

Mary Astell on the Existence and Nature of God

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Mary Astell’s philosophical theology has been largely ignored. However, there is a new modern edition of her major work in this field, *The Christian Religion*, and with it the hope of new interest in her work in this area.¹ This article will be the first to consider Astell’s philosophical theology in its own right, without consideration of how her views relate to her overall political or feminist views. Here, I am concerned to show that Astell was both active in the philosophical debates of her time concerning God’s existence and nature and that she made interesting and original contributions to these philosophical subjects.

Mary Astell claims we cannot fully comprehend the nature of God, “nor can any similitudes drawn from natural things, of which there are several, help us to a proper and worthy idea of the Divine Nature, tho’ they may give us a faint resemblance of it” (*CR* 62).² In this paper, I examine and evaluate Astell’s arguments for the existence of God, and her views concerning God’s attributes in her works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (1697) and *The Christian Religion, as Profess’d by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705). I maintain that Astell’s arguments for God’s existence are a blend of ontological and cosmological arguments.³ Although Astell’s arguments begin with the claim that we have a natural notion of God as a being who has all the perfections, Astell does more than merely assert that this

perfection entails God's existence. Astell wants to provide an argument that shows God as the sole source of perfection and existence in the world. It is only by giving a "first cause" argument that Astell can go on to show that our moral duties lie exclusively in the love of, and obedience to, God, who is the source of all happiness and life. In this section, I will demonstrate the unique features of Astell's arguments in contrast with those of her contemporaries.

Next, I consider some potential problems with her arguments and try to defend Astell against the charge of circularity and the failure to secure the unity of God. I also consider Astell's use of "Self-Existence" with respect to God. I argue that Astell follows Descartes' use of this term as meaning "having no outside cause" rather than "being uncaused." Finally, I address Astell's use of the notion of a perfection, which she maintains we cannot fully understand.

In the second part of the paper, I explore Astell's views on the nature of God. While Astell does not think that we can comprehend the full nature of God's infinite perfections, she does think that we can have a robust enough conception of God to understand our obligations to him. Here, I discuss her views on God's goodness and perfection, omnipotence, and sovereignty.

The Existence of God

Astell, a devote Anglican and High Church Tory, thought that the love of God was the proper aim and duty of all people. As a supporter of women's education, she used theological arguments to argue for both the metaphysical and moral equality of men and women. In the second *Proposal*, Astell is proffering a method for the improvement of women's understandings. The method, which is derived from Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (AT X 359–472; CSM I 9–78) and Arnauld and Nicole's *The Art of Thinking*, is given in order to help women approach learning in order to attain truth – both metaphysical and moral. In *The*

Christian Religion, she encourages all people, but especially women since she believes them to have been discouraged from contemplation, to improve their understanding of God and their place and duties in relation to him. In both these works, Astell promotes the perfection of the mind as the way to understand God, the world, and morality. Astell argues that in perfecting one's mind, one participates more fully in the perfection of God. It is through this manifestation of perfection that the world achieves its divine purpose. It is not surprising then, that in both works, she should produce an argument for the existence of God.

Astell maintains that even one who has had no training in divinity, by the mere use of reason, would find herself asking the questions, "What am I? and from whence had I my Being?" (*CR* 10). These questions are natural and fitting for a creature with reason and understanding, who are naturally inclined toward such philosophical questions, and these questions will lead to the knowledge of their creator. In the second *Proposal*, Astell writes, "But if it be made a Question whether there is a God, or a Being Infinitely Perfect? We are then to Examin the Agreement between our Idea of God and that of Existence" (*SP II* 180). In *The Christian Religion*, Astell notes,

If I had been admitted to converse among my Fellow-Creatures, the next thought must have been, certainly I do not owe my Being to those who are as weak, as precarious as I am; Mankind must have had a Beginning, and there must be a last resort to a Self-existing Being. And this Being which is so liberal in its communications, must needs possess in the utmost Perfection all that good which it bestows. (*CR* 10)

Astell claims even a woman, who has not be educated in theology, can use her reason to know that God exists, and to understand that he must be a perfect being. God has endowed all

persons with reason in order that they may know him, come to love him, and obey his commands. She writes, “Reason is that light which God himself has set up in my mind to lead me to Him, I will therefore follow it so far as it can conduct me” (CR 6).

Astell’s arguments for the existence of God in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, and *The Christian Religion*, although they differ somewhat, are both a combination of the ontological and cosmological arguments (CR 62). Her arguments bear some resemblance to the arguments of John Locke and Rene Descartes. For instance, Astell favors the Lockean causal principle, *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, rather than the Cartesian containment principle: *If an idea exists, then the cause of that idea must exist, too, and the cause must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality*.⁴ In *The Christian Religion*, Astell begins the section concerning the existence of God as follows: “And when I think of God, I can’t possibly think Him to be any other than the most Perfect Being; a Being Infinite in all Perfections” (CR 7). These perfections include the attributes of wisdom, justice, holiness, omnipresence, and omnipotence. This idea of God also includes the idea of self-existence. She claims that self-existence “is the most remarkable, as being the original and basis of all the rest” (CR 7). With these claims in hand, it would seem that her argument was complete. But, rather than argue that since God has all the perfections, and self-existence is a perfection, therefore, God must exist (as Descartes’ ontological argument runs), Astell provides a causal argument for God’s self-existence and perfection. The argument she produces begins like an ontological argument, but proceeds via a causal principle to show that the collection of contingent beings must have a self-existent and perfect cause of their existence.

In the second *Proposal*, Astell says that when we ask “whether there is a God, or a being infinitely perfect?” we must consider the agreement between the idea of God and the idea of

existence.⁵ Here, Astell claims that we can know via intuition that these ideas agree. Astell argues that it is by examining our ideas, searching for the agreement or disagreement between them, that we can see that perfection contains the idea, or notion, of existence. For, we see that the notion of a perfect being must contain the notion of existence as a part. This is true, she argues, for “tho the Idea of Existence is not Adequate to that of Perfection, yet the Idea of Perfection includes that of Existence” (*SP II* 180). She maintains that existence is the foundation of all the other perfections, “since that which has no Being cannot be suppos’d to have any Perfection” (*SP II* 180). That is, a being must have existence in order for a perfection to inhere in it. Thus, existence is the ground of all perfection.

The second portion of each of Astell’s arguments is cosmological. In the second *Proposal*, she signals the change with new questions: “Why is it necessary that All Perfection shou’d be Centered 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?” (*SP II* 180).⁶ Astell tells us that in order to answer this question, we must “look about for Proofs and Intermediate Ideas.” Astell claims that “the Objection it self will furnish us with one” (*SP II* 180). She goes on to argue that the many particular ideas of perfections, which one might compound to make an idea of one all perfect being, are the ideas of creatures. Creatures must be created, and so the intermediate idea of creature will lead us to their creator. She writes, “Now this idea [of Creature] 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 that necessity of an All-Perfect Being” (*SP II* 181).

Astell then proceeds to argue that whatever has any perfection must either get it from itself or from another. Creatures have perfections, but they cannot give them to themselves, for they cannot give themselves existence (which Astell thinks is the basis for all other perfections). In addition, they cannot receive their perfection from other creatures because, as Astell writes,

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, yet trace it a little farther, and you'l 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 your Thoughts, and in whom they Naturally and Necessarily rest and terminate. (SP II 181)

In *The Christian Religion*, Astell notes that if God does not receive his existence from himself, then there must be something greater and more perfect than him from whom he gets his existence and perfections. However, this is impossible. For by supposition, in order for something to be God, it must have all the perfections. God is the perfect being (there is no greater being). She proceeds by showing that contingent beings cannot be the cause of themselves. She writes,

That there is a self-existing being is evident to the meanest understanding, for without it there could have been no men, no world, no being at all. Since that which once was not, could never have made itself; nor can any being communicate that to another which it has not itself. Therefore the self-existing being must contain all other perfections; therefore, it must be an intelligent being, and therefore, it must be God. (CR 8)

Astell's argument might be formalized as follows:

1. If God is not self-existent, then he must be caused by something else.
2. No being can communicate that to another that which it lacks (for if it did, then something would come from nothing).
3. Therefore, if God is not self-existent, then there must be a being more perfect than him.
4. It is not possible that there be a being more perfect than God (for by supposition God is simply the being that contains all the perfections).
5. Therefore, God is self-existent and all perfect.
6. That which once was not can never be self-existent (for then something would come from nothing).
7. Man, the world, and all beings once were not.
8. Therefore, man, the world, and all beings are not self-existent.
9. Man, the world, and all other beings must be caused by something that is self-existent (otherwise something would have had to come from nothing).
10. That self-existent being which caused man, the world, and all other beings, must have all the perfections found these things.
11. Therefore, that self-existent being which created all things must be all perfect.
12. Therefore, that self-existent being which created all things is the all perfect God.

One might wonder why Astell does not rest content with the ontological portion of the argument. But we must bear in mind Astell's larger theological and moral concerns. Astell wants to show not only that God exists, but also our relation to him. Thus, it is necessary that she provide an argument that shows him as the creator of all things in order to establish our absolute dependence on God.

Although Astell's arguments bear some resemblance to those of Descartes, they are different in several important aspects. First, Astell's methodology differs from Descartes' in that she is concerned to show the relations of our ideas. Second, her arguments use a different, and perhaps more reasonable, causal principle, *ex nihilo, nihil fit*. Instead of assuming that existence is a property that must belong to a perfect being, as in some ontological arguments, she argues that if self-existence were not a predicate of such a being, we would have a violation of the *ex nihilo* principle. Likewise, Astell argues that a perfect being must exist in order to create all the attributes that are exhibited in the world; otherwise, something would come from nothing. She utilizes the *ex nihilo* principle in order to generate the causal principle that *a cause must have the perfections that it communicates to the effect*. She argues that if an effect could have some attribute or perfection that the cause lacks, then those perfections would have to come from nothing. It is clear from her discussion of the attributes of God that the cause of an effect must have the perfections it communicates in at least an equal or greater degree than the effect, but it need not contain the perfections in the same manner in which they are manifested in the effect. Here she seems to follow Descartes in thinking that a being with more overall perfection is capable of producing any of the effects found in lesser beings.

Objections

The first charge that one might level against the argument is that of apparent circularity. After all, Astell does begin her argument for the existence of God by claiming that God is a being who must contain all the perfections. If one is trying to prove the existence of a perfect being, then it seems that beginning with the premise that God is a perfect being is not appropriate. Circularity is a common charge against the ontological argument, for it seems that

such arguments attempt to define God into existence. However, while Astell does claim that God is a being with all the perfections, we should read her as arguing that *if* God exists, then he must be a being with all the perfections. If there is no being with all the perfections, then there is no God. She argues it is necessary, given the existence of the perfections we see in the world, that a most perfect being exists.

The second problem that one might notice with the argument is that it seems that Astell has failed to show that there is only one self-existent being. This is a common difficulty in cosmological arguments that employ the causal principle *ex nihil, nihil fit*. Locke, whose argument utilizes this principle, is accused by Leibniz of making the same mistake (Leibniz 1981, IV.x.6, 436). While the principle may guarantee that there must be some cause, it is not strong enough to show that there must be only one. Locke, when pressed in his correspondence with van Limborch on this matter, provided additional arguments for the claim that there can be only one omnipotent being (Locke 1981, Vol. Six, 789). Astell proposes the question “Why is it necessary that All Perfection shou’d be Centered in One Being, is’t not enough that it be parcel’d out amongst many?” (*SP II* 180). Her answer is that when we imagine that perfection can be dispersed through a number of beings, we are actually imagining his creation, which is just that – the distribution of perfection into multiple beings. However, Astell argues that it is just this distribution of perfection that is in need of explanation and which will lead us to the inevitable idea of a single self-existent perfect being. In doing so, she turns this standard objection on its head. She writes,

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 a Particular Being and of Creature, which are so far from having any thing to distinguish 'em, that in all Points they resemble each other. (*SP II* 181)

Third, one might object to Astell's contention that God is *self-caused*. Some of Astell's contemporaries held that since God is an eternal and immutable being, God is simply uncaused. In Aristotelian terms, he is the "uncaused cause" or "unmoved mover." The notion of self-existence or self-causation was one that many philosophers and theologians resisted because they held that a cause must always precede its effect. This renders the notion of self-causation nonsensical since it is impossible for something to exist prior to causing its own existence. In addition, it was deemed somehow unfitting to speak of God as having any cause at all – even if it was himself. Descartes met with much resistance from Arnauld after claiming in reply to Caterus' objections to the *Meditations*:

There is no need to say that God is the efficient cause of himself, for this might give rise to a verbal dispute. But the fact that God derives his existence from himself, or has no cause apart from himself, depends not on nothing but on the real immensity of his power; hence, when we perceive this, we are quite entitled to think that in a sense he stands in the same relation to himself as an efficient cause does to its effect. (AT VII 111; CSM II 80)

Here, Descartes maintains that there is a positive reason for God's existence, which is found in God's immense power. However, Arnauld rejected the idea that God's existence has any efficient cause on the grounds that nothing can stand in the proper relation to itself to be an efficient cause of itself. Arnauld claimed that God requires no cause of his existence because his existence is identical to his essence. Indeed, Descartes conceded this point in the Fourth Replies. However, Descartes' maintains that in order to posit a cosmological argument for God's

existence, we must be able to ask of anything, including God, what is the cause of its existence. If we exclude God from causal consideration before proving his existence, then we beg the question. If we understand *causa sui*, or self-existence, as being without a cause, then we undermine the causal principle used to generate the argument, namely, that since nothing can come from nothing, all things must have a cause or reason for their existence.

Descartes goes on to maintain that God's immense power is closer to the Aristotelian "formal cause." That is, God's power is not itself an efficient cause, but it does provide the reason or cause of there being no such efficient cause.⁷

Astell too seems to equate being self-existent with being without any outside cause rather than being simply uncaused. Astell writes of self-existence,

For if God deriv'd His Being from any but Himself, there must be something Greater and more Perfect than God, which is absurd, since God is by the supposition the most Perfect Being, and consequently Self-existing. Because there can be no Absolute and Infinite Perfection but where there is Self-existence; for from whence shall it be derived? And Self-existence is such a Perfection as necessarily includes all other Perfections. (CR 8)

In the second *Proposal*, Astell explicitly states that she does not take God to be self-caused, but that he must exist by virtue of his nature. Astell writes,

If to this it be Objected that we as good as affirm that this All-Perfect Being is his own Maker, by saying that 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. (*SP II* 181)

Astell's argument for God's existence is based on the causation of perfections. In order for the argument to justify stopping at God as the first and sole cause of all perfections, she must explain how God's perfections come into existence. Here, I believe, that like Descartes, Astell sees God's nature as a positive cause or reason for his perfections.⁸ She does not hold that God is the efficient cause of his perfections, for she seems to believe that efficient causes must precede their effects. Thus, we must understand her not as saying that God is the efficient cause of himself, but rather that God's nature is the ground of all existence, including his own.

Finally, Astell herself considers the objection that we cannot have the idea of a perfect being because we cannot, as limited and imperfect beings, understand what would constitute perfection. She asserts, however, that we do not need to have a precise idea of perfection. She writes,

We need not be told wherein Perfection consists, for let us be ever so skeptical, we must needs acknowledge, that Wisdom and Goodness, Justice and Holiness, are Perfections, and indeed the greatest Perfections, so that an intelligent Nature defective in these can't be perfect, but destitute of them must needs be miserable. Knowledge and Power without them wou'd not be beauties but blemishes; nor can a Being be infinitely Wise and Good, Just and Holy, unless He be also Omnipresent and Omnipotent. (*CR* 7)

It is sufficient for having the idea of a perfect being to know that he must have certain attributes – those that if any intelligent being were to lack them, it would be miserable. In other words, we can know by experience what the good making qualities of beings are. According to

Astell, we first observe the excellencies, or perfections, in created beings. These are generally moral attributes, like goodness and mercy. These moral attributes are connected to metaphysical attributes such as wisdom and power. Thus, our understanding of the metaphysical perfections is derived from our observation of moral perfection. Astell holds that a perfect being must possess the moral virtues since they are inseparable from knowledge and power. An all knowing and all-powerful being without the moral virtues would be an object of fear rather than love, and one's justice and goodness is lessened if one does not have the knowledge and power to act in accordance with them. Since the intellectual and moral attributes must coincide in every moral agent, we can deduce that they must coincide in the most perfect being. Astell writes, "tho' Moral and Intellectual improvements may be consider'd apart, they can't really be separated, at least not in a Christian sense" (CR 296).

Knowledge of God's Nature

Even though Astell believes that we can come to know that God must possess certain attributes by simply examining what is good for a rational human being, she cautions us that the ideas of attributes which we draw from our experience must not be taken as indicative of the divine nature. We can only infer that the positive qualities we see in nature bear some "faint resemblance" to those of God. However, we can know that some resemblance holds because we cannot conceive of properties being in the world without also being contained somehow in its cause.

Moreover, Astell cautions against philosophical discourses that deny certain attributes predicated of God in Holy Scripture or known through reason. She claims that these discourses are due to unbridled "pride" and show "contempt" for God. She writes:

The other Contempt for God which I was to take notice of, is what Ladies I hope are but little, if at all concern'd in, that is, those bold Discourses about the Nature and Attributes of God, wherein Men take upon them to deny not only what He has declar'd of Himself in His Word, but even what Natural Reason teaches; which plainly proves, That if there be a God, He must needs be infinitely Wise and Good, Just and Holy; and that to deny Him to be Infinite in all Perfections, either Directly or by Consequence, is in some respects worse than to deny His Existence. (CR 181)

Astell claims that these sorts of inquiries into the nature of God are beyond our rational capacities and are not necessary for this life. However, it is clear that some knowledge of God is necessary. She writes,

By the knowledge of God and of our Selves, which I take to be the proper aim of all our Contemplations, I do not mean a curious research into the Divine Nature, which being hid from us in inaccessible Light, we shou'd humbly Adore and not subtilly dispute about; nor a Physical Disquisition of our own Nature, since God by denying us an Idea of our Souls, signifies that this is not our present business. But I understand a Knowledge of the Relation we stand in to our God, and of the Obligations arising from it. (CR 306)

Here, Astell claims that we cannot have a complete conception of ourselves as intelligent souls, let alone a conception of God's nature. Rather, we should content ourselves with the knowledge that we are completely dependent upon God and that we owe our love and servitude to him alone. Our meditations allow us to achieve the amount of knowledge about the nature of God necessary in order to understand our subordinate position and duty to him.

Astell tells us in the second *Proposal*, exactly why it is that we should be careful in our meditations on the nature of God. Paraphrasing Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, she defines

a clear idea as that “which is Present and Manifest to an attentive Mind,” and a distinct idea as that “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” (*SP II* 172).⁹ She proceeds to say that we have a clear, but not a distinct, idea of God because as finite minds we cannot distinctly perceive that which is infinite. She then argues that where we have merely clear ideas, we cannot argue beyond our incomplete ideas and claim that there is something contradictory in the concept. She writes,

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. (*SP II* 172–3)

The methods for coming to understand God are through our “natural notion” of God and through revelation. A natural notion of God is not simply an innate idea; rather, Astell defines our natural notion as “that which mere reason will help us to” (*CR* 97). She claims that reason cannot completely comprehend God, but that reason is a type of “natural and universal revelation” (*CR* 22). Moreover, she claims that all that we discover about God via the use of proper reason is knowledge, while revelation, which gives us particular notions about God not attainable through reason (such as the tripartite nature of God), produces faith.

In the remainder of the paper, I will focus on Astell’s discussion of several of the attributes of God, and how these attributes are manifested in his creation. I will begin with a discussion of her views concerning God’s goodness and perfection.

God’s Attributes – Goodness, Moral and Metaphysical Perfection

Astell argues that God's nature is the ground of divine will and action. God's actions must be the direct result of his divine nature (his wisdom and goodness). Astell writes,

Now not to be too Metaphysical, or tedious in the Enquiry, I take the Glory of God to be the greatest Good... By the Glory of God, I understand the Manifestation of the Divine Attributes, according to the Eternal Reason of things; which some call the Rule of Order. Now this rule is nothing else, but that Way which the Wisdom and Perfection of the Divine Nature oblige God to Act, whenever He thinks fit to exert his Power and shew forth His Glory. And because His Goodness is over all His Works, He is pleas'd to take the greatest Glory in the display of this Attribute. (*CR* 201)

Astell argues that God's glory and goodness are proven from the beauty and variety, as well as the perfection, of his creation. She writes,

Cou'd there have been a more excellent End than the Glory of God, that had been the End of Creation, (which is not a mere empty show and noise like human Glory, but which consists in the Beauty and Perfection of His Works and Ways) being the best Design, all things were created for this purpose. (*CR* 109)

Astell maintains that it is God's goodness that promotes him to create the best. She writes, "...because God always does what most becomes Him, and it is the Perfection of His Nature to do always, and freely, that which is absolutely and entirely the Best" (*CR* 21). Astell holds that God creates by means of communicating his goodness, or perfections, into finite forms. She describes God as a "communicative being" and claims that a being "which is so liberal in its communications, must needs possess in the utmost Perfection all that good which it bestows" (*CR* 11–10). The view that God creates by an act of communicating his perfections is a

view that can be traced back to Plato. The idea being that goodness needs to be exemplified in order to be maximal. St. Thomas Aquinas also held this view, and he also held that God communicated his goodness to his creation in every possible way.¹⁰ Since God communicates his infinite goodness in every way possible, we should expect to see a variety of things in the world, each bearing its own unique perfection. Astell writes,

Yet all the Works of God are Perfect in their kind, tho' all of them do not possess the same degree of Perfection, for this wou'd not consist with the Perfection of the Whole, which arises from the order and symmetry of the several parts; among which there wou'd be little or no beauty if there were no distinctions, no different degrees of Glory. (*CR* 109)

Astell notes that some of the various created beings are free. She writes,

We know that the excellency of a work appears by that variety of Beauties that are in it: What makes the Universe so Beautiful but its innumerable varieties? And you who are such loves of Variety can have nothing to say against it. Was it then unfit for God to adorn His Creatures with all imaginable Ranks and Degrees of Being, consequently with Free Agents which is a very noble Order? (*CR* 91)

The metaphysical perfection of the world consists in the manifestation of God's perfections in a created universe that contains great variety and order. It is through God's moral and metaphysical perfection that the universe gains its metaphysical perfection. It is then the duty and obligation of each created being to achieve the greatest perfection of which it is capable in order to glorify God. Astell writes,

But in whatever Degree of Being a Creature is plac'd, whether it be a Free or Necessary Agent, there must be a certain measure of Perfection belonging to its Rank, which it

cannot attain but by some certain and stated Progressions or Methods, suitable to the Nature that God has given it, and in the same manner as a Seed becomes a Plant, or a Plant a Tree. Some actions therefore do naturally and necessarily tend to the Perfection of Mankind, and others as naturally and necessarily drag us down into Misery. (CR 92)

The obligation to perfect one's nature, for human beings, is the duty to understand and obey God's will. Each individual contributes to the moral perfection of the world insofar as he does his duty to God. The perfection of a rational human being consists in the perfection of reason. The more a person's actions are guided by reason, the more they will conform to God's will. Astell writes,

We have already seen that there is a God; consequently we who are His Creatures and who depend upon Him entirely owe Him the utmost Duty and Service. It has also been prov'd, That God, has Reveal'd his Will to us, hence it follows, that it is our Duty and Wisdom to apply the most exact Obedience to His Reveal'd Will, even tho there were no Sanctions annex to it. ...it is our highest Interest to be Obedient, and we can't transgress without the greatest Folly and Madness, as well as the most notorious Injustice, Ingratitude, and Wickedness. (CR 89)

Astell defines good as that which glorifies God, and evil as that which offends God (CR 201). To glorify God is to perfect oneself by properly manifesting the attributes that are suited to your rank of being, as was said above. According to Astell, what offends God is the "hinderences which Rational and Free Agents put in their own, and in each others way, towards the attainment of that Happiness which the Wisdom and Goodness of God originally design'd for them" (CR 201). By which, Astell means to imply that sin, which is a barrier to eternal life, is offensive to God.

Astell addresses some aspects of the problem of evil as well. It might seem inconsistent with God's goodness that we suffer. However, Astell maintains that these conditions give us opportunity to improve our virtue. She also claims that since no temporal good is our true good, Earthly suffering does not really cost us. The pain and suffering is always, however unlikely it may seem, to our own benefit. She writes,

So that a true Christian rejoices evermore, in all Circumstances; he gives thanks always for all things; For all things that God sends without exception, for Poverty, Afflictions, Persecutions, and what Men account most Calamitous. And good Reason, since these are only Exercises of his Vertue, and opportunities to encrease his Reward; since they deprive him of no real Good, but bring him much, fortifying his Mind with such a Joy as no Man can take from him. (CR 192)¹¹

Astell maintains that God's goodness prevents him from deceiving us, or from positing pain as mere torture. Instead, we can know that pleasure and pain are instruments by which we can learn what is harmful and helpful to us. She states, in several passages, that all things in the world tend toward the good, and in fact, the best. Our inability to understand how these things tend toward the good is no barrier to them being so. However, Astell does not address the question of whether some lives are so miserable that it would be better had they not lived at all. We can assume that she would reply that the life of the body is not our concern, rather it is the well-being of the soul that matters and which will result in our everlasting happiness. Still, since Astell maintains that all pain is used instructionally, one might wonder if God uses some Earthly creatures' lives as a mere means to bringing about this knowledge.

In addition, one might object that eternal damnation is not just punishment for a finite sin. However, Astell tells us that vengeance is necessary for God's justice, and that eternal damnation

is a fitting punishment for offending God. Since we owe God for our existence, we have a duty to obey and serve him. Moreover, only the most severe punishment will be an effective deterrent to sin. She writes,

And since we find in Fact that the severest Threatening, even Inconceivable and Eternal Misery, does not deter Mankind from Sinning, from doing that which naturally and necessarily tends to their own hurt, it is not to be imagin'd that lower motives wou'd have any effect upon them. So that God has appointed a Hell for the Wicked in mere Goodness to Mankind, since this or nothing will work upon the most disingenuous Tempers, and stir them up to qualify themselves for that Heaven which He is desirous to bestow on them. (*CR* 93)

Justice and vengeance are for our own well-being and prepare us for our future reward. However, Astell assures us that mercy is also part of God's justice. Having created the human mind, God understands its limitations, and makes some allowances for them. It is willful disobedience that justly merits the punishment of eternal misery. Astell does not think that God is in any way responsible for our tendency to sin. He has given us enough reason to gain knowledge of our true good. Nor does he give us any temptations that are impossible for us to resist. Astell claims that sin and evil are due to intellectual errors, namely, due to mistaking worldly goods for our true good. She writes, "For the irregularity of our Wills proceeds from the error of our understandings, from calling Good Evil, and Evil Good" (*CR* 154).¹² Astell's works are, at least in part, designed to provide a method for avoiding error and sin by increasing our knowledge of God and our obligations to him.

God's Omnipotence and Sovereignty

Astell argues that a perfect being must be omnipotent. And though she follows Descartes in many respects, Astell does not seem to hold Cartesian views with respect to God's omnipotence. Some commentators suggest that Descartes held that God's omnipotence entails the ability to do absolutely anything, even make contradictions true.¹³ Descartes holds that God controls all truths and is absolutely sovereign. There is nothing that is not dependent on God's will. However, in connection with her criticisms of Locke on thinking matter, Astell argues that God cannot make contradictions true, nor can he act in a way that is inconsistent with his nature. In her discussion of Locke, she recounts Descartes' Sixth Meditation arguments for mind and body distinction. She concurs with Descartes' conclusion that since she is essentially a thinking thing and clearly and distinctly perceives that she can exist without her body, it is impossible for thought to belong to matter. However, Astell does add one caveat: "Unless God has been pleas'd to Reveal that it is possible to His Omnipotency, for if so, I must conclude that I only imagine and don't indeed perceive that Repugnancy" (CR 268).

Astell no doubt wants to leave room for the seemingly contradictory claim in Scripture that God is both three persons and is one. We might think that she would say that this is not a truth about God's nature that we could come to via reason. The tripartite nature of God is a revealed truth, and thus an article of faith not reason. However, in the second *Proposal*, Astell claims that we merely lack the requisite ideas to understand the compatibility of the truth of the proposition *that there is only one God*, and the proposition *that there are three persons in the godhead*. Instead of claiming that we should accept the trinity as a mere article of faith, she seems to argue that the claim of God being both one and three is not contrary to reason, although we presently cannot know it. She writes,

Revelation which is but an exaltation and improvement of reason has told us, that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and our idea of the godhead of any one of these persons, is as clear as our idea of any of the other. Both reason and revelation assures us that God is one simple essence, undivided, and infinite in all perfections, this is the natural idea which we have of God. How then can the Father be God, the Son God, and the Holy Ghost God, when yet there is but one God? That these two propositions are true we are certain, both because God who cannot lie has revealed them, and because we have as clear an idea of them as it is possible a finite mind should have of an infinite nature. But we cannot find out how this should be, by the bare consideration of these two ideas without the help of a third by which to compare them. This God has not thought fit to impart to us, the prospect it would have given us would have been too dazzling, too bright for mortality to bear, and we ought to acquiesce in the divine will. So then, we are assured that these two propositions are true, There is but one God; and, there are three persons in the godhead: but we know not the manner how these things are. Nor can our acquiescence be thought unreasonable, nor the doctrine we subscribe to be run down as absurd and contradictory..." (*SP II* 147–8)

This passage seems to be a good indication that Astell did not see omnipotence to entail the ability to make contradictions true. She could claim that God's power is beyond our conception. For it would be easy, given her belief that there are matters which are confined to the realm of revelation and faith alone, to say that the seemingly contradictory nature of the trinity is one such matter. However, as the quote above shows, she refrains from taking this line on the trinity.

If Astell did not believe that God's omnipotence implies he could make contradictions hold, then it seems likely that her views on God's relation to the necessary, or eternal, truths was quite different from Descartes. It seems likely that Astell held that God is sovereign over all created things, but that he does not create the necessary truths.

Further evidence that Astell thought that God cannot change the eternal truths is her contention that God's power is constrained by his nature. Astell claims that God always does what is fitting. She holds that when we speak of God as not being able to do something, we are claiming that certain aspects of God's nature constrain his ability to will or do certain acts. She writes, "The same natural Notions do also assure us, That the Essential Rectitude of the Divine Nature, will not permit Him to use His Power and Lawful Authority otherwise than is just and fit" (CR 98). So, although Astell maintains that God, in principle, has the power to do many things that he does not in fact do, other aspects of his nature, his goodness and justice, make it impossible that he will or bring about those actions.

Indivisibility, Incorruptibility, and Immateriality

Astell argues that the human soul is immortal because it is indivisible and incorruptible. The argument is, in part, based on the fact that God is immaterial rather than material and extended. The discussion takes place in *The Christian Religion* in a section where Astell argues against John Locke's claim that God could superadd thought to matter. Locke claims that it is not contradictory that God should make a material extended thing think. However, Astell holds the Cartesian view that matter, or body, is essentially extended and that mind is essentially thoughtful, and that the two are distinct substances. She claims that if it were possible for body or matter to think, then since we know that God is a thinking being, it would have to be the case

that God is possibly extended. However, whatever is extended is capable of division. And whatever is capable of division is capable of corruption. It is inconsistent with the nature of an all-perfect being to be corruptible. Astell writes,

But we are sure, that God who is All Perfection Thinks, and that He is not Extended, for to be Extended, and for this reason Divisible, is a great Imperfection, and not consistent with His Eternity. 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, and that Creatures form'd after His own Image are Immaterial, and consequently in their own Nature, and not barely by Positive Institution, Immortal. (*CR* 261)

Astell adds that if thought belonged to both body and mind, then perhaps God would not need to be extended to think. However, Astell claims that if thought belonged to both body and mind would be no distinction between them. So that wherever thought occurs, we would have both body and mind. This would again imply that God must be extended if thinking, which is impossible.

Conclusion

In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* and in *The Christian Religion*, Astell actively engages in the debates regarding God's existence and nature. In doing so, she provides unique arguments for the existence of God. Like many of the philosophers writing on these topics, her arguments bear some resemblance to those others proposed.¹⁴ However, her arguments do succeed in pushing the debates forward and answering objections to previous versions. Astell produces these arguments in order to lay the foundation for Christian belief and moral duties. In

addition, she discusses a number of God's attributes drawing from our experience of the world, our natural notion of God, and scripture to do so. Astell maintains that our ability to understand the nature of God is limited, and that we should not enter into philosophical discourses that can result in the denial of aspects of God known via our natural notion of God or from revelation. However, she does believe that we can have a clear idea of God's nature, if not a distinct one, and that this idea is robust enough to satisfy the questions that we have regarding our creator and our obligations to him.¹⁵

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¹ (Astell 2013). Unfortunately, the new edition did not appear before the writing of this paper, so citations are to the 1705 edition. See Bibliography for more information.

² Throughout this essay, the following abbreviations will be used:

CR Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (1705)

L Mary Astell, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695, 2005)

SP I Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I* (1697, 2002)

SP II Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (1687, 2002)

³ Although there are many versions of the ontological and cosmological arguments, in general, ontological arguments attempt to derive the existence of God from premises known a priori (prior to experience) or by reason alone. Cosmological arguments argue from facts about the world to the existence of God as the unique first cause. For examples of ontological arguments, see (Anselm 2001), (Descartes AT VII 63–71; CSM II 44–49). For examples of the cosmological argument, see (Aquinas 1950, Prima Par, Question 2, Article 3), (Descartes AT VII 34–52; CSM II 24–36) (Locke 1975, Book 4, Chapter X) (Clarke 1998), and (Leibniz 1989, 149–150).

⁴ See (Descartes AT VII 40; CSM II 28). Locke’s principle, which translates as *from nothing, nothing comes*, was also accepted by Descartes, and it has been argued that Descartes’ cosmological relies only on the *ex nihilo* principle and not the stronger containment principle. See (Nolan and Nelson 2006, 104–121).

⁵ The phrase “being infinitely perfect” is used by both Nicolas Malebranche and John Norris. Astell likely adopted it from Norris – see (Astell and Norris 2005, 72) and (Norris 1701, 158). However, I am not here concerned with the phrase, but with her methodology for discerning the relationship between existence and being.

⁶ Springborg notes that Locke and Stillingfleet discuss these issues in their famous “Correspondence.” In the correspondence Locke defends his stance that we can know that God, a substance, exists because the existence of properties requires a substance in which they can inhere. I do agree that Astell’s arguments were affected by a portion of this debate. However, it seems to me that this particular portion of Astell’s argument is mainly concerned, not with whether we can infer a substance from its attributes, but with what sort of thing is required in order to create the perfections we see in the world.

⁷ For more on Descartes' understanding of God as *causa sui*, see (Schmaltz forthcoming and 2011).

⁸ This notion was "in the air" at the time. Samuel Clarke makes a similar point in his Boyle Lecture of 1704 on the "Nature and Attributes of God." Astell names this work as the sort of inquiry into God's nature that is "contempt" for God.

⁹ Astell paraphrases Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* Pt. I §45, see (Descartes AT VIII A 22; CSM I 207–6).

¹⁰ For a wonderful discussion of Aquinas's views on creation and communication, see (Kretzman 1991).

¹¹ Astell quotes St. John 16.22.

¹² Here, Astell follows Descartes' account of error and sin, and she recommends his method for guarding against intellectual error, as well as a thorough understanding of God as our sole good, as the remedy.

¹³ On this reading of Descartes, Descartes holds that for any proposition, P, possibly P, is true. Some commentators argue that Descartes holds a more limited view. On the limited view, Descartes denies that for any proposition, P, possibly P is true. However, possibly possibly P is true. For more on Descartes in relation to the eternal truths, see Curley 1984, Kaufman 2005 and 2003, Pessin 2010, Plantinga 1980, and Walski 2003.

¹⁴ Purely original arguments for the existence of God are quite rare. Descartes's Third Meditation cosmological argument for the existence of God might be one. In addition, Leibniz's argument based on pre-established harmony, and Malebranche's argument from "mere sight" might be unique. What these arguments have in common is that they are based on each philosopher's unique metaphysical commitments. It should be noted that many of these philosophers (and

Locke, Berkeley and Spinoza) produce versions of arguments for the existence of God that are refinements of ontological, cosmological, and design arguments which date back to Plato and Aristotle. When dealing with arguments with such long and distinguished lineage, we see that originality comes from innovation.

¹⁵ I would like to thank the participants at the “Women, Philosophy, and History: A Conference in Celebration of Eileen O’Neill and her Work” at Barnard College in 2009, and the 2009 “Oxford Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy,” for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Many thanks must go to Martha Bolton, Don Garrett, and especially to Tad Schmaltz for sharing his work on Descartes on self-existence. I would also like to thank the editors of this volume for many helpful comments and clarifications.