

## A Decaying Carcass? Mary Astell and the Embodied Self

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**Abstract:** Mary Astell (1666-1731) relies on a Cartesian account of the self to argue that both men and women are essentially thinking things and, hence, that both should perfect their minds or intellects. This account of the self might seem to ignore the inescapable fact that we have bodies. I argue that Astell accommodates the self's embodiment along three dimensions. First, she tempers her sharp distinction between mind and body by insisting on their union. Second, she argues that the mind-body union is good, at least when the body obeys the mind. Third, though Astell identifies the *self* with the mind, she identifies the *person* with the combination of mind and body.

**Key Words:** Mary Astell, self, person, mind, union, embodiment

“She who truly loves her self will never waste that Money on a decaying Carcass. . . what Decays she observes in her Face will be very unconcerning but she will with greatest speed and accuracy rectify the least Spot that may prejudice the beauty of her lovely Soul” – Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In hindsight, Descartes's sharp distinction of the mind from the body has seemed like one of the great bad ideas in the history of philosophy. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes argues that human beings are composed of two heterogeneous elements: an immaterial, thinking self and a

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<sup>1</sup> *Serious Proposal* 86-7.

human body conceived as an elaborate piece of clockwork, mysteriously connected at the pineal gland. This bifurcated picture of human nature raises a host of philosophical problems. If mind and body differ as much as Descartes claims, how can they interact?<sup>2</sup> How can such different elements form a unified subject, in which thought and body are interwoven?<sup>3</sup> When we feel pain or sorrow, we do not experience ourselves as immaterial, thinking things. We experience ourselves as flesh and blood. These familiar experiences of our materiality conflict with Descartes's view that the self is "simply a thinking, non-extended thing."<sup>4</sup> In the last few decades, scholars have paid more attention to the relations between mind and body in Descartes's philosophy and the ways he grapples with our embodiment.<sup>5</sup> Still, Descartes is fighting an uphill battle. Having broken the world into thinking subjects and extended things, Descartes struggles to put the pieces back together.

In emphasizing the embodied, social, and situated nature of the self, many of the chapters in this volume show the need for different ways of understanding ourselves. They suggest that it is high time to move past Cartesian conceptions of the self.<sup>6</sup> This chapter explores the work of a

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<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the so-called *interaction problem* in Descartes, see Radner (1971), Richardson (1982), Rozemond (1999), and Schmaltz (2008).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of what we might call the *composition problem*, see Broughton and Mattern (1978), Hoffman (1986), Chappell (1994), Rozemond (1998), and Simmons (2017).

<sup>4</sup> *M6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the works mentioned above, see Alanen (2003), Shapiro (2003), Brown (2006, 2014), Simmons (2003, 2008), and Chamberlain (2019, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, scholars disagree about how (dis)embodied the Cartesian conception of the self really is. See the works cited in n.4 for interpretations of Descartes's philosophy that defend more full-bodied conception of the self.

philosopher with a more optimistic assessment of Descartes's approach: Mary Astell (1666-1731).

Astell sees the moral promise in the Cartesian account of the self. She uses the idea of an essentially thinking self to ground an argument for the education of women.<sup>7</sup> For Astell, the real distinction between mind and body is not alienating or dehumanizing.<sup>8</sup> It is liberating.

Descartes's dualism may well have been appealing to Astell because women's bodies were so often held against them. Aristotle, for example, argued that women were mutilated or deformed men, who contributed only matter to reproduction and were naturally fit for servitude—views that proved unfortunately influential.<sup>9</sup> Given that the female body was often treated as a liability, we can understand why Astell would want to transcend the body. Still, we might worry that she goes too far in this direction. Her Cartesian account of the self might suggest an implausibly disembodied picture of our nature. As Bryson writes, “Astell adheres to Cartesian dualism by elevating the Mind, ‘which is truly the self.’ A person, as a ‘self,’ is not Lockean ‘thinking matter’ but is a Cartesian ‘thinking thing.’ The disembodied mind is ‘who’ a person is, and the gendered body is meaningless to

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<sup>7</sup> As Broad (2018) shows, Astell's account of the self owes as much to Malebranche as to Descartes. Astell endorses Malebranche's view that we *lack* a proper understanding of the nature of the mind. As Astell writes, “we can't Know the Nature of our Souls Distinctly” (*Serious Proposal* 173). My focus in this paper is less on the self's understanding of itself, however, and more on the self's relationship with the human body. Astell's skepticism about self-knowledge does not exhaust her debt to Malebranche: she also offers a Malebranchean account of the underlying *reason* for the mind's union with the body (which is unlike anything found in Descartes).

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms “mind” and “soul” interchangeably to refer to immaterial, thinking substances.

<sup>9</sup> See Horowitz (1976) and Deslaurier (2022) for discussion.

individuality and identity.”<sup>10</sup> While Bryson rightly emphasizes Astell’s view that the self is an immaterial thinking substance, Astell’s account of the self’s relationship to the body is more nuanced than Bryson depicts it.<sup>11</sup>

Astell accommodates the self’s embodiment along three dimensions. First, Astell tempers her view that mind and body are distinct substances by insisting on their union, much like Descartes himself. Second, despite Astell’s disparaging comments about the mind’s entanglement with the body, she holds that the union between mind and body is good, at least when the body obeys the mind. Third, although Astell most frequently identifies the self with the mind, she also claims that we are composites of mind and body. Thus, she offers two different, and seemingly contradictory, accounts of the kinds of being we are: as minds, and as compositions of mind and body.<sup>12</sup> When she

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<sup>10</sup> Bryson (1998, 52).

<sup>11</sup> For helpful discussions of Astell’s conception of self as a thinking thing, see Kinnaird (1979, 61), Gallagher (1988, 34), Perry (1985, 491; 1986), Bryson (1998, 52 and 54), Springborg (2005, 227), Shapiro (2013, 341-2), Broad (2015, 64; 2018, 214), Detlefsen (2016, 76 and 86; 2017), and Lascano (2016, 183). The claim that the self is an immaterial, thinking thing is of course compatible with holding that the self is embodied in various ways, as Sowaal (2015), Broad (2015, 2018), Detlefsen (2017), and Sipowicz (2021) rightly emphasize. My aim in this paper is to unpack Astell’s account of the self’s embodiment.

<sup>12</sup> Other commentators, such as Sipowicz (2021, 40-44), also detect the concept of an “embodied self” in Astell’s work. Broad (2018) also expresses sympathy for this position when she notes that “in this lifetime the soul or the mind is always intimately united and joined to a living human body. . . . In this lifetime, moreover, it is apparent that our minds can never attain complete *separation* from our gendered bodies and the bodily influences of sensations, passions, and appetites” (214).

describes us as mind-body composites, however, her point is that we should care for both our mind and body. Astell uses the concept of *person* to mark the composite's special significance. The self is what I *am*, but my person is what I am *responsible for* or *appropriately concerned with*. Bryson is wrong to say that “the disembodied mind is ‘who’ a person is.”<sup>13</sup> The embodied mind—or, better, the mind-body union—deserves this title.

## 1. Astell's Dualism

Let us begin with an overview of Astell's metaphysics. Following Descartes's lead, Astell divides the world into minds and bodies.<sup>14</sup> Minds are non-extended, thinking things, whereas bodies are extended, non-thinking things. Thinking is the operation that each of us is familiar with in our own case when we close our eyes and turn our attention inwards. Extension is three-dimensionality: height, width, and depth. The only things that really or fundamentally exist, for Astell, are minds and bodies, thinkers and material things, subjects and geometrical objects. Astell gives two arguments for this position. The first echoes Descartes's conceivability argument in *Meditation 6*, while the second has a Malebranchean flavor.<sup>15</sup>

The first argument begins with the claim that we have “no way to judge of things but by their ideas, or to distinguish *this* from *that*, but by the distinction and difference of ideas.”<sup>16</sup> Astell proposes the following test for whether two things are distinct. If we have two complete ideas—i.e., two ideas that represent substances or independent beings—and if these ideas are “without any

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<sup>13</sup> Bryson (1998, 52).

<sup>14</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.229, 182.

<sup>15</sup> See Broad (2015, 64-70).

<sup>16</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.229, 182.

relation to, or dependence on the other,” then it follows that the things represented by these ideas can exist apart. As Astell puts it, we can then “be sure of the existence of the one without the other, even at the same time we can suppose that the other does not exist.”<sup>17</sup> Mind and body pass this test. For in “the case of a thinking and of an extended being, or of mind and body; here these two ideas, and consequently the things they represent, are truly distinct and of different natures.” Astell concludes that “[t]he one is not, cannot be, extended, nor does, or can the other think, any more than a circle can have the properties of a triangle, or a triangle those of a circle.”<sup>18</sup>

The second argument for the distinctness of mind and body focuses on our grasp of body and its capacities.<sup>19</sup> If a body could think, then either thinking would belong to the nature or essence of body, or it would be a mode of body. In other words, thinking would either be part of what matter fundamentally is, *or* thinking would be a particular configuration of matter, analogous to size and shape—matter’s “way and manner of being,” as Astell puts it.<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this argument, Astell brackets her view that the essence of body consists solely in extension, as this view

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<sup>17</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.229, 183.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Whereas the first argument relies on our possession of adequate ideas of *both* mind and body, the second argument relies primarily on our grasp of body and its capacities. Given Astell’s sympathy for the Malebranchean view that we do *not* have a clear and distinct idea of the mind or soul, this second argument fits better with her overall system. See Broad (2018) for discussion of Astell on this point, and Schmaltz (1996), LoLordo (2005), and Nolan and Whipple (2005) for helpful discussion of Malebranche.

<sup>20</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.231, 183.

is controversial. Instead, she argues that neither of these options work on *any* reasonable understanding of the nature of body.

Astell quickly dispenses with the first option. Everyone will agree, she supposes, that thought does not belong to the essence of body.<sup>21</sup> For if thinking *did* belong to what matter essentially is, then every material thing would think, including rocks, clouds, and rivers, which is presumably not the case. Next, Astell examines whether thinking could be a mode or configuration of body. In this scenario, only material things with the right kind of configuration—say, the organization characteristic of functioning brains—would think. But, Astell contends, this will not work either, because this option binds thinking to matter too tightly. Consider an object’s shape. The shape of a piece of wax is not something that can float free from the wax. The shape *just is* the wax existing in a particular way. Shapes can only exist when there is matter to be shaped. Astell generalizes this point to all a body’s modes. If thinking *just is* a mode or configuration of matter—say, matter organized into a functioning brain—then thinking cannot occur without some matter to be thus configured. As Astell writes, “modes do immediately depend upon, and are inseparable from the thing whose modes they are, existing no otherwise but in it.”<sup>22</sup> But, Astell contends, absurd consequences follow if thinking is inseparable from matter.

It follows that God is material. If thinking consists in the organization of matter, and if God is a thinker, then God would have to be a material thing. “If thought be a mode of body,” Astell writes, “besides all other absurdities, it will follow, that God is an extended being or a body, otherwise upon this supposition He could not think.”<sup>23</sup> Astell’s appeal to God is rhetorically

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<sup>21</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.231, 184.

<sup>22</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.231, 184.

<sup>23</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.231, 184.

effective, since her readers would balk at the suggestion that God is material. Nobody wants to be a Spinozist.

Astell's point can be made to stick without theological trappings. She sees that if thinking can occur without occurring in matter, then thinking cannot be identical to any specifically *material* configuration or process, e.g., the material configuration characteristic of functioning brains.

## 2. What Am I?

Astell's division of reality into thinking and extended things does not immediately tell us how *we* fit in: are we minds, bodies, or a combination of the two? As many commentators point out, Astell often identifies the self (or *I*) with the mind.<sup>24</sup> In the *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell exhorts her readers—the “ladies”—to not waste their time on their physical appearance but to focus on their true selves:

No solicitude in the adoration of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your *self*, and do not neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect when it's unsuitable and much inferiour Companion [i.e. the body] is mouldering in the dust.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See, again, Kinnaird (1979, 61), Gallagher (1988, 34), Perry (1985, 491; 1986), Bryson (1998, 52 & 54), Springborg (2005, 227), Shapiro (2013, 341-2), Broad (2015, 64; 2018, 214), Detlefsen (2016, 76 & 86), and Lascano (2016, 183).

<sup>25</sup> *Serious Proposal* 52-3. See also 66, 86-7.



Astell identifies “that which is really your *self*” with “that particle of Divinity within you,” i.e., the mind or soul that survives beyond the death and corruption of the human body, “mouldering in the dust” (*ibid.*). Broad nicely summarizes the scholarly consensus: “it is important to recognize that Astell regards the self as the immaterial soul and *not* the material body *or* the soul-body composite.”<sup>26</sup> Bryson is even more forceful: “[t]he disembodied mind is ‘who’ a person is, and the gendered body is meaningless to individuality and identity.”<sup>27</sup> While I will dispute some aspects of Bryson’s characterization below, she rightly emphasizes that for Astell the self (or *I*) is a thinking, non-extended substance.

What justifies Astell’s identification of self and thinking substance? In the *Christian Religion*, her argument begins with the observation: “That we all *think*, needs no proof.”<sup>28</sup> Through a process of elimination, Astell uses our status as thinkers to argue that we must be minds:

body can’t think, and because I and all other reasonable creatures think, therefore we are something that is not body. Now all beings whatsoever, are either material or immaterial; therefore since that which thinks is not material, it must be immaterial; and for this reason it is not liable to separation of parts or corruption, as all material beings are; consequently the human mind is in its own nature immortal as was to be proved.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Broad (2015, 64, emphasis added). See also Broad (2018, 214).

<sup>27</sup> Bryson (1998, 52).

<sup>28</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.229, 182. See also *Serious Proposal* II, 168.

<sup>29</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.230, 183.

Astell assumes that I am either a mind or a body. Since I am something that thinks, which “needs no proof,” and since bodies cannot think, it follows that I am a mind.<sup>30</sup>

While this argument provides strong textual evidence *that* Astell holds that the self (or *I*) is the mind, it does not quite work as an argument *for* this position, even within the context of Astell’s own system. As stated, this argument overlooks the possibility that we are neither minds nor bodies, but combinations of the two. It ignores the possibility that we are mind-body unions.

Before explaining how Astell can address this problem, I will sketch two replies that do *not* work. Considering these unsuccessful replies will highlight complexities in Astell’s theorizing about the embodied self. First, someone might reply that Astell’s philosophy excludes mind-body unions. Her system includes minds, bodies, and various relations between them. But, this reply goes, minds do not combine with bodies to form a *thing* or *whole* with any metaphysical oomph. Hence, a mind-body union is not a candidate for what we are because there is no such thing.<sup>31</sup> This reply fails, however, as Astell clearly holds that the combination of mind and body is *something*, even if she is unclear about *what*.<sup>32</sup> In the *Christian Religion*, she writes:

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<sup>30</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.229, 182.

<sup>31</sup> Voss’s (1994) reading of Descartes inspires this reply, according to which Descartes excises human beings—construed as composites of mind and body—from his ontology because of the difficulties they raise.

<sup>32</sup> Astell is in good company. Similar obscurities plague Descartes’s claim in *Meditation 6* that the human mind and body are united in such a way that they compose “one thing” (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56). One then wants to ask: what *kind* of thing? One substance or something else? What are we supposed to be counting such that we count one instead of two? See Rozemond (1998, ch. 6) and Simmons (2017).

Human nature is indeed a *composition* of mind and body, *which are two distinct substances having different properties, and yet make but one person.* The certainty of this union is not to be disputed, for everyone perceives it in himself; but we can't attain a clear and distinct knowledge of it, from our present ideas.<sup>33</sup>

Human nature is a “composition of mind and body,” and mind and body “make but one person.” This suggests that the mind-body union has enough metaphysical status to be a candidate for the self (or *I*). Surely the possibility that we are persons should be on the table!

Second, someone might argue that mind-body unions do not think, in which case Astell could rule out this option in the same way she rules out the view that we are bodies. But this reply fails as well. In Astell's critique of Locke's thinking matter in the Appendix to the *Christian Religion*, she argues that the combination of mind and body is a bearer of properties, most notably *thinking*. This point emerges when she explains the grain of truth in Locke's hypothesis:

393. *What Locke's arguments about matter amount to.* For I do not find that the arguments of the great Mr. L. . . . amount to any more than that God *can* do what we find He *has* done, that is, make another substance besides body, whose essential property, if not its very essence shall be thought, and can unite this thinking substance to body, which is what we call the union between soul and body. For if there is “nothing at all in” matter *as* matter “that thinks,” then God's “bestowing on some parcels of” matter a power of thinking, is neither more nor less

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<sup>33</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.272, 209, emphasis added.

than the making an arbitrary union between body and something that is not body, whereby this *composite* has properties that matter as matter “is no way capable of.”<sup>34</sup>

Whereas Locke argues that God could create thinking matter by super-adding a power of thinking to matter, Astell argues that this creative act would amount to the creation of two substances—a material substance and a thinking substance—united together. The final sentence in this passage is revealing. When God unites a body and a mind, the mind-body composite has “properties that matter as matter ‘is no way capable of,’” namely, thinking (*ibid.*). This establishes, first, that the mind-body union is a subject of properties, and second, that thinking is among these properties. The first of these claims fleshes out the idea that the mind-body union is *something* in Astell’s system: minimally, a subject of properties. The second establishes that mind-body unions can think. Admittedly, the mind-body union thinks in virtue of including a mind. God bestows a power of thinking on the composite by creating it with a thinking part. But presumably the properties and processes of composite systems typically depend on their parts in this way.

Astell faces a version of the “too many thinkers problem,” or, better, a *two* thinkers problem.<sup>35</sup> When someone thinks “I’m hungry,” this thought has two thinkers for Astell: (1) the mind of which the thought is a mode, *and* (2) the mind-body union of which the mind is a part. Assuming the first-person pronoun “I” refers to its thinker, both mind and mind-body union are candidate referents of “I” and, hence, for being the self. So, we are still left with the question: what,

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<sup>34</sup> *Christian Religion* V.393, 300, emphasis original.

<sup>35</sup> For helpful discussion of the “too many thinkers problem, see Parfit (2012, 7, 14-15) and Madden (2017, 4-5).

if anything, justifies Astell's view that the self is the mind, rather than the mind-body union? Why single out the mind as one's true self?

Even if Astell holds that the mind and the mind-body union are both thinkers, they are thinkers in different senses. We can distinguish a person's derivative and non-derivative activities.<sup>36</sup> To adapt an example from Parfit (2012), consider the difference between digesting and dancing a waltz. Someone digests their food "by having a part, their stomach, that does the digesting," whereas someone dances a waltz with their whole person.<sup>37</sup> In the former case, this person digests their food in virtue of one of their parts—their stomach—digesting: the person digests *derivatively*. In the latter case, there is no further waltzing thing in virtue of which the person waltzes: the person waltzes *non-derivatively*. Of course, the person's waltzing depends on various goings-on in their mind and limbs. Waltzing counts as a non-derivative activity because none of these goings on by themselves are cases of waltzing. This distinction can be applied to the case of thinking. The mind-body union thinks *derivatively* in virtue of the mind thinking. In contrast, the mind thinks *non-derivatively*: there is no further thinking thing in virtue of which the mind thinks.

My proposal, then, is that when Astell identifies the self with the mind, she is assuming that the self is not just any old thinker. Rather, her interest in the nature of the self is about who or what is *really* doing the thinking when we reflect on our own thoughts. This interest pushes her to identify the self with the being who is closest to, and most intimately engaged with, the activity of thinking: the non-derivative thinker of thoughts. That is the mind. Indeed, given Astell's view that a thing's essence is the "thing itself," and given her view that thinking is the nature or essence of the mind, the mind *just is thinking*. Nothing is closer to our thoughts than that.

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<sup>36</sup> I borrow this terminology from Madden (2017).

<sup>37</sup> Parfit (2012, 14-15).

Commentators rightly interpret Astell as tying self, mind, and thought together. One upshot of the preceding discussion is that—*pace* Bryson—the Astellian self is *not* a disembodied mind. In this life, and perhaps in the next, the self or mind is united to a human body, resulting in a composite whole. This composite has a nature, distinct from the natures of mind and body, namely, a human nature. It is a bearer of properties, including thinking. The composite is also a *person*, whatever that means for Astell. I will return to these aspects of the self's embodiment below. First, let us consider the moral and practical implications Astell draws from her view that we are our minds.

### 3. From Metaphysics to Morals

Astell draws a straight line from metaphysics to morals. “[I]f we know ourselves,” Astell writes, “we shall know what is our true good, and knowing it we shall pursue it.”<sup>38</sup> Different kinds of being are *perfected* in different ways. Chasing squirrels perfects a dog. Sharpness perfects a knife. The cultivation of rational capacities, perhaps through philosophizing, perfects the mind. As Astell writes:

in whatever degree of being a creature is placed, whether it be a free or a 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.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.225, 179.

<sup>39</sup> *Christian Religion* I.78, 93. See also II.95, 103.

Every kind of being has a “certain measure of perfection belonging to its rank,” but things of different ranks have different forms of perfection. For rational beings, our perfection *benefits* us or is *in our own interest*. When someone perfects their mind by developing their intellect, this is a good thing. It is also *good for* the person whose mind it is. Astell refers to *our* good, *our* perfection, *our* happiness, and *our* interest interchangeably. In contrast, it is unclear whether sharpness is good *for the knife*.

We naturally care about our own good. Though human motives are not exclusively selfish, we *do* care about ourselves, and we are inclined to pursue what we take to be in our own interests. The passage from the *Christian Religion* quoted above continues as follows: “[b]ecause everyone pursues that which seems to them for the present, to conduce to their happiness: nor will they be so senseless as to seek for happiness where they know it is not to be found.”<sup>40</sup> Astell emphasizes the inescapability of self-concern. “For human nature is so formed,” she explains, “that it incessantly pants after that which it takes to be its true good.”<sup>41</sup> She reiterates this point in the *Serious Proposal*: “[s]ince you cannot be so unkind as to refuse your *real* Interest, I only entreat you to be so wise as to examine wherein it consists; for nothing is of worsen consequence than to be deceived in a matter of so great concern.”<sup>42</sup>

If we know what our “real Interest” consists in, we will pursue it. But if, as often happens, we are mistaken about where our interest lies, we will chase after the wrong things. A woman who is kept ignorant “wherein the perfection of her Nature consists” will “take up with such Objects as first offer themselves, and bear any plausible resemblance to what she desires. . . . she who has

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<sup>40</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.225, 179.

<sup>41</sup> *Christian Religion* II.123, 121.

<sup>42</sup> *Serious Proposal* I, 52.

nothing else to value her self upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase.”<sup>43</sup>

We can go wrong in many ways. We might be confused about what our nature is. Our bodies trick us into identifying with them so that we pursue their interests rather than our own. “What hinders our perfection,” explains Astell, is “the corruptible body that presseth down the soul.”<sup>44</sup> Our social world further encourages this identification with our body such that we “lavish out the greatest part of our Time and Care, on the decoration of a Tenement, in which our Lease is so very short.”<sup>45</sup>

Even once we recognize that we are minds, we may not know what minds are for. We may be ignorant of what perfects a mind and wherein its good consists. Astell argues, for example, that catering to the body’s needs does *not* perfect the mind. She writes:

For it can never be supposed that God created us, that is our minds, after His own image, for no better purpose than to wait upon the body, while it eats, drinks, and sleeps, and saunters away a *useless life*; or to forget themselves so far as to be plunged into the cares of a *busy* one. God, whose works are all in number, weight, and measure, could never form a rational being for so trivial a purpose; since a little more mechanism than what He has bestowed upon some

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<sup>43</sup> *Serious Proposal* I, 62.

<sup>44</sup> *Christian Religion* II.99, 105.

<sup>45</sup> *Serious Proposal* I, 66.



brutes, would qualify us sufficiently for those employments, even for the very best affairs that this world, separate from the next and without any relation to it, is capable of.<sup>46</sup>

Astell argues that the mind's purpose is *not* to care for the human body because a little more bodily machinery could just as easily achieve this end. When the mind directs the human body towards food and drink and steers it away from potential harms, the mind performs a role that could *just as well* be played by a body. A spiritual cog substitutes for a material one. The evidence for this is that "brutes" or animal machines can take care of themselves without minds running the show. Astell assumes that the mind's purpose must lie in something that only the mind can do, in an activity that *distinguishes* the mind from body. Guarding the body is not such an activity.

More generally, we should not look for the mind's perfection in the world of material things:

Further, since the mind is immaterial, as we have seen, it is evident that this world and the things thereof, are not, cannot be its good; they are of a much inferior nature, and their duration is contemptible. Nay, supposing them to be real goods, and ever so fit to be enjoyed, yet how can a material good satisfy or improve a spiritual nature? How can a temporal good render an immortal being happy?<sup>47</sup>

Astell alludes to her hierarchical vision of reality. Beings come in many different ranks or kinds, each with its distinctive form of perfection, ordered from lowest to highest. "[T]he Nothingness of

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<sup>46</sup> *Christian Religion* II.107, 111. See also IV.307, and *Serious Proposal* I, 55. Astell echoes Malebranche in this passage. See, for example, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* IV.14, OC XII 98/JS 61.

<sup>47</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.243, 190.

Material things” pales in comparison with “the reality and substantialness of immaterial.”<sup>48</sup> Matter is far beneath mind and so nothing material can perfect the mind. The mind cannot achieve this perfection through interacting with material things. The mind is immortal, whereas material things are transient and corruptible. If the mind’s perfection *were* to consist in its interactions with a material thing—such as a work of art or a garden—eventually the material thing would dissolve. The mind’s perfection would disappear with it.<sup>49</sup> Permanent perfection would be elusive. Astell assumes, however, that eternal happiness or perfection *is* possible for immortal minds. Otherwise, we wouldn’t crave it.<sup>50</sup> We must look elsewhere, then, for the mind’s purpose and perfection: inwards and up.

Astell argues that the mind perfects itself by cultivating its rational or intellectual faculties, its relationship to God, and regulating its actions and passions in accordance with God’s will.<sup>51</sup> In the *Christian Religion*, she argues that we find our truest happiness when we turn our minds and hearts towards God:

I find indeed a light in my mind, directing me to the author my being, making it necessary to adore, to love, to devote myself to Him, if I would avoid the reproaches of my own mind. How happy am I when thus employed! How uneasy, how wretched when it is neglected! But who is the gainer by this service? Not this all-perfect being, for there can be no addition to

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<sup>48</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 126.

<sup>49</sup> See Broad (2015, 70-71) for helpful discussion.

<sup>50</sup> *Christian Religion* I.13, 54.

<sup>51</sup> See Broad (2015, ch. 5) for discussion of regulating the passions and their connection to virtue.

infinite perfection. It is I only who get by it, I do what is fit, I answer the end of my being, and oh that I might ever do so!<sup>52</sup>

Later in this work she identifies the mind's perfection with knowledge of God. "For to know is to perceive truth, and the perception of truth is," Astell explains, "a participation of God Himself who is *the truth*, and the participation of God is the perfection of the mind."<sup>53</sup> Locating the mind's perfection in its relationship with God yields the possibility of stable and permanent happiness. Whereas material things come and go, God is eternal and, thus, a fit object of desire for an immortal mind.

#### 4. Education and Self-Preservation

Astell's arguments for the education of women apply her views about the mind to the case of women. Women as much as men are thinking beings. Both should cultivate their intellects. Astell does not separate her theorizing about the mind in general from her theorizing about women's minds. A mind is a mind no matter what:

For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular affairs. Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth as well as the fruition of God, is it not cruel and

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<sup>52</sup> *Christian Religion* I.12, 54.

<sup>53</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.262, 203. See also *Serious Proposal* I, 75-6.

unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of the one as well as from the employment of the other?<sup>54</sup>

She reiterates this position in the *Christian Religion*: “If God had not intended that women should use their reason, He would not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain. If they are to use their reason, certainly it ought to be employed about the noblest objects.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, when Astell identifies the self with the mind or thinking substance, she explicitly addresses “the ladies.” A woman’s deepest self is her mind. A woman perfects herself by perfecting her mind.

Like anyone else, a woman can lose sight of her true interests if she fails to recognize that she is a mind, or if she is confused about what her mind is for. Women confront these obstacles in distinctively gendered forms that are wrapped up with society’s emphasis on “outward beauty” for women.<sup>56</sup> A woman might mistakenly identify with her body and, hence, misidentify her perfection with the body’s. Alternatively, she might imbibe just enough philosophy to recognize that she is a mind, and yet nevertheless persist in thinking that her mind’s sole purpose is to serve the body. Both these mistakes take on a gendered aspect because society shapes women’s understanding of what perfects women’s bodies. Society encourages women to identify their body’s perfection with a physical appearance pleasing to men, rather than health or vigor, for example. Astell rails against the influence of custom here:

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<sup>54</sup> *Serious Proposal* I, 80.

<sup>55</sup> *Christian Religion* I.5, 50.

<sup>56</sup> *Serious Proposal* I, 51.

Let's . . . dare to break the enchanted Circle that custom has place'd us in, and scorn the Vulgar way of imitating all the Impertinencies of our Neighbors. Let us learn to pride ourselves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion: And not entertain such a degrading thought or our own *worth*, as to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men. We value *them* too much, and our *selves* too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion: and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things . . .<sup>57</sup>

In these scenarios, a woman is doubly alienated from her own interests. She subordinates herself to her body but also allows “the eyes of men” to decide what is good for her body.<sup>58</sup> This is even worse than mistaking the mind’s purpose for the provision of the body’s needs, since in that case at least the body’s needs are genuine.

Astell privileges the mental side of ourselves. She argues that the mind is distinct from the body, that we are our minds, and that our true happiness consists in the mind’s perfection. From this otherworldly perspective, the importance of everyday life dwindles. Astell scoffs at Locke’s emphasis on self-preservation, understood as preservation of the body or composite, as morally significant:

*Wherein self-preservation consists.* What then is *self-preservation*, that fundamental law of nature, as some call it, to which all other laws, divine as well as human, are made to do homage? And how shall it be provided for? Very well; for it does not consist in the preservation of the

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<sup>57</sup> *Serious Proposal* I, 55.

<sup>58</sup> For more on Astell’s treatment of inward and outward beauty, see Shapiro (2013).

person or “composite,” but in preserving the mind from evil, the mind which is truly the self, and which ought to be secured at all hazards. It is this “self-preservation” and no other, that is a fundamental sacred and unalterable law, as might easily be proved were this a proper place . . .<sup>59</sup>

If we are immaterial thinking beings, immune to dissolution and therefore naturally immortal, we do not need to *do* anything to secure our continued existence. We do not need to eat or drink, or protect ourselves from bodily harm, although foregoing sustenance may be uncomfortable.<sup>60</sup>

This constellation of views can lead to the impression that, as Bryson puts it, the self is the “disembodied (gender-less) mind” (1998, 56) and that the human body is “nothing more than a meaningless dwelling place” (1998, 46). Astell’s attitude towards the body—“this system of bones, flesh, and so on, which I call my body”—is more complex, however, than Bryson suggests.<sup>61</sup> First, Astell does *not* hold that the self is a “disembodied” mind, if by “disembodied” we mean disconnected from the human body.<sup>62</sup> Astell’s self is an *embodied* mind. Second, despite her disparaging remarks about the body, Astell holds that the mind’s union with the body is good. Our

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<sup>59</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.274, 210.

<sup>60</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.234, 186 & IV.272, 209.

<sup>61</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.227, 181.

<sup>62</sup> It is unclear what Bryson means when she characterizes the mind as “disembodied” for Astell. In one passage, Bryson glosses this by saying that the mind “has no direct relationship with matter” (Bryson 1998, 49). In another passage, Bryson explains the mind’s putative disembodiment by saying that the mind is an “immaterial ‘essence’” (42). The former claim is what I am taking issue with; the latter is unproblematic as a reading of Astell.

bodies serve an important religious function in our lives. Third, and perhaps most surprisingly, Astell complicates her identification of self and mind by suggesting that we are also mind-body unions.

## 5. The Mind's Union with the Body

Astell holds that we can know *that* mind and body are united,<sup>63</sup> but not *what* their union consists of. The nature of the union eludes us.<sup>64</sup> “[T]he certainty of this union’s not to be disputed,” Astell writes in the *Christian Religion*, “for everyone perceives it in himself; but we can’t attain a clear and distinct knowledge of it, from our present ideas.”<sup>65</sup> Similarly, she writes, “neither do I comprehend the vital union between my soul and body, nor how and in what manner they are joined, though I am sure that so it is.”<sup>66</sup> We are like someone fumbling in the dark who knows *that* something exists because she bumps against it, without knowing *what* she has stumbled upon.

Astell’s claim that “everyone perceives [the union] in himself” indicates that our certainty of the union is first-personal. *I* perceive that *my* mind is connected to a human body, and *you* perceive that *yours* is too. This experience includes the correlation between the states of mind and body. When my body is affected, I feel sensations. Bodily damage conjures sensations of pain. I act with and through my body. When I will to raise my arm, lo and behold it rises. As Astell writes, “by the Oeconomy of the Passions such and such Motions in the Body are annexed in such a manner to

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<sup>63</sup>As I mentioned above, Sowaal (2015), Broad (2015, 2018), and Detlefsen (2017) insist on this point as well.

<sup>64</sup> Descartes makes similar claims. See Simmons (2017).

<sup>65</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.272, 209.

<sup>66</sup> *Christian Religion* I.62, 80. See also I.16, 56 and I.62, 80.

certain Thoughts in the Soul. . . The Active Powers of the Soul, her Will and Inclinations are at her own dispose, her Passive are not, she can't avoid feeling Pain or other sensible Impressions so long as she's united to a Body, and that Body is dispos'd to convey these impressions."<sup>67</sup>

Astell suggests that our mental and bodily states are not merely correlated but also causally connected. "We know and feel the Union between our Soul and Body," she writes, "but who amongst us sees so clearly, as to find out with Certitude and Exactness, the secret ties which unite two such different Substances, or how they are able to act upon each other."<sup>68</sup> She reiterates later in the same work: "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."<sup>69</sup> The language of "act" and "influence" points towards an efficient causal connection.<sup>70</sup>

Given how much we can know about the relationship between mind and body—namely, that their states are both correlated and perhaps even causally connected—we might wonder what we are missing for Astell. Recall her insistence that we know *that* mind and body are joined, but not "how and in what manner."<sup>71</sup> Knowing *that* two things causally interact differs from knowing *how*. When we observe billiard balls ricocheting across a table, for example, we (arguably) know both *that* they causally interact and *how*, namely, through contact and collision. When we feel our minds

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<sup>67</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 213-4. See also *Christian Religion* IV.305, 229.

<sup>68</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 148, emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 161, emphasis added.

<sup>70</sup> Although some commentators—such as Taylor (2001)—have argued that Astell is an occasionalist about mind-body causation, I agree with O'Neill (2007) and Broad (2015) that mind and body act on one another in the efficient rather than merely occasional sense.

<sup>71</sup> *Christian Religion* I.62, 80.



interact with our bodies, in contrast, we do not know *how* this interaction occurs. Our minds do not collide with our bodies, nor are we aware of anything like collision that might make their interaction intelligible. Another elusive feature of the mind-body union is its ontological status: how the union fits into Astell's substance-mode ontology. Is the mind-body composite a third kind of substance (which would make Astell a trialist rather than dualist)? Or does Astell's ontology include more than just substances and modes? Astell doesn't say.

The mind's embodiment is not a temporary condition, for the mind will be united to a new and improved body after death. Astell exhorts her readers not to fear death. Because we are minds, not mind-body composites, death—understood as dissolution of the composite of which we are a part—does not threaten our existence.<sup>72</sup> In at least one passage, Astell offers an alternative explanation of why death is not to be feared:

it being our privilege and felicity to depend upon God, and upon Him only. For hereby we are out of the reach of the malice of men and devils, who may put us to some small inconveniences, may un-house us it's true, by dissolving the union between mind and body; but this is only to send us to a better habitation, "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (*Christian Religion* IV.234, 186)

The worst that other people can do is "un-house" us by damaging our bodies to the point that they can no longer sustain a union with the mind. Astell suggests that this will "send us to a better habitation, 'a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'" (*ibid.*). Maybe Astell is just saying that when we die our minds go to heaven, where they continue on in disembodied form. But that

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<sup>72</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.230, 183.

does not quite fit the text. She says that we will receive a better habitation—an eternal house—in the heavens. This suggests that we will receive a better, incorruptible body in heaven. Bodily resurrection awaits. A body is worth having and hoping for.

## 6. The Body's Importance

Bryson argues that the human body is “unimportant” and a “meaningless dwelling place” for Astell.<sup>73</sup> While Bryson is surely right that our bodies are *less* important than our minds, our bodies matter for Astell. Astell holds that *everything* is good, perfect, or meaningful to some degree. As Astell writes, “all the works of God are perfect in their kind, though all of them do not possess the same degree of perfection, for this would consist with the perfection of the whole, which arises from the order and symmetry of the several parts.”<sup>74</sup> Since our bodies are “works of God,” they possess a base level of perfection and importance. Moreover, Astell applies her metaphysical optimism—her view that everything that is, is good—to the mind-body union:

All the works of our creator are in number, weight, and measure, and therefore without controversy, it is for very good reasons that He has *so* united a corruptible body to an immortal mind, that the impressions which are made in the former, shall be perceived and attended with certain sensations in the other, and this by ways altogether mysterious and incomprehensible, and only to be resolved into the efficacy of the divine will. The body then

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<sup>73</sup> Bryson 1998, 44, 46.

<sup>74</sup> *Christian Religion* II.95, 103. See also I.78, 93.

may be of great service to us, if we know how to employ it according to the design of our maker.<sup>75</sup>

Though our bodies often distract us and drag us down, they “may be of great service to us,” if used correctly.

We should care for our minds *and* bodies, giving each their due. In the *Serious Proposal*, she writes:

That the true and proper Pleasure of Human Nature consists in the exercise of that Dominion which the Soul has over the Body, in governing every Passion and Motion according to Right Reason, by which we most truly pursue the real good of both, *it being a mistake as well of our Duty as our Happiness to consider either part of us single, so as to neglect what is due to the other. For if we disregard the Body wholly, we pretend to live like Angels whilst we are but mortals; and if we prefer or equal it to the Mind we degenerate into Brutes. The former indeed is not frequent, it is only to be found amongst a few Scrupulous Persons, who sometimes impose such rigors on the Body, as GOD never requires at their hands, because they are inconsistent with a Human Frame. The latter is the common and dangerous fault, for the most of us accustom ourselves to tast no other Pleasures than what are convey'd to us by the Organs of Sense, we pamper our Bodies till they grow resty and ungovernable, and instead of doing Service to the Mind, get Dominion over it. Thus we learn what is truly to Love our selves .*

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<sup>75</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.305, 229.

<sup>76</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 210-1.

It is “a mistake . . . to consider either part of us single, so as to neglect what is due to the other.” Rather, we should consider both our mind and body as well as their relations.<sup>77</sup> Astell helpfully distinguishes different ways we might mistakenly “consider either part of us single.” On the one hand, if we live an overly spiritual life, cultivating only our minds, “we pretend to live like Angels, whilst we are but mortals” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, if we live an overly brutish or animal life and cultivate only our bodies—or, indeed, if we treat the body as if it were the mind’s equal—then “we degenerate into Brutes” (*ibid.*). The latter mistake “is the common and dangerous fault,” and so Astell devotes it more attention: hence her frequent warnings about living an “animal” life.<sup>78</sup>

If we are immaterial, thinking beings, why *shouldn't* we live like angels? Because we are joined to the world in a way that angels are not. We should care about the wholes to which we belong:

I consider myself therefore as part of one great whole, in the welfare of which my own happiness is included. And without regarding any particular or separate interest, endeavor always to pursue that which in itself and absolutely speaking, is the most public, universal, and greatest good.<sup>79</sup>

We should care about our families, our community, and our countries. Similarly, a mind should concern itself with the mind-body composite of which it is a part, and, hence, with the body. The

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<sup>77</sup> Regulating one’s passions manages the relations between mind and body. See Broad (2015, ch. 5).

<sup>78</sup> *Serious Proposal* 126, 128-9, 215.

<sup>79</sup> *Christian Religion* II.170, 152.

mind's union with the body unites their fates and transforms the body into an appropriate object of concern.

Our bodies also have religious meaning. In *Christian Religion* IV.305, when Astell considers “what regard is due to our bodies,” she argues that “we ought to value and reverence” our bodies because they are “members of Christ” and “temples of His holy spirit” (*ibid.*). Christ was incarnated in body and soul, as a human being.<sup>80</sup> “[T]he manifestation of the son of God,” as Astell emphasizes, occurs “in the flesh.”<sup>81</sup> While God the Father created “our minds, after His own image,” He created our human nature—encompassing our minds *and* bodies—after Christ’s image. Our bodies deserve respect and reverence because they forge a resemblance between us and Christ. Astell reiterates this point when discussing “several sorts of pride”: “There’s a reverence due to human nature [i.e. the mind-body composite], because of God’s image, which all of us in some measure, bear. We are brethren, not only by nature, but after a more excellent manner, in Christ our elder brother; nay we are yet more nearly related, being members of the same body.”<sup>82</sup>

Astell borrows a page from Malebranche by arguing that our bodies allow us to imitate Christ on a deeper level too by providing us with a sacrifice to offer God.<sup>83</sup> She writes:

And not to enquire what our bodies would have been, had we preserved our innocence, the restorer of our nature [i.e. Christ] has shown us, that they [our bodies] are capable of glorifying God by being offered up ‘a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to Him, which is

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<sup>80</sup> *Christian Religion* II.107, 111.

<sup>81</sup> *Christian Religion* II.118, 118.

<sup>82</sup> *Christian Religion* II.141, 134.

<sup>83</sup> See Chamberlain (2018, 534-536) for discussion of Malebranche’s view of the body as sacrifice.

our reasonable service.’ The meaning of which is, that whereas under the former economies beasts were slain and offered on God’s altar; under the Christian, the appetites arising from the union of the body with the mind, are to be sacrificed all the days of our life, than which there is not anything more reasonable.<sup>84</sup>

We sacrifice and mortify our bodies by subjecting them to our minds: by making them into “the most obedient servants.”<sup>85</sup> Astell’s claims about mortifying the flesh might conjure dark associations of hair shirts and self-flagellation.<sup>86</sup> Astell offers a brighter vision of mortification, however, as bodily tranquility and control. The body is mortified when it obeys and does not distract the mind. Health achieves this state of obedience, whereas a sick body is an unruly distraction. A healthy body recedes into the background, allowing the mind to get on with things. As Astell explains, our bodies are as they should be:

When our bodies never call always the mind from its proper pleasure, to supply their imaginary wants, or to humor their appetites, but are healthy and satisfied with what reason assigns them. And this I take to be the best way to keep the body in good tune, to avoid pain, and to be always easy. I only fear there is too much Epicurism in it.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.305, 229.

<sup>85</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.312, 233.

<sup>86</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.307, 230.

<sup>87</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.312, 233.

We barely notice our bodies when they work well. The most pleasurable runs, for example, are effortless—when your legs move so easily that you barely notice. The mortification and sacrifice of the body, in Astell’s hands, becomes a form of bodily transparency—a surprisingly pleasant state.

The senses support the body’s equilibrium. Like Descartes and Malebranche, Astell holds that the proper function of the senses is to help us preserve our bodies and keep them healthy, so that our bodies are fit to serve our minds. We should “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.”<sup>88</sup> The senses provide helpful shortcuts when we decide what will benefit or harm the body:

It is certain you feel pleasure in [eating and drinking], and you thank God for it, since by this easy sensible way, without engaging yourself in the troublesome examination of the state of your body and the suitableness of the nourishment, you eat and drink what will support it. But you do this only to keep your body in health that it may be able to serve your mind, that both may serve their redeemer, in which service all your happiness consists.<sup>89</sup>

Taste and smell are quick and easy ways to decide what to eat and drink. Without these senses, we would need to perform elaborate experiments to determine whether an apple, or a stone, was nourishing, which would waste our time and distract us from God. The purpose of the senses

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<sup>88</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 164.

<sup>89</sup> *Christian Religion* V.378, 288-289. See also *Serious Proposal* II, 212.

interlocks with a grand chain of purposes. The senses are for preserving the body's health, the body's health is for serving the mind, and the mind and body are for serving Christ.<sup>90</sup>

## 7. A Composite Self?

Across her works, Astell maintains the importance of knowing our selves, the material world, and God:

Now I know not any Subjects more proper for our Meditation on this and all occasions, than our own Nature, the Nature of Material Beings, and the Nature of GOD; because it is thro the mistake of some of these that our Inclinations take a wrong bias, and consequently that we transgress against GOD, our Neighbour and our selves.<sup>91</sup>

So far, nothing new here. But then Astell throws a curve ball. The passage continues:

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<sup>90</sup> This chain of purposes distinguishes Astell and Malebranche, on the one hand, from Descartes, on the other. In *Meditation 6*, Descartes argues that “the proper purpose of sensory perceptions” is to help the mind preserve its body and then leaves it at that (AT VII 83/CSM II 57). Descartes does not explain *why* it is good for the mind to preserve the body, however, presumably because of his prohibition against guessing at God's purposes (*M4*, AT VII 55/CSM II 39). In contrast, Astell and Malebranche happily speculate about God's reasons. The passions have a similar function as the senses (*Serious Proposal II*, 206).

<sup>91</sup> *Serious Proposal II*, 210.



*For did we consider what we Are, that Humane Nature consists in the Union of a Rational Soul with a Mortal Body, that the Body very often Clogs the Mind in its noblest Operations, especially when indulg'd.*

That we stand not singly on our own Bottom, but are united in some measure to all who bear a *Human form*, especially to the Community amongst whom we live, and yet more particularly to those several Relations we may have in it. Did we go on to consider what are the proper Duties and Enjoyments *of such a nature as ours*, that is, what performances do naturally result from those Capacities we find our selves endow'd with, which may therefore be reasonably expected from us, and what sort of Pleasures we are made to relish. . . . Did we but employ so much of our Time and Thoughts on these things as we do on our Sins and Vanities, we shou'd not be long in discerning the good effects.<sup>92</sup>

If we rightly consider “what we Are,” we will realize that we are mind-body unions. The nature we are called upon to cultivate is not just the mind: it is our human nature, encompassing mind *and* body. We are not simply minds, apparently, but mind-body composites. On this account of the self, our bodies are not merely our constant companions or dwellings. Our bodies are *us*—or *parts* of us, anyway.

Admittedly, the account of the self as a mind-body composite conflicts with the many, many passages where Astell argues that the self is a mind. Hence, we might dismiss the “curve-ball” passage from the *Serious Proposal* as an aberration. The problem with dismissing it is that Astell often

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<sup>92</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 210, emphasis added.

suggests that we are mind-body composites.<sup>93</sup> This is a natural reading of the passage we saw above where Astell tells we should not “live like angels.”<sup>94</sup> She writes that is “a mistake as well of our Duty as our happiness *to consider either part of us single*, so as to neglect what is due to the other,” which presupposes that we are beings that *have* parts, and, specifically, that we are composite beings that include mind and body as parts of ourselves.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Astell’s claims that the mind-body union constitutes a *person* push in this direction. Let us take another look at a passage we saw above:

*Duty to our persons.* Human nature is indeed a composition of mind and body, which are two distinct substances having different properties, **and yet make but one person.** The certainty of this union is not to be disputed, for everyone perceives it in himself; but we can’t attain a clear and distinct knowledge of it, from our present ideas. No authority but His who made this union can justly dissolve it; for no person has a right over his own or his neighbor’s life, or liberty, to dispose of either, any further than as he can show a warrant and commission from God.<sup>96</sup>

When Astell writes that mind and body “make but one person,” she is naturally read as saying that *we* are made up of mind and body, especially in the wake of Locke’s discussion of personal identity in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

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<sup>93</sup> I concur with Sipowicz’s (2021, 40-43) observation that Astell employs a concept of the “embodied self.”

<sup>94</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 210-1.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.272, 209, emphasis added. See also *Christian Religion* I.62, 80.

What should we make of this? Are we minds or mind-body composites for Astell? Does one of these accounts reflect her true position or is she simply conflicted? When Astell identifies us with the composite of mind and body, her main point is practical rather than metaphysical. We should *care* for the composite of which our mind is a part. In contrast, when she is working out her metaphysics, Astell unwaveringly commits to the view that the *self*—i.e., the being that each of us refers to when we think “I”—is the mind. Astell clearly holds that our survival or identity over time is tied to the mind, as is our ultimate perfection. This is bedrock for Astell.

We should adopt a deflationary or non-metaphysical reading of Astell’s claims that we are composites of mind and body. For Astell, I am a mind united to a human body in such a way that I form a composite whole with my body. In virtue of forming this whole, my interests as a mind expand to include the interests of the whole.<sup>97</sup> I am a mind with a special responsibility for the human body with which I am entangled. When Astell claims that we are composites of mind and body, she evokes this responsibility. She reiterates the body’s importance to the mind. No more and no less. Indeed, Astell claims that we make a *practical* error—“a mistake as well of our Duty as our happiness”—rather than a metaphysical one, if we “consider either part of us single, so as to neglect what is due to the other.”<sup>98</sup> Astell uses the concept of *person* to pick out the sphere of this special responsibility.<sup>99</sup> The concept of person delineates the self’s special focus or concern.

Astell teases apart the concepts of self and person. The self—the mind—is what I *am*. But the person—the human composite of which the mind/self is a part—is what (or who?) I am uniquely *responsible* for.

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<sup>97</sup> *Christian Religion* II.170, 152.

<sup>98</sup> *Serious Proposal* II, 210-1.

<sup>99</sup> *Christian Religion* IV.272, 209, emphasis added. See also *Christian Religion* I.62, 80.

## 8. Conclusion

Astell is no defender of the “disembodied self.” She develops a rich account of our embodiment. We are uneasy marriages of mind and body, of immaterial substantialness and material nothing. Our good constitutively depends on both, though Astell weights the mind more heavily. As Astell writes, “I suppose then that you’re fill’d with a laudable Ambition to brighten and enlarge your souls, that the Beauty of your Bodies is but a secondary care” (*Serious Proposal* II, 122). Our bodies are “a secondary care”—but, crucially, worthy of care. For if either our mind or body is flawed or broken, then we are partly flawed, partly broken. If the mind and body are at odds, then we are at odds with ourselves. For Astell, the mind’s relation to the body is *personal*. This relation is between the parts of one’s person.<sup>100</sup>

Mary Astell’s body betrayed her in the end. She died of breast cancer in 1731 after painful and unsuccessful surgery. We may hope that her philosophy gave her solace. We may hope that the decay she observed in her body was “unconcerning” and did not “prejudice the beauty of her lovely soul.”<sup>101</sup> We may hope that she found the perfection and happiness she sought apart from her body, her “unsuitable and much inferior Companion . . . mouldering into dust”.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Serious Proposal* 86-7.

<sup>102</sup> *Serious Proposal* 53.

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