



8. Mary Astell: Virtue, Education and Autonomy



Virtue ethics and moral character

Recall that virtue ethics focuses on various character traits that need to be developed and practiced in order to live morally good lives. Plato posed four cardinal virtues that were central to all other virtues: wisdom, courage, self-control and justice. Aristotle also thought of these as important, but added virtues such as friendship, generosity, mildness, wittiness and modesty.

Which virtues are thought of as most important, and for whom, might depend on conventions of the society, including its culture and religion. In Mary Astell's contemporary Britain, in the late 17th and early 18th century, women were supposed to have some distinct feminine virtues: gracefulness, purity, delicacy, compliancy and chastity, to name only some.

Astell observed that women in her society – although they might possess these virtues – were paying little attention to other virtues that she considered far more important. This, she argued, placed women in a poorer moral condition than men.

Our moral character is a complex matter and something that we must develop throughout our lives. We must practice the virtues to become virtuous. So what if we practice only some virtues and ignore for instance the cardinal virtue of wisdom?

For Plato and Aristotle, that would be problematic, since wisdom is also what guides us in our other virtues. Think for instance of Aristotle's focus on practical wisdom, or *FRONESIS*, and of Plato's idea that we must first have knowledge of what is right before we will do what is right.

Rationalism and dualism: mind over matter

Astell emphasises, in line with Plato's moral philosophy, the virtues of wisdom and self-control, and the importance of education: we should be feeding our immortal souls rather than focusing on material things.

Astell was a rationalist, and she agreed with Plato and Descartes that true knowledge is achieved by reasoning, not the senses, and through a mastery of the soul over the body. This, we will see, is in strict contrast with the British empiricists, such as John Locke and David Hume, who emphasised perceptions and passions (that is: senses and feelings).

Note that Astell agreed with Descartes' strict dualism that there is a *res extensa* (matter extended in time and space, so material) and a *res cogitans* (a thinking matter without such extension) that each can exist separately. Still, she did hold, with Descartes, that there can be communication between body and soul, with influences going both ways.

A serious proposal to the ladies: educate yourselves!

In one of her most famous works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, from 1694, Astell suggests opening an all-female college so women could educate themselves and thus achieve autonomy. Autonomy (auto = self, nomos = laws) means that one has internal freedom and self mastery.

Now, one might think that in Astell's days, women lacked autonomy and freedom primarily because of social, political and even legal circumstances. Astell, however, argued that

women had more possibilities even within these social constraints that they did not take full advantage of. Since women were taught to focus only on the virtues of the body, not of the mind, they had come to value superficial virtues such as beauty and wealth, rather than wisdom.

Vices such as vanity, pride and greed are not natural for women, of course, since Astell thought, like Plato, that women and men have equal intellectual and moral capacities. But all capacities must be exercised.

...if from our infancy we are nursed up in ignorance and vanity, are taught to be proud and petulant, delicate and fantastic, humorous and inconstant, it is not strange that the ill effects of this conduct appear in all the future actions of our lives.

As a 'remedy' to this 'disease', Astell suggests that women should work to improve themselves morally and intellectually through meditation, reading, philosophical reflection and emotional self-control. The education she proposes includes languages, science, philosophy and religion.

The aim of all this, Astell says, is personal growth and liberation. This is in line with Aristotle's virtue ethics, saying that we should work to develop our moral character. By doing so, we can live good lives and become happy.

'If men are born free, how is it that women are born slaves?'

Astell places the responsibility of education, self-empowerment and autonomy on each individual, rather than criticising social and political constraints. Education leads to empowerment.

For since GOD has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?

In *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell addresses the power-imbalance between husband and wife. While many men are happy to enslave and possess their wives, they should instead be supportive of their moral and intellectual education. Love should be generous, kind and caring.

Women need other options than being wives and mothers. They should choose *not* to marry, if marriage comes with no advantage. Indeed, Astell proposed an all-female education institution: a retreat, or monastery. She herself never married, and she started a charity school for girls.

Letters Concerning the Love of God

Astell was a Christian and deeply religious, which can also be seen in her philosophical writings. Her emphasis is on the immortal soul, and she even offers three different proofs of God's existence, one of which is a bit similar to Descartes' proof:

- *I can imagine an infinitely perfect Being.*
- *Existence would be more perfect than non-existence.*

Therefore, such an infinitely perfect Being, such as God, must exist.

Nevertheless, she did not encourage women to simply accept religion as a dogmatic and authoritarian enterprise, but instead seek deeper understanding of the foundational issues.

Astell saw our intellectual faculty as a divine gift. The purpose of rational souls is to practice their virtues, a capacity that is equal for women and men. Our souls are all the same.

Discussion questions

- What is autonomy? How is this achieved, according to Astell?
- Why did Astell think it was important for women to get education?
- In what way is Astell a virtue ethicist?
- In what way is she a dualist? And a rationalist?
- What do you think of Astell's idea that women, regardless the external constraints of society, have a duty to educate and empower themselves?
- Do you think her philosophical and political views have relevance today?
- In what ways do we value, or devalue, ourselves based on how others expect us to be, you think?



Mary Astell (1666-1731)

Bridgerton – A Netflix series



Shonda Rhimes' (left) successful Netflix series, *Bridgerton*, is based on Julia Quinn's (right) book series. Although it's set much later, in 19th century Britain, the series gives us an insight into the gender roles that Astell is criticising.

Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpv7ayf_tyE

The Philosopher Queens: A book about women in philosophy by women in philosophy

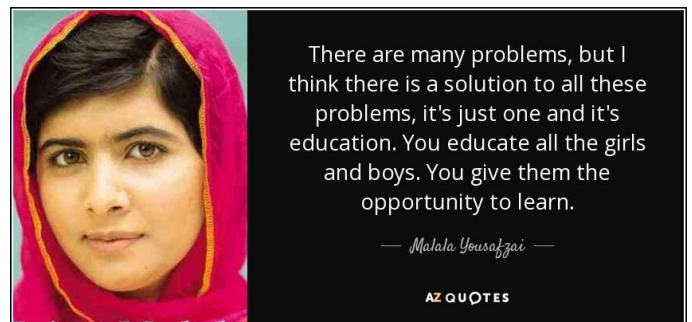


Philosophers Rebecca Buxton and Lisa Whiting noticed that there were no books or even chapters about women philosophers and wanted to change that. The result is *The Philosopher Queens*, which inspired me to include women philosophers in the *examen philosophicum* course (where for decades there were none). <https://unbound.com/books/philosopher-queens/>

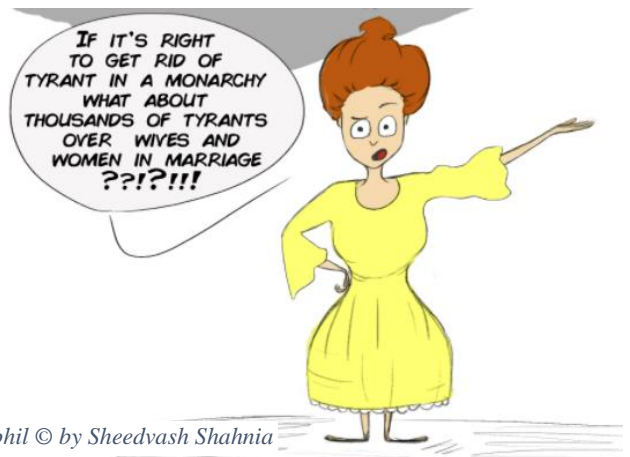
Astell shows how the values we grow up with affect our sense of self-worth. In the campaign #LikeAGirl, Always urges we use the phrase "like a girl" for something positive.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs>



Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan, 1997 -) is a contemporary human rights and education activist and a Nobel Peace Prize winner.



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