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Mary Wollstonecraft

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In *Liberalism*, Michael Festl (ed.), Stuttgart: Metzler (forthcoming).

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) was a significant and wide-ranging moral and political philosopher of the late Enlightenment period whose work remains relevant today. She is most well-known as an early feminist and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and her analysis of the social condition of women, and the structural nature of their subjection, retains much of its radical force. Her feminist arguments, of course, are both derived from, and in turn shape, her overall philosophical framework which is often seen as being located within the liberal tradition. This is a reasonable attribution, though it must be made both cautiously and with qualification. As we shall see, Wollstonecraft did not passively absorb or merely apply the intellectual concepts around her but consciously critiqued them and innovatively extended them.

Life and Works

Born in 1759 in the Spitalfields district of London, Wollstonecraft was the second of seven children. She grew up in difficult circumstances, with an abusive father who squandered the family's modest wealth, a harsh mother, and, as was standard for a girl at this time, she received no formal education. The family moved several times across the country, and Wollstonecraft also worked for a time in Ireland as a governess. In 1784 she established a school in Newington Green where she met the non-conformist minister and moral philosopher, Richard Price who was to be a significant influence in her intellectual development. Though a lifelong Anglican by conviction, Wollstonecraft moved extensively within radical dissenting circles. Shortly after arriving at Newington Green, she began writing and translating as a staff writer for the newly established intellectual magazine, the *Analytical Review*. In late 1792, she moved to Paris, just as France declared war on Britain and the Reign of Terror was beginning, mixing with leading Girondists and English supporters of the Revolution. She returned to England in 1795 and married the anarchist philosopher William Godwin in March 1797. Less than six months later, Wollstonecraft died aged 38 a few days after giving birth to her daughter, the novelist Mary Shelley.

During her short life, Wollstonecraft was a prolific writer. Her early works were innovative and addressed the themes of education and the condition of women for which she would later be known, including a short novel, a collection of inspiring stories for young children, a tract on the education of daughters, and an anthology of useful writing for young women. It was, however, the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in November 1790 that marked a turning point in her philosophical career. The tract was a response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which had only been published a month earlier, earning her the distinction of being the first published reply ahead of those by established writers such as Catharine Macaulay and Thomas Paine. While this was a hurried essay, in it we see the emergence of a philosophical framework that she would develop over the rest of her career and within which she would go on to structure her criticism of the social condition of women. Her approach was built around the central concept of freedom from arbitrary power as both an individual and a collective ideal, grounded in the rational and moral natural law and entailing a high standard of social and material equality, all of which are present in this first *Vindication*. While she would make this framework her own, she owed a substantial intellectual debt to Price and Macaulay – whose *Letters on Education* Wollstonecraft had also just read and reviewed in November 1790 – as well as to Locke ([s. ch. ???](#)) and Rousseau ([s. ch. ???](#)) amongst others. In *A*

Vindication of the Rights of Woman, which followed shortly afterwards, Wollstonecraft would call for the wholesale restructuring of the social, economic and political relations between the sexes, the education of women for citizenship and the extension to them of the political franchise.

While in Paris, Wollstonecraft wrote *An Historical and Moral History of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794). Substantively, Wollstonecraft drew extensively on a number of contemporary sources in this work, to which she stuck very closely (Bour 2010). As Wollstonecraft concedes, however, she wrote the book as a philosopher rather than as a historian, and her insights and reflections on the events give us a rich and reflective analysis of the nature of society, the state and revolution that built on the framework outlined above. Following this, she published *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) which was influential in the development of travel writing. Uncompleted upon her death was a second novel, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, which supplements, somewhat bleakly, many of the arguments initiated in the second *Vindication*.

Liberalism and Republicanism

Whether Wollstonecraft ought to be considered as a liberal thinker is a contested issue. To a large extent, the answer will depend on what we are doing when we classify her. However, while it is always worth viewing any philosopher in the correct context, it is perhaps more so for Wollstonecraft than for many others. The study of the history of political philosophy has been overwhelmingly as a male-dominated discipline. While this does not reflect the reality of its history, it means that the analytical concepts and frameworks used have been those developed by men with reference to male historical figures. Where women have pushed against the overtly or implicitly masculine and patriarchal aspects of their intellectual contexts, the question inevitably rises as to whether this constitutes an internal critique and innovation, in the spirit of reforming a given tradition, or an external challenge to that tradition itself. A second complication is that, while men are often given the benefit of the doubt for transgressing intellectual rules, typically women, including Wollstonecraft herself, have been viewed as passive adopters of the concepts and tools of their era. The result is that where their thinking deviates from expected norms, they are seen as being confused and where it conforms, they are thought shallow or unimaginative.

In general, whether we consider a given philosopher to be a liberal depends on a variety of factors, including what our purpose is, what our definition of liberalism is, and what other frameworks are available. Many feminists, for example, in the 1970s and 80s distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft because they regarded her as a liberal (Weiss 2009). In that context, liberalism was perceived to emphasise several characteristics that were antithetical to feminism, such as individualism over community, rights over duties and care, and prioritising the private sphere over the public. The liberal paradigm was also understood to be grounded in a particular set of ideals that were held out as abstract universal values but which were, in reality, masculine constructs. As we shall see, Wollstonecraft was, in fact, very much alive to these issues. How, then, should we define liberalism? One approach is to consider how an author stands within an overall lineage of sources normally regarded as its representatives. Here, Wollstonecraft's undoubted debt to Locke is often cited in favour of her liberalism. Virginia Muller, for example, writes that, "along with the other liberal theorists of her time, her roots are Lockean, and her intellectual home is the English dissenting tradition" (1996, 48). This is right, but we must be careful. If we mean that Wollstonecraft was committed to individual liberty and natural rights based on her faith in reason, the moral law and the power of education to bring positive change, then she certainly is an heir to Lockean values. On the other hand, it would be wrong to attribute to her any commitment to absolute property rights based

on principles of self-ownership, the centrality of contractarian principles, or a rigid distinction between the public and private (see Halldenius 2019 for an extended discussion).

Muller also identifies Wollstonecraft with radical eighteenth century dissent. She is right to do so, although whether the dissenters are best described as liberals raises the same interpretive questions as for Wollstonecraft herself. Here, we might consider what alternative frameworks are available. At the highest level of abstraction, we might consider as a liberal anyone who is committed to the centrality of individual liberty, within a set of egalitarian and democratic norms grounded in natural rights. Liberty, however, may be defined in a variety of ways. It is common today to distinguish between freedom understood as the absence of interference and as the absence of domination, where liberals are said to employ the former and where the latter is characteristic of republicanism (Pettit 1997). Based on this distinction, Wollstonecraft must be understood as republican – along with the English dissenters and Rousseau, another of her intellectual influences – even if republicanism might itself represent a sub-division of the larger overall sweep of liberal thought. Freedom as independence, or protection against arbitrary rule – historically, equivalent to non-domination – lies at the very heart of Wollstonecraft’s political philosophy and forms the basis for my analysis in what follows (Coffee 2013). In this ecumenical spirit, I should say that a recent volume of essays on Wollstonecraft’s philosophy, the *Wollstonecraftian Mind*, includes chapters on Wollstonecraft’s legacy for both liberalism (Penny Weiss) and republicanism (Lena Halldenius) (Bergès, Botting and Coffee 2019).

Freedom as Independence

Obvious biological differences aside, men and women are fundamentally and morally equal according to Wollstonecraft. We are equal in the eyes of God and we are equal in our capacity for reason. These two features combined mean that the respective virtues for each sex must also be the same. This being so, men and women must participate equally in the rights and duties of citizenship socially, politically and economically. This equality of citizenship is manifest through the central ideal of independence. This is a classical notion which serves as the hallmark of a citizen – the independent agent able to act in his own right, un beholden to the capricious (or arbitrary) whim of another. Independence was an exclusively male ideal. It was rooted in classical philosophy and the legal classifications of Ancient Rome in which the status of the independent freeman was contrasted with the dependent slave. Indeed, the word independence was synonymous with freedom, and dependence with servitude. Wollstonecraft follows this use, and in both the second *Vindication* and the novel *Maria*, she repeatedly uses the language of slavery to describe and to analyse women’s subject condition. Significantly, Wollstonecraft does not simply demand that women be admitted as independent citizens, she uses the internal logic of the concept of independence to show that its restriction to men is inconsistent, both arbitrary in itself and self-defeating. In other words, by denying women freedom, men are undermining the basis upon which their own freedom is based.

Independence represents a very demanding standard of personal freedom, demanding of both those who possess it and of the state that is charged with upholding it. In order to be genuinely free, a person must be independent in all the important dimensions of social, political and economic life. This freedom cuts across the boundaries of the public and private spheres, such that a person must be liberated as much in the home as in the workplace or civil society. Wollstonecraft recognises that to realise independence of this kind requires much more than simply extending certain legal or political rights to women. It would, she argues, need a radical and wholesale transformation of the whole suite of social relations between the sexes, what she calls a “revolution in female manners” (2014, 224). Bringing about cultural change on this scale will not, of course, be quick and so Wollstonecraft warns us that firmly-rooted prejudices “will require a considerable length of time to eradicate” (73). In

addition to the prejudices themselves, there are the structural obstacles which hold them in place that we have discussed, including patterns of social and political dependence, the corruption of civic virtue, and an inadequate access to education and positions of influence. Recognizing all this, Wollstonecraft nevertheless, remains confident in women's capacity to create lasting change – "by reforming themselves to reform the world" (71). While it may take time to overcome 'the *inertia* of reason... when it is once in motion, fables, once held sacred, may be ridiculed' and a new social world can be constructed (2009, 56).

Freedom, Equality and Virtue

Independence is best thought of, not as a single concept, but as a cluster of related ideals – freedom, equality, and virtue – organised within a distinct structure. It is both a personal and a collective value, such that individuals can only be free in a free society which, in turn, requires the presence of free citizens to maintain it. Independence operates on two distinct levels: independence of mind whereby one must be able to think for oneself; and civil independence, whereby one must be free to act on one's decisions. Civil independence is maintained by a set of republican institutions governed by the rule of law, which must itself be responsive to reasoned argument, public deliberation and the common good. What this means is that civil independence must be guaranteed as a matter of right. One cannot, therefore, be accidentally independent since independence is a matter of right and is reflective of one's standing within the political community.

If such an exacting ideal is to be maintained, citizens must possess and display a high degree of personal and civic virtue. Virtue is a complex idea that can be understood in a variety of different ways. In Wollstonecraft's day, it was customary to distinguish between feminine virtues – chastity, modesty, sensibility – and the masculine virtues that would sustain the republic. She would have none of this. Virtue is not gendered because it is rational, and since both sexes possess an identical capacity for reason it follows that their virtues must be the same. Indeed, Wollstonecraft traces the origin of almost all women's social and political subjection to a single, simple but devastating idea: that women "were created rather to feel than to reason" (2014, 89). The salient feature of civic virtue is that individuals must be able to think for themselves rather than to merely accept ideas passively from their surroundings. While a lack of education and intense social pressure leaves women vulnerable to being dependent on others for their beliefs and opinions, Wollstonecraft is clear that men are no less adversely affected. "Men, in general" she argues, "seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than to root them out" (38). Just as individuals should govern their conduct rationally, so this applies collectively, so that "the laws which bind society" are directed by "the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue" (37).

In addition to virtue, independence requires equality. "Virtue can only flourish amongst equals", she argues, and so, "among unequals there can be no society" (1790, 141, 87). The equality here is primarily one of status. Everyone must be subject to the same law that represents them all equally and affords them the same level of independence. However, equality must, to a high extent, also be economic. Anyone without adequate earnings or property depends on the generosity of others, and so is unfree. A common criticism of Wollstonecraft is that she is concerned only with the middle classes in her second *Vindication*. This is, however, untrue. The grinding effect of poverty on the character of Jemima is, for example, a principal theme of *Maria*. Jemima wonders in anguish, "how writers, professing to be friends to freedom, and the improvement of morals, can assert that poverty is no evil, I cannot imagine" (2005, 39). The condition of the poor is, likewise, of central concern in the *History of the French Revolution*. In the first *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft complains that the rich are above the law which they can circumvent while the poor fall below its protection.

Dependence is not only undesirable and dangerous, it also alters people's behaviour and, ultimately, their character. Wollstonecraft frequently draws attention to the silly, frivolous and coquettish behaviour exhibited by many women. While she is clearly exasperated by this, it is not correct to say, as is often argued, that Wollstonecraft is specifically singling women out for criticism. This behaviour is the inevitable result of women's servile social condition, and is, often, a prudent response to that condition since seeking the protection of a man and manipulating him through his sexual desires is one of the few means of control available to them. Repeated behaviour, however, breeds lasting habits and eventually people lose their capacity for virtue altogether. While Wollstonecraft's focus is on women, she nevertheless makes it clear that both sexes are equally implicated, and the corruption of virtue that results from the asymmetry of power in relationships of dependence afflicts both dominator and dominated in equal measure.

Education, Citizenship, Motherhood

Citizenship is a challenging ideal for which a person must be adequately equipped. The capacity for the responsible, rational, virtuous thought and action of a citizen is hard won and must be cultivated over a lifetime. It starts with the cultivation of an independent mind, and so Wollstonecraft stipulates that the women's "first duty is to themselves as rational creatures" (2014, 175). In an ideal world, this would be achieved through a combination of education – women should have a rigorous education, identical to that which men ought to receive – and practical action. There must be a full range of occupations that can both inspire the ambition of girls and women, and through which they might "unfold their faculties", developing skills and strengthening their character (ibid., 87, 173). "How many women", she asks, "waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry (ibid., 178).

As things are, however, Wollstonecraft concludes that education alone is not sufficient (ibid., 47). We are all very much the products of our social environment, men and women alike. What she has in mind here are the social prejudices that restrict women's lives. Chief among these, as we noted above, is the belief that women were naturally emotional rather than rational. "It would", she argues, "be an endless task to trace the variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows, into which women are plunged by the prevailing opinion, that they were created rather to feel than reason and that all the power they obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness" (ibid., 89). Associated with this, is the idea that a woman must therefore seek a man as her protector, which leads to a single-minded focus on women's appearance of sexual propriety as the sole basis for their social reputation and standing. "There is", Wollstonecraft argues citing Macaulay, "but one fault which a woman of honour may not commit with impunity", which is to be considered unchaste (ibid., 166). Protecting her reputation for modesty is, therefore, everything for a woman since it is for this alone that she is judged, rather than for the sum total of her character, talents and achievements. This has a chilling effect on women's behaviour, since anything she does to draw attention to herself or to defy expected norms is liable to bring accusations of loose morals, even where sexual conduct is irrelevant. A forthright or intelligent woman, for example, risks being considered suspect simply for stepping outside the accepted bounds of female behaviour.

Against this background of social pressure and prejudicial norms, women cannot hope to be independent. Not only is their conduct constrained but framing a rational argument to reform popular attitudes is futile since it would fall on deaf ears given the corrupted state of men's collective capacity for reason. It follows, therefore, that women must take control of the way they are viewed socially, ultimately bringing about the necessary revolution in manners. For this, they need an effective voice. Part of that voice will come through democratic participation and political representation, and part through having an increased social standing and credibility. These two aspects are closely related:

Wollstonecraft confesses that she “really” does think “that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government”, while acknowledging that this admission is liable to “excite laughter” in her readers who will likely find the idea ludicrous (ibid., 176).

While Wollstonecraft makes it clear that women should participate as citizens on an equal basis with men, she nevertheless acknowledges that there may be some gendered distinctions in the social division of labour. Women have what she considers to be a natural duty of motherhood. Not all women have to become mothers but most quite naturally will, she argues, and when they do the considerable burdens of raising children will fall to them. Men do have some corresponding duties as fathers but Wollstonecraft says very little about these and they are unlikely to offset the burdens on women. Exactly what Wollstonecraft has in mind when she invokes women’s duties of motherhood is ambiguous. She may believe, for example, that these are absolute duties, or she may be referring to matters as they stood in her social and technological world. Wollstonecraft certainly emphasises the importance of mothering duties. The wife that “neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of a wife, and has no right to that of a citizen” (ibid., 176). She gives both natural and socially-contingent reasons for saying this. Nevertheless, the fundamental purpose of her pronouncement is instrumental, because of the benefits the close maternal bond brings to children, to families, to society and to the mothers themselves (for a full discussion, see Bergès 2016). This leaves open the possibility that if the same benefits can be achieved through social reorganisation or technological progress, then the stipulation may be relaxed. Either way, it must be understood that the natural duties of motherhood arise in concert with the equally binding civic duties that compel society to ensure that women are fully independent. This means that there would have to emerge a full set of supportive measures for women such as, in today’s terms, paid parental leave and nursery provision (Coffee 2015).

Legacy

The application of the fundamental principles of freedom, equality and citizenship to women are now unquestionably part of any contemporary version of liberal theory, even if how this should be understood remains a matter of contention. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft has left a clear legacy. She was, for example, widely read across Europe and the USA throughout the nineteenth century (Botting 2013). However, while Wollstonecraft has long been regarded as an inspirational and pioneering early feminist, it is only comparatively recently – from the end of the twentieth century – that she has been taken seriously as a moral and political philosopher in her own right (Bergès, Botting, Coffee 2019, 1-9). Second-wave feminists of the 1960s-80s often dismissed Wollstonecraft as a captive of male-dominated Enlightenment patterns of thought, while many liberal feminists have looked to John Stuart Mill’s (see ch. ??) *Subjection of Women* (1869) as their primary historical source (a recent collection of essays on liberal feminism, for example, contains only two references to Wollstonecraft in the index, both tangential and bracketed with Mill, while Mill himself is extensively engaged [Baehr 2004]).

By the turn of this century, however, it has become increasingly common to view Wollstonecraft not solely as a feminist advocate but as a substantial moral and political philosopher who is responding to her cultural and intellectual climate and drawing on a diverse eclectic set of historical and contemporary sources to develop distinctive and innovative solutions to a range of social and ethical concerns. No longer was she regarded as a mere representative of early liberal feminism whose ideas could be more rigorously developed through Mill, but as a valuable – and still potent – resource for tackling contested contemporary debates, including on relational autonomy, capability theory, social

freedom, democracy, human rights, citizenship, multiculturalism, and structural forms of domination (see several essays in Bergès and Coffee 2016 and Bergès, Botting and Coffee 2019).

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