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Notes and Discussions

Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter

In 4.3.6 of the *Essay*, Locke contends that it is impossible for us to know whether God has not given some systems of matter a power to perceive and think. As Yolton points out, most supporters of the immateriality of the soul have argued from the inconsistency of thought and extension to the denial that matter can think.¹ In her work, *The Christian Religion*, Mary Astell (1666–1731) not only argues from this supposed inconsistency, but also attempts to show that passages in the *Essay* and letters to Stillingfleet are inconsistent with Locke's claim. Although Astell's reputation in philosophy did not survive the particular metaphysical and religious controversies of the seventh century, her work is of historical importance. In this paper I present a short account of her work and her criticism of Locke's view of thinking matter.

Among books in Locke's personal library are *An Essay in defense of the Female Sex* (1696), *A farther essay relating to the Female Sex* (1696), and *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700). The first two works have been attributed to Mary Astell, the latter is unquestionably her work.² Astell's metaphysical and epistemological works, which are highly critical of Locke, were published in 1705, after Locke's death. Smith reports that "the great Mr. Locke she knew and respected, however much she might refuse to accept his opinions."³

Mary Astell was born in Newcastle on November 12, 1666. Although she was a well-known Platonist during her time, little has been written about her life and works. A short account of her influence is presented by Ballard in his *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752).⁴ According to a letter from Thomas Birch to Ballard, after the breakup of her home in 1684 she settled with Lady Catherine

¹ John W. Yolton, *John Locke And The Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 161.

² The authorship of *An Essay in Defense of the Female Sex* is still a subject of controversy. In 1913 Professor A. H. Upham contended that the subject matter of the essay was inconsistent with ideas expressed in Astell's other works. The work has also been attributed to a Mrs. Drake.

³ Florence M. Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916). This was the only major biography of Mary Astell at the time this essay was written. Since then, a new biography has appeared: Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁴ George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (printed by W. Jackson, 1752).

Jones in Chelsea.⁵ Astell's home was frequently visited by prominent people in court circles. Philosophical discussions usually concerned religion and education for women. In 1694 she published her first work, *A Serious Proposal To The Ladies For the Advancement of their True and greatest Interest*. This was followed by Part Two in 1697. The work was well received and went through several editions. At the request of John Norris her correspondence with Norris was published in 1695 under the title of *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. Astell was a moderate Anglican. Her disagreement with Norris ranged from criticism of his extreme Calvinism to criticism of his metaphysical views. In 1700 she published *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*. Several of her pamphlets concerning political and religious controversy appeared in print between 1704 and 1705. In 1705 Astell summarized her religious and educational theories in *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*. In 1729 her health began to decline. Mary Astell died from cancer in 1731.

Given the disrespect with which women were held in the seventeenth century, Astell preferred to remain as obscure as possible. Ballard notes that even though her works were published anonymously, her name was soon discovered and became known to several learned persons. Her work was generally respected by most scholars and held in high regard by Norris and theologians who found Locke's doctrine of thinking matter dangerous to Christianity. Astell was known by scholars of the day as the "philosophical lady."⁶ She has been recognized more for her educational and feminist theory than for her metaphysical views. The first reference to her work is found in John Evelyn's *Numismata* (1697). Evelyn cites her work, *A Serious Proposal To the Ladies*, a work in which Astell argues for the establishment of a women's college. Subsequent references did not appear until a subsequent volume to Bayle's *Historical Dictionary* was published in 1738. Astell is mentioned in a note to an article on John Norris. By 1752 Astell's reputation had died out. Her works become popular again with the rise of the woman's movement. By 1766 her name appeared regularly in biographies devoted to the works of women.

The tradition of denying educational opportunities to women prompted Mary Astell to write *A Serious Proposal To The Ladies*. In the first part of this work she attempts to demonstrate that women are just as capable of a formal education as men. Her proposal was to erect an educational and religious institution for women. In the second part she discusses the philosophical methodology necessary for achieving intellectual goals. The most notable of all pleasures, she contends, is the search for truth. The proper method for achieving truth and certainty is Cartesian: "not to judge of anything which we don't Apprehend; to suspend our assent till we see just Cause to give it, and to determine nothing till the Strength and Clearness of the

⁵ Astell's father died in 1678 and her mother, Mary Errington, in 1684.

⁶ This attribution was the result of the reputation she established through her religious and political writings. She was well known for her opposition to Defoe, Swift, and Shaftesbury and for her pamphlet *Moderation truly Stated*, a reply to James Owen's *Moderation a Virtue*. Smith suggests that Lady Damaris Masham's *A Discourse concerning the love of God* (1696) was published as a reply to Astell as well as Norris.

Evidence oblige us to it. To withdraw our selves as much as may be from Corporeal things, that pure Reason may be heard the better; to make use of our Senses for which they are designed and fitted, the preservation of the body, but not to depend on their Testimony in our Enquiries after Truth."⁷

Although Astell was influenced by Locke's view of simple ideas and judgment, she could not accept his rejection of innate ideas. She regards all truth as "Antient, as being from Eternity in the Divine Ideas." She recommends that women follow certain rules in the search for truth and knowledge. They should begin with simple ideas and simple objects and ascend by degrees to knowledge of more complex things. Like Locke, she suggests that we judge no further than we perceive and not accept anything as true which is not evidently known to be so.⁸ In many cases we should be content with probability.

Astell prefers not to get involved in what she regards as futile arguments concerning the ontological status of ideas. She holds a representative theory of knowledge in which the term 'idea', is strictly defined as "that which represents to the Mind some Object distinct from it, whether Clearly or Confusedly."⁹ She also uses the term in a common or less rigorous sense: by the term 'idea', "we sometimes understand in general all that which is the immediate Object of the Mind, whatever it Perceives; and in this large Sense it may take in all thought, all that we are any ways capable of Discerning."¹⁰

From the standpoint of metaphysics, *The Christian Religion* is one of Astell's more interesting works. At the outset she presents versions of the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God. Although she believes that Locke aligned himself with the Socinians, she is reluctant to make a direct accusation. Instead, she attempts to refute claims that appear to support Socinianism. She focuses on the doctrine of the trinity and Locke's view of thinking matter. She is particularly critical of his apparent lack of interest in supporting the trinity, a truth, she says, "which is absolutely requir'd to be believed to make any one a Christian."¹¹ A good part of her work is devoted to showing that Locke's view of thinking matter is inconsistent.

Locke contends that "we have the *Ideas* of *Matter* and *Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material Being thinks, or no: it being

⁷ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (London: Fourth Edition, 1694), 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 107. Astell employs the terms 'simple idea' and 'perceive' in a Lockean sense. The influence of both Descartes and Locke is apparent throughout *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. In this work, as well as in *The Christian Religion*, her own philosophy emerges as an attempted reconciliation of the views of Norris and Locke. Because of her dislike of epistemological debate and her refusal to address many epistemological questions, it is difficult to construct a consistent picture of Astell's theory of knowledge.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion As Profess'd by a Daughter of The Church of England* (London, 1705), 75.

impossible for us, but the contemplation of our own *Ideas*, without revelation, to discover, whether Omnipotency has not given to some Systems of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking Substance."¹² Astell begins with the traditional objection of incongruity of thought and extension. She argues that the ideas of thought and extension are two completely different ideas and have different properties and affections (functions).¹³ They may be considered without any relation to or dependence on each other. To be distinct from a thing is not to be this thing. Consequently, says Astell, since thought and extension are distinct and different in their nature, "'tis evident that a Thinking Being can't be Extended, and that an Extended Being does not, cannot Think, any more than a Circle can have the Properties of a Triangle, or a Triangle those of a Circle."¹⁴ To say that a square is a triangle, or that an extended substance is a thinking substance is as contradictory as to say that motion is rest or that a substance is solid and not solid at the same time. Astell contends that if there is nothing in matter that thinks, then God's bestowing on some parcels of matter a power of thought "is neither more nor less than the making an Arbitrary Union between Body and something that is not Body, whereby this Composite has Properties that Matter as Matter is no way capable of."¹⁵ She points out that even if God has given thought to some parcels of matter it is not the body that thinks, but the mind that is united to it. She concludes that all Locke can possibly show is that God can make another substance besides body, a substance whose essential property or essence is thought and that God can unite this thinking substance to body.¹⁶

Astell concentrates on certain passages in the *Essay* and passages from Locke's letters to Stillingfleet. She points out that in 4.3.16 Locke does not deny that we have some knowledge of the connection or repugnancy of ideas even though this knowledge is not very great with regard to bodies. Locke says that our knowledge concerning corporeal substances will be very little advanced by any hypothesis until we can see "what Qualities and Powers of Bodies have a *necessary Connection or Repugnancy* one with another; which in the present State of Philosophy, I think, we know but to a very small degree."¹⁷ According to Astell, we *can know* that a subject cannot possess inconsistent primary qualities. It cannot, for example, be both round and square at the same time. In his second reply to Stillingfleet, Locke says: "that Omnipotency cannot make a substance to be solid and not solid at the same time, I think, with due reverence, may say; but that a solid substance may not have qualities, perfections, and powers, which have no natural or visibly necessary connection with solidity and extension, is too much for us . . . to be positive in."¹⁸ "Having so good authority as the *Essay*

¹² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Niddich (Oxford, 1975), 4.3.6.

¹³ Like Locke, she often speaks of ideas when she means the object signified by ideas.

¹⁴ Astell, *Christian Religion*, 250.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁶ Locke argues that this cannot be demonstrated.

¹⁷ *Essay*, 4.3.16.

¹⁸ *Christian Religion*, 465.

of Human Understanding on my side, I will presume to affirm," says Astell, "that it is impossible for a *Solid Substance to have Qualities, Perfections, and Powers, which have no Natural or Visible Connexion with Solidity and Extension*; and since there is no Visible Connexion between Matter and Thought, it is *impossible for Matter, or any Parcels of Matter to Think*, at least for us to *suppose it contains a Contradiction*, . . . Thought and Extension being as *incompatible* to the same Substance, as the Properties of a Square and a Triangle are at the same time."¹⁹

A particular point of dispute between Locke and Astell involves the epistemological, ontological, and causal likeness principles. Like Norris and Stillingfleet, Astell interprets Locke's epistemology in the framework of Cartesian dualism. In this context ideas or representations must in some way be like the object represented and a cause in some way like the effect. This framework incorporates an unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter and makes the ontological categories of substance and modification exhaustive. Properties or modes of mind cannot qualify body and properties or modes of body cannot qualify mind. If Locke accepts the likeness principles, Astell's criticisms of his view of thinking matter would appear to be convincing.

Astell accepts the likeness principles and Cartesian ontological framework. She contends that "all Beings whatsoever, are either Material or Immaterial; therefore since that which Thinks is not Material, it must be Immaterial."²⁰ She argues that if in fact body can think, then thought must be either the essence or the mode of body; or, she says, "in the plainest words, either the Thing it self, or its way and manner of Being." Although some may question whether extension is the essence of body, it is clear to Astell that no one would suggest that thought is its essence. It remains, she concludes, that "if Body can Think, thought must be in it as a Mode." Her argument against Locke continues as follows:

But Modes do immediately depend upon, and are inseparable from the Thing Whose Modes they are, existing no otherwise but in it. Therefore, if Thought be a Mode of Body, besides all other Absurdities, it will follow, that *God* is an Extended Being or a Body, otherwise or this Supposition He cou'd not Think. Unless you make Thought to be a Mode both of Body and of Mind, which to me seems a Contradiction. Because Body and Mind, or Material and Immaterial being directly opposite, and in their own Natures inconsistent; to say that the Mode of the one may be the Mode of the other, amounts to as much as to say, That a Thing may Be and may not Be, at the same time. But we are sure, that *God* who is All Perfection Thinks, and that He is not Extended. . . . And Since the First Intelligence the Father of Spirits, is not, cannot be Extended, this is a strong Presumption at least, if it is not a Proof, That Body is incapable of Thought.²¹

She concludes that it is as improper and absurd to say that body can think as it is to speak of the dimensions of thought.

If modifications of a substance must be ontologically similar to a substance, then thought cannot modify matter. Passages in the *Essay* and *Examination of Malebranche* seem to indicate that Locke does accept the likeness principles. He criticizes the

¹⁹ Ibid., 259.

²⁰ Ibid., 251.

²¹ Ibid., 251–52.

hypothesis of seeing all things in God by invoking the likeness principle: "I shall here," he says, "only take notice how inconceivable it is to me, that a spiritual, i.e., an unextended substance should *represent* to the *mind* an extended figure, v.g. a triangle of unequal sides, or two triangles of different magnitudes."²² Further, in 4.10 of the *Essay*, Locke tells us that incogitative matter and motion, whatever changes it might produce of figure, and bulk, could never produce thought. Unthinking particles of matter "however put together, can have nothing thereby added to them, but a new relation of Position, which 'tis impossible should give thought and knowledge to them." With regard to God, Locke concludes: "And whatsoever is first of all Things, must necessarily contain in it and actually have, at least, all the Perfections that can ever after exist; nor can it ever give to another any perfection that it hath not, either actually in it self, or at least in a higher degree; It necessarily follows, that the first eternal Being cannot be Matter."²³

The above passages are not conclusive, for Locke writes consistently as though he rejects all likeness principles (*Essay*, 2.8.7, 2.8.15, 4.2.11; *Examination of Malebranche*, par. 7). He is critical of Malebranche for accepting such principles. Malebranche reasons that "material things cannot be united to our souls after a manner that is necessary to the soul's perceiving them" because material things are extended and the soul is not, i.e., there is no proportion or similarity between them. Therefore, according to Malebranche it is impossible to see such things as the sun. Locke does not find any sense in this claim at all. There is one thing, he says, "which I confess stumbles me in the very foundation of this hypothesis, which stands thus: we cannot perceive any thing but what is intimately united to the soul," i.e., modifications of the mind only.²⁴

Locke's inconsistency with regard to the likeness principles makes it difficult for critics such as Norris, Stillingfleet, and Astell to make their criticisms of thinking matter credible. Had Locke considered the essence of body to be extension and the essence of mind to be thought, then Astell's criticisms would certainly have been valid. However, Locke claims that the essence of both mind and matter is unknown. He leaves it open that the mind may in fact be material. Given this sceptical point of view Locke can claim without inconsistency that it is possible for God to give some parcels of matter a power of thinking. Astell is correct to point out that Locke does regard it as highly probable that the mind is spiritual. Locke denies all charges of materialism leveled against the *Essay*.

Astell points out that in 4.3.29 of the *Essay*, Locke writes that in "some of our Ideas there are certain Relations, Habitues, and Connexions, so visibly included in the Nature of the Ideas themselves, that we cannot conceive them separable from them, by any Power Whatsoever." She also notes his subsequent comment that the idea of a right-lined triangle necessarily carries with it an equality of its angles to two

²² John Locke, "An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God," *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1824), Vol. 8, par.18.

²³ *Essay*, 4.10.10; 4.10.16.

²⁴ *Examination of Malebranche*, par.7.

right ones. We cannot, says Locke, "conceive this Relation, this connexion of these two Ideas, to be possibly mutable, or to depend on any arbitrary Power, which of choice made it thus or could make it otherwise."²⁵ She interprets this as including the power of God. Thus, she says, "we may *venture*, in this case at least, to *limit the Power of the Omnipotent Creator*, and may say, He *cannot possibly do* that which *destroys the Essence*, or *changes the Essential Properties of Things*." Astell argues that if God cannot change the nature of a triangle, He cannot alter the nature of mind and matter. Although she agrees with Locke that human knowledge is limited, she concludes that scepticism with regard to knowledge of substance is not warranted.

Although Astell's criticisms were not entirely original, her critique represents part of the vast reaction to empiricism and materialism. She is critical of any philosophy such as Locke's that does not recognize or emphasize the Ideal or the spiritual aspect of man. In spite of her praise for Norris, her *Letters* are primarily critical of his views concerning efficient causality.

Astell argued for the consistency of the New Testament and the political and educational rights of women. This argument, combined with her attempted reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism, did not gain the support of most of her contemporaries. Because she was unable to arouse a wide enough interest in her proposal for a women's college, Astell attempted to establish a charity school for girls in Chelsea. This school was established in 1729 by Lady Cathrine Jones and other friends.

Smith contends that "it may not be entirely unfair to lay claim to Mary Astell, with Ballard, as the first defender of 'the rights and privileges of her sex.'"²⁶ Of the numerous pamphlets on marriage mentioned in the Term Catalogues between 1697 and 1709, Astell's *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) is the only one having economic significance. From the standpoint of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought, Astell's views concerning the rights of women may be considered quite radical. Smith contends that her works on women are the most modern presentation until the time of Mary Wollestonecraft. It cannot be doubted that Astell contributed to the goal of women's intellectual and economic independence. Astell's influence on the following generation was not that of an individual, but of the developing ideology of an age. Although her philosophical works have gone unnoticed, they are an important part of seventeenth-century debate.

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²⁵ *Essay*, 4.3.29.

²⁶ Smith, 164.