

Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss, editors

Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell

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There are a number of (nonexclusive) ways to do feminist history of philosophy. One approach is to look to the history of philosophy for texts and conceptual frameworks that either implicitly or explicitly support feminist insights. Another approach is to revisit the philosophical canon with an eye toward its expansion, both in terms of figures and in terms of texts.ⁱ In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, we find a welcome example of these two approaches beginning to converge. On the one hand, the volume is part of the "Re-Reading the Canon" series--a series that sees itself as taking the first approach, by "offer[ing] feminist analyses of the theories of a selected philosopher" (x). Indeed, the series takes itself to be focusing on feminist analyses of *canonical* philosophers and texts--as the series editor writes, "it is not my intention to rectify the current canon of philosophical thought" (x). This suggests that we should not expect to find in it instances of the second approach, of revisiting and expanding the canon. And yet, in this case, the focus of "feminist interpretation" is Mary Astell, a seventeenth-century philosopher who is perhaps best known for her work *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, a treatise that appeals to a Cartesian understanding of reason as essentially unsexed to motivate a philosophical justification for the education of women. Thus the volume immediately sets itself apart from some of the other offerings in the series in two ways: first, insofar as its subject, Astell, is clearly engaged in something like a feminist project herself, and second, insofar as she is by no means (yet) a canonical figure in early modern philosophy. As Penny Weiss, one of the volume's editors, writes: "[t]wenty years ago, this volume on Astell was almost inconceivable--witness the paucity of references . . . to secondary works before then" (2).ⁱⁱ That we have come to a point where it is possible to offer a set of substantive essays concerning the works of a noncanonical early modern philosopher speaks to the hard work that feminist historians of philosophy have been engaged in for the past number of years. Indeed, it is a major strength of this volume that it takes seriously the work of an early modern woman both as a possible subject for feminist consideration and analysis, and also as a philosopher of note in her own right.

The overall strategy in this volume is to place early modern and contemporary feminisms in dialogue with one another: as Weiss puts it in her introduction, the volume addresses primarily the question of "how contemporary feminist theory can help us understand earlier feminisms, and, reversing the roles, what we today can learn from thinkers like Astell" (2). That Astell herself can be thought of as offering a feminist philosophy, as I mentioned, in part differentiates this volume from some of the others in the "feminist interpretations" series, in which commentators are sometimes called upon to confront, and explain--or explain away--some of the

negative views that canonical philosophers expressed regarding the nature or role of women. But this is not to say that Astell's work is straightforwardly unproblematic from a feminist point of view. Indeed, one of the recurring themes of this volume is an attempt to address and resolve or at least accommodate the tension between Astell's, on the one hand, commitment to a radical Cartesian egalitarianism with respect to the rational capacities of men and women, and her, on the other hand, support of the view that women should submit to their husbands in marriage. The initial essays in the volume largely attempt to address this by shifting away from thinking of feminism as the promotion of social or political equality and focusing instead on Astell's promoting and developing what we might think of as *internal* equality, that is, equality of intellect or of moral character. Thus, for instance, Jacqueline Broad argues, in her contribution to the volume, that Astell's development of Aristotelian views about virtue constitutes a "challenge [to] those moral theorists [including Aristotle] who regard women as inferior in terms of their moral status and their capacity for practical judgment" (31), and Alice Sowaal provides a reading of Astell as a philosophical optimist about human nature whose special interest is in undermining accounts of women's nature as particularly "evil because it is vice-ridden" (57). But whereas some of these initial essays focus on Astell's account of the moral virtues--with the virtues of friendship and generosity commanding special attention in more than one essay--Karen Detlefsen's contribution attempts to accommodate the tension between Astell's Cartesianism and her views on marriage by focusing on Astell's account of women's intellectual character. Detlefsen's essay (to my mind, one of the most illuminating of the volume) begins by drawing out some of the ways in which Astell adheres to classic Cartesian ontological and epistemological commitments, before elucidating Astell's view that women's rational capacity--grounded in divine creation, and directed toward the end of serving God--motivates an argument for women's education. Detlefsen pays careful attention to Astell's insistence that this education "should occur in . . . a women-only educational institution" (79), focusing on how friendship among women can help to foster the development of women's rationality; this account of friendship then plays the role, in the latter parts of the essay, of showing how Astell's view of intellectual freedom--while grounded in the Cartesian conception of freedom as autonomous--nonetheless deviates from the Cartesian account insofar as it stresses the ways in which our relationships can help to foster this autonomy. In the best case, Detlefsen argues, Astell sees marriage as just such a relationship: "a good marriage [is] one in which the woman and man are friends" (88). Thus Detlefsen argues that Astell can accommodate the presumed tension between seeing men and women as rational equals, and espousing women's submission to men in marriage, by arguing for marriage as an institution in which the man plays this role of enabling the intellectual flourishing of his wife. Of course, this is in the ideal case--and Detlefsen recognizes that it does not go all the way toward resolving the tension. But Detlefsen's paper is noteworthy in that it ties Astell's work to more contemporary feminist accounts of "relational autonomy" while offering a historically sensitive reconstruction of the texts, providing a reading of Astell as articulating a specifically feminist Cartesianism while recognizing the ways in which thinking of Astell as a feminist has its limitations.

Whereas the first set of essays in the volume see Astell as focusing her attention primarily inward, on women's character, a number of the essays also read Astell's work as addressing sociopolitical relationships. In particular, a group of later essays in the volume focuses on Astell as offering an analysis of seventeenth-century power structures, including the power structures inherent in marriage. A recurring theme in these essays is of reading Astell through the lens of

recent feminist work on epistemic injustice: more than one essay offers the suggestion that Astell's work can be seen as challenging the ways in which seventeenth-century power relations were used to undermine women's epistemic authority. For instance, Elisabeth Hedrick Moser, who offers an extended comparison of Astell's views on marriage with contemporary accounts of trauma, argues that Astell shows how oppressive power structures of marriage in the seventeenth century "systematically deconstruct [the wife] as a knowing person" (115), and sees Astell as offering a path toward remedying this epistemic damage. Weiss, too, in her stimulating contribution on Astell as a theorist of power, outlines how Astell understood that "power is connected to credibility" (146). More broadly, Weiss challenges the view, expressed by some feminist historians of political theory, that works from, for example, the seventeenth century (since that is the century under consideration)--even those that nominally express feminist views--are not fully feminist insofar as they do not involve theories of power. She argues cogently that a number of Astell's texts can be taken as analyses of power; for instance, in discussing Astell's views on education, Weiss outlines Astell's analysis of how the sociopolitical status of the educated (and sometimes the educators) both relies on and also is used to perpetuate epistemic injustices, which in turn further perpetuates sociopolitical inequality. Like other contributors, Weiss discusses Astell's views on marriage, but specifically in the interest of showing how Astell provides an analysis of marriage as a power relationship: "Astell was especially focused on making visible and understanding the nature and structural causes of unhappiness in the lives of the less powerful partners in personal relationships" (136). Weiss's primary interest, in outlining Astell's philosophical views, is to draw attention to the way in which those views can be taken to anticipate some of their contemporary feminist analogues, rather than, say, reading Astell as being in dialogue with her own contemporaries. But this is in line with Weiss's sentiment that she is "repeatedly astonished and disappointed by how little use contemporary feminists make of our history" (138). Presumably, this essay is addressed in part toward remedying this, and in this vein, I take it to be successful.

Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell includes contributions from both well-established Astell scholars (including the volume editors, Sowaal and Weiss), and also from some scholars who are perhaps not as well known for their work on Astell, but whose essays in this volume are nonetheless interesting and informative as a general rule. A number of the essays do a beautiful job placing Astell in historical-philosophical context: Broad's paper, as mentioned, develops Astell's view as emerging from Aristotelian virtue theory; Kathleen Ahearn's discussion of Astell on the moral virtues, and in particular on self-esteem, elaborates some of the ways in which Astell responds to and develops her account from its roots in Descartes's, Malebranche's, and Norris's work; and Marcy Lascano's illuminating discussion of Astell's philosophical theology--an essay that does not explicitly address Astell qua feminist, but straightforwardly engages with Astell qua philosopher--places Astell in the center of the tradition of philosophical debate about God's existence and nature that engaged so many of her seventeenth-century contemporaries. Topics addressed in this volume run the gamut from the more traditionally philosophical, as, for example, Detlefsen's and Lascano's contributions, to the somewhat less traditional, as, for example, Moser's discussion of trauma, but most of the essays are philosophically careful; even the minority of essays that do not engage in much philosophical analysis are engaging reads. My sense is that it is one of the assets of this volume that it tries to do a little bit of everything: to offer some careful historical textual reconstructions, to apply feminist analyses, to look at the history of ideas, to reconsider and expand the philosophical canon. The resulting volume is of

interest to a broad audience--not only to feminist historians of philosophy, but to historians of philosophy, feminist philosophers, and feminists more generally.

ⁱ In just the past two years, we have seen two exciting new web-based projects that aim in part to make texts from early modern women philosophers more widely available: "New Narratives in the History of Philosophy" (<http://www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net/>) and "Project Vox" (<http://projectvox.library.duke.edu/>), both accessed December 8, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Having said this, Weiss goes on in her introduction to offer a tremendously helpful discussion of the existing secondary literature on Astell.