

Astell and Masham on Epistemic Authority and Women’s Individual Judgment in Religion*

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Abstract

In 1705, Mary Astell and Damaris Masham both published works advocating for women’s use of individual judgment in matters of religion. Although both philosophers advocate for women’s education and intellectual autonomy, and both are adherents of the Church of England, they differ dramatically in their attitudes to religious authority. These differences are rooted in a deeper disagreement about the nature of epistemic authority in general. Astell defends an interpersonal model of epistemic authority on which we properly trust testimony when the testifier is answerable for its truth. Masham holds an evidence model of epistemic authority on which testimony is treated as an ordinary piece of empirical evidence. Central to Masham’s argument is her contention that religious beliefs based on the kind of authority recognized by Astell could never serve as a stable source of moral motivation. Because of their different theories of epistemic authority, Masham’s defense of women’s intellectual autonomy leads to a radical anti-clericalism, while Astell’s defense is fully consistent with her insistence on deference to the established church.

Mary Astell (1666–1731) and Damaris Cudworth Masham (1658–1708) were early English feminists,¹ and in particular advocates for the education of women. Both Astell and Masham rooted their arguments for women’s education in a combination of Protestant theology and modern philosophy.² Both were adherents of the Church of England. In the same year (1705), Astell and Masham

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1. While the term ‘feminist’ was not in use in the period under discussion, the label fits both Astell and Masham insofar as their writings aim to understand and to combat the oppression of women as a class. I agree with Patricia Springborg and Jacqueline Broad that doubts about the appropriateness of applying this label to early modern philosophers like Astell and Masham stem from an overly narrow conception of what such a project *must* look like. This conception is based on our social and political context, not theirs. See Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom From Domination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–12; Jacqueline Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 9. As Springborg says, ‘The refusal to apply the term “feminist” to those women who early engaged in the struggle to be recognized as minds and bodies with the autonomy and rights granted to men involves a kind of reverse anachronism’ (Springborg, *Mary Astell*, 6).

2. Astell’s major philosophical influences include Antoine Arnauld, Nicolas Malebranche, and John Norris, while Masham’s major influences include (her father) Ralph Cudworth and (her close companion) John Locke.

each published religious works aimed in part at defending women's use of individual judgment. Both connected this issue with their advocacy for women's access to education.³ Yet their arguments diverge dramatically.

The philosophical source of this divergence is a difference in their theories of *epistemic authority*. A person has practical authority over us when we have a duty to do what that person commands. A person has epistemic authority over us when we have a duty to believe what that person says. Astell's theory treats epistemic authority as a variety of practical authority. She believes that we can, and sometimes should, literally believe on command. Astell roots both practical and epistemic authority in a conception of *answerability*: where a genuine relationship of authority exists, the one who commands, and not the one who obeys, is answerable. This applies to belief as well as action.

Masham, on the other hand, regards testimony as ordinary empirical evidence and rejects any analogy between epistemic and practical authority. Masham argues, in particular, that the kind of belief needed to support virtue and true religion can be produced and sustained only by the exercise of one's own reason.

These differing views of epistemic authority and its role in religious belief are connected with radically different positions on the role of the clergy in shaping the beliefs of laypeople. These differing views about the structure of institutional Christianity result in differences in their defences of women's intellectual autonomy, in religion and elsewhere.

Historians of philosophy have recently been paying a great deal more attention to early modern women, including Astell and Masham.⁴ Meanwhile, epistemologists have increasingly come to regard testimony, epistemic authority, and social epistemology more broadly, as among the central questions of their

3. The similarities between Astell and Masham are emphasized by Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 5.

4. On Astell, see, e.g., Penny A. Weiss, "Mary Astell: Including Women's Voices in Political Theory," *Hypatia* 19, no. 3 (2004): 53–84; Alice Sowaal, "Mary Astell's Serious Proposal: Mind, Method, and Custom," *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 2 (2007): 227–243; Jacqueline Broad, "Mary Astell on Marriage and Lockean Slavery," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 4 (2014): 717–738; Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*; Jacqueline Broad, "Selfhood and Self-Government in Women's Religious Writings of the Early Modern Period," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 27, no. 5 (2019): 713–730. On Masham, see, e.g., Lois Frankel, "Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Seventeenth Century Feminist Philosopher," *Hypatia* 4, no. 1 (1989): 80–90; Sarah Hutton, "Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1993): 29–54; Sarah Hutton, "Debating the Faith: Damaris Masham (1658–1708) and Religious Controversy," in *Debating the Faith: Religion and Letter Writing in Great Britain, 1550–1800*, International Archives of the History of Ideas 209 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013); Marcy P. Lascano, "Damaris Masham and 'The Law of Reason or Nature,'" *The Modern Schoolman* 88, nos. 3/4 (2011): 245–265; Jacqueline Broad, "Damaris Masham on Women and Liberty of Conscience," in *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought*, ed. Eileen O'Neill and Marcy P. Lascano (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 319–336; Hilda L. Smith, "The Radical Nature of Mary Astell's Christian Feminism," in O'Neill and Lascano, *Feminist History of Philosophy*, 301–317. Works placing Astell and Masham in dialogue include Patricia Springborg, "Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics," in *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, ed. Hilda L. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*; Catherine Wilson, "Love of God and Love of Creatures: The Masham-Astell Debate," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2004): 281–298; and Joanne E. Myers, "Enthusiastic Improvement: Mary Astell and Damaris Masham on Sociability," *Hypatia* 28, no. 3 (2013): 533–550.

discipline.⁵ Further, the contemporary literature contains extensive debate on the question of the proper role, if any, for epistemic authority in religion.⁶ Yet the views of Astell and Masham on epistemic authority, developed in the context of debates about the place of women in the Church of England, have so far gone unexplored.⁷ More generally, while contemporary discussions of testimony, social epistemology, and epistemic authority often mention a handful of early modern figures—Locke, Hume, and Reid—neither epistemologists nor scholars of early modern philosophy have adequately appreciated the breadth and sophistication of early modern debates on this topic. This is perhaps in part due to the fact that these debates were largely carried out in the religious works of thinkers who have not been recognized as part of the philosophical canon. The disagreement between Astell and Masham provides an excellent starting point for recovering this rich, fascinating, and largely forgotten philosophical material. As a first step in this direction, the present paper will provide a detailed account of the differing views of Astell and Masham on epistemic authority, and the consequences of these differences for their defences of women’s education and intellectual autonomy and their attitudes to the established church.

1 Women’s Individual Judgment in Astell’s *The Christian Religion*

Astell’s *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* is written in the form of a letter to an unnamed female correspondent, presumed to be Lady Catherine Jones.⁸ It begins as follows:

When I borrowed *The Lady’s Religion*, your Ladyship I believe had no suspicion of being troubled with such a long address, nor had I any design to give you this trouble. Though if there be anything peculiar in “a lady’s religion” to distinguish it from that of other Christians, a woman I should think is as likely to be acquainted with that peculiarity as a man... though the press has helped us to the religion of a “physician,” a “layman,” a “gentleman,” and a “lady,” yet in my poor opinion they have all of them but one religion if they are Christians. (TCR, §1)

5. See, e.g., C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Elizabeth Fricker, “Second-Hand Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73, no. 3 (2006): 592–618; Benjamin McMyler, *Testimony, Trust, and Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6. See, e.g., Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, ch. 9; C. A. J. Coady, “Communal and Institutional Trust: Authority in Religion and Politics,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 4 (2014): 1–23; John Cottingham, “Authority and Trust: Reflections on Linda Zagzebski’s *Epistemic Authority*,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 4 (2014): 25–38; Matthew A. Benton, “Believing on Authority,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 4 (2014): §3.

7. But for discussion of some closely related issues in Astell, see Allauren Samantha Forbes, “Mary Astell on Bad Custom and Epistemic Injustice,” *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 777–801.

8. Jacqueline Broad, introduction to *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, by Mary Astell, ed. Jacqueline Broad, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*: Toronto Series 24 (Toronto: Iter Inc. / Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 7–8.

The text to which Astell refers, *A Lady's Religion*, is now believed to have been written by William Stephens, though Astell may have thought it was written by Locke.⁹ As Astell notes, the author is identified on the title page only as 'a Divine of the Church of *England*' (TCR, §2). Astell goes on (§28) to discuss a second, similar book, *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation*. This work was likely also written by Stephens since it appeared in a collection of Stephens' tracts published within his lifetime.¹⁰ However, some scholars have instead attributed it to John Toland.¹¹ These two anonymous works were both written in the form of letters by presumptively male authors addressed to female correspondents promising to resolve their religious quandaries.

Astell's response to these works appears at first glance to be a robust defense of women's intellectual autonomy. The heading of §3 reads, '*Everyone must judge for themselves*,' to which the heading of §5 adds, '*Women as well as men*.' Much of the language in these sections appears totally uncompromising:

to pretend to dictate to our fellow rational creatures. . . is an assuming of [God's] prerogative, and an usurpation upon their just and natural rights, who have as much right to abound in their own sense as we have to abound in ours. And to submit to such dictates is an affront to God, by despising or at the best neglecting the talents He has given us, and a direct disobedience to that command of Christ's, "call no man master upon earth" [see Matthew 23:9–10] . . . since "we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" [2 Corinthians 5:10] . . . it is as unreasonable to take upon us to *judge for*, as it is to *judge* another's servant [see Romans 14:4] . . . And we may observe, if we please, that a man never sets up himself to be anyone's oracle or director, but out of some selfish and base design. (TCR, §3).¹²

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, and in business of the greatest consequence, therefore in religion. (TCR, §5)¹³

Yet even in these very sections, there is material that seems to pull the other direction:

I know of none *but my lawful governors in church and state* who have a right to judge for me in any case, and therefore *they only shall do it* . . . [we must] follow no man's judgment or authority *any*

9. Broad, [introduction to *The Christian Religion*](#), 10–11.

10. Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, 144n108; see [William Stephens], *An Account of the Growth of Deism in England: With Other Tracts of the Same Author* (London, 1709), 182–215.

11. Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 122–123; Michael Brown, *A Political Biography of John Toland*, *Eighteenth-Century Political Biographies* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 82–84.

12. For a helpful analysis of Astell's frequent talk of the need to improve, rather than neglect, the 'talents' God has given us, see Myers, "[Enthusiastic Improvement](#)," 540–543.

13. Cf. [Mary Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies: For the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*, Part I, 4th ed. (1694; London: R. Wilkin, 1701), 47–52.

further than as he brings his credentials from the great master who is in heaven... God never requires us to submit our judgments to our fellow creatures, *except in cases wherein He makes them, and not us, answerable for the error and all its evil consequences.* (TCR, §3, emphasis added)¹⁴

What we have here is an instance of the general feature of Astell's thought that has most exercised scholars, her 'Tory feminism'.¹⁵ On the one hand, Astell offers what appears to be a robust defense of obedience to 'lawful governors in church and state,' directing her attack only against those men who take it upon themselves to serve as spiritual directors without lawful authority. On the other hand, Astell offers what appears to be an equally robust defense of women's autonomy, even going so far as to assert that 'most of, if not all, the follies and vices that women are subject to... are owing to our paying too great a deference to other people's judgments, and too little to our own' (TCR, §45; cf. [Astell], *Serious Proposal*, 27–28).

Some scholars see these two strands of Astell's thought as in conflict.¹⁶ When we come, at the end of the day, to evaluate Astell's philosophy by our own 21st century standards this conclusion may well turn out to be correct. However, these two strands are so thoroughly interwoven in Astell's text—particularly the opening sections of *The Christian Religion*—that it is simply not credible to suppose that Astell saw them as conflicting, nor is it credible to suppose that she hadn't considered the matter. As Hilda Smith puts it, 'Astell's work... was filled with a series of seemingly contradictory dyads, but ones not seen as such by her.'¹⁷ Astell sees such works as *A Lady's Religion* and *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation* as *simultaneously* undermining women's intellectual autonomy *and* the authority of 'lawful governors in church and state.' In response, she promises a unified defence of both.

Jacqueline Broad¹⁸ has recently argued that when Astell's writings are read against the backdrop of Christian Stoic ideas found in popular women's devotional manuals of the period we can see how Astell could regard obedience to authority as itself an expression of autonomy. According to Broad,

Astell affirms that an agent is truly autonomous when her choices and actions are motivated by a positive conception of the self, or when she lives her life in accordance with the beliefs and values of her enduring self. In her view, an agent can (and should) exercise her autonomy when choosing to render passive obedience to any religious authority. Astell's viewpoint thus challenges the idea that self-government and obedient submission are somehow mutually ex-

14. Cf. [Mary Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II: Wherein a Method is offer'd for the Improvement of their Minds* (London: Richard Wilkin, 1697), 51–54.

15. Joan K. Kinnaird, "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism," *Journal of British Studies* 19 (1 1979): 53–75; Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England 1680–1714* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), ch. 6; Springborg, *Mary Astell*; Sarah Apetrei, "'Call No Man Master Upon Earth': Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and an Unknown Correspondence," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 4 (2008): 507–523; Apetrei, *Feminism and Religion*, 150–152.

16. E.g., Apetrei, "Call No Man Master."

17. Smith, "Astell's Christian Feminism," 306.

18. Broad, "Selfhood and Self-Government."

clusive; an agent can be both autonomous and yet act in obedience to the dictates of the church.¹⁹

Broad's central point here is, I think, correct: Astell holds that obedience to authorities one takes to be legitimate can be an expression of one's own beliefs and values. As a result, autonomy or self-government is compatible with obedience. However, there is a deeper puzzle here which Broad has not addressed. Broad refers to the autonomy of 'choices and actions' and to the agent 'act[ing] in obedience to the dictates of the church.' Yet the discussion in §§3–5 of *The Christian Religion* is a discussion of religious *belief*. Astell certainly agrees with many other religious thinkers that religion aims ultimately at the production of virtue (TCR, §64). Nevertheless, she would not want to minimize the doctrinal component of religion, and she explicitly affirms that Christian *doctrine* is built on authority (TCR, §§6, 120).

In Astell's lifetime, as also today, the idea of *believing* on the basis of authority was widely thought to be far more problematic than *acting* on the basis of authority.²⁰ As Astell herself wrote, 'tho' the Order of the World requires an *Outward* Respect and Obedience from some to others, yet the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the Reach of the most absolute Tyrant'.²¹ However, in the opening sections of *The Christian Religion*, Astell proposes to defend *belief* on the basis of authority. How can this be rendered consistent with her insistence that '*Everyone must judge for themselves*' (TCR, §3)?

Astell endorses a form of doxastic voluntarism, the view that it is sometimes possible to believe (or disbelieve) at will. This view was not uncommon in the period. Descartes, for instance, holds that assent is always an act of the will (CSM, 2:39–41). Although Astell remains neutral on Descartes's general view about the roles of will and understanding in judgment ([Astell], *Serious Proposal II*, 101), she holds quite explicitly that '[religious] Faith has a mixture of the Will' ([Astell], *Serious Proposal II*, 82).²² There is a specific theological motivation for voluntarism about religious faith. According to traditional

19. Broad, "Selfhood and Self-Government," 727.

20. Among Astell's contemporaries, see John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration*, in *Political Writings*, ed. David Gauthier, trans. William Popple (1685; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 395; EHU, §§4.16.4, 4.20.17; John Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious: Or, a Treatise Shewing, That There is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine Can be Properly Call'd a Mystery*, 2nd ed. (London: Sam. Buckley, 1696), 16–24, 38–43, 137–138; Edward Synge, *A Plain and Easy Method, Whereby a Man of a Moderate Capacity May arrive at Full Satisfaction In all things that concern his Everlasting Salvation: To which is added, A Paraphrase on St. Athanasius's Creed*, 2nd ed. (1715; London: Thomas Trye, 1737), §§21–22, 40–43. Within recent analytic philosophy, McMyler (*Testimony*, ch. 5) and Zagzebski (*Epistemic Authority*, ch. 1) both see epistemic authority as in need of special defence, beyond the many well-known defences of practical authority. One reason for this is that a reason for believing something must be a reason to think that it is true, but it is hard to see how the command of an authority could be a reason for thinking something is true. Another reason is that belief is often thought to be involuntary. As we will see below, however, Astell herself holds that belief can at least sometimes be voluntary, and this is one of her key differences from Masham.

21. [Mary Astell], *Some Reflections upon Marriage: Occasion'd by the Duke & Duchess of Mazarine's Case*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (1700; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56; cf. TCR, §249.

22. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between will and understanding in Astell's philosophy, see Sowaal, "Mary Astell's Serious Proposal."

Christian doctrine, faith is a virtue (see, e.g., [ST](#), II-IIq4a5) and lack of faith is sinful. But virtue and sin depend on the will. Hence, faith—which is or involves a kind of belief—must depend on the will ([Astell], *Serious Proposal II*, 82; cf. [ST](#), II-IIq2a9).

Additionally, many Anglicans who, like Astell,²³ opposed efforts toward more expansive toleration of religious dissent wanted to claim that there was a moral and legal obligation to adhere (sincerely) to the established church. But such (sincere) adherence involves belief, and one cannot be obligated to what does not depend on one's will. Hence, at least some belief is voluntary. This is among the reasons for doxastic voluntarism—and specifically voluntarism about religious faith—given by Astell's contemporary Peter Browne.²⁴

If one can believe at will, then one can believe on command. But *should* one ever believe on command? Further, how could such belief be consistent with judging for oneself?

Astell writes,

though reason will never permit me to submit to any mere human authority, yet there is not anything more reasonable than to submit entirely to that authority, which I find upon a strict enquiry, has all the evidences that reason can ask, to prove that it is divine. ([TCR](#), §6)

As a Tory, Astell takes quite seriously the saying of St Paul, 'there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God' (Romans 13:1–2, KJV). The 'lawful governors in church and state,' according to Astell, exercise divine authority, and must therefore be obeyed. As we have seen, Astell thinks that belief can be commanded, and the discussion of obedience to authorities in the opening sections of *The Christian Religion* takes place in the context of a discussion of religious belief. Thus, Astell apparently takes (at least some) commands to believe to be among the commands of lawful authorities to which we must submit.

But could an individual possess *epistemic* authority—could we have a duty to *believe* that person—simply in virtue of being authorized by law, without regard to knowledge or expertise or honesty? Astell answers in the affirmative:

if . . . any point in controversy be too difficult for me. . . I will with all humility submit to God's authority in His church. Not to the man whom I may fancy or choose, for this were to follow my own way and not God's; but to him or them who shall have lawful authority over me. . . I will consult the bishop of the diocese in which I live, if it be a matter of great concern, but upon less occasions, the parish priest, to whom he has committed the cure of souls. For it is not

23. Mary Astell, *Moderation Truly Stated: Or, a Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitul'd, Moderation a Vertue* (London: Rich. Wilkin, 1704). For analysis of Astell's views on moderation, toleration, and the occasional conformity controversy, see Springborg, *Mary Astell*, ch. 5; Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, ch. 8.

24. Peter Browne, *A Letter in Answer to a Book Entitled Christianity not Mysterious* (Dublin: John North, 1697), 170–175; Peter Browne, *Faith Distinguished from Opinion and Science: In some REMARKS upon a Book lately Publish'd, By the Lord Bishop of Rapho* (1716); Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding*, 2nd ed. (London: William Innys, 1729), 235–255.

because a man talks finely in a pulpit, or has an agreeable way in private conversation that I depend on him; or because I think he is a man of learning; or which is better, of good sense; or which is best of all, of great integrity of mind, and of a holy and unblemished conversation, as well as of sound judgment; but in pure obedience to God, who has commanded me to “obey them who have the rule over me,” and who “watch,” or at least ought to watch, “for my soul” [Hebrews 13:17]. (TCR, §50)

The reference to a ‘point in controversy’ strongly suggests that we are, again, talking about submission in matters of belief here. Thus, Astell’s view is that the clergy possess *epistemic* authority simply in virtue of their institutional position, without regard to whether they possess ‘learning,’ ‘good sense,’ ‘integrity of mind,’ or ‘sound judgment.’ According to Astell, I must submit to my parish priest even if I judge him to be ignorant, corrupt, and foolish.

This is apt to strike us as absurd, particularly when it is applied to belief and not only to practice. However, Astell gives a specific reason for this surprising claim:

God never requires us to submit our judgments to our fellow creatures, except in cases wherein He makes them, and not us, answerable for the error and all its evil consequences (TCR, §3).

I will with all humility submit...to him or them who shall have lawful authority over me. For though they should happen to lead me into error, yet in this case they, and not I, must answer for it; as for me, I am safer in my obedience, than I could have been even with truth in a disorderly way. (TCR, §50)

The key concept here is *answerability*. Astell emphasizes the extent to which God will hold each individual—including each woman—accountable for her own beliefs (TCR, §3). In a certain range of cases, however, God has indeed appointed others to judge for us. These others, ‘to whom... has [been] committed the cure of souls’ (TCR, §50), are answerable for these judgments. It is for this reason that, under these circumstances, the layperson who errs obediently may in fact be ‘safer’ than the one who attains the truth ‘in a disorderly way.’

The talk about ‘error’ and ‘truth’ in §50 makes it clear that Astell is there speaking of epistemic authority. However, the account runs precisely parallel to her account of practical authority:

those in Authority [must] look on themselves as plac’d in their Station for the good and improvement of their Subjects, and not for their own Sakes; not as a Reward for their Merit, or that they may prosecute their own Desires and fulfil all their Pleasure, but as Representatives of GOD... he who Commands, has in a great measure the Faults of others to answer for as well as his own. ([Astell], *Reflections upon Marriage*, 56)

Genuine authorities—practical and epistemic—must be answerable for the faults of their subordinates.

This general approach is *not* obviously absurd, even by 21st century standards. It has recently been defended in detail by Benjamin McMyler.²⁵ According to McMyler, an epistemic authority assumes responsibility for a belief, in the sense that those who believe on his authority may defer challenges to him.²⁶ To use McMyler's example, if Alfred accepts a belief on Mary's authority, and the belief is challenged, Alfred may simply respond 'Don't ask me; Mary's the one who told me'.²⁷ Defending the belief against challenges is Mary's responsibility, not Alfred's. Further, on McMyler's account, if Alfred appropriately trusts Mary for a belief and that belief turns out to be false, Mary and not Alfred will be at fault.²⁸

What remains strange about Astell's position, however, is her view that people may possess this kind of authority in virtue of occupying an institutional position in church or state. Here too, however, Astell's position is internally coherent and contextually intelligible. According to Astell, 'God has instituted diverse orders [of clergy] in His church, giving to them different offices and powers' (TCR, §56). Astell argues that the system of episcopal polity (government by bishops) represents a divinely ordained mechanism whereby certain people are answerable for the spiritual well-being of Christian congregations (TCR, §§55–57).²⁹ When they exercise their proper authority and are appropriately obeyed by those under them, the clergy are answerable and the laypeople who defer to them are not.

Note that this is not *only* a matter of answerability 'before the judgment seat of Christ' in the afterlife (TCR, §3; quoting 2 Corinthians 5:10). As the government of the state is an earthly governing system subordinate to God, so also with the government of the church. Thus, it is the diocesan bishop who, acting on God's behalf, 'has committed the cure of souls' to the parish priest (TCR, §50). There are procedures for removing heretical or corrupt or immoral priests. Thus, the parish priest's answerability is earthly as well. It is because the clergy are answerable in this way, and can be held to account in this life and the next, that it is appropriate to defer to them.

25. McMyler, *Testimony*.

26. As Donald Rutherford helpfully pointed out to me, while McMyler likes to speak of an authority *assuming* responsibility, Astell is far more concerned with the way authorities are *held* responsible (answerable) by others, and especially by God. This contrast between Astell and McMyler helps to explain Astell's focus on institutional structures, a feature absent from McMyler's discussion.

27. McMyler, *Testimony*, 61.

28. On McMyler's view, trusting Mary for a belief is very much like (to use another example McMyler discusses at length) trusting Mary to pick up the kids today (McMyler, *Testimony*, ch. 4). Alfred trusts Mary to answer any challenges to the truth of the belief that may arise. This requires an ongoing relationship between Mary and Alfred whereby Mary undertakes this responsibility and gives Alfred the right to hold her to it (even if only by, e.g., feeling and expressing justified resentment if she fails, or not trusting her in the future if she fails). Typically, it will be reasonable for Alfred to enter into such a relationship only if he believes that Mary is willing and able to discharge this responsibility. As indicated above (note 26), McMyler is primarily interested in the way these relationships arise in informal social interactions, whereas Astell is interested primarily in relationships within hierarchical institutions. In Astell's view, these relationships may be *imposed* by such institutions, so that I find myself in them whether I like it or not. It is for this reason that they are independent of my judgment of the authority's trustworthiness. It is unclear whether McMyler allows for this kind of case. Nevertheless, the key commonality between McMyler and Astell is the view that an epistemic authority is a person who is responsible (answerable) for the truth of a proposition.

29. Also see Astell's remarks in Jacqueline Broad, ed., *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England: Selected Correspondence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 65–66.

In the *Serious Proposal*, Part II, Astell connects this idea with her more general Tory view that people are assigned by God to different stations in life:

unless we have very strange Notions of the Divine Wisdom we must needs allow that every one is placed in such a Station as they are fitted for. And if the necessity of the world requires that some Persons shou'd Labour for others, it likewise requires that others shou'd Think for them. ([Astell], *Serious Proposal II*, 206)

The general idea, again, is that some people are assigned by God to positions of special responsibility over others, and are answerable for how they conduct themselves in those positions. This applies as much to belief as to practice.

This interpretation can help us to understand Astell's response to *A Lady's Religion* and *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation*. These are both radical Protestant works that defend very strong versions of the right of individual judgment, and they are addressed to women. However, Astell alleges that the supposed defense of women's individual judgment in these works is disingenuous and predatory. While paying lip-service to the notion of individual judgment, the male authors set themselves up as judges to resolve women's religious quandaries. Further, they do so from behind a veil of anonymity, refusing to be answerable for the advice they give.³⁰ According to the Preface to the French translation of *A Lady's Religion*, included in English at the beginning of the edition Astell used, the aim of the book is 'to make it appear, that the Christian Religion ought to be levelled and accommodated to the reach of the meanest Capacity,' i.e., even to the supposedly inferior capacities of women.³¹ The conception of women's individual judgment in *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation* appears to extend only as far as women's right to choose their own (presumably male) spiritual guides.³² It is in this context that we must understand Astell's remark that 'a man never sets up himself to be anyone's oracle or director, but out of some selfish and base design' (TCR, §3). Later, Astell writes,

I know it is very frequently, but very sillily said, who shall judge of this agreement [between any teaching and the Word of God]? One great man says *this*, another *that*, and a third differs from them both, and a great many more from all these, and everyone of the number has his followers. What can a poor woman do but follow that opinion which is most in vogue? As if one were to tell [i.e.,

30. Indeed, according to Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 171, 'Mary Astell...thought that anonymous political pamphlets ought to be outlawed.' It seems unlikely that Astell went that far, seeing as her own writings were published anonymously. The text Perry cites ([Mary Astell], *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom: In an Examination of Dr. Kennet's Sermon, Jan. 31. 1703/4*, in *Political Writings*, 140) is better interpreted as a critique of esoteric writing. However, Astell certainly would not want her readers to treat anonymous writers as authorities and, indeed, Astell instructs her readers not to treat her as an authority (TCR, §3).

31. [William Stephens?], *A Lady's Religion: In a Letter to the Honourable My Lady Howard*, 2nd ed. (London: A. and J. Churchil, 1704), [4]. The 'French prefacer' was Pierre Cōste (Apetrei, *Feminism and Religion*, 124–125; Broad, *introduction to The Christian Religion*, 10–11). Cōste is best known for his French translation of Locke's *Essay*.

32. [William Stephens?], *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation Explain'd: In a Letter of Resolution Concerning Church-Communion* (London, 1704), 11.

count] noses to find out truth!... For sure she is to make as little use of her own judgment in choosing her guide, as in following him! (TCR, §44)

Astell's point in this section, and her more general opposition to 'private doctors and directors' (TCR, §49), is connected with a broader point about Astell's feminist thought which has recently been analysed by Allauren Forbes.³³ Astell identifies a distinctive form of epistemic injustice which Forbes dubs 'epistemic internalization injustice.' The force of social custom leads even women themselves to assign too much epistemic authority to men and too little to themselves.³⁴ This extends even as far as *first person* epistemic authority: custom prevents women from trusting themselves and other women to report their own beliefs and opinions. Through a process similar to, but distinct from, gaslighting,³⁵ women are prevented from taking themselves seriously as epistemic agents.

Forbes's analysis focuses on Astell's *Serious Proposal* and *Reflections upon Marriage*. Forbes does not discuss *The Christian Religion*. Nevertheless, this analysis makes excellent sense of Astell's remarks on improper reliance on spiritual guides in that text. According to Astell, not only men but women themselves are prone to ask, regarding serious theological and religious disputes, 'What can a poor woman do but follow that opinion which is most in vogue?' (TCR, §44) Bad custom has given women such a low opinion of themselves as epistemic agents that they think they are left either to 'tell noses' or to blindly follow a spiritual guide. But this position is absurd: 'If God had not intended that women should use their reason, He would not have given them any... If they are to use their reason, certainly it ought to be employed about the noblest objects, and in business of the greatest consequence, therefore in religion' (TCR, §5). Every human being, including every woman, must make use of her own reason in religion.

Nevertheless, Astell's intention is not to undermine religious authority in general. In a section headed, '*Judging for ourselves no prejudice to lawful authority*,' Astell writes,

How men who have *made themselves* our governors may like our withdrawing from their yoke I know not; but I am certain that this principle of judging for ourselves in all cases wherein God has left us this liberty, will introduce no disorder in the world, or disobedience to our *lawful* governors... The insinuations of those who have no right to be our directors, but who have only usurped an empire over our understandings, being one of the principal causes of our disobedience to lawful authority. (TCR, §46, emphases in original)

This distinction between 'men who have *made themselves* our governors' and '*lawful* governors' is crucial: Astell's aim is to defend the authority of the lawful clergy within their lawful domain, while attacking those men who would set themselves up as guides to women outside these structures of authority and answerability.

33. Forbes, "Bad Custom."

34. Forbes, "Bad Custom," 787–788.

35. Forbes, "Bad Custom," 794–795.

Astell's emphasis on *lawful* authority in church and state also resolves the contradiction Sarah Apetrei³⁶ finds between Astell's commitment to submission to clergy and her rejection of claims of clerical authority in her controversy with George Hickes.³⁷ As Apetrei³⁸ explicitly notes, Astell refused to recognize Hickes' status as a bishop given that he was consecrated by nonjurors³⁹ without the support of the state. Astell calls Hickes 'Mr. Dean',⁴⁰ giving him the title he possessed prior to the nonjuring schism.

Indeed, in the controversy with Hickes, Astell is quite clear that the duty of obedience and communion is owed to the lawfully constituted church in one's own country. Astell writes, 'I look upon an English Papist to be as much a Schismatick as a Presbyterian or other Dissenter is, but though an Italian should dissent from our Church I would not call him a Schismatick, any more than I would a Dane or a Swede'.⁴¹ It is, according to Astell, the duty of every Christian to obey the duly constituted spiritual and temporal authorities 'in all lawful things'.⁴² The duly constituted authorities are those supported by the state, and embedded within the proper structures of answerability. Thus, as Astell says in *The Christian Religion*, 'if the established national church where we reside, enjoins no terms of communion evidently sinful, it is our duty to join ourselves to her' (TCR, §51). The church which has divine authority over us is the *established national church*, i.e., the one backed by the state.

Because Hickes, as a nonjuror, stands outside this structure, Astell regards him as yet another self-appointed spiritual guide. Addressing the anonymous lady whose questions initiated the Astell-Hickes controversy, Astell includes Hickes among 'your Ladyship's Guides'.⁴³ It is, again, in the context of warning the lady against excessive reliance upon such unaccountable guides that Astell offers yet another defense of intellectual autonomy and individual judgment.⁴⁴ But this is, once again, connected with a defense of obedience to the lawful bishop. There is no conflict here: Astell supports obedience, including epistemic deference, to lawful authorities within their proper domain. She opposes adherence to unaccountable, self-appointed spiritual guides. Astell regards Hickes as belonging to the latter category. Thus, contrary to Apetrei,⁴⁵ there is nothing 'paradoxical' about the way Astell's 'distrust of "humane authority" dovetailed with her commitment to clerical establishment and institutional authority.' Because of the ways the established clergy are answerable to the state and to God, they—unlike the nonjuror Hickes—are not merely self-appointed human authorities.

How far does the lawful authority of the lawful clergy extend in matters of belief? Astell writes,

if through the sublimity of the subject, my ignorance of the sa-

36. Apetrei, "Call No Man Master."

37. The text of the controversy is included in Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England*, §1.2.

38. Apetrei, "Call No Man Master," 513.

39. Nonjurors were Anglican clergy who were removed from their positions because they refused to swear loyalty to King William following the Revolution of 1688–89.

40. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England*, 66.

41. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England*, 51.

42. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England*, 51.

43. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England*, 61.

44. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England*, 64–65.

45. Apetrei, *Feminism and Religion*, 118.

cred languages, of ecclesiastical history, and the ancient usage of the church, any point in controversy is too difficult for me, and after all my diligence I can't clear up the matter with evidence and certainty, but that all I can attain to is probabilities on both sides: if it is a matter in which a final decision is not necessary, I will suspend my judgment in hopes of further information; but if there is a necessity to determine, I will with all humility submit to God's authority in His church. (TCR, §50)

The circumstances in which Astell takes intellectual submission to be appropriate appear to be quite narrow, and she challenges women to use their intellect in determining who are the lawful authorities and when and how far submission to them is appropriate. In typical Anglican fashion, she limits this authority to doubtful or indifferent matters, and encourages women to judge for themselves whether church teachings are consistent with Scripture (TCR, §§43, 57).

In fact, *The Christian Religion* does not contain a single concrete example of Astell's own intellectual submission to the church. The reason for this is that Astell aims to show that the teaching of the Church of England is 'exactly agreeable' to what she can find for herself in Scripture (TCR, §57). Hence, by her own report, she does not find herself in the circumstance described. With respect to church doctrine, Astell finds herself in the happy position of one who independently judges all of the authority's commands to be good and right.

Nevertheless, Astell does maintain that religious 'mysteries' such as Christ's role as mediator, the union of the two natures (human and divine) in Christ, and the Trinity are to be believed on the divine authority of Scripture although limited human reason cannot understand them (TCR, §§59–66). As I have argued, Astell understands this kind of intellectual submission as obedience to a command. Astell herself does, then, adopt these beliefs out of obedience to the divine commands found in Scripture. Further, the conditions in which submission is appropriate are clearly relative to the individual. Hence, in Astell's view, there may be others who do need to practice intellectual submission within the Church of England—for instance, those who, unlike Astell, do not have sufficient knowledge of 'the ancient usage of the church' (TCR, §50) to discover for themselves 'that the same catholic tradition whereby the holy scriptures are conveyed to us, and proved to be what they pretend' teaches that God has ordained episcopal, rather than presbyterian, church government (TCR, §55).⁴⁶ Finally, recall that Astell holds that 'if the established national church *where we reside*, enjoins no terms of communion evidently sinful, it is our duty to join ourselves to her' (TCR, §51, emphasis added). Despite Astell's remarks about the flaws of the churches of Geneva and Amsterdam (TCR, §55), it seems reasonably clear that she does not regard their 'terms of communion' as 'evidently sinful'. However, these Calvinist churches have teachings regarding grace and free will that are far more specific and detailed than the teachings of the Church of England. Hence, an inhabitant of Amsterdam or Geneva might, in Astell's view, accept the Calvinist doctrines of grace with the kind of submission Astell describes.⁴⁷

46. Although a form of church government is itself a matter of practice, rather than belief, the view that episcopal government is uniquely ordained by God is a doctrine, and a controversial one.

47. Picking up on an example from *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation*, Astell in

Astell, then, really is a defender of the authority of the established church (in each country), and she really does extend that defence even to epistemic authority. However, her account of the circumstances in which epistemic deference is appropriate is highly restricted—so restricted that it is not clear whether she applies it to herself at all. Nevertheless, there is a consistent theory here, and it is a theory on which legitimate authorities—those that are answerable for their commands—may command belief, and their subjects must obey.

On a more general level, one may say that Astell’s feminist project is a project of freeing women from arbitrary authority usurped by men outside the (heavenly and earthly) institutional structures that make those who wield authority answerable for their commands. Astell’s Toryism means that she is a staunch defender of these inherently hierarchical institutional structures. Part of her reason for defending this hierarchy is her belief that when power is exercised outside these structures, people (and particularly women) find themselves subjected to others who are not answerable for their well-being. If we were to sum up Astell’s idea in a slogan, it would be: *no authority without answerability*.⁴⁸ Astell sees this dynamic in play just as much in belief as in practice: if I am to accept a belief on the authority of another, that other must be answerable for the truth of the belief and also for its practical consequences.

2 Women’s Individual Judgment in Masham’s *Occasional Thoughts*

Masham’s *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* is concerned, as the title suggests, with virtue and religion, and particularly the relationship between them. Her arguments on this topic stake out a radical position against the kind of intellectual submission advocated by Astell. Masham begins from the assumption that proper religious belief must be a stable principle of virtuous action. She then argues that religious belief can play this role only if it is produced by the exercise of one’s own reason.

According to Masham, ‘the great Foundation of both [virtue and wisdom] consists in being able to govern our Passions, and subject our Appetites to the direction of our Reason’ (OT, 177). Virtue, therefore, is not mere ‘Innocency’ (refraining from bad actions) nor is it ‘a partial Practice of Actions praiseworthy’ (OT, 11). Rather, whether an action or omission is virtuous depends on the inward principle from which it derives. Virtuous action is governed by ‘the Law of Reason, or Nature, that is to say, . . . [by] Those dictates which are the result of the determinate and unchangeable Constitutions of things’ (OT, 54).⁴⁹

In giving an account of this law and our discovery of it, Masham combines

these sections imagines herself as an African convert to Christianity travelling all over Europe in search of the purest form of Christianity, and ultimately leaving Geneva for England. However, she is clearly under no illusion that every believer will be able to do this, and her principle of submission is unambiguously applied to the established church of one’s own country, not the purest church in existence.

48. The absence of earthly answerability for husbands is also a theme in Astell’s critique of ‘private Tyranny’ (p. 47) in the *Reflections upon Marriage*. For analysis of Astell’s critique of private tyranny, see Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 150–169; Weil, *Political Passions*, ch. 6; Weiss, “Mary Astell”; Springborg, *Mary Astell*, ch. 3; Broad, “Mary Astell on Marriage and Lockean Slavery”; Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, ch. 7.

49. For detailed discussion, see Lascano, “Law of Reason,” §3.

empiricism with hedonism. According to Masham, ‘happiness consists in pleasure’ (OT, 74). We must, nevertheless, follow reason and not our present appetite because reason is ‘that Faculty in [us] which, in reference to the different properties and relations discernable in Things, can alone be the Judge what will, in the whole, procure to [us] the most pleasure’ (OT, 76). Masham concludes on this basis that ‘the Law of Reason... enjoyns us *only* a right regulation of our natural desire of pleasure... so that there is an inseparable connection, or relation of Moral Good and Evil, with our Natural Good [i.e., pleasure], and Evil [i.e., pain]’ (OT, 77–78, emphasis added).⁵⁰ It is because of this ‘inseparable connection’ between moral good and evil, on the one hand, and pleasure and pain, on the other, that the moral law can be discovered in experience. Virtue, according to Masham, is not mere accidental conformity to this law, but the intentional following of it, that is, the pursuit of pleasure properly regulated by reason.

According to Masham, ‘*Religion* has... been rightly defin’d to be *the knowledge how to please God*’ (OT, 84).⁵¹ But virtue is certainly what pleases God. This idea, according to Masham, is the fundamental principle needed for moral motivation:

Religion... [is] the only sufficient ground or solid support of Vertue; For the belief of a Superior, Omnipotent Being, inspecting our Actions, and who will Reward and Punish us accordingly, is in all Men’s Apprehensions the strangest [i.e., most powerful], and in truth the only stable and irresistible Argument for submitting our Desires to a constant Regulation, wherein it is that Vertue does consist. (OT, 14–15)⁵²

There is, however, a problem: ‘how much soever a Man is perswaded of the Authority of any Rule, a strong Passion, or apparent Interest may yet seduce him from the Obedience due to its prescriptions’ (OT, 148; cf. 86–87). Reason itself teaches us ‘that the Law of Reason is the Law of God,’ but it does not provide us with ‘an explicite knowledge of the penalty incur’d by the breach of that Law’ (OT, 103). This uncertainty creates two difficulties for mere natural religion (i.e., the attempt to please God apart from special revelation, such as that supposedly found in the Bible). On the one hand, in the moment of temptation, a person who is uncertain of the penalty for breaking God’s law cannot be sure ‘that the incurring of this penalty shall (in all cases) make the preference of breaking this Law, an ill Bargain’ (OT, 103–104).⁵³ On the other

50. See Lascano, “Law of Reason,” 254–255.

51. An account of religion as a kind of know-how has recently been defended by Terence Cuneo, “Ritual Knowledge,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (2014): 365–385.

52. Cf. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. J. W. Yolton and J. S. Yolton, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (1692; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), §136.

53. There is a difficulty for Masham’s theory at this point. According to Masham, virtue just is the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain properly regulated by reason, and God only commands what is *already* virtuous (prior to God’s command). Hence, prior to any rewards or punishments from God, breaking the law ought already, by definition, to be ‘an ill Bargain’—that is, it ought to lead to an unfavorable balance of pleasure and pain.

There are (at least) two possible solutions to this problem. First, in the *Discourse Concerning the Love of God*, Masham emphasizes the importance of ‘proportion[ing] our Desire to the worth of things’ ([Damaris Cudworth Masham], *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* [London: Awneham and John Churchil, 1696], 52–53). Further, Masham in that work

hand, *after* giving in to temptation, a person will naturally fear the unknown punishment and therefore look for ways to ‘appease [God’s] Anger, and avert the effects of his Wrath’ (OT, 89), which is the origin of human inventions in religion. It frequently happens that these human inventions are *too* successful, and people become convinced that religious ritual can serve as a substitute for virtue (OT, 87–96).

It was therefore appropriate for God to reveal what the punishments for sin and rewards for virtue might be and the circumstances (if any) in which God might graciously refrain from punishing sin (OT, 103–110).

So much, according to Masham, is apparent to natural human reason. The next question concerns what God has in fact revealed. In traditional Protestant fashion,⁵⁴ Masham divides the Christian revelation into two parts. The first consists in ‘The Revelation of an Eternal Life after this, with an express Declaration of Everlasting Rewards and Punishments annex’d to our Obedience or Disobedience, to the Law of Nature’ (OT, 105). The second part of the Christian revelation states that ‘Christ came to establish betwixt God and Man, a Covenant of Grace. . . [whereby] as many as believe in his Son, taking him for their King, and submitting to his Law, God would grant remission of their Sins; and that this *their Faith should be imputed to them for Righteousness* [see Romans 4]’ (OT, 115–116).

The word ‘this’ in Masham’s phrase ‘this their faith’ apparently refers back to the *entirety* of what she has just described. That is, according to Masham, faith consists in believing in Christ, accepting him as king, and submitting to his law. This move—which can also be found in earlier Anglican divines such as Edward Fowler⁵⁵—is, according to Masham, crucial for the doctrine of salvation by faith to play the role in moral motivation that it is intended to play.⁵⁶ What the doctrine of salvation by faith amounts to, on this reading of ‘faith’, is

says that loving a thing is the same as taking pleasure in the being of that thing ([Masham], *Discourse*, 18), yet she goes on to talk at some length about the question of what makes a person or thing ‘lovely’, i.e., an appropriate object of love ([Masham], *Discourse*, 53–69). This suggests that Masham’s moral theory might be based, not merely on pleasure as such, but on taking pleasure in appropriately ‘lovely’ objects.

Alternatively, Masham might hold that good actions are those that *naturally tend* toward pleasure, and bad actions naturally tend toward pain, and we may be tempted because we predict that a particular case might be an exception to this general tendency. (I thank Marcy Lascano for this suggestion.) If this was Masham’s view, she would anticipate George Berkeley, *Passive Obedience*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (1712; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–57), §§10–13.

Finally, these two strategies could be combined if Masham thought that what was objectively ‘lovely’ was what naturally tended in the long term toward the production of naturally pleasant sensations.

54. See Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. Mark D. Tranvik (1520; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 57–59.

55. [Edward Fowler], *The Principles and Practices of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England, Abusively called Latitudinarians (Greatly Mis-Understood) Truly Represented and Defended: Wherein (by the way) some Controversies of no mean Importance, are Succinctly Discussed*, 2nd ed. (London: Lodewick Lloyd, 1671), 114–116, 156–158.

56. It is debatable whether this account of the covenant of grace differs substantively, or only verbally, from Locke’s account. According to Locke (*Reasonableness*, 167–169), the covenant of grace requires faith *and* repentance, where repentance includes resolving to obey Christ’s law for the future. Including repentance as part of faith, rather than distinguishing the two as Locke does, enables Fowler and Masham to claim that their view is consistent with the traditional Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone ([Fowler], *Principles*, 180–190; OT, 116–120, 137–142). Locke apparently rejects this doctrine by requiring both faith and repentance.

that if we sincerely repent of our Sins past, and endeavour for the time to come, to obey the Law of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, which is no other than the Law of Reason, or the eternal Rule of Right, we need not despair of God's Mercy from the Imperfection of our Obedience; since he will for the sake of his Son, pardon their Sins who believe in him: Sincere endeavours after perfect Righteousness being accepted in those who believe in Christ as if they attained it, which is call'd, *the Righteousness of Faith*. (OT, 118; cf. [Fowler], *Principles*, 126–127; Locke, *Reasonableness*, 99–100, 174)

This understanding of faith blocks that perversion of religion whereby 'Men. . . have effectually been perswaded that they might render themselves acceptable to God without endeavouring sincerely to obey the. . . Law given them by God' (OT, 89–90).

Virtue, then, according to Masham, is the right regulation of our desires by reason. Natural religion consists in the belief that such regulation is commanded by God. Revealed religion makes up for the deficiencies of natural religion by providing us with information about rewards and punishments in an afterlife and about the possibility of forgiveness. However, what religion, whether natural or revealed, commands us to *do* is just the same thing that the law of reason told us to do all along: 'the prescriptions of right Reason, [and] of the Gospel. . . are but one, and the same, differently promulg'd' (OT, 98; cf. [Masham], *Discourse*, 52–53; [Fowler], *Principles*, 71–73; Locke, *Reasonableness*, 96).

With this general picture in place, our next question is: what kind of belief in these religious doctrines could play the specified role in moral motivation?

According to Masham, it is clearly observable that the kind of religious belief prevalent among Anglicans in her time does not adequately serve the needs of moral motivation. In diagnosing the failings of Anglicanism in her time, Masham examines the ways in which religious belief is formed and maintained in her community and argues that beliefs formed and maintained in these ways could not possibly serve as a principle of virtue.

Masham says that the most common form of early childhood religious education consists in requiring children to memorize catechisms full of words they don't understand and discouraging them from asking too many questions. Although Anglicans purport to be 'Protestants, whose Birth-right is not blindly to *Believe* but to *Examine their Religion*' (OT, 171), most Anglican parents instead behave like 'the good Lady of the Church of Rome [who] instructed her Child; [and] who when the girl told her, she *could not believe Transubstantiation*; Reply'd *What? do you not believe Transubstantiation? You are a naughty Girl, and must be whip'd*' (OT, 39).⁵⁷

57. The girl's claim that she *can't* believe in transubstantiation is suggestive of a line of argument found in Locke (*A Letter concerning Toleration*, 395) and a number of other Anglican writers of the period that commanding belief and punishing disbelief is tyrannical because belief and disbelief are not under the control of the will. See, e.g., William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation: Or An Answer to a Booke Entitled Mercy and Truth, Or, Charity Maintain'd by Catholiques, Which Pretends to Prove the Contrary* (Oxford: Leonard Lichfield, 1638), 328–330; [Fowler], *Principles*, 309–315; Syngé, *Plain and Easy Method*, §§21–22, 40–43. (As noted above, the premise that belief is not under the control of the will was often rejected by Anglican opponents of toleration, including Mary Astell and Peter Browne.) That Masham has this line of argument in mind is further suggested by her claim that this kind of coercive approach cannot produce genuine belief but only verbal repetition (OT, 39–40). However, she does not develop this point explicitly in *Occasional*

After the children have had the correct answers to the catechism questions (literally or figuratively) beaten into them, parents think it is sufficient to provide them with lists of arbitrary-looking moral rules that are said to come from God (OT, 162–163).

Many people who have undergone this kind of moral and religious education end up in atheism or religious skepticism (OT, 35–40). They assume, since their parents and teachers were so violently opposed to any questioning of religious dogma, that these dogmas cannot stand up to rational scrutiny.⁵⁸

Those who continue to conform are no better off. In the first place ‘beliefs’ (so-called) formed in this way may turn out to be nothing but empty words which have no motivational force whatsoever (OT, 39–40, 133–134).⁵⁹ Where there is genuine belief, it will be tenuous at best, and will not be the kind of firm conviction that can stand in the face of temptation (OT, 13).⁶⁰

Worst of all, though, such belief, not being based in reason, can never result in virtue. A virtuous agent is one whose pursuit of pleasure is regulated by reason. A person who unthinkingly conforms to the prevailing religion because she was beaten when she attempted to think for herself is not governed by the law of reason.⁶¹

What law *is* followed by the person who continues in unthinking conformity after the fear of beatings has ceased? Masham sarcastically calls it ‘the Sacred Law of Fashion’ (OT, 152; cf. [Astell], *Serious Proposal*, 31–32; Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 211–213). According to Masham, ‘The Law of Fashion, establish’d by Repute and Disrepute, is to most People the powerfulest of all Laws’ (OT, 202). Although Masham is also concerned to oppose religious coercion by the state,⁶² when she examines her own context she finds coercion by social pressure to be a more pressing threat to autonomy than open persecution.

Masham argues at some length that, by observing which actions are approved and which condemned, one can find that among her fellow upper-class Anglicans ‘there are measures of living establish’d by Men themselves according to a conformity or disconformity with which, and not with the Precepts of Jesus Christ, their Actions are measur’d & judg’d of’ (OT, 155). One can tell that these people are governed by the Law of Fashion because when the Law of Fashion conflicts with the Law of Christ (which, according to Masham, is the same as the Law of Reason), fashion wins every time (OT, 149–156). This, according to Masham, is an unavoidable result of the fact that people are taught from early childhood, under threat of punishment, to accept unquestioningly the religious beliefs and rules of action endorsed by their society.

Masham’s book, like Astell’s, is framed as a response to an anonymous man offering moral and religious advice to women. Masham tells us that the ‘oc-

Thoughts, offering other reasons against religious coercion instead. See Broad, “Masham on Liberty,” 328–331.

58. See Broad, “Masham on Liberty,” 330–331.

59. Cf. Toland, *Christianity not Mysteriorious*, 29–30: ‘what I don’t conceive can no more give me right Notions of God, or influence my Actions, than a Prayer deliver’d in an unknown Tongue can excite my Devotion’ (see 1 Corinthians 14:4–9).

60. Cf. [Astell], *Serious Proposal*, 30–35; Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris: Wherein his late Discourse, shewing That it ought to be intire and exclusive of all other loves, is further cleared and justified* (London: Samuel Manship, 1695), 211–213.

61. That corporal punishment is not an effective means of producing stable principles of virtue is also a theme in Locke’s *Thoughts on Education*. See Locke, *Education*, §§47–52.

62. Broad, “Masham on Liberty.”

casation' of *Occasional Thoughts* was a discussion among several women of the 1677 work *Les Conseils d'Ariste a Celimene sur les Moyens de Conserver sa Reputacion* [*Ariste's Advice to Celimene concerning the Means of Preserving Her Reputation*] (OT, 9). This book is now known to have been written by François Aubignac.⁶³ Like Astell, Masham is concerned with the ways in which men—especially those who set themselves up as 'spiritual directors' to particular women—abuse their position for their own benefit (TCR, §§3, 46; OT, 163–164). Also like Astell, Masham emphasizes that women are particularly vulnerable to coming under the irrational control of the 'Law of Fashion' because of the devastating social consequences, to women in particular, of being thought 'singular' (TCR, §§45, 48; OT, 197–203).⁶⁴ As Astell explains, 'men have twenty ways of retrieving their characters [i.e., reputations], whereas if a woman's is once sullied by any sort of folly, by the appearance, or suspicion of it, there's no way to recover its first luster' (TCR, §282). But the world considers anything out of the ordinary—including the improvement of one's intellect—to be folly in a woman (TCR, §283; OT, 197–199).

In this way, Astell and Masham can be seen as offering very similar diagnoses of the oppressive conditions that prevent women from using their reason, especially about matters of religion. However their responses to this problem differ dramatically. According to Astell, to be free from this kind of arbitrary domination by self-appointed guides, one must voluntarily submit oneself to *lawful* authorities who are answerable, in this life and the next, for their guidance. The domain of these lawful authorities is limited. For the most part, God has given us authority over our own beliefs, and where this is the case we ourselves are answerable for how we exercise that authority. We therefore have a duty to cultivate our reason and to exercise our own responsible judgment in many religious matters. Yet, according to Astell, just as anarchy is not the condition of true liberty, so also in matters of belief obedience to authority has its place.

Masham recognizes no such authority in matters of belief. All parties to this debate agree that parents have lawful authority over their children, yet Masham is adamant that parents may not demand unquestioning assent from even the youngest children (OT, 39–50).⁶⁵ Masham insists that

It is as undeniable as the difference between Men's being in, and out of their Wits, that Reason ought to be to Rational Creatures the Guide of their Belief: That is to say, That their Assent to any thing, ought to be govern'd by the proof of its Truth, whereof Reason is the Judge; be it either Argument, or Authority, for in both Cases Reason must determine our Assent according to the validity of the Ground it finds it Build on. (OT, 32–33; cf. EHU, §4.19.14)

Astell would not disagree with the idea that reason must judge the 'validity' of claims to authority. Nor does Masham mean to reject the notion of belief on the basis of testimony entirely. However, even when it comes to the testimony of God, according to Masham, we assent only because 'we know that God can

63. Hutton, "Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham," 36.

64. Indeed, it has been suggested that this part of Masham's *Occasional Thoughts* may be drawing on Astell's *Serious Proposal* (Wilson, "Love of God," 282, 291).

65. See Broad, "Masham on Liberty," 331–332. Cf. Locke (*Education*, §54): 'I advise their Parents and Governors always to carry this in their Minds, that Children are to be treated as rational Creatures.' Also see Locke, *Education*, §§81, 118–122.

neither Deceive, nor be Deceived' (OT, 34; cf. EHU, §4.19.11), and not because of God's right to command. Thus, although Masham says that 'if it appears that such a Proposition was truly reveal'd by God, nothing can be more Rational than to believe it' (OT, 34), and that 'Scripture-Authority, is that to which Reason may safely refer it self' ([Masham], *Discourse*, 83), nevertheless the claim that a proposition is revealed by God serves simply as a premise in a rational argument for the truth of that proposition.⁶⁶ In other words, Masham, like Locke, adopts an evidence model of testimony.⁶⁷ On such a view, to regard someone as an epistemic authority is nothing more, and nothing less, than to judge that that person is unlikely to 'deceive or be deceived'. Even God does not have authority to command us to believe.

Where Astell's interpersonal model of epistemic authority served to reconcile her feminist aims with her endorsement of clerical authority, Masham's evidence model is employed in the service of a strong form of anti-clericalism. Masham's account of the role of 'priestcraft' in false religion (OT, 87–97) and in corrupt forms of Christianity (OT, 122–128) could easily have been lifted out of a religious radical like John Toland.⁶⁸ Further, according to Masham, in every society there is a minority who follow reason rather than customary practices and opinions, and these people are unfairly vilified as atheists (OT, 96–97; cf. TIS, 111–113). She does not exempt her own culture from this generalization. Instead, she complains that the Anglican clergy, though paying lipservice to the idea that religion is a rational institution for the promotion of virtue, have in fact promoted orthodoxy with respect to useless speculations at the expense of reason and virtue (OT, 128–131).⁶⁹

Near the end of the book, Masham gives an account of the kind of relationship an educated and rational lady in the country is likely to have with the local clergy. A reader with knowledge of the author's identity can hardly escape the suspicion that this is autobiographical:

in the Country...[an educated and rational lady's] understanding of the Christian Religion would go near to render her suspected of Heresy even by those who thought the best of her: Whilst her little Zeal for any Sect or Party would make the Clergy of all sorts give her out for a *Socinian*, or a *Deist*: And should but a very little Philosophy be added to her other Knowledge, even for an Atheist. The Parson of the Parish, for fear of being ask'd hard Questions, would be shy of coming near her, be his Reception ever so inviting; and this could not but carry some ill intimation with it to such as Reverenc'd the Doctor. (OT, 199–200, corrected from Masham's errata)

Masham suggests here that accusations of heresy, Socinianism, deism, or even

66. Cf. [Fowler], *Principles*, 46–47, 56–61, 74; EHU, §§4.18.10, 4.19.14.

67. McMyler (*Testimony*, 24–31) treats Locke's *Essay* as the *locus classicus* for the evidence model. For a more nuanced scholarly account of Locke's epistemology of testimony, see Joseph Shieber, "Locke on Testimony: A Reexamination," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2009): 21–41.

68. See, e.g., Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 151–169.

69. Cf. [Masham], *Discourse*, 2–3. In her correspondence with the Dutch Remonstrant (Arminian) divines Philippus van Limborch and Jean Le Clerc, Masham offers further criticism of such attitudes among the clergy and reports that her father, Ralph Cudworth, regretted having once behaved in this way (Broad, "Masham on Liberty," 235).

atheism are not to be taken too seriously, even if they come from duly authorized clergy.

Masham's view that these labels must be disregarded is a direct consequence of her argument about the nature of properly efficacious religious belief. These odious labels are tools of social pressure for enforcing conformity. But Masham has argued that religious belief formed and sustained under coercion cannot have the kind of motivational force characteristic of true religion. This is true whether we are thinking of coercion by the discipline (or abuse) of parents, by threat of legal penalties from the state, or simply by the 'Repute and Disrepute' that establish the 'Law of Fashion' (OT, 202). Masham's radical conclusion is that any attempt to enforce standards of orthodoxy, even if only by social pressure, is ultimately destructive of true religion.

3 Conclusion

Astell and Masham both sought to defend women's use of individual judgment in religion. Both sought, in particular, to warn women against manipulation by self-appointed (male) spiritual directors. However, they began from different religious perspectives, which took different views of the role of the clergy in the formation of religious belief. For Astell, the key difference between the clergy of the established church and self-appointed spiritual directors is that the clergy are answerable for their teachings, in this life and the next. For this reason, according to Astell, trusting the established clergy is in fact safer than trusting guides of one's own choosing. This amounts, in our terms, to an interpersonal conception of epistemic authority.

Masham, on the other hand, sees no important difference between clergy authorized by the state and self-appointed guides. The power the clergy now have stems from a 'Spirit of Imposition and Persecution' whereby they long ago corrupted Christianity and seized control of the state (OT, 126).⁷⁰ It is a mistake, Masham insists, to think that 'those Tragedies [are] now at an end; or the Reformed part of Christendom [has] no share in the Guilt' (OT, 126–127). For Masham, epistemic authority can have nothing to do with practical authority and the kind of belief characteristic of true religion cannot be commanded. Virtue and religion require that we disregard the pressures exerted on us by family, community, church, and state in order to follow reason, and reason alone.⁷¹

Abbreviations

CSM Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91.

EHU Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. 1690. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

70. Cf. John Toland, *Tetradyms* (London, 1720), 133–136.

71. For very helpful comments on previous drafts, I thank Jacqueline Broad, Marcy Lascano, Allairen Forbes, Donald Rutherford, and several anonymous referees.

- OT** [Masham, Damaris Cudworth]. *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life*. London: A. and J. Churchil, 1705.
- ST** Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Laurence Shapcote. Revised by The Aquinas Institute. 8 vols. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2018. <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I>.
- TCR** Astell, Mary. *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*. Edited by Jacqueline Broad. *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series 24*. 1705. Toronto: Iter Inc. / Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013.
- TIS** Cudworth, Ralph. *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part, Wherein, All the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted; and Its Impossibility Demonstrated*. London: Richard Royston, 1678.