and associated with what is material, passive, natural, subordinate, feminine, and other” (Sowaal, 2016, 201-202).³⁹ Broad feels the need to defend Astell against the charge of ignoring and devaluing women’s

³⁸ See Delumeau 1990, which addresses, among other topics, the long influence of early Christian denigrations of the physical body.

³⁹ The philosophical devaluation of the body in contrast to the soul or mind is not specifically Cartesian, and for Astell may stem from Platonism and Christian philosophy as much as Descartes. However, she is often placed in a Cartesian context by scholars.

embodiment, writing that “Astell does not recommend completely extirpating all the passions, or [attempt] to repress the body and its disturbing influences” (Broad 2015, 174). On Broad’s account, Astell emphasises that “in this lifetime the soul or mind is always intimately united and joined to a living human body” (Broad 2018, 214), and so we are unable to “obtain complete *separation* from our gendered bodies” (214). This is as far as it goes an accurate account of Astell’s position.

I want to emphasise, however, that Astell nevertheless does devalue the body. She argues that women’s care for their selves is to be aimed at their *real* selves, their “Souls which are infinitely more bright and radiant” (*SP I*, 54). Women are not to “neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive ... when it’s [sic] unsuitable and much inferiour Companion is mouldring into Dust” (53). In Part II, she also refers to the body being “of a much Inferior Nature” (*SP II*, 210) to the mind, warning against “[pampering] our Bodies until they grow resty and ungovernable” (211). The ascetic approach to the body is even more evident in *The Christian Religion*, where Astell explicitly refers to the “Mortification” of the good Christian’s body (*CR*, 245, 250). She may criticise the rare people who “impose such rigors on the Body, as GOD never requires at their hands, because they are inconsistent with a Human Frame” (*SP II*, 211), but such people are in the minority compared to those who inappropriately attend to their bodies.

One may be left wondering if her opposition to practices of the self focused on bodily adornment, beauty and comportment leaves her advocating bodily suppression and denial. She seeks to govern the body, to keep it manageable, using the mind. This recalls Foucault’s famous remark that “the soul is the prison of the body” (Foucault 1977, 30): it is the “element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power” (29) over the body.⁴⁰ Astell’s

⁴⁰ Foucault is talking here of a very specific historical construction of the soul, separate from and “unlike the soul represented by Christian theology” (29). My use of the quote shouldn’t be taken as identifying Astell’s version of the soul with the one Foucault is concerned with, but merely to point to the possibility of the soul being used to exercise power over the body.

orientation towards the mind and away from the body is representative too of an attitude criticised by some feminist historians of philosophy as characteristically masculine. This interpretation was most famously put forward in Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason* (1984), which traces the gendering of rationality throughout the history of philosophy. Bordo, also, identifies a masculine attitude (with "masculine" referring to "a cognitive style, an epistemological stance" (Bordo 1986, 451)) with "*detachment*: from the emotional life, from the particularities of time and place" (451), linking it to a Cartesian project in which "absolute separateness ... from body and nature are keys to control rather than sources of anxiety" (452).⁴¹ By subduing the body for the sake of intellectual activity, Astell appears to be participating in precisely such a masculinist project. I am convinced, however, that there is much of feminist value to be gained from Astell's approach.

While there are aspects of bodily self-renunciation in Astell's programme, the purpose of these exercises is not to reject or deny the body totally, nor to cause it suffering. After all, her advocacy of Christian fasting comes with the caveat that "we intend not by this to impose any intolerable burden on tender Constitutions" (*SP I*, 85). The purpose of her bodily practices is to take "the most reasonable care of them [bodies]", which for Astell constitutes reducing them "to be most obedient servants to the Mind" (*CR*, 250): when this has taken place, bodies will "stand in need of no great observance, but be ready to accommodate themselves to all Conditions and Circumstances" (250). Astell's institution will "not only permit but recommend harmless and ingenious Diversions ... such as may refresh the Body without enervating the Mind" (*SP I*, 85). Indeed, in both *A Serious Proposal* and *The Christian Religion*, she describes her approach to the body as "in truth the highest *Epicurism* exalting our Pleasures by refining them" (86). The bodily practices to be followed by good women and good Christians are "the best way to keep the Body in good

⁴¹ These kinds of interpretation of seventeenth-century philosophy in general and Cartesianism in particular have been significantly challenged in recent years. Nonetheless, there is a legitimate concern to be engaged with regarding the devaluing of embodiment, specifically women's bodies.

tune, to avoid Pain and be always Easy” (CR, 251). She is advocating “living ... according to Nature” regarding the body, feeding it with the “simplest refreshments” which have “a greater relish than the most study’d delicacies to an indulg’d and a disorder’d Appetite, that is always longing after what it has not, and surfeiting with what it has” (251). The body should be governable, but it should nonetheless be cared for and free of pain.

Astell’s reference to disordered appetites is striking and evocative to a modern reader. She is certainly not referring here to what we would today consider eating disorders. However, the experience of discontent with one’s own bodily appetites, and having those appetites be disordered (in terms of what one desires to eat or what one does eat) is one which still resonates for many people, especially women.⁴² Although she is not writing about the practices of restricting food, binge-eating, or obsessively monitoring the food one eats, they would all be part of a moral failure for Astell: a diversion of attention away from what really matters and toward inferior, material concerns. Rectifying such disordered appetites is not simply an issue of health, either mental or physical, but of virtue. A dominant modern approach to eating disorders construes them solely as mental illnesses, thus overlooking the extent to which disordered eating behaviour is ubiquitous in our culture. While it may be undesirable to apply an overtly ethical framework to an area such as food and eating which is already heavily culturally moralised, thinking with Astell here brings out the extent to which disordered eating can warp the self. In my experience of obsessively counting calories for the sake of weight loss, I found my mind frequently occupied with food and its effects, and was hampered from spending time in social situations due to the fear of over-eating or gaining weight. Without framing this as a moral defect, moving past these disordered eating behaviours opened up the space to develop my self, develop my relationships, and to focus my mind on more important concerns:

⁴² While “eating disorder” as such is an anachronistic term in the early modern period, there was attention to both “gluttony” and excessive fasting, both of which were understood in moral terms. For detail on early modern approaches to diet and food, see Schoenfeldt 1999 and Fitzpatrick 2007.

to become more ethically whole and coherent. By relinquishing bodily practices such as weighing myself daily or counting calories, I found a new sense of freedom: rejecting those practices permitted me to do things I felt unable to do before.

By rejecting many bodily practices of the self in favour of a minimal bodily routine, Astell aims to refocus women's attention away from their appearances towards the cultivation of the soul. In the context of the obsessive concern for the body which custom drives women toward on Astell's account, this emerges as a valuable feminist practice. Whereas women are taught to place their self-worth in their bodily appearance and adornment, Astell encourages them to discard such concerns and focus instead on their real selves. The *rejection* of dominant social practices of the body functions as a freedom practice: if women reject such practices they will be practising their freedom from custom or discipline.

This drive to reorient attention away from the body is also found in the recently-labelled "body neutrality" movement among some modern feminists who seek to push back against the "body positivity" which has become "a new cultural chorus line" (Koul 2018). Writer Scaachi Koul, in an article about her drive to lose weight for her wedding, writes "I just want to feel apathy – to feel nothing about my body at all, to be merely grateful that it functions as I require, that I put clothes on it ... and food in it when necessary (surprisingly often!). Love, like hate, requires too much active effort for something I don't even want to deal with". Ann Kearney-Cooke, director of the Cincinnati Psychotherapy Institute, describes body neutrality as "the freedom to go about your day without such a strong focus on your body. ... There are lots of other things that need attention. You don't want to neglect your body, so you listen to it, and are aware of the function it serves" (Quoted in Meltzer 2017). It is striking how the language and concepts used to discuss body neutrality chime with Astell's comments on appropriate attitudes towards the body. Anti-dieting advocate Alice Dalrymple affirms that "Body neutrality should be rooted in not basing your worth on anything to do with your body – its

abilities or its looks – because those things aren't what make you the person you are" (quoted in Hosie 2018). The subheading for this article states that "[by] concerning yourself less with your body, you free up your mind to think about other things" (Hosie 2018).

Advocates of body neutrality argue that the dominant cultural narrative of body *positivity* as a feminist practice still "makes it all about [people's] bodies under the guise of focusing on more than that" (A. Long 2017). Body neutrality rejects self-surveilling bodily practices of the self such as frequent weighing or scrutiny in mirrors. "Weigh-Free May" is a recent project which encourages women to "step off the scales" during May, replacing that bodily practice with a practice of talking to others to remind oneself and others that bodies are acceptable in all forms. This is a project which recommends that women minimise and reject somatic techniques of the self. As we have seen, Astell too advocates a very limited set of bodily practices, the aim of which is to make the body into something which does not require observation or surveillance. She too sees bodily practices of the self as taking away time, energy and focus from work on women's *real* selves, and wants women to see their body as something which exists and requires some looking after, but is not worth excessive attention or scrutiny.

What would it look like for a woman here and now to adopt Astell's recommended bodily practices? She would take care of her body in terms of hygiene and cleanliness but little more: she would not devote time to removing body hair nor to the application of make-up. She would not spend money on expensive or decorative clothes, dressing simply and comfortably instead. While Astell does not remark on the comfort of clothing and fashion, it is hard to envision her approving of painful high heels or clothes which were impractical for daily activities. She would eat simply, not buying expensive or indulgent foods – but at the same time not restricting her food intake for the sake of her physical appearance. While she might exercise to keep healthy, she would not be concerned for her weight or body shape. By minimising bodily practices of the self she would free up both the time and the mental space for

other activities: cutting out make-up and hair removal alone could provide hours of free time every week. Furthermore, by eliminating practices which aim at making the female body presentable according to certain beauty standards, or sexually desirable to men, she will be engaging in a mode of resistance to disciplinary norms: she will be deliberately “living otherwise”, to use a Foucauldian phrase.

A few things strike me. First, the extent to which I have already largely adopted such an approach to my own bodily practices: I deliberately choose not to wear make-up, remove my body hair, wear high heels, or spend extensive time on my hair. My clothes are almost entirely second-hand and inexpensive, although I certainly do desire to style myself with them, rather than treat them functionally. My choice not to undertake those practices is a deliberate feminist act, although not made with Astell’s regimen in mind. By doing so, my mind and my time have been freed up to engage with other things. The thirty minutes or so I might otherwise have spent shaving my legs can be spent reading, writing, in conversation, or anything else worthwhile or pleasurable.

Secondly, I want to remark on the real difficulty of discarding certain bodily practices. This difficulty is partly due to the ubiquity of “custom” which teaches us that women’s bodies are to be managed and regulated to be a certain size and shape. Consider size: the effects on a woman whose body is larger than considered beautiful or healthy by social conventions go beyond her own feelings of discomfort or distress. There is evidence both anecdotal and researched that “fatphobia” is behind workplace discrimination (Flint et al. 2016), lower-quality healthcare (Hebl and Xu 2001) and social exclusion (Westermann et al. 2015). Returning to the last chapter, the benefits of separation make themselves apparent here. The existence of an all-female space which adopts a different custom could be strongly beneficial in enabling certain practices to be discarded and others to be taken up.

Another difficulty, which Heyes points to effectively in “Foucault Goes to Weight-Watchers”, is the control and increase in capabilities which

disciplinary bodily practices facilitate (Heyes 2007, 67). As Heyes puts it, “[o]n the one hand, deliberately losing weight by controlling diet involves the self-construction of a docile body through attention to the minutest detail. On the other hand, becoming aware of exactly how and what one eats and drinks, realizing that changing old patterns can have embodied effects, or setting a goal and moving towards it, are all enabling acts of self-transformation” (67). We cannot simply criticise such practices, says Heyes, without providing alternatives which fulfil a similar function. It is such alternatives which Astell seeks to provide.

Astell’s bodily technologies of the self are not aimed at the transgressive bodily existence which Foucault saw as a key site of resistance to domination (Oksala 2005). Furthermore, her attitude to the body is in tension with feminist approaches which emphasise the body’s value. Nonetheless, the practices and approaches to the body which she recommends can be viewed as valuable modes of resistance to custom, which demands huge amounts of time and energy from women to be spent on the body. By aiming to reduce women’s focus on their bodies and appearance, Astell hopes to free up their energy for alternative practices of the self. The body, for Astell, is simply something that is part of us in this life, but is not who we *really* are: even practices of the self aimed at establishing a positive relationship to the body are still drawing attention away from what really matters. Exercises concerning what is important form the bulk of Astell’s regimen for women, and it is those which I turn to next.

Askesis

In contrast to the limited bodily practices Astell advocates, she presents an extensive set of mental and emotional practices of the self throughout *A Serious Proposal*, particularly in Part II. These practices are situated in a framework of faculty psychology far from unique to Astell in this period: one in which the mind is composed of “two principal Faculties the Understanding and the Will” (*SP II*, 127). Each faculty, proposes Astell, is inclined to its own particular disease. The understanding is diseased by ignorance, and the will is

diseased by moral vice. Ignorance and vice are locked in a vicious circle: “Ignorance disposes to Vice, and Wickedness reciprocally keeps us Ignorant” (127). The practices which Astell advocates women undertake are aimed at rooting out these mental diseases, enabling women to achieve knowledge and virtue in their place.

The understanding is “the Capacity which we find in our selves of Receiving and Comparing Ideas” (205): in other words, the faculty which is associated with the activities of thinking and reasoning. The will, conversely, is “the Power of Preferring any Thought or Motion, of Directing them to This or That thing rather than to another” (205). This model is close to that offered by Descartes, in which the cause of our error is the inappropriate use of the will.⁴³ As we seek to extend and train the understanding, Astell advises, so should we seek to manage and govern the will. By doing so, women can achieve virtue and inner freedom.

In this section, I draw out four practices of the self which Astell advocates: meditation, the regulation of passions, the examination of representations, and sensory and worldly withdrawal. I argue that these constitute an *askesis*: a set of often austere practices aimed at achieving mastery over the self. On Astell’s account these practices function to assist women in achieving autonomy, and they can be understood as practices of freedom. At the same time, I draw them into dialogue with modern practices for women, considering their potential for feminist uptake today. My aim here is not to provide extensive accounts of Astell’s recommended practices but to outline them briefly before considering their purpose and significance.

Askesis is described by Foucault as “a practical training that was indispensable in order for an individual to form himself as a moral subject”, “not distinct from the practice of virtue itself” (Foucault, 1985, 77) in ancient Greek thought. In “the philosophical tradition dominated by Stoicism”, Foucault writes,

⁴³ “So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand.” (Descartes 1986, 40)

“*askesis* means ... the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained ... through the acquisition and assimilation of truth” (Foucault 1988b). *Askesis* in this sense, indissociable from virtue and mastery over the self, is a subset of practices of the self more broadly considered. While Foucault identifies two poles of *askesis* – meditation and exercise – and delineates the ancient concept in detail, my aim is not to force Astell into this precise framework. Rather, I want to use the broad idea of *askesis* to read Astell’s practices as forming a set of exercises aimed at self-mastery and autonomy.

Meditation

First, I want to pay attention to the practice of meditation as it appears in *A Serious Proposal*. Foucault identifies meditation as one of the two key poles of practices of the self in Stoic *askesis*. While the role of meditation for Astell is not the same as that identified by Foucault in Stoic philosophy, I want to argue that its presence points towards Astell’s practices of the self as constituting an *askesis* for women.

Meditation for Foucault is a self-reflexive practice of the self. The kind of meditation which Foucault identifies in Stoicism “is the work one undertook in order to prepare a discourse or an improvisation by thinking over useful terms and arguments” (Foucault 1988b). There are two categories of meditation in this *askesis*. First, “those that focus on the examination of the truth of what we think: keeping a watch on representations as they appear” (Foucault, 2005, 462), and secondly “those that test oneself as the subject of truth ... Am I really the ethical subject of the truth I know?” (Foucault, 2005, 463). As Foucault observes, this understanding of “meditation” is very different from ways in which the concept is commonly employed today. (Although a very close fit with how it was often understood in the seventeenth century, at the time of Astell’s writing.) Meditation in the modern Western world is frequently conceived as an *emptying* the mind of thought, or an acceptance

and detachment from any particular thoughts that arise, rather than a *training* or *exercise* of thought which might involve the careful examination of ideas.

Meditation is a recurrent recommendation throughout *A Serious Proposal*: “we learn how necessary it is to Retire and Meditate frequently” (*SP II*, 217), for instance, and certain faults of the mind can be remedied “by frequent and serious meditation” (160). For Astell, meditation is an exercise of thought which involves training the mind to attend to arguments in a certain way. The process of meditation is a difficult one: “deep Meditation is not so agreeable to our Animal Nature”, she writes, associating the practice with “Attention and strict Examination” (161).⁴⁴ Astell’s meditations include the categories which Foucault discusses in Stoic meditations: she wants women to examine the representations which appear to them, as discussed below. We also find meditations of the second sort Foucault refers to: “what remains for them to do at night but to review the Actions of the Day? to examine what Passions have been stirring? How their Devotions were performed? in what temper their Hearts are?” (*SP I*, 87). This is a reference to the practice of examination of conscience.

Astell writes that “[t]hat which we propose in all our Meditations and Reasonings is ... to deduce some Truth we are in search of, from such Principles as we’re already acquainted with” (*SP II*, 166), before outlining a system of reasoning drawn largely from the *Port Royal Logic* which is nothing else “but a Comparison of Ideas, and a deducing of Conclusions from Clear and Evident Principles” (167). The relationship between meditation and truth is found earlier on: “Thinking is a pain to those who have disus’d it, they will not be at the trouble of carrying on a thought, of pursuing a Meditation till it leads them into the confines of truth” (135). Through the practice of meditation, women equip themselves with the means to access truth. The advancement toward truth is one way in which Astell’s reader constitutes herself as an ethical subject: God, after all, is “the Fountain of Truth” (175), “the

⁴⁴ “Animal” here appears to refer to the non-rational, bodily component of our existence. Elsewhere Astell writes that “the Passions ... excite us any times to the Gratification of the Animal in prejudice of the Rational Nature” (*SP II*, 218), clearly setting the two in contrast.

Immutable Truth” (165), and “the GOD of Truth is ready to lead us into all Truth, if we Honestly and Attentively apply our selves to him” (163). Meditation leads the meditator towards truth and thus, towards God. Astell urges her readers “to be passionately in Love with Truth” (164), associating this practice with other moral transformations. By using Astell’s meditative technique, women will be put in touch with divine truth, which will assist them in becoming more virtuous people.

Astell advocates meditation for the improvement of the understanding *and* the regulation of the will, which will further transform the meditating subject: “did we calmly and deliberately Examine our Evidence”, Astell writes, “and how far those Motives we are acted by ought to Influence ... the Impetuosity of a warm Imagination wou’d be cool’d, and the extravagancies of a Disorderly one Regulated; we shou’d not be Deceiv’d by the Report of our Senses; the Prejudices of Education; our own Private Interest” (163). Regular meditation and practice of the “Contemplation of Truth” (*SP II*, 159) will aid a common problem in which women struggle to come up with ideas on topics they would like to consider, instead finding a “Contraction or Emptiness of Thought” (159). Meditation serves a similar function to the regular exercise of a muscle in the body which loosens it up and increase its capabilities: it enables the mind’s increased functioning. As Astell puts it, “the Use of our Powers improves and Encreases them” (175). We may have a concern here that by tempering and regulating the imagination while increasing the mind’s capabilities, Astell is presenting us with a quasi-disciplinary practice: one which subdues and renders docile while simultaneously improving capabilities in another regard.

A similar consequence of meditation is the prevention of “Rashness and Precipitation in our Judgments” (162): if meditators, “whenever they Meditate, be it on what Object it may ... fix their Minds stedily on it, not removing till it be throughly Examin’d” (162), their attention will be trained and improved. Meditation which involves “Attention and strict Examination” (161) will cultivate women’s intellectual capabilities so that they can combat the

“Prejudices of Education” to which, as we have already seen, Astell assigns a great deal of blame for women’s inferior condition.

As alluded to earlier, Sowaal identifies Astell’s meditative exercises as designed to help women avoid prejudice and custom and gain internal liberty. Sowaal is particularly interested in the “Women’s Defective Nature” prejudice, the false belief which women internalise concerning their own inadequacies: through the right kind of meditation, each woman will come to realise that “she was created by a wise God, who gave her a perfect nature ... This new understanding of metaphysics leads the meditator to improve herself” (Sowaal 2007, 239). Meditative practice becomes a feminist practice for Astell: it enables women to detach themselves from the detrimental teachings of custom and to care for their own selves. Furthermore, it provides them with what Astell refers to as “True Liberty”, which consists in “making a Right use of our reason, in preserving our Judgments Free and our Integrity unspotted, which sets us out of the reach of the most Absolute Tyrant” (CR, 195). While, after Astell’s practices of meditation, women may still be subject to domineering husbands, for instance, their “humanity ... integrity ... rationality remain out of reach” (Sowaal, 2017, 192): they have resisted the effects of domination on their self. They do this through a specific, intellectually rigorous, argumentative method.

What we often refer to as meditation today, while it takes a variety of forms, largely runs counter to Astell’s project of intellectual training. To take a popular example, the Headspace app offers audio mindfulness meditations of up to twenty minutes: the emphasis in these meditations is on letting thoughts come and go, assigning them no significance. Headspace uses the recurring metaphor of a blue sky which is always there behind the clouds that are thoughts, and reminds its listeners that “you are not your thoughts”.⁴⁵ Headspace and other forms of mindfulness meditation also propose that thoughts cannot really be controlled. When I have been taught mindfulness,

⁴⁵ This aspect of mindfulness has caused me some trouble when trying to practise it, as I find myself getting hung up on the issue of what I am if *not* my thoughts.

or used Headspace, I have been encouraged to accept my thoughts without dwelling on them: I am not supposed to put any strong effort into their direction.

Astell, conversely, advocates a rigid, rigorous exercise of thought. Indeed, some thoughts are to our detriment: “what a loss of Time and Study such irregular and useless Thoughts occasion, what a Reproach they are to our Reason, how they cheat us with a *shew* of Knowledge” (*SP II*, 162). These thoughts are not to be permitted to come and go as they will, but controlled and directed. Rather than conceptualising thoughts as things which pop up, more or less out of our control, and which have no bearing on who we “really” are, thoughts for Astell are deeply meaningful, and *what* we think can bear significantly on our moral constitution. We owe it to ourselves (as well as to God) to spend the time engaging in the difficult practice of argumentative meditation.

While Headspace, and other proponents of mindfulness meditation, offer freedom from “excessive rumination, anxiety, stress, and even depression” (Sellars 2017b, 6) through paying “attention to one’s immediate experience in place of one’s thoughts” (7), Astell provides women with internal freedom through a rigorous practice of intellectual training.⁴⁶ This kind of meditation can, and should, tame an unruly imagination, inappropriate passions, or racing thoughts, and provide in their place a steady progression towards important truths. For Astell, this intellectual rigour is of immense value in rectifying the damage done to women by custom and prejudice: it is the rigorous training which frees them from the bonds of custom.

Regulation of the passions

As well as improving intellectual capabilities and self-knowledge, meditation also functions to regulate the passions.⁴⁷ While we would all like to have a

⁴⁶ For an analogous comparison between modern mindfulness practices and Roman Stoic meditation practices, see Sellars (2017b).

⁴⁷ While it is important to note that the early-modern framework of the “passions” does not straightforwardly translate to the modern understanding of “emotions”, nor are they

“most desirable Temper ... the very top of Human Felicity” (209), we are often “under the power of quite contrary Inclinations and Relishes” (209-210) which obstruct the attainment of happiness. To rectify this, Astell suggests, “somewhat must be done by way of Meditation and somewhat by way of Exercise” (210).

Exercise, or *gymnasia*, is the second pole of Stoic *askesis* on Foucault’s reading. While meditation “trains thought, gymnasia is training in a real situation, even if it has been artificially induced” (Foucault 1988b). The key exercises which Foucault identifies in Stoicism are practices of “sexual abstinence, physical privation, and other rituals of purification” (Foucault 1988b). For Astell, exercise entails the management of the relationship between the soul and the body which results in passions: “in governing Animal Impressions, in directing our Passions to such Objects, and keeping ’em in such a pitch, as right Reasons requires” (*SP II*, 214). While passions are “natural and unavoidable, and useful too” (214), “we suffer ’em too often to get the Mastry of the Mind” (214). Exercise, then, consists of Astell’s readers not extirpating, but governing, their passions so that “we do not live like Machines, but like Reasonable Creatures” (215).⁴⁸ This is a primary route towards autonomy: if we are under the sway of our passions, we are “likely to adopt false prejudices and to habitually perpetuate damaging customs” (Sowaal 2017, 178). Once free from the dominion of the passions, we can form our beliefs, and govern our behaviour, rationally instead.

Astell’s approach to the passions, and the relationship between passions and autonomy on her account, has been extensively covered in the literature. Broad, for instance, discusses the short- and long-term “technique[s] of governance” (Broad 2015, 105) for regulating the passions which Astell advocates, while Sowaal (2017) carefully explicates how the training of the passions leads to internal liberty – “a form of freedom that not only leads to emancipation and self-determination but also allows [women] to no longer

unrelated. When considering the place of Astell’s practices in a modern context, I will be considering them in relation to the emotions, as a reasonably close analogue.

⁴⁸ For extensive detail on Astell’s position on governing the passions, see Broad 2015, 84-106.

experience external constraints as limiting” (191). I do not intend to retread ground on this topic: rather than providing a new account of Astell’s framework, I am interested in situating it in the context of practices of the self and asking what value it might have for us today.

As Apetrei remarks, the denigration of the passions and the elevation of reason is often regarded with much suspicion among feminist scholars. We see here a similar concern to that raised earlier regarding Astell’s devaluation of the body, that Astell is participating in a mode of Enlightenment rationalism which “[reinforces] perceptions of corrupting sensuality in the female and mental discipline in the male” (Apetrei 2010, 107). In a modern context, too, women are frequently positioned as over-emotional in relation to men, and are often dismissed due to the strength or expression of their emotions. Practices which encourage women to suppress, restrain or retrain their emotions may be understood as conceding too much to a purportedly masculinist tradition of “reason and logic which is opposed to desire, emotion and the bodily” (Green 1995, 23).⁴⁹ Furthermore, O’Grady identifies a cultural tradition in which “there are many incitements for women to monitor rigorously their own thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions to ensure conformity to accepted rules or the approval of others”, which “can result in a strict overseer type of relation to the self that precludes spontaneity and diminishes possibilities for self-fashioning” (O’Grady, 2004, 96). Monitoring and governing one’s passions or emotions so as not to be overcome by them may seem to encourage this overseer relation to the self.

I want to suggest, however, that practices of observing and managing the emotions may be of feminist value. By situating women’s passions and prejudices in the context of custom, Astell points to how social environments can affect and warp emotional responses. Despite the popular motto in online circles that “your emotions are always valid”, those emotions are inevitably structured by the systems of power which create the subject. In this context,

⁴⁹ Karen Green herself is not here aiming to challenge the role of reason: quite the opposite. Rather, she is providing a concise account of those feminists who do reject the supremacy of reason.

emotions such as despair and unhappiness in response to weight gain, or emotional satisfaction in one's desirability to men, may be worth observing and retraining. If I am compelled to restrict my food intake due to misery at weight gain, I am not just unfree due to the internal tyranny of my emotional reactions, but also due to the misogynistic custom which keeps women chasing thinness. By freeing myself of those emotional reactions, and governing my actions through reason instead, I am freeing myself too from a misogynistic means of control over my body. We can link Astell's regulation of the passions through the use of reason to modern-day Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which works to diminish painful and unpleasant emotions through rational engagement with the thoughts which trigger and exacerbate those emotions. Astell's therapy, however, is explicitly aimed at women's liberty: internal in one regard, but liberty nonetheless from prejudice and custom which stem from external sources.

Examination of representations

I have already referred to the examination of representations as one component of meditation as Foucault understands it in antiquity. This practice is particularly prominent in the writing of Epictetus, who refers to "the most excellent faculty of all ... the power to deal rightly with our impressions" (Epictetus 1995, 1.1.7.) and argues that "both good and evil rest essentially in the proper use of impressions" (2.1.4). Epictetus "requires that one adopt an attitude of constant supervision of representations that may come to mind" (Foucault 2005b, 503). The use we make of our assent to the representations, or *phantasiai*, which appear to us is a profoundly ethical concern, and on A.A. Long's interpretation is bound up intimately with the self.⁵⁰ "It is representations that provide selves with the viewpoints which they can accept as appropriate to who they are, or reject as inappropriate," (A.A. Long 1996, 282) he argues. While Astell's use of attention to and examination of our representations does not conform in detail to the Stoic account, she

⁵⁰ *Phantasiai* are, for the Stoics, "representations, appearances of something to me" (A.A. Long 1996, 270).

nonetheless incorporates a Stoically influenced version among her practices of the self. Her version of examination of representations has epistemological and moral components.

In Part II of *A Serious Proposal*, Astell presents the examination of representations as part of her epistemology. An “idea” for Astell is “that which represents to the Mind some Object distinct from it, whether Clearly or Confusedly” (*SP II*, 168), and she urges women to “examine accurately those notices which are most vividly represented to us” (156). In fact, “if we Know not Truly what is thus represented to our Minds we know nothing” (168). Astell here emphasises the necessity of examining representations of the external world for the sake of gaining knowledge.

A related but less epistemological process is advocated in Part I of *A Serious Proposal*. Astell repeatedly presents the notion that many of our representations are false and superficial: worthless appearances in comparison to what is truly of value. The practice of examining our impressions or representations becomes a tool to distinguish between real value and false value: “Whence is it but from ignorance, from a want of understanding to compare and judge of things, ... that we quit the Substance for the Shadow, Reality for Appearance?” (*SP I*, 64), she asks. “Take care”, she cautions, “that cheating Hucksters don’t impose upon you with deceitful Ware” (52). Here, the examination of representations is not an epistemological practice aimed at distinguishing and clarifying correct ideas. It is instead a broader ethical approach aimed at distinguishing between things of value and things which only appear to be of value.

There is a link between the practices of Part I and Part II: in Part II, Astell also urges women to examine their “Ideas of Morality” (170-171), particularly those ideas which stem from “the Opinions and Practices of the World” (171). By examining the moral ideas represented to them by custom and popular opinion, women can gain accurate moral knowledge, just as examining the

ideas of – for instance – the external world represented to them by perception, they can gain accurate knowledge of the world around them.

Astell's use of these practices is particularly interesting due to the gendered effects she once again identifies. She refers to being “either too much elated or depress'd by the representations of the [Glass]” (*SP I*, 52): of women being delighted or dismayed by their appearance as represented to them in a mirror. The “representations” referred to here are not as the epistemological concept of Part II. They are nonetheless representations of something which is customarily considered to hold value, and which if properly examined will be seen to hold no such value. Astell contends that “a serious reflection” will diminish women's emotional reactions to their physical appearances.⁵¹ This brings us back to the management of the passions: on Foucault's reading of Epictetus, we “must know whether or not we are affected or moved by the thing represented and what reason we have for being or not being so affected” (Foucault 2005b, 503). Epictetus also cautions his hearers not to place too much value in the representations of their physical appearance: “you yourself are not your flesh and hair, but your choice” (Epictetus 1995, 3.1.40.). Astell takes up this notion and points to its acute relevance for women of her time.

Astell's description of women being “elated or depress'd” by mirror representations strikes a chord: I have experienced both feelings all too often when gazing at my “Glass”. Astell calls women to reflect on these representations and to judge whether they are of genuine significance, or merely “Shadow” and “Appearance”. The same goes for wealth and fine things: considering a “poor Young Lady”, Astell remarks “no wonder that her tender Eyes are dazled with all the Pageantry; and wanting Judgement to pass a due Estimate on them ... longs to be such a fine and celebrated thing as they!” (*SP I*, 69). Practising attention to our impressions, particularly sensory impressions, will train women's judgement, teach them to understand what really matters and avoid the warping effects of prioritising appearance and wealth.

⁵¹ A pun, perhaps.

Withdrawal

Next, I want to discuss Astell's practices of withdrawal: withdrawal from material things, the evidence of the senses, and the hustle and bustle of everyday distractions. She advocates that we "withdraw our selves as much as possible from Corporeal things, that pure Reason may be heard the better" (*SP II*, 164), and not to depend on the senses' "Testimony in our Enquiries after Truth" (164) in order to aid the understanding. To cure the "Volatileness of Thought" which afflicts some people, those who "thro an immoderate nimbleness of Thinking skip from one Idea to another, without observing due Order and Connexion" (160), she is insistent that we "must therefore withdraw our Minds from the World, from adhering to the Senses, from the Love of Material Beings, of Pumps and Gaieties; for 'tis these that usually Steal away the Heart, that seduce the Mind to such unaccountable Wandrings" (161). While Astell does not appear to endorse renunciation of the self, her meditative practices do aim towards the renunciation of the everyday material world. Many of her meditative arguments conclude by emphasising the need to "render Spiritual and Future things as Present and Familiar as may be, and to withdraw as much as we can from sensible Impressions" (*SP II*, 217). Her external practices also tend to this end: Astell emphasises "how much it becomes us to keep out of the way of Theatrical Shows and inordinate Merriments, and not so much as to enter into a Parley with those Pumps and Vanities we renounc'd in our Baptism" (217). Astell is advocating an *askesis* which works on the real self, the mind, while simultaneously renouncing and withdrawing from the everyday world of the senses. This is in keeping with her Platonist tendencies: Apetrei, for instance, situates Astell in "the second generation of English Platonists which ... took refuge in the more spiritualist and ascetical aspects of their tradition" (Apetrei 2010, 105).

For Astell, this ascetic resistance to the material world and sensory distractions benefits women specifically. It is through withdrawal from the world that women can "form in their Minds adequate conceptions of the End and Dignity of their Natures" (*SP II*, 126). By turning away from the outside

world, women can shield themselves from the detrimental effects of custom and the prejudices which it inculcates. Thus the asceticism which Apetrei believes “has, in recent times, become a symbol of anti-feminism” (Apetrei 2010, 107) opens itself up to feminist possibilities.

Practices of withdrawal should not be conflated with the separatism discussed in Chapter One. Whereas we can conceive of all-female separatism which relishes in the sensory, material world, even while detaching from mainstream customs and activities, withdrawal requires both more and less than this. It requires more than forming an association with other women: it requires a detachment from sensory distractions and entertainments in favour of cultivating the mind and the tools of reason. Women can also, however, practise this withdrawal apart from being in a separate milieu: it is always possible to practise detachment from sensory pleasures and focus on intellectual, spiritual matters instead.

We may conceive of withdrawal as a feminist practice of liberation. Vintges draws on Foucault’s ethical work to recommend a universalist feminist ethics based on practices of the self, specifically freedom practices. These practices revolve around providing alternative modes of living to that which is considered normal. The withdrawal from the world which Astell advocates women undertake is a practice which removes their real selves from the everyday world of sexist bad custom: the custom which is key in the warping of women’s selves. Whereas women of the class whom Astell is addressing are usually engaged with their dresses, “Intrigues” (*SP II*, 123), love affairs or their estates, all of which tend to their self-debasement, Astell’s counsel of withdrawal removes them from this way of life. Renouncing the world may belong to a Christian ascetic tradition which Foucault disavows, but it is also part of a tradition from which many women have historically drawn strength and comfort.⁵² The renunciation of the everyday, material world, after all, is the renunciation of a misogynistic, patriarchal society.

⁵² See for example Burrus 1994, who argues that “[w]ithin the texts of the ancient Christian ascetic movement we can ... detect signs of women gaining control over their bodies and

The notion of worldly withdrawal as a feminist practice feels at odds, however, with a recurring modern mode of feminism aimed at bringing women out of the “private sphere” of the home and into the public sphere – whether that be the workplace or the political arena. Susan Moller Okin criticised Western political thinkers in whose work “the existence of a distinct sphere of private, family life, separated off from the realm of public life, leads to the exaggeration of women’s biological differences from men, to the perception of women as primarily suited to fulfil special ‘female’ functions within the home, and consequently to the justification of the monopoly by men of the whole outside world” (Okin 2013, 274–75): Astell’s practices of withdrawal for women indeed seem to leave men the outside world, with women seeking their pleasures in their private contemplations.

We may, furthermore, feel a resistance to Astell’s rejection of sensory pleasures, particularly if we are not convinced by her Christian Platonism. Nor is this an exclusively modern concern: Astell’s contemporary Damaris Masham, arguing against Malebranche and John Norris, and potentially responding to Astell, is scathing of the notion that we should retreat from society. She points to Jesus’s example, “Eating and Drinking, Conversing in the World like other Men” (Masham 1696, 123), arguing that human nature is fitted to social activity and engagement with the world. In Masham’s *Discourse*, the notion of disengagement and withdrawal is rejected out of hand.

There is, nonetheless, value to be found in Astell’s practices. While we may not want to dismiss the evidence and the pleasures of the senses, her advocacy of societal withdrawal, and withdrawal from the entertainments the world has to offer, is worth thinking through. In a modern context, we may consider how

sexualities” (32). In relation to medieval women mystics, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that their asceticism regarding food served to help women “gain control over self as well as circumstance”, and that through “fasting, women internalized as well as manipulated and escaped patriarchal familial and religious structures” (Bynum 1987, 298). For a study of female ascetics in late antiquity, see Elm 1994. A more oblique and quasi-poetic account of the meaning of female mysticism and asceticism is given by Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985).

rife much entertainment is with messages which contribute to women's warped sense of self. I am thinking of films and television shows which present stereotyped or sexualised images of women, or which contain narratives about what women should be interested in – such as heterosexual romance and marriage, being desirable to men, beauty, or fashion. Engagement with certain forms of social media can also be detrimental to women's selves: Instagram, for instance, frequently presents idealized images of thin, fit, women living in luxurious environments. Dominant media messages which reinforce the desirability of wealth and beauty can misdirect women's efforts, distracting them – as Astell would have it – from what *really* matters. Nor do such messages only appear in cultural products or social media: even one's social group, and casual day-to-day conversations, can have such effects. The male friend who tells a rape joke, or the female friends who talk about dieting constantly, can all affect the self.

Even aside from prejudices which can be internalised through engagement with entertainment and the social world, I also concur with Astell that these things can be detrimental to focusing on the self, and gaining autonomy through contemplation. In my own experience, it is easy to be absorbed in external distractions, and for those external distractions to make the sustained application of thought harder. So much is not especially controversial, but Astell relates this observation to gender: if women are not able to exercise their thought and engage in the practices we have been discussing, they will continue to be under the sway of custom and their passions.

I suggest that deliberately turning away from some social, material things can be a feminist practice today. By choosing not to engage in the ever-increasing torrent of media and social activity, whether on a short- or long-term basis, women can choose to distance themselves from those things which tell them they are inadequate without a male partner or a child, that their value lies in the shape of their bodies, that they should cover their faces with pigment to be attractive. This may be an austere and a difficult practice – and not one which

I have successfully practised myself - but that alone does not make it less worthwhile.

Astell, *askesis* and practices of freedom

I explained earlier how many feminist readings of Foucauldian practices of the self emphasise transgression, free creativity, and the attempt to “give to one’s own life a certain form” (Foucault, 1990, 49) which is, on the surface, in tension with Astell’s project. Astell prescribes a set of practices for women and, while encouraging women’s self-development, does so along a given path. In contrast to the bodily freedom practices often drawn on by Foucauldian feminists, Astell favours the mind, and mental practices, over the body and advocates withdrawal from the sensory world. McNay’s reading of Foucault “brings to light certain similarities between the ancient practices of caring for the self favored by Foucault and those that characterize self-policing” (O’Grady, 2004, 103). There is certainly a concern that Astell’s practices of the self are in fact practices of these kind. Even while rejecting certain culturally prescribed practices of the self, Astell nonetheless does not encourage creative self-fashioning, focusing instead on rules for thinking and achieving specific goals.

I want to make a case for the feminist benefits of a constrained, self-controlled *askesis* such as that Astell offers. This is a mode of *askesis* which can be found in Foucault alongside the overtly creative, transgressive practices of the self often emphasised by interpreters. Heyes, in her illuminating Foucauldian analysis of Weight Watchers, points to the “importance of method, structure, and consistency to any disciplinary project”, suggesting that “achieving greater freedom often involves discipline” (Heyes, 2007, 88). Vintges, similarly, pushes back against the interpretation of Foucault as “arguing for a life beyond any identity and beyond any subject form”, suggesting instead that the subject as construed by Foucault’s later work “is not the nomadic self that goes beyond identity” but that Foucault’s ethical work is “in fact a plea for a certain ethical coherence of the self” (Vintges, 2004, 285). McLaren too points towards “the

formation of an ethical subject formed through practices of the self and care of the self" (McLaren, 2004, 227). We can read this move towards order and coherence as a counterpoint to the creative, fluid self also found in Foucault. Such ethical coherence is, I suggest, what Astell wants her readers to strive towards: coherence which women usually lack due to the effects of social custom and miseducation.

This notion of ethical coherence and form appears most forcefully in *The Christian Religion*, in which Astell remarks first that there is nothing "so Lovely nor consequently so Reputable, as a Life that's all of a Piece" (CR, 226), and then, shortly after, that "tho' our Actions are Innocent, or even Useful, if they are not suitable to our Persons and Character, they lose their Beauty, they merit Blame and not Praise. It is ... the fitness and proportion that renders things valuable; where this is wanting in the works of Nature we call them Monstrous, and Art is nothing else but a result of due proportions" (230). This is an explicit statement from Astell that our actions should partly have art and beauty as their end. A similar theme arises in *A Serious Proposal*, where Astell comments that unless our actions have "some End", "Life ... is a disproportionate unseemly thing, a confused huddle of broken, contradictory Actions" (SP II, 142). Earlier, she comments on women who are governed primarily by their emotional impulses, writing that "there is no Beauty and order in their lives" (SP I, 71). By following the ordered regimen which she recommends, Astell's readers will be able to constitute themselves as ethically coherent subjects, rather than subject to whims and fancies.

By considering *A Serious Proposal* through the lens of *askesis*, we see *askesis* emerge as a set of practices which can function as freedom practices for women. Although Astell's practices appear restricted and narrow, especially in the light of Foucault's emphasis on "a style of liberty" and an "aesthetics of existence" (Foucault, 1990, 49), they in fact function to liberate women both from internal tyrannies of fluctuating emotions and sexist conditioning and from the external effects of sexist power structures. It is the austerity and regularity of Astell's regimen which encourages women towards the rationality

which will help free them from internalised misogynistic prejudices and custom. Astell's *askesis* works as a reminder that aesthetic practices of individual self-creation and self-becoming are not the only practices of the self which can function as freedom and resistance practices: a more constrained path can offer an alternative model of living for women, grant them internal freedom and autonomy, and resist the effects of custom.

Practising the self today

Withdrawing from the world of the senses, creating oneself as an ethically coherent subject, or practising the art of reasoning: these are not practices frequently advocated in mainstream modern feminism. Reading Astell, however, I am drawn to the idea that a rigorously structured set of practices could provide women with an autonomy sometimes overlooked by popular feminist discourse.

I am revising this chapter in a pandemic-induced lockdown, where most of us are compelled to withdraw from the world outside and our normal social behaviours. In such a context, it is thought-provoking to reconsider Astell's advocacy of practices of withdrawal and retreat. For her, perhaps, isolation should be conceived less as a burden and more as an opportunity to attend to the real self, cocooned from the influence of custom. Coincidentally, *The Guardian* recently published an article titled "The truth about self-care: how isolation has changed the way I look after myself" (2020), in which Eleanor Morgan explains how enforced isolation has encouraged her to develop activities which make her feel good, such as cooking or discovering wildlife on Hampstead Heath. I am interested in how the forced practices of withdrawal have affected women in particular.

On the one hand, we might wonder if withdrawal from the widespread gaze of others and from social activity has enabled women to reject disciplinary expectations regarding their bodies and appearances. There has been an

increase in women shaving their heads as a result of the lockdown.⁵³ This is partly due to the sudden lack of professional haircuts, but I venture that it may also represent a challenge to femininity as constructed through long hair. Women who were worried that they did not have the “right” shape of face for short hair before have abandoned such worries.

However, I have also observed an increase in online conversations about weight: both about the fear of gaining weight during a lockdown, and from those who push back against such fears. Even though we are less available to the eyes and judgements of others, many women are afraid of their bodies changing in supposedly undesirable ways during this time. The ability to connect to exercise classes online provides a new avenue for women to discipline their bodies through exercise even while isolated from day-to-day society. Whereas for Astell, withdrawing to one’s home or closet could effectively shield a woman from most of the world of distraction that awaited outside, we today are faced with mediums of custom (such as films and television programmes) being provided to us in our bedrooms.

This enforced withdrawal may illuminate the challenge of Astell’s practices, and return us to the benefits of separation discussed in Chapter One. For those, particularly women, who have children, live in cramped or busy dwellings, have been given new domestic burdens such as preparing family meals every day, or are trapped in abusive partnerships, a compulsory withdrawal from the world may not serve as a freedom practice so much it serves as a withdrawal *into* the equally oppressive domestic sphere. We are faced with the reality that, however appealing we find Astell’s set of practices of the self, they may not always or even often be possible to enact. Furthermore, the possibility of enacting them may reveal aspects of class and wealth privilege which we do not want to endorse.

⁵³ My source for this is the sheer number of women I have seen on Twitter or Instagram posting pictures of their newly shaved heads, including friends of mine. Admittedly this may not be representative of the population in general.

Conclusion

Heyes writes that “[t]hinking ourselves differently is important, but even more so is practicing ourselves into something new; I value the ascetic effort over the intellectual struggle for self-knowledge” (Heyes, 2007, 9). I have argued that Astell presents a programme for women with precisely this goal in mind: a set of practices aimed at implementing care for the self, which will transform women’s selves and reverse the harmful effects of custom.

Astell’s practices aim at self-mastery and self-control, and might appear to be disciplinary, replicating practices of surveillance and reinforcing sexist messages. Certainly, they seem a far cry from the playful creativity of the practices which Foucault advocated and practised, and the kinds of practice taken up by feminist appropriators of Foucault. Nonetheless, they can be read as feminist practices of freedom in the context of the custom against which Astell so frequently rails. Furthermore, they suggest strategies which women today could usefully consider, such as practices of body-neutrality, management of emotions, and meditative exercises. However, their implementation may be difficult according to women’s varied circumstances: following an *askesis* is not easy. Serious thought needs to be given to the accessibility of feminist practices of the self, and their suitability in different contexts.

There are other concerns about the nature of Astell’s practices which have yet to be addressed. Firstly, there is the worry that focusing feminist activity around practices of the self is individualist, failing to account for the importance of coalitional and communal activity. Secondly, we might be concerned that an emphasis on practices of the self, aimed at transforming the self, leaves serious external, systemic problems unresolved. These issues will be addressed in Chapter Four, when I consider the self and others. For now, I turn to consider a key practice of the self for Foucault and for Astell: philosophy itself.

Chapter Three

Philosophy as practice of the self: spirituality and critique⁵⁴

This chapter concerns philosophy as a feminist practice, and I had intended to begin it with some reflections on my own relationship to philosophy as a woman who has studied it academically for nine years. And yet, while the rest of the chapter has been relatively painless to write, I reach a barrier here. I have much to say about philosophy as such, and can articulate the effects that doing philosophy has had on my self, but the experience of practising philosophy *as a woman* is more elusive. I am alert to, and challenge, the writing out of women from the history of philosophy, or the predominance of male speakers on panels and at conferences, but these are problems which I am not conscious of having affected my own philosophical activity. I have not felt that doing philosophy has either conflicted with my feminism and my gender, nor that it is particularly significant to those things. Perhaps this is due to my own loose relationship to gender itself: my being a woman has a somewhat abstract, contingent feeling for me, rather than constituting any significant component of my identity.

That said, the practice of philosophy has played a significant part in my ethical and political self-development. Not as a woman specifically, but as a person, philosophy has been that which has shown me new possibilities, which has knocked down old assumptions and built tentative new struts in their place. It is this capacity of philosophy to transform the self which I attend to in this chapter, showing how Astell presents a model of philosophy which does precisely that.

⁵⁴ A condensed version of an earlier draft of this chapter was published in *Metaphilosophy* (2020) under the title “Philosophy as a Feminist Spirituality and Critical Practice for Mary Astell”. The article also draws on material from Chapter One of this thesis, concerning Astell and care of the self.

My own experience aside, the relationship between women and philosophical practice has been historically fraught. For some thinkers, there is a tension between being a woman and being a philosopher; a tension born not of any inability on women's part to engage in the rational discourse often identified with philosophy, but of the frequent sexism of philosophical discourse and how it has been structured to exclude women from participation. Michèle Le Doeuff has articulated and interrogated this concern throughout her work, writing in her own case that "I am a woman, philosophy is my trade, chosen partly because I am a woman, and yet there is a tension between these two things" (Le Doeuff 1991, 11). She identifies more specifically a potential conflict between *feminism* and philosophy: while "the project of philosophy and that of feminist thinking have a fundamental structure in common", it is still the case that "to be a feminist and a philosopher may generate a contradiction" (29, 31). This fundamental structure is that of "self-assertion through thought, or the individual withdrawal from generally held beliefs" (29), a notion which we will return to: the insistence of the validation of one's beliefs (which may be different from those which are widespread) by the use of thought and reason. The contradiction, on the other hand, is that "behind [philosophy] lies a long and weighty tradition of conniving in that oppression [of women] by either giving conceptual support to the alienation of women that it finds already constituted, by proclaiming the exclusion of women from the ranks of the learned or by managing to kill two birds with one stone" (45). In the first case, philosophers observe or encounter women's oppression and justify it using philosophical tools, while in the second they provide reasons why women themselves cannot use those same tools.

McWhorter is similarly conflicted regarding the practice of philosophy as a woman and a feminist, although for a different reason. For her, feminism's call to "affirm my identity as a woman" is in "terrible tension" with what she understands philosophy as being: "a lifelong activity of self-formation, which implies that the self is not a static entity awaiting recovery" (McWhorter 2004, 156). McWhorter's definition of philosophy here is an unusual one, but for

both Le Doeuff and McWhorter the question is pertinent as to whether one should practise philosophy as a woman or a feminist: whether philosophy can benefit women, or whether it is in tension with feminist self-assertion. For Le Doeuff, philosophy “is like military life: either you think it is a good thing, and in that case you should be pleased to see women in West Point and other military academies, or you think it despicable and support conscientious objectors” (Le Doeuff 1991, 2).

So should women wear white feathers in the field of philosophy? In this chapter I use a late-Foucauldian understanding of philosophy as a practice, a critique and a spirituality to argue that in Astell’s hands philosophy becomes a feminist practice of liberation and self-transformation. Philosophy is one of the techniques of the self advocated throughout *A Serious Proposal*, and a practice which enables women to disentangle themselves from the snares of custom and domination. I first explain what philosophy is taken to be for both Foucault and Astell. I then apply Foucault’s framework to Astell’s texts, showing how philosophy functions for her as a practice and a spirituality. Following this, I show how Astell genders the practice of philosophy, and examine its critical and liberatory role. Where Astell scholarship perhaps falls short is in recognising Astell’s philosophy not just as something which, through its arguments, can lead women to certain conclusions which assist them in development, but as being *in itself* a transformative practice. It orients women towards truth and away from the world of custom. The final section of the chapter reflects on the extent to which feminists should take up philosophy as part of our practice.

Foucault on philosophy

Key to this discussion is the question of what philosophy is, whether for Astell, for Foucault, or more generally. Understandings of Foucault’s account of philosophy vary: he has been interpreted as advocating philosophy as a way of life, in line with Pierre Hadot’s thought, which is constituted *by* certain practices; on the other hand, his conception of philosophy has also been

understood as *itself* a practice, one of many possible techniques of the self. I will articulate an account of Foucault's conception of philosophy as this chapter continues: what is important to understand from the outset is that for Foucault – and, I argue, for Astell – philosophy is something beyond a rational discourse that aims at establishing an inert truth.

Earlier in his career, Foucault primarily understood – and disparaged – philosophy as an academic discipline which attempts “to dictate the good, imposing ... theories and concepts on others” (McWhorter 2016, 24–25), a disengaged activity to be contrasted with political activism. In the late 1970s, he began to reconceptualise philosophy as something which, far from being a static academic discipline, could be a vital component of self-transformation and an ethical, political existence. This new understanding of “philosophy” is rich, and has been elaborated by many scholars.⁵⁵ There are a few key aspects of it I want to highlight. Firstly, philosophy's role as a practice of the self. Secondly, philosophy as a spirituality. Thirdly, philosophy as “critique”: an unravelling of the world around us. Finally, philosophy's relationship to freedom.

We can contrast this conception of philosophy which Foucault both develops in his own work and identifies as a specific historical tradition with philosophy as “a primarily intellectual activity aiming for the discovery of truth in the form of propositional and systematic knowledge” (Raffnsøe, Thaning, and Gudmand-Høyer 2018, 48). This is the kind of philosophy of which, in his earlier work, Foucault was so dismissive. As with his account of critical, transformative philosophical practice, he puts forward an historical narrative of philosophy as purely cognitive activity, locating its genesis in “the Cartesian moment”, continuing from “Leibniz to Husserlian phenomenology and analytic philosophy” (48). In this tradition, the subject's access to truth is independent of any transformation of the subject: rather, “such as he is, the subject is capable of truth” (Foucault 2005b, 19). In other words, the person who philosophises can do so from the outset: they do not need to work on

⁵⁵ See in particular Raffnsøe, Thaning, and Gudmand-Høyer 2018, O'Leary 2002.

their self before they can attain the truth. This contrasts with the spiritual model of philosophy, soon to be elaborated, in which the self of the philosophising subject is implicated in the philosophy itself. Setting aside Foucault's somewhat problematic treatment of Descartes, the point is the broad division between philosophy as a cognitive activity aimed at acquiring knowledge and philosophy as transformative, critical and lived. I contend that Astell can be situated in the latter tradition, and that her use and advocacy of philosophy is part of her feminist project.

When considering Foucault's thoughts on the nature of philosophy, we might continue to be troubled by thoughts about the meaning of philosophy for women: for Foucault, the figure of the philosopher seems always to be male. This can be partly explained, but not wholly justified, by the ancient models on which he draws, in which, as he presents the case, the philosopher is a free *man*. We can recall his remarks on the gendered nature of the ethics of care of the self. For Astell, however, philosophy is a practice for women to take up, which provides them with a mode of freedom.

Astell and philosophy

I turn now to how Astell uses and advocates the use of philosophy, primarily in *A Serious Proposal*. In this discussion, I am not restricting myself to what Astell herself would have labelled philosophy, and so I am not so concerned with her explicit deployment of the word. I am asking instead if and how practices we can recognise as philosophical are instantiated in Astell's writing, and how they function as feminist practices.

We do find explicit references to and discussions of philosophical practice by Astell. It is something that she largely recommends. It would be in our present and future interest, she writes, to "Search after and to Follow Truth ... with all that Candor and Ingenuity which becomes a true Philosopher as well as a good Christian" (*SP II*, 187). Although she believes that "Philosophical Truths are not open to every Inquirer" (138), due both to the intrinsic differences in capability for rational thought that exists between minds and to the lack of leisure time

possessed by many, she has a harsh retort to those who argue that “the only thing necessary is to be good Christians, and we may be that without being Philosophers” (201). She grants that we may indeed, but this alone “can never excuse the Sloth and Stupidity of those who have both [time and capacity]” (201) to philosophise. A woman who says she has no time to develop her rational capacities through philosophical thinking “must not pretend to be a fine Lady ... but be content to herd amongst the Drudges of the World who eat Their Bread in the Sweat of their Brows,” while the woman who says she lacks the ability to think must be content “amongst the Fools and Idiots” (202).

Here we are brought sharply up against some of the limits of Astell’s feminist project: Astell is ready to use the threat of drudgery or intellectual incapacity as a rhetorical persuasive. Her elitism aside for now, the point is that philosophical activity, for women who *do* have the leisure and the ability, is an ethical duty. It’s one thing for the lower classes “to be content with Ignorance, or rather with a less degree of Knowledge” (202), but for her readers to “Chuse and Delight in’t ... shews our Disesteem of our Souls, our Contempt of GOD and the Talents he has given us, and exposes us to all the dreadful consequences of such a neglect” (202). Failing to philosophise, for those who *can* do it, is an ethical failure.

Astell’s understanding of philosophy in these passages is as an intellectual process: the use of reason to search after the truth. It might be tempting to read her as occupying the philosophical tradition that Foucault identifies as stemming from “the Cartesian moment”, one in which philosophy is a primarily intellectual activity. As I will demonstrate, however, the use of this rational method in Astell’s framework has considerable implications for the subject who practises it, as well as for her understanding of her social situatedness.

Philosophy as practice of the self

On Foucault’s account of ancient philosophy, practices of the self emerge from a philosophical context (Foucault 2005b). Of interest here, however, is the

specific role which philosophy plays as a practice of the self. He refers to philosophy as “all the work that has been done ... to become other than what one is” (Foucault 1997d, 327). In this formulation, philosophy is a reflexive practice which transforms the self that undertakes it. What distinguishes philosophy from other such practices of the self, I suggest, is its connection to thought, reason and truth.

Foucault links philosophy as a practice to the “care of the self”. Philosophy in its ancient form, he claims, was the “set of principles and practices available to one ... for taking proper care of oneself” (Foucault 2005b, 135–36). Elsewhere, we find “the identification of ‘practicing philosophy’ with ‘taking care of the soul’” (88). Admittedly the relationship is ambiguous and perhaps recursive: on the one hand, as observed, philosophy was a set of practices *for* taking care of the self; on the other, Foucault refers to “[having] to take care of oneself” as “a condition for gaining access to the philosophical life in the strict and full sense of the term” (9). Philosophy is connected to, but not identifiable *with*, care of the self.

There is a recognition across Astell scholarship that philosophy in Astell’s view serves for women to work on their selves. Sowaal describes philosophy as functioning for Astell’s ideal reader as “the tool that will lead her to develop her perfections” (Sowaal 2007, 239), while Kolbrener refers to a “philosophical method for the overcoming of imagination [and] passion” (Kolbrener 2007, 56). Broad too is at pains to urge that “[Astell’s] philosophy was purposively designed to bring about changes in the practical lives of women” (Broad 2015, 23). Philosophy’s function as a practice or a method to alter women’s lives is widely acknowledged, although not in the framework of practices of the self.

One of the passages most clearly demonstrating the role of philosophical thought as a transformative practice can be found in Part II of *A Serious Proposal*, and has already been referred to in the last chapter. Astell is advising her readers on the way to obtain the “most desirable Temper” (*SP II*, 209), with “a Sagacity of Understanding to discern readily what is best, but likewise with

such a Regularity of Will, as makes it even Hate and Abhor all evil ways” (209). To become as wise and self-controlled as Astell deems ideal, she recommends “somewhat ... by way of Meditation and somewhat by way of Exercise” (210). The meditation which she discusses consists of a rational consideration of several philosophical topics and their connection to each other. The subjects are “our own Nature, the Nature of Material Beings, and the Nature of GOD” (210). She begins by advising readers to “consider what we Are, that Humane Nature consists in the Union of a Rational Soul with a Mortal Body, that the Body very often Clogs the Mind in its noblest Operations” (210). From this dualist foundation, she continues by reminding us that we are “united in some measure to all who bear a Human Form” and encouraging us to “consider what are the proper Duties and Enjoyments of such a nature as ours” (210). If we meditated on all these things, Astell argues, and “were we so far at least Philosophers, as to be able to pass a due estimate on material Beings” and “not to prize them above their real value”, then “we shou’d not be long in discerning the good effects” (210). She expounds these good effects at length, considering each topic in turn.

By considering the arguments for dualism, “we shou’d be convinc’d that the Body is the Instrument of the Mind and no more, that it is of much Inferior Nature, and therefore ought to be ... ready on all occasions to serve the Mind” (210). It is through philosophical activity that women will “learn what is *truly* to love our selves [my italics]”: not to “pamper our Bodies” (211) but instead to subdue them to our minds. By considering our unity with a greater whole and our connectedness to each other, we will realise that we can never benefit ourselves by harming others. Finally, by noting that “we do not find intire Felicity in our selves, but ... are conscious of many wants which must be supply’d elsewhere”, we will be led to consider where those wants will be met, realise that it will not be in material beings, and instead be led to “that infinite Good which alone can satisfie us” (212): God. Once we start contemplating the divine appropriately – whether we consider “his Almighty Power; or ... the Spotless Purity of his Nature, ... his Infinite Goodness”, or “how much he has

done to render us capable of this Happiness even when we fled from it" (213) - we will find ourselves transformed. "All our Passions will be Charm'd, and every Inclination attracted!" (213), Astell exclaims.

Astell uses philosophy in this passage to contribute to the care of the self. It is by considering dualist arguments that women will understand what care for the self *really* consists in; that while "Self-Love as it is usually understood has a very ill Character and is the Root of Evil, yet rightly apply'd it is Natural and Necessary" (*SP II*, 211). If we read Astell as proposing an ethics of care of the self for women, then philosophy contributes to that care of the self in two ways: first, by providing women with the tools to understand what the self really is and what it means to care for it, and secondly by being *in itself* transformative. This latter point will be explored further in connection with spirituality.

So, among the practices of the self which Astell advocates in *A Serious Proposal* are techniques of rational thought and reflection which contribute to self-transformation and care of the self. It is these practices which focus on the use of reason and systematic reflection which I am identifying as philosophical, and they form a key part of Astell's regimen for women.

The impression one might get from such passages is of Astell as a conservative, rather than critical, thinker. She propounds a set of truths for her readers to consider, the expected result being that they will reach the same conclusions as her, to the same effect. The tenets she advocates may be unpalatable to many modern feminist readers, as discussed elsewhere: her insistence on the superiority of the rational mind over the body, for instance. Furthermore, the teleology of philosophical activity is, on Astell's account, a submission to the will of an all-powerful God: "We shall no more dispute his Will, nor seek exemption from it" (213). It could be argued that Astell is using philosophy to *reinforce*, rather than to interrogate and challenge, a central source of patriarchal authority in seventeenth-century England: the Church of England. This point will be taken up in more depth in Chapter Five. Returning to the last chapter's discussion of disciplinary practices of the self, however, the

worry is that under Astell's regimen philosophical practice will become a means for women to subdue their selves, bringing them into conformity with a potentially damaging mode of thinking. This is a reasonable concern, and one which I will address. First, however, I want to demonstrate the functioning of philosophy as a *spiritual* practice for Astell, its role as critique, and its usefulness as a freedom practice for women.

Philosophy as spirituality

Foucault identifies philosophy as, in some historical moments, belonging to a subset of practices of the self: the ethos or collection of practices he calls "spirituality". Foucault understands by spirituality "the subject's attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformations that the subject must carry out on itself to attain this mode of being" (Foucault 1997c, 294). Not all practices of the self constitute a spirituality, nor are all conceptions and modes of philosophy spiritual, but for Foucault philosophy *has been* intertwined with spirituality. This relationship too is linked back to care of the self, with Foucault asserting that "spirituality and philosophy were identical or nearly identical in ancient spirituality. In any case, philosophy's most important preoccupation centered around the self, with knowledge [*connaissance*] of the world ... serving, most often, to support care of the self" (Foucault 1997c, 294). For Foucault philosophy is a practice of the self which has historically been a spiritual practice aimed at caring for the self. The three concepts are, however, conceptually separable.

Spirituality, for Foucault, has three major characteristics, all of which are visible in *A Serious Proposal*: first, it "postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right" (15); instead, the subject must be transformed or altered in some way to attain the truth. Secondly, there must be "a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of asceticism" (16). Finally, "the truth is not just what is given to the subject, as reward for the act of knowledge" (16): rather, the truth itself, once attained, has further transformative effects on the subject. Prior to "the Cartesian moment",

Foucault suggests, philosophy and spirituality were inextricable: following this moment, the philosophical tradition of philosophy as purely cognitive activity, separate and separable from spirituality, emerged. In Foucault's own work, however, a spiritual dimension – particularly the work of the self on the self – is reincorporated into philosophical practice. In Astell too, I argue, philosophy as a process of rational thought is at the same time a spirituality.

Two points should be established. First, the term “spirituality” is in Foucault's analysis disconnected from any necessarily religious connotations, although in Astell's spirituality is in fact embedded within a Christian belief system. Secondly, the relationship between “spirituality” and practices of the self for Foucault is one in which “[n]ot every practice of the self is necessarily a form of spirituality, although every spirituality requires rigorous practices of the self” (C. Davidson 2015, 114): spirituality is a set of practices within “the quite general ethical category of practices, technologies, or care of the self” (114). The argument I am making is that Astell's use of philosophy goes beyond being a practice of the self and is specifically a form of spirituality.

First, on Astell's account her subject cannot access truth before being transformed. Admittedly, Astell proposes that “there are some degrees of Knowledge necessary before there can be *any Human Acts*” (*SP II*, 129); merely by virtue of possessing rationality a human being will also possess “the Rudiments of Knowledge” (128). There are some components of the truth that the subject does have right of access to inherently, by being a human subject. For instance, the principle “*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*” (129). Further access to the truth, however, is cloudy. When the subject, starting from that principle, goes on to ask *how* to perfect its being and become happy, “Our Reason is at first too weak, and afterwards too often too much sophisticated to return a proper Answer” (129). Without further work, the subject cannot get further than the initial self-evident principle. There are, in other words, conditions to knowledge.

Furthermore, these conditions are not of the sort Foucault identifies in Cartesian philosophy which are “either intrinsic to knowledge or extrinsic to the act of knowledge, but which do not concern the subject in his being” (Foucault, 2005, 18). Astell’s conditions, on the contrary, relate to the soul’s purity: “any eminent degree of Knowledge, especially of Mortal and Divine Knowledge ... can never be obtain’d without considerable degrees of Purity” (*SP II*, 131).⁵⁶ It is only by tackling “the Corruption of the Heart” (130), Astell proposes, that we can access truth; “the more Pure we are the clearer will our Knowledge be” (131). The first characteristic of spirituality is thus evident in *A Serious Proposal*.

Secondly, the *askesis*: a set of exercises designed at transforming the subject so that it can access the truth. I have already discussed Astell’s emphasis on working on the self, and the *askesis* which she presents in *A Serious Proposal*. She identifies the purpose of our life in this world as being “to pass our Probation, to Prepare our selves and be Candidates for Eternal Happiness”, something which can only be achieved “by Labour and Industry” (132). To free ourselves from prejudice and custom, we must put in “a good deal of Time and Pains, of Thought and Watchfulness to the rooting out of ill-habits, to the fortifying our Minds against foolish Customs” (141). This work by ourselves on ourselves is necessary to gain the purity of heart and clarity of understanding needed to access the truth. It is the “best Method for Improvement” (142), the details of this work, which Astell spends the bulk of Part II of *A Serious Proposal* elaborating.

The final characteristic of spirituality is recursivity; the truth must further transform the subject who has already been transformed in order to access it. This too is explicit in Astell’s conception of knowledge: “when we have procur’d a competent measure of both [knowledge and purity], they mutually assist each other; the more Pure we are the clearer will our Knowledge be, and the more we Know, the more we shall Purify” (*SP II*, 131). It is plain from this

⁵⁶ To be pure on Astell’s account is to be free of moral vice and wickedness: “Vice ... casts forth Vapours and Mists to darken the Soul and eclipse the clear light of Knowledge ... She then who desires a clear Head must have a pure Heart” (*SP II*, 127).

that the attainment of truth rebounds to modify the subject's soul further. Gaining knowledge is "Instrumental ... to the Salvation of our Souls ... A Great deal of Good will be omitted, and very much Evil, or Imperfection at least, stick to us" if we do not undergo "Meditation and the helps that study affords" (200) to access the truth. Furthermore, Truth is identified with God and divinity itself: "this All glorious Sun the Author of Life and Light is as inexhaustible a Source of Truth as he is of Joy and Happiness" (154), she writes. To access Truth is to encounter God, and "a Divine Sensation ... endues the Soul not only with a Sagacity of Understanding to discern readily what is best, but likewise with such a Regularity of Will, as makes it even Hate and Abhor all evil ways" (209). It is by accessing truth that we can reform ourselves into virtuous subjects.

Platonist influences are at play here. The Christian Neoplatonist Simon Patrick (1626-1707), for instance, was "convinced that a properly cultivated spirituality could offer a form of contemplative reunion with God" (Wilde 2013, 157), drawing on Plotinus as an expert on spiritual techniques which could facilitate this. Norris, with whom Astell corresponded, had connections with the Cambridge Platonists, who believed that "all the philosophical schools had arrived at truths which could be amalgamated with Christian teachings into a single, complete, and correct system" (37). In a Platonic framework, "[i]n order to ascend ... and finally be united with the divine, the human being must become purer and more knowing" (12).

In addition to Christian Platonist influences, the philosophical method which Astell proposes for women to learn to think is drawn from Cartesian methods generally and the Cartesian-influenced *Port Royal Logic* in particular. Her method as such, and her advocacy of philosophy as a means to transform the character, are not unique: in the work of Henry More and Nicolas Malebranche, for instance, we find close parallels.

More's *Account of Virtue* (1690) offers a similar project to Astell's. The "Work in Hand, was an honest Intention to excite the Minds of Men unto Virtue," he writes in the epistle to the reader. More acknowledges his debt both to "what

Des-Cartes in his *Definitions of the Passions* had done before him” and to “many of the Ancients”, citing throughout the work of Stoic philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. More’s Christian Platonism is evident throughout: “What Rational Creature is there, but must acknowledge, That Virtue has a participation with the Divine Nature?”. More’s work, like that of Astell, is embedded in a Christian Platonist framework which also draws from Stoic texts and Cartesianism. Malebranche, whom Astell repeatedly acknowledges as an influence, also insists that philosophy should be transformative when read in the right way. He criticises those who “read [Descartes’] works as fictions and romances, which are read for diversion and not meditated upon for instruction” (Malebranche 1997, 13). The aim of *The Search after Truth* is to “render the mind as perfect as it can naturally be, by supplying the help necessary to extend its scope and make it more attentive and by laying down the rules that it must observe” (408). Like Astell, Malebranche intends his readers to take up his method and apply it to themselves, becoming intellectually and ethically transformed as a result.

Throughout the early modern period there are many further instances of philosophy being presented as a route to self-transformation and constitution as an ethical subject.⁵⁷ Astell’s project is not unique in this regard, and simply provides another example of the mode of philosophy which Foucault identifies in the history of philosophy, and which continues more richly in the early modern period than he acknowledges. Astell, however, advocates philosophy as a transformative practice to women. It is her use of philosophy as a critical *feminist* practice which I now address.

Philosophy as critique

Philosophy for Foucault is inextricable from “critique”: “the task of philosophy as a critical analysis of our world is something that is more and more important,” and perhaps “the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time, and what we are, in this very moment” (Foucault

⁵⁷ See for instance Corneanu 2011.

2002, 336). Critique in this context is a particular ethos or attitude that “simultaneously problematizes man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject” (Foucault 1983b). Through critique, we can uncover the contingency of aspects of our world that are presented to us as given and necessary, and open up possibilities for doing otherwise. It is through critique that we can “separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think”. For Foucault, critique is about investigating what has led to us being constituted as the subjects that we are, and through doing so showing that there are alternatives.

This critical function of philosophy is not a purely outward facing concern, something distinct from its role as practice of the self. Philosophy’s role critiquing our world today and its role as work on the self are fundamentally linked. What is “philosophy today”, Foucault asks, “if it is not the critical activity that *thought brings to bear on itself?* [my italics]” (Foucault 1985, 8–9). Philosophy’s task of working out how “to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known” (9) is at the same time a task which implicates the subject who undertakes it. The critique of the present moment entails the “displacement and detachment of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, *to do something else, to become other than what one is* – that, too, is philosophy [my italics]” (Foucault 1997d, 327). The philosophical ethos of critique is therefore *also* “work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings” (Foucault 1983b). By challenging and interrogating the limits of our world as it is given to us, Foucault claims, we can open a space to exist differently within that world.

Philosophy also functions as critique for Le Doeuff, who refers to philosophy, at its origin, as “the only means of appeal” against “custom” (Le Doeuff 1991, 148): a “gleam of light” meaning that “a philosopher could dispute his society’s custom concerning an important aspect of women’s position”. Le Doeuff also, in an echo of Foucault, suggests one aspect of philosophy as being “the

reworking of thought” (139). By linking the critical function of philosophy to custom, and in a feminist context, Le Doeuff opens the way to connect to Astell, who wields philosophy as critique against the custom she identifies as inimical to women’s being.

We find Astell’s most radical use of philosophy to critique social structures in *Reflections Upon Marriage*, in which she criticises the domination and subjection of women generally and the institution of heterosexual marriage in particular. Her philosophical arguments in this text lead her to conclude that “a Woman has no mighty Obligations to the Man who makes Love to her, she has no reason to be fond of being a Wife, or to reckon it a piece of preferment when she is taken to be a Man’s Upper-Servant; it is no advantage to her in this world” (*RM*, 93). In the course of her argument, as Detlefsen explains, Astell reveals the husband-wife relationship as “not intrinsic to men’s or women’s nature” (Detlefsen 2016, 82). While Astell acknowledges that “Scripture commands *Wives to submit themselves to their own Husbands*”, she observes that neither St. Paul nor St. Peter “derive that subjection from the Law of Nature” (*RM*, 20). There are other reasons for marriage, and for women to subject themselves to their husbands, but women’s subjection is not found in nature itself. In other words, we find Astell wielding philosophy to denaturalise a social institution commonly understood as natural and inevitable to those around her. She writes of the “Woman who has been taught to think Marriage her only Preferment, the Sum-total of her Endeavours, the completion of all her hopes,” (*RM*, 60) before opening the way to the notion that “if a Wife’s case be as it is here represented, it is not good for a Woman to Marry” (77): an idea which we can imagine lodging in the mind of the formerly described woman and fermenting.

This reading is complicated by Astell’s stance on marriage as “the Institution of Heaven, the only Honourable way of continuing Mankind, and far be it from us to think there could have been a better than infinite Wisdom has found out for us” (*RM*, 9). This has troubled subsequent readers of Astell; there is disagreement concerning just how far she is taking her criticisms. As

Detlefsen observes, sometimes “Astell seems to suggest that husbands’ power over their wives is simply a factual description of what men, through a power grab have usurped for themselves” (Detlefsen 2016, 81), such as when she writes that “the Right [of women’s subjection] can no more be prov’d from the Fact, than the Predominancy of Vice can justify it” (*RM*, 10). At other times, however, she “seems to assert that the inequality between men and women in marriage is right ... because of the civil stability such a hierarchy can afford” (Detlefsen 2016, 81). Varying accounts have been offered regarding Astell’s position and the extent of its feminism: Detlefsen, for instance, writes that “Astell’s feminist promise should not be overstated,” but that her remarks on marriage nonetheless include “a feminism that requires some social change” (90), and which includes an important component of relational autonomy.

Despite this ambivalence, Astell repeatedly raises the possibility of positions in *Reflections upon Marriage* which she then goes on to partially disavow. Often, these positions are placed in the mouthpieces of “some refractory Woman” (*RM*, 62), who might “beg leave to be excus’d from such high thoughts of her Sovereign [her husband]” (62) or an imagined “Female Reader” (79) who could infer that a man who misuses his authority thus forfeits it. In the latter case, Astell hurries to write – how sincerely, it is hard to say – that “A peaceable Woman indeed will not carry it so far, she will neither question her Husband’s Right nor his Fitness to Govern” (79). Regardless of Astell’s genuine beliefs, the significant aspect of *Reflections* here is the opening up of possibilities. By thinking through the nature of marriage, and the justification of male authority within marriage, Astell is making it possible to think otherwise: to think that women may be better off out of marriages, or to think that they owe less deference to their husbands than is ordinarily assumed. This is an interrogation of what is “given”: a use of philosophy as a feminist critical practice.

Beyond the use of philosophy to challenge custom, Astell advocates critique as a personal practice; as a means for women to think themselves differently. This is a consequence of philosophy’s role as social critique: as Sowaal

identifies, Astell in *A Serious Proposal* presents strategies which will “displace the WDN [Women’s Defective Nature] Prejudice, or at least provide tools to critique the customs that perpetuate it” (Sowaal 2007, 238). The use of philosophical arguments tackles the confusion and paralysis brought about by the WDN prejudice, allowing women to exist differently in the world.

“Tis true, thro’ Want of Learning, and of that Superior Genius which Men as Men lay claim to, she [the author] was ignorant of the *Natural Inferiority* of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as a Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth,” (*RM*, 9) Astell writes with biting irony at the beginning of *Reflections upon Marriage*.⁵⁸ She goes on to assert that the only way to demonstrate a case satisfactorily is “not by *Affirming*, but by *Proving*, so that every one may see with their *own* Eyes, and Judge according to the best of their *own* Understandings,” insisting on a female reader’s “Natural Right of Judging for her self” (10) concerning what is right. Astell is insisting on the rejection of supposed self-evident truths about women, instead advocating that women use their own intellectual capabilities to establish the truth. This is what Foucault describes as the “movement by which ... one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules – that is philosophy” (Foucault 1997d, 327). For Astell, this movement is of vital importance for women: she rejects out of hand the idea that women should “affirm that we see such things as are only the Discovery of Men who have quicker Senses; or that we understand and Know what we have by Hear-say only” (*RM*, 10). If they take what is given to them as true, they will accept without question the “Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth” of their inferiority.

Throughout *A Serious Proposal*, Astell draws contrasts between accepted models of femininity and womanhood and the qualities of which she deems women capable. I have already discussed her attacks on the vices and defects which she admits many women suffer from: vanity, folly, ignorance, a tendency to “be Proud and Petulent, Delicate and Fantastick, Humorous and Inconstant” (*SP I*, 61). As Sowaal emphasises, one of Astell’s key moves is to

⁵⁸ Astell’s use of irony is noted in another context by E. Derek Taylor (2001).

reject the claim that “Women are *naturally* incapable of acting Prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly [my italics]” (58). Contrary to much popular opinion, Astell insists, “Women need not take up with mean things, since ... they are capable of the best” (59). This challenge to customary understandings of womanhood is explicitly philosophical on Astell’s account: she challenges those who would bar women from self-improvement and education either to “take up *his* Paradox, who said *That Women have no Souls*; which at this time a day, when they are allow’d to Brutes, wou’d be as unphilosophical as it is unmannerly; or else let them permit us to cultivate and improve them” (*SP I*, 81).⁵⁹ The claim that women are soulless, that they are not capable of improvement, is one that Astell identifies as not in accordance with philosophical reason. As Sowaal addresses, Astell is not primarily attempting to persuade men to change their opinion on women’s capabilities: rather, by challenging customary prejudices concerning women’s nature, she is setting her female readers on the path to self-transformation and improvement – a path which will be further facilitated by her “strategies that displace the WDN Prejudice” (Sowaal 2007, 238). In other words, she is enabling women to become and to *be* different from how they may have accepted themselves being. *A Serious Proposal* works to assist women in thinking and doing “otherwise”, to displace and transform their frameworks of thinking, and to become other than they were, through the critical use of philosophical reason.

Philosophy and feminist freedom

Foucault links the different aspects of his conception of philosophy. “In its critical aspect”, he states, “philosophy is that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists ... To a certain extent, this critical function of philosophy derives from the Socratic injunction ‘Take care of yourself,’ in other words, ‘Make freedom your foundation,

⁵⁹ The claim that women have no souls was frequently rejected in literature of the period as a purported common belief, sometimes attributed to “Turks” or Muslims. See for instance Sherman 1681, who terms the claim “that *Mahometan, Turkish* opinion” (12). It appears to be more of a straw-man than a genuine claim argued for with any frequency.

through the mastery of yourself” (Foucault 1997c, 300–301). Note that, in a classical slant, Foucault is positioning mastery of the *self* as the pathway to freedom. In this interview, Foucault draws together the disparate-seeming functions philosophy serves in his model. Philosophy is critical: it questions our present moment, allowing us to think ourselves differently and break out of relations of domination. It is also an individual practice of care of the self: the exercise of thought on itself which facilitates the self in gaining autonomy and practising freedom. It is, thus, an ethical practice: for what else is ethics, asks Foucault, other than the conscious practice of freedom?

Philosophy is that which calls into question domination, and Foucault asserts that the problem of knowing how to avoid states of domination “must be framed in terms of rules of law, rational techniques of government and *ethos*, practices of the self and of freedom” (Foucault 1997c, 299). Timothy O’Leary places philosophy at the core of Foucault’s ethics, which he understands as an ethics of freedom. O’Leary claims that “for Foucault the telos, the aim of this work [on the self] is freedom” (O’Leary 2002, 154) and identifies philosophy as a “practice that was central to Foucault’s attempts to formulate a contemporary ethics” (140). The liberating role of philosophy for Foucault is gestured at in his interview “The Masked Philosopher”, where Foucault describes philosophy as the “movement” by which one “seeks other rules” (Foucault 1997d, 327), the “changing of received values, and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else” (327). Elsewhere he states that “the relationship between philosophy and politics is permanent and fundamental” (Foucault 1997c, 293). Philosophy is a practice of the self which is at once ethical and political, challenging domination and facilitating freedom.

By attending to how Astell presents and uses philosophy as both a spiritual practice of the self and a social critique, we can shed light on its feminist potential. The customs which Astell’s philosophy challenges and unravels are rooted in irrational sexism; the readers she urges toward critical self-reflection

are women. By using philosophy to critique the possibilities offered for women, Astell opens spaces for women to think themselves differently, and thus achieve a kind of freedom.

Astell uses a variety of terms to describe women's condition, including "Domination" (*RM*, 31), "Slavery" (19), "Subjection" (10) and "Oppress'd" (78, 79). Interestingly, in one of his relatively rare comments on gendered power relations, Foucault describes married women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "in a state of domination" (Foucault 1997c, 292), even though "one cannot say that it was only men who wielded power in the conventional marital structure" (292). He goes on to say, as quoted earlier, that in "its critical aspect ... philosophy is that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form" (300). In Astell's writing, we see this critical aspect of philosophy instantiated in the case of gendered oppression or domination, and in *Reflections upon Marriage* concerning Foucault's example of eighteenth-century marital structures.

Astell's primary concern regarding liberty is internal rather than external. Sowaal and Broad both make this clear: Astell is not presenting a project which will necessarily remove from women "external constraints, including marital laws and the organization of social and political institutions such as universities" (Sowaal 2017, 179), but instead emphasizes a freedom which "consists in an exercise of the will in accordance with reason" (Broad 2015, 172). For Astell, "subjection to our Passions is of all Slaveries the most grievous and ignominious; because the Mind it self puts on its own shameful yoke" (*CR*, 195), and we lose our "Indifferency and Liberty" (197) when we are "Prepossess'd and liable to Rash Judgments, when we adhere to Principles which we never Examin'd, which are only recommended by Education and Custom, or by Authority and Interest" (196-197). Freedom is identified with rational, examined choices and judgements, as opposed to unthinking judgements given to us by custom.⁶⁰ This Classical stance is not unusual,

⁶⁰ This is a very brief account of Astell's position. For more on Astell's understanding of liberty and how it relates to political theory of the period, see Springborg's historically situated

especially within “the context of Astell’s rationalist metaphysics” (Sowaal 2017, 179). As Springborg explains, in “this respect she followed Aristotle, the Stoics, and, curiously, John Locke” (Springborg 2005, 5).

On Sowaal’s interpretation, “the presence of internal liberty *renders moot* the presence of external constraints” (Sowaal 2017, 179) for Astell. This finds support in *Reflections*, as well as elsewhere: “the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, ’tis out of the reach of the most absolute Tyrant” (*RM*, 56). This is not a unique claim on Astell’s part by any means, although she applies it to women’s situation: the idea is represented strongly in Platonic and Stoic philosophy. Descartes “even added that ... tyranny derived from an external source can be experienced as joy because it makes one realize one’s perfect ability to remain unaffected by such dominion” (Sowaal 2017, 179). On Sowaal’s reading, not only is there more to women’s lack of freedom than sexist social rules and institutions, but if women can achieve internal freedom then they will be fundamentally unaffected by such external factors.

However, the philosophical critique of external constraints such as marriage and custom is not unrelated to the achievement of internal liberty, as Broad observes (2014, 117). On the contrary, Astell sees the external situation, and the external ways in which women are treated and cultivated, as a key cause of the internal tyranny under which women suffer. Astell’s comment in *The Christian Religion* which I recently quoted identifies us as unfree specifically when we adhere to principles which have only been recommended by education, custom, authority or interest. As I explained in Chapter One, miseducation and the effects of custom are highly gendered on Astell’s account: women are at greater risk of being inculcated with such unexamined principles. “As Prejudice fetters the Understanding so does Custom manacle the Will, which scarce knows how to divert from a Track which the generality around it take,” (*SP II*, 139) Astell writes. Here, as elsewhere, she connects social context and individual constraint. Custom “enslaves the very Souls of Men” (140). We have

account (2005). For an account of how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women theorised freedom, see Broad 2014 and Broad and Sowaal 2017.

shown in Chapter One how custom functions to the detriment of women's selves: for Astell, prejudice and custom are gendered social effects which affect women's beings in a variety of negative ways.

Reflections upon Marriage, furthermore, warns against the degradation of the self which unequal marriage can bring to women, and points to the risk a woman undertakes when she "puts her self intirely in [her husband's] Power" (*RM*, 55). She reiterates the arguments made in *A Serious Proposal* regarding women's serious miseducation: "So much and no more of the World is shewn them, as serves to weaken and corrupt their Minds, to give them wrong Notions, and busy them in mean Pursuits; to disturb, not to regulate their Passions; to make them timorous and dependant" (65). So, while Broad, Sowaal and others are right to highlight the primacy of internal liberty for Astell, philosophy's role in critiquing custom and social institutions is nonetheless relevant as a tool for achieving such liberty. I would challenge Sowaal's claim that the external constraints are rendered moot by internal liberty as somewhat misleading: the psychological, inner oppression from which women need liberating directly results from external forces and constraints, and the state of domination in which women exist.⁶¹ By wielding philosophical critique outwards, toward institutions such as marriage, women can effect an inward change.

That said, while Astell recognises the link between external factors such as custom and miseducation, and women's lack of internal freedom, she does not push the connection as far as she could or as we might like. It seems that on her account removing or reinventing external constraints on women would be highly beneficial to their attainment of internal liberty: however, she fails to push this further and advocate strongly for such removal or reinvention. We might wonder whether philosophy can have the effects she claims for it without some degree of external change. This is a point which I pick up further on.

⁶¹ See Moser (2016) for a reading of *Reflections upon Marriage* which draws out the "fragmentation and dissociation of the woman's psyche" (111) resulting from an authoritarian marriage in Astell's view.

How does the practice of philosophy function to enable internal liberty for women? Firstly, the philosophical critique of social custom facilitates women in the realisation that their faults and vices are not intrinsic to their being women, but inculcated by extrinsic factors. This opens the possibility of self-transformation and no longer being subject to the same vices and passions as before. This is the role for philosophy which Sowaal identifies for Astell: a tool for dislodging the Women's Defective Nature Prejudice and enabling a woman to "develop her perfections" (Sowaal 2007, 239). In this case, philosophy facilitates liberty through its *conclusions*: rejecting the idea that "our Souls were given us only for the service our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men" (*SP I*, 55) and to reveal instead the "dignity of [women's] nature" (57). Once women change their beliefs philosophically in this way, better avenues will be opened to them.

Secondly, and more importantly, the practice of philosophy as rational reflection itself works to transform women. By clarifying their ideas, women can avoid making false judgements and simply concurring with custom. If we simply accept "Customs and the Observations we make on the Practice of such" (*SP II*, 170) as the source of our ideas, they are likely to be "very fallacious and many times opposite to the Dictates of Reason" (170). If instead we reason appropriately and "make right use of our Faculties", we will "certainly be Enlighten'd, and cannot miss of obtaining as much Truth" (175) as we are capable of receiving. By being motivated by the love of truth rather than passions, worldly interests or self-love, women will have internal liberty in the sense of "living life in accordance with the deeper interests of the true self" (Broad 2015, 173), and will avoid the efforts of "a Designing Person" (*SP II*, 187) who "seems to have an Intention to reduce us to the vilest Slavery, the Captivation of our Understandings" (188). Rational and logical reflection helps us to "Disengage our selves from all our former Prejudices, from our Opinions of Names, Authorities, Customs and the like," all of which "Contract our Souls ... hinder the free range of our Thoughts and confine them only to that particular track which these have taken, and in a word, erect a Tyranny over

our free born Souls” (133). Philosophical practice, on Astell’s account, aligns us with reason which “wills that we shou’d think again, and not form our Conclusions ... till we can honestly say, that we have with our Prejudice or Prepossession view’d the matter in Debate on all sides ... only determined by Truth it self” (135). While this practice *relates* to the beliefs that we hold – for Astell, if women philosophise they *will* come to the right beliefs about their nature and discard customary prejudice – it has its own liberatory effect.

To practise philosophy is to be aligned with the search for truth and to reject customary opinion and prejudice. This is itself ethically transformative, breaking “the enchanted Circle that custom has plac’d us in” (*SP I*, 55) and allowing us to be otherwise. This relates back to philosophy’s role as a spirituality. As explained, Astell sees purity and knowledge as mutually reinforcing: the purer we are, the more knowledge and truth we can gain, and knowledge and truth likewise contribute to our purity. Through philosophising and orienting themselves towards truth, women are purifying themselves. This feminist function of philosophy for Astell has not been adequately distinguished by the scholarship from its effects on the passions or women’s beliefs.

If we see inner freedom, or autonomy, as a feminist value, and one which is threatened by prevailing social customs, practices and institutions, we can also find valuable Astell’s advocacy of philosophical practice as a means of achieving this autonomy. We can also understand philosophy as something which resists domination, and which can be of particular use for women. This line of thought runs counter to the mooted tension between feminism and philosophy, suggesting instead that philosophy can function as a useful feminist practice in an ethic of the self.

Reflections on philosophical practice and feminism

Does philosophy do for women what Astell claims it can do? Does it free us from custom, opinion, and prejudice, and bring us under the sway of reason and virtue? Astell offers an attractive picture of philosophy as a practice which

can unpick the knots of custom and make us autonomous women who reject prejudice and form enlightened beliefs. Put alongside Foucault's alignment of philosophy with that which challenges domination, philosophy emerges as admirable and transformative. As drawn as I am to this picture, I am not sure that it should be too readily accepted.

Philosophy as tool of oppression

We have repeatedly seen the failure of philosophical practice to detach philosophers from prejudiced beliefs. The role of Hume (1711-1776), Kant (1724-1804) and other influential philosophers in legitimating and developing racist, white supremacist ideas bears disturbing witness to this. Hume, in "Of National Characters", claims that there "never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation" (Hume 1994, 86).⁶² Hegel (1770-1831) writes that among "the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent" (Hegel 1956, 96) and that "we may conclude *slavery* to have been the occasion of the increase of human feeling among the Negroes" (98). In these cases, far from enabling the philosopher to *detach* from prejudice, philosophy is a tool to *reinforce* prejudiced opinion. This brings us back to Le Doeuff's point that philosophy has often been found to shore up women's oppression and provide reasons why women cannot participate in philosophy itself. In these cases, philosophy serves the function of diminishing and damaging the selves which it targets, as well as morally warping those who wield it.

In the introduction, I referred to the current controversy in UK philosophy regarding transgender women. Often, the arguments put forward by Kathleen Stock and other philosophers for the pre-eminence of "biological sex" as a

⁶² The philosophical standing of Hume's racism has been much debated, with some scholars considering it an unfortunate error of little relevance to his broader philosophical project. I, however, am inclined to agree with Garrett and Sebastiani when they argue that it "cannot be considered philosophically insignificant insofar as it is connected with Hume's central ideas about moral and natural causes" (Garrett and Sebastiani 2017, 41) and that "it is important to highlight the cases when undeniably great philosophers held considered beliefs that we hold to be morally repugnant and which they thought followed from what we hold to be some of their important philosophical achievements" (41).

determinant of oppression, the risks of greater legal acceptance and validation of trans people's genders, and the dangers which trans women pose to cis women are dismissed as bad philosophy by those who believe that trans women are women and that they are oppressed.⁶³ To some extent, this is true: there are some strikingly apparent flaws in Stock's arguments.⁶⁴ I am not sure, however, that this is the *problem* with what Stock writes: nor am I convinced that good philosophy – in the sense of being skilful and well-reasoned – could not lead to bigoted conclusions. The essential failure in the work of philosophers who reach what I consider to be morally repugnant conclusions is, I think, one of compassion or love, rather than of reason. If one has not taken the initial leap, a leap which cannot be argued for as such, to see and love the humanity in another, then the best reasoning may go ethically astray. I found this expressed when reading *Anna Karenina* last year: Levin, near the end of the novel, has the thought that “Reason could not discover love for the other, because it's unreasonable” (Tolstoy 2000, 797). If one does *not* have that love for the other, there is no guarantee that philosophy will be a means of resistance or liberation: rather, one's train of reasoning may serve to reinforce those damaging beliefs which can detrimentally affect others' selves, or one's own.

For Astell, the use of philosophical reason is tethered to truth and virtue. From her perspective, the appropriate use of philosophy *could not* lead to the damaging effects outlined above, because reason leads to divine truth and purification of the soul. If philosophy is a spirituality, then it may be safer from the effects of misuse than if it is detached from the ethical transformation of the self. However, I am not convinced that the use of reason *must* have the transformative ethical effect which it *can* have: this being so, philosophy as such as is a risky tool to advocate as liberatory.

The use of philosophy as liberatory practice is feasible only if tethered to something else: some ethical principle. For myself, I take that principle to be

⁶³ For some examples of such arguments, see Stock (2018a, 2018b).

⁶⁴ Aleardo Zanghellini has helpfully outlined a number of these flaws in a recent article (Zanghellini 2020).

love. Paulo Freire, talking about the nature of dialogue in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, writes that love “is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (Freire 1996, 70) and that it must “generate other acts of freedom; otherwise it is not love” (70). He is not referring to philosophical dialogue specifically, but the notion of rational educative dialogue is not far removed from that of philosophy. If the use and practice of philosophy is tied to love, and care for others, then the risk of misuse and being wielded in favour of domination is diminished considerably.

Indeed, Astell might agree, although for her love is embedded in a Christian framework. Astell urges us primarily toward a love of God, which is a love of desire, and secondarily toward a benevolent, unselfish love of others. She identifies love as “the predominant Passion in every one”, arguing that if “therefore our Love be Right, the rest of our Passions will of course be so” (*SP II*, 219). The love which Astell prioritises is the love of God, and “when we act by this one grand Principle ... our Lives are uniform and regular” (*LG*, 274). While for Astell the unifying principle of love is love for the divine, and my guiding inclination is instead toward love for other people, in both cases we see the notion that love will guide the rest of one’s thoughts, emotions and actions to their right end. This may not be easily applicable for everyone: it is not the case that all we need to do is *simply* love and the rest will follow: love may itself require practice and work to perfect. Uniting philosophy to love, however, and keeping the two entwined, may be key to philosophy’s adoption as a liberatory practice of the self. Love for others and the love of God will both be addressed further in the final two chapters of this thesis.

Capacity to philosophise

We find in *A Serious Proposal* a gesture towards a conflict between the advocacy of philosophical practice as a liberatory critical practice for women and other feminist concerns, although it is not a conflict Astell recognizes. As observed, Astell believes that women who claim a lack of time or capacity to engage in philosophical thought should content themselves with being “Drudges” or “Idiots”. Her feminist project is not, she hardly needs to add,

aimed at drudges or idiots. In one sense it might seem absurd to charge Astell, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, with lacking a class consciousness, and even more so to blame her for a lack of sensitivity to those with what we understand today as learning disabilities.

However, these passages raise questions of contemporary concern. What are the implications of putting forward a practice as a feminist strategy which is inaccessible to groups of women? Furthermore, there is a serious risk of overemphasizing the role of philosophy and intellectual activity as a means of feminist self-care and critical engagement and overlooking material actions that can be taken to relieve women's oppression.

I think this question can be answered by firstly presenting philosophy as *one of the* practices which women may undertake as a freedom practice, rather than a *necessary* freedom practice for care of the self. It is not necessarily problematic to identify as useful practices which not everyone can carry out. It is, however, an important note of caution to sound when developing regimens of the self in a feminist context, especially for feminist academics working in an intellectualised milieu.

Secondly, the difficulty in terms of time and space for undertaking philosophy could spur us to work to *provide* such space, rather than to discard philosophy. Take the Stuart Low Trust Philosophy Forum, for instance, with which I have been volunteering for nearly three years. This is a weekly philosophy discussion group aimed at vulnerable adults in Islington. There is no specified curriculum, and the project is conceived not as one of teaching, but one in which participants are facilitated in practising their philosophical reason, in large and small group discussions.⁶⁵ This is a project which does not assume that participants have the time or space to philosophise, or lament their lack thereof, but rather *creates* that space. We provide a physical location, a space

⁶⁵ For more detail on how I conceive philosophy to function in the context of the Philosophy Forum, see Webb 2018.

for participants to meet and engage in dialogue, and set aside a time for this to take place.⁶⁶

Finally, it is important not to underestimate the capacity of nearly every person for some level of philosophical activity. Returning to the Philosophy Forum, participants have a wide range of abilities to engage, and some participants have learning difficulties or mental illnesses which affect their level of involvement. Nonetheless, most participants are able to provide some comment on the week's topic and find enjoyment and satisfaction in taking part.

Rather than seeing philosophy as intrinsically inaccessible, its value should be recognised and spaces made for it to function as a feminist practice. This notion of space links us back to Astell's project for a female educational community: while that community itself would be inaccessible to many women on Astell's model, she is still advocating a physical environment in which women are provided with the time and space to practise philosophy.

Philosophy and social change

As a stronger challenge, we can ask whether the philosophical practices urged on women by Astell conflict with the social upheaval which many feminists consider necessary to dislodge patriarchal systems of oppression. Jane Duran points out that rebellions "cause chaos, confusion, and hurt. They impede the doing of philosophy, and for the philosophically minded, like Astell, the world of ideas always comes first" (2006, 105). Astell's use of philosophy as critique does not, at first pass, seem lead to social action. As radical as *Reflections Upon Marriage* is in its challenge to heterosexual partnerships, Astell's advice to women in unsatisfactory marriages is to take comfort in the exercise of their virtue. She praises the woman who "suffers a continual Martyrdom to bring Glory to GOD and Benefit to Mankind, which consideration indeed may carry her through all Difficulties" (*RM*, 78). The married women who seek self-improvement through learning – "a Philosophical Lady as she is call'd by way

⁶⁶ Recently, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been running sessions via Zoom, thus providing a virtual environment for philosophical discussion.

of Ridicule” – will bring “themselves such a reach of Thought, to such exactness of Judgment, such clearness and strength of Reasoning, such purity and elevation of Mind, such Command of their Passions, such regularity of Will and Affection, and in a word, to such a pitch of Perfection, as the Human Soul is capable of attaining in this Life” but “it does not qualifie them to make a Noise in this World, to found or overturn Empires” (76). Instead, it will prepare them for the afterlife (75). The woman who engages in philosophical reflection *prior* to marriage, who “would ... duly examine and weigh all the Circumstances, the Good and Evil of a Married State” (74), will “either never consent to be a Wife, or make a good one when she does” (75). Philosophical activity prior to marriage might change an individual woman’s decision to contract a partnership but will not dismantle marriage as an institution. Philosophical activity *in* marriage may make the married state bearable but will not challenge its existence.

The advocacy of the separatist community in *A Serious Proposal* may be more in line with feminist social action: however, Astell largely sees the community as a retreat from the world of custom, not as a means to change it. It is a haven, an island of alternative custom in a sea of folly and vice, not a location where organisation can take place for further social change. Indeed, it is the *withdrawal* from the damaging world of social custom which facilitates women’s practice of philosophy. As in *Reflections Upon Marriage*, Astell even suggests that philosophical self-improvement will make women more suited to live in the existing world: “Learning is therefore necessary to render them more agreeable and useful in company, and to furnish them with becoming entertainment when alone, that so they may not be driven to those miserable shifts, which too many make use of to put off their time ... A rational mind *will* be employ’d, it will never be satisfy’d in doing nothing; and if you neglect to furnish it with good materials, ’tis like to take up with such as come to hand” (*SP I*, 80-81). As elsewhere, Astell disavows any connection between women’s philosophical education and conventional political or religious activity: “We pretend not that Women shou’d teach in the Church, or usurp Authority

where it is not allow'd them; permit us only to understand our *own* duty, and not be forc'd to take it upon trust from others" (81). Astell's implication is that the practice of rational thought, by providing women with better conversational material and an increased ability to be self-supporting, will make women more amenable members of society, less likely to turn their time to ill use. Sowaal identifies a similar concern, noting that "from the perspective of contemporary feminism" Astell's stance seems to "[encourage] the very passivity that already characterizes the oppressed woman" (Sowaal 2017, 192) by advising women "not to actively protest the current system, but ... [to] ignore society and meditate solitarily" (180).

This conversation resonates in the letters of Astell's fellow philosopher Damaris Masham. Masham, writing to John Locke, claims that "Religion is the Concernment of All Mankind; Philosophy as distinguish'd from It, onely of those that have a freedom from the Affaires of the World" (Masham 1688). She criticises "the Pleasures of this Life" as "Triffling and Transitorie", and "Its Cares so many and Bitter, that I think one must be very Miserable and Stupid, not to seek Ones satisfaction in some thing else". That something else, she implies, is philosophy. While Masham does not explicitly gender the cares and troubles of life, her letters are shot through with dissatisfaction with her married state, showing little love for the role of housewife or mother. For Astell and Masham, philosophy is associated with retreat from, and a means of coping with, the everyday world of gendered care and custom.

The knot we have to untangle is the contradiction between philosophy as critique – of society and the self – which Astell advocates and practises, and philosophy as a practice which is best undertaken by a withdrawal from the world and which may have the effect of fostering satisfaction or contentment with the way things are. The question arises whether philosophy as a practice of the self functions more as a coping mechanism for getting by in the face of relations of domination than it does as a practice of liberation for women. Le Doeuff points to a relationship between philosophy and flight from womanhood as a category: "The interest manifested by some women for

philosophical study may well proceed, not from a desire to find themselves, but from one of losing themselves” (Le Doeuff 1991, 206). Philosophy, Le Doeuff thinks, may have had the appeal for women of providing respite from the confines and overdetermination of womanhood as an identity. There are echoes of Masham’s invocation of philosophy as an alternative to the world of family life which distracts and often distresses her. We can interpret Astell’s philosophical practice too as a flight: from the world of custom, from narrow understandings of femininity, and into the world of the intellect and the prospective afterlife. This is a flight which transforms the self who undertakes philosophical practice, but may not stimulate a direct confrontation with or upheaval of relations of domination.

On one reading, however, we can understand Astell as proposing strategically useful practices, including the practice of philosophy, for women to undertake *given* the state of society in which they find themselves. McWhorter draws links between Foucault’s comments on the dominated situation of eighteenth-century wives and “women in the US in the twentieth century” (McWhorter 2013, 71), arguing that while both groups “needed to be liberated” (71), they also required “[o]ther transformations, including transformation of those women themselves” (71). For McWhorter, Foucauldian practices of the self, specifically practices of freedom, are an important component of any feminist project, but particularly so in what she terms a post-liberation world. By practising philosophy, women can transform their selves, access truth, and critique custom in a way which further aids their own development – and, crucially, this can be done to some extent *whether or not* society also changes, and regardless of the presence or absence of organised opposition to sexist structures. All that is required is time, solitude, and advice on philosophical method (although Astell admits that many women will struggle to find the first two of these).

This line of thought is bolstered by Astell advocating an active engagement in the world for the purpose of reform, although she has in mind a religious betterment rather than a feminist restructuring of society. She writes: “We’re

all apt enough to cry out against the Age, but to what purpose are our Exclamations unless we go about to Reform it? Not faintly and coldly as if we were unconcern'd for the success ... but *with all our Might*, with an Unwearied Industry and Vigor" (*SP II*, 235). Likewise, she remarks that "an Active Life consists not barely in *Being in the World*, but in *doing much Good in it*", situating philosophical practices such as "[furnishing] our Understandings with useful Principles ... [setting] our Inclinations right, and ... [managing] our Passions" (232) as preparatory to engagement with the world. While she disavows women's engagement in religious or political positions of authority, Astell envisions women as having an essential role in the moral transformation of society in line with Christian principles. Although this is not explicitly connected to the challenging of sexist social structures, nor any kind of major reworking of society, it does imply that the practice of philosophy on Astell's view *need not* be antithetical to social engagement.

One answer to the questions raised above is as follows: while major social restructuring or upheaval is not one of Astell's goals, her model of philosophy permits some attempts at social change, and also provides a valuable strategy for women to undertake given society as it is. Furthermore, as explained earlier, Astell's position regarding freedom implicitly encourages external societal changes for the sake of women's internal liberty, although she does not carry her arguments on this point through to their natural conclusion. This interpretation is perhaps too tidy, however, and does not completely resolve the tensions and contradictions explored. Another response is to accept the tensions without resolution, to say that philosophy is at once flight and critique: coping mechanism and resistance. McWhorter writes that the questions concerning feminism and philosophy "are not issues that can ever be settled on paper. They can be resolved only in practice, by being enacted and incorporated" (McWhorter 2004, 159). I am inclined to agree: only as women do philosophy can we see how it functions for us as flight or resistance, and only by doing it can we enact it in the most desirable way.

Philosophy and community

Returning to the question of philosophical introversion, it should not be too readily conceded that philosophy is an intrinsically isolated and detached practice. Le Doeuff argues for a reconceptualization of the philosophical enterprise as a fundamentally communal one in which “each person involved in the enterprise is no longer in the position of being the subject of the enterprise but in that of being a worker, engaged in an enterprise which is seen from the outset as collective” (Le Doeuff 1977, 11). Le Doeuff connects this communal re-envisioning of philosophical activity to her concern for women’s place in philosophy: “The belief which has emerged from my still very recent experience of collective work is that the future of women’s struggle for access to the philosophical will be played out somewhere in the field of plural work” (11). Foucault too, despite charges of isolationism, positions philosophical and intellectual activity, in its role as a search for the “good”, as a communal project, stating unambiguously that the “good is defined by us, it is practiced, it is invented. And this is a collective work” (Foucault 1988a). Philosophy *need* not be a solely individual practice. Astell too hopes to situate women’s intellectual activities within a community environment.

I have experience of practising philosophy in a communal setting through the Philosophy Forum. This is not an explicitly feminist or political activity, although sessions are often held on political topics: I have led discussions on Astell, feminist critiques of marriage and motherhood, Foucault, and anarcho-communism. It is, however, a communal setting in which people who are marginalised in a variety of ways (on the basis of mental illness, class, race, or other axes of oppression) engage in high-level philosophical activity. The experience of being listened to, and having their ideas considered seriously, is I believe highly beneficial to the selves of our participants. This is not a setting where their views are pathologised, nor in which they go unchallenged: rather, they are taken *as* philosophical views, meriting critical engagement. Nor is it the case that this weekly philosophical practice discourages participants from political activity: several regular participants have a history of activism, past

and present. One participant spends a considerable amount of time undertaking direct action in the cause of animal rights.

Speaking for myself, volunteering with the Philosophy Forum has been an intensely transformative experience: by *facilitating*, rather than *teaching*, my mode of engagement with marginalised others was shifted. It was humbling to realise the arrogance with which I started volunteering: the assumptions which I held concerning the participants' philosophical backgrounds and capabilities. Working with the Philosophy Forum has brought me, through philosophical dialogue, to a heightened recognition of the personhood and the selves of marginalised people: to move away from seeing members of certain demographics as objects of charity and rather as fellow philosophical thinkers. This is at the heart of any anti-oppressive politics: the recognition of the other as being as fully, completely, human as oneself.

If philosophy is to be used as a critical and liberatory practice, it is in this context which it could most effectively manifest: a communal, dialogic practice rooted in anti-oppressive politics. The way forward for philosophy to function in this way as a feminist practice might lie in women-only philosophy groups, akin to the Forum: such groups would possess the separate quality which Astell advocates, albeit on a temporary level, and enable women to orient themselves toward truth and transformation in loving dialogue with others.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by considering the relationship between women, feminism and philosophy, and questioning whether philosophy was in tension with feminism and womanhood. By thinking through the practice of philosophy with Foucault and Astell, I have tried to show that it need not be in such tension; that philosophy can be a feminist critical practice of the self. To be so, however, it needs to be tied to an ethical principle, and engaged with in a space with others rather than as a merely solitary activity.

Despite the communal potential of philosophy, there is still a recurring concern regarding Astell and Foucault that their ethical recommendations lead to an isolated individualism which is at odds with feminism understood as a communal political practice. This concern requires sustained attention. In the next chapter I consider the relationship between Astell's advocacy of an ethics of the self and relational and communal practices. I look at the role of the other and the community in Astell and Foucault, asking whether they are genuinely vulnerable to the charge of isolated individualism, and if so to what extent.

Chapter Four

Care of the other: friendship, love, community

Like most people, I am not an isolated self in the world, but have a range of relationships with others. I have several close friends of various genders, whom I have known for varying lengths of time. I am close to my family: my parents, my sister, and my niece and nephew. I have a partner whom I live with, and relationships with his family members. In addition to relationships I have with individuals, I am part of groups and communities: official organisations such as a trade union and looser senses of allegiance such as to women in general, or, as a bisexual woman, to LGBTQ communities. I do not experience myself as a self which simply encounters those others whom I relate to, or which simply exists within communities, but a self which is constituted by my relationships and communities. As my friendships and relationships shift, grow, and alter, so do aspects of my self. I am also concerned with, and committed to, wider political change: I am not just interested in practices or behaviours which affect my own self, but in the selves of many others.

Astell and Foucault, however, have each been interpreted as promoting an isolated self lacking in relationality, and failing to provide any possibility of meaningful political engagement. These positions have been presented as particularly problematic from a feminist perspective. The concern linking feminist responses to both Astell and Foucault is that an ethics which prioritises the development of the self will fail to be sufficiently open to the relationally constituted self emphasised by many feminist thinkers. It may run the risk of presenting an implicitly masculine autonomous self which can be construed as treating others strategically, as opposed to engaging in mutual and reciprocal care for other people. There is also a risk that focusing on *self*-care and *self*-transformation will render an individual woman insufficiently motivated to instigate broader socio-political change in coalition with others.

If I want to suggest that a feminist ethic of the self drawing from Astell and Foucault could be of value to women today, these issues must be addressed.

I argue that criticisms of Astell and Foucault on the grounds of individualism and lack of relationality are ill-founded. First, I show how Astell's account of friendship, particularly in *A Serious Proposal*, can be read as part of Astell's ethic of the self and a practice which challenges custom and conventional modes of relationality. Reading this element of Astell's work in conjunction with Foucault's advocacy of a homosexual *askesis*, I show how Astell rejects heterosexual relationality and emphasises instead the value of same-sex female friendship as integral to women's self-development. Where Foucault's emphasis is on same-sex relationships between men, Astell points us towards the feminist value of such relationships between women.

Secondly, I argue that while Astell does indeed target the reform of the individual woman rather than collective political action and social reform, this can be read as a deliberate strategy in the face of apparently insurmountable systems of domination. Foucault, on the other hand, is not unconcerned with collective resistance, but disavows the task of outlining such projects as one which does not properly belong to intellectuals and philosophers. I also point to the significance of communal projects and spaces in Astell's work, even when they are not explicitly projects of political resistance or activism: she is heavily concerned with the development of bonds between women and group female identity. For Astell, the establishment of a female community is all but essential to women's self-care and development.

In the last chapter, I began to consider a key positive aspect of an Astellian feminist ethic of the self: the practice of philosophy. In this chapter, that positive programme will be developed further, by arguing for the role of friendship and community as a component of such an ethic. The third section of this chapter is a reflection on the prospects for Astell's model of friendship and community in a modern feminist context: I consider its challenges and possibilities, and how it could be developed for our times.

This chapter's focus is on friendship, romantic relationships, and community: it is worth flagging the lacuna of the family and family relationships. This is partly due to Astell's (and Foucault's) scant attention to family structures and childcare. My focus has been on drawing out the most explicit parts of Astell's project. However, serious questions should be raised concerning if and how family relations, particularly motherhood, could relate to the ethic of the self developed throughout the thesis. These are questions I have not addressed but hope to do so at some future juncture.

Isolation and autonomy

Feminist critiques of implicitly male asocial, individualistic and autonomous selfhood are well documented. Allen, considering Foucault's conception of the self, points to "a shared insight of these related feminist perspectives on the relational self: namely, that mutual, reciprocal, communicative social interactions are necessary for the formation, sustenance, and repair of the self" (Allen 2004, 240). According to sociologists and thinkers such as Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, men and women develop their identities differently, rendering this a gendered insight. On Chodorow's account, "the rigidly differentiated, compulsively rational, stubbornly independent self is a masculine defensive formation ... that develops as a result of fathers' negligible involvement in childcare" (Anderson and Meyers 2016). Women, however, partly due to their identification with their mothers, supposedly develop a more relationally constituted self. This relationality affects women's ethical positions, argues Gilligan: women tend to take a perspective of care as opposed to adopting a justice-based ethics.

These accounts are controversial, and their analyses of identity formation are not universally applicable, but historically and culturally contingent. Indeed, Friedman sketches out some of the critiques faced by Gilligan and others: one such critique being that "the empirical research underlying Gilligan's discussion on care ethics was based only on white, middle-class, heterosexual women" (Friedman 2000, 210). Nonetheless, as Friedman also remarks, many "feminists believe that women are more likely than men to realize and

acknowledge the interdependences between people ... men are more likely than women to retain an implausibly individualistic outlook” (209). Without committing wholeheartedly to the gender divide proposed by Gilligan and others, the issue is prevalent enough that it is worth considering whether an ethic of the self, especially one which we hope to claim as feminist, can account sufficiently for relationality. Even aside from the feminist concern, relationships with other individuals and with communities seem to be of sufficient value that an ethical stance which overlooked or underplayed them would be lacking. It is important in light of these considerations to address the issue in Astell’s, and also Foucault’s, writing.

Foucault is sometimes treated with suspicion by feminist thinkers on precisely these grounds. McNay is not the only scholar to criticise Foucault’s supposed “privileging of the isolated self” (McNay 1992, 157), but she argues the case extensively and articulately. Her critique is twofold: she charges Foucault’s ethics both with overlooking “the intersubjective dimension of social relations” (157) which feminists have worked to emphasise, and with being “deeply antipathetic to any kind of collective politics such as feminism” (160). These concerns are continuous with broader feminist concerns regarding the relationality of the self: McNay paints Foucault as “[filtering] out a more communal and interactional notion of the self held by the Greeks”, claiming that his “idea of the formation of the self as a work of art [is] predicated on the severance of links between the self and other social structures” (165). Furthermore, she argues, “within the type of hierarchical relations that structure modern society, caring for the self necessarily involves a struggle to delegitimize, overpower, and silence the other” (174). For McNay, an ethic of care for the self is in direct conflict with caring for others, at least in society as it is.

Allen relays concerns from other scholars which go even further, arguing that Foucault’s account “is not merely in conflict with feminist investigations” but

is “thoroughly masculine” (Allen 2004, 237).⁶⁷ While Allen is more sympathetic to Foucault’s ethics than McNay, she concludes that “Foucault’s account of practices of the self ... pays insufficient attention to the reciprocal, mutual, and communicative dimensions of social relations” (251). The worry concerning Foucault’s ethics of the self is that, by focusing on the self and its practices, he is firstly treating others strategically, according to their value to the self, and secondly overlooking the extent to which the self is *constituted* by relationships with others. I will contend, however, that Allen and others pay insufficient attention to Foucault’s comments on homosexual relationships, which he presents as deeply reciprocal and mutual.

Astell has also faced concerns from feminist scholars regarding the potentially individualist nature of the self on which she focuses. Broad, for instance, argues that “Astell’s concept of the self is ... highly individualistic. On this view, the self is apparently capable of extracting itself from all social ties and reinventing itself on its own terms, or ‘pulling itself up by its bootstraps’, so to speak” (174). As Broad points out, this is “decidedly at odds with recent thinking about the self as an entity that is in fact *constituted* by kinship ties and communal attachments” (174). Devereaux, similarly, argues that “the necessity of removing oneself from society, of focusing the mind entirely on God, is ... the philosophical underpinning of [Astell’s] entire heterotopian community” (Devereaux 2009, 62), and that her “turn-of-the-century Malebranchean theology relied on interiority and individualism” (66).⁶⁸ Astell’s practices of withdrawal and contemplation, discussed in the last two chapters, lead to a concern here that she neglects relationality.

This is not a universally accepted interpretation of Astell’s understanding of the self: scholars such as Myers and Detlefsen see Astell as presenting a profoundly relational, mutually constituted vision of the self. Detlefsen describes “Astell’s focus on female-coded traits of community and friendship rather than the male-coded trait of isolated individualism” (Detlefsen 2017,

⁶⁷ This is Allen’s account of other critics of Foucault, not her own stance.

⁶⁸ Devereaux draws on Foucault’s notion of the “heterotopia” throughout her article to characterise the imagined communities of both Mary Astell and Sarah Scott.

200), contrasting Astell's vision with what she identifies as isolated individualism in the works of both Descartes and Rousseau. Myers challenges the "claim that Astell's philosophy is antisocial" (Myers 2013, 535), arguing that "Astell implicitly presents a subject whose choices are and must be governed by a concern for and a recognition of the claims of others" (535). I argue throughout this chapter that both interpretations of Astell are true to an extent: that she advocates women's withdrawal and isolation from men and heterosexual relationships, but situates women thoroughly within a communal female space and presents a moving vision of female friendships.

By drawing on Foucault's advocacy of innovative affective relations, and in particular his movement towards a homosexual *askesis* based on friendship, I will show how Astell's arguments in favour of same-sex female relationships fit into her ethic of care of the self and freedom practices. I argue that reading *A Serious Proposal* in dialogue with Foucault can reveal her as advocating new modes of affective relation between women while at the same time rejecting and critiquing heterosexual relationships. Same-sex affective relations function as part of Astell's recommended *askesis* for women. I also address the issue of collective action and community relationships, showing how Astell is pessimistic but leaves spaces for women's collective action, and discussing the centrality of the community to her feminism. What Astell brings to Foucault, conversely, is an account of the significance of *female* friendships, as well as an understanding of how the refusal of certain modes of relationality can be as valuable a component of liberation as their innovation.

Love and friendship

History and philosophy of friendship

I am first going to address relationships between individuals, and the role they play in an ethic of the self. I am primarily interested here in romantic partnerships and friendships. While a multitude of other ways of relating to people exist, such as familial relationships or pedagogical relationships, for Astell it is the heterosexual marriage bond and female friendship which loom

the largest. The literature which contextualises this section primarily concerns friendship: its history and philosophy. I provide an overview here of the main areas of scholarship from which I am drawing, before moving to an analysis of Foucault's account of friendship and relationality.

There is an exceedingly long history of philosophical thought on friendship, which is often rooted in Aristotle's analysis in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "his friend is another self ... the extreme of friendship is likened to one's love for oneself" (Aristotle 2009, 169). This notion of the friend as another self recurs throughout this tradition, and raises its head in Astell's texts. I cannot provide a thorough account of this tradition here: a lively and thoughtful overview can be found in Nehamas's *On Friendship* (2016). Of more concern for this chapter is the role women have played. Ivy Schweitzer (2016) has written a valuable account of the classical tradition of friendship as it pertains to women, pointing to the implicit and explicit historical exclusion of women from so-called "ideal" friendship. Astell has been situated by scholars within this classical tradition of friendship, interpreted as drawing from and reworking ancient models.

Despite its historical marginalisation, female friendship has been increasingly taken up by feminist theorists as a feminist practice or model. Janice Raymond's *A Passion for Friends: A Philosophy of Female Friendship* (1986), for instance, "parallels the philosophical tradition of male homosocial friendship defined by Plato and Aristotle" (Schweitzer 2016, 355), using it to argue for a feminist politics rooted in ideal friendship between women. Adrienne Rich, likewise, with an emphasis on lesbian relationality, heavily advocated the power of connections between women to transform themselves and the world around them. Friedman has argued for the "socially disruptive possibilities" (Friedman 1989, 286) of female friendship. Bonds between women provide a way to resist misogynistic forces and provide too an alternative to often-damaging relations with men.

Friendship is increasingly identified as a mode of resistance to neo-liberal modes of relating to others: Todd May, drawing on Foucault's work, argues that some modes of friendship both resist "the figures of neo-liberalism" (May 2013, 70) and model "a route toward ... a democratic politics" (70) due to the egalitarianism which he believes characterises friendship. Schweitzer, similarly, begins her essay by asking: "Does friendship's basis in affect offer an alternative to liberal and neoliberal notions and practices of power?" (Schweitzer 2016, 337). The ways in which friendship can be used to resist dominant practices and modes of interaction will be particularly interesting when considering Astell.

Also relevant is the role which friendship plays in accounts of ethics of the self. Richard Shusterman, for instance, while focusing on writing as a practice of the self, emphasises the value of "a caring friend or interlocutor with whom one can share one's self-revelations ... one's sense of responsibility to an intimate other can drive the self to be more responsibly frank and diligently rigorous in self-examination" (Shusterman 2013, 47). The concern accounts like this may face, however, is that the caring friend is treated strategically: as a means to self-transformation, rather than loved for their own sake.

Conceptions of friendship in the early modern period were strongly influenced by ancient traditions, both Aristotelian and Platonic. Useful accounts and analyses of friendship in the period can be found in Lochman and Lopez (2011) as well as C. C. Brown (2016), while Wilde also provides valuable context when considering "seraphic" male-female friendship in the period (2013). Broad (2009) provides a useful account of the discussions concerning women and friendship in Astell's period, pointing to how philosophers such as John Norris show that there was an increased openness to the possibility of real friendships between men and women, although far less acknowledgement and discussion of same-sex friendships between women.

The nature and function of friendship for Astell has been addressed multiple times throughout the secondary literature. She has been situated in the Aristotelian tradition by Broad, who also shows how Astell's theory of

friendship functions as a feminist means toward social change (Broad 2009). Nancy Kendrick challenges Broad's interpretation of Astell as an Aristotelian regarding friendship, arguing that Astell's account of friendship is "determinedly anti-Aristotelian" (Kendrick 2018, 47). Kendrick emphasises instead the Christian-Platonist metaphysics which grounds Astell's theory of friendship, and argues that Astell presents female "spiritual" friendship as an alternative to the male-female marriage relation (Kendrick 2018). I am not interested in judging whether Astell's understanding of friendship is more Aristotelian or more Christian and Platonic: rather, I am interested in taking insights from both Broad and Kendrick regarding how Astell *uses* her theory of friendship, and integrating them into my broader argument.

Other interpretations of Astell's philosophy of friendship assign key importance to it as part of her feminism. Detlefsen, for instance, argues that "the power of female friendship" (Detlefsen 2016, 87) is an integral part of Astell's "relational autonomy". Relational autonomy is a "feminist account of freedom or autonomy" which "acknowledges that we just are in social relations, and that these relations are central to how we understand our freedom" (87). Detlefsen identifies these criteria in Astell's account of same-sex friendship between women: this account "rests upon an individual recognizing the subjectivity of others" (88), and "acknowledging the other's subjectivity requires one to modulate one's own behaviour toward the other precisely so as to allow the other to better herself by developing her mind, which in turn ... increases her freedom" (88). On Detlefsen's account, Astell's practice of friendship is intrinsically linked to female freedom, a point which reinforces the notion of friendship as a practice of resistance.

By considering Astell's treatment of individual interpersonal relationships, I will show how she is positioned at the intersection of these philosophical, feminist, and historical treatments of friendship between women. First, I will address Foucault's most important remarks on relationships, then show how Astell rejects and resists heterosexual relationality, before presenting her use of friendship as a profoundly relational ethical feminist practice.

Foucault and friendship as a way of life

In an interview Foucault gave to the French gay magazine *Gai pied*, as well as in the 1982 interview “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act”, Foucault links his work on *askesis* and practices of the self to gay men’s life and behaviour. This link is most explicit in the first interview, “Friendship as a Way of Life”, in which Foucault re-identifies *askesis* as “the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself” before stating that “it’s up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent ... a manner of being that is still improbable” (Foucault 1997a, 137). It is not sexual behaviour for Foucault that characterises such a homosexual *askesis*, but “a certain style of existence, a form of resistance or art of living, which might be called ‘gay’” (Foucault 1990d, 292). His concern is with “a way of life [that] can yield a culture and an ethics” (Foucault 1997a, 138). His thoughts on homosexuality are continuous with the rest of his later ethical work: he is proposing, if sketchily, a gay or “homosexual” ethics of the self.

The gay mode of existence Foucault envisions, as well as being intrinsically other-related, is also innovative: he gestures to the possibility that “gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate” (Foucault 1990d, 301). Gay people, he hopes, will “learn to express their feelings for one another in more various ways and develop new life-styles not resembling those that have been institutionalized” (301). In “Friendship as a Way of Life” he refers to the invention of “a manner of being that is still improbable” (Foucault 1997a, 137) and presents “homosexuality” as an “occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities” (138). The homosexual lifestyle’s role in challenging and unknitting pre-existing, taken-for-granted forms of relationship is comparable to the role Foucault assigns philosophy as critique. Like philosophy itself, a homosexual way of life is a way of thinking “differently, instead of legitimating what is already known” (Foucault 1985, 9). In the invocation too of the “way of life” phrasing familiar from Hadot’s “philosophy as a way of life”, Foucault in these interviews gestures towards an

understanding of a gay lifestyle and a gay ethics as being themselves philosophical practices and *askeses*.

These new forms of gay relationship are positioned as a kind of resistance. “The important question here”, Foucault suggests, “is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system” (Foucault 1990d, 294). Foucault is clear about homosexual relationships offering an alternative and the opportunity for invention. “We must escape and help others to escape the two readymade formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers’ fusion of identities” (Foucault 1997a, 137): the gay life-style, the mode of life he advocates, is a way of forging a new path aside from the culturally-given scripts. These culturally-given relationship models include heterosexual marriage: “Between a man and a younger woman, the marriage institution makes it easier ... But two men of noticeably different ages – what code would allow them to communicate?” (136). While he is not overtly criticising heterosexual marriage relationships here, they are associated with the law and habit that homosexual innovation can permit us to escape.

Despite the critiques levelled at Foucault concerning the isolated character of his self-creating ethical subject, the homosexual *askesis* he puts forward is intrinsically other-related. The “concept ‘gay’”, he affirms, “contributes to a positive ... appreciation of the type of consciousness in which affection, love, desire, sexual rapport with people have a positive significance” (Foucault 1990d, 287). Indeed, it is the relationship between people – or, rather, between men – which characterises the issue for Foucault. The root of homophobia is not the fear of sexual encounters between men, but “the common fear that gays will develop relationships that are intense and satisfying even though they do not at all conform to the ideas of relationships held by others” (301). He is insistent that the “development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship” (Foucault 1997a, 136): “to want guys [*garçons*] is to want *relations with guys* [my italics]” (136). It is in response

to the dominant straight characterisation of homosexuality as “two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other’s asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour” (136) that Foucault pushes this point. He is responding, it seems, to a claim about homosexuality analogous to the claim that critics like McNay make about his ethic of the self: that it is fundamentally strategic, a way for isolated individuals to use each other to gain pleasure. Such an image, Foucault says in a particularly moving sentence, “cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for” (136). Twice in his answer to his interviewer’s question, he invokes love itself: “But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there’s the problem. ... These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there’s supposed to be law, rule, or habit” (137). His reference here to law and habit is again resonant with Astell’s “custom”.

These interviews present homosexuality and the “gay lifestyle” as continuous with Foucault’s ethical work and his advocacy of self-creation and *askesis*. We “have to work at *becoming homosexuals* [my italics]”, Foucault insists. And the “culture and ... ethics” (138) that emerges here is fundamentally other regarding: it is “the affirmation that to be a homosexual is for a man to love another man” (138). The warmth of Foucault’s comments on love, affection, friendship and tenderness between men as part of a homosexual ethics makes McNay’s remarks on his ethics seem bafflingly inapt: where in these interviews can we find “the lone subject who acts upon the self in order to realize his/her identity” (McNay 1992, 170), “ethics of the self as a solitary process” (177), or “an introverted labour” (179)? Even the more sympathetic Allen is confident that his account “ignores the necessary role that communicative, reciprocal, mutual interactions play in the formation of a self that is capable of recognizing, shaping, and beautifying itself” (Allen 2004, 250). Again, this claim is at odds with Foucault’s advocacy of a homosexual *askesis* which is fundamentally concerned with such reciprocal and mutual interactions.

As elsewhere, Foucault is primarily concerned with men and the possibilities for relationships between men. When asked about relations between women, he is almost dismissive. “The affection and passion between women is well documented” (Foucault 1997a, 138), he claims: “Women have had access to the bodies of other women ... Man’s body has been forbidden to other men in a much more drastic way” (139). When asked in the second interview about the “growing tendency in American intellectual circles, particularly among radical feminists, to distinguish between male and female homosexuality”, his initial response is both dismissive and opaque: “[Laughs] All I can do is explode with laughter” (Foucault 1990d, 291). That said, he goes on to remark that he finds the question “very amusing, perhaps for reasons I couldn’t give even if I wanted to” and that “the distinction offered doesn’t seem to me convincing” (291). His general response to the questions is peculiar and a little troubling, but this comment implies, perhaps, that he believes male and female same-sex relationships can function in similar ways; that a meaningful distinction need not be drawn between the two. The potential for love between women to be innovative and disruptive, however, or the ways in which such relationships can function for women’s ethics and self-transformation, is simply not his primary concern.

Heterosexual relationships

In the last chapter, I showed how Astell’s analysis of marriage functions as the kind of critique which Foucault identifies as a key function for philosophy. And indeed, when considering Astell’s approach to individual women’s relationships with other people, it is hard not to be struck first of all by her intensely scathing critique of heterosexual marriage: while it may be a divinely authorised institution, she is clear that it is nearly always bad for women and to be avoided if possible.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ For Astell, of course, “heterosexual marriage” was simply marriage. I make the distinction here as it is useful when considering the value of Astell’s critique for modern feminist appropriation: we may not want to critique same-sex marriage in the same ways as we critique heterosexual marriage. That said, many feminists are willing to criticise marriage as an

One reason for Astell's suspicion of marriage lies in its effect on the self of the woman in a married state: her obligation to submit to her husband's authority damages her autonomy, and this is particularly troubling when her husband's opinion of women prevents her from receiving the respect she deserves. In the case of marriage, a woman "puts her self intirely in his [her husband's] Power, leaves all that is dear to her, her Friends and Family, to espouse his Interests and follow his Fortune, and makes it her Business and Duty to please him!" (RM, 55). Astell describes a situation in which a woman relinquishes all that may provide her own sense of self and takes on instead the selfhood of her husband: *his* interests, his pleasures. The analysis is not dissimilar to Friedman's account of romantic partnerships, in which she argues that the "merger" of selves commonly considered to be a part of romantic love is frequently asymmetrical and in men's favour. "Historically", Friedman writes, "women were usually *submerged* by their mergers with men" (Friedman 1998, 173): a submergence aptly described by Astell. Indeed, Astell explicitly couches women's position within marriage in terms of loss of self, referring to "the eminent exercise of Humility and *Self-denial*, Patience and Resignation, the Duties that a Wife is call'd to [my italics]" (RM, 62). The heterosexual marriage relation, for Astell, diminishes women's selves, subsuming them to their husbands.

These are problems for women even in good marriages, due to the very nature of what marriage is in Astell's world. The situation is considerably more severe when a husband is a misogynist. Astell writes of a man who cannot "respect his Wife when he has a contemptible Opinion of her and her Sex", who "looks down on them as void of Understanding, and full of Ignorance and Passion, so that Folly and a Woman are equivalent Terms with him" (57). She is intensely critical of the conclusion which some men draw that women were made only for their sakes, simply because they have dominion over women in a married state: "a false Conclusion, as he who shou'd say the People were made for the Prince who is set over them" (57). Astell thinks, in other words, that such men

institution regardless of the genders participating: see Claudia Card (1996), for instance, which I discuss further on.

fundamentally misunderstand the nature of authority: “those in Authority” are “plac’d in that Station for the good and improvement of their Subjects, and not for their own sakes ... the Representatives of GOD whom they ought to imitate in the Justice and Equity of their Laws” (56). They are not to abuse their authority to pursue their own desires and pleasures. Her account of how a man with this mindset thinks of his wife remains disturbing: “she was made to be a Slave to his Will, and has no higher end than to Serve and Obey him!” (57). In marriages with misogynistic men, women must contend with being treated as no more than tools and servants, in addition to the loss of self which occurs in any marriage.

Astell’s description of marriage is reminiscent of recent accounts of domestic abuse in which an abuser controls and isolates their partner. In a series of *Guardian* interviews with Australian women who succeeded in leaving abusive partners, the theme of control and obedience recurs: “Initially it was things like, we’d have to travel to Sydney but for the whole trip I wasn’t allowed to go to the toilet” (Lee n.d.), writes one survivor: “He became very obsessive and jealous and accusatory if I got a phone call from anyone” (Schubach n.d.), recounts another. Throughout the women’s narratives, we find too accounts of loss of self: “When you’re in the relationship for a long time, you lose your identity. ... We don’t believe in our ability to live an independent life” (Lee n.d.). Where Astell writes of women relinquishing their families and friends for the sake of marriage, twenty-first century abuse victims tell us that “I lost the support of my own family, and friends” (Lee n.d.) and “he was critical of my friends, my family, and in the end he didn’t want me to see any of my friends so very quickly I was isolated” (Schubach n.d.). The same woman writes that “your self-esteem gets eroded ... I’ve seen incredibly strong, beautiful, forthright women ... disintegrate into a shell of themselves. They don’t even know who they are any more”. What for Astell was commonplace in marriage is today recognised as the sign of a relationship gone deeply wrong.

Moser links Astell's account of marriage to modern work on trauma, claiming that to "a modern reader, Astell's description of the state of a woman's inner life in marriage bears haunting resemblance to the symptoms of a person who has experienced a life-threatening trauma" (Moser 2016, 112). She points to Astell's "prescience in pointing to the violence that may underlie relationships even when no physical violence is present" (112). What Astell also points to, however, is the extent to which marriage in its origins facilitates loss of self and the conditions for abuse: even marriage to a generally good-willed partner. This is Claudia Card's argument when she affirms that marriage "enlists state support for conditions conducive to murder and mayhem" (Card 1996, 8). Astell, more than Card, points to the loss of self and autonomy which married women can suffer: conditions which, as she discusses in *A Serious Proposal*, gravely hinder women's potential for constituting themselves as ethical subjects.

While Astell does indicate the ways in which marriage can develop women's virtue, this is rare and difficult: "the Husband's Vices may become an occasion of the Wife's Vertues, and his Neglect do her a more real Good than his Kindness could. But all injur'd Wives don't behave themselves after this fashion, nor can their Husbands justly expect it" (*RM*, 40). A woman who can turn a bad marriage into the tools to develop a good character must already have "a strong Reason ... a truly Christian and well-temper'd Spirit, ... all the Assistance the best Education can give her" (78). Most women will not.

Marriage has a final damaging effect to women on Astell's account. Women are miseducated into believing that marriage is the end and purpose of their lives, what they should most desire and be fit for: "alas! what poor Woman is ever taught that she should have a higher Design than to get her a Husband?" (*RM*, 65), Astell laments. She writes too, with the air of a woman who has seen it all too many times, of women who have been taught that marriage is their sole aim and purpose in this life (60). This is not a damaging belief simply because it leads women into making dangerous or faulty choices regarding marriage: it represents a warping of the self, a commitment to wrong ends.

The woman who is taught to prioritise marriage as the pinnacle of her achievement fails to comprehend the other paths to self-development open to her. Most importantly, for Astell, she fails to develop her intellect and her virtue.

If Astell is pessimistic regarding divinely sanctioned heterosexual marriages, she is even more profoundly suspicious of any other kind of relationship between men and women, including friendship. Relations with men, it seems, are dangerous to women, and inimical to their self-development and virtue. *Reflections upon Marriage* goes to some lengths to emphasise the risks women face in forming connections with men, and the general tendency towards deceit and sexual predation which men display. “Can a woman then be too much upon her Guard?” (*RM*, 66), she writes: “that Woman can never be in safety who allows a Man opportunity to betray her” (69). Even “Frequent Conversation” is risky, as it “does for certain produce either Aversion or Liking” (69) – and if the latter, men are liable to take advantage.⁷⁰ “It were endless to reckon up the divers Strategems Men use to catch their Prey,” (69) Astell writes with the voice of bitter observation: “Sometimes a Woman is cajol’d, and sometimes Hector’d, she is seduc’d to Love a Man, or aw’d into a Fear of him” (69). Even the most appealing of men can’t be trusted: “generally the more humble and undesigning a Man appears, the more improbable it looks that he should dare to pretend, the greater Caution shou’d be us’d against him” (70).

What is usually called friendship between men and women is largely used as a cover for the man’s sexual desire: “Liking insensibly converts to Love, and ... when she admits a Man to be her Friend, ’tis his Fault if he does not make himself her Husband” (71). The monastic retreat for women of *A Serious Proposal* is presented as partly designed to protect women from forming relationships with men, as explained earlier (*SP I*, 102). Marriage may be acceptable, although rarely wise, for women to undertake: any other

⁷⁰ “Conversation” at the time Astell was writing could refer to social interaction in general, not merely shared talk (*OED Online* 2020).

relationship between a woman and a man is to be avoided.⁷¹ Even where marriage is on the horizon, Astell sternly states that “Modesty [requires] that a Woman should not love before Marriage, but only make choice of one whom she can love hereafter” (102).

That said, Astell does also write that “[h]e who does not make Friendship the chief inducement to his Choice, and prefer it before any other consideration, does not deserve a good wife ... we can never grow weary of our Friends” (*RM*, 37). However, this can be read more from the perspective of pragmatic advice than as a general rule: if men and women are to marry, then the best chance of happiness will be secured if partners are chosen on the basis of friendship and character as opposed to beauty, wealth or superficial charm.

Astell’s stance regarding heterosexual relationality is one of profound suspicion. Women are to be cautious of friendships with men; to guard themselves against sexual relationships; to marry only after careful consideration. The nature of marriage is detrimental to women’s care for their selves: it diminishes their selves. Her insistence that women should neither concern themselves with men’s opinions of their appearance or character nor develop relationships with them beyond the marriage contract maintains the radical force it had at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in a context where women were largely economically dependent on men. We can take from her the point that *closing off* certain forms of affective relation can be as significant an act of resistance of domination as the *opening up* of new forms. Recall Foucault’s “three elements in my morals ... refusal, curiosity, innovation” (Foucault 1988a). Astell’s stance on individual relationships is characterised as much by refusal – the refusal of heterosexual relationships – as it is by the innovation of relations between women. By refusing relationships with men, women can preserve the integrity of their selves, and care for those selves.

⁷¹ Although Astell corresponded with and made use of male acquaintances such as Norris, her serious emotional connections and friendships were all with women.

This separation is a practice of the self, and a practice which is also one of powerful resistance. Marilyn Frye writes that “conscious and deliberate exclusion of men by women, from anything, is blatant insubordination” (Frye 1992, 292). This refusal is, for Frye, a taking of power: when “our feminist acts have an aspect of separation, we are assuming power by controlling access and simultaneously undertaking definition” (293). Astell’s separatism is to be found not just in her proposal for an all-female community, but also in her rejection of widespread cultural assumptions about the nature of heterosexual relationships and her extreme caution about engaging in any such relationship. In 1980, Adrienne Rich coined the concept of compulsory heterosexuality: the “cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” (Rich 1980, 640). Astell challenges compulsory heterosexuality.

Whereas Foucault is welcoming of the possibility that his “new forms of relations could be ... available not only to gay people, but also to non-gay-identified people who suffer, in the same way, from the ‘impoverishment’ of relational possibilities” (O’Leary 2002, 163), Astell restricts the scope of the relationships she advocates. A feminist ethic of the self closely modelled on Astell perhaps limits the possibilities for innovation and disruption, rejecting the potential for men and women to forge new ways of relating to each other which go beyond sexual desire or marital union. This seems deeply pessimistic regarding the possibility of social change: if women must always protect themselves from male friendships, standing on their guard, how can we envision an altered society in which men and women no longer exist in a relation of domination?

What we should take from Astell, however, is her decentring of men and heterosexual marriage for women following her ethical regimen. For many women today, the goal of a heterosexual relationship and male approval remains central to their lives, or is assumed to be central by the media which surrounds them. Forty years after Rich’s essay, compulsory heterosexuality is

still an acutely relevant concept. It is not uncommon for women to withdraw their time and energy from their friendships and to aim it instead at their romantic and sexual relationships. Such a preoccupation has its risks: risks which Astell observed, and which have more recently been commented on by feminist philosophers such as Friedman and Card. It is a phenomenon which I have noted in myself: even in my loving, balanced heterosexual relationship I have noted my tendency to neglect friendships or former hobbies and interests in favour of spending as much time with my partner as possible. To resist the diminishing of self which this could imply has required an active effort towards nourishing my friendships and practising my interests.

A modern feminist ethic of the self which draws from Astell need not require women to leave or to reject their relationships with men. Rather, it could encourage women to decentralise the significance of dominant heterosexual relationship models and demonstrate their risks. Doing this may involve increasing the importance of women's other relationships, including those with other women. It is friendships and relationships between women which I turn to next.

Astell and virtuous same-sex friendship

Astell is critical not solely of relationships between men and women, but also of friendship between women as it is generally practised: "by Friendship", she insists, "I do not mean any thing like those intimacies that are abroad in the world, which are often combinations in evil and at best insignificant dearnesses; as little resembling true Friendship, as modern Practice does Primitive Christianity" (*SP I*, 99). Some pages later she elaborates some of the problems with such relationships, referring to "that froth and impertinence, that Censure and Pragmaticalness, with which Feminine Conversations so much abound" (101-102).⁷² Elsewhere she refers to quitting "the Chat of insignificant people for an ingenious Conversation; the froth of flashy Wit for real Wisdom; ... The deceitful Flatteries of those who under pretence of loving

⁷² "Pragmaticalness" is a largely obsolete term referring to officiousness, meddlesomeness and dogmatism (*OED Online* 2020).

and admiring you, really served their own base ends, for the reasonable Reproofs and wholsom [sic] Counsels of your ... affectionate Friends” (74). Similar themes emerge regarding female friendship as with other areas of the un-transformed woman’s life: froth, superficiality, style over substance. In *The Christian Religion*, Astell refers darkly to “some who call themselves our Friends” who are simply “looking for a blind Approbation, or ... an Artful Pretence of being convinc’d of the Reasonableness of all they Propose” (CR, 164). In these cases, so-called friendship is nothing but a guise for validation, a means of seeking approval for immoral behaviour. If practised incorrectly, friendship can be profoundly damaging to a woman’s care for her self, reinforcing the inimical effects of custom and obstructing her development as an ethical subject.

Genuine friendship between women, however, is key to Astell’s proposal for her community. This kind of friendship is characterised by “the greatest usefulness, the most refin’d and disinterest’d Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved; And makes no distinction betwixt its Friend and its self” (99). The classical notion of the friend as an “other self” appears here. For Astell, two women bonded in friendship will not distinguish between their selves, except that in “Temporals” (99), or earthly matters, each will prioritise the other’s interest.

The value of friendship is not to be underestimated: it is “a Blessing, the purchase of which were richly worth all the World besides ... she who possesses a worthy Person, has certainly obtain’d the richest Treasure!” (98). Indeed, “next to the love of GOD”, friendship is “the choicest Jewel in our Celestial Diadem, which, were it duly practic’d, wou’d both fit us for heav’n, and bring it down into our hearts while we tarry here” (98). Friendship is “a Vertue which comprehends all the rest; none being fit for this, who is not adorn’d with every other Vertue” (98). The language used by Astell is worth attending to: friendship is something to be *practised*; a virtue which will

prepare us for the afterlife. At the same time, it is described using metaphors of jewels and wealth: a way of emphasising to readers its value as an alternative to the material possessions they may otherwise be concerned with.

What happens when we practise friendship? We have already seen that it “fits us for heav’n”. Astell goes on to say that friendship “has a special force to dilate our hearts, to deliver them from that vicious selfishness and the rest of those *sordid Passions* which express a narrow illiberal temper” (99). By practising love for other women, women can expand their capacity for love and challenge “mistaken Self-love” (98). Friendship is “the best Instructor to teach us our duty to our Neighbour” (99). As well as its effects on one’s own self, the practise of friendship will work to transform the friend as well. Part of the purpose of friendship on Astell’s account is mutual criticism, advice and direction. In *The Christian Religion*, she takes “Friendship to consist in Advising, Admonishing, and Reproving as there is Occasion, and in watching over each others Souls for their mutual Good” (CR, 162). “The truest effect of love”, she writes in *A Serious Proposal*, is “to endeavour the bettering the beloved Person” (SP I, 100). Astell’s Christianized model of friendship is ethical in multiple directions: the practice of loving another transforms and improves us, while we are also concerned to advise and improve our friend. At the same time, our friend is providing ethical guidance and advice to us which further facilitates our development. In these senses, it is meaningful to describe this conception of friendship as an ethical practice of the self: a practice of the self, furthermore, which expands the very boundaries of the self, incorporating and merging it with the friend.

While heterosexual marriage also provides opportunities for women to exercise their virtue, it is consistently cast by Astell in terms of fortitude in the face of an unfulfilling relationship. Furthermore, Astell’s concern with respect to heterosexual marriage is still largely for the individual woman who enters such a partnership. The care of the self required in such a relationship does little to acquit Astell of the charge of introversion and individualism: indeed, heterosexual marriage seems to require women to retreat into “the Exercise

and Improvement of her Vertue here, and the Reward of it hereafter” (*RM*, 80). By contrast, relationships with other women are profoundly other-focused: it is through union with and care of another woman that one’s own virtue is enhanced.

As with Foucault’s warm advocacy of a homosexual friendship-based *askesis*, so too do Astell’s comments on friendship go some way toward rescuing her from the charge of individualism and introversion supposedly at odds with a feminist praxis. The love that Astell envisions women partaking of “makes no distinction betwixt its Friend and its self, except that in Temporals it prefers her interest” (*SP I*, 99). In spiritual friendship, there is a union of selves: we move away from the image of an isolated self working on her own improvement and care. As Broad highlights, “for Astell, virtuous friendship is essentially *other-centred* or *other-interested*” (Broad 2009, 81): it moves her “beyond a radical subjectivity (the project of self-transformation alone) to an other-centred project of moral reformation” (79). The care for the self which Astell advocates throughout *A Serious Proposal* becomes also care for the other. If we seek to draw on Astell’s model for use by feminists today, such a practice of friendship may be central to the regimen.

We might wonder what it is that genders, or renders feminist, Astell’s advocacy of friendship. There are several relevant features: the simplest, and most obvious, is that her discussion of friendship in *A Serious Proposal* concerns friendship between women, and only between women. On a basic level, Astell is emphasising the value of friendship between women over other relationships or bonds of friendship. More significant, however, is the function which friendship plays in her ethic of the self: it aids women in doing what custom hinders them from doing. That is, it facilitates their development of an ethical, virtuous self. The practice of friendship as Astell describes it directly resists dominant modes of interaction with others, as well as dominant ideas concerning what is good and valuable. It runs counter to the frothy, superficial conversations which women otherwise tend to be engaged in; it encourages women to experience genuine love for another, rather than be distracted by

sexual desire or material possessions. Friends will admonish and advise each other if they seem to be slipping into bad custom. Friendship bolsters women and provides fortitude against custom. We can compare the function of friendship here to May's argument that modern friendship functions as a resistance to neo-liberalism: friendship, as a relation based fundamentally on equality (as May understands it) and characterised as its best by seeking "the good of the other for the sake of the other, and not simply the friend's own sake" (May 2013, 66) acts to "cut against the figures of neoliberalism" (66). Friendship between women, similarly, cuts against the figures of misogynistic custom which Astell identifies. In this sense, I take it to be a practice of feminist resistance.

In addition, female friendship functions for Astell as an innovative relationality of the kind Foucault discusses. This facet of Astell's model becomes apparent when we look at the paucity of models for female friendship in the tradition within which she was working. In seventeenth-century England, as Wilde explains, "women were considered less capable or even incapable of participating in a refined friendship" and, more broadly, "in the philosophical and poetical discourse on *philia* and *amicitia* – from Plato to Derrida – women are almost non-existent" (Wilde 2013, 7–8). While some writers, such as Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) and Astell's own correspondent Norris addressed the issue of friendships between men and women, friendships *between* women were nearly entirely un-theorised in the period.⁷³

One potential source for Astell for discussion and elevation of friendship between women lay in the poetry of Katherine Philips (1631-1664), who had died two years before Astell's birth. Astell was clearly aware of Philips, urging her readers to remember "the famous Women of former Ages, the *Orinda's* of late" (*SP I*, 53). "Orinda" was Philips' *nom de plume*, and the name she took within her poems: "But never had Orinda found / A soul till she found thine"

⁷³ That said, we find some literary models for female friendship: in the poetry of Katherine Philips, as discussed below, as well as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (1600) and *As You Like It* (1623), and Margaret Cavendish's novel *The Blazing World* (1666). These sources, and others, represent female friendship but tend not to theorise it.

(Philips 1995, 23). Like Astell, Philips was a Platonist (Brady 2010). Throughout her poetry, she reworks the classical model of friendship into an exaltation of Platonic love between women specifically. Broad identifies Astell as building “upon Philips’ insight that female friendships can act as ... support networks for women who hold unconventional or unfashionable views” (Broad 2009, 79). Philips’ prominence as a seventeenth-century advocate of friendship between women highlights the relative paucity (although not a complete lack) of alternative models: in presenting their vision of love between women, both she and Astell engage in innovation, opening new possibilities for relationality.

Astell herself, it seems, experienced such love for her friends. While there is debate concerning how personally we should read her letters with Norris, she nonetheless writes movingly of a “strong Propensity to friendly Love” (*LG*, 48) in her relationship with other women. This love is generous and other-oriented: “none ever loved more generously than I have done,” she writes: “Fain wou’d I rescue my Sex, 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” (48-49). Her friendship is also, however, characterised by desire, the topic which she is concerned to discuss with Norris. It is “a very difficult thing for me to love at all, without something of Desire,” (48) she states: “I find an agreeable Movement in my Soul towards her I love” (50). She expresses both desire towards her female friends and an urge to transform and improve them.

Astell even proposes a model of friendship in her community akin to a marriage contract: “what shou’d hinder, but that two Persons of a sympathizing disposition, the *make* and *frame* of whose Souls bears an exact conformity to each other, and therefore one wou’d think were purposely design’d by Heaven to unite and mix; what shou’d hinder them from entring into an holy combination to watch over each other for Good, to advise, encourage and direct, and to observe the minutest fault in order to its amendment” (*SP I*, 100). Astell presents an opportunity for two women to enter into a divinely authorised union, and characterizes it with uniform

positivity in comparison to heterosexual marriage. Kendrick takes note of Astell's contrast between same-sex friendship of this nature and marriage, arguing that Astell is "providing a justification for female-female spiritual bonds in contradistinction to female-male marriage bonds" (Kendrick 2018, 46). Furthermore, Kendrick argues, Astell's advocacy of female-female spiritual unions is put to feminist use by showing how "female-female spiritual/intellectual life" (50) can be justified to the same or greater degree than heterosexual marriage.

The question of lesbian relationality must be addressed. Katherine Philips has frequently been interpreted as writing sublimated lesbian poetry, although Mark Llewellyn dismisses this reading as "an ahistorical understanding of friendship" in which the "Platonic seems to be being merged with the sexual or romanticized form of love with which it is anathematic" (Llewellyn 2002, 462).⁷⁴ Occasionally, although less frequently, similar remarks have been made concerning Astell.⁷⁵ Perry, while careful to note that "[w]hether or not Mary Astell was a lesbian is not the most fruitful way to ask the question" (Perry 1986, 140) nonetheless identifies "a libidinous energy in her pleas for women, at the same time that she completely dismisses men" (141), adding that she "resisted male attractions with no difficulty" (145). Catherine Wilson interprets Astell's laments to Norris in the *Letters Concerning the Love of God* about rejection by friends as concerning specifically romantic rejection (Wilson 2004, 284).

On the one hand, it is right to point to a certain anachronism in interpreting Astell as a lesbian, or as proposing lesbian relationalities: the frameworks for friendships and relationships with which she is working are simply not the same as those we work with today, and as Perry observes, "I am sure that Mary

⁷⁴ See for instance Lilian Faderman's inclusion of Philips' poetry in her anthology *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (1995).

⁷⁵ I have found speculation concerning Astell's lesbianism to occur more often when presenting her in a public-facing context than in Astell scholarship itself. Most recently, when I was discussing Astell's life and work on the *Embrace the Void* philosophy podcast, the presenter was keen to insinuate that Astell's choice not to marry, as well as her close female friendships, may have been an indicator of lesbianism.

Astell never physically acted out a passion with anyone of either sex. Her belief was that the more one denied the urges of the body the better” (Perry 1986, 141). That said, there is also something reductive about dismissing out of hand the possibilities which emerge if we consider lesbian relationality in Astell’s work. While Astell did not conceive of herself as a lesbian, she nonetheless prioritised and centred her same-sex relationships, refusing to follow custom by marrying a man. Her life, and much of her writing, was oriented towards other women. Borrowing the words of Adrienne Rich, she undertook “the task of independent, non-heterosexual, woman-connected existence” (Rich 1980, 635). Rich uses the phrase “lesbian continuum” to describe “a range – throughout a woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (648). She uses this term to “grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of clinical, mostly limited definitions of ‘lesbianism’” (649). We can conceptualise Astell, and her dedication to female friendship, as lying somewhere on Rich’s lesbian continuum.

For Foucault, practising loving homosexual relations between men is a way of inventing new ways of being in the world, new ways of relating to others. For Rich, lesbian existence is “the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (649). Astell’s advocacy of female friendships and her resistance to heterosexual relations can be understood as a historical instantiation of this approach. Whether or not we want to consider it as “lesbian”, we can read Astell’s framework for same-sex female friendship as exposing the contingency of the usual stories about relationships and friendships. Penelope Anderson, writing about Astell’s and Margaret Cavendish’s visions of female friendship, notes that telling “a different story about human bonds ... exposes the contingency of the usual stories” (Anderson 2012, 253–54). Returning to a quote from Foucault, Astell wants women to “escape and help others to escape the ... readymade formulas” (Foucault 1997a, 137) governing relationships. It seems evident that Astell is seeking to think through new and unconventional modes

of relationship for women to inhabit in *A Serious Proposal*, just as she is advocating a different mode of life overall.

Friendship also has a transformative effect on society. Astell writes that “[p]robably one considerable cause of the degeneracy of the present Age, is the little true Friendship that is to be found in it ... The cause and the effect are indeed reciprocal; for were the World better, there wou’d be more Friendship, and were there more Friendship we shou’d have a better World” (*SP I*, 98). Broad agrees that Astell’s model of friendship “develops the traditional virtue of friendship – and female friendship in particular – into a force for social change” (Broad 2009, 68), showing how “Astell promotes the power of female friendships to counter the customs and conventions of seventeenth-century England” (81). These friendships, Broad points out, “[prepare] us for the performance of charitable acts in the wider world” (85), leading to social change which “would not be widespread or revolutionary in the modern political sense, but ... would nevertheless be social change to the extent that it would involve a transformation in social attitudes, norms, and practices towards women” (85). Broad draws connections between Astell and Friedman, arguing that it “is not too difficult to conceive how this ‘friendly admonition’ [of which Astell speaks] might lead to a general consciousness-raising among female friends” (Broad 2015, 180). She links this point to Friedman’s suggestion that “close female friendships can provide women with a moral vantage point from which to identify, and then to challenge, social norms and practices that compromise their well-being” (180). We can read in Astell a call for us today to re-examine the nature of our friendships and their value: to re-assess friendship as something with ethical and political dimensions which affects our self-constitution and should, therefore, be taken as seriously as any other ethical-political practice we undertake. If Astell is right, women’s friendships with other women should be carefully considered as part of our feminist *askeses*.

Taking *Reflections upon Marriage* and *A Serious Proposal* together, we see Astell casting heterosexual relationships as undesirable for women: at the

same time, she presents loving friendships between women as an important means toward caring for the self. And yet they are not strategic: we are not concerned in friendships about our own self-improvement, but “the bettering of the beloved Person” (*SP I*, 100). Astell has no comment to make on male-male friendships. Her interest is exclusively in the effects on women of the relationships in which they partake. And she is emphatic concerning the destructive effects of the wrong kind of relationality, particularly heterosexual relationality. Taken in conjunction with Foucault’s homosexual *askesis*, we hear from both Astell and Foucault a call to practise freedom from custom through innovative same-sex relationships based on reciprocal love.

Community and political action

From individual relationships, we move to the question of community and political action. As with individual relationships, the perceived lack of potential for organised resistance or action has been levelled as a criticism at Astell and Foucault alike. This is a particular problem for feminists, most of whom aim at some large-scale social change concerned with women as a class.

Sowaal, for instance, presents three problematic aspects of Astell’s stance on liberty from the perspective of modern feminism. One of these is that “Astell’s view seems to promote passivity in women ... according to Astell, women are not to actively protest the current institutional systems, but rather they should ignore society and meditate solitarily” (180). Detlefsen levies a similar line of criticism at Broad’s “suggested solution to the threat to feminism” (Detlefsen 2016, 84) in Astell’s philosophy: the turn to Astell’s ethics. Detlefsen describes this approach as “inherently limited from a feminist point of view, for it ... encourages a quietism on behalf of women in the face of socially debilitating conditions, a quietism that cannot bring about change” (85). And indeed, Broad’s defence of Astell’s feminism relies on encouraging us to “think differently about what counts as feminist thought in bygone eras ... Her credentials as a feminist are problematic only if we conceive of feminism in rather narrow political terms” (Broad 2015, 171). In all three scholars, we find a

recognition that Astell does not at face value appear to align with more recent feminist projects to resist institutions and systems of male power as a group. While Sowaal, Detlefsen and Broad all defend Astell's position as a feminist in various ways, they generally concede this point.

McNay levels related criticisms at Foucault. She argues that he struggles to show how "such an ethics [of the self] translates into a politics of difference that could initiate deep-seated social change" (177). His framework "remains unable to explain theoretically how the self may be called out of a politics of introversion" (191). This concern emerges as particularly pressing in the light of gender and other forms of structural oppression. McWhorter, putting forward a defence of Foucault, points to the "question of whether the concept of women's oppression can actually be accommodated within a Foucauldian framework" (McWhorter 2013, 55), while Sawicki too points toward feminist criticisms of the supposedly limited possibilities for resistance offered by Foucault. As well as his ethics of the self potentially leading to an aesthetically-oriented introversion antithetical to communal resistance, his earlier work on power has also been challenged for presenting "modern disciplinary power as ubiquitous and inescapable", seeming "to deny the possibility of freedom and resistance" (Armstrong n.d.). Collective resistance is not the only form of relating to others as a community, however. I also want to consider – particularly in relation to Astell – the notion of community itself, and the ways in which being embedded in a community might function as care for the self.

Moser interprets the community which Astell advocates as "a spiritual community of the oppressed" (Moser 2016, 123) and as such "a vital aspect of the recovery from trauma" (123). On Moser's reading, the communal nature of Astell's proposal is fundamental to the care of the self which she wants women to undertake: "As the new self is forged, it needs to be forged within community" (124), Moser writes. The individual focus of the practices of the self in Part II, on Moser's interpretation, are subordinate to the communal project of Part I. Moser links *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* and *A Serious*

Proposal to modern work on recovery from trauma. As Moser interprets Astell, she recognises the group oppression and trauma of women and sees a communal project as a vital response.

On Detlefsen's reading too, Astell's is a feminism "based upon an acknowledgement of our essential, communal interrelatedness" (Detlefsen 2016, 89). "Astell's women", Detlefsen argues, "will retreat to a community of benevolent women ... a world ruled in accordance with the female-coded traits of community and interdependence, care, and concern for others" (205). While admittedly this is still not the collective resistance to patriarchal oppression we might hope for, that is perhaps more of a pragmatic than a theoretical concern. Detlefsen approaches Astell in terms of ideal and non-ideal theory, arguing that "Astell's is a theory that addresses the lived experiences of real women in a way that is immediately practicable" (204).

From the perspective of this scholarship, Astell could be seen to prefigure modern feminist advocacy of community.⁷⁶ Weiss provides an overview of feminist communities: "the experiments in feminist living carried out in a range of environments, for a variety of purposes, and with varying degrees of 'bumpiness' and success" (Weiss 1995, 12). She goes on to remark that community "is essential to feminist survival" (12). Ann Ferguson is a proponent of "oppositional communities", which are "intentional or chosen communities of resistance ... attempts to realize some of our ideals in the present as we struggle to change the world in the future" (A. Ferguson 1995, 372). The "network of actual and imagined others to whom one voluntarily commits oneself in order to empower oneself and those bonded with others by challenging a social order perceived to be unjust" (372) may resonate with Astell's vision for a community of women.

There are those who see Astell's community of women in a less positive and sociable light, however. Devereaux argues that Astell's retreat is rooted in a

⁷⁶ This is not to say that community is universally advocated by feminists. Iris Marion Young, for instance, is highly critical of the ideal of community (Young 1995), while Weiss acknowledges that communities "can have troubling origins and devastating consequences" (Weiss 1995, 3).

paradoxical tension between isolation and “feminine friendship and sociability” (Devereaux 2009, 64). On this view, Astell moves toward “a muted sense of the ‘paradise within’ offered by the practice of idealism and isolationism” (64), and away from her vision of female friendship, as *A Serious Proposal* progresses. Anderson writes that the “idealized all-women’s community [which Astell advocates] serves as a rebuke to society, but it does not contribute directly to transformation by changing the terms of the debate” (Anderson 2012, 251). In the final section of this chapter, I will consider some of the risks and challenges facing a community such as Astell proposes, and ask if there is a workable way of carrying this proposal into a modern feminist ethic.

Collective action

Returning to the “Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual” interview of 1988, we find an unambiguous statement from Foucault that we “have to rise up against all forms of power” (Foucault 1988a), although “not just power in the narrow sense of the word, referring to the power of a government or of one social group over another”. Even given this clear advocacy of resistance, Foucault is unwilling to provide a programme of action – in fact, such a programme would run directly counter to his conceptualisation of his role, and the role of the intellectual or philosopher more broadly.⁷⁷ “I’m not a prophet; I’m not an organizer; I don’t want to tell people what they should do,” he asserts firmly. It is not, and should not, be the intellectual’s role to “tell us what is good ... For two thousand years they’ve been telling us what is good, with the catastrophic consequences that has implied”. Rather, it is “up to people themselves” to “define for themselves what is good for them”. The good is “a collective work”.

Two key elements emerge from this interview. First, Foucault is definite about the need for resistance – resistance which does include, although it goes

⁷⁷ Foucault’s resistance to programmes is plausibly linked to the perceived failures of revolutionary political movements after 1968, many of which held “Marxism as a dogmatic framework” (Foucault 1990f, 8).

beyond, opposing structural group oppression such as the oppression of women. Secondly, this is a collective endeavour. In his role as a philosopher, Foucault is unwilling to provide an account of what organised resistance should look like: this is precisely because he positions it as something which the collective should practise together, without instructions from intellectuals.

We can push this position further when considering the oppression of women and their potential resistance to structures of domination. It is not, perhaps, a weakness in Foucault's work that he does not address women's situation in detail, or ways in which women and other groups might practise their freedom. Rather, given his comments above, it is surely right that he should not provide a programme of resistance for women to follow; it is instead up to women to define for themselves, collectively, what is good and how to practise it.

This is not to say that Foucault has nothing to offer women as they work out how to rise up against power. Sawicki sees Foucault's aim as "not to provide an alternative emancipatory theory at all, but rather to provide tools that subjugated individuals might enlist in a particular set of struggles" (Sawicki 1996, 176), and it is those tools which women can draw on as they organise. Foucault may not be interested in providing women with a vision of what is good – unlike Astell – but his work nonetheless provides fruitful resources for women to draw from.

Despite her scepticism regarding the possibility for collective female action, Astell shows an awareness of women's oppression as a group, beyond the individual warping of women's selves. This comes through especially clearly in *Reflections Upon Marriage*. She refers to a "Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant", which "render[s] useless if not hurtful, the Industry and Understandings of half Mankind" (*RM*, 31), and bids a sarcastic "Adieu" to "the Liberties not of this or that Nation or Region only, but of the Moiety of Mankind!" (31). Here, she links the oppression or freedom of nations with that of women, clearly conceiving of women as a collective: the "moiety", or half, of humanity.

Famously, she compares women's subjugation with slavery: "how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne", she bitterly points out, "not *Milton* himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny" (46-47). Her most known quote is probably the aphorism "If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves?", which she goes on to elaborate: "as they must be if the being subjected to the *inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will* of Men, be the *perfect Condition of Slavery?*" (18-19). The strength with which she draws this comparison implies the moral righteousness of resistance: "Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny, *unless* they are strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and Abdicate, which I doubt wou'd not be allow'd of here [my italics]" (46). The issue here concerning collective resistance does not appear to be Astell's disapproval, but her pessimism regarding women's ability to do so: a pessimism which was hardly unrealistic given the world which she witnessed daily.

Indeed, despite her claim that "we mean not to intrench on any of [men's] lawful privileges" (*SP II*, 233) and her remark that "Women have no business with the Pulpit, the Bar or *St. Stephens Chapel*" (196), Astell does comment in passing on the possibility of organised political action by women as a class – although apparently dismissively. In *Reflections Upon Marriage*, she writes that "I do not propose this to prevent a Rebellion, for Women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection" (*RM*, 29). In this passage, the implication is that Astell's aversion to communal political action on the part of women is due less to disapproval and more to pessimism concerning its practicality. She is seemingly cynical about women's abilities to engage in collective action, writing with biting sarcasm that they "are for the most part wise enough to Love their Chains, and to discern how very becomingly they set" (29). This is a sharp insight into the phenomenon of women who internalise and support systems of sexist oppression.

Furthermore, as addressed in the last chapter, Astell does point toward the possibility of women changing society together. The discussion is admittedly brief, and does not refer specifically to challenging misogynistic structures. While women with families are duty-bound to educate their children, “the whole World is a single Lady’s Family, her opportunities of doing good are not lessen’d but encreas’d by her being unconfin’d” (*SP II*, 203). Astell actually suggests that “perhaps the Glory of Reforming this Prophane and Profligate Age is reserv’d for you Ladies, and that the natural and unprejudic’d Sentiments of your Minds being handsomely express’d, may carry a more strong conviction than the Elaborate Arguments of the Learned” (203). Her vision appears to be that single women will use “Persuasions like the Suns mild and powerful rays” to reform “Sturdy Sinners” (203) more effectively than direct argumentative attacks. Women working individually can exercise their agency to reform society, despite the problems which face attempts at collective change.

In a similar line of thought to my comments earlier regarding philosophy and social change, we can read Astell’s emphasis on individual women’s self-development and friendships between individuals as a practical response to the difficulty in uniting women in insurrection. If she is right that women “have a Spice of Masculine Ambition, every one wou’d lead, and none will Follow” (29), then an individual woman who wants to make a change – to herself or to others – is likely to have more success in cultivating her self or one other friend than she is in collective feminist action. Despite her pessimism about collective action, there is a sense in which Astell offers hope: rather than despairing at the perhaps insurmountable challenge of uniting communities of women to rise up against sexist domination, individual women can do something active and concrete as they care for and work on their selves and their friends.

As Weiss remarks, in a reading of Astell which echoes the 1960s/70s feminist slogan “the personal is the political”, “[r]esistance can take place, just like the exercise of power, in public and private, in personal relations and in

institutions, and the effects of change in one reverberate to the others” (Weiss 2016, 151). Astell recognises the limitations on women’s collective ability to resist and provides a means to do so and to change society through personal relations such as friendship.

A community of women

In Chapter One, I considered the function of Astell’s female community primarily in relation to its separatism: the way in which retreating from the world of custom and being shielded from men can be beneficial to women’s self-care. Here, however, I want to emphasise its positive role as a *community*: Astell’s project in *A Serious Proposal* is precisely a communal one, albeit not one of uprising and active resistance.

The community environment will be a place in which friendships can be fostered: exactly the kind of friendships which will assist women’s self-cultivation. Astell refers to “the seasonable Reproofs and wholsom [sic] Counsels of your hearty well-wishers and affectionate Friends, which will procure you those perfections” (*SP I*, 74), and to the community as providing “opportunity of contracting the purest and noblest Friendship” (98). Encouragement of friendship is explicitly one of Astell’s aims: “That institution therefore must needs be highly beneficial, which both disposes us to be friends our selves, and helps to find them” (99). As explained, Astell is critical of much of what passes for friendship in the world: if women are to find suitable female friends, an institutional community of like-minded women will be immensely beneficial. In the day-to-day world of custom, we may not have adequate opportunity to examine potential friends and ensure their suitability: in Astell’s “Society we shall have the best opportunities for doing so. ... the Souls of all the Religious will be open and free” (100). Within an all-female communal space, women will be best equipped to form the friendships which can be so integral to self-development and self-transformation.

However, the community as envisioned by Astell is something above and beyond the individual relationships women within it contract. “In a word, this

happy Society will be but one Body, whose Soul is love, animating and informing it,” (*SP I*, 87) Astell writes. Women will be so united in love that they will be as one. While there will be friendships, “they must by no means prejudice the general Amity” (87). It is the metaphor of embodiment which partly leads Myers to argue that “the responsibilities that structure one’s life are organically constitutive of the self” (Myers 2013, 544–45) on Astell’s model; that there is a “necessity of community ... for an individual naturally and vitally social” (546). As with Astell’s account of friendship, her description of the separatist community shows her to be dedicated to women’s bonds and relationships with other women, and the transformation that can occur resulting from such bonds.

Astell’s presentation of the community links us back to the issue of collective action. It is “not only a Retreat from the World” (*SP I*, 73), but also “an institution ... to fit us to do the greatest good in it ... the most probable method to amend the present and improve the future Age” (73). In other words, Astell intends her institution to prepare women to enact change in the world, not merely to function as a quietist retreat. This is not a training camp for women to throw off their collective chains, however: women are to enact moral change throughout society once their own virtue has been fortified enough, but they will not be challenging underlying power structures. Nonetheless, we can see in this vision some potential for action and change to occur: the potential for a community which brings women together as friends, facilitates their ethical development, and sends them out into the world to foster change where they can.

Astell presents an ethic of the self which women can follow on their own: as explained, Part II of *A Serious Proposal* is precisely such a regimen. It should not be forgotten, however, that even at the beginning of Part II Astell states that the problems concerning women’s selves and virtue “cou’d hardly be rectified but by erecting a Seminary” (*SP II*, 126) and that without such an institution “we are still of Opinion that the Interest of the Ladies can’t be duly serv’d” (126). The community, the single breathing body of women she

describes in Part I, is a key component of her ethical framework for women. For women to enact the care for the self they so urgently require, the company, friendship and love of other women dedicated to the same ethical goals will be integral.

Feminist love, friendship, and community today

While Astell is not unique as a feminist in her attention to the role of friendship, her model is worth paying attention to. I am particularly interested in her use of friendship as an *ethical* practice: something which should be carefully entered into and which should function as an ethical training for each person engaged in it.

Astell's model of friendship, and subsequent feminist accounts of friendship with an ethical dimension, are demanding. They require that we do not choose our friends based on a shared pleasure in talking about others, or on the pleasure of easy company for socialising. What Astell insists we do, to get the benefits of friendship, is to observe the other's very soul, to be sure that it is alike to our own, and then to commit to that person's interest, placing it above our own. We are committed too to a mutual ethical training: to advise and be advised, to correct and be corrected. Without such friendships in our lives, Astell suggests, we will be deficient, less able to undertake the self-work we so desperately need.

Few friendships, in my experience and observation, meet the standards Astell sets. (And nor did they in her own time, as she observes in *A Serious Proposal*.) It is more common for friendships to be based on a shared interest, the pleasant passing of time, or more superficial conversations than it is for their roots to be in a deep similarity of character and commitment to each other's good. That said, there are ways in which my closer friends and I have facilitated each other in ethical development. When I was transitioning from vegetarianism to veganism, my friend's moral commitment to veganism encouraged and influenced me, although this influence did not take the form of explicit moral counsel. Rather, she spoke about her own commitments,

encouraged me in the steps I was making, and talked through my questions and thoughts. This, however, is a relatively rare example in my own friendships of those friendships functioning as a means to ethical cultivation.

Another concern is the myriad ways in which even those friendships between women explicitly aimed at feminist ends can result in dysfunction and conflict. Judith Taylor has analysed feminist memoirs in the United States, observing that “there exists a persistent effort to make the creation of *a new ethic of social relations among women* a central goal of feminist movements” (J. Taylor 2013, 94): an ethic comparable to what I am drawing out from Astell’s texts. However, she draws from these memoirs a rich vein of “women’s cruelty to one another” (108-9), showing that the narratives “resist idealized notions of women’s happy relations with one another absent men” (110). Taylor is not dismissing the value of female friendships but pointing to the complexity and difficulty of many real friendships between women as opposed to the idealization presented by some feminist theorists. The memoirs she analyses “do not characterize relationships between women as loving and supportive” (97): they are far more complicated. The difficult reality of human relationships further troubles the uptake of ethical friendship as a feminist practice.

The relationship in my life that comes closest to Astell’s ideal for friendship is in fact my heterosexual romantic partnership. More so than with even my very close friendships, my male partner and I are willing to provide ethical guidance to each other, and to place each other’s interests first. When reflecting on this relationship, I understand most strongly the ways in which relationships with others can transform and benefit the selves involved. This challenges me, however, to ask why my friendships with other women do not play the same role as my partnership with a man; to consider how often women who focus their attention and energy on a male partner simultaneously decentre their relationships with other women. I am reminded, furthermore, of the clarity and fervour of Astell’s critique of heterosexual relationships, and the dangers they can pose for women.

What we may want to take from Astell here is not necessarily the severity of her position on relationships with men, nor the unshakeably high standards for female friendships which she sets. Both positions seem at odds with the reality of human relationships. Rather, we may want to use Astell's thought to shift perspective a little: to catch sight of a mode of friendship which is ethically transformative and deeper than many of the friendships we now fall back on; to consider friendship as part of our feminist practice, and to decentre, although not remove, our romantic relationships with men where we have them. In thinking with Astell, we may be encouraged to treat our friendships as more akin to our romantic partnerships in the seriousness with which we treat them and the care we take in choosing.⁷⁸ We may also, thinking beyond Astell, want to conceptualise our romantic partnerships as closer to such ideal friendships.

However, in society as it is – as I experience it in twenty-first century Britain, with reason to believe the situation is similar elsewhere – it is *difficult* to choose and nurture friendship in the way Astell would suggest. This is particularly the case when in a romantic partnership which forms the central bond of one's daily life. The difficulty is not merely one of willpower and dedication to the task. Rather, the difficulty is the limited time and space which a capitalist working world circumscribes for intimate relationships. Given the long hours which most of us are expected to work, and the other things which must fill non-work time – housework, cooking, exercise, commuting – relationships can be squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces. This means that it is difficult to *meet* friends of the appropriate kind, and it is difficult to *develop* those friendships. Often, one can at best maintain friendships with those one already knows, which may itself be difficult. The fact is that society is structured to enable the superficial friendships which Astell deplores, rather than to encourage deep, mutually transformative relationships. The worry once again arises that the kinds of practices Astell advocates cannot take place unless society is restructured.

⁷⁸ Of course, care is often *not* taken in choosing romantic partners. I refer here more to prevailing expectations concerning what *ought* to be done when choosing.

This does not indicate that the case is hopeless, however. Thinking again of Astell's proposal, and the notion of a community of women, one response is to put in the work to *make* spaces in which women can be together and form friendships. Such spaces need not take the institutional form which Astell proposes but can, perhaps, be more *ad hoc*: a part of women's lives rather than all their lives.

This is not a simple solution. Feminists who experienced separatist communities in the twentieth century have written of the challenges facing such spaces. Rita Mae Brown, recalling her time in lesbian separatist commune the Furies Collective in the early 1970s, writes that although they "thought we knocked down all the walls ... we discovered, painfully, ... the real walls that prevent effective political commitments between people" (R. M. Brown 1995, 129). Such walls included the class differences between members of the collective, which she pinpoints as the issue which destroyed the group. This was not the only issue, however: "The first and thickest barrier was that we lied to ourselves about ourselves" (129). The problems were not all internal to the group: Brown writes, melancholically, that it is "politically impossible to create a separate, feminist 'state' surrounded by an ocean of hostile patriarchs" (132). The internal and external pressures on the community were too much for it.

In the light of comments made by Brown and others, we might see Astell's vision of a community undivided by discord and united in perpetual love as poignantly naïve. It is not what we can expect in any real-world community of women aimed at care of the self, just as we cannot expect our real-world friendships to live up to the ideals which Astell and others have set before us. In such a context, it is easy to sympathise with Iris Marion Young's critique of the community ideal as something which "fails to see that alienation and violence ... can and do exist in face to face relations" (Young 1995, 234). As Taylor discovers in her analysis of feminist friendship, human flaws can get in the way of any professed ideal.

However, I want to resist any pessimism resulting from this point. Frye paints a defiantly optimistic and messy picture of her lesbian community, writing that “we have fought and quarreled, and trashed, and bashed, and made love and made hate, had parties and played and flowed through shifting patterns of affiliation and ostracism, and had powerful feelings of solidarity and powerful feelings of alienation from each other ... and felt great and felt terrible” (Frye 1995, 158). She concludes by stating, I think joyfully, that in her community “lesbians don’t agree about anything and *lesbians survive in droves*” (158). The value of the community of women she describes does not lie in an idealized harmony, but in the very messiness and humanity which characterises it. This is where Foucault may be of use to us: his insistent refusal to set out a vision of the good, and encouragement instead to experiment, innovate, find new ways of living, opens up the possibilities for trying and failing but failing in new, interesting and valuable ways.

Furthermore, Ferguson’s remarks on “oppositional communities” can be valuable in thinking through how such communities can manifest. Ferguson is critical of the notion of *one* feminist community, noting that “one’s gender identity ... is never entirely separable from one’s other identities, such as racial, ethnic, and class background” (A. Ferguson 1995, 375). Rather, she proposes *multiple*, overlapping feminist communities, positing this as also a way to deal with tension regarding separatism versus mixed-gender settings. By creating multiple spaces for women (and, in some cases, men and women), some of the pressure is taken off the vision of one perfect all-female community. The notion of multiple communities allows for more fluidity, change, and overlap.

From Foucault, we have the notion of innovative, playful relationships: relationships which find new forms and have no given endpoint or structure, no set vision of the good. From Astell, we have a clear vision of a community and friendships which will be an integral part of transforming women into virtuous subjects. It is in the interplay between free-form innovation and a structured programme for self-development that I believe we can find great value: the ethical vision provides us with a guide, while the curiosity and

innovation allow for experiment and change. This is not to downplay the differences between Astell and Foucault on this point: Astell's somewhat static vision of a reclusive, ordered female community is not easily at home in Foucault's world of dynamic, innovative relationships. Foucault may describe the invention of the good as a collective work, but he is not inclined toward communitarianism. It is precisely this tension, however, which I see as being productive: the Foucauldian contribution of flux and invention, and Astell's contribution of a harmonious, structured community life. Exactly what emerges from this dialogue is hard, perhaps impossible, to predict. It requires an attempt to instantiate and enact which cannot be done on the page.

Finally, this practice of friendship and communal spaces for women dovetails with my advocacy of feminist philosophical practice. Beverley Clack argues for the "role of friendship in the practice of philosophy" (Clack 2020, 152), writing that "making friendship the context for [philosophy's] practice allows something more intimate and personal to emerge" than in the model of philosophy as "thought-in-isolation" (148). Eduardo Mendieta, writing specifically about epistolary philosophy, also centres the role of friendship: "The letter is a unique vehicle for philosophy because it depends on the bonds of friendship," (Mendieta 2016, 121) he claims, adding that philosophy is "nourished by the gift of the intimacy of thought that makes its place among those who render themselves vulnerable to each other's powers of confession, justification, and clarification" (126). We can link these thoughts back to the last chapter's discussion of Le Doeuff's vision of philosophy. She conceptualises herself as "a tributary to a collective discourse and knowledge" (Le Doeuff 1977, 11), and affirms her belief that the future of women's engagement in philosophical activity will manifest in group endeavours (11). On these accounts, the intimacy of friendship has a special relation to philosophy: it can nurture it and bring it forth. In Astell's proposed institution, women will engage in philosophical practice situated within a community of potential and actual friends. This image is central to her ethic of the self.

Conclusion

Far from the suspicion of isolated individualism that has hung like a cloud over both Astell and Foucault, both thinkers in fact offer visions of human relationships and communal activity that are moving and informative for women today. With their concern for mutual, reciprocal, and loving same-sex relationships, Foucault and Astell offer new ways to resist the domination of custom while at the same time unfolding an ethics of the self which incorporates others.

That said, we can also find value in the refusal of certain relationships. Astell points to the dangers which heterosexual relationships hold for women. This is worth bearing in mind in the face of feminist criticisms levelled at Astell and Foucault concerning putative isolated selves: in Astell's framework, refusing marriage or even friendship with men is a liberatory practice of the self for women.

Where communal, group political action is concerned, it is true that this is not the first concern of either thinker. Both Astell and Foucault focus their attention on individual actions and practices. This is not, however, due to a lack of awareness of the value of the collective and communal. While Astell is pessimistic concerning the possibilities for collective action by women, she strongly values communal living and education, at a time when both were far more available to men. Foucault, likewise, points to the collective nature of the construction of the good. What both philosophers might offer modern feminists is a set of tools for women to employ within existing networks of power.

Astell's advocacy of friendship and community links to her programme of philosophical development for women, forming a set of positive feminist practices of the self to complement practices of withdrawal and rejection. In addition to these are the Christian religious and spiritual practices which she believes are integral to virtue and happiness. The relationship between religion, especially Christianity, and Astell's feminist ethic of the self is an

important theme which I have yet to address in detail. This is the subject of my fifth chapter.

Chapter Five

Religion, the divine, and the ethic of the self

In this final chapter it is necessary to address substantively the relationship between Astell's mode of Christianity, to which she is deeply committed, and the feminist ethic of the self which I identify in her texts. Some secular modern feminists encountering Astell may find her religiosity and piety disconcerting, and potentially at odds with the rest of her feminist project.⁷⁹ For many feminists today, Christianity has become associated with male-dominated power structures and the policing of women's sexuality and bodies. Astell's ecstasies over a distinctly male God who commands our obedience and obliges women to obey their husbands seem decidedly at odds with modern feminist commitments.

It is also far from obvious at first pass that a sturdily Christian framework such as that Astell commits herself to is in harmony with a Foucauldian feminist ethic of the self. Her orientation toward the afterlife, elements of self-renunciation and mortification to the world, and a rigidly defined morality all seem at odds with a care of the self aimed at transforming and developing the self, for reasons I will elaborate. It is not clear that women will find freedom practices in a religious framework so often characterised as patriarchal.

All this said, we must acknowledge too how Christian communities such as convents have offered women opportunities through history: opportunities to evade marriage, to devote themselves to spiritual self-development, and to hold positions of authority and leadership. This chapter will address the value of Astell's Christianity to her ethic of the self as well as the tensions between them, and ask if these tensions can be reconciled.

I write this chapter as a confirmed member of the Anglican church, who has long lapsed but is still drawn to the ritual, community, and sense of the

⁷⁹ A survey in 2011 suggested that British feminists, compared with the general female population in the UK, were less likely to be supportive of traditional religions such as Christianity (Aune 2011).

transcendent which religion can bring. I have also attended Quaker meetings sporadically in search of an alternative mode of religious practice. Now neither atheist nor theist, researching this chapter has opened new ways of understanding religion and philosophy of religion, particularly in my encounter with Grace Jantzen's thought. It has also challenged some long-held prejudices, especially concerning more recent religio-spiritual practices such as neopaganism and modern witchcraft.

In this chapter, I look beyond the content of Astell's religious beliefs. Drawing on approaches used by feminist philosophers of religion as well as Foucault's work on religion, I aim to address how Astell's religious practices and discourse function in the context of a feminist ethic of the self.

First I explain the mooted tensions between Christianity and feminism, adding some reflections on tensions between Christianity and an ethic of the self. This is counterbalanced by a brief account of feminist approaches to theology and the philosophy of religion: approaches which take a more welcoming stance toward Christianity.

I then look to Foucault's double-edged stance on religion, pointing to the critical inflection with which he treats Christianity but also to his revised comments on religion in the wake of the Iranian revolution. In response to Foucault's comments I revise the problematic which faces us concerning Astell's project. I primarily ask if and how the Christian practices Astell advocates function for women; whether they can serve as transformative freedom practices or whether they contribute to the detrimental effects on women's selves that Astell elsewhere tries to combat.

Moving on to Astell, I provide an overview of the scholarship on her Christian beliefs and commitments, and an account of key aspects of her belief system. I argue that Astell demonstrates how Christian discourse and practices can be used as freedom practices for women, and that their specifically religious components play important roles. At the same time, however, Astell's mode of Christianity is in tension with a modern feminist ethic of the self in several ways: most seriously, I point to a concern regarding her support for Church of

England hierarchy. In Astell, we witness a similar division to that which Foucault makes: a division between state religion operating as an institution of power on the one hand, and religious practices which can be transformative and liberating on the other.

In response, I ask if alternatives to Astell's Christianity could fulfil its functions in a modern ethic of the self, looking particularly at present day practices of neopaganism, witchcraft and the occult.

Throughout this chapter, I use "religion" and "religious" broadly to refer to established institutions which are concerned with deities or the divine, and their associated beliefs and practices. This may not be an adequate definition in some contexts: here, however, my focus will be on the Christian religion, and my use of "religion" and "religious" is intended to pick out its institutional nature and framework of beliefs. I will also refer to "spiritual" beliefs and practices. This is intended to refer broadly to those things which relate to non-worldly affairs, the inner life, the soul, the divine, the holy, or the sacred, but which need not be part of a religious framework.⁸⁰ My use of "spiritual" in this chapter is to be distinguished from Foucault's very specific use of the term which I discussed and used in Chapter Three.

Tensions between Christianity and a feminist ethic of the self

For decades, some feminists have been articulating what they see as tensions between Christianity and the commitments of feminism. Part of this tension is contingent, concerning the history and practice of Christianity: we can also find, however, tensions between feminism and the core beliefs and structures of the religion. These concerns have been concisely expressed by Daphne Hampson, a leading feminist critic of Christianity, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, an important feminist theologian.

Regarding the history and practice of Christianity, Hampson points to its nature as a patriarchal religion. "The long line of prophets, Jesus (who is central to the religion), the apostles and the leaders of the Church throughout

⁸⁰ Hence the common identification of "spiritual, but not religious".

history to the present have been men – almost without exception,” (Hampson 1985, 341) she writes, observing that women “are related to them as wives, mothers and companions” (341). Ruether makes a similar point concerning Christian leadership and ministry, particularly emphasizing the “exclusion of women from priestly roles” (Ruether 2001a, 98) and the “fundamental ordering of the Church as a patriarchal hierarchy of priest over laity and male over female” (99).⁸¹ Feminism, on the other hand, as Hampson conceptualizes it, “[strives] for women equally to be able to conceive of themselves as first-class citizens, as those who organize the world”, and affirms that “women should not have to find their identity in relation to men to a greater extent than do men in relation to women” (Hampson 1985, 341). On this account, Christianity’s extensive patriarchal history, leading up to the present day, is in direct conflict with feminist aims.

The issue would not be addressed by simply reworking modern church structures to be more inclusive of women, however. Despite the recent ordination of women as priests and bishops in the Anglican church, and in many other denominations aside from Roman Catholicism, Christianity’s tensions with feminism run much deeper according to Hampson and Ruether. Hampson goes so far as to say that there “are very real reasons why Christianity cannot so adapt [to take in women as equals]” (Hampson 1985, 342): reasons rooted in the religion’s “historical referent”. Christianity is “grounded in particular historical events and finds expression in concrete symbolism” (342). However, from the parables of the New Testament to the figure of Christ himself, these concrete historical events prioritise men and cast women as subordinate.

God and Christ are central to Christianity, and Hampson and Ruether identify both as problematic for feminists. Ruether provides five aspects of Christianity which emerge as patriarchal and oppressive: its anthropology, its account of sin and grace, God, Christology, and its ecclesiology and ministry. God is

⁸¹ Ruether’s focus is primarily on the Roman Catholic church: this analysis is applicable however to many other Christian denominations.

frequently understood as “a patriarchal male who created the world ... God rules as one with sovereign authority to dominate and punish” (Ruether 2001a, 96). Hampson argues that how “we portray God is a profoundly ethical matter” (Hampson 1985, 343), pointing out that we “cannot easily substitute for the white male image one which reflects the multiplicity of humankind” (343). If God is understood, even supposedly through metaphor and visual representation, as male (and frequently as white too), this seems to foreclose the possibility of women resembling God. Women are relegated as being *less* like God than men are.

Christ, as God incarnate, compounds the issue. It “remains the case that the second person of the Trinity is identified with a male, and not a female, human person” (Hampson 1985, 344), Hampson observes. This means that “women cannot, as can men, identify with the symbol of their God” (344-5). God is instantiated in male form and, for Hampson, this is at the heart of feminism’s conflict with Christianity. As a religion, she insists, it is “essentially tied to a symbol system in which God is conceived as a male. The implication for ... a feminist is that this cannot be her religion” (345). Ruether’s account of the “problem” of Christ for feminists emphasises the history of rationalising his maleness, particularly Thomas Aquinas’s account whereby maleness was “necessary for [Christ’s] full and normative humanness” (Ruether 2001a, 97). Even where such rationalisations are no longer given, feminists may still be troubled that the most fully human and fully divine being, God made human, is a man, and that this man is central to Christianity.

There are other concerns feminists have had with Christianity, some of which Ruether outlines. Apart from doctrinal content, we may observe very material ways in which some instantiations of Christianity and Christian churches can be detrimental to women: the frequently expressed opposition to abortion, for instance, or the negative construal of female sexuality. This is certainly not to paint all denominations, Christian leaders, or believers with the same brush, nor is it to say, with Hampson, that feminists *must* not be Christians: indeed, as Ruether herself exemplifies, there is a rich seam of feminist Christian

theology. Rather, it is to point to quite serious tensions which need to be acknowledged and addressed in an assessment of Astell's feminism.

In addition to the tensions between feminism and Christianity, we may also wonder about the compatibility of an ethic of the self with a Christian belief system. I will elaborate this further as I address Foucault's remarks on Christianity, but some preliminary comments are in order. An immediate concern is the origin and value of the self: rather than a model of self-creation, most forms of Christianity propose that our selves were in some sense created by God. Our very ability to transform our selves may indeed be dependent on how we have been thus created. Furthermore, our value and worth, on a Christian perspective, tends to originate in our status as God's creation: we are frequently discouraged from emphasising too strongly our individual self-worth as it stems from us. A Christian orientation may have God or an afterlife as the end of ethical action, rather than the self being its own end. This is a teleological distinction. We may also want to draw a methodological distinction between an ethic of the self which permits multiple routes to a desired outcome and one which prescribes a specific means to an end. A Foucauldian ethic of the self would tend towards the former, one in which individuals create their own mode of living, while Christian doctrine broadly tends toward prescription and set paths toward goodness and salvation.

The outcome of this is that we may have cause to be concerned if Christianity forms an inextricable part of Astell's feminist ethic of the self. There are good, although not perhaps overriding, reasons for thinking that neither feminism or ethics of the self are compatible with Christian beliefs and institutions. This is, however, only one side of the story: to take the question further, it is necessary to consider feminist theology and philosophy of religion, particularly Christian feminist thought.

Feminist theology and philosophy of religion

Where some feminist thinkers and theologians see patriarchy and oppression in Christianity's beliefs and structures, there are those too who see potential

for liberation and transformation. Ruether sets out as a counterpoint to Christianity's oppressive features an equally articulate account of "another framework for reading Christianity, a prophetic, liberationist framework that subverts this patriarchal reading and offers a radical alternative" (Ruether 2001b, 126). Ruether in fact identifies Astell as part of "the first *movement* of feminist theology" (Ruether 2002, 5), with another strand of this movement emerging from "radical, apocalyptic Christianity" (5) and exemplified by Margaret Fell.

Feminist approaches to theology and the philosophy of religion, and even the sociology of religion, often broaden their understanding of the aspects of religion or spirituality relevant for analysis. Traditional Anglo-American philosophy of religion has tended to take as its focus cognitive content and belief claims, usually Christian. The question, for instance, of whether it is rational to believe in the existence of a God with a certain set of characteristics, and the nature of those characteristics, is central to much of the literature. By contrast, many feminist philosophers of religion attend to other aspects of religion: Grace Jantzen, for instance, who was key in developing feminist philosophy of religion as a discipline, presents as "the aim of a feminist philosophy of religion ... becoming divine" (74). She chooses to prise apart the "theist/atheist split" and take the beginnings of her approach "from that which has been excluded from the traditional approach: desire and imagination rather than belief and truth-claim, the female rather than the male, the vulnerable rather than the all-powerful" (67). Her interest is in the religious *symbolic*, rather than a system of truth-claims. In a highly Foucauldian comment, she refers to the "mystics of medieval Christendom ... [who] offered ways of thinking and being which both subverted the dominant religious symbolic and opened creative new paths" (5). Again, the thought here concerns religion as a mode of being, a way of life: something open to creation and innovation.

Feminist sociology of religion also includes an emphasis on religio-spiritual *practices*, rather than beliefs. Kristin Aune's research into feminists' religious

engagement has found “three characteristics present in feminists’ spiritual approaches: They are de-churched, are relational, and emphasize practice” (Aune 2015, 139). This focus on practice is useful for several reasons. First, it dovetails with the emphasis on practices of the self which an ethic of the self incorporates, making it possible to think about the role of religious practices of the self in such an ethic. Secondly, it allows us to consider the function and effect of religious practices apart from the religious institution or system of beliefs. Thirdly, as I will show, it enables us to think through potential alternatives to major religions by focusing on the role which their religio-spiritual practices play.

When considering Astell’s Christianity in the light of feminist work on theology and religion, we must think not solely about the beliefs she is committed to, but about the practices which she advocates and their relationship to institutional religious structures. All these things must be addressed in relation to their effect on women’s selves.

Foucault and religion

Foucault’s remarks on religion are found throughout his writing and interviews: he does not synthesise his comments into a single cohesive position. In what follows, I draw out two aspects of Foucault’s commentary on religion. First I address Christianity’s role in the development of pastoral power and its appropriation of ancient techniques of the self: this is the more negative component of Foucault’s position. Secondly, I address Foucault’s surprisingly positive engagement with religious practices as a mode of liberation and resistance stemming from his reportage on the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s.

Jeremy Carrette devotes a book to establishing a framework from Foucault’s remarks on religion: a framework in which “a single critique of religion in Foucault” (Carrette 2000, 4) emerges. This single critique, on Carrette’s reading, has two “forms”. These are “spiritual corporality”, in Foucault’s earlier body of work, and a “political spirituality” in his later years. More important

for my purposes here than the framework Carrette draws out is his identification of how religion “forms part of a technology of the self” (149) for Foucault, especially the way in which “‘belief’ is a form of ‘practice’” (150). Continuous with many feminist approaches to religion, Foucault too is concerned with discourse and practice, questioning “the prioritisation of ‘belief’ over ‘practice’ in the Western conception of religion” (150). While I otherwise diverge from Carrette’s framework for understanding Foucault, these insights are highly valuable.

First, I address Foucault’s engagement with Christianity as an institutional religion, associated with state power. He elaborates a Christian mode of “pastorship” as one of many technologies of power, a technology most specifically emerging in Western Europe alongside “the *reason of state* and the *theory of police*” (Foucault 1999c, 145). This is a “form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation in the next world ... a form of power that looks after not just the whole community but each individual in particular” and “cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls” (Foucault 2002, 333). This religious pastoral power is continuous with the power exercised by the modern state: “In a way”, he argues, “we can see the state as a modern matrix of individualization, or a new form of pastoral power” (334). Here, Christianity is such is associated with its institutionalised form, as well as with the state which takes on the mode of pastoral power.

While Christian pastorship’s role as a technology of power does not make it intrinsically bad for Foucault, he imbues it with a negative cachet. Pastorship is one of the hallmarks of modern Western societies, and Foucault argues that such “societies proved to be really demonic since they happened to combine those two games – the city-citizen game and the shepherd-flock game [pastorship] – in what we call the modern states” (Foucault 1999c, 143). It is also clear by the end of these lectures that part of Foucault’s purpose in tracing the history of modern states is as a means to resistance and liberation. “Political rationality has grown and imposed itself all throughout the history of

Western societies. It first took its stand on the idea of pastoral power, then on that of reason of state,” he claims, summarising his account, before concluding: “Liberation can come only from attacking not just one of these two effects [individualisation and totalisation] but political rationality’s very roots” (152). By providing the story of political rationality, including its background in Christian pastoral power, Foucault is revealing the roots which we must attack to liberate ourselves. Christian pastoral technologies of power are therefore situated as in need of attack if we are to resist the state which is “both individualising and totalitarian” (152).

It is, furthermore, an act of critique on Foucault’s part simply to uncover the genealogy of the modern state.⁸² “[E]xperience has taught me”, he says, “that the history of various forms of rationality is sometimes more effective in unsettling our certitudes and dogmas than is abstract criticism. For centuries, religion couldn’t bear having its history told” (151). Two things are evident from this passage: first, that the story which includes Christian pastoral power should be unsettling to us, a form of criticism; second, that Foucault views religion too as something which has required critique through genealogy.

Foucault also argues that Christianity appropriated ancient, classical techniques of the self in a way which warps their original purpose. He highlights Christian appropriation of “two essential instruments at work in the Hellenistic world: self-examination and guidance of conscience”, which Christianity “took ... over, but not without altering them considerably” (143). These two techniques of the self – both of which are recommended in *A Serious Proposal* – become instruments of mortification when taken over by Christianity. Their goal, Foucault claims, is “to get individuals to work at their own ‘mortification’ in this world. ... a renunciation of this world and of oneself: a kind of everyday death” (143). This death to oneself and the world is “a constitutive part of the Christian identity” (143) on Foucault’s account.⁸³

⁸² For more on the role of genealogy as critique, which Foucault draws from Nietzsche, see his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (Foucault 1998a).

⁸³ Foucault’s characterization of Christianity can be somewhat monolithic, eliding the distinctions between different kinds of Christianity in different times and places. His account

Christianity and pastoral power did not, according to Foucault, cover up or destroy the care of the self, but they did deeply affect its classical form. “You find many elements [of the culture of the self] that have simply been integrated, displaced, reutilized in Christianity,” (Foucault 1997b, 277–78) he argues. “But insofar as individual salvation is channelled ... through a pastoral institution that has the care of souls as its object, the classical care of the self disappeared, that is, was integrated and lost a large part of its autonomy” (278). So, while Christianity doesn’t *displace* the care of the self on Foucault’s account, it absorbs and reorients it. While Foucault does not say so explicitly, one gets the impression that for him Christianity has functioned as a warping influence, turning care of the self into a tool of self-denial and renunciation rather than a positive practice of self-becoming.

In Foucault’s reporting on the Iranian revolution of 1978 we find an attitude towards religion which recognises it as a means of political activity as well as a transformative technology of the self. “In rising up”, Foucault remarks, “the Iranians said to themselves – and this is perhaps the soul of the uprising: ‘Of course, we have to change this regime ... But, above all, we have to change ourselves. Our way of being, our relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with God, etc., must be completely changed and there will only be a true revolution if this radical change in our experience takes place” (Foucault 1990b, 217–18). He identifies Shi’ite Islam as a set of pre-existing practices which the revolutionaries could use to transform their subjectivity in the context of a political rebellion: “religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity ... there was the desire to renew their entire existence by going back to a spiritual experience” (218). In the terminology which Foucault uses to discuss Shi’ite Islam, he evokes his work on techniques of the self and care of the self.

must be situated in his French context, in which Roman Catholicism was still a major social force. Mortification is not universally central to Christianity, and the distinction between Astell’s Anglicanism and the Roman Catholicism described by Foucault should be borne in mind.

Some religious practices, he suggests, can function as technologies of care for the self, not simply technologies of government.

Foucault is at pains to make clear that Shi'ite Islam is not simply "an ideology that is so widespread among the people that true revolutionaries are forced for a time to join it" (Foucault 2005a, 202). That is, it is more than a convenient channel for the revolutionary impulse, "a simple vocabulary through which aspirations, unable to find other words, must pass" (202). Rather, on Foucault's reading, it is a transformative "mode of social relations, a supple and widely accepted elemental organization, a way of being together" (202). It has the potential to "[transform] thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery, and despairs into a *force*" (202). At the same time Shi'ite Islam is "an inner experience, a sort of constantly recommenced liturgy" (Foucault 1990b, 214) which also brings out "an absolutely collective will" (215) towards political change. In this sense it is double-edged: both a technique for internal transformation of individual subjectivity and a conduit for collective revolt.

In Foucault's interpretation of Shi'ite Islam, we find a pre-existing set of religious beliefs, practices and institutions which are used by individuals and communities in transformative, revolutionary ways: "when I say that they were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity, this is quite compatible with the fact that traditional Islamic practice was already there and already gave them their identity" (218). This is consonant with his point elsewhere that practices of the self are never "something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault 1997c, 291). The role of religious practices and institutions as *pre-existing* social models is an important one to which we will return when looking at Astell.

Nor is Foucault's analysis of religion in this context limited to Shi'ite Islam. In a dialogue with Baqir Parham in 1979, he professes himself "astonished by the connections and similarities that exist between Shi'ite Islam and some of the

religious movements in Europe at the end of the middle ages, up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Foucault and Parham 2005, 186). These movements were “great protests against the all-powerful control of the state” (186). He even touches on early modern England, saying that “during the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth century ... we have a complete series of religious-political struggles. These movements are religious because they are political, and political because they are religious” (187). He singles out the Anabaptists as a movement which rejected hierarchies and state domination: as we will see when discussing Dissenters of Astell’s period, there were many other such groups, such as Diggers, Levellers, and Quakers.

Furthermore, Foucault did not see Christianity as solely detrimental to the culture of the self. He argues that “during the Renaissance you see a whole series of religious groups ... that resist this pastoral power” and that “[a]ccording to these groups, the individual should take care of his own salvation independently” (Foucault 1997b, 278). In these instances, we “can see, therefore, a reappearance ... not of the culture of the self, which had never disappeared, but a reaffirmation of its autonomy” (278).

Pondering Marx’s notorious characterisation of religion, Foucault suggests that “the type of Christianity that was the opium of the people was the product of political choices and joint tactics by the states, or the government bureaucracies, and the church organization during the nineteenth century” (187): Marx’s statement should not in fact be understood “as a general statement on all eras of Christianity, or on all religions”, but instead a specific historical analysis “for the time period in which he lived” (187). In this dialogue, Foucault opens the possibility for Christianity to function as a revolutionary, transformative practice in some contexts. Religion emerges as a creative practice of the self which can have liberatory political import; not only a technology of government which reinforces the “individualizing and totalitarian” (Foucault 1999c, 152) effects of the state. Comments such as these mark out some forms of Christianity as modes of resistance, capable of

facilitating an authentic care of the self. As we will see, however, it is in fact such modes of Christianity which Astell rails against in her pamphlets.

I would not want to endorse whole-heartedly Foucault's starry-eyed and perhaps deliberately provocative reaction to the Iranian revolution, which has been widely criticised - not least for his continued inattention to women's experiences. And Foucault points to concerns which will later arise for us regarding Astell's use of religion: "this double affirmation [of a collective will and a desire for radical change in ordinary life] can only be based on traditions, institutions that carry a charge of chauvinism, nationalism, exclusiveness" (Foucault 1990b, 224). The capability of Shi'ite Islam to have the effects which Foucault identifies stems from its pre-existing institutions and practices: institutions and practices which may engender a multitude of concerns.

Foucault's approach towards religion is double-edged. On the one hand he positions state religion, particularly Christianity, as a tool for exercising pastoral power and technologies of government, and on the other hand he identifies some religions as sources for transformative technologies of the self. "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad," (Foucault 1997b, 256) he remarks elsewhere, continuing by suggesting that "the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger" (256). Religion is, indeed, dangerous on Foucault's understanding.

The double-edged analysis of religion offered by Foucault will guide me as I address the role of Christianity in Astell's project. I will consider the religious practices of the self she offers, the prospect for transformation and resistance, and at the same time show the tensions caused by her commitment to the Church of England in particular. I will also bring her beliefs and practices into dialogue with feminist critiques and approaches to Christianity.

Astell, feminism, and Christianity

Christianity as such is not a single thing in Astell's writing. It has several components worth considering: Anglicanism's role as state religion and social order and instrument of power in that regard, the set of practices which constitute it as a mode of living, the set of beliefs Astell considers necessary to be a Christian, and the role those beliefs play in Astell's philosophical arguments. These are not clearly extricable, however; while my focus is on Christianity as a set of practices and beliefs, some of the functions these serve are intimately linked to the authority which a state religion grants them.

Reception of Astell's Christianity

When considering the attention paid to Astell's Christian commitments in Astell scholarship, I want to distinguish between analysis of Astell's philosophy of religion and analysis of the broader religious apparatus to which she is committed. Lascano, for instance, addresses Astell's account of the existence and nature of God (Lascano 2016), while Broad spends a chapter of her book on Astell analysing her philosophy of religion (Broad 2015). Philosophy of religion is not irrelevant to this chapter, especially as regards Astell's conception of God and salvation, but I am primarily interested here in interpretations of Astell's Anglican commitments.

Moser argues, in her reading of Astell as a theorist of trauma, that "Astell's faith, rather than detracting from the power of her theories, or being simply a by-product of her time period, as some critics have argued, is integral to her prescription for survival and recovery within this traumatic system [of misogyny and marriage]" (Moser 2016, 113). Moser situates Astell's religious commitments as central to her feminist project: a vital component of how women can cope with psychological violence and trauma. Modern work on trauma, Moser writes, "increasingly [begins] to recognize the importance of religious work" (125) to recovery. In this analysis, there appears to be no concern regarding a tension between the nature of Astell's religious faith and a feminist approach to trauma. Indeed, situating Moser's interpretation of Astell

within the framework which I am using, we see religious community and practice emerging as powerfully transformative and healing of women's selves.

Moser refers to critics who dismiss or criticise Astell's faith, specifically citing Duran's *Eight Women Philosophers*. Sowaal, likewise, points to "another concern about Astell's feminism, namely her commitment to a philosophical theology" (Sowaal 2016, 202), but does not refer to specific scholars with such a concern. Duran is indeed somewhat dismissive about Astell's Christianity, writing that "despite a head for cosmology ... Astell defended many of the more conservative beliefs of the Church of England" (Duran 2006, 81) and that "Astell was merely responding to her time in the way that someone of her (adopted) social class would necessarily have done" (82). There are, however, many pieces of work which acknowledge and sensitively address the role of Astell's Anglicanism.

Sharon Achinstein argues that "a recovery of [Astell's] religious writing is long overdue" (Achinstein 2007, 19), pointing out that she "address[ed] some of her most searching questions about the nature of human agency, personal relationships, the passions, and virtue – all questions central to feminism – through the discourse of religion" (19). To miss Astell's "spiritual orientation", Achinstein suggests, is to "miss something about early feminism": her "otherworldliness enabled Astell's contribution to the historical modes of the organization of gender as a strategic intervention regarding hierarchy, identity, and subjectivity" (28). For Achinstein, Astell's feminism is bound up with, not in conflict with, her Christianity, but her Christianity gives her feminism a notably different orientation to much modern feminism: she refuses "the priority of lived, embodied experience" (29).

Astell emerges as a key figure for Apetrei in her study of *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (2010), and this book provides some of the most valuable contextual insight into Astell's religious positioning. Whereas, Apetrei argues, theological content in early feminist writers has often been "marginalized as token or uncritical concessions to a hegemonic religious culture" (Apetrei 2010, 29–30), religion is in fact "so

centrally important [to early feminist arguments] that any attempt to interpret them without taking account of their theological content is bound to be distorting” (33). Like Achinstein, Apetrei identifies the ways in which Astell’s religious asceticism is part of, not an obstacle to, her feminism. However, there is still “an impossible conflict in Astell’s world”: a conflict between her idealization of the Anglican Church and the reality of its fallibility and corruption, and also between “her commitment to liturgy and tradition, and a feminist mysticism which rejected knowledge and authority as mediated by men” (150). This is a conflict which will emerge throughout this chapter, as we see the tension between the feminist effect of Astell’s religious spiritual practices and the hierarchical, patriarchal state religion to which she is committed.

The role of Astell’s Christianity in relation to her feminist project is questioned and problematised throughout the scholarship to varying degrees. While there may be fewer outright dismissals or criticisms of her faith than comments from Moser and Sowaal might suggest, the work which engages with it still points to tensions and points of uncertainty. Achinstein refers to a dissonance between Astell’s orientation and much of modern feminism, which may render Astell’s project particularly complicated for appropriation in a modern context. In this chapter, I reappraise the relationship between Astell’s Christianity and her feminism, and ask what can be taken forward today.

Overview of Astell’s position

As explained in the thesis introduction, Astell is a committed and orthodox Anglican, devoting considerable time in *The Christian Religion* to expounding both her interpretation of the duties of the Anglican faith – the state religion – and why it is in conformity with reason. She affirms that “I am a Christian then, and a member of the Church of *England*, not because I was Born in *England*, and Educated by Conforming Parents, but because I have, according to the best of my Understanding, and with some application and industry, examin’d the Doctrine and Precepts of Christianity, the Reasons and Authority on which it is built” (*CR*, 6). Indeed, she emphasises throughout her writing

the necessity of understanding the rational grounds of Christian faith, writing that if a woman's "Religion it self be taken up as the Mode of the Country, 'tis no strange thing that she lays it down again, in conformity to the Fashion" (*SP I*, 70). In other words, the failure to engage rationally with one's faith may lead to a failure of Christian commitment.

That said, Astell is far from advocating a critical inquiry into the authority of the Church of England. "[When] I speak of the little deference that is to be given to Names, Authorities, and receiv'd Opinions, I extend it no farther than to matters purely Philosophical ... and do not design any Prejudice to the Authority of the Church," (*SP II*, 138) she cautions. While everyone should *examine* the principles of their faith, "yet it is not fit that he shou'd draw Conclusions, contrary to what has been already determin'd by the Catholick Church, or even by that particular Church of which he is a Member, unless where it does plainly and evidently contradict that sense of Holy Scripture which has been receiv'd by the Church Universal" (138).⁸⁴ The Christian religion, on Astell's account, is open to rational understanding but not to re-evaluation or critical attention.

The God which, for Astell, is the rightful beginning and end of all our endeavours, and due all our obedience and love, is presented in traditional terms as an omnipotent, omniscient, male creator. He is "a Self-Existing Being, who is the Maker and Lord of all things" (*SP II*, 181). While she refers to the Church of England itself as a "holy Mother" (*SP I*, 84), God himself is not described with any feminine metaphors or characteristics. Indeed, Astell's God is precisely of the kind critiqued and challenged by many feminist philosophers of religion as "[d]rawn almost exclusively from the world of ruling class men ... [granting] a theomorphic character to men who rule and relegate women, children, and other men to marginalized and subordinated areas" (Frankenberry 2018). Jantzen affirms that "the masculine symbolic of the west is undergirded by a concept of God as Divine Father, a God who is

⁸⁴ The "Catholick Church" referred to here is the Church of England, not the Roman Catholic Church.

also Word ... whether it is held that there is a God or not, the *concept* of the divine serves to valorize disembodied power and rationality” (Jantzen 1998, 10). Astell’s texts consistently reinforce a male divinity modelled after human monarchy: a “divine Majesty” (*SP I*, 96), “the Author of our Being, *from* whom we derive and *to* whom we owe our *All*” (*SP II*, 210).

Furthermore, Astell straightforwardly assigns authority in the church to men: “Women have no business with the Pulpit” (*SP II*, 196), she states, earlier reassuring her readers that “[w]e pretend not that Women shou’d teach in the Church, or usurp Authority where it is not allow’d them” (*SP I*, 81). This was the orthodoxy of the time, deriving from the New Testament teachings of St. Paul, and a safe position for Astell to hold. It is worth noting, however, the existence of far more radical Christian positions on the topic. Margaret Fell (1612-1702), a founder of Quakerism who wrote before Astell, produced a pamphlet entitled *Women’s Speaking Justified* (1666), in which she marshalled a range of biblical arguments to support women’s preaching. As I will show, Fell uses some similar argumentative strategies to Astell, particularly in her interpretation of scripture, but in this respect and others presses her case much further. This demonstrates that positions such as Fell’s on women’s preaching and equality within the church were not unthinkable in Astell’s context, although certainly subject to a huge amount of criticism.

Religion as community

I have considered Astell’s proposed community as it functions as a *separatist* community and as a *women’s* community. It is also a fundamentally religious community, first described in *A Serious Proposal* as “a *Monastery*, or if you will ... a *Religious Retirement*” (*SP I*, 73). Religion, Astell writes, is “its *main*, I may say its *only* design ... Religion is the adequate business of our lives, and largely consider’d, takes in all we have to do” (76-77). Everything that is undertaken in the religious retirement must have “either a *direct* or *remote* tendency to this great and *only* end” (78). The course of study and education which Astell advocates for women is targeted towards “furnish[ing] our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge” and understanding, without which “we can

scarce be *truly*, but never *eminently* Good”: after all, without “a competent degree of Knowledge” we may expect to be “carried about with every wind of Doctrine” (77). Christianity is central to Astell’s community, which is modelled after a monastery or a convent in its design.

Astell is conscious of the similarities between her community and a convent, and the two serve many of the same functions. Perry describes nunneries as “the time-honored solution for single gentlewomen that Astell adapted for her *Proposal*” (Perry 1986, 132), pointing to the fact that since the dissolution of the monasteries and convents a century and a half earlier, there “was nowhere for a genteel woman to go, nothing for her to do, if she would not – or could not – marry” (133).⁸⁵ Convents had signified “an alternative refuge for a woman outside of her family circle” (133): a mode of life for women other than marriage. Astell’s community is a convent without vows and without the permanence of becoming a nun, but is nonetheless a community bound by religious belief and practice which offers an alternative way of life to that of custom.

The community of religious practice Astell envisions for women has the effect of legitimating their spiritual and physical withdrawal from worldly, misogynistic society. The everyday world of custom is, as established earlier, associated with social structures and practices which warp women’s selves, rendering them incapable of being virtuous subjects. Astell offers as an alternative a community which values and supports women’s selves, recognises their dignity, encourages their education, and does not collaborate in the image-obsessed culture of everyday society. The monastic setting serves as a refuge for “those who are convinc’d of the emptiness of earthly Enjoyments, who are sick of the vanity of the world” (*SP I*, 73).

Once a woman is situated in a communal religious environment, “to what heights of Piety will not she advance, who is plac’d where the sole Business is

⁸⁵ That said, note should be taken of the existence of English convents-in-exile in Europe, to which some women from English Catholic households continued to go. For more detail, see Bowden and Kelly 2013.

to be Good, where there is no pleasure but in Religion, ... where her Soul is not defil'd nor her Zeal provok'd, by the sight or relation of those Villanies the World abounds with?", Astell asks. We find here an intriguingly double-edged point. On the one hand, Astell's religious community will protect women from the "road of temptation" (95) to which the everyday world subjects them. This function has a straightforwardly feminist interpretation: we can understand the value of providing women with an alternative, separate lifestyle from that which they are usually expected to undertake. On the other hand, however, Astell also wants her religious community to shield women from being provoked to anger at the wrongs of everyday society: they should not have their "Zeal provok'd". This aspect is more problematic in the context of a modern feminist project, and one I will return to when considering the passivity Astell's Christian practices encourage.

The function of shielding women from misogynistic social structures and practices, and providing them with an alternative way of life, does not require a *religious* community to be fulfilled. On the face of it, any space serving as a "Mountain where the world will be plac'd at our feet" (*SP I*, 97) would have the effect of removing women from the ill effects of sexism which Astell so eloquently identifies.

There are several key roles which religion plays, however. First, Christianity provides a compelling alternative set of practices and behaviours for women: rather than being cut adrift from their normal vain and frivolous activities, such as fashion or gossip, with no clear idea of how to replace them in such a way to care for their selves appropriately, women can simply adopt a previously existing way of life. I consider this at more length in the next section.

Secondly, Anglicanism provides validation and legitimation for women's withdrawal from society. By providing women with a *Christian* lifestyle to follow, Astell attempts to place her project beyond reproach: naysayers risk being charged as un-Christian, against God himself. Nor is this merely implied: "Now, who that has a spark of Piety, will go about to oppose so

Religious a design?" (*SP I*, 107), Astell asks, perhaps somewhat mischievously. In fact, the similarity of Astell's proposition to a Roman Catholic convent did draw opposition: on Perry's account, "it was the Catholic tinge to Mary Astell's plan, its similarity to the old nunneries, that prevented it from being put into practice" (Perry 1986, 134). Nonetheless, the proposal's religiosity provides it with a certain amount of respectability: I follow up this notion of religious validation in later sections.

Finally, the religious orientation of Astell's community provides its emotional and spiritual heart: it binds women together in love and desire for the divine. Her "happy Society" will be "perpetually breathing forth it self in flames of holy desires after GOD, and acts of Benevolence to each other" (*SP I*, 87). This is a powerful bond. I consider the emotional centrality of desire for the divine below, but I want to emphasise here its function in bringing women together, uniting them around a common purpose. Moser points to Astell's "religious vision" (Moser 2016, 126) as a key element in women's recovery from trauma, describing the "unity of individual spiritual transformation with the support of a community of women devoted to one another's spiritual good" as "a formula for recovery from trauma both at the individual and the societal level" (126). Here, a community of women devoted to the same spiritual ends serves to heal their selves from detrimental effects.

Religious practices

Foucault writes that practices of the self are "not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault 1997c, 291). The implication is that alternative practices of the self, practices of liberation or resistance, also require models: they cannot simply be invented by the subject. Such a model is provided by Christianity for Astell: she provides women with a set of alternative practices to undertake. These are practices other than customary practices of self-adornment and conformity to fashion.

In the proposed religious retirement, “a stated portion of [time will be] daily paid to GOD in Prayers and Praises” (*SP I*, 84), and the women will “pay a strict conformity to all the Precepts of their holy Mother the *Church*” (84). These include at a base level “the daily performance of the Publick Offices after the Cathedral manner ... the celebration of the Holy Eucharist every Lords Day and Holyday, and a course of solid instructive Preaching and Catechizing” (84). Beyond this, “they will consider it as a special part of their Duty to observe all the Fasts of the Church, viz. *Lent, Ember, and Rogation-days, Fridays and Vigils*” (85). *The Christian Religion* goes into more depth concerning appropriate religious practice, elaborating sets of duties to God, to our neighbours, and to ourselves. It is necessary to pay God “Publick Homage, in a Congregation Assembled according to His directions” (*CR*, 100), for instance.

“An habitual Practice of Piety for some years will so root and establish it in us, that Religion will become a second Nature, and we must do strange violences to our selves, if after that, we dare to oppose it,” (*SP I*, 100-101) Astell writes near the end of the first part of *A Serious Proposal*, again invoking the early modern ethical emphasis on habit. Here, as elsewhere, Astell explicitly links the habitual *practice* of religion to its effects on women’s *selves*: “having long since laid the Ax to the root of sin ... they will look upon these holy times of recollection and extra-ordinary Devotion (without which Fasting signifies little) as excellent means to keep it down, and to pluck up every the least Fibre that may happen to remain in them” (85). By following a rigorous alternative set of practices to those pushed upon them in the world of custom, women will accustom themselves to being differently. Astell’s use of Christian practices here recalls Vintges’ vision of a Foucauldian “feminism oriented to freedom practices” (Vintges 2004, 294) which “entails creating alternative ways of living to that which is deemed the life of ‘normal woman’ by the predominant culture” (294). For women in Astell’s community, renunciation of the everyday world and commitment to alternative ways of living go hand-in-hand with a renunciation of the misogyny and domination of women which

structures our society. The Anglican framework to be adopted provides a sturdy, readymade, and socially sanctioned alternative mode of being.

Epistemic validation of women

On multiple occasions, Astell wields her religious beliefs to validate women's epistemic authority and independent access to the truth. Since "GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls", she inquires, "why should they be forbidden to improve them?" (*SP I*, 80): it is their status as God's creation which both permits and, indeed, *requires* women to work on their own rational selves and gain knowledge. If God "has given to Mankind a Rational mind", she argues later, "every individual Understanding ought to be employ'd in somewhat worthy of it" (*SP II*, 168). By presenting intellectual self-improvement as a duty to God, Astell provides divine legitimacy to women's pursuit of understanding.

Furthermore, she identifies union with God with attainment of knowledge and truth, in Platonist fashion: "our Beatitude consists in the contemplation of the divine Truth and Beauty ... can Ignorance be a fit preparative for Heaven?" (*SP I*, 81). Each person who applies themselves, it seems, can access divine truth: "For the GOD of Truth is ready to lead us into all Truth, if we Honestly and Attentively apply our selves to Him" (*SP II*, 163). Union with God is accessible by individuals who follow an appropriate regime of intellectual and moral training: "if we love GOD with *All* our Soul ... our *Desires* will be carried out after nothing but GOD and such things as may further our Union with Him" (219). By presenting a God which can be accessed and communicated with unmediated by religious figures and institutions – despite Astell's commitment to the Church of England – Astell is providing a warrant for each individual woman's epistemic authority. Women are legitimated in their *pursuit* of knowledge by being the rational creation of God, and the knowledge that they *attain* in their search is similarly divinely sanctioned. "GOD has not only allow'd, but requir'd us to judge for our selves," (*CR*, 31) she insists.

As well as validating women's epistemic authority, Astell draws more broadly on the concept of a creator God to argue for women's dignity and purpose

independent of men. “As for those who think so Contemptibly of such a considerable part of GOD’s Creation, as to suppose that we were made for nothing else but to Admire and do them Service, and to make provision for the low concerns of an Animal Life, we pity their mistake,” (*SP II*, 232) she writes scathingly. A woman is to be respected and esteemed “because she is GOD’s Workmanship, endow’d by him with many excellent Qualities, and made capable of Knowing and Enjoying the Sovereign and Only Good; so that her Self-Esteem does not terminate in her *Self* but in GOD” (233). While the injunction that women should value themselves not for their own sake, but because they are the product of a male creator God, may be uncomfortable for modern readers wanting to establish women’s self-worth on their own grounds, Astell is effectively placing women’s dignity beyond question. This point is aimed not just at men, but at women themselves: due consideration of having been created in God’s image will challenge their internalised prejudices regarding their own nature, and assist them in realising their potential for self-development.

Sowaal points to the argumentative role which God plays in Astell’s method to help women overcome internalised prejudice. “Astell must hold what I will call the Principle of God’s Power and Wisdom” (Sowaal 2007, 234), she writes, which “implies that every part of his creation has a use” (234). As she interprets Astell’s argument, “the kind of education that will fulfil God’s design is one of inward reflection” (235): this consideration will “relieve [a woman] from her skeptical predicament by redirecting her from the [Women’s Defective Nature] Prejudice and toward the view that she is a rational being who *can* and *ought* to improve” (235). While Sowaal is correct in identifying the cognitive role which God plays in Astell’s argument, she perhaps overemphasises the role of belief as such: “Astell’s meditator comes to a resolution of the WDN Prejudice when she comes to believe that she was created by a wise God, who gave her a perfect nature ... This new understanding of metaphysics leads the meditator to improve herself” (239). Sowaal’s discussion of belief and metaphysics underestimates the extent to

which Astell's Christianity is a spiritual and emotional commitment, not simply a piece of her philosophical argument.

Scriptural validation of women

Astell draws on scriptural authority, established elsewhere as unquestionable in her religious framework (*CR*, 26-27), to shore up her case for women's dignity and rationality. This is most evident in *Reflections upon Marriage*, in which she invokes biblical authority to make her case for the natural equality of men and women: "The Bible is for, and not against us, and cannot without great violence done to it, be urg'd to our Prejudice," (*RM*, 28) she writes, arguing in a lengthy passage that "Holy Scripture considers Women very differently from what they appear in the common Prejudices of Mankind" (23). Her use of scripture here is highly reminiscent of Margaret Fell's in *Women's Speaking Justified*, referred to earlier: like Fell, Astell invokes key biblical women to demonstrate their value and the role they play in the holy texts.

Meticulously displaying her scriptural knowledge, Astell shows how "no small part of [the Sacred Story] is bestow'd in transmitting the History of Women famous in their Generations", beginning by reminding her readers of "Two of the Canonical Books bearing the Names of those great Women whose Vertues and Actions are there recorded" (23), referring to the Book of Ruth and the Book of Esther. She lists a multitude of noble and admirable biblical women: Rebecca, Rebecca's Nurse, Miriam, Deborah, "that valiant Woman who deliver'd *Thebez*" (24), Samson's mother, Abigail, "the wise Woman (as the Text calls her) of *Tekoah*" (24), the queen of Sheba, "a *Widow-Woman* whom GOD made choice of to sustain his Prophet *Elijah at Zarephah*" (25), Huldah, "four Daughters of *Philip*, Virgins who did Prophecy" (26). Slyly, Astell writes that it "wou'd be thought tedious to enumerate all the excellent Women mention'd in the New Testament" (27), before going on to relate the names of several.

As well as simply emphasising the number of women to be found in scripture, Astell skilfully interweaves her account with commentary on their qualities and the conclusions we can legitimately draw from their inclusion. From

Deborah's story, for instance, Astell highlights how "tho' she had a Husband, she her self Judg'd *Israel* and consequently was his Sovereign ... Which Instance, as I humbly suppose, overthrows the pretence of *Natural Inferiority*. ... *Deborah's* Government was confer'd on her by GOD Himself. Consequently the Sovereignty of a Woman is not contrary to the Law of Nature" (24). Indeed, she returns throughout this passage to the divine authority granted women to govern.

Nor is her account confined solely to virtuous characters: by referring to "the Mothers of the Kings of *Judah*" (25), including "the wicked *Athaliah*" (25), Astell draws attention to "the great Respect paid them, or perhaps their Influence on the Government, and share in the Administrations" (25). Even Jezebel is invoked in this context to demonstrate the political influence women are depicted as enjoying in biblical narratives. This deliberate emphasis on women's political authority in scripture is particularly provocative given Astell's insistence elsewhere that she is not trying to encourage women to seek political authority, but simply to gain mastery of their own selves. It renders her sincerity on that point, as is often the way with Astell, difficult to determine.

Astell even goes so far as to point, subversively, to the misogyny displayed by the apostles. She relates the account of "the Holy Women who attended our Lord to the Cross" (27) who were rewarded by being sent "to Preach the great Article of the Resurrection to the very Apostles, who being as yet under the Power of Prejudices of their Sex, esteem'd the Holy Women's *Words as idle Tales and believed them not*" (27). Astell's interpretation of scripture shows even Jesus's chosen disciples to be subject to misogynistic prejudices which contribute to the invalidation of women's epistemic authority. At the same time, she emphasises the significance of the women in question, who should indeed have been believed. Notably, this example is also employed by Fell, as part of her case for the permissibility of women preaching: "It was *Mary Magdalene*, and *Joanna*, and *Mary the Mother of James*, and the other Women which were with them, which told these things to the Apostles, and their

Words seemed unto them as Idle Tales, and they believed them not. Mark this, ye despisers of the Weakness of Women” (Fell 1666, 6-7).

The insistence on the unshakable authority of scripture may initially have problematic connotations for a modern feminist project. If women have “the obligation to hold certain books as a permanent source of truth” (Foucault 1999a, 169), to quote Foucault concerning Christianity’s “obligation[s] of truth” (169), then they are seemingly obliged to accept whatever “truths” about their gender that those books contain. In other words, the texts of presumably male authors must take priority over women’s own rationality, and potentially contribute to the warped self-image which Astell rails against. Certainly, some feminists have taken biblical texts to be irredeemably misogynistic and “unalterably patriarchal” (Upton 2006, 100), in which case their unquestioning acceptance could prove highly detrimental to women’s sense of self. Indeed, attacks on women in Astell’s period were frequently rooted in biblical evidence: Joseph Swetnam, for instance, writing just under a century before Astell, drew from biblical examples in his misogynistic pamphlet *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615).

Astell, however, takes the unquestionable authority of scripture and cleverly manipulates it to feminist ends: she creates a feminist counter-narrative from a collection of male-dominated texts, applying feminist hermeneutics to scriptural resources to show how women are divinely validated in the dignity, virtue and authority which her contemporary English society frequently denied them. Because “there is not any thing more certain than what is delivered in the Oracles of GOD” (*RM*, 22), Astell renders her case safe against argument – those who would argue *for* female inferiority are implicitly situated as un-Christian. This strategy was not unique to Astell: women such as Rachel Speght (1597 – unknown) and the pseudonymous Ester Sowernam can be found decades earlier using scriptural exegesis in direct refutations of Swetnam’s pamphlet (Speght 1617; Sowernam 1617).

There is perhaps some tension in Astell’s scriptural interpretation between her encouragement of “reasonable, honest, and unprejudic’d enquirers” (*CR*, 30)

into “the Truth laid down in Holy Scripture” (30) and her requirement that Christians submit to Church authority. It is notable, however, that she writes: “if thro’ the sublimity of the subject, my ignorance of the Sacred Languages, of Ecclesiastical History, and the ancient Usage of the Church, any point in controversy be too difficult to me, and that after all my diligence I can’t clear up the matter with Evidence and Certainty ... if there is a necessity to determine, I will with all humility submit to GOD’s Authority in his Church” (34). In this passage, Astell prioritises her individual interpretation of scripture, and appears to position Church interpretation as second place. It is to be resorted to *if* she cannot clear up confusion on her own account. Here, as elsewhere, we witness Astell’s inclination toward individual, personal access to divine truth, bypassing Church authority even while acknowledging it.

Astell’s use of scripture does not simply challenge male prejudices against women. It provides a tool for women to re-envision their own selves: another means to be liberated from the “Women’s Defective Nature” prejudice. Astell’s feminist biblical hermeneutics emerge here as a practice of the self which develops women’s self-esteem by providing scriptural authority for their value. By reading scripture attentively through this light, women can challenge common misogynistic ideas about their selves.

Quietism and the afterlife

Although religious discourse and practice can function in service to women’s care of the self, Astell’s Christian commitments nonetheless pose some major problems for a modern feminist appropriation of her work.

One of the most serious is the focus on the afterlife and future salvation which she encourages in women. Astell herself writes, albeit with some bitter irony, that it “is very much a Man’s Interest that Women should be good Christians”, since “She will freely leave him the quiet Dominion of this World, whose Thoughts and Expectations are plac’d on the next” (*RM*, 75). By focusing her attention on a time “when her Sex shall be no bar to the best Employments” (75), Astell claims, a woman will have “a sufficient compensation for all the neglect and contempt the ill-grounded Customs of the World throw on her”

(76). The prospect of heavenly recompense is “a sufficient Cordial to support her Spirits, be her Lot in this World what it may” (76). Astell explicitly states in these passages that women’s attention being appropriately fixed on the afterlife will console them for the mistreatment which is meted out to them in this world, thus permitting men to continue their regime of domination.

Astell’s treatment of marriage most prominently highlights this concern: her vivid descriptions of the miseries that marriage can bring to women, outlined in the last chapter, throws into sharp relief the quietism of her recommended response. It is only the existence and reverence of God on Astell’s account which can ensure women’s obedience to men in the married state. “Indeed nothing can assure Obedience, and render it what it ought to be, but ... the paying it for GOD’s sake,” (*RM*, 75) she states, immediately after discussing women’s behaviour in marriage. We have a “clear and sufficient Reason” to obey God’s commands: after all, “nothing but what’s Just and Fit, can be enjoy’d by a Just, a Wise and Gracious God” (75). No such reason, however, obliges women to obey “Men’s Commands” on their own account, not “unless they can prove themselves infallible, and consequently impeccable too” (75). This is precisely why it is men have an interest in women’s devout Christianity: without respect for divine authority to ensure a wife’s proper obedience, women would simply have no reason to submit to their husbands. *Given* this divine authority, however, it seems that married women are indeed compelled toward obedience.

This acceptance of the way things are on earth due to the promise of eternal salvation does not merely affect women’s outward behaviour. The practices which Astell advocates in *A Serious Proposal* are intended to ensure that women react *internally* in the appropriate ways to the injustices of the world. This appropriate reaction is not one of anger and a zeal for change: rather, Astell wants her readers to achieve a “Felicity which depending on GOD only and your own Minds, is out of Fortunes reach, will place you above the Batteries of the world, ... and enable you at once to triumph over and despise it” (*SP I*, 98). The ideal “Temper” for women to be in is “Recollect and

Compos'd, holding our Minds in as even a poise as ever we can between Mirth and Melancholy ... both of [which] weaken and dispose it [the soul] for Passion" (*SP II*, 215). If women focus on "Spiritual and Future" things, Astell argues, they will "find 'em of Weight and Moment sufficient to employ all her Passions" (217), while the sensible Impressions of the day-to-day world "will be scarce taken notice of; or be look'd on with Indifferency, because they ... are not of value enough to discompose the Mind" (217). If "we Love GOD with *All* our Soul", "our *Desires* will be carried out after nothing but GOD" (219) and we will inevitably from this gain serenity of the soul (220).

Some legitimate anger is permitted, but in relation only to violations of God's will: "If ever we are *Angry* it will be when His Laws are Contemn'd and Right Reason violated; a just *Indignation* will arise when the Worthless are Prefer'd, and Merit is left unregarded" (220). On the whole, however, our focus on God helps us to accept that "this world is not a soil for perfect Happiness to Grow in" (228): while we're "expos'd to the Contempt and Outrage of the World ... that makes us less in love with it, and more ready to welcome Death, whene're it brings the kind Releasing Summons" (228). Women may acceptably take note of the problems of everyday society, but this largely serves to facilitate their *renunciation* of the world, not anger in service of its reformation.

While earlier in the thesis I argued that the component of mortification and renunciation of the world which Foucault identifies in Christianity functions as a freedom practice for Astell, here a flip side emerges. Death to and withdrawal from the world fosters indifference to oppression and injustice; a lessening of the urge to change which seems integral to feminist projects. In recommending to women that they train themselves to find happiness in God, their own selves, and their projected salvation, and temper their passions and emotional engagement with the everyday world, Astell is using religion rather as a coping mechanism than as a freedom practice. For women who otherwise find their treatment by men unbearable, or the constraints of an unhappy or abusive marriage intolerable, a retreat from the world and a retraining of

attention on God and the afterlife could in fact be invaluable as a technique for individual women to live in otherwise untenable situations.

This notion of a coping mechanism may not be intrinsically problematic in the context of a feminist ethic of the self. With the development of women's selves in mind, in a society designed to warp, damage and suppress them, Astell's religious strategies function as a way for women to shield those selves from damage. Given the ubiquity of the forces which work to damage and harm women, and the insurmountable difficulty of escaping or dismantling such forces, anger may be of little use for them. The religious strategies work as protective mechanisms in the world as it exists for Astell, rather than in an ideal world. Disengaging from social issues, rather than encouraging anger at injustices, has been found to be a coping mechanism practised by modern feminists (Watson et al. 2018), with some women reporting a "half-hearted desire for more 'blissful ignorance' to the ways in which oppression operated in their daily lives" (304) . The authors of this study remark that "it is important to recognize that possessing a feminist lens may also bring about distress" (304). While not ideal, the use of a religious coping mechanism in the face of oppressive circumstances is not necessarily in conflict with a feminist ethic.

The Church: state, hierarchy, power

"If we allow that GOD Governs the Universe, can we so much as imagine that it is not Govern'd with the Greatest Justice and Equity, Order and Proportion?" (SP II, 227), Astell demands of her reader in Part II of *A Serious Proposal*. As this question indicates, her Christian beliefs are at odds with endeavouring to effect societal transformation: after all, "[i]s not every one of us plac'd in such Circumstances as Infinite Wisdom deems to be most suitable ... ? What reason then to complain of the Management of the World?" (227). Despite her criticisms of women's miseducation and abuse, Astell frequently invokes divine authority to shore up social hierarchy. "Christians are under the strictest Obligation to render Active Obedience to Just Authority," (CR, 119)

she sternly informs her readers in *The Christian Religion*. She even goes so far as to argue that it is “better that I endure the Unreasonableness, Injustice, or Oppression of a Parent, a Master, &c., than that the Establish’d Rules of Order and Good Government, shou’d be superseded on my account” (138). “Order and Government must be maintained,” (138) she repeats.

Astell’s prioritisation of hierarchy as a result of her Christian commitments raises serious questions about their compatibility with any feminist project. Most feminists are committed to challenging the hierarchy of men over women at the very least, and many conceptualise the feminist project as being more broadly in opposition to hierarchy and domination. bell hooks, for instance, writes that feminism “is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society” (hooks 2014, 26). Astell, however, is dedicated both to a hierarchically structured organisation and to that organisation’s dominance to the exclusion of others.

This is best shown in her approach to Dissenters and Nonconformists, Protestant Christians who separated from the Church of England: these groups ranged from Baptists and Quakers, who continue today, to the Diggers and Levellers with their more radical political aims.⁸⁶ Astell was scathingly, viciously critical of the Dissenters in her political pamphlets, writing of the “necessary Duty” to “lay open the Secret Designs of the Dissenters ... to make all the good Laws we can, to defend us from their Treachery” (FW, 112-113). Despite the appeal which Dissenting groups tended to have for women (Zook 2007, 108), Astell’s approach to them is mired in fear and contempt, partly due to their purported challenge to social order, partly due to other concerns such as “the sexual politics and double standards of male Whigs and Dissenters” (112). This social order, as Zook observes, for Astell entails “loyalty, hierarchy, and social deference” (113). Astell’s resistance to Dissenting groups is particularly notable since many such organisations fostered radical approaches

⁸⁶ For a detailed account of the radical beliefs of these groups, and their social context, see Hill 1975.

more harmonious with feminist ends than the Church of England. The Quakers, for instance – then and now – have consistently challenged social hierarchies and sexual inequality.

While feminist Christian theology and liberation theology may read into Christianity a radical faith which challenges hierarchy and oppression, this is evidently not the mode of Christianity to which Astell is committed. In the face of alternative modes of Christianity, available to her in her own time, she is dedicated to the state religion and all that entails. Astell scholars have worked to solve some of the immediate problems this faces for her feminism: Broad, for instance, argues that “Astell’s ideas concerning female autonomy ... are entirely compatible with submission to the Church, provided that such submission is made after a careful process of critical reflection on past beliefs and values” (Broad 2019, 727). This is certainly a plausible reading of Astell. However, for a modern reclaiming of a feminist ethic of the self, this compatibility is not sufficient. Astell’s commitment to state and Church hierarchical power is at odds with critical practices of resistance and freedom, which I believe are valuable.

Transcendence and the erotic

Finally, before reflecting on the implications of Astell’s use of Christianity, I must emphasise its sheer emotional centrality to her project. The prospect of union with the divine provides Astell, and her readers, with the most intense forms of pleasure, and is the object of the most profound desire.

The “Seraphic Soul”, Astell writes, who “devotes her self entirely to the Contemplation and Fruition of her Beloved” enjoys an “*Acme* of delight” as she “moves in a direct and vigorous motion towards her true and only Good”. This good is God, whom such a soul “embraces and acquiesces in, with such an unspeakable pleasure, as is only intelligible to those who have tried and felt it” (*SP I*, 75). A mystical element emerges here: union with the good is inexpressible, and not understandable, except by those who have experienced it directly.

The theme of desire for God, and delight in Him, is repeated with greater intensity in Part II of *A Serious Proposal*. Astell writes, in an erotically charged turn of phrase, of a desire to be “peirc’d with the Beams of [God’s] Glory, and wounded, not to Death but Life, with the Arrows of his Love and Beauty” (*SP II*, 212). God is “that infinite Good which alone can satisfie us ... Somewhat too ineffable to be nam’d, too Charming, too Delightful not to be eternally desir’d!” (212). Again, there is a mystical character to this passage: a mysticism which Apetrei notes, observing that it is “surely significant that seventeenth-century feminism so frequently went hand-in-hand with this mystical principle” (Apetrei 2010, 128). Astell is at her most ardent here, writing of the intense pleasures of direct encounters with the divine. These encounters entirely bypass the hierarchical structure of the Anglican church in favour of an immediate experience of pleasure. Indeed, Astell’s mystical elements are somewhat in tension with her “commitment to liturgy and tradition” (150) in the Anglican church, as Apetrei observes. By speaking of such direct encounters with God, Astell removes the need for her religion to be mediated by male authority figures.

The emotional charge of Astell’s desire for the transcendent Good, a desire which she finds hard to imagine others do not share, is a powerful force throughout her texts. For her, it is a source of pleasure and bliss which is not to be found in the material world: it is the only thing worth desiring. The yearning for transcendence or unity with the divine is far from exclusively Christian: indeed, it is not even exclusive to those who would term themselves religious. The draw towards such an experience is something I have strongly felt myself, and those moments in which I have felt something similar to Astell’s delight in God are highly treasured, although I characterise them in different terms.

This is perhaps the most substantial loss incurred if we separate Astell’s religion from her feminist ethic of the self: a movement towards the divine, the transcendent, the ecstatic – the element of desire. While such a movement need not be feminist in nature, it offers a dimension of beauty, awe and

wonder. We can consider Audre Lorde's writing on the erotic: considered not as a purely sexual impulse, but as "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (Lorde 2007, 88). For Lorde, the erotic experience is a spiritual experience, and her account of it bears comparison with Astell's experience of the divine. It "flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience" (90). For Lorde, this erotic energy comes from within: for Astell it comes from without, from beyond. For both women, it offers the possibility of transformation and ethical development. Lorde describes the erotic as making us "responsible to our selves in in the deepest sense". I suggest that, however this desire and emotional charge is conceptualised, it is a valuable part of a full life, and beneficial for an ethic of the self.

Reflections

Is Astell's project separable, at least in theory, from its religious orientation, and particularly from Astell's orthodox Anglicanism? The answer is not straightforward. Christian belief and practice play multiple valuable roles in her framework: the provision of a community united around a common faith, a set of alternative practices to those suggested by custom, a coping mechanism in the face of misogynistic society, and the validation of women's dignity and epistemic authority. These are functions which could perhaps be replaced with alternatives. A community's common goal need not be religious to bind it together, for instance. However, Astell's faith functions too as the emotional core in her project, providing an ecstatic desire and yearning for union with divinity which may leave her ethic emotionally diminished and directionless if removed. The movement toward the transcendent which runs throughout her writing may be possible to excise in a modern feminist ethic of the self, but it is not evidently desirable to do so.

The specifics of Astell's religious and spiritual commitments, however, may be less intrinsic. As it is, there is a tension between her dedication to the state

religion, with its patriarchal and hierarchical structures, and her advocacy of women's self-realization and autonomy. While scholars have done excellent work resolving this tension to some extent (Apetrei 2010; Broad 2019), there is still an acknowledged puzzle in Astell's writing which would dissolve if the Anglican church was no longer at the heart of her project. She puts Anglicanism to good use in many respects: by appealing to the authority of the state religion, interpreting it through a favourable lens, women can defend their withdrawal from misogynistic social structures and their pursuit of knowledge and intellectual development. However, many of the functions it serves could potentially be replaced. This is especially the case for a modern feminist ethic of the self, given the decreased social authority of the Church.

The second question of interest is to what extent we *want* to separate Astell's project out from its religious and spiritual elements. I think there is good reason to separate it from the specifics of her religious commitments, while still retaining their broader value. The religious practices which Astell advocates are double-edged: they work to facilitate women's self-transformation and development, and at the same time provide protection against external attack. However, there are numerous concerns regarding their relationship to a feminist ethic of the self.

Astell grounds women's self-worth in God, rather than in their own selves. There is a contradiction between an ethic of the *self* in which the self is its own object and Astell's Christian framework in which God is always positioned as the ultimate end. While I addressed this briefly in my first chapter, my proposed resolution – the identification of the self with the divine rendering care of the self and obedience to God one and the same – is not ultimately satisfactory. It seems as if Astell uses God to aid women in turning away from the everyday world and developing their own selves, only to position him as a male figure in whom all their projects must terminate, valuable only for his sake. This also renders the foundation of Astell's project problematic in a more secular world: if women's value and worth is ultimately assured by God, then they seem to be on shaky ground if belief in a creator God crumbles. If God

leaves the picture, women seem once again vulnerable to attacks on the value and capabilities of their selves. It would be desirable for women's value to have a surer footing than this.

There are also serious conflicts between feminism, understood as an anti-hierarchical project, and Astell's approach to the Anglican church as state religion. Furthermore, by appealing to Christianity and the divine as the ultimate authority, whether to facilitate one's own self-development or to defend against outward pressures and criticisms, women also seem to close off opportunities for practising liberation and resistance *against* the church. And indeed, it is hard to deny that Christianity as a state religion has played its role in contributing to the domination of women, regardless of whether its practices and modes of existence can *also* be appropriated to feminist ends.

"[T]hat is, I think, the deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness, of Christian technologies of the self: no truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self," (Foucault 1999a, 180) Foucault claims in his later lectures. I have not approached Astell's Christianity from the perspective of Foucault's analysis of truth and self-renunciation, but we can see a comparable contradiction – or richness – in the relationship between her Christian faith and practice on the one hand and her feminist project on the other. Her faith provides the emotional, yearning heart of her texts: at the same time it supports submission to injustice in favour of order, hierarchy over chaos, eyes fixed on posthumous salvation rather than changes that can be wrought in the material world.

Looking forward, we can consider whether there are religiously oriented frameworks and practices which fulfil the positive functions that Astell finds in Anglicanism while also providing more opportunities for women's creative self-development. It is possible that no such ideal religious framework exists; many women may be happier trying to discard this part of Astell's project entirely. For those, however, who feel drawn towards a spiritual, religious dimension to existence, or already have religious commitments they wish to honour, alternatives are worth seriously considering.

Spiritual practices beyond Christianity

By understanding the tensions at play between Astell's Christianity and the feminist ethic of the self visible in her project, we can work out the points at which an alternative framework needs to differ from Astell's own. We might want to insist on a way of life oriented at the world as it is, rather than toward an all-too-uncertain posthumous salvation; we may too want to ensure that the worth of women's selves, and the legitimation of their self-development, does not terminate in an exterior creator God. We may want a religion or set of spiritual practices that is neither patriarchal in structure and origin, nor implicated in hierarchical and oppressive power structures.

There are many other religions than Christianity: I will not here be attempting to evaluate major religions such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism for their compatibility with a feminist ethic of the self. Given the close links between these religions and cultures, ethnicities or races, and the fact that some of them are opposed to proselytising, it would be inappropriate either to advocate or dismiss such religions wholesale in relation to my project. I will also not be considering other versions of Christianity, although I am extremely drawn to denominations such as Quakerism. Rather, I want to discuss here alternative, perhaps novel and creative, religio-spiritual frameworks which are open to newcomers and separate from mainstream, more conventional religious traditions.

One such alternative framework has been claimed by some women to lie in spiritual traditions such as Wicca, neopaganism and witchcraft, or other magical sets of practices.⁸⁷ Tracy L. Luff points to "two main branches of feminist spirituality": those who "work within the Judeo-Christian [sic] tradition, and revolutionaries who create completely new spiritual visions"

⁸⁷ Neopaganism is a broad term referring to loosely organised movements emphasizing magical practice and a purported recovery of ancient magical and spiritual traditions. Wicca is a specific form of neopaganism developed in the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout this section I will use "magical" and "occult" broadly to refer to Wicca, witchcraft, astrology, tarot, divination, and other frameworks or sets of practices which invoke the supernatural outside the realm of mainstream organized religions. This is not intended to be a rigorously delineated concept, and I want to leave space for the possibility that some such practices or sets of practices are more valuable or worthwhile than others in this context.

(Luff 1990, 91).⁸⁸ She identifies “[m]odern witchcraft” as one such form of “revolutionary feminist spirituality” (91), and argues compellingly for the value of some such spirituality for feminists. There have been close links between neopaganism and feminism since the 1960s and 70s, with some forms, such as Dianic Wicca, welcoming only women and focusing exclusively on female deities (Urban 2015, 169, 171). Many feminists associated with these movements have seen them as a radical alternative to patriarchal and hierarchical religions, with a frequent emphasis too on environmental issues (Griffin 1995, 39).

Witchcraft and associated practices such as astrology and tarot provide a set of alternative practices for women, something other to the disciplinary, detrimental practices of mainstream misogynistic society. In fact, practice, rather than belief, is central to many forms of witchcraft and magic, with Hugh Urban writing that “[neopaganism] may be thought of as a religion of ‘ortho-praxy’ (‘right practice’) rather than ‘orthodoxy’ (‘right belief’)” (Urban 2015, 166). Such a focus on practice is consonant with Aune’s findings regarding feminists’ religio-spiritual approaches (Aune 2015), and is also well-aligned with an ethic of the self which emphasises practices. The practices used in Wicca can have specifically feminist effects, according to Luff: “The rituals help women to overcome some of the self-doubts instilled in them by patriarchy and to be comfortable with both their bodies and their sexuality” (Luff 1990, 101). Here, the use of ritual and practice appears to be directly aimed at helping women develop and recover their selves from the damage inflicted by custom.

The specific practices undertaken in neopaganism, witchcraft, or other magical tradition vary immensely. Much neopagan practice is centred on ritual, which can “be performed for a wide array of purposes” (Urban 2015, 167): these purposes include “honoring a deity” and “harness[ing] spiritual

⁸⁸ “Judeo-Christian” is a term I have seen frequently criticised by Jewish people as one which subsumes the distinctly Jewish aspects of Judaism into a Christian framework, as well as excluding Islam as one of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths. I want to point as well to Hindu feminists, Sikh feminists, and feminists who find support and value in the spirituality of many faiths other than Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

energy toward some practical goal, such as protection and physical and psychological healing” (167). The rituals are often heavily symbolic, involving the “carving out” (167) of a sacred space, implements representing the four traditional elements of fire, earth, air and water, and the invocation of a deity. Luff, discussing Wicca, includes “ecstatic singing, shouting, and/or dancing, or silent meditation” (Luff 1990, 100) among potential ritual practices, but emphasises that “[i]ndividual witches or covens are encouraged to modify and expand upon rituals” (100). Practices can be linked to political action, which I will expand upon shortly: Luff refers to “a 1980 ‘gathering’ to speak out against ... a multinational corporation involved in arms production” (101). This collective Wiccan practice incorporated street theatre and singing as part of political protest. Other modern forms of witchcraft involve working with symbols, talismans, altars, herbs, and texts to achieve some end, while tarot readings often use archetypal symbols and images to stimulate reflection and self-knowledge. Practices may be linked to an ethical framework which valorises the natural world, individuality, or womanhood, depending on the tradition or group.

Magical and occult practices are having a moment in popular feminist media and culture today. These are often more loosely conceived or organised than the structured neopagan practices referred to, but there is a burgeoning interest among young women in witchcraft, astrology, tarot and other occult practices. Online feminist media outlets often host articles on these topics. *Autostraddle* referred to the “age of the Resurgence of the Witch” in a roundtable discussion in 2015, while in 2018 *Vice* magazine pointed to how, over “the past two or three years, astrology has shifted from being a niche interest to a major point of enthusiasm for many women and queer people” (Ewens 2018). *Cosmopolitan*, a magazine which, while hardly radical in its feminism, nonetheless pays lip-service to its ideals, regularly publishes articles on astrology, tarot, and other forms of magic.

Indeed, the substitution of religion for more esoteric disciplines is often recognised in public discourse. “Women and queer people are drawn to

astrology because it offers community and refuge, something to lean on during a time in which religion has taken a back seat,” argues Hannah Ewens in *Vice*. Beth Maiden, writer and practitioner of tarot, explicitly contrasts tarot and witchcraft with “organised religions with rules and regulations” (*Autostraddle* 2015), arguing that it is “radical how marginalized people seek out, embrace and actively create alternative spirituality and health/wellbeing practices, away from what we’re offered in ‘regular’ society”. Here, Maiden explicitly frames alternative spiritualities as options for the marginalized to take up which are not those of everyday custom.

Unlike many religious frameworks, however, these occult practices facilitate playfulness and creativity. “Tarot is exciting, creative, fun, thought-provoking, inspiring”, writes Maiden; “there are as many approaches to tarot cards as there are people to read them. ... once you’ve got your cards it’s absolutely up to you how you want to work with them”. This element of creativity and unique invention runs through women’s comments on witchcraft: “that’s at the core of witchy practice: healing through self-reflection, enacted in a practice that’s uniquely your own,” writes Cecelia; “Queer people know the power of building movements by creating, subverting, and refashioning new meaning for language. When I talk about magic, this is what I mean,” (*Autostraddle* 2015) she continues. Whereas many religious discourses and practices can be rigid in their prescriptions, there may be fewer limits to how astrology, witchcraft or tarot can be implemented by their adherents.

Neesha Powell-Twagirumukiza points to another purported distinction between religion and magical practices: “Most religions”, they write, “require worship of a patriarchal figure who punishes you for doing wrong, while magic allows us to harness our power within” (2017). This crude portrayal of religion aside, Powell-Twagirumukiza is highlighting here the self-originating nature of many magical practices. Rather than, as in Astell’s Christian framework, women’s self-worth and value terminating in an external God, these magical modes of subjectivity place the origin of value in the self. “In a world that devalues both my womanhood and my personhood, brujeria and witchcraft

give me power that comes from that womanhood” (*Autostraddle* 2015), writes Mey Rude.⁸⁹ Luff in fact identifies “self-actualization and valuation of self” (Luff 1990, 96) as the first major value of Wiccans emerging from a review of Wiccan writing. This valuation of the self for its own sake strongly accords with an ethic of the self.

Occult practices are also used as practices of purported resistance against structures of domination. Powell-Twagirumukiza writes movingly about how “the word ‘magic’ fills my head with images of enslaved Black people preserving their ancestral deities in the Americas by practising Voodoo and Santería. ... I use magic in my everyday life to combat individual and systemic oppression” (2017). Another witch, Laura, writes that “being a witch is about paying attention to our bodies and the earth, rethinking what society tells us is valuable, and using all that knowledge to create well-being and sisterhood” (*Autostraddle* 2015). Sady Doyle traces the history of feminists wielding magical practices as a form of resistance, pointing to the mid-twentieth century “explosion of neo-pagan traditions, including the witches’ coven that initiated ... Starhawk” (2019).⁹⁰ Through “Starhawk’s anarchist, ecofeminist lens”, Doyle continues, “witchcraft was not just a way to acquire magical powers, but was a deeply political act”. Doyle identifies witchcraft as “the choice to worship something other than patriarchy’s gods, to reject and read backward the narratives of the dominant culture”. Occult ways of life, it seems, provide the opportunity to practice liberation in ways which resist dominant religious institutions as well as the other aspects of sexist social structures. Doyle concludes her article with a call to arms of sorts for women: “Our power is waiting for us, out in forbidden spaces, beyond the world of men. Step forward and claim it. Step forward into the boundless and female dark”. Unlike Astell’s Christian framework, it seems, these forms of magical practice are directly targeted at changing and challenging the everyday world,

⁸⁹ *Brujería* is a broad term for various kinds of Latin American witchcraft beliefs and practices.

⁹⁰ Starhawk (1951 -) is a well-known pioneer and theorist of feminist and ecological Neopaganism.

rather than fostering contentment with it and orienting oneself towards the afterlife.

If feminist witchcraft, astrology, tarot and other magical sets of practices can provide alternative lifestyles and practices for women which can function as practices of resistance without the concerns I have raised about Christianity, should I then endorse occult frameworks as valuable to a feminist ethic of the self? It certainly seems that these ways of living provide creative alternatives to mainstream modes of existence which legitimate women's selves without recourse to an external creator. They can provide communities of speaking and listening, unconstrained by the code-based moralities of Christianity. They furthermore provide pre-existing practices for women to adopt, but with the room to play and create. Despite these features, I have experienced a deep discomfort with these sets of practices and their widespread acceptance by popular feminist and queer media.

I am forced to admit, nevertheless, after considering this discomfort, that it seems to arise at least partly from a prejudicial valuing of more widely practised religious traditions over newer ones such as Wicca. I experience a respect and an appreciation of more traditional faiths and practices even when I do not practise them myself, and have found great value in religious and spiritual texts from Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. Such religions that I do not share myself have not invoked in me the tendency toward scorn or dismissal I have experienced towards magic and witchcraft. If I want to argue that spirituality and religious frameworks can play a valuable role in a feminist ethic of the self, then my instinctive resistance to innovative spiritual frameworks often developed by and for women may be poorly rooted. While Astell would have been horrified to think of witchcraft as an adequate, even an improved, substitute for Anglicanism in her project, I have no similar commitment to Christianity which would warrant such a response.

An initial line of argument I attempted to develop against occult and magical alternatives to mainstream religion revolved around the use of reason. Fundamental in Astell's regimen for women's self-development is the

development of their reason and their intellectual capabilities, with God – as demonstrated – being key to the legitimisation of women’s intellectual development. It is precisely because God has created women as *rational* minds that we can infer our duty to develop those minds. We should practise logical thinking and the construction of sound, valid arguments. I was under the impression that there is no such prioritisation of reason in the magical practices I have been discussing. Rather, women and other marginalised groups are supposed to harness their power and combat oppression by casting spells or reading the stars – things I had classed as non-rational at best, irrational at worst. These occult sets of practices and their advocates, I argued, encourage women to set aside rational thought and their intellectual capacities in favour of wishful thinking.

My thinking resembled Martha Nussbaum’s critique of Foucault in *The Therapy of Desire*. She argues that while Foucault is right to “[stress] the extent to which they [Hellenistic philosophers] are not just teaching lessons, but also engaging in complex practices of self-shaping” (Nussbaum 1994, 5), this is something “the philosophers have in common with religious and magical/superstitious movements of various types in their culture” (5). The distinctive contribution of philosophical ways of life in Hellenistic culture, Nussbaum insists, is “that they assert that *philosophy*, and not anything else, is the art we require, an art that deals in valid and sound arguments, an art that is committed to the truth ... the pursuit of logical validity, intellectual coherence, and truth delivers freedom from the tyranny of custom and convention, creating a community of beings who can take charge of their own life story and their own thought” (5). This latter quote is of course deeply resonant with Astell’s project in *A Serious Proposal*. Astell, too, is committed to a philosophical set of practices – embedded within a Christian framework, with all the problems we have identified – which prioritise reason and truth.

However, reflecting more recently and in dialogue with Heloise Thomas, a queer writer and academic who practices witchcraft, I have come to feel that

this argument does not hold.⁹¹ Firstly, I have been made aware of a greater emphasis on rationality in some magical frameworks than I was initially willing to accept. Thomas writes that “witchcraft and the myriad practices that are connected to it” are “meant to guide in the crafting of a philosophical system”. There is a requirement for “rational coherence within whichever system you’re functioning”, and a limitation on meanings. They also emphasise the “huge ethical side ... which also connects to the very ontology that you subscribe to and which implies knowing in depth about the philosophical, religious, and ethical traditions that you culturally come from”. Rationality, they write, is core to magical practice: “the religious/spiritual part of things is not meant, at least if considered properly, to curtail the use of reason; on the contrary, you can’t actually be a good witch if you haven’t established, rationally, what your relationship to the world is, how you define the self, etc”. While they acknowledge that much of the popular uptake of witchcraft is superficial, failing to engage in-depth with the above rational constraints and systematisation, this is not a failing in witchcraft as such.

I have written earlier in this thesis about the possible limits of reason in ethical life. Indeed, philosophers such as Pascal and Hume emphasise its limits in all areas of life: Pascal writes of two “excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason,” (Pascal 1966, 85) suggesting that reason’s “last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that” (85). He links this moderation of reason to Christianity: “If we submit everything to reason our religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural. If we offend the principles of reason our religion will be absurd and ridiculous” (83). There are parts of human existence which are not subject strictly to reason: the use of the symbolic, the ritual, the mystical, and the ecstatic can be components of a rich human experience. Griffin writes, concerning feminist witches, that “regardless of intellectual debate, the women have felt the need to replace one

⁹¹ Thomas also writes under the pen name A.K. Afferez. I am grateful to them for permission to use the following material from a private exchange in Twitter Direct Messages in September 2019. Their Twitter handle is @akafferez.

set of mythic images with another, and have created religious images and symbols that have special significance and meaning for them ... they continue to engage in this process of creation each and every time they do ritual” (Griffin 1995, 46). A magical and occult practice which is internally coherent but which gestures beyond reason to the symbolic and ritual need not be in conflict with philosophical modes of being.

This is not to say that articles such as “Everything You Need to Know About Dating a Libra Man” (Register 2020) need to be welcomed as a significant component of a feminist ethic of the self. But then, as I discussed in Chapter One, neither do many popular means of “self-care”. Superficial, disconnected, and often commercialised magical practices – what Heloise Thomas refers to as “froth” – may be useless, and potentially detrimental. Coherent symbolic (and non-patriarchal) frameworks of practices, however, with the benefits I have already outlined, could serve as valuable alternatives for women seeking to incorporate spirituality in their feminist ethic of the self. Such practices can contribute to self-knowledge and reflection, as with tarot and astrology, foster a sense of internal power and capability, provide an emotional and symbolic core, and encourage innovation and creativity. I do not advocate this as a necessary component of a feminist ethic of the self, but working on this chapter has provided me with a greater understanding of modern witchcraft and considerably altered my prior prejudices. Astell would, certainly, be horrified: Foucault, I think, would not.

Conclusion

I want to return to a quote I used earlier: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad” (Foucault 1997b, 256). In the end, we are always compelled to search for the lesser danger, to accept one danger as a means of resisting another. The ambiguous, double-edged role of Christianity in Astell’s project should hardly come as a surprise in a Foucauldian reading. It provides divine authorisation for women’s selfhood and epistemic authority as well as a legitimate alternative way of life – but at the same time fosters a death to the world and

submission to divine providence which directly conflicts with an attitude of resistance and revolt. Alternatives, however, will have different dangers. The search for the ideal feminist ethic of the self or way of life is not, I think, a fruitful one. In the end, perhaps, all we can do is use whatever means are available to us to find modes and moments of resistance.

Foucault writes of an “anti-strategic” ethic: “to be respectful when something singular arises, to be intransigent when power offends against the universal” (Foucault 1999b, 134). “One does not have to maintain that these confused voices sound better than the others and express the ultimate truth,” he insists. “For there to be a sense in listening to them ... it is sufficient that they exist and that they have against them so much, which is set up to silence them” (133-134). When considering the role which religion can play in a feminist ethic of the self, then, this should be borne in mind: we do not have to endorse or commit to a framework, or accept their truths, but recognise where moments of revolt, resistance and transformation are occurring.

A critical conclusion

Failure and curiosity

Someone once told me that a PhD thesis is never finished, but only cauterized. This metaphor evokes the living, developing nature of a thesis: rather than ever being whole and complete, it is cut off as it grows, tangled with other things, and never, ultimately, done. Concluding such a document is not a matter of tying a tidy bow, but of doing one's best to draw together disparate thoughts and strands without leaving too many loose ends. It is a matter, perhaps, of finding a way to stop writing. In this conclusion, aside from bringing together what I have done in a summary, I aim to reflect on and evaluate the project: to ask what I have done rightly and where, conversely, I have not achieved my aims.

One way of conceiving these concluding reflections is in terms of failure. Perry Zurn provides a taxonomy of failure in "Work and Failure: Assessing the Prisons Information Group" (Zurn 2016). He evaluates the GIP (*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*) according to five modalities of failure: discursive, structural, deconstructive, systemic, and productive. Discursive failure is "not to do what you say you do" (Zurn 2016, 83), structural failure is "to not do what you try to do", deconstructive failure is "to create consequences that inhibit or cancel out what you do", systemic failure is "to participate in a system that inhibits or cancels out what you do", and productive failure is "to successfully accomplish one thing by 'failing' to accomplish another thing". On Zurn's account, the GIP evaluated the prison system along these criteria, and the GIP can itself be evaluated using the same criteria. This taxonomy of failure, and its complementary taxonomy of "work", can help in thinking through what in this thesis has "worked" or "failed", and in what ways. Have I done, or failed to do, what I say I am doing, or what I am trying to do? Have I created consequences that either reinforce or cancel out what I am trying to do? Am I participating in a system which supports or inhibits what I am trying to do?

Finally, have any of my failures constituted productive failures? I will not answer these questions systematically, but return to them throughout this conclusion, allowing them to guide my reflections.

This project was intended as a dialogue between Astell and Foucault, and to engage with the body of literature on each thinker. An initial point of evaluation is to ask what I have offered to both fields of scholarship. The thesis has brought Astell's project into a modern context more extensively than other literature, treating her not merely as an historical philosopher but as a feminist theorist whose ethical vision may speak to our times. I have positioned her work within a new theoretical framework, providing novel possibilities for analysis and interpretation. By using Foucault's ethical thought, I have shown how Astell's work functions as a feminist ethic of the self which incorporates care for the self and practices of freedom and resistance.

Regarding Foucault, and Foucauldian feminism, I have identified Astell as an historical reference point for an extensive woman-authored and woman-aimed ethic of the self. I have used Astell to demonstrate how Foucault's ethical work can be gendered: why women need an ethic of the self, the obstacles they face to its practise, and how it can function for them. Using Astell's writing, I have pointed to and helped to fill in the gendered gap in Foucault's work, supplementing the valuable work already done by Foucauldian feminists. At the same time, I have provided interpretations of Foucault's thought throughout the thesis which challenge dominant readings, such as attending to his comments on homosexuality and love.

In these regards, I believe that my thesis has largely been a discursive success, to use Zurn's terminology: in providing useful contributions to Astell scholarship and to Foucault scholarship I have done what I said I was doing from the beginning. The more challenging task, however, has been my attempt to put forward a modern feminist ethic of the self in dialogue with Astell and Foucault: one which is drawn from Astell's texts but which is guided

by a Foucauldian framework and influences. I have tried to contribute to modern feminist thought and practice.

What, in the end, are the possibilities for a such a feminist ethic of the self? Can an Astellian ethic work for our present moment? In each chapter, I have offered reflections on how Astell's ethic of the self could translate to the modern world, asking what can be taken forward and what must be discarded or reimagined. I have largely offered scaled back, more tentative versions of Astell's proposals, suggesting that we can incorporate some of her ethic in our lives as women and feminists today, and offering guidance on how we can do so.

Particularly salient for the present day is Astell's insight that women's ethical selves can be adversely affected by misogynistic social structures and habits. If there is one point we should take from her, it is the clarity with which she urges women to look to their selves and to identify how their self-development has been inhibited or misdirected. Women are called to attend to what *really matters*: this ethical urgency is important in a modern context where the language of virtue is rarely spoken in popular feminist discourse. To be obsessed with one's appearance, one's clothes, or one's beauty will never be empowering in Astell's framework, regardless of whether women feel good doing so. Such an obsession is always detrimental to women's ethical selves.

As well as the ethical clarity which Astell provides, her advocated practices of withdrawal and separation can speak to women today. By withdrawing from the male-dominated world of custom, women can find a space to reflect and regain their autonomy. While the separatist community envisioned by Astell no longer seems wholly viable, it is easier to envision some deliberate spaces for separation or acts of withdrawal from the everyday world. Not engaging with social media or entertainment for periods of time, for instance, or choosing to spend less time socialising with men, could be ways for women to refocus their attention on their selves. By rejecting bodily practices of the self and other practices aimed at altering women's physical appearance, women can attend instead to their intellectual and ethical self-development.

The ethic of the self drawn from Astell is not solely a negative programme of withdrawal. It contains positive elements which contribute to liberation and resistance: the practice of philosophy, especially as critique; ethical and loving friendships between women; a community of practice; a spiritual heart providing its motivating force. Again, these are elements which we can take up as part of modern feminist practices: the critical use of philosophy to unpick customary misogynistic beliefs and practices, for instance, or the development of ethical friendships. While such practices do not overtly contribute to a radical societal restructuring, they may nonetheless contribute to individual feminist self-development, constituting ways in which individual women or small communities can enact resistance and transformation.

I wonder, looking back at these offerings, if there is something sadly reduced in the ideas for a feminist ethic of the self that I have put forward: they lack the clarity and boldness of Astell's proposals. Where Astell has recommended a withdrawal from the world and separation from men, I have suggested *some* level of withdrawal from *some* worldly things, and *some* spaces for women to be separated from men. The concerns which I have identified regarding Astell's project are serious and real, but the force of her motivation and the clarity of her vision are lessened by the caveats which those concerns introduce.

There is a solution to this problem, however. To leave room for the creation and innovation which Foucault urges us towards, and to be mindful of the risks of offering rigid programmes for action, there must necessarily be something sketchy and incomplete about what I can offer on the page. After all, it is not just Foucault who is cautious of programmes: bell hooks is critical both of "[e]quating feminist struggle with living in a counter-cultural, woman-centred world" and of the "the notion of an alternative feminist 'lifestyle' that can emerge only when women create a subculture" (hooks 2014, 29). For hooks, emphasis on these elements can leave women feeling that their everyday lives and experiences have been devalued, and neglect the political components of feminism. For these reasons, it may be valuable to offer

guidance toward a feminist ethic of the self, based on Astell's, but not to push a comprehensive programme or lifestyle on those who may not welcome it. "People have to build their own ethics," (Foucault 1990f, 16) Foucault affirms in a later interview. By working jointly with Foucault and Astell, we can offer *possibilities* for a feminist ethic of the self but must nonetheless provide the opportunity for those who wish to take up such an ethic to build their own.

I have pointed towards some possibilities for a feminist ethic of the self, and in this respect I believe that my thesis again "works" discursively: I have done what I said I would do. There are, however, limitations to what I have done, and ways in which I have failed. The most pressing of these is the issue of intersectionality.

Throughout the thesis, I have commented occasionally on how axes of oppression such as race, class or transness could affect an Astellian ethic of the self for our time. Reflecting now, I believe that these have been insufficiently accounted for: I have not addressed the ways in which an Astellian ethic of the self could be a specifically white feminist ethic, or intrinsically oriented towards women of higher social classes. By failing to attend to the possibility of a distinctively Black feminist ethic of the self, or a trans ethic of the self, I have implicitly centred whiteness and cisness, placing them as the norm from which other identities deviate. Kimberlé Crenshaw observed over thirty years ago that the "value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged," (Crenshaw 1989, 154) and that Black women's "exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women*" (154). Despite being aware of this, I have not adequately applied the insights of Crenshaw's intersectional framework to my work in this thesis. This omission parallels Foucault's own cursory attention to gender in relation to ethics of the self. I have added questions of gender to Foucault's framework, but continued to treat race, transness, class and sexuality as optional to discuss. Nor is this justified by focusing on an early modern philosopher: in attempting to bring Astell's framework for women into a modern feminist context I am responsible for considering salient

features of that context. Despite my discursive success in offering a potential feminist ethic of the self, I consider this a structural failure in that I did not do what I was *trying* to do. My intention was certainly to be intersectional in my approach to oppression and identity and to provide an ethic of the self which was sensitive to these issues. I have not done so.

This failure is indicative of the need to build intersectional approaches in from the beginning of a philosophical project. It also demonstrates how easy it is to overlook the issue: unthinkingly to treat aspects of one's own, socially dominant identity, as the default. By attending to the nature of this failure, new avenues of research and exploration are opened: questions concerning how whiteness inflects ethics of the self, for instance. In this way, the structural failure may not be productive *per se* – it has not, in its very failure, produced something else – but it contains the seeds of production.

This PhD thesis has been undertaken within the UK academic system. While my PhD is indeed an academic project, aiming to contribute to the scholarship in several fields, I have also been working on something which would ideally have a role outside academia. A feminist ethic of the self, if it is to be useful and not merely speculative, and especially if it is to function as an ethic of freedom and resistance, must not be an ethic for just a few academics. The academic system, however, is often not conducive to disseminating material like this to a broader audience: the necessity of publishing journal articles, for instance, to remain competitive on the job market requires that research is presented in outlets which will be read by very few people, and next to no non-academics. My journal article about Astell's philosophical practice, published in *Metaphilosophy*, was not made open access because neither I nor UCL was willing to pay to make it so. While the academic system certainly does not preclude public engagement, and in some ways offers support for it, it is nonetheless a system built on the production of academic research for other academics, particularly in the humanities. It is also important to be

conscious of how academia itself can reinforce and uphold structures of oppression including misogyny and racism.⁹²

The feminist ethic of the self which I have been offering, conversely, is intended to function as a means of resistance against domination, and advocates the creation of women's spaces for practising philosophy outside the academy. My project has been completed, therefore, within a system which at least partially inhibits or cancels out its very aims. Returning to Zurn's taxonomy, I can classify it in this regard as a systemic failure. This does not render the project worthless: it does, however, signal the need to look beyond the university for ways to practise and discuss feminist ethics of the self. This goes hand in hand with my pre-existing desire to engage in philosophical work outside of academic contexts, and the work I have done to facilitate this.

Zurn argues for "the possibility that political resistance might require us to fail – and to work – in more and in different ways" (Zurn 2016, 84): that failure is not a single-faceted, morally bad event, but complex, informative and useful in its own right. This stance complements Foucault's advocacy of curiosity. The process of curious innovation and experimentation is one which must permit failures of various kinds. Foucault's comments on curiosity are tender and moving:

[Curiosity] evokes care; it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. ... I dream of a new age of curiosity. (Foucault 1997d, 325–26)

⁹² Sexual harassment, particularly of female students, is frequently not investigated properly. We may also want to consider how curricula can uphold racism and sexism, the role of universities in enforcing the hostile environment policy in the UK, and the paucity of Black professors in the UK, among many other examples.

I have been curious throughout this thesis, and that very curiosity provides an opening for the possibility of failure. These failures are not “bad” as such: at least not in virtue of their being failures. In fact, the areas where failures have occurred point towards fruitful directions for further experimentation and curiosity. Some of this future experimentation can take place in an academic context, in the form of further research into Astell, Foucault, feminism and ethics of the self. Some, however, must necessarily take place in people’s day-to-day lives: must be attempted, practised and lived, not merely theorised. A number of the questions which have gone unresolved in this thesis may find their answers only in this way. An ethic of the self cannot remain solely written if it is to be of value: it must be enacted for the transformation to occur.

Bibliography

"conversation, n.". 2020. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed August 6 2020. <https://www-oed-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/40748?rskey=sJJYzb&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

"Effective Weight Loss Retreat for Women." n.d. *the Body Retreat*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.thebodyretreat.co.uk/retreat/weight-loss-retreat>.

"Highly Cited Researchers (h>100) According to Their Google Scholar Citations Public Profiles." n.d. *Ranking Web of Universities: Webometrics ranks 30000 institutions*. Accessed July 28 2020. <http://www.webometrics.info/en/hlargerthan100>.

"Home." n.d. *Mary on the Green*. Accessed August 6 2020. <https://www.maryonthegreen.org>.

"The Nourish Retreat: Women's Empowerment." n.d. *Ibiza Retreats*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.ibizaretreats.com/group-retreats/womens-empowerment-retreats>.

"Our 5 Demands." n.d. *Women's Place UK*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://womansplaceuk.org/our-5-demands>.

"pragmatism, n.". 2020. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed August 6 2020. <https://www-oed-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/149293?redirectedFrom=pragmatism>.

"self-care, n.". 2020. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed August 12 2020. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/175131?redirectedFrom=self+care>.

“Women.” n.d. *retreat.guru*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://retreat.guru/be/women>.

“Why It’s Time For You To Go On A Women’s Retreat.” n.d. *BookRetreats*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://bookretreats.com/blog/why-go-on-a-womens-retreat>.

“Why We Are Witches: An A-Camp Roundtable.” 2015. *Autostraddle*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.autostraddle.com/why-we-are-witches-an-a-camp-roundtable-291366>.

Achinstein, Sharon. 2007. “Mary Astell, Religion, and Feminism: Texts in Motion.” In *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michael Michelson, 17–29. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate.

Ahearn, Kathleen A. 2016. “Mary Astell’s Account of Feminine Self-Esteem.” In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss, 35–56. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Allen, Amy. 2004. “Foucault, Feminism, and the Self: The Politics of Personal Transformation.” In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 235–57. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Alvarez, David P. 2011. “Reason and Religious Tolerance: Mary Astell’s Critique of Shaftesbury.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44 (4): 475–94.

Anderson, Penelope. 2012. “Covert Politics and Separatist Women’s Friendship: Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell.” In *Friendship’s Shadows: Women’s Friendship and the Politics of Betrayal in England, 1640–1705*, 222–259. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Apetrei, Sarah. 2010. *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment*

England. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aristotle. 2009. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Edited by Lesley Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Armstrong, Aurelia. "Michel Foucault: Feminism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://iep.utm.edu/foucfem>.

Arnauld, Antoine, and Pierre Nicole. 1662. *La Logique ou l'Art de penser*. Charles Savreux, Jean Guignard, Jean de Lavnay. Paris. *Early European Books*.

Astell, Mary. 1717. *The Christian religion, as profess'd by a daughter of the Church of England*. Printed by W.B. for R. Wilkin. London. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.

———. 1996a. "Reflections Upon Marriage." In *Political Writings*. Edited by Patricia Springborg, 7-80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1996b. "A Fair Way With the Dissenters and their Patrons." In *Political Writings*. Edited by Patricia Springborg, 87-127. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1996c. "An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion." In *Political Writings*. Edited by Patricia Springborg, 135-197. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2002. *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. Parts I and II*. Edited by Patricia Springborg. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd.

Astell, Mary, and Bridget Hill. 1986. *The First English Feminist: Reflections Upon Marriage and Other Writings*. Edited by Bridget Hill. Gower/Maurice Temple Smith.

Astell, Mary and John Norris. 1695. *Letters concerning the love of God*. Printed for S. Manship and R. Wilkin. London. *EEBO*.

Astell, Mary, and Patricia Springborg. 1996. "Introduction." In *Astell: Political*

Writings, edited by Patricia Springborg, xi–xxix. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aune, Kristin. 2011. “Much Less Religious, a Little More Spiritual: The Religious and Spiritual Views of Third-Wave Feminists in the UK.” *Feminist Review* 97 (1): 32–55.

———. 2015. “Feminist Spirituality as Lived Religion: How UK Feminists Forge Religio-Spiritual Lives.” *Gender and Society* 29 (1): 122–45.

Ballard, George. 1752. *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*. Printed by W. Jackson, for the author. ECCO.

Banicki, Konrad. 2012. “Therapeutic Arguments, Spiritual Exercises, or the Care of the Self: Martha Nussbaum, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault on Ancient Philosophy.” *Ethical Perspectives* 22 (4): 601–34.

Barber, Stephen M. 2004. “Exit Woolf.” In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 41–64. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1990a. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York; London: Routledge.

———. 1990b. “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” In *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, 63–82. New York; London: Routledge.

Beauvoir, Simone De. 2009. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.

Bernauer, James W., and Michael Mahon. 2005. “Michel Foucault’s Ethical Imagination.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, edited by Gary Gutting, 2nd ed., 149–75. Cambridge.

Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2018. ““When Tables Speak”: On the Existence of Trans Philosophy.” *Daily Nous*. Accessed July 28 2020.

<http://dailynous.com/2018/05/30/tables-speak-existence-trans-philosophy-guest-talia-mae-bettcher>.

- Bloem, Jeanette. 2004. "The Shaping of a 'Beautiful' Soul: The Critical Life of Anna Maria van Schurman." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 15–27. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Bordalo, Pedro, Katherine Coffman, Nicola Gennaioli, and Andrei Shleifer. 2019. "Beliefs About Gender." *American Economic Review* 109 (3): 739–73.
- Bordo, Susan. 1986. "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought." *Signs* 11 (3): 439–56.
- Bowden, Caroline, and James E. Kelly. 2013. *The English Convents in Exile, 1600-1800: Communities, Culture and Identity*. Edited by Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly. Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Bradatan, Costica. 2013. "From Draft to Infinite Writing. Death, Solitude and Self-Creation in Early Modernity." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54 (2): 241–57.
- . 2015. *Dying for Ideas: The Dangerous Lives of the Philosophers*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Brady, Andrea. 2010. "The Platonic Poems of Katherine Philips." *The Seventeenth Century* 25 (2): 300–322.
- Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. "Mary Astell." In *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, 90–113. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2009. "Mary Astell on Virtuous Friendship." *Parergon* 26 (2): 65–86.
- . 2014. "Women on Liberty in Early Modern England." *Philosophy Compass* 9 (2): 112–22.

- . 2015. *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2018. "Mary Astell's Malebranchean Concept of the Self." In *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics*, edited by Emily Thomas, 211–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2019. "Selfhood and Self-Government in Women's Religious Writings of the Early Modern Period." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 27 (5): 713–30.
- Broad, Jacqueline, and Alice Sowaal. 2017. "Introduction." In *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jacqueline Broad and Alice Sowaal, 1–14. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Cedric C. 2016. *Friendship and Its Discourses in the Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Rita Mae. 1995. "The Furies Collective." In *Feminism and Community*, edited by Marilyn Friedman and Penny A. Weiss, 125–34. Temple University Press.
- Bunch, Charlotte. 1972. "Perseverance Furthers: Separatism and Our Future." *The Furies Fall*.
- Burrus, Virginia. 1994. "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10 (1): 27–51.
- Buxton, Rebecca, and Lisa Whiting. 2020. *The Philosopher Queens*. Edited by Rebecca Buxton and Lisa Whiting. London: Unbound Press.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Card, Claudia. 1996. "Against Marriage and Motherhood." *Hypatia* 11 (3): 1–23.
- Carrette, Jeremy R. 1999. "Prologue to a Confession of the Flesh." In *Religion and Culture*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, 1–47. New York: Routledge.
- . 2000. *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1668. "The Convent of Pleasure." In *Plays, Never Before Printed*, printed by A. Maxwell. London. *Literature Online*.
- Charlton, Kenneth. 1999. *Women, Religion, and Education in Early Modern England*. London: Routledge.
- Clack, Beverley. 2020. "Wisdom, Friendship and the Practice of Philosophy." *Angelaki - Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 25 (1–2): 141–55.
- Corneanu, Sorana. 2011. *Regimens of the Mind: Locke, Boyle, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Cottingham, John. 1998. *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140: 139–67.
- Dacier, André. 1701. "Life of the Emperour Marcus Aurelius Antoninus." In *The Emperor Marcus Antoninus his conversation with himself*, translated and edited by Jeremy Collier. Printed for Richard Sare. London. ECCO.
- Davidson, Arnold I. 2005. "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought." In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, Second*

- Edition*, edited by Gary Gutting, 2nd ed., 123–48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, Christopher. 2015. “Spinoza as an Exemplar of Foucault’s Spirituality and Technologies of the Self.” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 4 (2): 111–46.
- Delumeau, Jean. 1990. *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- DeRango-Adem, Adebe. 2017. “Self-Care Is A Radical Act, But Not The Way We’re Practising It Right Now.” *Flare*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.flare.com/living/self-care-is-a-radical-act>.
- Descartes, René. 1986. *Meditations on First Philosophy. With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Translated by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Detlefsen, Karen. 2016. “Custom, Freedom, and Equality: Mary Astell on Marriage and Women’s Education.” In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, 74–91. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2017. “Cartesianism and Its Feminist Promise and Limits: The Case of Mary Astell.” In *Descartes and Cartesianism: Essays in Honour of Desmond Clarke*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger and Catherine Wilson, 191–206. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.
- Devereaux, Johanna. 2009. “A Paradise within? Mary Astell, Sarah Scott and the Limits of Utopia.” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (1): 53–67.
- Devlin, Hannah and Diane Taylor. 2019. “Baby Dies in UK Prison After Inmate ‘Gives Birth Alone In Cell.’” *The Guardian*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/04/baby-dies-in-uk-prison-after-inmate-gives-birth-alone-in-cell>.
- Doeuff, Michèle Le. 1977. “Women and Philosophy.” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 17:

2–11.

- . 1991. *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.* Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Doyle, Sadie. 2019. "Monsters, Men And Magic: Why Feminists Turned To Witchcraft To Oppose Trump." *The Guardian*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/aug/07/monsters-men-magic-trump-awoke-angry-feminist-witches>.
- D'Souza, Christa. 2017. "Oppressive? Hardly – My High Heels Are the Most Empowering Thing I Own." *The Telegraph*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/oppressive-hardly-high-heels-empowering-things>.
- Duran, Jane. 2006. *Eight Women Philosophers: Theory, Politics, and Feminism*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Ellenzweig, Sarah. 2003. "The Love of God and the Radical Enlightenment: Mary Astell's Brush with Spinoza." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (3): 379–97.
- Elm, Susanna. 1994. *Virgins of God: The Making of Ascetism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Enszer, Julie R. 2016. "How to Stop Choking to Death': Rethinking Lesbian Separatism as a Vibrant Political Theory and Feminist Practice." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20 (2): 180–96.
- Epictetus. 1995. *The Discourses, The Handbook, Fragments*. Edited by Christopher Gill. London: Everyman.
- Ewens, Hannah. 2018. "Why Straight Men Hate Astrology So Much." *Vice*. Accessed July 29 2020. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/qvq87p/why-straight-men-hate-astrology-so-much.

———. 2020. “Gong Baths, Breathwork and Crystals: How Spirituality Became a Luxury.” *Vice*. Accessed July 28 2020. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/jgejj3/spirituality-luxury-upper-class-goop-lab-healing-treatmentss.

Faderman, Lilian. 1995. *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Edited by Lilian Faderman. Penguin.

Fell, Margaret. 1666. *Women’s Speaking Justified*. London. EEBO.

Ferguson, Ann. 1995. “Feminist Communities and Moral Revolution.” In *Feminism and Community*, edited by Marilyn Friedman and Penny A. Weiss, 367–97. Temple University Press.

Ferguson, Kathy E. 2004. “E.G.: Emma Goldman, for Example.” In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 28–40. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Fitzpatrick, Joan. 2007. *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate.

Flint, Stuart W., Martin Čadek, Sonia C. Codreanu, Vanja Ivić, Colene Zomer, and Gomoiu Amalia. 2016. “Obesity Discrimination in the Recruitment Process: ‘You’re Not Hired!’” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (647).

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish*. Edited by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books.

———. 1983a. “Self Writing.” In *Dits et Ecrits*, IV: 415–30. <https://foucault.info/doc/documents/foucault-hypomnemata-en-html>.

———. 1983b. “What Is Enlightenment?” In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 32–50. New York: Pantheon Books.

———. 1985. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. New York,

NY: Pantheon Books. <https://soth.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-bin/asp/philo/soth/sourceidx.pl?&sourceid=S10021786>.

- . 1986. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- . 1988a. "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual." *History of the Present* 4: 1–2, 11–13. <https://www.michaelbess.org/foucault-interview>.
- . 1988b. "Technologies of the Self." In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, 16–49. University of Massachusetts Press. <https://foucault.info/doc/documents/foucault-technologiesofself-en.html>.
- . 1990a. "An Aesthetics of Existence." In *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, 47–53. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1990b. "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit." In *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, 211–24. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1990c. *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*. Edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1990d. "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: Foucault and Homosexuality." In *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, 286–303. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1990e. "The Concern for Truth." In *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, 255–67. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1990f. "The Minimalist Self." In *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews*

- and Other Writings 1977-1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, 3–16. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1990g. “The Return of Morality.” In *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, edited by L.D. Kritzman, 242–54. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 1997a. “Friendship as a Way of Life.” In *The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume I, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 135–40. New York: New Press.
- . 1997b. “On the Genealogy of Ethics.” In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 253–80. New York: The New Press.
- . 1997c. “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom.” In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 281–301. New York: The New Press.
- . 1997d. “The Masked Philosopher.” In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 321–27. New York: The New Press.
- . 1998a. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” In *Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by James Faubion, 369–91. Allen Lane The Penguin Press.
- . 1998b. “What Is an Author?” In *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion, 205–22. New York: The New Press.
- . 1998c. *The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley. London: Penguin.
- . 1999a. “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self (1980).” In *Religion and Culture*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, 158–81. New York: Routledge.
- . 1999b. “Is It Useless to Revolt? (1979).” In *Religion and Culture*, edited

- by Jeremy R. Carrette, 131–34. New York: Routledge.
- . 1999c. “Pastoral Power and Political Reason (1979).” In *Religion and Culture*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, 135–52. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. *Madness and Civilization*. Abingdon: Routledge Classics.
- . 2002. “The Subject and Power.” In *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3*, edited by James D. Faubion, 326–48. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2005a. “Tehran: Faith against the Shah (1978).” In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, edited by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, 198–203. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- . 2005b. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-2*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, Michel, and Baqir Parham. 2005. “Dialogue between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham (1979).” In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, edited by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, 183–89. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frankenberry, Nancy, “Feminist Philosophy of Religion”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/feminist-religion/>.
- Freeland, Cynthia A. 2000. “Feminism and Ideology in Ancient Philosophy.” *Apeiron* 4 (33): 365–406.
- Freire, Paulo. 1996. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.
- Friedman, Marilyn. 1989. “Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community.” *Ethics* 99 (2): 275–90.

- . 1998. "Romantic Love and Personal Autonomy." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 22 (1): 162–81.
- . 2000. "Feminism in Ethics: Conceptions of Autonomy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, edited by Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby, 205–24. Cambridge.
- Frye, Marilyn. 1992. "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power." In *Feminist Philosophies: Problems, Theories, and Applications*, edited by Janet A. Kourany, James P. Sterba, and Rosemarie Tong, 288–95. Englewood Cliffs: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- . 1995. "Lesbian Community: Heterodox Congregation." In *Feminism and Community*, edited by Marilyn Friedman and Penny A. Weiss, 155–58. Temple University Press.
- Garrett, Aaron. 2013. "Seventeenth-Century Moral Philosophy: Self-Help, Self-Knowledge, and the Devil's Mountain." In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp, Oxford, 229–76. Oxford University Press.
- Garrett, Aaron, and Silvia Sebastiani. 2017. "David Hume on Race." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by Naomi Zack, Oxford, 31–43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Green, Karen. 1995. *The Woman of Reason: Feminism, Humanism and Political Thought*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Griffin, Wendy. 1995. "The Embodied Goddess: Feminine Witchcraft and Female Divinity." *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1): 35–48.
- Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell.

- Hampson, Daphne. 1985. "The Challenge of Feminism to Christianity." *Theology* 88 (725): 341–50.
- Haslanger, Sally, and Jennifer Saul. 2006. "Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 80 (May): 89–143.
- Hayes, Allie. 2018. "15 Simple Self-Care Activities That Cost Exactly Zero Dollars And Zero Cents To Do." *Buzzfeed*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alliehayes/free-self-care-tips-you-can-do-today>.
- Hebl, MR, and J Xu. 2001. "Weighing the Care: Physicians' Reactions to the Size of a Patient." *International Journal of Obesity and Related Metabolic Disorders : Journal of the International Association for the Study of Obesity* 25 (8): 1246–52.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. Dover Publications, Inc.
- Heyes, Cressida J. 2007. *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2013. "Introduction, Foucault Studies Special Issue: Foucault and Feminism." *Foucault Studies*, no. 16: 3–14.
- Hill, Christopher. 1975. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*. Harmondsworth; Baltimore: Penguin.
- hooks, bell. 2014. "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression." In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 18–33. New York: Routledge.
- Hosie, Rachel. 2018. "What Is Body Neutrality And Why Do Some People Prefer It To Body Positivity?" *Independent*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/body-neutrality-definition-movement-positivity-image-difference-explained-a8494646.html>.

- Hume, David. 1994. "Of National Characters." In *Political Essays*. Edited by Knud Haakonssen, 78-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutton, Sarah. 2015. *British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Irrera, Orazio. 2010. "Pleasure and Transcendence of the Self: Notes on 'a Dialogue Too Soon Interrupted' between Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (9): 995-1017.
- James, Susan. 1997. *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jantzen, Grace M. 1998. *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Jay, Shani. 2020. "The Powerful Benefits of Attending A Women's Yoga Retreat." *She Rose Revolution*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://medium.com/sheroserevolution/the-powerful-benefits-of-attending-a-womens-wellness-retreat-a8b49e6eeca1>.
- Kendrick, Nancy. 2018. "Mary Astell's Theory of Spiritual Friendship." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26 (1): 46-65.
- Kisner, Jordan. 2017. "The Politics of Conspicuous Displays of Self-Care." *The New Yorker*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-politics-of-selfcare>.
- Kohr, Amanda. 2015. "10 Simple Ways To Practice Self-care." *Wanderlust*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://wanderlust.com/journal/simple-ways-practice-self-care>.
- Kolbrener, William. 2007. "Astell's 'Design of Friendship' in Letters and A

Serious Proposal, Part I.” In *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, 49–64. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate.

Koul, Scaachi. 2018. “I Shouldn’t Have To Lose Weight For My Wedding. So Why Do I Feel Like A Failure?” *Buzzfeed*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/scaachikoul/wedding-dress-lose-weight-loss-body-image-positivity>.

Kyte, Holly. 2019. *Roaring Girls: The Forgotten Feminists of British History*. London: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd.

Lascano, Marcy P. 2016. “Mary Astell on the Existence and Nature of God.” In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss, 168–87. University Park, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lee, Faliana. n.d. “The Most Dangerous Time: Five Women Tell Their Stories of Leaving An Abusive Relationship.” *The Guardian*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/ng-interactive/2015/jun/02/domestic-violence-five-women-tell-their-stories-of-leaving-the-most-dangerous-time>.

Lefebvre, Alexandre. 2016. “Mary Wollstonecraft, Human Rights, and the Care of the Self.” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7 (2): 179–200.

Llewellyn, Mark. 2002. “Katherine Philips: Friendship, Poetry, and Neo-Platonic Thought in Seventeenth-Century England.” *Philological Quarterly* 81 (4): 441–69.

Lloyd, Genevieve. 1984. *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lochman, Daniel T., and Maritere Lopez. 2011. “Introduction: The Emergence

of Discourses: Early Modern Friendship.” In *Discourses and Representations of Friendship in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*, edited by Daniel T. Lochman, Maritere Lopez, and Lorna Hutson, 1–26. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Long, A. A. 1996. *Stoic Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Long, Allie. 2017. “A Case For Body Neutrality.” *Medium*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://medium.com/@allielong/a-case-for-body-neutrality-d42745837f99>.

Lorde, Audre. 1988. *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*. Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books.

———. 2007. “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” In *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, edited by Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins, 87–91. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Luff, Tracy L. 1990. “Wicce: Adding a Spiritual Dimension to Feminism.” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 35: 91–105.

Malebranche, Nicolas. 1997. *The Search After Truth*. Edited by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Malone, Ailbhe. 2017. “19 Tiny Self-Care Tips to Try Out.” *Buzzfeed*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ailbhemalone/tiny-self-care-tips-to-try-out>.

Masham, Damaris. 1688. “*Lady Damaris Masham [née Cudworth] to John Locke: 17 April 1688.*” *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, ed. Robert McNamee et al. Vers. 3.0. University of Oxford. 2017. Web. 9 Oct. 2018.

———. 1696. *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God*. Printed for Awnsham and John Churchil. London. EEBO.

May, Todd. 2013. “Friendship As Resistance.” In *The Anarchist Turn*, edited by

- Jacob Blumenfeld, Chiara Bottici, and Simon Critchley, 59–79. Pluto Press.
- McLaren, Margaret A. 2004. "Foucault and Feminism: Power, Resistance, Freedom." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 214–34. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- McNay, Lois. 1992. *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 1994. *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McWhorter, Ladelle. 2004. "Practicing Practicing." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 143–62. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- . 2013. "Post-Liberation Feminism and Practices of Freedom." *Foucault Studies*, no. 16: 54–73.
- . 2016. "The Abolition of Philosophy." In *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, edited by Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, 23–40. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meltzer, Marisa. 2017. "Forget Body Positivity. How About Body Neutrality?" *The Cut*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.thecut.com/2017/03/forget-body-positivity-how-about-body-neutrality.html>.
- Mendieta, Eduardo. 2016. "The Intimacy of Thought: Philosophy as the Labor of Friendship." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 30 (2): 115–27.
- Michaeli, Inna. 2017. "Self-Care: An Act of Political Warfare or a Neoliberal Trap?" *Development* 60 (1–2): 50–56.
- Miller, James. 1993. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. London: Flamingo; Harper Collins.

- More, Henry. 1690. *An Account of Virtue or, Dr. Henry More's Abridgement of Morals*. Printed for Benj. Tooke. London. *EEBO*.
- Morgan, Eleanor. 2020. "The Truth About Self-Care: How Isolation Has Changed The Way I Look After Myself." *The Guardian*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/08/the-truth-about-self-care-how-isolation-has-changed-the-way-i-look-after-myself>.
- Moser, Elisabeth Hedrick. 2016. "Mary Astell: Some Reflections upon Trauma." In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, 111–27. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Myers, Joanne E. 2013. "Enthusiastic Improvement: Mary Astell and Damaris Masham on Sociability." *Hypatia* 28 (3): 533–50.
- . 2014. "'Supernatural Charity': Astell, Shaftesbury and the Problem of Enthusiasm." *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37 (3): 299–314.
- Nehamas, Alexander. 1998. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press.
- . 2016. *On Friendship*. New York: Basic Books.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1994. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- O'Grady, Helen. 2004. "An Ethics of the Self." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- O'Leary, Timothy. 2002. *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Okin, Susan Moller. 2013. *Women In Western Political Thought*. Princeton;

Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Oksala, Johanna. 2005. *Foucault on Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pascal, Blaise. 1966. *Pensées*. Translated by A.K. Krailsheimer. London: Penguin Classics.

Perry, Ruth. 1986. *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.

Philips, Katherine. 1995. "To My Excellent Lucasia, On Our Friendship." In *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, edited by Lilian Faderman, 23. Penguin.

Powell-Twagirumukiza, Neesha. 2017. "How To Write A Spell Against White Supremacy." *Autostraddle*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.autostraddle.com/how-to-write-a-spell-against-white-supremacy-395098>.

Raffnsøe, Sverre, Morten S Thaning, and Marius Gudmand-Høyer. 2018. "Philosophical Practice as Self-Modification: An Essay on Michel Foucault's Critical Engagement with Philosophy." *Foucault Studies*, no. 25: 8–54.

Raymond, Janice. 1986. *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection*. London: Women's Press.

Register, Jake. 2020. "Everything You Need To Know About Dating A Libra Man." *Cosmopolitan*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a25605915/libra-man-personality-traits>.

Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5 (4): 631–60.

- Rios, Carmen. 2015. "Rebel Girls: On Building a Better Separatism." *Autostraddle*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.autostraddle.com/rebel-girls-on-building-a-better-separatism-309366>.
- Roncal, Mally. 2013. "Using Makeup Shows Love for Yourself." *The New York Times*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/01/02/does-makeup-hurt-self-esteem/using-makeup-shows-love-for-yourself>.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 2001a. "Oppressive Aspects of Christianity." In *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Christian-Buddhist Conversation*, 88–104. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- . 2001b. "What I Find Liberating in Christianity." In *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Christian-Buddhist Conversation*, 126–44. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- . 2002. "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, edited by Susan Frank Parsons, 3–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sawicki, Jana. 1996. "Feminism, Foucault, and 'Subjects' of Power and Freedom." In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Hekman, 159–78. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2013. "Queer Feminism: Cultivating Ethical Practices of Freedom." *Foucault Studies*, no. 16: 74–87.
- Schneewind, J.B. 2002. *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schoenfeldt, Michael C. 1999. *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schubach, Kay. n.d. "The Most Dangerous Time: Five Women Tell Their Stories of Leaving An Abusive Relationship." *The Guardian*. Accessed July 29 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/ng-interactive/2015/jun/02/domestic-violence-five-women-tell-their-stories-of-leaving-the-most-dangerous-time>.

Schweitzer, Ivy. 2016. "Making Equals: Classical Philia and Women's Friendship." *Feminist Studies* 42 (2): 337-64.

Scott, Sarah. 1762. *A Description of Millennium Hall*. Printed for J. Newbury. London. ECCO.

Sellars, John. n.d. "Self or Cosmos: Foucault versus Hadot." In *The Late Foucault: Ethical and Political Questions*, edited by Marta Faustino and Gianfranco Ferraro. London: Bloomsbury.

———. 2016. "Shaftesbury, Stoicism, and Philosophy as a Way of Life." *Sophia* 55 (3): 395-408.

———. 2017a. "Henry More as Reader of Marcus Aurelius."

———. 2017b. "Roman Stoic Mindfulness: An Ancient Technology of the Self."

Sherman, Edmund. 1681. *The Birth and Burning of the Image Called S. Michael*. Printed for Richard Janeway. London. EEBO.

Shusterman, Richard. 2013. "Philosophy as a Way of Life: As Textual and More Than Textual Practice." In *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, edited by Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, 40-56. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd.

Som, Rituparna. 2019. "Is Self-Care An Act of Political Warfare?" *Vice*. Accessed July 28 2020.

https://www.vice.com/en_asia/article/nexbpz/is-self-care-a-political-act.

Sowaal, Alice. 2007. "Mary Astell's Serious Proposal: Mind, Method, and Custom." *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2): 227–43.

———. 2016. "The Emerging Picture of Mary Astell's Views." In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Penny A. Weiss and Alice Sowaal, 188–206. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

———. 2017. "Mary Astell on Liberty." In *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen, 178–94. Oxford Scholarship Online.

Sowernam, Ester. 1617. *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman*. Printed by Thomas Snodham for Nicholas Bourne. London. EEBO.

Speght, Rachel. 1617. *A Mouzell for Melastomus*. Printed by Nicholas Okes for Thomas Archer. London. EEBO.

Spicer, André. 2019. "'Self-Care': How A Radical Feminist Idea Was Stripped of Politics for the Mass Market." *The Guardian*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/21/self-care-radical-feminist-idea-mass-market>.

Springborg, Patricia. 1998. "Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics." In *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, edited by Hilda L. Smith, 105–25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2002. "Introduction." In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, edited by Patricia Springborg, 9–41. Broadview Press.

———. 2005. *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Stock, Kathleen. 2018a. "Why Self-identification Should Not Legally Make You A Woman." *The Conversation*. Accessed August 4 2020. <https://theconversation.com/why-self-identification-should-not-legally-make-you-a-woman-103372>.
- . 2018b. "Changing the Concept Of 'Woman' Will Cause Unintended Harms". *The Economist*. Accessed August 4 2020. <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/07/06/changing-the-concept-of-woman-will-cause-unintended-harms>.
- Swetnam, Joseph. 1615. *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*. Printed by George Purslowe for Thomas Archer. London. EEBO.
- "t philosopher". 2019. "I Am Leaving Academic Philosophy Because of Its Transphobia Problem." *Medium*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://medium.com/@transphilosopher33/i-am-leaving-academic-philosophy-because-of-its-transphobia-problem-bc618aa55712>.
- Tabb, Kathryn. 2014. "Struck, As It Were, With Madness': Phenomenology and Animal Spirits in the Neuropathology of Thomas Willis." In *Brain, Mind and Consciousness in the History of Neuroscience*, edited by C.U.M. Smith and Harry Whitaker, 43–57. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Derek E. 2001. "Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Thinking Matter." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (3): 505–22.
- Taylor, Judith. 2013. "Enduring Friendship: Women's Intimacies and the Erotics of Survival." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 34 (1): 93–114.
- Tessman, Lisa. 2005. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Testa, Federico. 2016. "Towards a History of Philosophical Practices in Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot." *Pli*, 168–90.
- Tolstoy, Leo. 2000. *Anna Karenina*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press.
- Upton, Gillian Gilfillian. 2006. "Feminist Theology as Biblical Hermeneutics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, edited by Susan Frank Parsons, 97–113. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Urban, Hugh B. 2015. "Wicca and Neopaganism: Magic, Feminism, and Environmentalism." In *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America*, 157–78. University of California Press.
- Ure, Michael. 2007. "Senecan Moods: Foucault and Nietzsche on the Art of the Self." *Foucault Studies*, no. 4: 19–52.
- Vasalou, Sophia. 2019. *The Measure of Greatness: Philosophers on Magnanimity*. Edited by Sophia Vasalou. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vintges, Karen. 2004. "Endorsing Practices of Freedom: Feminism in a Global Perspective." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 275–99. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Watson, Laurel B., Mirella J. Flores, Morgan Grotewiel, Jenna M. Brownfield, Sara Aslan, and Michelle Farrell. 2018. "How Do Feminist-Identified Women Cope With Discrimination? A Feminist Standpoint and Grounded Theory Study." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 42 (3): 291–312.
- Webb, Simone. 2018. "Philosophy By the Public: A Response to David Johnson." *Blog of the APA*. Accessed August 6 2020. <https://blog.apaonline.org/2018/07/05/philosophy-by-the-public-a-response-to-david-johnson>.

- . 2020. "Philosophy as a Feminist Spirituality and Critical Practice for Mary Astell." *Metaphilosophy* 51 (2-3): 280-302.
- Weiss, Penny A. 1995. "Feminist Reflections on Community." In *Feminism and Community*, edited by Marilyn Friedman and Penny A. Weiss, 3-18. Temple University Press.
- . 2016. "From the Throne to Every Private Family': Mary Astell as Analyst of Power." In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss, 128-152. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Westermann, Stefan, Winfried Rief, Frank Euteneuer, and Sebastian Kohlmann. 2015. "Social Exclusion and Shame in Obesity." *Eating Behaviors* 17: 74-76.
- Whitehead, Barbara. 1999. *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500-1800*. Edited by Barbara Whitehead. New York: Garland Pub.
- Wilde, Cornelia. 2013. *Friendship, Love, and Letters: Ideals and Practices of Seraphic Friendship in Seventeenth-Century England*. Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Wilson, Catherine. 2004. "Love of God and Love of Creatures: The Masham-Astell Debate." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21 (3): 281-98.
- . 2008. *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wilson-Beevers, Helen. 2019. "Is Shapewear an Anti-feminist Buy or Purely About Personal Choice?" *Glamour*. Accessed July 28 2020. <https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/is-shapewear-feminist>.
- Wright, John P. 2011. "Ideas of Habit and Custom in Early Modern Philosophy." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42 (1): 18-32.
- Ylivuori, Soile. 2014. "A Polite Foucault? Eighteenth-Century Politeness as a Disciplinary System and Practice of the Self." *Cultural History* 3 (2): 170-89.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1995. "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference." In *Feminism and Community*, edited by Marilyn Friedman and Penny A. Weiss, 233-57. Temple University Press.

- Zanghellini, Alcardo. 2020. "Philosophical Problems With the Gender-Critical Feminist Argument Against Trans Inclusion." *SAGE Open* 10 (2): 1–14.
- Zook, Melinda. 2007. "Religious Nonconformity and the Problem of Dissent in the Works of Aphra Behn and Mary Astell." In *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, 99–113. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate.
- Zurn, Perry. 2016. "Work and Failure: Assessing the Prisons Information Group." In *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, edited by Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, 75–91. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zurn, Perry, and Andrew Dilts. 2016. "Active Intolerance: An Introduction." In *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, edited by Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, 1–19. Palgrave Macmillan.