

Mary Astell on Bad Custom and Epistemic Injustice

ALLAUREN SAMANTHA FORBES 

Mary Astell is a fascinating seventeenth-century figure whose work admits of many interpretations. One feature of her work that has received little attention is her focus on bad custom. This is surprising; Astell clearly regards bad custom as exerting a kind of epistemic power over agents, particularly women, in a way that limits their intellectual capacities. This article aims to link two contemporary sociopolitical/social-epistemological projects by showing how a seventeenth-century thinker anticipated these projects. Astell's account of bad custom shows that she was attuned to the kinds of institutional or structural explanations theorized by Sally Haslanger, and that she acknowledges that bad custom—as an institutional or structural explanation—is intimately linked with epistemic injustice, albeit a kind not yet captured by contemporary social epistemologists. I call this form of epistemic injustice found in Astell epistemic internalization injustice. I argue that the epistemic significance of Astell's notion of bad custom is that it enables us to understand how bad custom conditions human relations in such a way as to result in epistemic injustice. Through coming to understand her notion of bad custom, we can expand our understanding of social epistemic phenomena like epistemic injustice.

Mary Astell is a fascinating figure whose work admits of many interpretations: Aristotelian and Cartesian, virtue-theoretical and epistemically motivated, and politically conservative and feminist, among others (see Perry 1990; Kolbrener and Michelson 2007; Broad 2015; Sowaal and Weiss 2016). One feature of her work that has received little attention is her focus on bad custom. Although some scholars have addressed Astell's remarks on bad custom as a feature of her Cartesian ethics or theory of mind, none has addressed bad custom as a set of epistemically deleterious practices in her work (Bryson 1998; Broad 2007; Sowaal 2007). This is surprising; Astell clearly regards bad custom as exerting a kind of epistemic power over agents, particularly women, in a way that limits their intellectual capacities. This article aims to link two contemporary sociopolitical/social-epistemological projects by showing how a

Hypatia vol. 34, no. 4 (Fall 2019) © by Hypatia, Inc.

seventeenth-century thinker anticipated these projects. Astell's account of bad custom shows that she was attuned to the kinds of institutional or structural explanations theorized by Sally Haslanger, and that she acknowledges that bad custom—as an institutional or structural explanation—is intimately linked with epistemic injustice, albeit a kind not yet captured by contemporary social epistemologists. I call this form of epistemic injustice found in Astell *epistemic internalization injustice*. I argue that the epistemic significance of Astell's notion of bad custom is that it enables us to understand how bad custom conditions human relations in such a way as to result in epistemic injustice. And, more than this, her solution to bad custom—an educational institution for women—suggests that she recognizes knowledge as inherently social and that institutional problems require structural changes. As such, through coming to understand her notion of bad custom, we can expand our understanding of social epistemic phenomena like epistemic injustice.

In light of developments in social epistemology—specifically, the connection among social location, knowledge, credibility, and power—contemporary epistemology has produced the concept of epistemic injustice, that is, a harm done to people in their capacity as epistemic agents. An epistemic injustice is simultaneously an epistemic harm insofar as it impairs one's ability to give and obtain knowledge, and a moral harm in that it undermines a fundamental part of human agency. One of the first philosophers to discuss epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker, argues that it comes in two forms: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007). In the former, an identity prejudice undermines appropriate application of credibility, and in the latter, identity prejudice causes a lacuna in epistemic resources such that the speaker cannot be a subject of social understanding. More recently, some epistemologists have sought to expand the list of kinds of epistemic injustice: Christopher Hookway offers the notion of participant-perspective testimonial injustice; Kristie Dotson offers testimonial quieting, testimonial smothering, and contributory injustice; and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. offers willful hermeneutical ignorance (Hookway 2010; Dotson 2011; 2012; Pohlhaus 2012). However, Astell's account of bad custom alerts us to a form of epistemic injustice—epistemic internalization injustice—not captured by any of these categories, in part because bad custom results in the internalization of one's diminished epistemic agency.

To make my case, I set out Astell's theory of bad custom in section I. Bad custom has two main components: first, it is connected to Astell's theory of mind by undermining the intellectual capacities of understanding and will, and second, bad custom is artificial and arbitrary. I end this section showing how Astell's account of bad custom presages Haslanger's discussion of social structural explanation. Then, in section II, I illustrate how Astell's account of bad custom, as a social structural explanation, has thoroughgoing epistemic consequences, particularly with respect to epistemic authority. Using this analysis, in section III I show how bad custom provides the conditions under which epistemic injustice flourishes, and that we see in Astell an example of epistemic injustice that does not fit into currently available schemas. I close in section IV by showing that this analysis fulfills two purposes: first, that through examining Astell's account of bad custom we may accomplish the important historical and

philosophical task of understanding a central epistemic feature of Astell's work, and second, it illustrates how Astell's insights with respect to the notion of bad custom are still relevant to feminist and social epistemological projects today.

I. ASTELL ON BAD CUSTOM

Custom, as Astell and her contemporaries understood it, is a range of established beliefs and practices endemic to a society with great epistemic and moral weight—something like a wide-scope set of norms that extended through public and private life. More important, custom inclines one to accept these beliefs and practices—and act accordingly—solely in virtue of their being socially entrenched: it is a kind of authority stemming from habitual thought and action (Broad 2007, 168). Astell identifies custom as a pervasive problem for women: custom places women in an enchanted circle; it delivers poison in a golden cup; and it instructs women in froth and emptiness (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 55, 63, 64). It is a tyrant and a tyranny; a disease that infects the mind; and a cloud of ignorance (67, 94, 72, 77). However, it is important to understand Astell's comments on the failures of custom as referring to *bad* custom. As Karen Detlefsen points out, Astell distinguishes between good custom and bad custom; the former aligns human will with the will of God (that humans develop their rational faculties), whereas the latter runs antithetical to God's designs (Detlefsen 2016, 78). Even so, Astell did not use the term *bad custom* herself. In the following, for clarity, I will use the term *bad custom* unless I am referring to good custom, in which case I will specify the distinction.

In *Letters concerning the Love of God*, Astell points out that “Custom, as the Philosopher well observed, is no small matter: It is the most difficult thing imaginable to recall our Thoughts and withdraw the Stream of our Affections from that Channel in which they were used to flow” (Astell and Norris 1695/2005, 117). Her point is that habits are difficult to break, and following bad custom is a serious habit. This also shows that Astell begins her investigation into bad custom by regarding it as resulting in both an epistemic and moral phenomenon, a view that is borne out in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (Astell 1695/1697/2003; hereafter *Proposal*) and *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (Astell 1700/1997; hereafter *Reflections*). All forms of custom shape how one thinks and feels, thus bad custom possesses power over one's activities as both an epistemic agent and a moral agent. But what is bad custom, exactly? Astell never gives an explicit definition; I turn now to an identification and discussion of two main features of bad custom.

BAD CUSTOM AND ASTELL'S THEORY OF MIND

The first feature of bad custom is that it is entwined with Astell's theory of mind. Astell divides the mind into two faculties: the understanding and the will (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 80, 127, 130).¹ The former receives and compares ideas, and the

latter prioritizes and directs one's thoughts and actions (80, 128, 205). The understanding aims at achieving truth, whereas the will is meant to help agents achieve the good (for example, 146, 206).² Astell says "the Will is blind, and cannot chuse but by the direction of the Understanding; or to speak more properly, since the Soul always *Wills* according as she *Understands*, so that if she *Understands* amiss, she *Wills* amiss" (80). As rational creatures by nature, humans choose their actions—exercise their wills—according to the contents of their understanding (128). For Astell, the proper functioning of one's mind occurs when the understanding, as the faculty that grasps ideas, rules over the will, which then provides the motivation to act upon those ideas via assent.³ Jointly, these two intellectual faculties are responsible for producing knowledge. For Astell,

Knowledge in a proper and restricted Sense and as appropriated to Science, signifies that clear Perception which is follow'd by a firm assent to Conclusions rightly drawn from Premises of which we have clear and distinct Ideas. Which Premises or Principles must be so clear and Evident, that supposing us reasonable Creatures, and free from Prejudices and Passions . . . we cannot withhold our assent from them without manifest violence to our Reason. (149)

Here one can see the broadly Cartesian epistemological principles underlying Astell's thought, specifically a conception of knowledge as clear and distinct ideas to which the will must assent, barring the interference of prejudice or the emotions (for example, Broad 2015, 26–36; cf. Detlefsen 2017). Unfortunately, bad custom impairs both faculties and thus it interferes with knowledge-acquisition and epistemic activities more broadly (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 67, 70, 101, 130, 139).⁴

The understanding is the mental faculty responsible for considering ideas—it is where one finds the "Principles and Reasonings" by which one judges or chooses one's actions (128). In this sense, it obtains a preliminary version of knowledge: it is meant to gather the true or clearly and distinctly perceived ideas to which the will may then assent and ratify into proper knowledge. Moreover, ignorance—a lack of true or clear and distinct ideas borne of a deficient understanding—explains subsequent misfiring of the will:

Whence is it but from ignorance, from a want of understanding to compare and judge of things, to chuse a right End, to proportion the Means to the End, and to rate ev'ry thing according to its proper value; that we quit the Substance for the Shadow, Reality for Appearance, and embrace those very things which, if we understood, we shou'd hate and fly. (64)

On Astell's view, much of what appears to be vice is simply action based on defective understanding—women are not vicious, but lacking in clear and distinct or true ideas about what matters (for example, 62, 67, 69, 128). The understanding is thus a kind of fundamental intellectual capacity that makes the proper operation of one's will—the source of one's choice—possible. Astell's conception of knowledge is undeniably Cartesian, but her notion of understanding as undermined by bad custom

suggests that the understanding is less passive a faculty than it might first appear. For one's understanding to operate correctly, that is, to compare ideas and rightly reject false ones, one must be free from ignorance, both in the sense of possessing true or clear and distinct ideas—of having a provisional kind of knowledge—and in the sense of comparing those ideas—of thinking—properly.⁵

Bad custom undermines both aspects of the understanding. Without formal education, women are deprived of all kinds of provisional knowledge or true ideas. One of the purposes of Astell's institution is, as she says, "to expel that cloud of Ignorance, which Custom has involv'd us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge" (77). But one cannot disperse bad custom's cloud of ignorance by gathering true ideas or provisional knowledge alone. Rather, one must also attack bad custom as an impediment to comparing ideas (67, 68–70, 77, 94–95, 143; cf. Detlefsen 2016, 78).

One way in which bad custom has this troubling epistemic effect is through its creation and support of prejudices, which are false beliefs without rational basis; prejudices undermine the proper operation of the understanding (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 133, 139; cf. Sowaal 2007, 229). Astell says that "Prejudice fetters the Understanding": it acts as a kind of epistemic lens or sieve that illegitimately prevents certain thoughts or ideas from being considered in the first place—the first function of the understanding (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 139, 140). Prejudice operates by habituating women to defer to authority—those who claim that the locus of value in women is their appearance, for example—rather than to truth, the proper object of the understanding (133, 137–39). One such prejudice at work in Astell's time, and one that Astell clearly rejects, is what Alice Sowaal calls the Women's Defective Nature prejudice (WDN) (Sowaal 2016a, 60). This is the view—held by men and women—that women are deficient compared to men; specifically, that they are vicious and intellectually limited by nature (60). Were one to ask the average lady of Astell's time about her intellectual abilities, she might sincerely respond that women are not capable of the same achievements as men. This is consistent with Astell's frequent criticism of the view that what matters about women is their appearance or attractiveness alone (for example, Astell 1695/1697/2003, 62–63, 69, 91). Prejudice is a kind of epistemic tyranny: it is self-reinforcing and, in the absence of education, prejudice teaches women what to believe by shaping their intellectual habits (133–35).⁶ Given that Astell argues that one should believe only that for which one has good evidence, bad custom and its prejudices are at best distractions, and at worst, a kind of misleading and corrupting "evidence" (133, 172; cf. Sowaal 2016b, 197). These prejudices function as epistemic obstacles to true beliefs: this prevents the proper operation of the understanding.

The epistemic effects of living in a society where bad custom has brought about prejudices like the WDN prejudice are significant. As Jacqueline Broad points out, "custom has taught women to live like Cartesian machines . . . in an 'unthinking mechanical way of living'" (Broad 2015, 71). Like Descartes, Astell does not think that people are machines; rather, she is expressing concern that bad custom and particularly the WDN prejudice have forced women to live *as though* they were

machines—that is, without proper thought, but rather with unthinking acceptance just as a robot fulfills its programming (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 94). Following bad custom requires a great deal of effort and activity from women, but none that is focused on their intellectual development; in conforming to bad custom and the WDN prejudice, women are made complicit in the contracting of their minds (94). That is, women internalize the habit of uncritical acceptance of ways of thought; in this way, bad custom facilitates the corruption of women's mental faculties. Rather than pursue formal education or spiritual guidance, women focus their attention on adorning their bodies or developing pleasing manners—not out of a carefully considered view on what matters, but an unreflective and automatic acceptance of these values given their societal prevalence. Such intellectual corruption is habitual and difficult to escape (134).

Bad custom, through prejudices like the WDN prejudice, offers an improper way of interpreting the world: prejudices cause one to believe and value on the basis of external authorities rather than on the basis of one's own rational assessments. Thus, they hinder one's search for truth and dispose one to error. The WDN prejudice and bad custom together cause and constitute a thoroughgoing prejudice about what kind of epistemic agents women can be.

Bad custom further interferes with the proper functioning of women's minds by exploiting a vulnerability in human will, namely, its need for guidance in reaching its end of the good or apparent good (129–30). In a properly functioning mind, the will is ruled by the understanding, but bad custom undermines the operation of the understanding.⁷ Without this internal direction, as Astell observes, one is likely to rely on external authorities like “Education, Example or Custom” (130). Women are denied formal education but are presented with many examples of women conforming to bad custom and of bad custom itself. So women's circumscribed set of possible learning experiences is clearly arranged such that bad custom is at an advantage to exert improper influence and to undermine women's epistemic agency. Astell says that bad custom manacles one's will, “which scarce knows how to divert from a Track which the generality around it take, and to which it has it self been habituated” (139). In habituating women to act and value in certain ways, bad custom places the will—the source of one's freedom—in shackles: it names something other than God's will as good and motivates one to act accordingly (170).

As the source of one's freedom, the will's need for direction causes problems for women's moral agency, too. Astell conceives of freedom as self-determination; it emerges from her Cartesian epistemology (for example, 128). In Astell's view, all humans are by nature free in virtue of their rational capacities, and one's freedom increases when one wills without external impediment and when one's volitions are in line with God's will (129). Bad custom, however, undermines this proper functioning of the will, particularly in that it teaches that women are valuable only insofar as they are attractive to men rather than as creatures of well-developed rational understanding—a precondition of maximal freedom. This results in women developing the “feminine vices” of pride and vanity:

When a poor Young Lady is taught to value her self on nothing but her Cloaths, and to think she's very fine when well accoutred. When she hears say that 'tis Wisdom enough for her to know how to dress her self, that she may become amiable in his eyes; to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lay out her Industry and Money on such Accomplishments. . . . (69)

Women are accused of being prideful and vain, but this is only because they value in themselves what others tell them is valuable about women. For Astell, the feminine vices are predictable results of bad custom because deficient education makes women ignorant about what they should value and pursue. All women have a desire for personal achievement and the perfection of their natures, "But she who is kept ignorant of the matter, will take up with such Objects as first offer themselves, and bear any plausible resemblance to what she desires . . ." (62). Without a properly developed understanding—one that holds true ideas—women will seize upon the methods of feminine achievement authorized and prized by bad custom, such as those pertaining to their beauty and attire (62). Women want to be good, to esteem themselves, and to be esteemed by others. Without education, the only evidence available to women as to how they might achieve this are the remarks of others, and, unsurprisingly, women are constantly told—especially by those with epistemic authority (that is, men)—that what matters is how attractive they are. After all, "What poor Woman is ever taught that she should have a higher Design than to get her a Husband?" (Astell 1700/1997, 65). Astell admits that women may be vicious and desire the wrong things, but this is because of ignorance rather than defective natures.⁸

For Astell, reason and freedom are like muscles: everyone is born with them, but they can atrophy or strengthen given stimulation or lack thereof. Astell's discussion of prejudice and moral vice illustrates how bad custom atrophies these muscles. First, bad custom atrophies the understanding by conditioning women to think only in ways determined by bad custom and its prejudices; in so doing, they lack access to truth and knowledge, and become epistemically unfree. Second, bad custom atrophies the will by falsely naming poor values as the good, thus making women vicious. From these two dimensions, one can see that bad custom is entwined with Astell's theory of mind.

BAD CUSTOM AS ARTIFICIAL AND ARBITRARY

The second major feature of bad custom is that it is artificial and arbitrary. In *Reflections*, Astell points out that an "is" does not imply an "ought": nothing about the customary subjugation of women entails that women were meant to be subjugated (Astell 1700/1997, 10–11). Astell draws a parallel between the biblical claim that women ought to be subordinate to men and the prohibition on men having long hair:

For by all that appears in the Text, it is not so much a Law of Nature, that Women shou'd Obey Men, as that Men shou'd not wear long Hair. Now how can a Christian Nation allow Fashions contrary to the Law of Nature, forbidden by an Apostle and declared by him to be a shame to Man? Or if Custom may make an alteration in one Case it may in another, but what then becomes of the Nature and Reason of things? (12)

There is more said in the Bible against long-haired men (I Corinthians 11:14) than for men's absolute supremacy (Astell 1700/1997, 12). Astell's point here is a cheeky one. Unless men are willing to bite the bullet that they are either violating God's will for the sake of their hair, or that they are cherry-picking evidence from the Bible, the Bible (and therefore God's will) cannot be used as evidence for women's subjugation. And if some claims in the Bible are mere custom and can be changed, why think that the claims about women's subordinate status are not of this kind? So, bad custom and the law of nature are not necessarily the same.⁹ This shows that bad custom is a human creation and not God's will—that is, it is artificial and arbitrary. Indeed, as Astell's later case of the Shunamite—a woman who ruled her lands and her husband—shows, what is customary has not been the same over time (25).¹⁰ Women fulfilling social functions other than as subordinates is, as Astell says, neither contrary to Holy Scripture nor the Law of Nature (26). If it bears no serious consequences, and if it has not always been as it is, then bad custom is arbitrary.

Astell is troubled that God is blamed for women's inferiority when it is bad custom that is really at fault (Astell and Norris 1695/2005, 79–80). Since God gave all humans rational souls, Astell takes it that it is God's will for all humans to exercise their rational capacities. However, bad custom interferes with the development and exercise of these capacities:

For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? . . . Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of the one, as well as the enjoyment of the other? (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 80).

The way to improve a faculty is to use it; thus, bad custom's practice of preventing women from obtaining education has the effect of undermining one's happiness in this life and, given its divine origins, in the afterlife (80). Again, this shows that bad custom is problematic on the basis of its artificiality and arbitrariness: God did not will it, because it is not rational, and so it could be otherwise.¹¹ Indeed,

tho great deference is to be paid to the Ways and Usages of the Wise and Good, yet considering that these are the least number of Mankind, 'tis the Croud who will make the Mode, and consequently it will be as absurd as they are: Therefore Custom cannot Authorise a Practice if Reason Condemns it, the following a Multitude is no excuse for the doing of Evil. (139–40).

Astell's concern is not that *humans* created bad custom but that *irrational* humans created it.¹² Although the multitude shapes and is shaped by bad custom, this is against reason and against divine will (for example, Ahearn 2016, 43). Rather, what one must do is deflate the arbitrary authority of bad custom so that only reason, the proper determinant of thought and action, remains (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 95).

Astell also criticizes the arbitrariness of bad custom within marriage. Although marriage is a divinely instituted hierarchy and not a form of custom, poor treatment of wives is a perversion of God's will and a practice of bad custom (Detlefsen 2016, 81). Bad custom contributes to the ills of marriage by fooling women into entering this relation with those who would abuse their power: it lends an illegitimate authority to men's claims in practices of courtship and confers undeserved epistemic authority to men more generally (Astell 1700/1997, 49, 54). As Astell points out, much of the authority husbands possess over wives is a usurpation of power that occurs through bad custom; Astell describes bad custom as a yoke and a whip by which husbands may mistreat their wives (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 120; Astell 1700/1997, 39; Weiss 2016, 148).¹³ This seizure of political and epistemic power is artificial and arbitrary, for it is not what God ordained. Bad custom and its advocates purport to draw authority from the will of God, but this is simply a case of cherry-picking evidence to serve other purposes.

Astell's account of bad custom is rich: following bad custom is intertwined with her theory of mind and presents obstacles to one's intellectual capacities and subsequent capacity for freedom, and it is artificial and arbitrary, though powerful. Thus, bad custom is a set of social norms about women's role in society instantiated by beliefs and practices such as deficient education for women that result in and support what Sowaal calls the WDN prejudice.

As such, Astell's account of bad custom can also be seen as a kind of historical predecessor of Haslanger's recent account of social structural explanations. Haslanger points out that people, actions, and behaviors do not occur in a vacuum. We want explanations that get at the explanandum in a meaningful sense—that both answer the initial question of why something happened as it did and that account for the various foci and contrast spaces one might imagine (Haslanger 2016, 117, 115). Indeed, "if a particular is part of a system or structure, then the best first step may be to indicate *that* it is part of the system or structure and proceed to explain what's up with the structure. The explanation of the workings of the structure will be the best way to explain the behavior of its parts" (118). One of the cases Haslanger introduces, that of Lisa and Larry and their new daughter Lulu, illustrates this in a particularly salient way. In the case, Lisa and Larry are equal in every sense that matters—intellectually, domestically, professionally, with respect to power in their relationship—yet they live in a community where women make, on average, only 75% of men's wages. Moreover, childcare is prohibitively expensive. So, when Lulu is born, Lisa quits her job and Larry continues to accrue professional and economic power. When we ask why Lisa quit her job, the immediate cause is, of course, Lisa's decision to do so. But, as Haslanger points out, it is woefully inadequate to explain Lisa's choice as though it were irrespective of the system and community she inhabits:

The fact is that Lisa quit her job because she chose to *and Larry didn't also choose to quit his job*. It is a background structural constraint that they both can't quit, and so Larry's behavior, their relationship, and the options available are crucial to explaining her action. . . . The structure within which she and Larry live combines human (infant) dependency, a stable framework of gender relations, and a particular wage-labor system. These structural constraints limit the possibility space—this choice architecture—for both Lisa and Larry; the differences in what is available to them, given their gender, is crucial for explaining what occurs. (Haslanger 2016, 123, 124)

A full explanation of Lisa's choice requires an understanding of the social structures bearing on her, Larry, and Lulu's lives. This is a social structural explanation—that is, one that accounts for the background constraints on possibilities, live options, and choice architecture emanating from the social structures of one's community underlying any particular choice or behavior.

Astell's account of bad custom offers a similar kind of social structural explanation. In railing against how bad custom undermines the development and exercise of women's intellectual capacities and freedom and how bad custom manifests in artificial and arbitrary social practices, Astell shows us how bad custom places limits on women's choice architecture: bad custom represents a possibility space and incentive structure in which women make decisions that is structurally similar to the social forces that explain Lisa's choice to quit her job. Moreover, these features of bad custom occur at a socially systemic level: all people are subject to bad custom, and all people are operating within a context that disadvantages women. Although women might make decisions that do not necessarily serve their best interests—to prioritize their appearance over all other goals, for example—it would be inadequate to explain these behaviors by saying that they just wanted to look nice. Rather, Astell's discussion of bad custom illustrates the social conditions that made these women choose as they did. If one inhabits a society where the only viable option to sustain oneself is marriage, then one's choice to adorn oneself (even—or especially—at the expense of other endeavors) is not just a preference, but a survival strategy, the only reasonable option given the background conditions. Like Lisa, these women's behaviors, many of which maintained the subordinate status of women, were not explained simply by preference or choice, full stop. Astell's notion of bad custom as possessing social epistemic effects demonstrates both that bad custom is a structural phenomenon and that it explains behavior at a deeper, more fruitful level.

II. BAD CUSTOM, EPISTEMIC PHENOMENA, AND THE CONDITIONS FOR EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

As a social structural explanation, or at least a predecessor of such a concept, Astell's account of bad custom explains not only women's choice architecture, but the epistemic phenomena that plague them in exercising their epistemic agency. Moreover,

as we shall see in section III, bad custom erodes women's epistemic agency in a way that facilitates a new form of epistemic injustice. In this section, I address the deficient epistemic conditions that make this injustice possible: first, I set out how bad custom undermines women's first-person epistemic authority, and second, I show how this illustrates a related and multifaceted epistemic harm.

The central way in which bad custom erodes women's epistemic agency is through the collective effects of bad custom on women's first-person epistemic authority or assessments of their credibility. Under most circumstances, there is a presumption of correctness of one's claims about one's own mind (for example, one's beliefs, desires, fears). That is to say, people tend to assume that individuals have special epistemic access (relative to others) to the contents of their own mind. So, when an individual says that she desires a cup of tea, or that she is a Tory, one ought to believe her. It would be inappropriate, for example, for someone else to insist that she really wants coffee, or that she is really a Whig. One might be able to make these claims, but it would take a great deal of contrary evidence or the discovery that her testimony was given under coercion to treat her claims as misrepresentative of her thoughts. Assumptions of first-person epistemic authority—and epistemic authority generally—operate on the basis of epistemic trust or credibility: one must trust that the speaker's assertion is a reason to believe that claim; in order for this to be the case, one must first believe that the speaker is the sort of person who makes claims only when she is in a position to do so—that she is epistemically credible.

As Nancy Daukas points out, epistemic trustworthiness or credibility—and the authority it confers—is socially constructed: insofar as a society or group is hierarchical, members of the dominant group or class will be afforded more epistemic trust, and members of the subordinate group will receive less. This has serious effects: “If you are young and impressionable, and people whom you perceive as authoritative systematically and confidently treat you as having little cognitive/epistemic potential, it is not unlikely that you will internalize that expectation about yourself” (Daukas 2006, 114–15). Members of the dominant group, too, will find themselves with an excessive estimation of their capacities due to an overly large share of epistemic trust. In short, when someone is accorded first-person epistemic authority—the default in assessing certain kinds of testimonial claims—the speaker is granted a baseline level of epistemic trust; one trusts that the speaker is correct in making claims about her experience. One's epistemic trustworthiness and associated epistemic authority tends to be corrupted in hierarchical groups or societies.

Bad custom subverts the usual allocation of first-person epistemic authority and equitable epistemic authority in general. It might be the case that, in a context where bad custom holds sway, people would accord epistemic trust to women who claimed that they wanted a cup of tea, but it is less obvious that they would do so for a more complicated claim like the one about political leaning. To trust that Mary holds the belief that “the Tory party best represents my political views” when she says she does requires that the audience implicitly accept that she has the intellectual capacities to understand her belief and perhaps even possess some evidence for it. What is more troubling is that it is not immediately obvious why people influenced

by bad custom would be wrong to fail to trust Mary: bad custom systematically deprives women of education and access to knowledge; it supplies them with faulty norms about their own intellectual and moral capacities; it undermines their capacities to think and understand the world. Moreover, if a man “corrected” Mary’s assessment of her own views, bad custom has further loaded the deck in his favor: men are granted more epistemic authority by default. As Astell points out, “Custom and the Dignity of his Sex give Authority . . . Since he is the *Man*, by which very word Custom wou’d have us understand not only greatest strength of Body, but even greatest firmness and force of Mind . . .” (Astell 1700/1997, 49, 54). The mere fact of being a man is assumed to grant a better epistemic position, which then tends to be used to disadvantage women. Indeed, this imbalance of epistemic trust means that women’s claims are not taken seriously; they are not taken to be epistemic authorities over their own experiences and internal lives. “For Custom has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority, that she who would endeavour to put a stop to its Arbitrary Sway and reduce it to Reason, is in a fair way to render her self the *Butt* for all the Fops in Town to shoot their impertinent Censures at” (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 95). This illegitimate and powerful authority—the epistemic dominance of bad custom—is what underlies the WDN prejudice, the practice banning women from formal education, and the mistreatment of wives within marriage. If women are not taken seriously, why should they be afforded the same opportunities as men?

One complication to this is that it is not only men who fail to allocate women first-person epistemic authority and trust, but women, too. Women’s social interactions are underwritten by the expectations and practices of bad custom right from birth. Some women, Astell says, “find themselves born for Slavery and are so sensible of their own Meanness as to conclude it impossible to attain to any thing excellent, since they are, or ought to be best acquainted with their own Strength and Genius” (Astell 1700/1997, 30). Bad custom conditions women to think themselves deficient, both intellectually and otherwise. Indeed, Astell complains that most women “think as humbly of themselves as their Masters can wish, with respect to the other Sex, but in regard to their own, they have a Spice of Masculine Ambition, every one wou’d lead, and none will Follow” (Astell 1700/1997, 29). Bad custom not only conditions women to fail to take themselves as epistemic authorities, but also to diminish and compete with one another rather than cooperate to improve their conditions. As such, women genuinely come to believe that they are deficient by nature, despite having access to their own experiences and minds that could prove otherwise. The WDN prejudice is real and persistent; it is hardly surprising that someone treated as a decorative object comes to think of herself as such. Women internalize the beliefs and practices of bad custom such that they participate in their own epistemic oppression as shaped by bad custom. As Astell points out, somewhat dryly, “[Women] are for the most part Wise enough to Love their Chains, and to discern how very becomingly they set” (Astell 1700/1997, 29). Bad custom systematically undermines women’s epistemic agency (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 64, 69, 134).

Indeed, and as a result, bad custom produces a multifaceted epistemic harm.¹⁴ First, bad custom alters *how an agent interprets her evidence*. Where one’s perceptual

experiences should take priority as the best and most relevant evidence, instead the testimony of another does so. Similarly, bad custom shapes *how women think*—and how men think of women—such that women achieving at the same levels as men are not recognized as such or are dismissed as outliers. Individuals are unable to interpret the available evidence because it lacks even the appearance of *being* evidence. As such, bad custom *obscures the truth and one's true beliefs*: women like Astell had the true belief that they were not deficient by nature, yet this was obscured by bad custom and the treatment they endured. As a result of these epistemic harms, bad custom *undermines agents' grasp of reality or truth* and thus *their ability to act as epistemic agents* in their communities. Through bad custom, men and women are persuaded that women are essentially deficient; thus women have great difficulty in forming true beliefs about their capacities or participating in the creation and exchange of knowledge.

Bad custom shapes how one thinks and acts by undermining one's moral and epistemic capacities such that one's ability to interpret evidence, access truth, and participate in epistemic communities is severely diminished. It does so by producing epistemic practices that afford inappropriate epistemic weight to some agents over others, thus it produces an epistemic harm. Further, it constructs and makes use of an identity prejudice such as the WDN prejudice. Bad custom is a structural social feature that produces troublesome epistemic effects—for example, poorly functioning intellectual capacities, social structures, and practices that undermine women's capacity to live as they ought or as they wish—and also epistemic harms that cause women to internalize the notion of their inherent epistemic inferiority through certain troubling social relations.¹⁵ As we shall see in the next section, this facilitates a new form of epistemic injustice, *epistemic internalization injustice*.

Astell thinks that a large part of the solution for women experiencing the harms of bad custom is for women to remove themselves from the sphere of bad custom and develop epistemically and morally advantageous relations—that is, friendships—with other women; these relations are underwritten by trust. This suggests that she regards bad custom as a kind of contagious social phenomenon and one that requires the right kinds of social support to resist. Indeed, the main project of the first half of her *Proposal* is to persuade women to join her educational institution, in which they will obtain formal education and thus become wise and good—creatures unaffected by bad custom.

III. BAD CUSTOM AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Thus far, I have set out Astell's account of bad custom and suggested how it can be understood as a social structural explanation (section I) and showed how it undermines women's epistemic agency such that it brings about bad epistemic effects (section II). In this section, I will show that Astell's account of bad custom, as an institutional phenomenon that provides social structural explanations, results in a form of epistemic injustice not entirely captured by contemporary literature. Specifically, Astell

identifies a form of epistemic injustice in which the main feature is that the victim is manipulated into assigning herself a subordinate epistemic status. In the first part of section III, I motivate bad custom as producing an epistemic injustice rather than a mere epistemic harm. Then, in the second part of section III, I compare this new epistemic injustice to previously identified forms of epistemic injustice and to the contemporary notion of gaslighting, but show that the injustice caused by bad custom, what I call epistemic internalization injustice, is importantly distinct.

EPISTEMIC HARM, EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Bad custom certainly produces an epistemic *harm*, but it is not yet clear that it produces an epistemic *injustice*. There are at least two ways in which the collective practices of bad custom bring about a state of affairs that is demonstrably an epistemic injustice: first, bad custom undermines women's capacities as knowers, thus affecting a core dimension of human value, and second, it operates on the basis of a socially systemic imbalance of social power, thus suggesting an injustice.

Bad custom compromises women's capacities as knowers in three interconnected ways. First, it forms an external barrier to knowledge by preventing women from obtaining formal education. At a fundamental level, this prevents them from obtaining the basic knowledge requisite for exerting practical autonomy over the domains open to them—for example, how to choose a husband, or how to run a household. Second, bad custom is a defeater of knowledge in that it prevents justification of true beliefs. A woman in Astell's time might hold the true belief that her value as a person comes from something other than her physical appearance. However, it is difficult to see how this would count as knowledge. Having been deprived of formal education, she is systematically deprived of occasions to acquire justification—evidence—for this belief. So, though she might believe it truly, she cannot be said to know it. Third, bad custom causes women to believe that certain kinds of knowledge are impossible for them. Women cannot believe that they can know that they are potential moral and epistemic equals to men because their mental faculties are corrupted and their evidence is faulty. Moreover, even if this evidence were available, it seems unlikely that they would be able to interpret it correctly given the broad harms to their intellectual capacities.

Bad custom also operates on the basis of a systemic imbalance of social power that undermines proper epistemic authority. Bad custom creates and exploits a vulnerability by constructing and maintaining an identity prejudice (that is, WDN) that manifests across domains of life: wives were considered part of their husbands' legal persons, and women who worked outside the home had few options in case of poor treatment at the hands of their employers. On one view, this is simply another instantiation of seventeenth-century institutional sexism. On another, the imbalance of social power was at least partly because bad custom obfuscated the fact that men and women were natural equals made so by God, according to Astell. This is the kind of institutional imbalance of social power with which injustices tend to be

concerned: men possessed great social power over women in virtue of their superior status, and women were habituated to think in the same way. That is, the WDN prejudice created a disparity in social power or potential for thought, action, and freedom.

This imbalance of power directly leads to an unjust deficiency of epistemic authority. Women are not only socially subordinate, but epistemically subordinate, too. The practices of bad custom shape women's epistemic capacities such that they cannot gain access to knowledge, cannot acquire justification to make their true beliefs into knowledge, and cannot believe that they might come to possess certain kinds of knowledge about themselves. As Astell points out, men are granted greater epistemic authority solely in virtue of their gender (Astell 1700/1997, 49, 54). One way to understand this is that the testimony of men is afforded greater credibility than that of women, but another is to understand it as a credibility deficiency that women are tricked into assigning *themselves*.

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Contemporary conceptions of epistemic injustice share the feature of being about individuals as knowers and ways in which this status is not taken seriously by their audiences. This adds an important level of explanation to our ability to explain how some people are wronged in virtue of social structures. One way to understand Astell's account of bad custom is to view it as offering a social structural explanation (presaging Haslanger's ideas) for the background conditions that enable epistemic injustices (presaging the ideas of Fricker and others) to occur. But another way to understand Astell, and what is truly unique and exciting about her view, is that, in the process of setting out this explanation, she also indicates the existence of a kind of epistemic injustice in which those who are treated unjustly often do not even see themselves as suffering an injustice because of the internalization mechanism included in practices of bad custom.

Epistemic injustices, as injustices that harm people in their capacity as epistemic agents, tend to focus on the ways in which one's ability to provide knowledge is impeded. The most fundamental and common method for the exchange of knowledge is testimony. As such, most kinds of epistemic injustice relate to conditions under which testimony goes awry. Perhaps the paradigmatic example of this is Fricker's testimonial injustice, an injustice that occurs when a hearer assigns a speaker less credibility than she deserves because of an identity prejudice in the hearer. Dotson and Hookway offer variations of this injustice in Dotson's forms of testimonial oppression (testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering) and Hookway's participant perspective testimonial injustice. In testimonial quieting, the speaker is not identified as a knower, so her testimony is not taken seriously. Similarly, Hookway's participant perspective injustice occurs when a speaker offers a nonassertive, nontestimonial contribution, but is not regarded as a knower who is adding to the epistemic context. Dotson's testimonial smothering is a little different in that the speaker offers

a truncated version of her testimony in order to accommodate the level of testimonial competence of her audience. What groups these kinds of epistemic injustice together is not just that they concern testimony, but that they require a certain kind of failure of uptake—one concerning estimations of credibility—in the hearers. Moreover, nothing precludes the victim of the injustice—the speaker—from knowing that she is being harmed by these attitudes in her audience. In each case, the speaker regards herself as possessing epistemic authority and credibility, and in each case her capacity to provide knowledge is frustrated by epistemic errors outside of herself.

It is both possible and likely that these sorts of epistemic injustice were brought about by bad custom, but they do not capture the kind of epistemic injustice targeted by Astell's account of bad custom. This is because in each case, the speaker knows herself to be a knower, a properly functioning epistemic agent, and knows that the epistemic error is occurring in others. It is difficult for two reasons to see how this might be the case for the women with whom Astell is concerned. First, they often fail to regard themselves as knowers due to the epistemic effects of bad custom. It isn't that Astell's compatriots are testifying and not being taken seriously, it is that *they are prevented from testifying in the first place*—they are systematically barred from the knowledge and intellectual skills needed to articulate certain kinds of claims. Second, bad custom brings about a particularly insidious kind of epistemic harm because the epistemic error of assigning women a deficient level of credibility occurs within women, too. Men and women both share an identity prejudice about women's inherent epistemic capacities (that is, WDN prejudice) due to bad custom; as such, women are less likely to take themselves and one another seriously as individuals offering knowledge. A credibility deficit is at play, as in testimonial epistemic injustices, but it is one that the victims are manipulated into assigning themselves. This feature of internalization is not captured by the above forms of epistemic injustice.

A second kind of epistemic injustice in contemporary literature focuses less on the audience's uptake of testimony and more on the conditions under which one's testimony is intelligible. One such form is Fricker's hermeneutical injustice, an injustice in which there is a collective lack of interpretive resources by which to understand a speaker; this makes it difficult for the victim to understand or communicate her experiences. Fricker's prototypical case of hermeneutical injustice is sexual harassment: before there was a term for this kind of harm, it was difficult for women to understand what was happening to them and to make the severity of this harm clear to others. The epistemic injustice comes about in that this lacuna is the result of excluding women as co-creators of social concepts and meanings. Dotson and Pohlhaus offer two similar kinds of epistemic injustice, namely contributory injustice and willful hermeneutical ignorance. Dotson describes contributory injustice as when the resources by which one might understand a speaker exist, but the audience willfully refuses to use them, thereby preventing the speaker from contributing to her epistemic community. Similarly, Pohlhaus's willful hermeneutical ignorance occurs when socially dominant epistemic agents refuse to make use of the interpretive resources of marginalized epistemic agents, thus making it possible to ignore or dismiss the marginalized agents' claims. These kinds of epistemic injustices are linked by their

concern with interpretive resources, but also in the distribution of those resources. In hermeneutical injustice, the issue is that the lack is collective, whereas in contributory injustice and willful hermeneutical injustice, the lack of interpretive resources is in the socially dominant group and it is willful.

It is possible that bad custom brings about one or more of these forms of epistemic injustice, but the particular epistemic injustice at the core of Astell's account of bad custom does not include either a lack of interpretive resources or a willful refusal to use them. The interpretive resources to make sense of bad custom and its effects existed in Astell's time.¹⁶ Bad custom does not bring about an epistemic injustice in which women are unable to understand the ills of custom because the concepts to make sense of it do not exist, but because the effects of bad custom *make women incapable of seeing this about themselves*. The lack of resources is not collective, but *in the targeted group* because the injustice is brought about by and maintains their poor epistemic position. Bad custom results in structurally prejudiced interpretive resources: resources are created and disseminated in a way that prevents women from obtaining full epistemic agency. Yet bad custom occurs on an institutional scale—it is far from clear that the ignorance it produces is *willful*, even if particular agents are engaging in interactions with malicious intent. Again, this fails to account for the most insidious feature of the epistemic injustice produced by bad custom: that it changes the way the victim thinks and feels about herself. Someone suffering from contributory injustice or willful hermeneutical ignorance knows she is being harmed and can articulate the problem. This just was not true of most women in Astell's day: the resources to make sense of their predicament existed, but women were systematically deprived of them.

Astell's account of bad custom bears on epistemic injustice in two distinct ways. First, it illustrates her connection between offering social structural explanations of institutional phenomena like bad custom and the kinds of downstream epistemic and ethical effects this has on the people subjected to them. Second, it suggests a form of epistemic injustice not entirely captured by contemporary categories. This is because Astell's account of bad custom foregrounds a core feature of this epistemic injustice not included in other, contemporary forms—namely, women's internalization of their subordinate epistemic status. This is significant: it suggests that people can be involved in epistemically unjust relations without being aware of it themselves—a feature notably absent from current kinds of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice or willful hermeneutical ignorance are clearly injustices, and part of how we know this is that people experiencing them can articulate that something has gone wrong, epistemically speaking, even if they do not possess the conceptual labels of “testimonial injustice” or “willful hermeneutical ignorance.” This is not the case for Astell: she thinks women suffer what we would now call an epistemic injustice and have no real grasp of this happening to them because of the social and epistemic effects of bad custom.¹⁷ Astell's account of bad custom thus reveals a new sort of epistemic injustice: one that occurs on an epistemic level prior to the offering or interpreting of testimony, and that is constituted by the internalization of one's deficient epistemic status. Let us call this injustice *epistemic internalization injustice*.

Astell has thus identified a form of epistemic injustice where the main feature is not only a failure to take someone seriously as a knower via inappropriate allocations of epistemic trust, but one in which the victim is manipulated into assigning herself a subordinate epistemic status—that is, one in which women internalize their inferior epistemic status, thus perpetuating their own oppression. Interestingly, these effects are similar to, albeit importantly distinct from, those of gaslighting, a form of psychological abuse in which the abuser forcefully asserts a different reality—one that is obviously false—from the one that their target experiences. This undermines the victim's sense of what is true, real, and what she is able to know.

Gaslighting is a kind of manipulation, and so its success is dependent on the target's trust in her abuser and the intuition that no one would lie quite so baldly.¹⁸ The term *gaslighting* comes from the play, *Gas Light* (1938), where a nefarious husband seeks to undermine his wife's grasp on reality so that he can abscond with stolen jewelry. The name comes about because, in service to convincing her that she's going mad, he denies that she sees the gas lights dim when he is searching for the jewels in the vacant apartment above them. The effect of gaslighting is that the target loses her grip on reality, on what she is able to know about herself and her experience of the world. In much the same way, bad custom manipulates women into thinking that they are epistemically deficient by nature, rather than by customary practice/belief. Both gaslighting and bad custom feature a mechanism of internalization: just as the victim of gaslighting internalizes a new reality and adjusts her sense of self accordingly—for example, I see the lights dimming, but I am repeatedly assured that this is false: thus, I must be mad—so too do the women subjected to bad custom internalize a view of themselves as deficient by nature, irrespective of their actual capacities—for example, I have rich philosophical thoughts, but it is known that women are not capable of such things: thus, I must be mistaken about myself.

Gaslighting works because it captures the simple psychological features of humans that dispose people to trust others' observations of them and to value the esteem of others. Humans are social creatures and are wired to want others to think well of them, but moreover, people generally tend to accept that others might have special insight that they themselves lack. This is the premise of feedback: I might think I am an excellent singer but defer to my cringing audience. I internalize this feedback and cease thinking of myself in this way. Gaslighting incorporates such internalization, though what is internalized is false and contrary to the individual's experiences. Similarly, bad custom creates the conditions that allow for epistemic internalization injustice. Women are inundated with the beliefs and practices of custom right from birth—for example, about their value only as beautiful objects, their natural epistemic deficiencies—and, in sharing the universal human impulse to obtain the regard of others, they internalize this feedback and come to think of themselves in this way. It is this internalization of a false conception of women as epistemic agents that constitutes epistemic internalization injustice; this occurs because of the conditions created by bad custom. Despite the fact that bad custom and gaslighting share this deleterious form of internalization, they come apart in an important way. The perpetrator of gaslighting is an intentional individual agent whose aim is to undermine another's

understanding of herself, whereas bad custom is—as argued above in the parallel drawn with Haslanger’s work—a corrupted social structure.

In this section, I have discussed how Astell’s account of bad custom reveals a kind of epistemic injustice made possible by the conditions of bad custom and how this form of epistemic injustice—epistemic internalization injustice—is distinct from contemporary categories of epistemic injustice—that is, one whose power and injustice stems from the target’s subsequent inability to assign herself proper credibility, and whose capacities to think and act freely are deeply undermined. As such, bad custom brings about an insidious form of epistemic injustice in that it causes women to internalize a view of themselves as epistemically inferior agents, but in a way that is similar to, though importantly distinct from, gaslighting.

IV. HISTORICAL AND FEMINIST CONCLUSIONS

Bad custom plays a persistent and important role in Astell’s view of society, women, and education. In coming to understand how her account of bad custom operates, we are better able to appreciate the nuance and force of her arguments and views as a whole. This has at least two important dimensions. First, through railing against the tyranny of bad custom and its intellectual, moral, and political enslavement of women, Astell provides the modern reader with evidence to construct an account of bad custom as a social structural explanation, and as a social institution that brings about a kind of epistemic injustice. This not only shows a conceptual linkage across hundreds of years, but also demonstrates the importance of recovering the works and views of historically overlooked figures like Astell; they have much to teach us. And, in light of contemporary concerns about epistemic injustice in all its forms, achieving clarity on the force of Astell’s criticisms helps us to get a better understanding of the psychological nature of bad custom and perhaps even gain some tools to deal with analogous contemporary cases of gaslighting or other troubling interpersonal relations. Indeed, Astell offers the reader a notion of epistemic injustice that is pernicious in virtue of its internalization within the agent—this is a helpful development for further investigations of epistemic injustices. Astell’s aims were in line with contemporary sensibilities, and this offers an interesting lesson about the history of philosophy and especially philosophy written by women. That is, Astell’s account of bad custom offers us an opportunity to observe and appreciate the continuity and connections of philosophical thought across hundreds of years; this can only deepen and improve contemporary philosophical work.

Second, Astell’s discussion of bad custom reveals her feminist leanings. Astell was deeply troubled by bad custom and its effects on women. The first half of her *Proposal* focuses on women joining her school to become wise and good. One of the most interesting aspects of this school was that it offered women the opportunity to form true friendships. Some recent scholarship on Astell’s theory of friendship suggests that these friendships are transformative—they support the development of virtue and one’s intellectual capacities (see, for example, Broad 2009; Detlefsen 2016)—and

some suggests that it is a spiritual friendship meant to authorize female–female pairings so as to avoid marriage (see Kendrick 2018).¹⁹ Elsewhere, I argue that the most exciting thing about Astell's theory of friendship is that it illustrates her account of relational autonomy—that what it is to be free is to be self-defining, but that this can come about for women affected by bad custom only through the autonomy-affirming relation of friendship. One might also think that these friendships are prime social locations for developing the relations and skills of epistemic trust that would insure one against the harms of bad custom. For Astell, as for many contemporary philosophers, it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle the individual from the social, and her proposed solution suggests a clear understanding of knowledge and epistemic agency as being deeply institutional; this is a feminist view. Thus, Astell's account of bad custom also offers the contemporary reader some insight into early feminist thought and how individuals can work together to improve their conditions despite hostile social circumstances; again, this can only be helpful.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the New Narratives in the History of Philosophy: Renaissance and Early Modern Women symposium during the Canadian Philosophical Association at the Université du Québec à Montréal in June, 2018; the Bridging the Gender Gap through Time conference at King's College London in February, 2018; and at a philosophy department colloquium hosted by Wilfrid Laurier University in January, 2018. I wish to thank the organizers of these events and the participants for their comments, and especially Lisa Shapiro for her insightful and helpful commentary. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for their help. Many thanks also to Karen Detlefsen.

1. Astell has a rich and fascinating theory of mind that I cannot do justice to within the confines of this article. The sketch here serves my present purposes. For a more in-depth discussion, see Sowaal 2007.

2. The aim of the faculty is the function it is meant to fulfill. The understanding aims at truth in that God intended humans to use it to grasp clear and distinct ideas in order to obtain knowledge (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 70–71, 137, 146, 149, 153), and the will aims at the good in the sense that it provides motivation toward the right sorts of things (right values and the proper development of rational faculties as per God's will) in the right way—that is, governed by the understanding (128, 130, 143, 144, 205, 206). The will may also extend toward the *apparent* rather than true good, but this is a case of the understanding leading the will astray. Astell discusses the operation of the understanding and will at length in the second half of *Proposal* (see 127ff.; cf. Sowaal 2007, 228–29; Broad 2015, 28–29).

3. Astell notes that there is a mutual relation between these two faculties wherein a defect in one is likely to undermine the other, thus it is necessary that both the understanding and the will be functioning properly (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 130). See Astell 1700/1997, esp. 23–31, for the importance of the understanding to possessing knowledge and therefore various kinds of equality.

4. One might worry that the central contention of this article—that Astell’s work shows that she was sensitive to epistemic injustice long before such concepts were formalized in philosophical literature—is subject to an anachronism insofar as what Astell took to be knowledge (and thus the category of epistemic) is roughly Cartesian, whereas the contemporary model of knowledge (and thus the category of epistemic) is something more like justified true belief. In short, one might think that I have sidestepped an important historical question, namely, what counts as epistemic for Astell? This requires a longer and more careful discussion than I can fully address here, but a brief response to these worries is the following: the claim that there is a form of epistemic injustice present in Astell’s thinking does not turn on a specific definition of knowledge or the epistemic. Rather, the kind of epistemic injustice—epistemic internalization injustice—with which Astell is concerned does interfere at the level of knowledge proper (like some forms of contemporary epistemic injustice), and my central aim here is to show how it does so by interfering with the proper operation of the intellectual faculties that are responsible for producing knowledge (in Astell’s sense) and thus epistemic agency, broadly construed (like other forms of contemporary epistemic injustice). I take it that the domain of intellectual faculties is properly construed as epistemic, irrespective of exactly what knowledge consists in.

5. Astell suggests that the understanding is a fundamental intellectual faculty in that it must possess a kind of preliminary knowledge (“some lower degrees of Knowledge” [Astell 1695/1697/2003, 131; cf. Sowaal 2007, 228]) via the light of understanding before one can purify oneself (become good through assenting, via the will, to the right things), though the relationship between the understanding and the will in service of the greatest knowledge (“Divine Knowledge”) is importantly reciprocal (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 129–31). Moreover, although the understanding might operate with some automaticity—prejudicial thinking, for example—it seems to be something that one can shape and exercise judiciously. One of Astell’s central projects of the second half of the *Proposal* is to set out a method of thinking that women ought to adopt; this requires a conscious conditioning of both parts of the mind so that they may operate as intended (166–88). Her approach here is clearly influenced by Descartes, Antoine Arnauld, and Pierre Nicole; she offers a Cartesian devotion to clear and distinct ideas (170, 172, 174) along with rules of logic borrowed from Arnauld (176–78) in order to help her readers come to think and thus live well. Moreover, Astell points out that one’s judgments arise in response to comparing ideas (a function of the understanding), and proper thinking comes from comparing judgments (173). So the understanding seems central and not entirely passive. However, Astell claims that the understanding is not at fault when one thinks incorrectly: “for if the Will be right the Understanding can’t be guilty of any Culpable Error” (164). This suggests that the will plays a fundamental role in epistemic activities, too, even if it is not necessarily involved in obtaining lower degrees of (or preliminary) knowledge. A full discussion of Astell’s theory of mind and educational methods is beyond the scope of this article, but in either case, acquiring both a fully functional understanding and will is crucial on Astell’s view for the sake of knowledge and various activities women might engage in; bad custom interferes with the operation of both the understanding and the will.

6. Astell’s point here is that bad custom (and especially its practices like denying women formal education) creates the social space for (and explicitly supports) prejudicial

thinking; prejudicial thinking is habitual and difficult to escape (and tends to support bad custom in turn). Consider a community in which open defecation is customary. Without some kind of learning experience to illustrate the health risks of this practice, subsequent generations of the community have only custom to teach them how to dispose of their waste. People who have been members of this community their whole lives would not consider this a strange practice; for people engaging in open defecation habitually, it ceases to be a subject of thought. Astell recognizes that all habits—physical or intellectual—are difficult to escape because one ceases to notice the habitual practice, and moreover, when this occurs on a large scale, the habit is normalized no matter its troubling consequences (in this case, contaminating the food/water supply, providing a breeding area for insects that carry various diseases, and so on). Custom—both good and bad—supports the formation and maintenance of prejudicial habits: these habits are underwritten not just by what is done, or what one sees others doing, but the (likely, perceived) high social cost of doing something else (for example, imagine the social response to open defecation in a society with toilets). Members of an open-defecation community's prejudice—resulting from the custom—toward beliefs and behaviors compatible with open defecation means that they are more likely to accept other compatible beliefs, and also that they are going to find an interloper who says “open defecation puts community health at risk” far less credible than an interloper who says “ah yes, this practice seems perfectly acceptable.” The custom leads to the practice and associated beliefs via prejudicial thinking, and this makes them resistant to contrary evidence or ways of thinking.

7. Astell also identifies the passions as a possible replacement for the understanding as ruler of the will (Astell 1695/1697/2003, 128).

8. Astell also argues that custom halts one's spiritual development (for example, Astell 1695/1697/2003, 69–70, 88, 138).

9. Hair length is not obviously good or bad custom, in Astell's view, so it is referred to only as custom.

10. “And the History of the Shunamite is a noble Instance of the Account that is made of Women in Holy Scripture. . . . the Text calls her a *Great Woman*, whilst her Husband is hardly taken notice of, and this no otherwise than as performing the Office of a Bailiff. It is *her* Piety and Hospitality that are Recorded, *She* invites the Prophet to *her House*; who converses with and is entertained by *her*” (Astell 1700/1997, 25). Astell goes on to say that she does not and is not required to explain herself to her husband, who obeys her commands, and the prophet Elijah pays no attention and gives no benefits to her husband (25). She then adds, “I would not infer from hence that Women generally speaking, ought to govern in their Families when they have a Husband, but I think this Instance and Example is sufficient Proof, that if by Custom or Contract, or the Laws of the Country, or Birth-right (as in the Case of Sovereign Princesses) they have the supreme Authority, it is no Usurpation, nor do they Act contrary to Holy Scripture, nor consequently to the Law of Nature” (26). Astell's point is that custom and God's will/the Law of Nature come apart.

11. Astell, like many of her contemporaries, took reason to extend from nature and the divine, whereas custom was an invention of mere mortals (for example, Cornett 1997, 58).

12. The fact that bad custom was made by irrational people, thus is itself irrational, explains why bad custom is bad. Formal education is an instance of good custom because it is compatible with and enhancing of God's will that humans develop and exercise their rational capacities.

13. For some of the fascinating literature on Astell's views on marriage, see Lister 2004; Broad 2014; Springborg 2015; Weiss 2016.

14. Though bad custom is an epistemic harm, good custom may be an epistemic boon: proper education, once pervasive, could be a practice of good custom.

15. Contemporary literature tends to group epistemic harms under the category of "inappropriate allocations of epistemic trust or credibility," and a great body of work is aimed at articulating and resolving these kinds of disparities. (This is beyond the scope of this article; see, for example, Origi 2012; McCraw 2015.) Moreover, these disparities tend to underwrite conceptions of epistemic injustice. Given the importance of epistemic trust or credibility to the various epistemic issues raised by bad custom, this seems to be a promising route for dealing with bad custom and related social phenomena. However, these accounts tend not to get at the central feature of bad custom and the epistemic harms it brings about, specifically, that women subjected to bad custom internalize a view of themselves as epistemically deficient by nature. Astell's account reveals this aspect of bad custom, and her work suggests a practical and promising solution.

16. Several philosophers in Astell's time were concerned with custom going awry in various ways. Descartes talks about custom and its good and bad effects in, among other works, *Discourse on Method*, as does Locke in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. See also Mills 2000.

17. There is a legitimate worry about paternalism here for the contemporary reader insofar as one can be a victim of epistemic injustice without simply knowing it or being able to know it. This is not a concern for Astell: not only does she have an account of the properly functioning human mind, but she can and would appeal to God and his intentions for human development in order to support this view.

18. For some of the philosophical work on gaslighting, see Abramson 2014; McKinnon 2017.

19. See also Kolbrener 2007.

REFERENCES

- Abramson, Kate. 2014. Turning up the lights on gaslighting. *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (1): 1–30.
- Ahearn, Kathleen A. 2016. Mary Astell's account of feminine self-esteem. In *Feminist interpretations of Mary Astell*, ed. Alice Sowaal and Penny Weiss. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Astell, Mary. 1695/1697/2003. *A serious proposal to the ladies: Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg. Toronto: Broadview Press.
- . 1700/1997. Some reflections upon marriage. In *Astell: Political writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Astell, Mary, John Norris. 1695/2005. *Letters concerning the love of God*, ed. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Broad, Jacqueline. 2007. Astell, Cartesian ethics, and the critique of custom. In *Mary Astell: Reason, gender, faith*, ed. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- . 2009. Mary Astell on virtuous friendship. *Parergon* 26 (2): 65–86.
- . 2014. Mary Astell on marriage and Lockean slavery. *History of Political Thought* 35 (4): 717–38.
- . 2015. *The philosophy of Mary Astell: An early modern theory of virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryson, Cynthia. 1998. Mary Astell: Defender of the 'disembodied mind'. *Hypatia* 13 (4): 40–62.
- Cornett, Judy M. 1997. Hoodwink'd by custom: The exclusion of women from juries in eighteenth-century English law and literature. *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 4 (1): 1–89.
- Daukas, Nancy. 2006. Epistemic trust and social location. *Episteme* 3 (1): 109–24.
- Detlefsen, Karen. 2016. Custom, freedom, and equality: Mary Astell on marriage and women's education. In *Feminist interpretations of Mary Astell*, ed. Alice Sowaal and Penny Weiss. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2017. Cartesianism and its feminist promise and limits. In *Essays in honour of Desmond Clarke*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger and Catherine Wilson. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236–57.
- . 2012. A cautionary tale: On limiting epistemic oppression. *Frontiers* 33 (1): 24–47.
- Forbes, Allauraen Samantha. Unpublished. Mary Astell, friendship, and relational autonomy.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2016. What is a (social) structural explanation? *Philosophical Studies* 173 (1): 113–30.
- Hookway, Christopher. 2010. Some varieties of epistemic injustice: Reflections on Fricker. *Episteme* 7 (2): 151–63.
- Kendrick, Nancy. 2018. Mary Astell's theory of spiritual friendship. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26 (1): 46–65.
- Kolbrener, William. 2007. Astell's 'design of friendship' in *Letters* and *A Serious Proposal, Part I*. In *Mary Astell: Reason, gender, faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kolbrener, William, and Michal Michelson, eds. 2007. *Mary Astell: Reason, gender, faith*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Lister, Andrew. 2004. Marriage and misogyny: The place of Mary Astell in the history of political thought. *History of Political Thought* 25 (1): 44–72.
- McCraw, Benjamin. 2015. The nature of epistemic trust. *Social Epistemology* 29 (4): 413–30.

- McKinnon, Rachel. 2017. Allies behaving badly: Gaslighting as epistemic injustice. In *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, Rebecca. 2000. 'That tyrant custom': The politics of custom in the poetry and prose of Augustan women writers. *Women's Writing* 7 (3): 391–409.
- Origi, Gloria. 2012. Epistemic injustice and epistemic trust. *Social Epistemology* 26 (2): 221–35.
- Perry, Ruth. 1990. Mary Astell: The feminist critique of possessive individualism. *Eighteenth Century Studies* 23 (4): 444–457.
- Pohlhaus Jr., Gaile. 2012. Relational knowing and epistemic injustice: Toward a theory of willful hermeneutical ignorance. *Hypatia* 27 (4): 715–35.
- Sowaal, Alice. 2007. Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal*: Mind, method, and custom. *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2): 227–43.
- . 2016a. Mary Astell and the development of vice: Pride, courtship, and the women's human nature question. In *Feminist interpretations of Mary Astell*, ed. Alice Sowaal and Penny Weiss. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2016b. The emerging picture of Mary Astell's views. In *Feminist interpretations of Mary Astell*, ed. Alice Sowaal and Penny Weiss. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Sowaal Alice, and Penny A. Weiss, eds. 2016. *Feminist interpretations of Mary Astell*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Springborg, Patricia. 2015. Mary Astell's critique of marriage practices. In *Feminist moments: Reading feminist texts*, ed. Katherine Smits and Susan Bruce. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Weiss, Penny A. 2016. "From the throne to every private family": Mary Astell as analyst of power. In *Feminist interpretations of Mary Astell*, ed. Alice Sowaal and Penny Weiss. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.