



# A True Friend Stabs You in the Front: Astell's Admonisher Conception of a Friend

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

My goal in what follows is to argue that Astell endorses what I call the admonisher conception of a friend. For I will argue that, according to Astell, a sufficient condition for whether someone is our friend is that they admonish us in her technical sense. So anyone who admonishes us in this sense—be they Mother Teresa, the sinner sitting in confession, or our professional rival—is a friend to us. Put simply, an Astellian friend is an admonisher. The paper is divided into four sections. Having motivated my reading in section one, section two develops and defends my thesis that admonishment is a sufficient condition for someone to be our Astellian friend. With Astell's admonisher conception on the table, the balance of the paper shows how Astell might have persuaded us to accept her severe-sounding view by sketching the goods that she thinks flow from having an admonisher as a friend. Section three thus contends that, on Astell's view, there is a class of deep truths about who we are that only our admonishing friends can reliably access; section four sketches how admonishment enhances our moral reasoning skills on Astell's picture.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is never fun to be criticized for our foibles. Such criticism can especially sting if it comes from our friends since it is natural to expect our friends, more than anyone else, to ‘take our side’ and to want our friends to see nothing but our very best. Furthermore, it is reasonable to agree with contemporary philosophers of friendship when they say that the duty to correct our flaws does not fall so much to our friends as it does to our parents, teachers and mentors (Cocking and Kennett 2000: 284, 287; Elder 2013: 92–93; White 1999: 80). While this chain of thought chimes well with commonsense, it actually has no shortage of dissenters, chief among them being the 17<sup>th</sup>-century English philosopher, Mary Astell. The young Astell declares, ‘I love you whom the world calls enemies ... nay, you’re the best of men because you are the truest friends’ (1986: 403–4). By ‘the truest friends,’ the young Astell means those ‘kind monitors ... [who] tell me of my faults ... [whose] spurs correct & mend my halts’ (1986: 404). In the same way teachers admonish their students for the sake of improving them, true Astellian friends admonish one another for the sake of moral growth (Broad 2009: 81–82; 2015: 120; Kolbrener 2007: 63–64; Kendrick 2018: 59–60; Forbes 2021: 489).

Astell’s conception of a friend is bold. After all, the word ‘admonisher’ does not rush to mind when we think about our own friends. And the sorts of relationships whose characteristic activities do include admonishment, e.g., the teacher–student relation, are not exactly paradigms of good friendships. So if the young Astell is right to suggest that a friend is just a kind of admonisher, then many of us will turn out to be friendless or to be woefully wrong about what a friend is. Because our intuitions differ so much from Astell’s, it is worth asking whether Astell really champions such a severe-sounding conception of a friend. And my goal in what follows is to argue that she did. Specifically, I will argue that Astell endorses what I call the *admonisher conception of a friend* because I will show that, according to Astell, a sufficient condition for whether someone is our friend is that they admonish us in her technical sense. So anyone who admonishes us in this sense—be they Mother Teresa, the sinner sitting in confession, or our professional rival—is a friend to us. Put simply, an Astellian friend is an admonisher.

The paper is divided into four sections. Section one motivates the admonisher conception by reminding us of the exalted role that Astell assigns to friends and then suggesting that Astell has powerful reasons to think that an admonisher can fulfill this role. Having exposed some Astellian motivation for equating an admonisher with a friend, section two develops and defends my thesis that admonishment is a sufficient condition for someone to be our Astellian friend by analyzing rich passages from Astell’s most mature work, *The Christian Religion*. With Astell’s admonisher conception on the table, the balance of the paper shows how Astell might have persuaded us to accept her severe-sounding view by sketching the goods that she thinks flow from having an admonisher as a friend. Section three thus contends that, on Astell’s view, there is a class of deep truths about who we are that *only* our admonishing friends can reliably access. Just as Aristotle likens a friend to a mirror that reveals what we look like, warts and all, Astell insists that a friend tells us what we are like, flaws and all (1213a10–26; Cooper 1977: 295–96); section four sketches how admonishment enhances our moral reasoning skills on Astell’s picture.

## ASTELL’S STARTING POINTS

Astell’s theorizing about friendship starts from the perfectionist premise that every rational being seeks to better itself. In a representative text, she declares: ‘a desire to advance and perfect its being, is planted by God in all rational natures’ (2002: 62). Given that Astell believes that our desire to perfect ourselves ultimately stems from God, it is unsurprising to hear her further assert that it is our duty ‘to endeavor to be “perfect”’ since this ‘is to do what God commands’ (2013: 250). Now, Astell instructs that we should improve our understandings above all else because, ‘[a]s to our understandings, I consider, that God did not give us any talent to lay up in a napkin’ (2013: 199; See also 2013: 177; 2002: 102). As Joanne Myers observes, Astell’s use of the word ‘talent’ in this context alludes to a Biblical parable that she believes wonderfully illustrates our duty to nurture our understandings (Myers 2013: 540–43; see Astell 2013: 208–9). Though there are different versions

of the parable, its governing idea is that a master entrusts his money to his servants, all of whom, the parable stresses, have a duty to grow it as best they can. Astell urges that, like the servants in the parable, we must improve the understanding that God grants us to the best of our ability.

Convinced that all of God's creatures have a duty to improve their understandings and keen on pointing out just how far this duty reaches, Astell is at pains to argue that women are just as obliged and able to better their minds as men are obliged and able to perfect their minds. She thus asks rhetorically: 'since God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they [i.e., women] be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our thoughts ... ?' (2002: 80). Astell is reasoning as follows: if men may improve their souls, as nearly everyone in her 17<sup>th</sup>-century England believed, and if there is no discernible difference between a man's soul and a woman's soul, as Astell takes Descartes to have firmly established, then women should be able to perfect their souls as well (Scaltsas 1990: 141). Because Astell thinks that each link in her chain of reasoning is unassailable, she believes that the only way to challenge her argument is to say that women have no souls, a move she criticizes for being 'unphilosophical' for an age that was willing to grant souls to even animals (2002: 81).

Having focused her attention squarely on the advancement of the ladies of her day, Astell then argues that women can improve their minds only if they overcome two formidable forces: bad custom and bad nature. Let us start with bad custom. We can think of Astellian custom as referring to the wider social context in which we find ourselves.<sup>1</sup> As Allauren Forbes helpfully explains: '[c]ustom, 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' (2019: 779). Consider the prejudice that women are naturally inferior to men (Sowaal 2007: 231) or the prejudice that women are nothing over and above their bodies. Astell blames prejudices like these for the regrettable fact that the ladies of her day tend to neglect their minds and the fact that many women readily accept a false self-image according to which they *are* naturally inferior to men, *identical with* their bodies, etc. (Forbes 2019: 786–87). Astell would thus have us believe that it is this harmful social context or bad custom, as Astell scholars call it, that tempts women into making poor choices. As Astell exclaims in an oft-quoted text, it is 'custom therefore, that tyrant custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices' (2002: 67).

Bad nature, on the other hand, refers to the flaws and limitations stemming from human nature itself. Launching into a long discussion about our natural imperfections, Astell reflects:

let us now turn our eyes to our weaknesses and imperfections. And alas! They are so many and so great ... [t]o find our views so short! Our attention so unsteady! Our resolutions so imperfect, so vain! Our possessions and prejudices so inveterate! The bias that education and custom, example and authority have put on our minds so strong! (2013: 185)<sup>2</sup>

Although Astell is happy to lay some of the blame for our imperfection at bad custom's door, notice that she also names other villains in this passage: a certain amount of vanity, a frustratingly limited epistemic gaze, as well as some 'inveterate prejudices.' We will examine each of these villains in more detail below. But for our present purposes, the most important thing to note is that Astell believes that these villains live in the sinner, the saint and everyone in between. For these flaws are, Astell continues, '[m]iserable of nature that the most holy persons groan under; to say nothing of the defilements of the wicked and profane' (2013: 185).

Having argued that it is bad nature and bad custom that prevent women from developing their God-given talents, Astell turns her attention to what she sees as one of their most effective cures: friendship. Describing the advantages of her academy, Astell boasts that it will offer women 'all the innocent pleasures it is able to afford you, and particularly that which is worth all the rest, a noble vertuous and disinterest'd friendship' (2002: 75). Affirming this idea, Astell predicts that,

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1 I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the role that social context plays.

2 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this passage.

should we enroll in her academy, ‘we shall have the opportunity of contracting the purest and noblest friendship,’ a friendship that she proceeds to call ‘a medicine of life’ (2002: 98; 2002: 99). Filling out this medicine metaphor, Astell advises us to choose friends carefully lest ‘we suck in poyson where we expected health’ (2002: 100; See also Ahearn 2016: 52). Continuing the medicine metaphor, Astell reflects: ‘because few of us are humble enough to submit the diseases of our mind to anyone’s cure but our own, it may not be amiss to consider the symptoms of that disease’ (2013: 194). In other words, just as the sick should gladly let a doctor examine their body, the fallen should eagerly enlist the help of others, e.g., their friends.

We have every reason to believe that the ‘diseases’ which Astellian friendship ‘cures’ are bad custom and bad nature. With respect to bad custom, Astell writes: ‘were there more friendship we shou’d have a better world’ (2002: 98). To use the cliché, Astell holds that friendship will make the world a better place and more precisely, a better place *for women* (Forbes 2021: 488). As Maks Sipowicz explains on Astell’s behalf:

true friends establish a social context in which we are no longer subject to the prejudices and customs which are harmful to us. This is to say, friendship provides the proper social context for our moral development and allows the embodied self to be free of those influences which degenerate our passions into vice. (2021: 49; see also Broad 2015: 36; 2007: 168; Detlefsen 2017: 202; Ahearn 2016: 52)

Since the harmful social context was one of the main obstacles preventing women from realizing their potential, its removal makes it likelier, Astell reasons, that women will flourish.<sup>3</sup> Astell’s proposal to the ladies of her day thus partly boils down to the request that they, in the words of one commentator, ‘remove themselves from the sphere of bad custom and develop epistemically and morally advantageous relations—that is, friendships’ (Forbes 2019: 789).

Astell maintains that friendship can match bad nature too. For she believes that friendship ‘has a special force to dilate our hearts, to deliver them from that vicious selfishness and the rest of those sordid passions which express a narrow illiberal temper, and are of such pernicious consequence to mankind’ (2002: 99). To fix ideas, imagine two close friends, Pallavi and Vera. While Pallavi might allow her vanity to rule her if she were left under the aegis of bad nature, Pallavi has in Vera, among other things, a clear and compelling alternative.<sup>4</sup> Upon noticing that Vera donates to charity regularly, Pallavi might find herself disposed to do the same. More generally, Astell believes that the Veras of the world are ‘good example[s], [ones,] it is to be hop’d, [that] will so influence the rest of their sex, that women may no longer pass for those little useless and impertinent animals’ (2002: 76). Moreover, to the extent that Pallavi’s bad nature dominates her with the assistance of bad custom and to the extent that friendship removes us from bad custom’s reach, to that extent Pallavi’s friendship with Vera can also weaken bad nature’s grip on her.

In light of the exalted role that a friend plays for Astell, it is natural to wonder what she takes a friend to be such that they can do the ameliorative work that she assigns to them. And one prominent reading that has emerged revolves around the notion of love. According to what I call the *love-based readings*, what makes two people Astellian friends is a certain kind of love. As Astell shares: ‘by friendship ... I intend ... a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of power and duty, too much to do or suffer for its beloved; and makes no distinction betwixt its friend and its self’ (2002: 99; See also Astell 2005: 101). Leaning on such passages, Jacqueline Broad has developed a reading according to which Astell’s view resembles Aristotle’s venerated account, especially with respect to its demanding nature. Just as the purest Aristotelian friends love one another’s virtue above all else, the truest Astellian friends love each other’s souls above all else (Broad 2009: 71; see also 2015: 118–21). And in the same way Aristotle denies that we can form the deepest kind of friendship with the wicked, Broad’s Astell seems committed to the idea that we cannot be friends with the profane. Like Broad, Nancy Kendrick has defended a love-based reading; but unlike Broad, Kendrick thinks Astell has a more permissive view. Pushing hard on Astell’s Christian convictions, Kendrick claims

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3 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

4 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for challenging me to pursue this point.

that, on Astell's view, the 'love of benevolence' that is the mark of a good Christian 'is to be extended to the wicked as well' (2018: 52). Since this sort of love is also the mark of a friend, however, it follows on Kendrick's reading that we can also be Astellian friends with the wicked.

In a recent twist on these love-based readings, Forbes argues for a 'hybrid' reading (2021). Reconciling the demanding nature that Broad's reading highlights with the permissive nature that Kendrick's account underscores, Forbes argues that Astellian friendship runs along a spectrum (Forbes 2021: 492–93). And as Forbes tells it, this spectrum has two poles: first, the 'general amity' and second, 'particular friendships' (Astell 2002: 100; Astell 2002: 87). Let us start with Astellian general amity. In the same way that Mother Teresa's goodwill toward humanity might earn her the title, 'friend of humanity,' Astell's notion of the 'general amity' picks out a person who cares for all of God's creatures. After all, Astell reports that a good Christian stands ready to love their neighbor, whoever this person happens to be in a given moment, and to offer them 'the most endearing love and universal good-will' (2002: 87). What Astell dubs 'particular friendships' or what we might call close friendships, on the other hand, is exemplified by our relationship with, say, our best friend. Accordingly, close Astellian friendship includes intuitively friendly-qualities such as mutual care, intimate knowledge and trust, qualities that I will discuss in more detail below.

While we might suppose that close friendships and friendships to humanity differ in kind, Forbes argues that, for Astell, their difference is one of degree and that the degrees in question are degrees of love (Forbes 2021: 493; see also Forbes 2021: 501 note 18). Perhaps the most intuitive way to see Astell's point is to note that all our close friends were once strangers to us. But as the love between us and the then-stranger grew, the stronger the relationship became and the stronger the relationship became, the more duties and expectations it placed on us until we finally found ourselves with a close friend. Astell seems to have something like this chain of reasoning in mind when she suggests that particular friendships grow out of the general amity. As Astell puts it: 'particular friendship under the gospel ... makes us friends to the whole human race, and more especially to the body of Christ, so far as power and opportunity allow' (2013: 169). This passage is admittedly dense. But as I read it, Astell is telling us how she thinks close friendships come about; they take hold when the friendship that we have with every human being, regardless of their faith, is gradually nurtured by our 'power' to care for a particular Christian as well as the 'opportunity' to develop special concern for this particular Christian.

The love-based readings thus conceive of an Astellian friend as a kind of lover. And although I do not doubt that Astell conceives of a friend as a kind of lover, I will argue that she also identifies a friend with a kind of admonisher. This admonisher character powers what Astell herself calls 'Christian friendship' (2013: 169) or what I will call her admonisher conception of a friend.<sup>5</sup> According to Astell's *admonisher conception of a friend*, all it takes for someone to be our friend is that they admonish us in Astell's technical sense; whether we love them or whether they love us is beside the point. So if a stranger on the street or my professional rival admonishes me for littering and they do so without any love for me, this act of admonishment still suffices to make them my Astellian friend. And while such a sufficient condition might sound severe on first blush, I hope the foregoing has exposed some of Astell's motivations for endorsing it. For to the extent that she assigns friends the exalted role of improving us, she should be open to the idea that anyone who brings about positive changes in us is a friend (Kendrick 2018: 60–61). It further seems reasonable to suppose that an admonisher can improve us without having love for us, in the same way a coach can improve an athlete while harboring some dislike for the athlete.

Moreover, there is reason to think that the admonisher plays a more foundational role in Astell's system than the lover does because there is a sense in which Astellian admonishment is what leads two people to have Astellian love for one another. To see how, recall Kendrick's claim that, according to Astell, we should have love for the sinner (2018: 52). This claim is puzzling since it is intuitive to think that loving a sinner can corrupt rather than improve us and since there are ways of bonding with a sinner that fall short of loving them, e.g., becoming their mentor. But if Astell endorses the admonisher conception and sees it as more fundamental than her love-based

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<sup>5</sup> This handy label stems from a comment left by an anonymous referee.

conception, as I claim she does, then she can use the admonisher conception to explain why we might be rationally moved to love seemingly unlovable characters like the sinner. For Astell might have assumed that, if a sinner can admonish us and if they uptake our admonishment in the right ways, then such a sinner can be a fine, albeit imperfect, partner in our quest to improve ourselves. For these reasons, such a sinner is worthy of our love. A similar explanation can also account for how two decent people develop love for one another. What I hope all the foregoing has shown, then, is that the admonisher conception of a friend is very much a live possibility for Astell; what I want to do now is argue that she indeed champions it.

## ADMONISHMENT AS A SUFFICIENT CONDITION

I rest my case for thinking that admonishment is a sufficient condition for someone to be our Astellian friend on some eye-catching passages. Consider the following snippet from the *Christian Religion*, where a mature Astell declares:

next to the grace of God ... there's not any blessing comparable to this of a prudent and honest advisor. Friend I should say, if I followed my own sense, but I submit to the usage of the world, since we certainly lose what people call their friendship, by presuming to tell them the truth, though ever so kindly and modestly. (2013: 169)

There is a lot to unpack in this passage. To start, we can note that Astell here subtly separates her own conception of a friend from that of the world's and in a way that is reminiscent of the young Astell. For recall that the young Astell writes in her poem, 'I love you whom the world calls enemies ... nay, you're the best of men because you are the truest friends, tho this appear a paradox' (1986: 403-4). And just as the mature Astell highlights honesty as an important quality of a friend, the young Astell insists that the truest friends are those 'kind monitors [who] tell me of my faults, [whose] spurs correct and mend my halts' (1986: 404).

Having distinguished her view of a friend from that of the world's, Astell then fleshes out her view in terms of admonishment and improvement. Elaborating on admonishment in her poem, the young Astell reasons: 'if the merits of a friend be weigh'd, his worth in a just balance laid, light flattery will blow away, and just reproof will all the rest out-weigh' (1986, 404; cf. Broad 2009: 73). So while Pallavi might adore Vera's frugality, Pallavi ought to treasure Vera's honesty and more specifically, Vera's ability and willingness to express her honesty in the form of admonishment. The more mature Astell develops this chain of reasoning further when she announces: 'I take friendship to consist in advising, admonishing, and reproving as there is occasion, and in watching over each other's souls for their mutual good' (2013: 169; see also Broad 2015: 120). As I read this passage, Astell holds that friendship has two ingredients: admonishment and improvement. Because other scholars have discussed the improvement element of Astell's view (Broad 2015: 119; Forbes 2021: 488-89; Kendrick 2018: 60-61), I set aside that ingredient for now. Moreover, for our present purposes, I propose we take a step back and appreciate Astell's big picture, which, in my view, is that what makes someone a friend to us is whether they improve us via admonishment. Put differently, a sufficient condition for someone to be our Astellian friend is that they improve us via admonishment.

Although this condition invites a host of questions, such as why the notion of love is notably absent from it, let us set aside these sorts of questions and focus on the more basic question of what it means to admonish someone in the first place. And Astell is quick to add that to admonish someone in her technical sense is not to harangue, harass or humiliate them. Speaking of the flaws that the students of her academy will inevitably have, Astell warns: 'what faults they bring with them shall be corrected by sweetness not severity; by friendly admonitions, not magisterial reproofs' (2002: 89). Let us fix ideas with a case. Suppose Pallavi has just started a new job and is throwing a dinner party to get to know her new coworkers. To put herself at ease, Pallavi invites her close friend Vera and to make her coworkers comfortable, Pallavi allows each of them to bring a friend. Once the guests arrive, they all engage in conversation. At some point, however, Pallavi makes some rather distasteful jokes about her boss's appearance in an effort to bond with her guests. Commonsense suggests that anyone at this party would be within their rights to admonish Pallavi; but they would be abusing this right, on Astell's view, if they yelled at, insulted or condescended to Pallavi.



Having explained what admonishment is not, Astell goes on to explain what it is by acknowledging not one, but two kinds of admonishment: first, that which is proper to the friend of humanity and second, that which is fitting for close friends. With respect to the admonishment that falls to the friend of humanity, Astell instructs, ‘this [admonishment] indeed is to be done to all of mankind so far as we can’ (2013: 170). In particular, Astell tells us that the friend of humanity’s admonishment consists in offering a conversational corrective or, more precisely, in making

A prudent and gentle insinuation of something useful in conversation; an undaunted and impartial correction of vice where we are superiors; a frank condemning it where we are equals; and the expressing some way or other a modest dislike even where we are inferiors. (2013: 170)

So the friend of humanity might admonish Pallavi by declaring that they do not find her jokes to be funny, by insisting that such jokes are hurtful or by gingerly implying that Pallavi has erred in some way in telling her jokes. Should they provide Pallavi with some such conversational corrective, they will have discharged their duty since, Astell claims, the ‘magnanimously asserting the cause of God and religion in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation ... is all that can be done in the common course of the world, and in general conversation’ (2013: 170).

Notably, Astell does not think that the friend of humanity’s admonishment needs to be driven primarily by their love for the target of admonishment. Instructing us on how we ought to receive admonishment, Astell warns: ‘Though he should discover more pride, or passion, or malice, than goodwill, he will however make the best of everyone’s observation, and know how to use it, though it be not to the admonisher’s purpose’ (2013: 169). In brief, the intentions of the friend of humanity do not matter. Indeed, the letter of Astell’s passage suggests that she has an extreme case in mind. To see it, imagine that one of the guests at Pallavi’s party, Kurt, dislikes Pallavi because Kurt sees Pallavi as one of his main professional rivals and because Pallavi has been rather rude to Kurt at their work meetings.<sup>6</sup> When Kurt hears Pallavi tell her distasteful jokes, it occurs to Kurt that Pallavi has given him an outlet through which he can vent his pent-up frustrations with her, while looking like a hero to their boss and colleagues. If Kurt admonishes Pallavi with these less than noble intentions, he would, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, still be her Astellian friend. After all, for Kurt to look like a hero in the eyes of the guests, he has to at least pretend to care for Pallavi and correct her gently. And so long as his pretension leads Pallavi toward improvement, Kurt is her Astellian friend and more generally, a friend of humanity.

The admonishment that Astell associates with close friends, on the other hand, demands more than a conversational corrective; it also requires action and good intention. Immediately after describing the admonishment fitting to the friend of humanity, Astell adds: ‘But we must go further with our friends. ... We should watch all opportunities, attack all avenues, call in all assistances to serve them in their most important interest’ (2013: 170). As Pallavi’s Astellian friend, Vera must provide Pallavi with a conversational corrective after hearing Pallavi’s distasteful jokes. But as Pallavi’s close Astellian friend, Vera cannot stop there. For Astell clarifies elsewhere: ‘nor are any friends so acceptable as those who tell you faithfully of your faults *and* take the properest method to amend ‘em’ (2002: 123, italics added.). So in addition to pointing out that Pallavi’s jokes are distasteful, Vera might take Pallavi to see comics who manage to be funny without being mean. And Vera must do so because she wants to see Pallavi improve, rather than because Vera wants to support the performing arts. In short, the intentions of a close friend do matter because, in Astell’s words, ‘an attempt to reform our neighbors ought not to be made, without some probability of success as well as a good intention’ (2013: 168).

Aware of the delicate nature of correcting others, Astell teaches us how to admonish most effectively. For starters, she contends that, of the two sorts of admonition that she acknowledges, the sort performed by our close friends is more effective. For a passage we have already looked at continues as follows: ‘This [admonishing for the sake of improvement] indeed is to be done to all mankind so far as we can, as has been shown above, but it will not be done to any great purpose,

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6 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this sort of case to my attention.

except where we have an intimate acquaintance and particular endearments' (2013: 170; see also 2013: 168). In other words, it is only with our close friends, those we know, trust and care for deeply, that our admonishment can make a big difference. Underscoring this idea, Astell asks:

What remains then to be done for a friend in particular? Nothing that I know of, but to prefer him in our charity, because we are best acquainted with his affairs; and, which is the greatest of all charities, to watch over his soul, and to promote his perfection to the utmost. (2013: 170)

Collectively, these passages suggest that Astell thinks that close friends will be more effective in admonishing us because they enjoy three advantages: greater knowledge, greater concern and greater trust. First, of all the people at Pallavi's party, it is Vera and Vera alone who knows Pallavi well enough to know that the best place and time to admonish Pallavi is, say, right after her mood-boosting yoga sessions. Second, it is Vera and Vera alone who cares enough about Pallavi to see to it that Pallavi will, in fact, take whatever additional steps are necessary for her to outgrow her juvenile sense of humor. Third and finally, unlike Kurt and the strangers at the dinner party, whom Pallavi might not readily trust, Vera has earned Pallavi's trust through her unmistakably good intentions toward Pallavi and her past admonitions; these 'particular endearments,' in turn, make it likelier that Pallavi will give Vera's advice greater consideration.

Finally, Astell thinks that it is unwise for the admonisher to correct a flaw that they themselves are currently struggling with. She thus cautions: 'He who corrects in another what he is guilty of himself ... who does not begin his reformation at home, will do no service to his neighbor' (2013: 168). After all, the person who has a similarly juvenile sense of humor might be amused by Pallavi's jokes and thus be utterly blind to the fact that they are wrong. Matters would be different if such a like-mind had already managed to reform their juvenile sense of humor when they hear Pallavi's jokes. For the fact that this individual once battled the same foe that Pallavi is currently facing might give them special insight into Pallavi's struggle and this special insight, in turn, might well make their admonishment of her all the more effective.<sup>7</sup> But unless and until this person has fully mastered their own juvenile sense of humor, it is unlikely that they will possess this hindsight and, as a consequence, it is improbable that they will be able to admonish Pallavi better. For these reasons, Astell concludes: 'it is most unseemly and unreasonable to reprove others when we ourselves are guilty' (2013: 169).

Having described the two species of admonishment to her satisfaction, Astell turns her attention to how we should uptake admonishment. For Astell thinks, '[i]t is to no purpose to say how the duty of Christian admonition ought to be performed, till people are convinced how it ought to be received' (2013: 168). In particular, Astell holds that we have a duty to ourselves to accept admonishment:

as I placed Christian friendship in giving frank advice, so I now reckon the taking it among the duties we owe to ourselves. Nor can we be more unkind to our own souls, or guilty of a greater folly, than by supposing we are too great, or too wise, or too good, to be advised. (2013: 200)

There are two points to observe in this passage. First, Astell here reduces friendship to admonishment, which reinforces my earlier claim that a sufficient condition for someone to be our Astellian friend is that they admonish us. For the letter of the first part of the passage suggests that Astell takes friendship to be exhausted by the 'giving [of] frank advice' and this amounts to admonishment. Second, Astell holds that our duty to uptake admonishment stems from what we owe to ourselves and she further claims that the person who is committed to bettering themselves will recognize that they have such a duty. After all, when it comes to admonishment, '[h]ow it is to be taken is not hard to learn, for he who truly thirsts after perfection, will be glad of *any sort of help*' (2013: 169, italics added). So should Kurt admonish Pallavi with his less than noble intentions, Pallavi owes it to herself to separate the chaff that is Kurt's ill-intentions from the kernels of truth in his admonition.

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7 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this point.



Now, it is natural to suppose that what ensures that we uptake admonishment as we should is that the admonisher will guide us all along the way, up to and including the point where we replace our faulty judgment with the admonisher's wiser judgment. For an analogy, consider the reasons we often accept medical advice. If my doctor tells me I need more fiber in my diet, I will gladly allow her judgment to replace mine even if I do not understand her explanation and even if I disagree with her. After all, I trust my doctor and I trust my doctor because, visit after visit, she has demonstrated that she has good medical judgment and goodwill towards me. How goes the doctor-patient relation, so goes the admonisher-advisee relation. For like a good doctor, Vera has demonstrated, time after time, that she has good judgment and goodwill towards Pallavi. This history of trust and goodwill, in turn, suggests that, even if on this particular occasion, Pallavi cannot understand or agree with Vera's explanations of why Pallavi's jokes are inappropriate, Pallavi should still replace her faulty judgment with Vera's wiser judgment.

Astell, however, does not think that matters are so simple. Speaking of an alleged friend, Astell confesses:

I could never understand the meaning of some who call themselves our friends, *to be sure I could never comply with them*, when they expect to be followed *right or wrong* in their principles, party, and passions, looking for a blind approbation. (2013: 171, italics added.)

What Astell finds so troubling about the model sketched above is that it invites us to temporarily suspend what she sees as God's most precious gift to us—our epistemic agency. Speaking of those who dare to 'place themselves in God's stead and judge for us,' Astell warns: 'it were the utmost baseness to submit to their usurpation and tyranny, by parting with that most valuable privilege, and infeasible right, of judging for ourselves' (2013: 200). Rather than let others think for us, Astell insists: 'we must judge *finally* for ourselves' (2013: 200, italics added.; See also Astell 2002: 81; Astell 2002: 156). So even if Vera has demonstrated to Pallavi that Vera has good judgment and goodwill towards Pallavi, Astell maintains that Pallavi still owes it to herself to inspect Vera's counsel just as carefully as she might inspect Kurt's advice and to accept Vera's counsel only after Pallavi has seen for herself why Vera is right.

A good test for whether someone uptakes admonishment in the right way is to observe what happens if they are asked about their behavior by a neutral third-party. Suppose that a such person asks Pallavi to repeat her jokes and that Pallavi declines. Surprised by Pallavi's newfound reticence, this neutral third-party presses Pallavi to explain herself. For our purposes, there are two ways Pallavi might respond. First, she might say something along the lines of, 'My friend Vera told me to stop telling those jokes and Vera has never been wrong about these things.' In this case, Pallavi does not uptake in the right way because she has not deployed her epistemic agency to figure out for herself why her jokes were wrong. In this case, the admonisher's judgment has problematically replaced the advisee's judgment. Second, Pallavi might say something to the effect of: 'I wouldn't like it if people made fun of my appearance, so I'd rather not do that to others.' In this case, Pallavi uptakes properly because she has deployed her epistemic agency to figure out for herself why her jokes are inappropriate. In this second case, the admonisher's judgment has merely guided the advisee, making the right judgment more salient to the advisee and inviting them to work out for themselves why this judgment is right.

With Astell's notion of uptake on the table, we have the main pillars of Astell's admonisher conception of a friend in view. The closer a friend is to us, the more their admonishment will involve; should a stranger on the street admonish us for littering, they need only call out our mistake in conversation. On the other hand, should our best friend admonish us for littering, they would need to see to it that we do our very best to not litter next time and they would have to push us toward these actions for the sake of helping us. But no matter how minimal or involved the admonishment is, the mere fact that someone improves us through their admonishment suffices to make them our Astellian friend. In this way, Astell's stance on friendship is indeed permissive. To borrow Kendrick's line of thought, 'anyone—the wicked, the good, or our enemies—can ... be a friend by bringing about friendship's design' of improving us (2018: 61). What we have just seen is that the admonishers among us also belong on this list since they too can improve us.

The reading of an Astellian friend that I have just developed and defended revolves around admonishment and this focus might cause us some concern.<sup>8</sup> As a characteristic activity of friendship, admonishment is surely not as enjoyable as going bowling together and as a governing condition for whether someone is a friend, admonishment does not seem as intuitively appealing as the affection that the love-based readings highlight. Moreover, it seems that the more someone discharges the duties of Astellian friendship, the more they will admonish us. But the more our Astellian friend admonishes us, the more they risk hurting our feelings and ultimately, ruining the friendship.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is the ‘paradox’ that the young Astell gestures at in her poem (1986: 404). What is beyond dispute, however, is that the mature Astell is acutely aware of the danger that her admonisher conception of a friend presents. As she puts it in a passage we have already examined, ‘we certainly lose what people call their friendship, by presuming to tell them the truth, though ever so kindly and modestly’ (2013: 169).

Although Astell acknowledges the risks involved in her view, she ultimately stands by it. As a first step in addressing this concern, Astell insists that whether a friend brings us pleasure is not the question we should be asking in either forming friendships or in theorizing about friendship. I believe this is one reason why Astell is keen to separate her view of what makes someone a friend from that of the world. As the young Astell says, those who conceive of friendship in a more intuitive way in fact ‘prostitute that sacred name, unto the partners of their sin and shame’ (1986: 404; see also 2002: 75). Astell fleshes out this idea in more detail elsewhere, stating ‘friendships are not cemented by intrigues nor spent in vain diversions, but in search of knowledge, and acquisition of vertuous habits’ (2002: 123). As Astell sees the matter, our friends should aid us in learning and growth first and foremost. And while Astell would be happy to hear that our friends bring us joy, by either helping us improve or by playing a game of cards with us, she denies that pleasure is what we should treasure in a friend or in the ensuing friendship.

As a second and more significant step in addressing this concern, Astell draws our attention to how she thinks having an admonisher as a friend can shape us for the better. Returning to her medicine metaphor yet again, Astell shares this certainty: ‘the faithful wounds of a Christian friend, do only let out our corruption in order to health and beauty’ (2013: 168). Just as the sick should relish medicine, despite its not tasting like candy, the fallen should delight in admonishment, despite the fact that being admonished is not fun. Specifically, Astell argues that the sort of friend that she equates with an admonisher can improve us in two profound ways. First, they can enhance our moral reasoning skills and second, they can furnish us with precious self-knowledge. My goal in the paper’s remaining two sections is to trace out these two benefits of having an admonisher as a friend, beginning with self-knowledge.

To see how Astell’s view of self-knowledge intersects with her admonisher conception of a friend, let us revisit her perfectionist premise. Astell writes: ‘Our duty to ourselves consists in making the best use of our talents, and hereby aspiring to the highest degree of happiness and perfection of which we are capable’ (2013: 179). For our present purposes, it is Astell’s next few lines that matter most. Astell announces:

in order to this we must know ourselves, be acquainted with the weaknesses and the excellencies of human nature, that we may provide against the one and improve the other ... [f]or if we know ourselves, we shall know what is our true good. (2013: 179; See also Astell 2013: 202)

Although Astell here speaks of the ‘weaknesses and the excellencies of human nature’ in general terms, she does intend for her reader to seek knowledge of *their particular* goods and evils. As she

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

<sup>9</sup> Another concern in this neighborhood is, what happens when we no longer need admonishment? As one anonymous referee asks: will such a day represent the end of an Astellian friendship? Though I think Astell would answer this question in the affirmative, I do not think that she would see this possibility as a real probability since, for her, the day when we no longer need admonishment would be the day when we have entirely rid ourselves of our bad nature. But I doubt that she thinks such an elimination is possible.

tells us elsewhere: '[o]ur danger then is from ourselves, from the ignorance of our own weakness, errors and sins' (2013: 186). In Pallavi's case, Astell's suggestion is that Pallavi ought to work on her rudeness and that, in order for Pallavi to do so, she must first come to know *that she is rude*. So for Astell, the journey of self-perfection starts with knowledge of our virtues and vices.

According to a strategy that was popular in Astell's day, such self-knowledge can be acquired through self-reflection. As Aaron Garrett reminds us: 'The paucity of public virtue and vigorous public discussion after the Glorious Revolution suggested that self-knowledge was far more likely to be acquired in such times by turning inward' (2012: 268). A proponent of the self-reflection strategy would thus recommend that Pallavi self-reflect if she wishes to know herself and furthermore, that she should refine her ability to self-reflect by studying texts like Descartes's *Meditations*. After all, Garrett adds that early modern philosophers like Descartes 'wished to show their readership and their students, friends, and followers a means to self-knowledge' (2012: 255). In Descartes's case, the idea is that his *Meditations* can teach Pallavi a method for acquiring knowledge that is so general that it can yield the self-knowledge necessary for her self-improvement just as well as it can yield the knowledge needed to do metaphysics. And the method is meditation or self-reflection.

Given that some core elements of Astell's philosophy are strikingly similar to Descartes's philosophy and that this similarity has been stressed by several Astell commentators (Broad 2007; 2015: 27; Detlefsen 2017: 195–96; Sowaal 2007; Ahearn 2016), we might plausibly suppose that Astell herself adheres to the self-reflection strategy. For starters, Astell endorses six rules for thinking in the second part of her *Serious Proposal* (2002: 176–79) and her rules bear a glaring resemblance to the rules that Descartes outlines in his *Discourse* (1985: 31–34) as well as to those of the Port Royal Logic.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Astell is explicit that we can gain some self-knowledge through self-reflection. It is for this reason that she exhorts us to

attend [to] the least beatings of our own heart. Our own heart which is indeed one of the best books we can study, especially in respect of morality, and one principal reason why we're no better proficient in useful knowledge, is because we don't duly consult it. (2002: 216–17)

If we do read 'our own hearts,' then Astell thinks we will acquire what she calls 'lower degrees of knowledge' (2002: 131). And we have every reason to think that these lower degrees of knowledge will include lower degrees of *self-knowledge*, e.g., that we exist, that we think, that we are hungry, etc. (Sowaal 2007: 237, see also 240 note 11).

Some Astell interpreters have suggested that Astell thinks self-reflection can even deliver knowledge of our virtues and vices. Liking the reader of the second part of Astell's *Serious Proposal* to a kind of Cartesian meditator, Alice Sowaal asserts that such a meditator will 'reflect on the reach of her understanding, and thus she will come to know *her* strengths and weaknesses' (2007: 237, italics added.). So should Pallavi self-reflect in the way that Descartes's *Meditations* teaches, she will eventually come to know that she is rude. There is something intuitive about this claim. Forbes nicely brings out a part of its appeal when she describes the first-person epistemic authority that Astell would like to see every woman wield. For Forbes argues: '[u]nder most circumstances, there is a presumption of correctness of one's claims about one's own mind' (2019: 787). Though Forbes does not explicitly include claims about our strengths and weaknesses in her examples (2019: 787), we could be forgiven for supposing that her observation extends to such claims; for example, I have just as much privileged access to the fact that I am lazy as I do to the fact that I prefer drama over comedy.

For my own part, I doubt that Astell thinks reflecting on ourselves can reliably yield knowledge of our strengths and weaknesses. Through luck or some quirk of the meditator, self-reflection might yield knowledge of their virtues and vices on some occasions. But it is not a reliable source of self-knowledge on Astell's view. As a first step toward seeing Astell's skepticism, we should note that she maintains that self-knowledge is hard to come by. In one text, we find Astell saying, 'how apt we are to disguise our selves, how hard it is to know our own hearts' (2002: 100). She broaches

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<sup>10</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for drawing this idea to my attention.

a similar idea when she observes that the ability ‘to know our own strength and neither to over nor underate our selves is one of the most material points of wisdom and which indeed we are most commonly ignorant of’ (2002: 154). Elsewhere, Astell wonders whether it is our bad nature or our ‘having too high or low an opinion of our own abilities’ that presents a bigger challenge to our advancement (2013: 201). And she concludes that it ‘is not easily determined’ which is ‘the greater hindrance’ (2013: 201). I thus agree with Broad’s assessment that Astell ‘follows Norris and Malebranche, and not the orthodox Cartesian position’ on which self-knowledge is, in some sense, easily accessible (2015: 65).

One reason Astell is skeptical of our ability to know our strengths and weaknesses through self-reflection stems from her conviction that bad nature gives each of us deep-seated biases about ourselves. Elaborating on these biases, Astell explains:

how large soever our knowledge in other things may be, we are not well acquainted with our own hearts. All which consider’d, how confidently soever we’re perswaded of our own integrity, tho we think we have penetrated to the very bottom of our hearts, it wou’d not be amiss to suspect our selves sometimes, and to fear a bias, even at the very instant we take care to avoid one. (2002: 186)

What is so striking about this passage is that Astell strongly suggests that we have a ‘bias’ that might be unconsciously but systematically steering our self-reports. Having discovered her rudeness during a cool moment of self-reflection, Pallavi’s biases about herself might then seduce her into supposing that her rudeness is not as bad as it seems, that she had very good reasons for acting the way she did or that her so-called rudeness is actually a form of bluntness that ought to be celebrated. And Pallavi will be inclined to ‘spin’ her behavior in these subtle ways, Astell reasons, even if she takes steps to check her biases, steps like doubting her integrity or adhering to Astell’s rules for thinking. In these ways, Astell thinks we effectively ‘hide our faults under the borrowed name of vertue; an old device taught us by the enemy of our souls’ (2002: 132). More generally, Astell believes that these subtle acts of self-deception are common since she ascribes their cause to bad nature and in particular, to the ‘pride and vitious self-love, to which all are so prone, and which hide themselves under so many disguises’ (2002: 185).

Astell further suggests that these subtle acts of self-deception disqualify us from being the best judges of ourselves. For Astell thinks that, when our neighbor’s judgment is clouded,

This every one of us is apt to discern in others but we’re blind to it in ourselves. We can readily say that it is pride or obstinacy, interest or passion or in a word self-love that keeps our neighbor from conviction, but all this while imagine our own hearts are very clear of ‘em, tho’ more impartial judges are of another mind. (2002: 185; See also Astell 2013: 188)

Astell here flatly asserts that there are ‘more impartial judges’ of ourselves. What is more, she claims that, among these ‘more impartial judges,’ are our friends and enemies. For Astell shares: ‘To help us to the knowledge of our own capacities, the informations of our friends, nay even of our enemies may be useful’ (2002: 156). Let us take Astell’s claim about our friends and enemies in turn, starting with our enemies. To this end, recall Kurt, Pallavi’s professional rival. It is plausible to suppose with Astell that a rival like Kurt will not be blind to Pallavi’s faults in the same way that Pallavi is; if anything, Kurt might be especially skilled at and motivated to look for Pallavi’s foibles and will likely perceive Pallavi’s jokes for what they in fact are—as some kind of character flaw, rather than a virtue that ought to be celebrated.

But the person who has the best information about our virtues and vices is, Astell claims, our friend. Affirming her view about the goal of friendship, Astell declares: ‘he who will not see his Friend’s Infirmities is not like to inform him of them, and so frustrates the great Design of Friendship, which is to discover and correct the most minute Irregularity, and to purifie and perfect the Mind with the greatest Accuracy’ (2005: 102). For our present purposes, the most important piece of this passage is its final three words, ‘the greatest accuracy,’ because this phrase suggests that Astell thinks our friends are the best at discovering our strengths and weaknesses. One reason Astell

is so confident in our friends is that she takes them to be, above all else, honest. As she frames it elsewhere: '[w]hy do we trust our friends but because their truth and honesty appears to us equivalent to the confidence we repose in 'em?' (2002: 174). Drawing on her honesty, as well as her intimate knowledge of Pallavi, Vera might be able to interpret Pallavi's behavior in ways that no one else can. For example, Vera might be able to see Pallavi's jokes as a sign of not just some character flaw or other but more specifically, of Pallavi's inept social skills. A stranger who is honest but barely knows Pallavi, on the other hand, is unlikely to be able to diagnose Pallavi's foul jokes with such precision and nuance.

On the basis of these texts, I conclude that Astell does not think self-reflection can yield knowledge of our strengths and weaknesses as reliably as a friend can. In denying that self-reflection can reliably reveal our strengths and weaknesses, Astell identifies an eye-opening exception to both the self-reflection strategy that was so popular in her day and to the Cartesian rules for thinking that she herself so admired. As Broad frames Astell's driving insight, '[t]he Cartesian rules for thinking can only get us so far' (Broad 2015: 91, see also 33). For '[t]he problem' that Astell sees, Broad continues, 'is that our moral failings, such as our pride and misplaced self-love, prevent us from embracing the truth' (2015: 34). By contrast, Astell does not think that our friends suffer from the same moral failings. Moreover, if I was right to say that an Astellian friend is an admonisher, someone who is honest first and foremost and who is unafraid to express this honesty in the form of admonishment, then we have a clean explanation as to why Astell might have believed that a friend is able and willing to tell us the deep but difficult truths about ourselves, truths that our bad nature would otherwise hide from us.<sup>11</sup>

## ENHANCING THE MIND VIA FRIENDS

In addition to maintaining that our admonishing friends hold the key to vital pieces of self-knowledge, Astell also asserts that our admonishing friends can enhance our moral reasoning skills (Detlefsen 2016: 88; 2017: 203). To better understand this strand of Astell's thinking, let us examine three ways in which she thinks the mind can improve: by getting better at comparing things, by learning as much as possible, and by acquiring good habits of mind. First, Astell believes that we can improve our minds by strengthening its ability to compare things (2002: 205). She thus writes: 'the frailties of a true Christian ... arise from want of ability or leisure to compare things as we ought' (2013: 256; see also 2002: 64). One way in which we can get better at comparing things is by knowing which features we ought to concentrate on for the sake of performing the comparison. Take, say, Pallavi's comparing a triangle to a square and her coming to see that their shapes are different. In making this comparison, Pallavi must concentrate on the right properties—shape as opposed to color—and draw the right inferences from her observations, namely that the shapes are different.

Second, Astell holds that we can learn more things. She thus shares: 'The business of the understanding is to contemplate truth, and it is so much the more excellent in proportion as it is enlarged, and more able to take in, to consider and compare, the greater number of truths' (2013: 200). It is therefore unsurprising to hear Astell urge us to 'enlarge our ideas, seek out new fields of knowledge, whereby to rectify our first mistakes' (2002: 92, see also 78). So even the mind that already knows the truths of mathematics and those of music should pursue more knowledge by, say, studying philosophy (Astell 2002: 82–83). Now, Astell does think that some truths demand our attention more urgently than others. The truths concerning our strengths and weaknesses, for example, would be among the first truths that we should learn on Astell's view since they have a clear practical significance for us. By contrast, she thinks, '[t]ruths merely speculative and which have no influence upon practice, which neither contribute to the good of soul or body, are but idle amusements, an impertinent and criminal wast of time' (2002: 143).

Third, Astell maintains that we should cultivate good habits of mind: 'the best use we can make of our mind consists in furnishing it with such qualities and dispositions as may enable it to judge according to the eternal reason of things' (2013: 200). With respect to 'dispositions' and 'qualities,'

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<sup>11</sup> It is less obvious that the love-based readings can offer a similarly clean explanation since, in the words of the young Astell, 'a friend's loving eyes are sometimes blind, and will not any blemish find' (1986: 404).



Astell is likely referring to the habits of mind that her six rules for thinking would foster (2002: 176–79).<sup>12</sup> Take Astell's third rule, for just one example. According to this rule, we ought to break questions down into simpler components and then move from the simple to the complex (Astell 2002: 177). If the question before us is whether we ought to choose Astell's proposal for education or the traditional proposal for marriage, we might break this complex question down into simpler components by first asking ourselves what the benefits of each proposal are. Will an education help us prosper? What about a marriage? Astell maintains that this habit of breaking complex questions down 'is indeed most necessary in difficult questions which will scarce be unravell'd but in this manner by pieces' (2002: 178).

Having sketched the three ways in which she thinks women can improve their minds, Astell then recommends friendship and in particular, the admonishment among friends, as a means for bringing about these improvements. Addressing the prospective students of her academy, Astell declares: 'You will only quit the Chat of insignificant people for an ingenious Conversation ... for the seasonable Reproofs and wholsom Counsels of your hearty well-wishers and affectionate Friends, which will procure you those perfections' (2002: 74). To see Astell's idea, let us imagine how Vera's admonishing conversation with Pallavi might go. Having carefully chosen the proper place, time and manner for admonishing, Vera might begin by matter-of-factly stating that Pallavi's jokes were inappropriate. Vera might continue building her case by inviting Pallavi to compare a less risky strategy for bonding with her coworkers with the one that Pallavi deployed during her dinner party. Tapping into her insider-knowledge of Pallavi, the supportive social context of friendship, as well as its 'special force' to inspire us, Vera should be able to get Pallavi to a point where Pallavi finds herself wondering whether her jokes were problematic. Should Pallavi play her part, she should examine Vera's advice critically and make the inference that her pride would otherwise hide from her—that her jokes were, in fact, wrong.

It is plain how persistent participation in these sorts of conversations might improve our moral reasoning skills. For it should be clear how these sorts of conversations can expose us to new truths. In Pallavi's case, she gains the precious self-knowledge that she is rude, that are better ways to bond with her coworkers and so on. Moreover, these sorts of conversations allow us to get better at comparing things. Vera's presence raises the likelihood that Pallavi will base her comparison of ways to bond with one's coworkers on the right properties—the overall impact that they have on others rather than just their ability to solicit laughter—and that Pallavi draws the right inferences. These sorts of conversations can also cultivate good habits of mind. Confronted with the question of what is the best way to bond with one's coworkers, Pallavi might, at Vera's behest, break this question down into simpler parts and start by getting clear on what 'best' means in this context. Moreover, these improvements more fully explain Astell's earlier claim that we cannot replace our faulty judgment with the admonisher's wiser judgment. For if Pallavi were to do so, their conversation would be much shorter, presumably stopping somewhere near the point where Vera matter-of-factly tells Pallavi that her jokes were wrong. And if so, the admonishing conversation would present fewer learning opportunities for Pallavi.

## CONCLUSION

My aim has been to show that an Astellian friend is just an admonisher of sorts. For in Astell's scheme of things, a friend's role is, first and foremost, to make us better people. And while one prominent reading suggests that Astell sees a certain kind of lover as fulfilling this exalted role (Broad 2009; Kendrick 2018; Forbes 2021), I have claimed that Astell also has good reason to suppose that a certain kind of admonisher can realize this role and that, in Astell's system, such an admonisher plays a more fundamental role than the lover does. Moreover, I sketched how Astell explicitly equates a friend with an admonisher and how she technically conceives of admonition. To persuade us of her admittedly severe-sounding view, Astell draws our attention to the benefits of having an admonisher as a friend. Chief among these benefits is knowledge of our strengths and weaknesses. For unlike early modern philosophers who hold that we can gain knowledge

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<sup>12</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for drawing this idea to my attention.



of our virtues and vices on our own, Astell believes that we can reliably acquire such knowledge only from friends who are unafraid to stab us in the front with their honesty or, in a word, from an admonisher. So the next time that a stranger admonishes us—I am sure it will not be too long since none of us is perfect—we would do well to take a moment and wonder: is this admonisher a foe in the making or a friend in waiting?<sup>13</sup>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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