

Early Modern Moral Philosophy

Lecture 6: Conventional morality

§1. Mary Astell on virtue and knowledge

T1 ‘...virtue... consists in governing animal impressions, in directing our passions to such objects, and keeping them in such a pitch, as right reason requires.’

(Serious Proposal to the Ladies, p.214)

The basic ethical question for Astell is whether our emotions are appropriately directed and appropriately intense. Our actions are virtuous if and only if they are the result of appropriately directed/intense emotions. It is reason that tells us whether or not our emotions are appropriately directed and appropriately intense.

According to Astell, the fact that we have particular emotions/sentiments plays no part in explaining how we know the appropriate objects/intensity of our emotions/sentiments.

Two possible problems with Astell’s theory...

T2 ‘Ignorance disposes to vice, and wickedness reciprocally keeps us ignorant, so that we cannot be free from the one unless we cure the other... She then who desires a clear head must have a pure heart; and she who has the first in any measure will never allow herself to be deficient in the other.’

(Serious Proposal to the Ladies, p.127)

Astell appears to subscribe to both of the following claims...

P1 I can acquire knowledge only if I have already acquired virtue.

P2 I can acquire virtue only if I have already acquired knowledge.

T3 ‘...the more pure we are the clearer will our knowledge be, and the more we know, the more we shall purify.’

(Serious Proposal to the Ladies, p.131)

Again, Astell appears to subscribe to both of the following claims...

- P1 Virtue requires the complete extirpation of negative emotions – specifically, pride, anger, hatred, deep sorrow.
- P2 Virtue requires the direction of emotions towards the appropriate objects and with the appropriate intensity.
- T4 ‘...the two approaches... are compatible if we see the first as a short-term technique of governance, or an immediate strategy that we might employ while in the grip of such intense feelings, and the second as a more long-term strategy toward acquiring an enduring disposition of character.’

(Jacqueline Broad, *Philosophy of Mary Astell*, p.105)

§2. *Virtue and happiness for early modern women*

If Shaftesbury and Hutcheson are right, then there is no particular reason to think that women in early modern English/Scottish society were disadvantaged with respect to their capacity to acquire moral knowledge/act virtuously. But if Astell is right, and our reason or intellect plays an important part in the acquisition of moral knowledge, then there is reason to think this.

- P1 We can't act virtuously if we don't know what are the appropriate objects of our emotions, and what is the appropriate intensity with which to have these emotions towards those objects.
- P2 We can't know what are the appropriate objects of our emotions, or what is the appropriate intensity with which to have these emotions towards those objects, unless we have cultivated our rational/intellectual faculties.
- P3 Women in the early modern period didn't cultivate their rational/intellectual faculties.
- C Women in the early modern period couldn't act virtuously.
- T5 ‘The right education of the female sex, as it is in a manner everywhere neglected, so it ought to be generally lamented. Most in this depraved later age think a woman learned and wise enough if she can distinguish her husband's bed from another's.... Vain man is apt to think we were merely intended for the world's propagation, and to keep its human inhabitants sweet and clean, but by their leaves, had we the same literature, he would find our brains as fruitful as our bodies. Hence I am induced to believe, we are debarred from the knowledge of human learning lest our pregnant wits should rival the towering conceits of our insulting lords and masters.’

(Hannah Woolley, *Gentlewoman's Companion*, quoted in Joan Kinnaird, *Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism*)

Many early modern moral philosophers claim that there is a close connection between virtue and *happiness*.

- T6 ‘...it follows, that the natural affections duly established in a rational creature, being the only means which can procure him a constant series or succession of

the mental enjoyments, they are the only means which can procure him a certain and solid *happiness*.’

(Shaftesbury, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*, p.216)

Astell uses this claim to make a further point about the disadvantages of women in early modern English/Scottish society.

- P1 Women in the early modern period can't act virtuously.
- P2 People can be truly happy only if they act virtuously.
- C Women in the early modern period can't be truly happy.

T7 ‘From... the constant flattery of external objects, arises that querulousness and delicacy observable in most persons of fortune, and which betrays them to many inconveniences. For besides that it renders them altogether unfit to bear a change, which considering the great uncertainty and swift vicissitudes of worldly things, the greatest and most established ought not to be unprepared for; it likewise makes them perpetually uneasy, abates the delight of their enjoyments, for... some little disorder which others would take no notice of, like an aching tooth or toe, spoils the relish of their joys.’

(*Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, p.92)

T8 ‘Happiness is not *without* us... it must be found in our own bosoms.’

(*Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, p.225)

§3. Bentham on virtue and pleasure

T9 ‘By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.’

(*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, p.947)

T10 ‘By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is concerned.’

(*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, p.948)

An action is *virtuous* to the extent that it produces pleasure and the absence of pain.

Bentham thinks that there are seven ways in which we can compare the pleasures produced by particular actions; with respect to intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.

§4. *Bentham on impurity*

In *Offences Against One's Self*, Bentham is interested in acts of 'procuring sensations by means of an improper object'.

1. 'Of the proper species but at an improper time, for instance, after death.
2. Of an object of the proper species and sex, and at a proper time, but in an improper part.
3. Of an object of the proper species but the wrong sex...
4. Of a wrong species
5. In procuring this sensation by one's self without the help of any other sensitive object.'

(*Offences Against One's Self*, Part 1, p.389-390)

On sex between men...

T11 'As to any primary mischief, it is evident that it produces no pain in anyone. On the contrary, it produces pleasure... As to secondary mischief, it produces not any pain of apprehension. For what is there in it for anybody to be afraid of...?'

(*Offences Against One's Self*, Part 1, p.390)

Bentham considers Montesquieu's claim that sex between men makes them 'weaker'. His response is that '[if]... it tends to weaken a man it is not any single act that can... have that effect. It can only be the habit' (p.391-392). So if Montesquieu is right, what is wrong is not men having sex with men, but rather men *too frequently* having sex with men.

Bentham considers the claim that sex between men 'hurts population'.

T12 '...if we consult Mr. Hume and Dr. Smith, we shall find that it is not the strength of the inclination of the one sex for the other that is the measure of the numbers of mankind, but the quantity of subsistence which they can find or raise upon a given spot.'

(*Offences Against One's Self*, Part 1, p.396)

And he considers that claim sex between men 'robs women'.

T13 '...if the female sex are losers by the prevalence of this practice it can only be on this supposition – that the force with which it tends to divert men from entering into connection with the other sex is greater than the force with

which the censure of the world tends to prevent those connections by its operation on the women.'

(*Offences Against One's Self*, Part 1, p.399)

Bentham on bestiality...

T14 'An abomination which meets with as little quarter as any of the preceding is that where a human creature makes use in this way of a beast or other sensitive creature of a different species... Accidents of this sort will sometimes happen; for distress will force a man upon strange expedients. But...if all the sovereigns in Europe were to join in issuing proclamations inviting their subjects to this exercise in the warmest terms, it would never get to such a height as to be productive of the smallest degree of political mischief.'

(*Offences Against One's Self*, Part 2, p. 101)

T15 'If there be one idea more ridiculous than another, it is that of a legislator who, when a man and a woman are agreed about a business of this sort, thrusts himself in between them, examining situations, regulating times and prescribing modes and postures... he will probably be a little at a loss when he comes to enquire... how the case stands when the man for example, having to do with a woman, begins in one part and consummates in another; thinks of one person or of one part while he is employing himself with another; begins with a woman and leaves her in the lurch. Without calling in the principle of utility such questions may be multiplied and remain undecided for evermore; consult the principle of utility, and such questions never will be started.'

(*Offences Against One's Self*, Part 2, p.100-101)

Bibliography

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