

might we be to one another? What vast Discoveries wou'd be made in the wide Ocean of Truth? How many Moral Irregularities wou'd be observ'd and rectify'd? We shou'd be restrain'd from aspiring to things above our reach, move regularly in our own Sphere, not abuse those good Parts which were given us for Common Benefit, to the Destruction of our selves and others, be in a fair way to discern the Defects of our Mind and to proceed to the Cure of 'em.

start
excerpt

§III. We have already exprest our thoughts concerning the Capacity and Perfection of the Understanding, and what has been said if duly consider'd is sufficient to bring every particular Person acquainted with their own defects.¹ But because they who need Amendment most, are commonly least dispos'd to make such reflections as are necessary to procure it, we will spend a few Pages in considering for them, and in observing the most usual defects of the Thinking Faculty.

If we are of their Opinion who say that the Understanding is only Passive, and that Judgment belongs to the Will, I see not any Defect the former can have, besides Narrowness and a disability to extend it self to many things, which is indeed incident to all Creatures, the brightest Intelligence in the highest Order of Angels is thus defective, as well as the meanest Mortal, tho in a less degree. Nor ought it to be complain'd of, since 'tis Natural and Necessary, we may as well desire to be Gods as desire to Know all things. Some sort of Ignorance therefore, or Non perception we cannot

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- 1 Astell in *A Serious Proposal, Part I* (1694 edn, 76/78 above) had discussed "necessary and perfective truths" with reference to the arguments of John Norris's *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* (1690). What follows owes a good deal to Norris's argument at §15 of the same work (1690 edn, 17-18) where, in answer to the question "what is it that is perfective of the Understanding," he asserted:

To the Question then I answer, that the Perfection of the Understanding, as that of the will, is either *Formal* or *Objective*. The *Formal Perfection* of the understanding, as that of the will, is no other than its Exercise or Operation, which is *Thinking* and *Perception*, as that of the other is *Willing* and *Chusing*. According to the vulgar Maxim, that *the Perfection of every thing is its Operation*, which must be understood only the *Formal Perfection*. The *Objective Perfection* of the understanding is *Truth*, as that of the will is *Good*. The Result of these two Perfections joyn'd together is what in the understanding we call *Knowledge*, and what in the will we call *Virtue*.

help; a Finite Mind, suppose it as large as you please, can never extend it self to Infinite Truths. But no doubt it is in our Power to remedy a great deal more than we do, and probably a larger Range is allowed us than the most Active and Enlightned Understanding has hitherto reach'd. Ignorance then can't be avoided but Error may, we cannot Judge of things of which we have no Idea, but we can suspend our Judgment about those of which we have, till clearness and evidence oblige us to pass it. Indeed in strictness of Speech the Will and not the Understanding is blameable when we Think amiss, since the latter opposes not the Ends for which GOD made it, but readily extends it self as far as it can, receiving such Impressions as are made on it; 'tis the former that directs it to such Objects, that fills up its Capacity with such Ideas as are foreign to its Business and of no use to it, or which does not at least oppose the incursions of Material things, and deface¹ as much as it is able those impressions which Sensible Objects leave in the Imagination. But since it is not material to the present Design, whether Judgment belongs to the Understanding or Will, we shall not nicely distinguish how each of 'em is employ'd in acquiring Knowledge, but treat of 'em both together in this Chapter, allotted to the Service of the Studious, who when they are put in the way may by their own Meditations and Experience, rectifie the mistakes and supply the Omissions we happen to be guilty of.

They who apply themselves to the Contemplation of Truth, will perhaps at first find a Contraction or Emptiness of Thought, and that their Mind offers nothing on the Subject they wou'd consider, is not ready at unfolding, nor in representing correspondent² Ideas to be compar'd with it, is as it were asleep or in a Dream, and tho' not empty of all Thought, yet Thinks nothing clearly or to the purpose. The Primary Cause of this is that Limitation which all Created Minds are Subject to, which Limitation appears more visible in some than in others, either because some Minds are endow'd by their Creator with a larger Capacity than the rest, or if you are not inclin'd to think so, then by reason of the Indisposition of the Bodily Organs, which cramps and contracts the Operations of the Mind. And that Person whose Capacity of receiving Ideas is very little, whose Ideas are disorder'd, and not capable of being so dispos'd as that they may be compar'd in order to the

1 Blot out, obliterate, efface (*OED*).

2 Corresponding.

forming of a Judgment, is a Fool or little better. If we find this to be our Case, and that after frequent tryals there appears no hopes of Amendment, 'tis best to desist, we shall but lose our Labour, we may do some Good in an Active Life and Employments that depend on the Body, but we're altogether unfit for Contemplation and the Exercises of the Mind. Yet e'er we give out let's see if it be thus with us in all Cases: Can we Think and Argue Rationally about a Dress, an Intreague, an Estate? Why then not upon better Subjects? The way of Considering and Meditating justly is the same on all Occasions. 'Tis true, there will fewest Ideas arise when we wou'd Meditate on such Subjects as we've been least conversant about; but this is a fault which it is in our power to remedy, first by Reading or Discoursing, and then by frequent and serious Meditation, of which hereafter.

As those we have been speaking of are hindred¹ in their search after Truth, thro a want of Ideas out of which to deduce it, so there are another sort who are not happy in their Enquiries, on account of the multitude and Impetuosity of theirs. Volatileness of Thought, very pernicious to true Science, is a fault which People of warm Imaginations and Active Spirits are apt to fall into. Such a Temper is readily dispos'd to receive Errors and very well qualified to propagate them, especially if a volubility of Speech be join'd to it. These thro an immoderate nimbleness of Thinking skip from one Idea to another, without observing due Order and Connexion, they content themselves with a superficial view, a random glance, and depending on the vigor of their Imagination, are took with Appearances, never tarrying to penetrate the Subject, or to find out Truth if she float not upon the Surface. A multitude of Ideas not relating to the matter they design to think of rush in upon them, and their easie Mind entertains all comers how impertinent soever; instead of examining the Question in debate they are got into the Clouds, numbring the Cities in the Moon and building Airy Castles there. Nor is it easie to cure this Defect, since it deceives others as well as those who have it with a shew of very great Ingenuity. The vivacity of such Persons makes their Conversation plausible, and taking with those who consider not much, tho not with the Judicious; it procures for them the Character of Wit, but hinders them from being Wise. For truth is not often found by such as won't take Time to examine her Counterfeits, to distinguish

1 Hindered.

between Evidence and Probability, Realities and Appearances, but who thro a conceit of their own sharp-sightedness think they can pierce to the bottom with the first glance.

To cure this Distemper perfectly perhaps it will be necessary to apply to the body as well as to the Mind: The Animal Spirits must be lessen'd, or rendred more Calm and Manageable; at least they must not be unnaturally and violently mov'd by such a Diet, or such Passions, Designs and Divertisments¹ as are likely to put 'em in a ferment. Contemplation requires a Governable body, a sedate and steady Mind, and the Body and the Mind do so reciprocally influence each other, that we can scarce keep the one in tune if the other be out of it. We can neither Observe the Errors of our Intellect, nor the Irregularity of our Morals whilst we are darkned by Fumes, agitated with unruly Passions, or carried away with eager Desires after Sensible things and vanities. 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, and so fill up its Capacity that they leave no room for Truth, so distract its Attention that it cannot enquire after her. For tho' the Body does partly occasion this fault, yet the Will no doubt may in good measure Remedy it, by using its Authority to fix the Understanding on such Objects as it wou'd have Contemplated; it has a Rein which will certainly curb this wandering, if it can but be persuaded to make use of it. Indeed Attention and deep Meditation is not so agreeable to our Animal Nature, does not flatter our Pride so well as this agreeable *Reverie*, which gives us a pretence to Knowledge without taking much Pains to acquire it, and does not choak us with the humbling thoughts of our own Ignorance, with which we must make such ado e're it can be enlightened. Yet without Attention and strict Examination we are liable to false Judgments on every occasion, to Vanity and Arrogance, to Impertinent Prating of things we don't understand: are kept from making a Progress, because we fancy our selves to be at the top already, and can never attain to true Wisdom. If then we wou'd hereafter think to purpose, we must suffer our selves to be convinced how oft we have already thought to none, suspect our Quickness, and not give our desultory Imagination leave to ramble.

1 Diversions.

And in order to the restraining it we may consider, 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, which so long as we are under the power of this giddy Temper will inevitably escape us And if to this we add a serious perusal of such Books as are not loosely writ, but require an Attent and Awakened Mind to apprehend, and to take in the whole force of 'em, obliging our selves to Understand them thoroughly,¹ so as to be able to give a just account of them to our Selves, or rather to some other Person intelligent enough to take it and to correct our mistakes, it is to be hop'd we shall obtain a due poise of Mind, and be able to direct our Thoughts [to]² the thorow³ discussion of such Subjects as we wou'd Examine. Such Books I mean as are fuller of Matter than words, which diffuse a light through every part of their Subject, do not Skim, but penetrate it to the bottom, yet so as to leave somewhat to be wrought out by the Reader's own Meditation; such as are writ with Order and Connexion, the Strength of whose Arguments can't be sufficiently felt unless we remember and compare the whole System. 'Tis impossible to prescribe absolutely, and every one may easily find what Authors are most apt to stay⁴ their Attention, and shou'd apply to them. But whenever they Meditate, be it on what Object it may, let 'em fix their Minds stedily on it, not removing till it be thoroughly Examin'd, at least not until they have seen all that's necessary to their present purpose.

Doing so we shall prevent Rashness and Precipitation⁵ in our Judgments, which is occasion'd by that Volatileness we have been speaking of, together with an over-weaning opinion of our Selves. All the irregularities of our Will proceed from those false Judgments we make, thro want of Consideration, or a partial Examination when we do consider. For did we Consider with any manner of Attention, we cou'd not be so absurd as to call Evil, Good, and Chuse it as such, or prefer a less Good before a greater, a poor Momentary Trifle, before the Purity and Perfection of our Mind, before an Eternal and Immutable Crown of Glory! But we seek no farther than the first Appearances of Truth and Good here we Stop,

1 Sic, i.e., thoroughly.

2 Errata list, 298, requires insertion of "to."

3 I.e., thorough.

4 To hold.

5 Undue haste (*OED*).

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allowing neither Time nor Thought to search to the bottom, and to pull off those Disguises which impose on us. This Precipitation is that which gives birth to all our Errors, which are nothing else but a hasty and injudicious Sentence, a mistaking one thing for another, supposing an Agreement or Disparity amongst Ideas and their Relations where in reality there is none, occasion'd by an imperfect and cursory view of 'em. And tho' there are other things which may be said to lead us into Error, yet they do it only as they seduce us into Rash and Precipitate Judgments. We love Grandeur and every thing that feeds our good Opinion of our Selves, and therefore wou'd Judge off hand, supposing it a disparagement¹ to our Understandings to be long in Examining, so that we greedily embrace whatever seems to carry Evidence enough for a speedy Determination, how slight and superficial soever it be. Whereas did we calmly and deliberately Examine our Evidence, and how far those Motives we are acted by ought to Influence, we shou'd not be liable to this Seduction. For hereby 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, and readiness to receive the Opinions whether True or False of those we Love because we think they will serve us in that Interest; our inordinate thirst after a great Reputation, or the Power and Riches, the Grandeurs and Pleasures of this World, these wou'd no longer dissipate our Thoughts and distract our Attention, for then we shou'd be sensible how little Concern is due to them. We shou'd neither mistake in the End and Object by not employing our Understandings at All about such things as they were chiefly made for, or not Enough, or by busying them with such as are out of their reach, or beneath their Application; nor shou'd we be out in the Method of our Meditation, going a wrong or a round about way. For the GOD of Truth is ready to lead us into all Truth, if we Honestly and Attentively apply our selves to him.

In sum, whatever false Principle we embrace, whatever wrong Conclusion we draw from true ones, is a disparagement to our Thinking Power, a Weakness of Judgment proceeding from a Confuse and Imperfect view of things, as that does from want of attention, and a hasty and partial Examination. It were endless to reckon up all the false Maxims and Reasonings we fall into, nor is it

1 Discredit.

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possible to give a List of them, for there are innumerable Errors opposite to one single Truth. The General Causes have been already mention'd, the particulars are as many as those several Compositions which arise from the various mixtures of the Passions, Interests, Education, Conversation and Reading, etc. of particular persons. And the best way that I can think of to Improve the Understanding, and to guard it against all Errors proceed they from what Cause they may, is to regulate the Will, whose Offense it is to determine the Understanding to such and such Ideas, and to stay it¹ in the Consideration of them so long as is necessary to the Discovery of Truth; for if the Will be right the Understanding can't be guilty of any Culpable Error. Not to Judge of any thing 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 Evidence oblige us to it. To withdraw our selves as much as may be from Corporeal things,² that pure Reason may be heard the better; to make that use of our senses for which they are design'd and fitted, the preservation of the Body, but not to depend on their Testimony in our Enquiries after Truth. Particularly to divest our selves of mistaken Self-love, little Ends and mean Designs, and to keep our inclinations and Passions under Government. Not to engage our selves so far in any Party or Opinion as to make it in a manner necessary that that shou'd be Right, lest from wishing it were, we come at last to persuade our selves it is so. But to be passionately in Love with Truth, as being thoroughly sensible of her Excellency and Beauty. To embrace her how opposite soever she may sometimes be to our Humours and Designs, to bring these over to her, and never attempt to make her truckle to them. To be so far from disliking a Truth because it touches us home, and lances our tenderest and dearest Corruption,³ as on the contrary to prize it the more, by how much the more plainly it shews us our Errors and Miscarriages. For indeed it concerns us most to know such Truths as these, it is not material to us what other Peoples Opinions are, any farther than as the Knowledge of their Sentiments may correct Our Mistakes. And the higher our Station is in the World, so much the greater need have we to be curious in this particular.

1 To control, restrain (obsolete) (*OED*).

2 Material things.

3 Astell suggests the image of lancing a boil.

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The mean and inconsiderable often stumble on Truth when they seek not after her, but she is commonly kept out of the way, and industriously conceal'd from the Great and mighty; either out of Design or Envy, for whoever wou'd make a Property of another must by all means conceal the Truth from him; and they who Envy their Neighbours Preeminence in other things, are willing themselves to excel in exactness of Judgment, which they think and very truly, to be the greatest Excellency. And to help forward this deception, the Great instead of being Industrious in finding out the Truth, are generally very impatient when they meet with her. She does not treat them so tenderly and fawningly, with so much Ceremony and Complaisance as their Flatterers do. There's in her that which us'd to be the Character of our Nation, an honest Plainness and Sincerity, Openness and blunt Familiarity: She cannot mould her self into all Shapes to be rendred agreeable, but standing on her Native Worth is regardless of Out-side and Varnish. But to return from this Digression.¹

Above all things we must be thoroughly convinced of our entire Dependance on GOD, for what we *Know* as well as for what we *Are*, and be warmly affected with the Sense of it, which will both Excite us to Practise, and Enable us to Perform the rest. Tho' we are Naturally Dark and Ignorant, Yet in *his Light we may hope to see Light*, if with the Son of Syrac² we Petition for *Wisdom that sits by his Throne to labour with me*, and Sigh with David after his *Light and Truth*. For then he who is *The Light that Lightneth every one who comes in to the World*, the Immutable Truth, and Uncreated Wisdom of His Father, will *Teach us in the way of Wisdom and lead us in right Paths*,³ he will instruct us infinitely better by the right use of our own Faculties than the brightest Human reason can. For in him are all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge which he Liberally dis-

1 Astell's digression — an attack on politicians, in particular the whigs, Shaftesbury, Locke, etc. — is familiar from her later writings. The digression is included in *The Ladies Library* extract, but the following paragraph is not.

2 "The Wisdome of Jesus the sonne of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus" is the name of one of the books of the Apochrypha. Richard Allestree, who may be Astell's source, refers his reader in *The Ladies Calling*, part 1, §1 (1705 edn), 527, to Ecclesiasticus, 23, for the Son of Syrach on the wantonness of women.

3 Astell echoes the formulaic language of Psalms 23: 3 and 35: 4. Proverbs 4: 11 and 8: 20, etc.

pences to all who Humbly, Honestly and Heartily ask 'em of him. To close this Head: Whatever the Notion That we see all things in GOD, may be as to the Truth of it, 'tis certainly very commendable for its Piety, in that it most effectually humbles the most dangerous sort of Pride, the being Proud of our Knowledge, and yet does not slacken our Endeavours after Knowledge but rather Excites them.¹

§IV. As to the *Method* of Thinking, if be proper for me to say any thing of that, after those better Pens which have treated of it already, it falls in with the Subject I'me now come to, which is, that *Natural Logic* I wou'd propose. I call it natural because I shall not send you further than your Own Minds to learn it, you may if you please take in the assistance of some well chosen book, but a good Natural Reason after all, is the best Director, without this you will scarce Argue well, tho you had the Choicest Books and Tutors to Instruct you, but with it you may, tho' you happen to be destitute of the other. For as a very Judicious Writer on this Subject (to whose Ingenious Remarks and Rules² I am much obliged) well observes, "These Operations [of the Mind]³ proceed meerly from Nature, and that sometimes more perfectly from those who are altogether ignorant of Logic, than from others who have learn'd it."

That which we propose in all our Meditations and Reasonings is, either to deduce some Truth we are in search of, from such Principles as we're already acquainted with; or else, to dispose our Thoughts and Reasonings in such a manner, as to be able to Convince others of those Truths which we our selves are Convinc'd of. Other Designs indeed Men may have, such as the Maintenance of their Own Opinions, Actions and Parties without regard to the Truth and Justice of 'em of the Seduction of their unwary Neigh-

1 Astell appears to accept Masham's critique in *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) of the Malebranchean principle of "Seeing all things in God," to which Astell had subscribed in her *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695). But in *The Christian Religion* (1705) she reindorses Malebranche's principle.

2 *Art of Thinking* – Astell.

Astell's Marginal note is to Antoine Arnauld's *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*. The quotation is from the introduction to Part I, ch. 1, and almost certainly from the English edn of 1693, 38, which Astell reproduces almost exactly. She elsewhere indicates her indebtedness to Arnauld for the rules of logic which she sets out.

3 These are Astell's square brackets.

bours,¹ but these are Mean and Base ones, beneath a Man, much more a Christian, who is or Ought to be endow'd with greater Integrity and Ingenuity.

Now Reasoning being nothing else but a Comparison of Ideas, and a deducing of Conclusions from Clear and Evident Principles, it is in the first place requisite that our Ideas be Clear and Just, and our Principles True, else all our Discourse will be Nonsense and Absurdity, Falshood and Error. And that our Idea may be Right, we have no more to do but to look attentively into our own Minds, having as was said above, laid aside all Prejudices and whatever may give a false tincture² to our Light, there we shall find a Clear and Lively Representation of what we seek for, unsophisticated with the Dross³ of false Definitions and untelligible Expressions. But we must not imagine that a transient view will serve the turn, or that our Eye will be Enlightened if it be not fix'd.⁴ For tho' Truth be exceeding bright, yet since our Prejudices and Passions have darkened our Eye-sight, it requires no little Pains and Application of Mind to find her out, the neglect of which Application is the Reason that we have so little Truth, and that the little we have is almost lost in that Rubbish of Error which is mingled with it. And since Truth is so near at hand, since we are not oblig'd to tumble over many Authors, to hunt after a very celebrated Genius, but may have it for enquiring after in our own Breasts,⁵ are we not inexcusable if we don't obtain it? Are we not unworthy of Compassion if we suffer our Understandings to be over-run with Error? Indeed it seems to me most Reasonable and most agreeable to the Wisdom and Equity of the Divine Operations, that every one shou'd have a Teacher in their own Bosoms, who will if they seriously apply themselves to him, immediately Enlighten them so far as that is necessary, and direct them to such Means as are sufficient for their Instruction both in Humane and Divine Truths; for as to the lat-

1 Astell appears to be impugning Locke as the seducer of Masham.

2 Colouring matter, dye, pigment (obsolete), tint, hue, colour (rare) (*OED*).

3 Extraneous matter thrown off in melting metals (as in the frequent Biblical comparison between dross and gold); scum (*OED*).

4 Astell parodies the language of Locke's exclusively optical perspective, which pretends the transparency of reason, but omits the functions of deliberation and the will.

5 Astell's restatement of Descartes' "cogito" and its implications: that individuals understand ultimate truths by self-reflection.

ter, Reason if it be Right and Solid, will not pretend to be our sole Instructor, but will send us to Divine Revelation when it may be had.

GOD does nothing in vain, he gives no Power of Faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to Mankind a Rational Mind, every individual Understanding ought to be employ'd in somewhat worthy of it. The Meanest Person shou'd Think as *Justly*, tho' not as *Capaciously*, as the greatest Philosopher. And if the Understanding be made for the Contemplation of Truth, and I know not what else it can be made for, either there are many Understandings who are never able to attain what they were design'd and fitted for, which is contrary to the Supposition that GOD made nothing in Vain, or else the very meanest must be put in a way of attaining it: Now how can this be if all that which goes to the composition of a Knowing Man in th' account of the World, be necessary to make one so? All have not leisure to Learn Languages and pore on Books, nor Opportunity to Converse with the Learned; but all may *Think*, may use their own Faculties rightly, and consult the Master who is within them.¹

By Ideas 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: So when we say we have no Idea of a thing, 'tis as much as to say we know nothing of the matter. Again, it is more strictly taken for that which represents to the Mind some Object distinct from it, whether Clearly or Confusedly; when this is its import, our Knowledge is said to be as Clear as our Ideas are. For that Idea which represents a thing so Clearly, that by an Attent and Simple View we may discern its Properties and Modifications, at least so far as they can be Known, is never false; all our Certainty and Evidence depends on it, if we Know not Truly what is thus represented to our Minds we know nothing. Thus the Idea of Equality between 2 and 2 is so evident that it is impossible to doubt of it, no Arguments could convince us of the Contrary, nor

1 Astell turns the Cartesian *cogito*, the "I think, therefore I am," which democratizes the proofs of existence, against Locke, presumably the Genius in question, rehearsing an argument she has made earlier, that if Locke is right we cannot believe him (as the product of environmental conditioning he cannot make truth claims), and if Descartes is right Locke is superfluous.

be able to persuade us that the same may be found between 2 and 3.¹

And as such an Idea as this is never False, so neither can any Idea be said to be so, if by False we mean that which has no Existence; our Idea certainly Exists, tho' there be not any thing in Nature Correspondent to it. For tho' there be no such thing as a Golden Mountain, yet when I think of one, 'tis certain I have an Idea of it.²

But our Ideas are then said to be False, or rather Wrong, when they have no Conformity to the Real Nature of the Thing whose Name they bear.³ So that properly speaking it is not the Idea but the Judgment that is False; we err in supposing that our Idea is answerable to something without us when it is not. In simple Perceptions we are not often deceiv'd but we frequently mistake in Compounding them, by Uniting several things which have no Agreement, and Separating others which are Essentially United. Indeed it may happen that our Perceptions are faulty sometimes, thro the Indisposition of the Organs or Faculties thus a Man who has the *Jaundice* sees everything ting'd with Yellow, yet even here the Error is not in the Simple Idea but in the Compos'd one, for we do not mistake when we say the Object appears Yellow to our Sight, tho' we do, when we affirm that it does, or ought to do so to others. So again, when the Mind does not sufficiently Attend to her Ideas nor Examine them on all sides, 'tis very likely she will Think amiss, but this also is a false Judgment, that which is amiss in the Perception being rather the Inadequateness than the Falseness. Thus in many Cases we enquire no farther than whether an Action be not Directly Forbidden, and if we do not find it Absolutely Unlawful, we think that sufficient to Authorize the Practise of it, not considering it as we ought to do, Cloathed with the Circumstances of Scandal, Temptation, etc. which place it in the same Classes with things unlawful, at least make it so to us.

Rational Creatures shou'd endeavour to have right Ideas of every thing that comes under their Cognizance, but yet our Ideas

1 See Locke's first letter to Stillingfleet (1823 edn, 52-53).

2 The source of the golden mountain example is unknown. Locke in the *Essay*, bk 3, ch. 6, §50 (1690 edn, 264) gives a nominalist account of "Gold," whose various usages, he insists, connote no underlying substance or essence.

3 Astell subscribes to the classical theory of truth which accords human cognition the capacity to know things as they really are. It is this confidence which Locke's scepticism seemed to undermine.

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of Morality, our thoughts about Religion are those which we shou'd with greatest speed and diligence rectifie, because they are of most importance, the Life to come, as well as all the Occurrences of This, depending on them. We shou'd search for Truth in our most abstracted Speculations, but it concerns us nearly to follow her close in what relates to the Conduct of our Lives. For the main thing we are to drive at in all our Studies, and that which is the greatest Improvement of our Understandings is the Art of Prudence, the being all of a Piece, managing all our Words and Actions as it becomes Wise Persons and Good Christians.

Yet in this we are commonly most faulty; for besides the deceits of our Passions, our Ideas of Particular Vertues and Vices, Goods and Evils, being an assemblage of divers simple Perceptions, and including several Judgments are therefore liable to mistake, and much more so considering how we commonly come by them. We hear the Word that Stands for such a Thing, suppose Honor and then instead of enquiring what it is at the Fountain-head the Oracles of GOD, and our own, or the Impartial Reason of the Wisest and the Best, Custom and the Observations we make on the Practice of such as Pretend to it forms our Idea, which is seldom a Right one, the Opinions and Practices of the World being very fallacious and many times quite opposite to the Dictates of Reason wou'd we but give ear to them. For what a strange distorted Idea of Honor must they needs have, who can think it Honourable to break a Vow that ought to be Kept, and Dishonourable to get loose from an Engagement that ought to be broken? Who cannot endure to be tax'd with a Lye, and yet never think fit to keep their Word? What do they think of Greatness who support their Pomp at the Expence of the Groans and Tears of many Injur'd Families? What is their Idea of Heaven, who profess to Believe such a thing, and yet never endeavour to Qualifie themselves for the Enjoyment of it? Have they any Idea at all of these things when they speak of 'em? Or, if they have, is it not a very false one?¹

1 Here Astell anticipates her challenge to Locke and the Whigs in *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700, 29, 32, 38-41, 92-95; 1706/1996, 27/46, 31/48, 36-41/51-54, 87-92/76-80), to apply in the private sphere the democracy they advocate in the public. "How much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, not *Milton* himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny," Astell dismally concluded (27/46-47). Charles

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Now that we may avoid mistake the better, and because we usually join Words to our Ideas even when we only Meditate, we shou'd free them from all Equivocation, not make use of any Word, which has not a Distinct Idea annex'd to it, and where Custom has join'd many Ideas to one Word, carefully separate and distinguish them. For if our Words are Equivocal, how can we by Pronouncing such and such, excite the same Idea in another that is in our own Mind, which is the End of Speech, and consequently how can we be Understood? And if sometimes we annex one Idea to a Word, and sometimes another, we may for ever wrangle with those who perhaps wou'd be found to agree with us if we Understood each other, but can neither Convince them, nor clear up the Matter to our own Mind. For instance: Shou'd I dispute Whether Evil were to be Chosen? Without defining what I mean by Evil, which is a Word customarily apply'd to things of different Natures, and shou'd conclude in the Affirmative, meaning at the same time the Evil of Pain, or any Corporal Loss or Punishment, I were not mistaken, tho' another Person who annexes no other Idea but that of Sin to the word Evil, might justly contradict me and say that I was. Or if in the Process of my Discourse, I shou'd without giving notice of it, substitute the Idea of Sin instead of that of Pain, when I mention Evil, I shou'd argue falsely. For it is a Maxim that we may Chuse a less Evil to avoid a greater, if both of them be Corporal Evils, or if one of them be so, and we chuse it to avoid a Sin, between which and the Evil of Pain there is no Comparison: But if the two Evils proposed to our Choice be both of them Sinful, that Principle will not hold, we must Chuse neither, whatever comes on't, Sin being Eligible no manner of way.

Thus many times our Ideas are thought to be false when the fault is really in our Language, we make use of Words without joyning any, or only loose and indeterminate Ideas to them, Prating like Parrots who can Modify Sounds, and Pronounce Syllables, and sometimes martial them as a Man wou'd, tho without the use of Reason or understanding any thing by them. So that after a long Discourse and many fine Words, our Hearer may justly ask us what

Leslie in his "Supplement," March 25, 1703 (6-7), "With a short Account of the *Original of Government* Compared with the *Schemes* of the *Republicans* and *Whigs*," appended to *The New Association, Part II*, laid down the same challenge in what is believed to be the first published critique of Locke's *Two Treatises* — erroneously, as I maintain (Springborg, 1995).

we have been saying? And what it is we wou'd be at? And so a great part, of the Good Breeding of the World, many Elegant Complements pass for nothing, they have no meaning, or if they have, 'tis quite contrary to what the Words in other Cases signifie.

From the Comparison of two or more Ideas clearly Conceived arises a Judgment, which we may lay down for a Principle, and as we have occasion Argue from. Always observing that those Judgments which we take for Axioms or Principles, be such as carry the highest Evidence and Conviction, such as every one who will but in the least Attend may Clearly see, and be fully convinced of, and which need not another Idea for their Demonstration. Thus from the Agreement which we plainly perceive between the Ideas of GOD and of Goodness singly consider'd, we discern that they may be joyn'd together so as to form this Proposition, *That GOD is Good*: And from the evident disparity that is between GOD and Injustice, we learn to affirm this other, *That he is not Unjust*. And so long as we Judge of Nothing but what we see Clearly, we can't be mistaken in our Judgments, we may indeed in those Reasonings and Deductions we draw from them, if we are Ignorant of the Laws of Argumentation, or Negligent in the Observation of them.

The First and Principal thing therefore to be observed in all the Operations of the Mind is, That we determine nothing about those things of which we have not a Clear Idea, and as Distinct as the Nature of the Subject will permit, for we cannot properly be said to Know any thing which does not Clearly and Evidently appear to us. Whatever we see Distinctly we likewise see Clearly, Distinction always including Clearness, tho this does not necessarily include that, there being many Objects Clear to the view of the Mind, which yet can't be said to be Distinct.

That (to use the words of a Celebrated Author)¹ may be said to be "Clear which is Present and Manifest to an attentive Mind;" so as we say we see Objects Clearly, when being present to our Eyes they sufficiently Act on 'em, and our Eyes are dispos'd to regard 'em. And that Distinct, which is so Clear, Particular, and Different from all other things, that it contains not any thing in it self which appears not manifestly to him who considers it as he ought. Thus

1 *Les Princip. del la Philosof. de M. Des Cartes* Pt. I. §45 – Astell.

Astell's marginal note, section note added as per Errata list, 298. Note that the material in parentheses, i.e., the attribution to Descartes, is omitted from the extract reproduced in *The Ladies Library* (1714 edn), vol 1, 490.

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we may have a Clear, but not a Distinct and Perfect Idea of GOD and of our own Souls; their Existence and some of their Properties and Attributes may be Certainly and Indubitably Known, but we can't Know the Nature of our Souls Distinctly, for Reasons too long to be mentioned here, and less that of GOD, because he is Infinite. Now where our Knowledge is Distinct, we may boldly deny of a subject, all that which after a careful Examination we find not in it: But where our Knowledge is only Clear, and not Distinct, tho' we may safely Affirm what we see, yet we can't without a hardy Presumption Deny of it what we see not. And were it not very common to find People both Talking and Writing of things of which they have no Notion, no Clear Idea; nay and determining Dogmatically concerning the entire Nature of those of which they cannot possibly have an Adequate and Distinct one, it might seem Impertinent to desire them to speak no farther than they Apprehend. They will tell you Peremptorily¹ of Contradictions and Absurdities in such matters as they themselves must allow they cannot Comprehend, tho others as Sharp sighted as themselves can see no such thing as they complain of.

As Judgments are form'd by the Comparing of Ideas, so Reasoning or Discourse arises from the Comparison or Combination of several Judgments. Nature teaches us when we can't find out what Relation one Idea bears to another by a Simple view or bare Comparison, to seek for a Common Measure or third Idea, which Relating to the other two, we may by Comparing it with each of 'em, discern wherein they agree or differ. Our Invention discovers it self in proposing readily apt Ideas for this Middle Term, our Judgment in making Choice of such as are Clearest and most to our purpose, and the excellency of our Reasoning consists in our Skill and Dexterity in Applying them.

Invention indeed is the hardest part, when Proofs are found it is not very difficult to manage them. And to know precisely wherein their Nature consists, may help us somewhat in our enquiries after 'em. An Intermediate Idea then which can make out an Agreement between other ideas, must be Equivalent to, and yet Distinct from those we compare by it. Where Ideas agree it will not be hard to find such an Equivalent, and if after diligent search we cannot meet with any, 'tis a pretty sure Sign that they do not agree. It is not necessary indeed that our Middle Idea be Equivalent in all

1 Decisively, conclusively, in a manner to preclude debate (*OED*).

respects, 'tis enough if it be in such as make the Comparison: And when it is so to one of the Compar'd Ideas but not to the other, that's a Proof that they do not agree amongst themselves.

All the Commerce and Intercourse¹ of the World is manag'd by Equivalents, conversation as well as Traffick.² Why do we Trust our Friends but because their Truth and Honesty appears to us Equivalent to the Confidence we repose in 'em? Why do we perform Good Offices to others, but because there's a proportion between them and the Merit of the Person, or our own Circumstances? And as the way to know the Worth of things is to Compare them one with another, so in like manner we come to the Knowledge of the Truth of 'em by an Equal Ballancing.³ But you will say, Tho I may learn the value of a *Spanish Coin* by Weighing, or Comparing it with some other Money whose Standard I know, and so discern what proportion it bears to those Goods I wou'd exchange,⁴ yet what Scales shall I find to weigh Ideas? What Hand so even as to poize them Justly? Or if that might be done, yet where shall I meet with an Equivalent Idea when I have occasion to use one?⁵

In answer to this Demand I consider, that as Light is always visible to us if we have an Organ to receive it, if we turn our Eyes towards it, and that nothing interpose between it and us; so is Truth, we are surrounded with it, and GOD has given us Faculties to receive it. If it be ask'd, Why then do we so seldom find it? The

1 Trade.

2 A marvellously Lockean statement of the principle of general equivalence. But in fact the phraseology is directed at Masham, who in *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696 edn, 121) had convicted Astell's project of denying human sociability, making "it impossible to live in the daily Commerce and Conversation of the World, and love God as we ought to do."

3 The remainder of this, and the following two paragraphs, are omitted from *The Ladies Library* extract (1714 edn), vol. 1, 492.

4 Astell demonstrates knowledge of the value of money as an expression of exchange-value, taken by Locke after the manner of the Church Fathers, from Aristotle in the *Politics*, bk 1, ch. 3, 1257a-1257b.

5 Astell challenges extension of the notion of general equivalence in economics to the realm of ideas as an instance of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Scales to weigh coin, and money as the expression of exchange value, are items to hand, but not so for an "Equivalent Idea." It is of course ironic that Astell should be charging Locke with over-concretizing ideas, but she draws attention to Locke's arbitrariness in retaining a role for ideas at all in a mechanistic materialist system.

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Reason is, because instead of making right use of our Faculties we employ them in keeping it out; we either shut our Eyes, or if we vouchsafe to open them, we are sure to view it thro such unsuitable Mediums as fail not to misrepresent it to us. As for those few Noble Spirits, who open the Windows of their Souls to let in Truth, and take the Films of Interest, Passion and Prejudice from before their Eyes, they will certainly be Enlighten'd, and cannot miss of obtaining as much Truth as they are capable of Receiving. For, to go on with the Comparison, as we can See no farther than our own Horizon, tho the Light shine never so bright around us; and as we cannot discern every Object even within that Compass Clearly, nor Any Distinctly but what we particularly apply our selves to; So neither are our Capacities large enough to take in *All* Truth, as has been often said, nor are we capable of attaining *Any*, without Attention and diligent Examination. But if we carefully Consider those Ideas we already have and Attend to those Truths we are acquainted with, we cannot want Mediums to discover more, if our Enquiries be after that which is within our Reach. He who is the Fountain of Truth is also a GOD of Order, and has so regularly connex'd one Truth with another, that the discovery of one is a step towards a further Progress; so that if we diligently Examine those Truths which, we Know, they will clear the way to what we search after: For it seldom happens but that the Question it self directs us to some Idea that will serve for the Explanation or Proof of it.

There is no Object, no Accident of Life but affords us matter of Instruction. GOD has so dispos'd all the Works of his Hands, all the Actings of his Providence, that every one of 'em ministers to our Improvement, if we will but Observe and Apply them. Indeed this Living *Ex Tempore* which most of us are guilty of, our making no Reflections, our Gay and Volatile Humour which transports us in an Instant from one thing to another, e're we have with the Industrious Bee suck'd¹ those Sweets it wou'd afford us, frequently renders his gracious Bounty ineffectual. For as the Diligent-hand maketh Rich, whil'st the Slothful and Prodigal come to nothing, so the Use of our Powers improves and Encreases them, and the most Observing and Considerate is the Wisest Person: For she lays up in her Mind as in a Store-house, ready to produce on all

1 Astell appears to echo the song from Shakespeare's *Tempest* (V, i, 88 ff.), "Where the bee sucks, there suck I."

Occasions, a Clear and Simple Idea of every Object that has at any time presented itself. And perhaps the difference between one Womans Reason and anothers may consist only in this, that the one has amass'd a greater number of such Ideas than the other, and dispos'd them more Orderly in her Understanding, so that they are at hand, ready to be apply'd to those Complex Ideas whose Agreement or Disagreement cannot be found out but by the means of some of 'em.

But because Examples are more familiar than Precepts, as condescending to shew us the very manner of Practising them, I shall endeavour to make the matter in Hand as plain as I can by subjoining Instances to the following Rules, which Rules as I have not taken wholly on Trust from others, so neither do I pretend to be the Inventer of 'em.¹

We have heard already that a Medium is necessary when we can't discern the Relation that is between two or more Ideas by Intuition or a simple View. Could this alone procure us what we seek after, the addition of other Ideas wou'd be needless, since to make a shew of Wit by tedious Arguings and unnecessary Flourishes, does only Perplex and Incumber the Matter, Intuition being the Simplest, and on that account the best way of Knowing.

Rule I. And therefore we shou'd in the first place, Acquaint our selves thoroughly with the State of the Question, have a Distinct Notion of our Subject whatever it be, and of the Terms we make use of, knowing precisely what it is we drive at: that so we may in the second.

Rule II. Cut off all needless Ideas and whatever has not a necessary Connexion to the matter under Consideration, which serve only to fill up the Capacity of the Mind, and to Divide and Distract the Attention. From the neglect of this comes those causless Digressions, tedious Parentheses and Impertinent Remarques which we meet with in some Authors. For, as when our Sight is diffus'd and

1 Astell takes her rules of logic from Arnauld, who acknowledged having taken them from "a small *Manuscript* of the deceas'd *Monsieur Paschal*, entitled, *The Soul of Geometry*," i.e., the work of that title by Blaise Pascal (1623–62). (See Arnauld's *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*, 1693 edn, 12.) But the rules set out by Arnauld in the Introduction to Part I of his work (40) and in Part 4, ch. 4 (413 ff.) are five in number, to which Astell adds a sixth, and her formulations do not correspond to the phraseology of the 1693 translation.

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extended to many Objects at once we see none of them Distinctly; so when the Mind grasps at every Idea that presents it self, of rambles after such as relate not to its present Business, it loses its hold and retains a very feeble Apprehension of that which it shou'd Attend. Some have added another Rule (*viz*). *That we Reason only on those things of which we have Clear Ideas*; but I take it to be a Consequence of the first, and therefore do not make it a distinct one: For we can by no means Understand our Subject, or be well acquainted with the State of the Question, unless we have a Clear Idea of all its Terms.

Rule III. Our Business being stated, the next Rule is *To conduct our Thoughts by Order, beginning with the most Simple and Easie Objects, and ascending as by Degrees to the Knowledge of the more Compos'd*. I need not tell you, that Order makes everything, Easie, Strong and Beautiful, and that the Superstructure is neither like to Last or Please unless the Foundation be duly laid, for this is obvious to the most Superficial Reader. Nor are they likely to solve the Difficult, who have neglected or slightly pass'd over the Easie Questions. Our Knowledge is gradual, and by passing Regularly thro Plain things, we arrive in due time at the more Abstruse.

Rule IV. In this Method we are to practise the Fourth Rule which is, *Not to leave any part of our Subject unexamin'd*, it being as necessary to Consider All that can let in Light, as to shut out what's Foreign to it. We may stop short of Truth as well as over run it; and tho we look never so attentively on our proper Object, if we view but half of it, we may be as much mistaken, as if we extended our Sight beyond it. Some Objects agree very well when observ'd on one side, which upon turning the other shew a great disparity. Thus the Right Angle of a Triangle may be like to one part of a Square, but compare the Whole, and you'll find 'em very different Figures.¹ And a Moral Action may in some Circumstance be not

1 To Locke's further extended discussion of the triangle, an example of abstract ideas as products of the mind rather than Platonic archetypes, Stillingfleet, like Astell, raised serious objections. Antoine Arnauld, whose *Art of Thinking* Astell goes on to treat, opens ch. 5 of that work, "Of the Universality, Particularity and Singularity of Ideas," with a discussion of any given triangle as "a Figure containing three Lines and as many Angles; which *Idea* so inform'd may serve for the apprehension of all other Triangles" (London, 1693 edn, 65).

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only Fit but Necessary, which in others, where Time, Place, and the like have made an alteration, wou'd be most Improper; so that if we venture to Act on the former Judgment, we may easily do amiss, if we wou'd Act as we ought, we must view its New Face, and see with what Aspect that looks on us.

To this Rule belongs that of *Dividing the Subject of our Meditations into as many Parts, as we can, and as shall be requisite to Understand it perfectly*. This is indeed most necessary in difficult Questions, which will scarce be unravell'd but in this manner by Pieces: Ever taking care to make Exact Reviews, and to Sum up our Evidence justly e're we pass Sentence and fix our Judgment.

Rule V. To which purpose we must *Always keep our Subject Directly in our Eye, and Closely pursue it thro all, our Progress*; there being no better Sign of a good Understanding than Thinking Closely and Pertinently,¹ and Reasoning dependently, so as to make the former part of our Discourse a support to the Latter, and *This* an Illustration of *That*, carrying Light and Evidence in ev'ry step we take. The neglect of this Rule is the Cause why our Discoveries of Truth are seldom Exact, that so much is often said to so little purpose; and many Intelligent and Industrious Readers when they have Read over a Book are very little wiser than when they began it. And that the two last Rules may be the better observ'd, 'twill be fit very often to look over our Process so far as we have gone, that so by rendring our Subject Familiar, we may the sooner arrive to an Exact Knowledge of it.

Rule VI. All which being done we are in a fair way towards keeping the last Rule, which is, *To judge no further than we Perceive, and not to take any thing for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so*. Indeed in some Cases we are forc'd to content our selves with Probability, but 'twere well if we did so only where 'tis plainly Necessary. That is, when the Subject of our Meditation is such as we cannot possibly have a Certain Knowledge of, because we are not furnish'd with Proofs which have a Constant and Immutable Connexion with the ideas we apply them to, or because we can't perceive it, which is our Case in such Exigencies as oblige us to Act presently, on a cursory view of the Arguments propos'd to us, when

1 To the point.

we want time to trace them to the bottom, and to make use of such means as wou'd discover Truth.

I cannot think we are often driven to such straits in any considerable Affair, tho I believe that very many Subjects may be propos'd to us, concerning which we cannot readily pass our Judgment, either because we never consider'd them before, or because we are wanting in some Means that lead to the Knowledge of 'em. In which Case Reason wills that we suspend our Judgment till we can be better Inform'd; nor wou'd it have us remit our Search after Certainty, even in those very Cases in which we may sometimes be forc'd to Act only on Probable Grounds. For Reason can't rest satisfy'd with Probabilities where Evidence is possible, our Passions and Interest may, but *That* does not incline us to leave off Enquiring lest we happen to meet somewhat contrary to our Desires. No, Reason requires us to continue our Enquiries with all the Industry we can, till they've put us in Possession of Truth, and when we have found, enjoyns us to follow her how opposite so ever she may cause our Latter Actions to be to our Former. But by this we may learn (and so we may by every thing that such weak and fallible Creatures as we are perform) to think Candidly of those whose Opinions and Actions differ from our own. Because we do not know the necessity of their Affairs, nor in what ill Circumstances they are plac'd in respect of Truth.

And now to Apply what has been said; The State of the Question being Distinctly known, and certain Ideas fixt to the Terms we make use of, we shall find sometimes that the Difference which was suppos'd to be between the Things themselves, is only in words, in the divers ways we make use of to express the same Idea.

For if upon looking into our selves we discern, that these different Terms have but one and the same Idea, when we have corrected our Expressions the Controversie is at an End, and we need enquire no further. Thus, If we are ask'd *Whether GOD is Infinitely Perfect?*¹ There needs no Intermediate Ideal to compare the Idea of

1 Locke in his reply to the Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet, revisited this question, which he had raised in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, at great length. Astell follows Stillingfleet in maintaining that the conditions Locke sets for invalidating the idea of God are impossible, because we can have no standard of comparison for him, precisely Locke's argument, in fact.

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GOD with that of Infinite Perfection, since we may discern them on the very first view to be one and the same Idea differently express'd, which to go about to explain or prove were only to cumber with needless words, and to make what is Clear, Obscure. For we Injure a Cause instead of Defending it, by attempting an Explanation or Proof of things so Clear, that as they do not need, so perhaps they are not Capable of any.

But if it be made a Question *Whether there is a GOD, or a Being Infinitely Perfect?*¹ We are then to Examin the Agreement between our Idea of GOD and that of Existence.² Now this may be discern'd by Intuition, for upon a View of our Ideas we find that Existence is a Perfection, and the Foundation of all other Perfections, since that which has no Being cannot be suppos'd to have any Perfection. And tho the Idea of Existence is not Adequate to that of Perfection, yet the Idea of Perfection Includes that of Existence, and if *That* Idea were divided into parts, one part of it wou'd exactly agree with *This*. So that if we will allow that *Any* Being is Infinite in All Perfections, we cannot deny that Being Exists; Existence it self being one Perfection, and such an one as all the rest are built upon.

If unreasonable Men will farther demand, *Why is it necessary that All Perfection shou'd be Centred in One Being, is't not enough that it be parcel'd out amongst many? And tho it be true that that Being who has all Perfection must needs Exist, yet where's the Necessity of an All-Perfect Being?*³ We must then look about for Proofs and Intermediate Ideas, and the Objection it self will furnish us with one. For those *Many* whose Particular Ideas it wou'd have joyn'd together to make a Compound one of All Perfection, are no other than Creatures, as will appear if we consider our Idea of Particular Being and of

1 Discussed by Locke in reply to Stillingfleet (*Letter to the Bishop of Worcester*, in John Locke, *Works*, 1823 edn, vol. 3, 8 and 51), with reference to his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk 4, ch. 4, §18; from pages 52-55 of the same Letter, Locke refers to his *Essay*, bk 4, ch. 10, §7.

2 See Locke's reply to Stillingfleet (8-9) on substance and existence, addressing the question in the terms of the Scholastics — “‘Ens’ or res per se subsistens et substans accidentibus?” — to which he answers that simple qualities presuppose a substratum or substance.

3 Discussed by Locke in reply to Stillingfleet, 8; again on 46, citing the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk 4, ch. 10, §1; and on 51, with reference to his *Essay*, bk 4, ch. 4, §18.

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Creature, which are so far from having any thing to distinguish 'em, that in all Points they resemble each other. Now this Idea naturally suggests to us that of Creation, or a Power of giving Being to that which before the exerting of that Power had none, which Idea if we use it as a Medium, will serve to discover to us the necessity of an All-Perfect Being.

For in the first place, what ever has any Perfection or Excellency (for that's all we mean by Perfection here) must either have it of it self, or derive it from some other Being. Now Creatures cannot have their Perfections from themselves because they have not their Being, for to suppose that they Made themselves is an Absurdity too ridiculous to be seriously refuted, 'tis to suppose them to Be and not to Be at the same time, and that when they were Nothing, they were able to do the greatest Matter. Nor can they derive either Being or Perfection from any other Creature. For tho some Particular Beings may seem to be the Cause of the Perfections of others, as the Watch-maker may be said to be the Cause of the Regular Motions of the Watch,¹ yet trace it a little farther, and you'll find this very Cause shall need another, and so without End, till you come to the Foundation-head, to that All-Perfect Being, who is the last resort of our Thoughts, and in whom they Naturally and Necessarily rest and terminate. If to this it be Objected that we as good as affirm that this All-Perfect Being is his own Maker, by saying he is Self-Existent, and so we fall into the same Absurdity which we imputed to that Opinion which supposes that Creatures were their own Maker. The reply is easie, That we do not say he Made him self, we only affirm that his Nature is such, that tho we can't sufficiently Explain because we can't comprehend it, yet thus much we can discern, that if he did not Exist of himself no other Being could ever have Existed. So that either All must be swallow'd up in an Infinite Nothing, if Nothing can properly have that Epithet, and we must suppose, that neither we our selves, nor any of those Creatures about us ever had, or ever can have a Being, which is too ridiculous to imagine, or else we must needs have recourse to a Self-Existing Being, who is the Maker and Lord of all things. And since Self-Existence must of necessity be plac'd somewhere, is it not much more Natural and Reasonable to place it in Infinite Perfection, than amongst poor, frail Creatures, whose Origin we may trace, and whose End we see daily hastning?

1 This famous analogy points to Descartes.

To Sum up all: Since there are Innumerable Beings in the World, which have each of them their several Excellencies or Perfections; Since these can no more derive their Perfections than their Being from themselves or from any other Creature; Since a Self-Existing Being is the result of our Thoughts; the First and only True Cause, without whom it is impossible that any thing should ever have Existed; since Creatures with their Being receive all that depends on it from him their Maker; Since none can give what he has not,¹ and therefore he who Communicates an innumerable variety of Perfections to his Creatures, even all that they enjoy, must needs contain in himself all those Beauties and Perfections he is pleas'd to Communicate to Inferior Beings; nothing can be more Plain and Evident than that there is a GOD, and that the Existence of an All-Perfect Being is Absolutely necessary.

Perhaps these Arguments are not in Form, I do not oblige my Self to follow servilely the Rules of Art, nor know I what better Judges will think of 'em, but they seem to me to be Clear, Rational and Concluding, which is all I aim at. And I hope the Reader will receive from hence more light into the way of Arguing, than she cou'd have gain'd had I spent as many Pages in prescribing Rules and giving trifling Examples, which when they are known, merit only to be forgot again. But if some are better pleas'd with the usual way of Syllogism,² and think an Argument cannot be rightly managed without one, for their Satisfaction we will add another Instance.

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- 1 Astell's phraseology is curiously close in form of words to the principle on which Locke's argument against slavery is based in the *Two Treatises of Government* (1988 edn, Bk 2, §23, 284): "No body can give more power than he has himself; and he that cannot take away his own life cannot give another power over it." Astell is already citing Locke's *Two Treatises* in *The Christian Religion* of 1705, and I believe that there is clear evidence she had read the work by 1700 (see Springborg, "Mary Astell, Critic of Locke"), but could she have read it by 1697? The first systematic comment on Locke's political treatises is usually credited to Charles Leslie, in his "Supplement," dated March 25, 1703, to *The New Association, Part II* (6-7).
 - 2 The syllogism is a standard form of argument in Aristotelian logic comprising two premises which contain a common or middle term, from which the third term or conclusion is derived by deduction. Astell's discussion of the technical rules governing the syllogism follows Arnauld's *The Art of Thinking: Port Royal Logic*, part 3, chs 2-10 (1693 edn, 215-382).

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Suppose the Question were put *Whether a Rich Man is Happy?* By a Rich Man understanding one who possesses the Wealth and Good things of this World, and by Happy the Enjoyment of the Proper Good of Man. We compare the two Terms Riches and Happiness together, to discern if they be so much one and the same, that what is affirm'd of the one may be said of the other; but we find they are not. For if Riches and Happiness were terms Convertible, then all who are Happy must be Rich, and all who are Rich must be Happy, to affirm the last of which is to beg the Question, and the contrary appears by the following Argument, which makes use of *Satisfaction with ones own Condition* for the middle Idea or Common Measure.

He who is Happy is satisfied with his Condition and free from Anxious Cares and Solicitude (for these proceeding from the want of Good, he who enjoys his proper Good cannot be subject to them.) But Riches do not free us from Anxieties and Solicitude, they many times encrease them, Therefore to be Rich and to be Happy are not one and the same thing.

Again, If there are some who are Happy and yet not Rich, then Riches and Happiness are two distinct things. But a Good Poor Man is Happy (in the Enjoyment of GOD who is better to him than Thousands of Gold and Silver,) therefore Riches and Happiness are to be distinguish'd.

We may further consider, that if the Enjoyment of Riches can make a Man Happy according to our Notion of Happiness, they must be his Proper Good. Now if we compare the Idea of Riches with that which we have of Man, we shall find in the former nothing but what's Material, External and Adventitious, but our Idea of the latter represents to us somewhat that Thinks, and so is of an Immaterial and more noble Nature, a Nature altogether different from the former, and much more excellent and Superior to it; and by Consequence the less Noble cannot be the Good of the more, nor a Body or an Extended Substance, the Proper Good of the Mind, a Spiritual or Thinking Substance, So that upon the whole matter we find, that we cannot affirm a Man is Happy because he is Rich, neither can we deny it; Riches consider'd absolutely in 'emself, neither make a Man Happy nor hinder him from being so. They Contribute to his Happiness or they Obstruct it according to the Use he makes of 'em.

As for the Common Rules of Disputation they do more frequently Intangle than Clear a Question, nor is it worth while to know any more of them than may help to guard us from the

Sophistry of those who use them, and assist us in the managing an Argument fairly, so long as it is Tenable, and till we are driven from it by the meer dint of Truth. To be able to hold an Argument Right or Wrong may pass with some perhaps for the Character of a Good Disputant, which yet I think it is not, but must by no means be allow'd to be that of a Rational Person, it belongs to such to detect as soon as may be the Fallacies of an ill one, and to establish Truth with the Clearest Evidence. For indeed Truth not Victory is what we shou'd contend for in all Disputes, it being more Glorious to be Overcome by her than to Triumph under the Banners of Error. And therefore we pervert our Reason when we make it the Instrument of an Endless Contention, by seeking after Quirks and Subtilities, abusing Equivocal Terms and by practising the rest of those little Arts every Sophister is full of, which are of no service in the discovery of Truth, all they can do is to Ward off an Opponents blow, to make a Noise and raise a Dust, that so we may escape in the Hurry, our foil being undiscover'd.

It were endless to reckon up all the Fallacies we put on our selves and endeavour to obtrude on others. On our selves in the first place, for however we may be pleas'd in the Contemplation of our own Craft or to use those softer Names we are apt to give it, our Acuteness and Ingenuity; who ever attempts to impose on others is first impos'd on himself, he is cheated by some of those grand Deceivers, the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, and made to believe that Vain-glory, Secular Interest, Ambition or perhaps Sensuality or Revenge, or any the like contemptible Appetites are preferable to Integrity and Truth.

Neither is it necessary to reduce the most usual Sophisms to general Heads since that's already very well perform'd in a Book to which I'de rather refer you, than be at the trouble of Transcribing,¹ having nothing to add but this, that if I be not mistaken, all the false Arguing enumerated there, and what other you may happen to meet with may be discover'd and avoided by the Rules already

1 *Art of Thinking*, Pt.3, Ch. 19, 20 – Astell.

Astell's preceding arguments about the possibility of certitude restate the case against the Pyrrhonic sceptics in Arnauld's *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*, (1693 English edn), 309-82, referenced in this marginal note. Chs 19 and 20 of the *Port Royal Logic* are entitled "Of the several sorts of vicious Arguments call'd Sophisms," and "Of bad reasoning in civil Conversation and common Discourse."

given, and do indeed proceed, so far as they relate to the Understanding, from the Non-observation of some of 'em.

But it is to little purpose to guard our selves against the Sophisms of the Head, if we lie open to those of the Heart. One irregular Passion will put a greater Obstacle between us and Truth, then the bright Understanding and clearest Reasoning can easily remove. This every one of us is apt to discern in others but we're blind to it in our selves. We can readily say that it is Pride or Obstinacy, Interest or Passion or in a word Self-love that keeps our Neighbour from Conviction, but all this while imagine our own Hearts are very clear of 'em, tho' more Impartial Judges are of another Mind.

I wish there were no Reason to think that there are some who attempt to maintain an Opinion which they know to be false, or at least which they have cause to suspect, and therefore industriously avoid what wou'd manifest their Error.¹ 'Tis hop'd however that the greatest part of the Disputers of the World are not of this number, and that the reason why they offer their Neighbours Sophistical Arguments, is because they are not aware of it themselves. That what makes them so Positive is their firm persuasion that they are acted only by a Zeal for GOD, an honest Constancy and Stanch Integrity, tho at the very same time quite different Motives move them under these Appearances.

And indeed he must be an extraordinary good Man, a Wonder scarce produc'd in an Age, who has no Irregular Passion stirring; Who receives no Manner of Tincture² from Pride and Vicious Self-Love, to which all are so prone, and which hide themselves under so many disguises; Who is got above the World it's Terrors and Allurements, has laid up his Treasure in Heaven, and is fully Contented with his Present Circumstances, let them be what they will, having made them the boundaries of his Desires; who knows how

1 Astell's claim, in apparent contradiction with her earlier affirmation of the Platonist position that one cannot knowingly do wrong, is resolvable in terms of corruption of the will. When the will is corrupted even cognition is skewed, and it is by failing to discipline the will that individuals "industriously avoid what wou'd manifest their error."

2 In the sense favoured by the Cambridge Platonists (especially Henry More), but now obsolete: "a supposed spiritual principle or immaterial substance whose character or quality may be infused into material things, which are then said to be tintured; the quintessence, spirit, or soul of a thing" (*OED*).

to live on a Little very happily and therefore receives no Bias from his own Conveniency, nor is weigh'd down by the dead Weight of his Appetites and Interests; which ought to be the Temper of every Person who wou'd find out Truth, and who desires to make a high Judgment in all things.

We all pretend to this it's true, and think our selves Injur'd if it be not believ'd that we are Disinteress'd¹ and free from Passion; that no Humour or Private End, nothing but an honest Zeal for Truth gives warmth to our Discourses; and yet it often happens that e're we Conclude them, we give just occasion to have it thought, that how large soever our Knowledge in other things may be, we are not well acquainted with our own Hearts. All which consider'd, how confidently soever we're perswaded of our own Integrity, tho we think we have penetrated to the very bottom of our Hearts, it wou'd not be amiss to suspect our selves sometimes, and to fear a Bias, even at the very instant we take care to avoid one.

For Truth being but One, and the Rational Faculties not differing in Kind but in Degree, tho there may be different Measures of Understanding, there could not be such Contradictions in Mens Opinions as we find there are, even in those who examin as well as in those who do not, were they acted only by the Love of Truth, and did not Self-Love perswade them that they shall find their own particular account by such an Opposition. I wou'd not be so understood as if I thought that in all Controversies one side must needs be Criminal, if not be Wilfully Opposing Truth, yet at least by an indulgence of such un-mortifi'd Passions as estrange them from her. No, without doubt great allowances are to be made on the score of Education, Capacity, [the]² Leisure, and Opportunity of Information we have had. But this we may venture to say, that had we but a Modest Opinion of our selves, believing it as possible for us as for those who contradict us to be mistaken, did we behave³ our selves answerable to such a belief; were we seriously convinc'd that nothing is so much our Interest as a readiness to admit of Truth, from what ever Hand it comes, greatest part of our Disputes wou'd have a better Issue than we generally find. At least if we cou'd not be so happy as to Convince one another, our Contests wou'd be manag'd with more Temper and Moderation, wou'd

1 Disinterested.

2 Insertion as per Errata list, 298.

3 Hold or conduct ourselves.

not conclude in such a breach of Charity, or at best in such a Coldness for each other, as they usually do.

If we consider wisely we shall find it to be our Present Interest as well as our Future, to do that in Reality which all of us Pretend to, that is, to Search after and to Follow Truth. And to do it with all that Candor and Ingenuity which becomes a true Philosopher as well as a good Christian, making use of no Arguments but what we really believe, and giving them up contentedly when we meet with stronger. Our *Present Interest*, which is that which weighs most with the generality, and to which we make all other considerations give place; For what is it we Contend for? They who have such little Souls as to bait at any thing beneath the highest End,¹ make Reputation their Aim, and with it that Authority and Wealth which usually attends it. But now Reputation cannot be acquir'd, at least not a lasting one, by Fallacious Reasonings; we may perhaps for a while get a Name by them amongst unwary Persons, but the World grows too quick-sighted to be long impos'd on. If a Love of Truth do not, yet Envy and Emulation will set other heads a Work to discover our Ignorance or Fraud, they are upon the same Design, and will not suffer us to go away with the Prize undeservedly, And besides, with how ill an Aspect must he needs appear who does not Reason fairly, and by consequence, how unlike is he to gain on those who hear him? There are but three Causes to which false Arguments can be refer'd, Ignorance, Rashness, or Design, and the being suspected for any one of these hinders us very much in acquiring that Reputation, Authority or Preferment we desire.² I must confess were we sure the Fallacy wou'd not be detected, and that we shou'd not lie under Suspicion of it, we might gain our point; for provided the Paint do not rub off, good Colouring may serve a present turn as well as a true Complexion: But there is little reason to hope for this, because of what was just now mention'd, and for other Reasons that might be added.

Now what can be more provoking than the Idea we have of a Designing Person? of one who thinks his own Intellectuals so strong and ours so weak, that he can make us swallow any thing,

1 Astell's aside to her critics.

2 Here again Astell appears to be answering her critics, pointing in the direction of Locke, whom she elsewhere convicts of expedient arguments, a party man from Shaftesbury's stable.

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and lead us where he pleases? such an one seems to have an Intention to reduce us to the vilest Slavery,¹ the Captivation of our Understandings, which we justly reckon to be the highest Insolence. And since every one puts in for a share of Sense, and thinks he has no reason to complain of the distribution of it, whoever supposes that another has an over-weaning Opinion of his own, must needs think that he undervalues his Neighbours Understanding, and will certainly repay him in his own Coin, and deny him those advantages he seems to arrogate.²

The most we can say for our selves when the weakness of our Arguments comes to be discover'd, is that we were mistaken thro Rashness or Ignorance, which tho more pardonable than the former, are no recommending Qualities. If we argue falsly and know not that we do so, we shall be more pittied than when we do, but either way disappointed. And if we have added Rash Censures of those who are not of our Mind, Pride or Positiveness³ to our Errors as we cannot so handsomely Retreat so neither will so fair a Quarter be allow'd as those who Argue with Meekness, Modesty and Charity may well expect. So that when we have cast up our Account and estimated the Present Advantages that false Arguings bring us, I fear what we have got by a Pretence to Truth, won't be found to countervail the loss we shall sustain by the Discovery that it was no more. Which may induce us (if other Considerations will not) to be wary in receiving any Proposition our selves, and restrain us from being forward to impose our Sentiments on others.

After all, 'tis a melancholy reflection that a great part of Mankind stand in need of Arguments drawn from so low a Motive as Worldly Interest, to persuade them to that to which they have much greater inducements. It is strange that we shou'd need any other considerations besides the bare performance of our Duty, and

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- 1 Astell introduces the rhetoric of slavery, for which *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) and the 1706 Preface are so famous.
 - 2 Astell's argument against Locke as an opportunist takes a new twist. Locke, assistant to the Earl of Shaftesbury in the 1670's and 1680's, during the period of his commercial involvement in the slave-owning American colonies, had argued strongly against slavery in the second of the *Two Treatises of Government* (Bk 2, §149, Laslett edn, 1988, 367). But Astell convicts him of impugning the capacity of human understanding in the *Essay* in order to enslave people to his opinions.
 - 3 Subjective certainty, confidence, assurance (*OED*).

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those unspeakable advantages laid up for all such as do it sincerely, hereafter. When we have the Approbation of GOD and the infinite Rewards he has propos'd to those who study to recommend themselves to him, for our Encouragement, how low are we sunk if the Applause of Men and the little Trifles which they can bestow weigh any thing with us! I am therefore almost asham'd of proposing so mean a consideration, but the degeneracy of the Age requir'd it, and they who perhaps at first follow Truth as the Jews did once, for the Loaves only,¹ may at last be attracted by its own Native Beauties.

End
excerpt

§V. As Nature teaches us Logic, so does it instruct us in Rhetoric much better than Rules of Art, which if they are good ones are nothing else but those Judicious Observations which Men of Sense have drawn from Nature, and which all who reflect on the Operations of their own Minds will find out 'em selves. The common Precepts of Rhetoric may teach us how to reduce Ingenious ways of speaking to a certain Rule, but they do not teach us how to Invent them, this is Natures work and she does it best; there is as much difference between Natural and Artificial Eloquence as there is between Paint and True Beauty. So that as a good Author well observes,² all that's useful in this Art, "is the avoiding certain evil ways of Writing and Speaking, and above all an Artificial and Rhetorical Stile Compos'd of false Thoughts, Hyperboles and forc'd Figures which is the greatest fault in Rhetoric."

I shall not therefore recommend under the name of Rhetoric an Art of speaking floridly on all Subjects, and of dressing up Error and Impertinence in a quaint and taking garb; any more than I did that Wrangling which goes by the name of Logic, and which teaches to dispute *for* and *against* all Propositions indefinitely whether they are True or False. It is an abuse both of Reason and Address to press 'em into the Service of a Trifle or an Untruth; and

1 Astell's phraseology suggests an Old Testament parable, probably I Samuel, 10, 3-4; 17, 17; 21, 3; 25, 18 or II Samuel, 16, 1. But she could have the New Testament parable of the loaves and fishes in mind from Matthew, 14, 17 to 15, 36; Mark 6, 38 to 8, 19; Luke, 9, 13 to 11, 5; or John, 6, 9-26.

2 *L'art de Penser*, p. 22 – Astell.

Astell quotes in fact from the introductory Second Discourse of the English edn of the *Port Royal Logic* (1693, edn, 24-25), already cited by her as a marginal note (1697 edn, 164).