

Mary Wollstonecraft: Forerunner of Positive Liberty and Communitarianism

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the extent to which Mary Wollstonecraft can be associated with the philosophical conversation about liberty, in which John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill are familiar names. Wollstonecraft was a woman whose appearance in this discourse was well-known during her lifetime; however, due to her unorthodox lifestyle and her gender, she was discredited after her death. My research corrects this omission by placing her within the canon as a philosopher of liberty. In particular, an analysis of her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* in light of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's work, reveals Wollstonecraft's position as an early proponent of what comes to be called positive liberty and communitarianism. Positive liberty, loosely defined, is the idea that freedom requires more than the absence of restraint; there are certain actions that government and society need to take to ensure citizens' freedom. Communitarianism, which proposes that true freedom may only be found in a certain form of society, is closely linked with ideas of positive liberty. Indeed, Wollstonecraft's call for national public education and the restructuring of the property system, in conjunction with her recognition of the public and political nature of the 'private' family, is evidence that not only was she a proponent of positive liberty and communitarianism, but her philosophy was ahead of its time.

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To Rebecca,  
Mary would love you!

## Chapter One: Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft was a British woman living during the turbulent era of the French revolution. In fact, she was in France during the tumultuous years of 1792 to 1795. Born in 1759, she came of age during Britain's conflict with America, and her adult life reflects the influence of both of these revolutions. British political philosophy of the day was heavily influenced by the works of John Locke (1632-1704), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Edmund Burke (1729-1797), and Richard Price (1723-1791). Locke and Rousseau were also educational reformers; however, neither of them extended a call for education specifically to women and the lower classes, and Rousseau openly advocated limiting the education of women.<sup>1</sup> Wollstonecraft, drawing on and responding to the ideas of the above writers, as well as on her own intellect and especially on her own experiences, entered a rich arena of political philosophical thought and added to it her own unique ideas about freedom: those of positive liberty and communitarianism, not simply the extension to women of classic liberal theory.

While conceptions of liberty and of its correlation with education were gaining ground in Mary Wollstonecraft's lifetime, they were neither applied to the public in general, and certainly not to women in particular, nor were they categorized, during her lifetime or later, as 'positive liberty' or 'communitarianism'. Yet, it is possible to observe strong connections between Wollstonecraft's thinking about liberty and later

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<sup>1</sup> See John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, eds. John W. and Jean S. Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1979), book five.

political philosophers, in particular, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.<sup>2</sup> While there is always the risk of anachronism when studying previous centuries using current terminology, this study does not seek to read Taylor into Wollstonecraft, but rather, to read Wollstonecraft into Taylor. As Virginia Sapiro so eloquently points out:

... [a] way of assessing a theorist such as Wollstonecraft is to ask what we can learn from her work when we examine it in the context of other writers regardless of whether they shared any direct link, or in the context of what we know of later relevant history, or indeed, when we assess other writers in the context of her work.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this study will explore the echoes of Wollstonecraft which can be heard long after her death within the work of later theorist, Charles Taylor.

Studies of Wollstonecraft tend to fall into two camps: that of biography and that of feminist theory. This study will fall into neither of these; rather, I aim to study her work as that of a political philosopher. In doing so, I argue that Wollstonecraft is revealed as forerunner of positive liberty and communitarianism: she advocates for state action to promote opportunity and development, on the individual and community levels; recognizes the importance of the community in the development of individuals; and conversely, recognizes that a society is only as free and progressive as are its individual members. An analysis of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), *French Revolution* (1794),<sup>4</sup> and *Letters*

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Taylor himself agrees that Wollstonecraft is a figure of a "richer liberalism," toward which we should be looking for answers to the problems with liberalism in the modern day. Ruth Abbey and Charles Taylor, "Communitarianism, Taylor-Made: An Interview with Charles Taylor," *The Australian Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1996): 4, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20634713> (accessed September 20, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xxiv-xxv.

<sup>4</sup> I will refer to it as the *French Revolution*. The full title, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the effect it has produced in Europe*, is a lovely example of the tradition of the time to weigh down books by giving them long unwieldy titles.

*Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) reveals that Wollstonecraft's conceptions of liberty and society anticipate Taylor's conceptions of positive liberty and communitarianism. Unlike her fiction and her earlier instructional works,<sup>5</sup> these four books relate to society as a whole and the first three are overtly political in nature.

The actual phrase, "positive liberty" is a relatively new one. It came into widespread use on the political/philosophical stage in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In short form, the idea of positive liberty is that true political freedom requires more than non-interference by the state or by others; it requires that people are able to follow their own inclinations and become self-realised. In contrast, negative freedom rests on conceptions of the individual as a discrete entity, whereas positive freedom presupposes that the individual acts within, and is acted upon, by the community, and so, is less discrete.<sup>7</sup> In other words, positive liberty goes beyond what was called for by philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill, who made the stand for non-interference by the state, except when harm is involved.<sup>8</sup> Positive liberty, instead, requires the capacity to reason as well as societal support. Thus, people need the right opportunities in order to

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<sup>5</sup> These include *Mary: a Fiction* (1788), *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (posthumously, 1798), *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788). Additionally, Wollstonecraft had published several translations and works she had edited by other authors, and Godwin published some fragments of fiction after her death.

<sup>6</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty (1969)," in *Freedom: a Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ian Carter, Matthew H. Kramer, and Hillel Steiner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007): 39-58, Gerald C. MacCallum, Jr., "Negative and Positive Freedom (1967)," in *Freedom: a Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ian Carter, Matthew H. Kramer, and Hillel Steiner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007):70-78, and David Nicholls, "Positive Liberty, 1880-1914," *The American Political Science Review* 56, no. 1 (1962): 114-128, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1953101](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1953101) (accessed January 19, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2008 Edition, s.vv. "positive liberty," negative liberty." <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/liberty-positive-negative/> (accessed January 10, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), eBooks@Adelaide, Chapter One. [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john\\_stuart/m645o/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645o/) (accessed February 11, 2012).



learn about themselves and how to reason so that they can achieve self-realisation.

Among other things, people need a thorough education involving exposure to a broad range of ideas.

While many twentieth-century liberals were uncomfortable with positive liberty, viewing it as a breeding ground for authoritarianism,<sup>9</sup> Taylor elucidates that the two views of freedom are not, in fact, separable. For instance, it is not enough to say that freedom is just the absence of external obstacles, but rather, it is apparent that freedom is the absence of external obstacles to significant actions. Indeed, Taylor claims that “the application even of our negative notion of freedom requires a background conception of what is significant...So some discrimination among motivations seems essential to our concept of freedom...because we are purposive beings.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Taylor is arguing that even if one maintains a strictly negative understanding of freedom as being free of interference, one must have some discrimination of what counts as interference. The fact that we are not allowed to drive down the middle of the road, but must remain in our lane, is not interference that counts as a barrier to freedom. Rather, we discriminate between interference that impinges on freedom and interference that does not do so. Taylor is claiming that the method by which we discriminate between the two is by understanding our motivations and by understanding ourselves as having specific purposes. Thus, we need a way or ways in which freely to discover our purposes, as well as a way or ways in which to then act out our purposes. It is not enough to simply remove interferences, since one may be “hemmed in” by internal obstacles. The solution,

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<sup>9</sup> In particular, see Isaiah Berlin’s article, note 1.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” in *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 183.

says Taylor, is that true freedom may only be found in a certain form of society. Taylor's view of liberty and society, and others similar to it, is termed 'communitarianism'.<sup>11</sup>

For the better part of two hundred years Wollstonecraft was studied mainly in biographical form, and there are a multitude of biographies from which one can learn of the details of her life, details most often taken from her many letters. Wollstonecraft educated herself, traveled, lived on her own, had affairs and a child out of wedlock, and called for more opportunities for females to learn to reason and be involved in the public world, rather than only the private one. Her writings illuminate the need for changes, and give recommendations on what those changes should be, in both education and society. They also reveal her efforts for self-realisation and true freedom. Yet, although most of the biographies mention her written work, they often give her work just that: a mention. In fact, of the biographers mentioned here -- William Godwin, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, G. R. Stirling Taylor, Ralph M. Wardle, Margaret George, Edna Nixon, Eleanor Flexner, Claire Tomalin, Margaret Tims, Jennifer Lorch, and Janet Todd -- some do not even mention all of the four works with which this study is concerned.

In the 1990s, however, there was a decided shift in scholarship as an interdisciplinary contingent of feminist theorists, political theorists, and historians began to analyse her work, not only as pieces of her life story, but as philosophical and theoretical works in and of themselves. In part, this was due to the shift away from studying history as a collection of 'great' men and 'great' women. It was also due to the

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, "Negative Liberty," 191, 193. Taylor explains communitarianism as being "multi-layered...Ontological issues have to do with how you explain social life while advocacy issues encompass things that are valued, held to be good and worth promoting." Abbey and Taylor, "Communitarianism," 3. In this way, Taylor explains that someone could be a communitarian ontologically, but not on the advocacy level. He, however, is a communitarian on both levels.

theoretical turn taken by feminism and women's studies. With the establishment of women's studies departments in many universities, the emphasis shifted from asserting that women have an important place in history to investigating what, specifically, women's writings and experiences assert. The most work has been done from a primarily feminist standpoint, including such authors as Gary Kelly,<sup>12</sup> Virginia Sapiro, Wendy Gunther-Canada, Barbara Taylor, Eileen Hunt Botting, and Natalie Fuehrer Taylor.<sup>13</sup> It becomes apparent that the study of Wollstonecraft increased in academic significance beginning in the 1990s, given that the above scholars developed their professional reputations, at least in part, with their publications about Wollstonecraft. Sapiro, Botting, and Fuehrer Taylor, though, do not address Wollstonecraft only as a feminist author, but also as a political theorist.

Not all of Wollstonecraft's biographers devote space to *Rights of Men*, and some who mention it are fairly dismissive. Indeed, Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, gives barely a passing comment on the treatise that catapulted Wollstonecraft into the radical arena in his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, first published in 1798. He merely states that she garnered applause for the book, and then quickly moves on to her

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<sup>12</sup>Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). Kelly's work can also be read as a biography, but he incorporates much more textual analysis than do most of her biographers, so I have chosen to include him in this category.

<sup>13</sup> Eileen Hunt Botting, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Enlightened Legacy: the "Modern Social Imaginary" of the Egalitarian Family," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (2006): 687-701, SAGE, <http://abs.sagepub.com/content/49/5/687> (accessed September 4, 2012). Wendy Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Politics* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001). Barbara Taylor *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

next accomplishment.<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Robins Pennell, amateur historian and author of the first full-length biography of Wollstonecraft since Godwin, writing in 1884, states that “[b]ecause of these faults of youth and haste, Mary’s “Letter” is not very powerful when considered as a reply to Burke; but its intrinsic merits are many.”<sup>15</sup> Ralph M. Wardle, editor of the complete collection of Wollstonecraft’s letters in 1979, echoes these sentiments, claiming that “[a]s a reply to Burke’s arguments her book was hardly successful.”<sup>16</sup>

However, two notable exceptions to the dismissal of *Rights of Men* between Pennell and Wardle are Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough and G. R. Stirling Taylor. Rauschenbusch-Clough wrote the first truly scholarly biography of Wollstonecraft, based on her doctoral thesis of 1894 at the University of Bern in Switzerland. Publishing her biography in 1898 she claims that it aims to “define the influences which have resulted in the social revolution of the present day.”<sup>17</sup> G. R. Stirling Taylor, a writer and historian in the early twentieth century, recognizes that Wollstonecraft was at the forefront of significant social changes.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he categorizes her assault on property as

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<sup>14</sup> William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. W. Clarke Durant (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1927), 53. Godwin was her husband and the father of her second child, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890), 135. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22800/22800-h/22800-h.htm> (accessed September 26, 2012). This was first published in 1884.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 115.

<sup>17</sup> Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft and The Rights of Woman* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898), iii, Internet Archive, <http://archive.org/details/studyofmarywolls00rausrich> (accessed September 26, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> G. R. Stirling Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a Study in Economics and Romance* (New York: John Lane Company, 1911), 90-93. Hathitrust Digital Library. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106001937223> (accessed September 5, 2012).

“socialism”.<sup>19</sup> Both of these early biographers viewed *Rights of Men* as a foundation for the later *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and both point out that she lamented that true liberty had not yet been found in government.<sup>20</sup>

Following Wardle in 1966, Margaret Tims, Jennifer Lorch, and Janet Todd, editor of *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, with Marilyn Butler in 1990, and *The Complete Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, in 2003, offer some important analyses for the purposes of this study. Tims, in 1976, and Lorch, in 1990, recognize Wollstonecraft’s position as a vanguard of social change.<sup>21</sup> Lorch makes clear that she called for “thinking people” to do something to ameliorate the discrepancies between members of society.<sup>22</sup> This, claims Lorch, was an intellectual leap from individualism to thinking in terms of “collectivities”.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Todd recognizes a significant development in Wollstonecraft’s political philosophy. While previously Wollstonecraft had been satisfied to promote individual charity as sufficient for alleviating poverty, in the *Rights of Men* she changes her demands to a call for political eradication of the problem.<sup>24</sup>

Generally, commentary on *Rights of Woman* recognizes the tremendous value of this work. For instance, Pennell claims that in it Wollstonecraft carried her ideas of equality to their “logical conclusion...She saw the evil to which greater philosophers than

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<sup>19</sup> Stirling Taylor, *Economics and Romance*, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Rauschenbusch-Clough, *Study of Mary Wollstonecraft*, chapter IV, and Stirling Taylor, *Economics and Romance*, 92-93.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Tims, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Social Pioneer* (London: Millington Books Ltd., 1976), 114, see chapter seven, and Jennifer Lorch, *Mary Wollstonecraft: The Making of a Radical Feminist* (New York: Berg Publishers Limited, 1990), 77-79.

<sup>22</sup> Lorch, *Radical Feminist*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> Lorch, *Radical Feminist*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 166.

she had been indifferent,” and “advanced new doctrines which threatened to overturn existing social relations.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly to Tims and Lorch, one finds that Wollstonecraft is viewed as a vanguard. Stirling Taylor, writing before World War I, considers her call for the advancement of women to be a call for the advancement of society as a whole, acknowledging that if half the population is left devoid of knowledge and virtue, the entire society will suffer. Even more revolutionary for the time, though, is Stirling Taylor’s understanding of the *Rights of Woman* as a call for the end of sex, that is, the end of the continual consciousness of sexual difference.<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of this study, this idea will be discussed as it pertains to her call for liberty, but not as it pertains to feminist and gender theory.<sup>27</sup>

Some biographers recognize that there is a direct connection between Wollstonecraft’s life and her philosophy. Wardle makes the important point that it was Wollstonecraft’s own experience that led her to conclude that both sexes are entitled, by virtue of being human, to “liberty and equality,” and that the neglect of this affects society as a whole.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, Wardle also claims that Wollstonecraft did not offer a legislative program toward these ends, when, in fact, she did.<sup>29</sup> Just as Wardle observes that Wollstonecraft’s concepts originated with her experiences, Margaret George discerns

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<sup>25</sup> Pennell, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 168, 171.

<sup>26</sup> Stirling Taylor, *Economics and Romance*, 101-105.

<sup>27</sup> There are many studies of Wollstonecraft focusing on her feminism and locating her within the history of the women’s movement. Some excellent examples of such work are Maria J. Falco’s edited volume, *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Eileen Jan Yeo’s edited volume, *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminisms* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997); and Barbara Taylor’s *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Wardle, *Critical Biography*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Wardle, *Critical Biography*, 137.

some critical connections between Wollstonecraft's life-choices and her theories in *Rights of Woman*. George characterizes her life and this work as "a remarkable and open account of female response to the exhortation and promises of liberal individualism, of one woman's demand for equal opportunity for self-creation."<sup>30</sup> Further on George characterizes Wollstonecraft's definition of freedom as "unique".<sup>31</sup>

Like George and Wardle, Eleanor Flexner observes that Wollstonecraft's unique contribution was to extend the concern for social change to women; and that this extension was based on her life experiences, rather than on her interpretation of other thinkers. Of course, Flexner iterates Wollstonecraft's call for education as the solution to the inequalities which she lists.<sup>32</sup> Yet Flexner maintains that "in a class-conscious age such as ours...to read the *Vindication* and search for such a viewpoint will not be rewarding."<sup>33</sup> Flexner remarks that Wollstonecraft was concerned only with the middle and upper classes, but that is not completely accurate.<sup>34</sup> Wollstonecraft does not speak to the economic exploitation of women, true, but she was concerned with the education of all classes and mandated that all classes be educated together at the elementary level. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

As the 1970s wore on, however, authors increasingly recognized the political nature of Wollstonecraft's work. Importantly for the purposes of my work, Claire

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret George, *One Woman's "Situation": a Study of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 6.

<sup>31</sup> George, *One Woman's "Situation"*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1972), 149-155.

<sup>33</sup> Flexner, *A Biography*, 149.

<sup>34</sup> Flexner, *A Biography*, 149-150.

Tomalin, whose biography was first published in 1974, recognizes that Wollstonecraft's strident support for equality is political, and extends into both the private and public spheres.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, though, Tims claims that *Rights of Men* was Wollstonecraft's only "foray into the world of politics..."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Tims declares that the value of *Rights of Woman* "is less as an original book, or even as a contribution to women's emancipation, than as the expression of an original life."<sup>37</sup> Tims is somewhat contradictory when she later states that Wollstonecraft "linked the struggle for women's rights with the wider struggle for a just society...—'Public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue,' [Wollstonecraft] observed..."<sup>38</sup> This sounds political and original, and has been identified as such by Eileen Hunt Botting.<sup>39</sup> Like Tomalin, Lorch recognized the revolutionary nature of the treatise and discussed Wollstonecraft's goal as being the promotion of active citizenship for women, which necessitated better education. Lorch also pointed out Wollstonecraft's criticism of the government for its failures in supporting women.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding Wollstonecraft's *French Revolution* and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, biographers are not nearly as voluble. Lorch merely mentions them in passing, while Todd discusses them only in light of the events of her life, with little critique of the works themselves. This is

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<sup>35</sup> Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 135-136.

<sup>36</sup> Tims, *Social Pioneer*, 121.

<sup>37</sup> Tims, *Social Pioneer*, 128.

<sup>38</sup> Tims, *Social Pioneer*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Botting, "Enlightened Legacy," 687-701, especially pp. 691-693.

<sup>40</sup> Lorch, *Radical Feminist*, 81.



unfortunate since these two works make some of Wollstonecraft's most mature political statements, as will be discussed in chapter four.

Other authors devote space to discussing the *French Revolution*, but most find little to applaud. Flexner states that this is Wollstonecraft's "least interesting and important" book.<sup>41</sup> Wardle also finds little merit in the book, although his account of her thesis in the book is telling. He claims that "she recurred constantly to her fixed belief that the depravity of the French was due to past restraint rather than present liberty."<sup>42</sup> Whatever Wollstonecraft's faults of organization regarding her writing, and most biographers mention something about her lack in this aspect, she was consistent concerning her political principles. Edna Nixon, although not entirely favourable toward the *French Revolution*, draws parallels between Wollstonecraft's previous political theses and this one. Particularly, Nixon draws attention to Wollstonecraft's prescription for France's "moral depravity": "an improved system of education and domestic affairs."<sup>43</sup>

Toward *Letters Written*, Wollstonecraft's biographers are generally more forgiving, even admiring, than to the previous work. Wardle deals rather graciously with *Letters Written*. Yet, although he recognizes that Wollstonecraft continues to advocate liberty as the basis of progress, he promotes the book due to its revelation of Wollstonecraft as a "whole woman".<sup>44</sup> George, although she barely mentions *French Revolution*, observes that *Letters Written* is "in many ways the most mature demonstration of her study of philosophic radicalism, her most sustained commentary on

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<sup>41</sup> Flexner, *A Biography*, 195.

<sup>42</sup> Wardle, *Critical Biography*, 207.

<sup>43</sup> Edna Nixon, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Her Life and Times* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1971), 120.

<sup>44</sup> Wardle, *Critical Biography*, 252, 256.

the nature of people and society.”<sup>45</sup> Flexner similarly observes that this is a philosophical work, primarily devoted to understanding the path of societal progress in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>46</sup>

Kelly and Sapiro published their studies in the same year, 1992, but with clearly different objectives. Kelly’s work is a study of Wollstonecraft’s “Revolutionary feminism” as a writing revolution. That is, Kelly maintains that Wollstonecraft attempted to enter and subvert political and philosophical discourse by means of her writing style, not only by means of the topics of her writing. According to Kelly, Wollstonecraft’s feminism is “a feminism conditioned by its time in its very attempt to transcend or transform those conditions.”<sup>47</sup> Sapiro’s work takes the position that Wollstonecraft is important to both feminist theory and democratic political theory. Her emphasis is on the importance of Wollstonecraft’s critique of gender and its applicability not only to feminism, but also to other democratic theorists who came after her. Importantly for my purposes, Sapiro argues that Wollstonecraft is an important democratic theorist regardless of whether a direct line can be traced between her work and subsequent theorists. Rather, later theorists can be assessed in light of what Wollstonecraft already articulated or alluded to in her writings.<sup>48</sup>

Gunther-Canada positions her book between the theses advanced by Kelly and Sapiro. She takes issue with Sapiro’s desire to position Wollstonecraft within the political canon, claiming that Wollstonecraft would never have wanted such a thing. Additionally,

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<sup>45</sup> George, *One Woman’s “Situation”*, 135.

<sup>46</sup> Flexner, *A Biography*, 220.

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 227.

<sup>48</sup> Sapiro, *Political Virtue*, xxiv-xxv.

she posits that Sapiro should have paid more attention to genre in discussing Wollstonecraft's work. On the other hand, she accuses Kelly of being "blindsided by the politics of gender," although she concedes he is more proficient at analyzing genre.<sup>49</sup> Instead, she aims to "demonstrate how Wollstonecraft's writing subverted the patriarchal plot of political theory..."<sup>50</sup> However, it is not apparent to me that Gunther-Canada's analysis is all that different from Sapiro's. The primary difference is that Gunther-Canada leaves out an analysis of Wollstonecraft as a democratic theorist. While this is significant, it does not entail that the two analyses are mutually exclusive.

In fact, much of what these three advocate regarding Wollstonecraft's writings is very similar. For instance, Kelly considers the *Rights of Men* a "considerable achievement":

Not only did Wollstonecraft take on the most celebrated political orator and writer of the day, and the man who set the terms for the British debate on the French Revolution, but she engaged with both the central themes and the rhetorical strategy of the *Reflections*...she competently, clearly and cogently put her case against the gentry property system and the culture built on that system...Furthermore, she did this with considerable rhetorical skill and subtlety...<sup>51</sup>

In a similar vein Sapiro also recognizes that Wollstonecraft's argument was sophisticated and presented an argument not only about politics and virtue, but about political language and culture. In other words, not only did Wollstonecraft argue against anti-revolutionary sentiments, but she argued against the language used to present the sentiments.<sup>52</sup>

Gunther-Canada also explores Wollstonecraft's use of language, focusing on her

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<sup>49</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 6-8.

<sup>50</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 100, see chapter four.

<sup>52</sup> Sapiro, *Political Virtue*, chapter six.

appropriation of the “gendered mantle of political authority.”<sup>53</sup> Gunther-Canada views this work as Wollstonecraft’s subversive insertion of herself into the political scene, in which women had no recognized place.<sup>54</sup>

Kelly effectively discusses Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical devices, and recognizes the gendered nature of her philosophy and philosophical debate in general; however, he judges the effectiveness of Wollstonecraft’s work based on its reception and whether its subversive nature was recognized or not. He describes *Rights of Woman* as being Wollstonecraft’s argument for “Revolutionary feminism as part of a general revolution,”<sup>55</sup> and certainly that is the case as Kelly’s detailed analysis shows. Yet, Kelly considers Wollstonecraft to have failed in her attempt to create a revolutionary space because the subversive nature of her writing was unsuccessful in its attempt to deconstruct the dominant discourse. He states that “Wollstonecraft’s Revolutionary feminism was to be a reading and writing revolution in several ways; but such a revolution may simply substitute revolutionary writing for the real-life ‘revolution in female manners’ it proposes.”<sup>56</sup>

Undeniably, the revolution in female rights and liberties, and indeed in the rights and liberties of the lower classes, did not transpire, directly, because of her writings. Yet, as this study will show, her ideas did not disappear, even if she was not always given credit for them. Again, Kelly considers the *French Revolution* a failure in so far as it is revolutionary writing. He describes the work as a realignment of “differences of

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<sup>53</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 94.

<sup>54</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, chapter three.

<sup>55</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 124, see chapter five.

<sup>56</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 139.

discourse, genre and style, and their relation to class and gender distinctions.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, due to the failure of its reviewers to discern her deconstruction of the dominant political discourse, Kelly considers Wollstonecraft unsuccessful.<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, although Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written* was generally well-received, Kelly declares it the “beginning of the breakdown of Wollstonecraft’s attempt to fashion her career into the public figure of ‘female philosopher’...”<sup>59</sup> His claim, in this case, is based to the fact that Wollstonecraft is received as a woman rather than as a philosopher in this work.<sup>60</sup>

Sapiro’s study devotes itself to revealing some of the broader implications of Wollstonecraft’s political texts,<sup>61</sup> rather than judging them, as Kelly does, on their reception upon publication. Sapiro’s textual analysis reveals Wollstonecraft’s struggle to call for the improvement of society *in toto* as Wollstonecraft critiques “unnatural distinctions based on rank, property, occupations and professions, familial ties, and gender...”<sup>62</sup> In fact, Sapiro concludes that Wollstonecraft is far more radical than many democratic theorists, and “anticipates...later feminists and communitarian theorists.”<sup>63</sup> Sapiro states that “[Wollstonecraft] described a sociopolitical system in which the institutionalized self-interest of the powerful corrupts the society as a whole, including all the relationships within it and its operating values.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Sapiro makes it clear that

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<sup>57</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 153.

<sup>58</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 170.

<sup>59</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 195.

<sup>60</sup> Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism*, 194.

<sup>61</sup> Such texts include both *Vindications*, *French Revolution*, and, to a lesser extent, *Letters Written*.

<sup>62</sup> Sapiro, *Political Virtue*, 165.

<sup>63</sup> Sapiro, *Political Virtue*, 163.

Wollstonecraft maintained that both the rich and the poor were in the worst states in society, since both conditions lack the “medium for nurturing strength of mind.”<sup>65</sup> This interpretation is echoed by Barbara Taylor, who understands Wollstonecraft to be equating gender and rank in so far as both positions “reduce individuals to moral nullities, puppets of the power relations they inhabit.”<sup>66</sup> In this, they come very close to the ideas this study will advocate, particularly that Charles Taylor’s political theory can be read in light of Wollstonecraft.

Focusing mainly on the *Vindications*, but neglecting the *French Revolution* and *Letters Written*, Gunther-Canada also proclaims Wollstonecraft’s work as revolutionary, and like Sapiro, views it as successful in the sense that Wollstonecraft clearly presents her views. She states:

The popular response to her defense of the rights of men and political events in both England and France proved to this rebellious writer that now was the time to call for women’s rights....Thus, in both vindications she employed rhetorical devices that confounded the mark of gender and she developed theoretical arguments that denied sexual difference. This dual strategy gave her the authority to enter the rights debate and to represent her sex in the conversation of political thought.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, like Kelly, she deals more specifically with the rhetorical methods Wollstonecraft used to appropriate authority for herself as a political voice. Yet, like Sapiro, she also explores Wollstonecraft’s theoretical arguments. Throughout, though, Gunther-Canada focuses on the interplay of eighteenth-century discourse and gender in order to explain how Wollstonecraft “exploded eighteenth-century social constructions of authority and

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<sup>64</sup> Sapiro, *Political Virtue*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Sapiro, *Political Virtue*, 95.

<sup>66</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 161.

<sup>67</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 97.

femininity.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, like Kelly, Gunther-Canada limits her focus to a feminist reading of Wollstonecraft’s work.

Much of Barbara Taylor’s work is not relevant to this study, dealing as she does with the development of Wollstonecraft’s theories of imagination and reason. However, she makes some valuable judgments regarding *Rights of Men*. In particular, Taylor explores the utopianism found in Wollstonecraft’s prescriptions for societal justice. Specifically, Taylor recognizes Wollstonecraft’s “absolute egalitarianism” as the root of her utopianism.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, in considering Wollstonecraft’s work in general, Taylor makes the illuminating statement that Wollstonecraft would not have worried “in the least that ideas not deemed incompatible – such as a ‘liberal’ emphasis on personal rights versus a ‘republican’ emphasis on public obligations – were in her writings promiscuously blended.”<sup>70</sup> An exploration of Charles Taylor’s current communitarian theory<sup>71</sup> will shed some light on this apparent paradox, showing Wollstonecraft’s conceptions of personal freedom and public obligations to be far more compatible than Barbara Taylor perceives. Additionally, Barbara Taylor perceives that while Wollstonecraft was a natural rights thinker, she was not systematically so. That is,

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<sup>68</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 125. See chapters three and four.

<sup>69</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 165.

<sup>70</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 214.

<sup>71</sup> In Charles Taylor’s words, “it is possible for someone to have a communitarian or holist ontology and to value liberalism’s individual rights.” Abbey and Taylor, “Communitarianism,” 3. In other words, Taylor’s idea is that one can explain social life (language, for instance), in terms of shared goods, which is a communitarian ontology, but also value the advocacy of liberal rights, such as freedom of speech and religion.

natural rights were for her a tool to advance her fervent calls for equality and moral progress.<sup>72</sup>

Barbara Taylor, in fact, explores the ways in which Wollstonecraft's unique contributions to ideas of liberty and natural rights were appropriated by Owenite Socialists<sup>73</sup> of the mid-nineteenth century. In particular, Taylor points to the link Wollstonecraft creates between female equality and the "social and political liberation of 'the people' as a whole."<sup>74</sup> This, she claims, evolved during the first part of the nineteenth century into a "social system" which included, but was not limited to, female emancipation. In fact, John Stuart Mill acknowledged the Owenites as promoters of absolute equality between the sexes, during a time of great hostility to this idea.<sup>75</sup> This understanding of Wollstonecraft as a socialist hearkens back to G. R. Stirling Taylor, mentioned above, although Barbara Taylor makes no mention of his interpretation.

Natalie Fuehrer Taylor focuses on Wollstonecraft's political philosophy, as found in *Rights of Woman*, but fails to analyse any other of Wollstonecraft's texts. Rather, she explores the philosophers she deems as being influential on Wollstonecraft's thought in *Rights of Woman*: Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseau. She includes the first two even though there is no proof that Wollstonecraft studied their works.<sup>76</sup> Her conclusion is that

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<sup>72</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 214.

<sup>73</sup> Owenite Socialism was a program of complete social and sexual equality inspired by Robert Owen, a manager and then part-owner of a huge cotton mill. He began, in his mill, to incorporate ideas of welfare and work incentives. This led him to desire to do more than manage cotton mills in a new way, but to create change on a larger scale. In 1824 he began to promote "a new social order based on classless, co-operative communities." Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), xii, but see the entire introduction for a thorough review of Owenite Socialism.

<sup>74</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, xiii.



Wollstonecraft bears similarities to these philosophers, but goes beyond them to conceive of the whole woman as a political being, active in the public sphere.<sup>77</sup> It is my contention that in going beyond the philosophers who predate her, she moves forward into ideas that do not become prominent until much later.

Her views on women make her, arguably, an early feminist; however, it is this standing as an early feminist that has often contributed to her neglect in the political philosophical canon. Certainly she spoke about gender, but in her own words she stated that she “earnestly wish[ed] to see the distinction of sex confounded in society...”<sup>78</sup> While this can easily be seen as the standard feminist critique of society, it also portrays Wollstonecraft’s desire to simply live as a human, a member of society, a person, without the constant presence of her sex. Indeed, Barbara Taylor writes that if Wollstonecraft had been a man, she would have been named as a “typical radical *philosophe*.”<sup>79</sup> In appreciation of that sentiment, I aim to study her as a political theorist only. Moreover, many of her lived experiences espouse the very principles she articulated in her work. As a result, it is possible to attain a full conception of her political theory in both words and practice. Thus, Wollstonecraft can be considered a philosopher and educational reformer who lived and wrote in support of what would much later come to be called ‘positive liberty’ and ‘communitarianism’. Although Sapiro alludes to the possibility, this method

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<sup>76</sup> Fuehrer Taylor, *Rights of Woman as Chimera*, 5, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Fuehrer Taylor, *Rights of Woman as Chimera*, 164-166.

<sup>78</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications: The Rights of Men, The Rights of Woman*, ed. D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf (Toronto: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997), 172.

<sup>79</sup> Barbara Taylor, “Feminism and the Enlightenment 1650-1850,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 47 (Spring, 1999): 264, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4289613](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289613) (accessed October 12, 2012).

of interpreting Wollstonecraft and the conclusions to which it leads, have not, to date, been part of the conversation about Wollstonecraft.

## Chapter Two: The ‘Right’ Idea: A Vindication of the Rights of Men

It is important to situate Wollstonecraft within the rights theory of her time because I am arguing that she was a political philosopher and as such, was a forerunner of positive liberty and communitarianism. Wollstonecraft arrived at many of the same conclusions, based on her experiences and very informal education, as did the well-educated, privileged men of her time. Her original contributions develop specifically as a result of her under-privileged position. For Wollstonecraft, it was not enough to simply assert that people had rights; instead, she determined to specify some areas in which rights were severely abused, and suggest corrections for such situations. It is in her conceptions of what could be done to solve social problems that she is ahead of her time.

Given her conceptions of liberty, reason, and virtue, Wollstonecraft has a greater role in mind for government than did her predecessor John Locke, who is often considered fundamental to liberalism, and Edmund Burke, to whom she responds with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Although Locke promotes the idea of equality and liberty, his *Second Treatise* explains the role of society as being the protection of property, and the goal of the Legislature as being the preservation of society, or more specifically, the common good.<sup>80</sup> Yet, although Locke includes life, liberty, and estates under the heading of property, he does not present a view of society in which all members are equal. More to the point, Locke does not explain how those without liberty may go about obtaining liberty so that they may acquire an estate of any sort, nor does he even advocate that they do so. His focus seems to be on the men of the propertied

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<sup>80</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2§123, 131, 134 (references to this work will follow the pattern of book and paragraph). Hereafter referred to as *TT*.

classes, with no concern for the lower classes. It is not enough for Wollstonecraft that government simply upholds/enforces the Lockean idea of freedom from interference, nor does she find it sufficient that Britain should consider its political development a *fait accompli*, as Burke argues.<sup>81</sup> While “depraved sensual taste may give way to a more manly one...Both may be equally natural to man; the test is their moral difference, and that point reason alone can decide. Such a glorious change can only be produced by liberty.”<sup>82</sup> So, she declares, if “liberty should have a firm foundation”, government must be laid on the shoulders of the poor and/or the philosophers, since these are the only ones who are disinterested and/or wise.<sup>83</sup> In other words, only a disinterested government could ensure liberty for all and supply the conditions necessary so that all could exercise their liberty and reason in order to be virtuous citizens.

For Wollstonecraft, issues of liberty were closely intermingled with issues of reason and morality. It is important to note that Wollstonecraft is not careful to distinguish between different senses of the word ‘liberty’. She often conflates the political and metaphysical senses, due to the fact that she was not a trained philosopher. In fact, one author declares that Wollstonecraft actually conflates liberty with reason.<sup>84</sup> An implication of her conflation of the two is that people have a right to the freedom necessary for the development of the reason required for morality. Wollstonecraft writes

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<sup>81</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 162-178.

<sup>82</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in *The Vindications: The Rights of Men, The Rights of Woman*, ed. D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997), 81.

<sup>83</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 82.

<sup>84</sup> Alex Schulman, “Gothic Piles and Endless Forests: Wollstonecraft between Burke and Rousseau,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 1 (2007): 45, Project Muse, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ecs/summary/v041/41.1schulman.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

that “[t]he power of exercising our understanding raises us above the brutes; and this exercise produces that “primary morality,” which some term “untaught feelings.”<sup>85</sup> In Wollstonecraft’s case, it was primarily her experiences that led to her ideas of rights, as opposed to a systematic philosophical theory, which in turn convinced her that liberty was the primary right of humankind. Specifically, her lack of education, her difficulties finding worthwhile employment, and her constant financial shortages had the greatest impact on her theories. Thus, Wollstonecraft did not study philosophy as a means of developing a philosophy. Instead, whatever philosophical knowledge she gained from independent reading and her work for publisher Joseph Johnson was incorporated into the ideas she was developing based on her experiences. While this is not to say that other philosophers during the eighteenth century did not allow their experiences to influence their philosophy, it is to say that Wollstonecraft made her philosophy fit her experiences, and not her experiences fit her philosophy.

## **Life and Writings**

Her experiences were certainly other than the experiences of the men she encountered in writing and in person. Unlike the philosophers (I use this term broadly) of the day, and earlier ones such as John Locke, Wollstonecraft approached political theories from a position of subjection. She owned no property, she had no social connections, she was primarily self-educated, and could not have attended university if she had tried, and, of course, she was female. From this position, her ideas of rights and liberty exude an urgency not always apparent in male writings. And certainly, her needs

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<sup>85</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 66.

were urgent. She was continually in debt, most often as a result of providing assistance to her sisters and the Blood family, and she constantly felt both her lack of preparation for financial independence and her limited choices for it.

Indeed, some of her earliest letters<sup>86</sup> reveal the paucity of her education.<sup>87</sup> Her husband, William Godwin, explains that Wollstonecraft obtained some form of education while she lived with her family in Beverly, Yorkshire, from the ages of nine-and-a-half until fifteen (1768-1774), but he gives no credit to this education for her later “eminence”.<sup>88</sup> She does not mention her schooling in her early letters, except to say that she did not have the advantage of a “Master” as her correspondent, Jane Arden, did.<sup>89</sup> The master referred to could have meant that Arden had a tutor, but Wollstonecraft may have been referring to Jane’s father, John Arden, a lecturer on science. It is evident from a later letter that Wollstonecraft had, at some previous date, received at least one lesson from him, since she mentions “the next time he is so obliging as to give me a lesson on the globes, I hope I shall convince him I am quicker than his daughter...”<sup>90</sup> Additionally, while in Bath, as a lady’s companion to Mrs. Sarah Dawson, it is possible she attended his lectures, since in a letter to Jane she mentions seeing an advertisement for them.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 1-18. These early letters were written during 1773 and 1774 to her friend Jane Arden. At the time, Wollstonecraft was 14-15 years of age.

<sup>87</sup> Her deficiencies included spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Charges were levelled at her throughout her writing career about her poor grammar. In fact, even her husband mentions her lack, remarking that “[w]hen tried by the hoary and long-established laws of literary composition, [*The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*] can scarcely maintain its claim to be placed in the first class of human productions.” Godwin, 56.

<sup>88</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 14.

<sup>89</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, spring 1773, *Letters*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1774, *Letters*, 16-17, and notes 43 and 44.

Additional sources of education may have been Mr. and Mrs. Clare, a clergyman and his wife beside whom she resided when her family moved to Hoxton in 1774, or early 1775, and her friend Fanny Blood. Godwin notes that she spent days and weeks visiting with the Clares. Wollstonecraft writes that they “took some pains to cultivate my understanding...they not only recommended proper books to me, but made me read to them;--I should have lived very happily with them if it had not been for my domestic troubles...”<sup>92</sup> It is evident that the Clares encouraged her to read and study, but it was her close friend, Fanny Blood, who, according to Godwin, provided her with a more thorough instruction in writing when they met in 1775.<sup>93</sup> However, there are no surviving letters between Fanny and Wollstonecraft, and the closest Wollstonecraft comes to viewing Fanny in an educational light is the statement that “her conversation is not more agreeable than improving...She has a masculine understanding, and sound judgment...”<sup>94</sup>

By age twenty-three, Wollstonecraft’s primary focus was on financial independence, and her main frustration was that there were so few avenues for a woman to be independent. This was particularly pertinent since support from her father was an impossibility after he failed at farming and used up his children’s inheritance.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, 1779, *Letters*, 19 and note 47, Todd, 38, and Godwin, *Memoirs*, 21-24. The dating for Wollstonecraft’s time with Dawson is somewhat problematic. Godwin places it from 1778-1780, but Wardle and Todd place the date slightly later, from 1779-1781.

<sup>92</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, early 1780, *Letters*, 24. This reference to domestic troubles is not expounded upon, but could refer to her father’s tendency to often move the family and/or his violence. Godwin recounts that her father was violent and that Mary “would often throw herself between the despot and his victim...She has even laid whole nights upon the landing-place near [her parents] chamber-door...” Godwin, *Memoirs*, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, early 1780, *Letters*, 25.

Following her mother's death in 1782, Wollstonecraft was thrown completely upon her own resources. Moreover, she became responsible for her younger sisters and supported them as best as she could for the rest of her life; even though her older brother, the eldest child, was well-situated as a lawyer in London, his support for his brothers and sisters was almost nonexistent.<sup>96</sup>

For Wollstonecraft, independence meant living off something she produced, rather than living as a servant, a paid companion, or a governess.<sup>97</sup> She was both a companion and a governess during her life, and of neither role did she have a good opinion.<sup>98</sup> Rather, her first scheme for independence was based on drawings and needlework as a source of income for herself, her sister Everina, and Fanny Blood. The three would live together and earn enough to take care of themselves. While this was

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<sup>95</sup> Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden, Early 1780, *Letters*, 23-24.

<sup>96</sup> Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1787, *Letters*, 114, 192-193 and note 437, 196 and note 448.

<sup>97</sup> Wollstonecraft considered being a companion or governess to be something between being a servant and being one of the family. She states that upon entering the steward's quarters she "felt something like a sensation of envy – I am a something betwixt and between..." Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1787, *Letters*, 117.

<sup>98</sup> While her surviving letters from her time as a companion are relatively cheerful, she makes a telling statement to her sister years later that implies her boredom during her time as a companion. "How do you contrive to live with Mrs Tew...You are not, I hope, confined to her society." Wollstonecraft to Eliza Bishop, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1787, *Letters*, 130. Of being a governess, Wollstonecraft wrote to her sister, Everina, "I believe, I could have interest enough to recommend her [her other sister, Eliza] or you as a Governess – but I scarcely know how to persuade you to enter on such an arduous and uncertain undertaking..." Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1787, *Letters*, 117. Wollstonecraft writes that, "[f]ew are the modes of earning a subsistence, and those very humiliating. Perhaps to be an humble companion to some rich old cousin, or what is still worse, to live with strangers...A governess to young ladies is equally disagreeable." Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 1787, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, electronic edition, vol. 4, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), 26, Intalex Past Masters, <http://library.nlx.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/xtf/view?docId=wollstonecraft/wollstonecraft.00.xml;chunk.i d=div.wollstonecraft.pmpreface.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.wollstonecraft.pmpreface.1;brand=default> (accessed December 15, 2012).



rather unrealistic, since both trades provided only the barest of subsistences at best, the next plan was successful for a time.<sup>99</sup>

Though it took longer than Wollstonecraft planned, in 1784 she became independent. In that year Wollstonecraft, Eliza, and Fanny began a day-school, and once they moved it to Newington Green, it was well attended. They were shortly thereafter joined by Everina. Unfortunately for the school, Fanny married Hugh Skeyes in 1785 and moved to Portugal. This caused the school hardship, since she was one of the teachers. Even more unfortunately, always in ill health, she became more so during her pregnancy. In late autumn of the same year, Wollstonecraft left the school to attend Fanny during her lying-in. Fanny gave birth to a son, but sadly they both died shortly thereafter. Upon her return to London, after an absence of approximately two months, Wollstonecraft found the school beyond help. It closed after operating for two and a half years.

During the years she was running the school, Wollstonecraft developed two important connections. She became friends with Dr. Richard Price, to whose defense she would come when she wrote *Rights of Men*, in 1790, and Joseph Johnson, who later became her publisher when he published her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* in 1787. 1786 found Wollstonecraft ensconced as a governess in Ireland to the King family, a position which she dreaded, consisting as it did of isolation from society and being “debarred the *imperfect* pleasures of friendship...”<sup>100</sup> In 1787 Wollstonecraft lost her position with the Kings, and began working for Johnson as a reviewer and translator.

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<sup>99</sup> Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, c. January 1784, *Letters*, 46, and note 99.

<sup>100</sup> Wollstonecraft to George Blood, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1786, *Letters*, 74.

It is at this point that she truly became independent, although she was forever in debt.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, her letters indicate that she was constantly settling and contracting debts, and continually searching for social connections that would provide better opportunities for her sisters and her brother Charles, the youngest of the Wollstonecraft siblings. She positioned herself as the caretaker for these siblings immediately following their mother's death. Much of the frustration inherent in her letters is due to the difficulty of finding permanent, profitable situations for these three younger members of the family. As a result, she realized the immense difficulties facing those who desired to support themselves honourably, but who lacked avenues for training or gaining experience. For example, she paid for Everina to spend time in Paris learning the French language, which would make her more attractive as a teacher and a governess; however, paying for this trip indebted her even more.<sup>102</sup>

She must have also felt great frustration, even anger, toward Charles, who ruined his opportunities to go into law.<sup>103</sup> He was a man, and so could avail himself of many more choices than she could, yet he threw away this chance. In fact, she must have been generally unhappy with her brother Edward (Ned), since he did not assist her and her

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<sup>101</sup> Biographical information taken from Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 55-120, and Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 50-127. Godwin, *Memoirs*, 26-42, also provides some details of this time, but some of his dating conflicts with other records. He places the birth of Eliza's daughter in late 1782, rather than 1783, and so implies that they ran the school much longer than was the case. Yet, the record of Eliza's marriage dates to October 1782, so it is very unlikely that the daughter was born that year. See Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> Wollstonecraft to George Blood, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1788, *Letters*, 154. Also see note 356, which records Johnson's understanding of her extensive spending on her siblings. He stated that "[s]he could not, during this time I think expend less than £200 upon her brothers & sisters."

<sup>103</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 147, and Wollstonecraft to George Blood, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1791, *Letters*, 189. In this letter she referred to Charles as a "blister." On the same day, Wollstonecraft wrote to William Roscoe, *Letters*, 190, again calling Charles a "blister," and asking Roscoe if he can find Charles a position at a counting house. By June of 1792, Charles was waiting to go to America with the Barlows, which he eventually did in October of that year. See Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 199-200, and Wollstonecraft to William Roscoe, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 204.

sisters, other than provide a temporary home for Everina. The other two brothers, James and Henry Woodstock, were mostly independent. James was a sailor and Henry was apprenticed to an apothecary. Yet there is no record of either of them lending assistance to the sisters either. In fact, at one point Wollstonecraft assisted James in expanding his education.<sup>104</sup> She was certainly aware that her siblings were a significant strain on her life. Writing to Eliza in 1790 she stated that “if I had not cared for my sisters who certainly do not adore me – the last two years of my life might have passed tranquilly not embittered by pecuniar [sic] cares.”<sup>105</sup> Thus, she could not have but been aware of her precarious position. Should people cease to assist her, she would have found herself in a poorhouse, or begging a home with Ned. Her continual awareness of her situation certainly contributed to her acerbity.<sup>106</sup> Yet, it also endowed her with a certain clarity concerning the need for social change. Her recognition of such a need led to her support for the French Revolution, and so to her production of *The Rights of Men*.

For three years, from 1787-1790, Wollstonecraft honed her skills as a writer, but even more importantly, she exposed herself to new political ideas, becoming one of the radicals in London, particularly once the French Revolution began. At Johnson’s table she met many ‘live authors’, some of whom were also Dissenters, as was Johnson. These included Dr. Price, again, but significantly, Thomas Paine, Henry Fuseli, and William

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<sup>104</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 20-21, 37, 146, 171. There are very few records of Henry Woodstock. He entered his apprenticeship when the family left Beverly in 1775, and that is the last we know of him. James was sent to sea in 1780, and after some education, possibly beginning in 1788, returned to the sea in 1791. He promised to send his sisters some prize money if he received any, but there is no record of him ever doing so.

<sup>105</sup> Wollstonecraft to Eliza Bishop, c. late 1790, *Letters*, 183.

<sup>106</sup> While only 38 of her 354 surviving letters mention financial difficulties, the first one doing so is in 1784, and the last is the year of her death, 1797. Also, she mentions her debts and monetary needs to many different people, and at one point, writes to Johnson that she is “over head and ears in debt.” Wollstonecraft to Joseph Johnson, late 1788 or early 1789, *Letters*, 159.

Godwin were also often present.<sup>107</sup> Her experiences with these men, her own private studies, and the financial difficulties she continually faced helped to develop her viewpoints on rights and liberty, and these viewpoints entered the public world late in 1790, in her response to Edmund Burke.

Burke was a well-known politician and political thinker who published *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790. In it he argues against the radical nature of the Revolution and regarding the National assembly states:

[has] not the sanction and authority of the character under which they first met. They have assumed another of a very different nature; and have completely altered and inverted all the relations in which they originally stood. They do not hold the authority they exercise under any constitutional law of the state.<sup>108</sup>

This book sparked strong reactions among British supporters of the French Revolution, and Wollstonecraft was not alone in writing a rebuttal; she was the first to publish one, though. During the writing of her reply, she experienced a crisis of confidence. After all, to enter into such a public debate with an illustrious man was a daring undertaking for a woman, especially since the topic was political. Godwin reports that a visit from Johnson seemed to calm her down, and she then finished her work without delay.<sup>109</sup> Often criticized for its lack of organization and emotional tone, *Rights of Men* was nonetheless popular after publication in 1790. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, its political implications are often overlooked. Drawing on her own difficult struggle against poverty, brought on because of laws allowing her father to squander the children's inheritance and the lack of laws mandating education and employment

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<sup>107</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 152.

<sup>108</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 335-336.

<sup>109</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 52-53.

opportunities for females, and her strong sense of rights and liberty, she offered her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* to the world.

## Arguing for Rights

*Rights of Men* offered a more forward-thinking view than Burke's *Reflections*. Indeed, David Bromwich concludes that she "seems to [be] a more original moral thinker...than any of the large and capable regiment of anti-Burke pamphleteers."<sup>110</sup> Burke writes of the reward of the poorer classes being in the afterlife, not in this one. His concern is not with rights or liberties in general, but with the rights and liberties of the classes currently holding power in England, and most particularly, the classes with large amounts of property.<sup>111</sup> Wollstonecraft takes issue with this limited view of rights, proposing instead the "liberty of reason."<sup>112</sup> As Margaret Tims, one of Wollstonecraft's many biographers, states, her view of government was such that it belongs "to the twentieth century—or possibly the twenty-first—rather than the eighteenth."<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Wollstonecraft chastises the government for the Enclosure Acts<sup>114</sup> which deprived the industrious poor of land. She then continues by lamenting the misery in the "pestilential

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<sup>110</sup> David Bromwich, "Wollstonecraft as a Critic of Burke," *Political Theory* 23, no. 4 (1995): 617-618, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/191903> (accessed February 1, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 207-208, 411.

<sup>112</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 35.

<sup>113</sup> Tims, *Social Pioneer*, 235.

<sup>114</sup> Enclosure refers to the "conversion of communal or commonly held public lands into private ownership." Specifically, Wollstonecraft was referring to the spate of parliamentary acts beginning in 1760 that dispossessed many small farmers and labourers. *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society*, s.v. "enclosure," <http://knowledge.sagepub.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/environment/n350.xml?rskey=doFLwM&row=2> (accessed November 8, 2012).

corners” of London, where those who could work are unable to find work.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, using the specific example of game laws and press-warrants<sup>116</sup> Wollstonecraft demonstrated that liberty was not present, and the government was not a “good parent”.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, she takes Burke to task for his refusal to recognize that all citizens have a concern with government. Burke held that only those with substantial property to protect needed to be, or should be, concerned with government.<sup>118</sup> Rather, she promotes a form of government that would ensure liberty for all. Specifically, she praises the French National Assembly as a “glorious *chance*” of “attaining more virtue and happiness than has hitherto blessed our globe...”<sup>119</sup>

Wollstonecraft also draws attention to the contradiction inherent in Burke’s support for the American Revolution and his condemnation of the French Revolution. Indeed, Burke fails to compare the American Revolution with the French Revolution in any way.<sup>120</sup> Specifically, she exclaims that given Burke’s arguments in *Reflections*, he should not have been able to support America:

But on what principle Mr. Burke could defend American independence, I cannot

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<sup>115</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 94.

<sup>116</sup> During this period, wild game, such as deer, could be owned by estate-holders. These animals could not be hunted by anyone else, even if they strayed off the estate and destroyed adjoining crops. This greatly disadvantaged small farmers. Press-warrants refers to the right of the Navy to take men onto ships when needed, without consent.

<sup>117</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 37-38, 47.

<sup>118</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 207-208, 218. “Nothing is a due and adequate representation of a state, that does not represent its ability, as well as its property...It must be represented too in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected...But as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society...”

<sup>119</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 83.

<sup>120</sup> J. C. D. Clark, “Introduction,” in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 74.

conceive; for the whole tenor of his plausible arguments settles slavery on an everlasting foundation. Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished...<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, she explains that the very arguments he uses to explain the wrongness of taking land from the Church in France could be used to support continued slavery for the planters in America. She is emphatic that there “is not one argument, one invective, levelled by you at the confiscators of the church revenue, which could not, with the strictest propriety, be applied by the planters and negro-drivers to our Parliament...”<sup>122</sup> Likewise, Wollstonecraft is incredulous that during the American Revolution, Burke supported the loss of property which some Englishmen suffered; yet, he now sympathizes with the Catholic Church from which the Revolutionary government was taking land. She states that although Burke’s “prophetic phrensy [sic]...contributed to deprive some of thy fellow-citizens of their property in America: another spirit now walks abroad to secure the property of the church.”<sup>123</sup> In a similar vein, she claims that it is his desire to increase his reputation that has led him to publish *Reflections*, even though in it “he has deserted his post,” and turned from his previous position “on the side of liberty and natural rights.”<sup>124</sup> Thus, she fears that Burke is now excusing, and even justifying, slavery in all its forms.

As discussed in chapter one, Barbara Taylor does not consider Wollstonecraft a systematic theorist of rights; yet this should not be taken to mean that Wollstonecraft did not have a definite theory of rights. In fact, she may be considered more systematic than

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<sup>121</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 44.

<sup>122</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 86.

<sup>123</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 70.

<sup>124</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 78.

Burke, given his significant contradictions regarding the two major revolutions of the last half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, Wollstonecraft had a definite theory of rights, and we can trace some of Wollstonecraft's ideas back to John Locke, even if we cannot prove that she read his work.<sup>125</sup> In agreement with his general theory of ideas, Locke maintains that moral rules were not innate, since “*there cannot any one moral rule be proposed, whereof a man may not justly demand a reason...*”<sup>126</sup> Morality then, is founded in natural law, because natural law is the law of reason. Thus, morality is grounded in reason.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, to be moral is to maintain a correct relationship between one's actions and the laws to which one is subject: divine, civil, and philosophical.<sup>128</sup> For this reason, Locke maintains that children should be trained in the use of their reason, so that they learn to make moral choices, even when their appetites desire them to make different choices.<sup>129</sup> He states:

He that has not a mastery over his Inclinations, he that knows not how to *resist* the importunity of *present Pleasure or Pain*, for the sake of what Reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true Principle of Vertue and Industry; and is in danger never to be good for any thing [sic].<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Wollstonecraft's first published work bears a marked resemblance to Locke in both title and ideas, and she makes a reference to his educational treatise. Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 11. She also quotes Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding in Rights of Men*, 77.

<sup>126</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), I.iii.4. (References to this work will follow the pattern of book, chapter, paragraph.) Hereafter referred to as Locke, *ECHU*.

<sup>127</sup> Locke, *TT*, 2§6, and Steven Forde, “Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (2001): 397, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2669348> (accessed January 31, 2012).

<sup>128</sup> Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 70, and Locke, *ECHU*, II.xxviii.4, 5, 7-10, 14, 15.

<sup>129</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John W. and Jean S. Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), §41, 77, 81, 200.

<sup>130</sup> Locke, *Concerning Education*, §45.



Likewise, Wollstonecraft holds that people are not born with innate moral ideas. Although people are born with passions, or appetites, which are dispositions toward certain things, since they are born ignorant, their passions are neither good nor bad. They are born ignorant, and so are innocent, until they develop reason, which is the “director of the whole host of passions.”<sup>131</sup> She strongly disagrees with Burke that such things as “inbred sentiments” guard, monitor, and support morals, since “inbred sentiments” are nothing more than instinct, which cannot be understood to use reason, but simply “moves in a direct line to its ultimate end, and asks not for guide or support.”<sup>132</sup> It seems that here she is equating instinct with dispositions for or against certain things. Thus, morals develop out of reason, while instinct is simply to be controlled by one’s passions. This is precisely what Locke is concerned with in the above passage.

In order to ground morality in reason, Wollstonecraft claims that moral law comes from a reasoned deduction of mankind’s relationship to God. Thus, moral law is essentially divine law, and it can be uncovered by reason, at which point one will be morally obligated to obey his/her reason.<sup>133</sup> This is similar to Locke, but not quite the same. Locke states that “Morality is the proper science, and business of mankind in general; (who are both concerned, and fitted to search out their *summum bonum*),”<sup>134</sup> and he admits that divine law is the “true touchstone of *moral rectitude*,”<sup>135</sup> an idea with which Wollstonecraft’s thoughts bear a striking similarity. However, Locke’s *Two*

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<sup>131</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 64.

<sup>132</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 64.

<sup>133</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 66.

<sup>134</sup> Locke, *ECHU*, IV.xii.11.

<sup>135</sup> Locke, *ECHU*, II.xxviii.8.

*Treatises of Government* delineates more clearly than does Wollstonecraft's account the specific morality that can be drawn from an examination of Natural Law. Rather, Wollstonecraft seems to focus in on the idea that Natural Law is the law of reason, and then explores what is needed for a person to reason to his/her fullest capacities.

Despite their differing emphasis on Natural Law, they both viewed morals as actions that, in and of themselves, were either good or evil. Locke states that virtue and vice are names given to actions that are "in their own nature right and wrong."<sup>136</sup> Wollstonecraft, as we have seen above, also considered morals to be actions undertaken at the command of reason. She declares that "the foundation of virtue remains firm. – The power of exercising our understanding raises us above the brutes...If virtue be an instinct, I renounce all hope of immortality."<sup>137</sup>

It is apparent, for both of these authors, that for a person to be a moral subject certain rights are involved. Knud Haakonssen explains that Locke connects morals and rights in the following way: "moral powers" are the rights we possess regarding ourselves, our world, and any contractual rights which we have negotiated.<sup>138</sup> Regarding moral powers, the rights we possess over ourselves are such rights as are necessary to bring our actions in line with divine, civil, and philosophical laws. Thus, since one has a duty to obey these laws, one has a right to that which is necessary for obedience in all these cases. Haakonssen concludes that for Locke, rights are the necessary means of acting morally.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Locke *ECHU*, II.xxviii.10.

<sup>137</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 66.

<sup>138</sup> Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 55.

<sup>139</sup> Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 6, 315.

Importantly, Locke equates natural law with the law of reason,<sup>140</sup> thus, it is likely that Locke would agree with the following statement by Wollstonecraft:

It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights.<sup>141</sup>

In other words, since God endowed mankind with reason, and gave people an innate “improvable faculty”, thus setting them apart from the lower animals, humans have a natural right to use their reason. Locke states that although people are not “born in this full state of *Equality*, ...they are born to it.”<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, he declares that “we are *born Free*, as we are born Rational...”<sup>143</sup> Additionally, given that “natural rights are powers to fulfil the fundamental duty of natural law,”<sup>144</sup> and given that natural law is the law of reason, then Wollstonecraft is positing a Lockean idea when she claims that the rights and duties common to all include reason, virtue and knowledge; and from reason, the other two follow.<sup>145</sup>

Moreover, they both hold moral behaviour as the means whereby individuals, and thus society, can be happy, happiness being one of the rewards for moral behaviour. Locke states that God “joined *virtue* and public happiness together; and made the practice

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<sup>140</sup> John Locke, *TT*, 2§6.

<sup>141</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 43.

<sup>142</sup> Locke, *TT*, 2§55.

<sup>143</sup> Locke, *TT*, 2§61.

<sup>144</sup> Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 55.

<sup>145</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *The Vindications: The Rights of Men, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997), 117.

thereof, necessary to the preservation of society and visibly *beneficial* to all...”<sup>146</sup> Locke makes clear that natural law does not result in a right to harm; while one has the right to liberty, it is a controlled liberty. Because everyone is equal, everyone has the same liberty, and thus one cannot infringe on another’s liberty by way of harming life, health, liberty, or possessions (all of which are considered property to Locke).<sup>147</sup> Thus, even in the State of Nature, one is still bound by moral behaviour if one wants to avoid punishment by God in the future, or punishment by one’s fellow wronged human in the present.<sup>148</sup>

Similarly, Wollstonecraft determines that “[s]ociety can only be happy and free in proportion as it is virtuous...”<sup>149</sup> yet, she takes this further and claims that society must be free in order to be virtuous. Her reasoning is thus: first of all, morality is to be “settled on a more solid basis,” that is, on reason. Secondly, all humans are moral agents, thus they all have reason. Thirdly, reasonable creatures should not be treated as slaves or animals, but given the same rights as adult men of property have.<sup>150</sup> Thus, a society that treats some of its members as if they are not moral agents, that is, does not allow them to use their reason, is not behaving morally. Her rationale for including all humans as moral agents is based on the fact that all people are held accountable by God for their actions, making all people moral agents. Therefore, all people must be capable of reason. In fact, she points out, men also hold women accountable for their virtuous or immoral actions.

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<sup>146</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 117.

<sup>147</sup> Locke, *TT*, 2§4-7.

<sup>148</sup> Locke, *TT*, 2§8, 10.

<sup>149</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 312.

<sup>150</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 146-147.

Thus, they recognize them as moral agents as well.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, she claims that anyone who founds their ideas of morals and religion, using their reason, upon the “attributes of God” will conclude that liberty is an “immutable truth” and a “sacred right,”<sup>152</sup> and, she contends for “...the *rights of men* and the liberty of reason.”<sup>153</sup> In this case we can see that Wollstonecraft does indeed conflate reason and liberty, as noted previously. It is important also to note that Wollstonecraft had a broader conception of ‘men’ than Locke did. She is making a point that all people fall under the category of moral agents, not just men with property. Locke fails to account for other classes of people.

Given Wollstonecraft’s acceptance of Locke’s union between natural law and reason, and his proposal that all have liberty, Wollstonecraft declares:

“[m]oralists have unanimously agreed, that unless virtue be nursed by liberty, it will never attain due strength – and what they say of man I extend to mankind, insisting that in all cases morals must be fixed on immutable principles; and, that the being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority, but that of reason.”<sup>154</sup>

Thus, there are no duties where there are no rights, and rights are forfeit if the duties are not accomplished. So, if people do not have the right of liberty, they do not have a duty to reason and be moral. This reiterates her contention that there is no virtue without liberty.<sup>155</sup> In fact, she is adamant that “[t]he sacred rights of humanity are violated by

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<sup>151</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 146, 158-160.

<sup>152</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 38 and 38n.

<sup>153</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 35.

<sup>154</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 340.

<sup>155</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 104, 282, 284, 295, 343.

insisting on blind obedience...,”<sup>156</sup> and that “...to urge prescription as an argument to justify the depriving men (or women) of their natural rights, is one of the absurd sophisms which daily insult common sense.”<sup>157</sup> However, she realizes that natural rights must to be retained by the labour of reason.<sup>158</sup> Thus, if people do not reason and act morally, they give up their right to liberty. It is clear that she holds liberty and reason as the necessary and sufficient means for attaining virtue, upon which she based the well-being of society.

Similarly to Wollstonecraft and Locke, Richard Price, whom Wollstonecraft certainly knew, holds that actions have an essential nature or character, and so they can be right or wrong. For Price, this is evidenced by our perceptions of actions, via our understanding. For instance, our feelings are the effects of moral perceptions and depend on “the positive constitution of our natures; but principally on the essential congruity or incongruity between moral ideas and our intellectual faculties.”<sup>159</sup> In other words, there is a relation between morality, reason, and feelings such that what we reason to be good, and understand to be good, will produce a feeling or perception of goodness in us. Moreover, he states clearly that actions have a moral nature; that actions have a character that can be affirmed as either right or wrong, and that we perceive their characters by our understanding.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 205.

<sup>157</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 118.

<sup>158</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 170.

<sup>159</sup> Richard Price, “A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals,” in *British Moralists 1650-1800 volume II*, ed. D.D.Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 151.

<sup>160</sup> Price, “A Review,” 146-147.

In the matter of rights, Price's views are again very like Wollstonecraft. He claims that it is obligatory to perform virtuous actions, and since this is the case, we have a duty to act morally. Thus, we have a right not to be interfered with in the performance of such duty.<sup>161</sup> He goes on to say that:

...it holds universally and incontestably, that whatever is right in such a sense, as that the omission of it would be wrong, is always and indispensably obligatory. And, in the next place, that though the idea of *rightness* may be more general than that of *fitness, duty, or obligation*; so that there may be instances to which we apply the one, but not the other; yet this cannot be said of *wrong*.<sup>162</sup>

Furthermore, he outlines the “*branches of virtue, or heads of rectitude and duty*,” which are duty to God, self, beneficence (the good of others/public good), gratitude, truthfulness, and justice.<sup>163</sup> He also states that reason is the “*natural and authoritative guide of a rational being*.”<sup>164</sup> If this is the case, then it is likely that he would hold whatever necessary for the exercise of reason to be a right of humankind. Indeed, four decades after he wrote the “Review,” he gave and published a sermon which somewhat clarifies his position on natural rights. First, he specifically states that virtue must be directed by knowledge, and secondly, he claims that liberty “is inseparable from knowledge and virtue...”<sup>165</sup> Here again, we can see his influence on Wollstonecraft, since she also claims that liberty, knowledge, and virtue are inseparable. Thus, it may be that Price also holds that people have a natural right to anything required for them to use their

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<sup>161</sup> Price, “A Review,” 162, 168.

<sup>162</sup> Price, “A Review,” 169.

<sup>163</sup> Price, “A Review,” 178-183.

<sup>164</sup> Price, “A Review,” 165.

<sup>165</sup> Richard Price, “A Discourse on the Love of our Country (1789),” in *The Vindications: The Rights of Men and The Rights of Woman*, ed. D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997), 361, 363.

reason. In other words, people are free to pursue knowledge and better themselves by learning to reason. It was this sermon that instigated Edmund Burke to publish his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which in turn, prompted Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men*.

While it is unclear whether, or how much, Wollstonecraft read Locke, we know she studied Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work. In some ways, Wollstonecraft and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are very similar regarding the inter-relatedness of liberty and morality. Rousseau was unequivocal that to "renounce our freedom is to renounce our character as men, the rights, and even the duties, of humanity...It is incompatible with the nature of man; to remove the will's freedom is to remove all morality from our actions."<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, he claims that without reason it is impossible to even conceive of moral beings.<sup>167</sup> Rousseau explains very specifically which kind of dependence is incompatible with freedom. For him, dependence on things is compatible with freedom, since even in the state of nature humans were dependent on things. Dependence on people, however, is slavery. Thus, laws are to be instituted so that people become dependent on things (laws) again, thereby regaining their freedom, "...and freedom which keeps man exempt from vices would be joined to morality which raises him to virtue."<sup>168</sup> Additionally, he states that "although the law does not control moral standards, it is legislation that gives them birth: when laws grow weak, standards of behaviour degenerate..."<sup>169</sup> Thus, for Rousseau, laws can produce freedom. Such a conception of law could be compatible

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<sup>166</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50.

<sup>167</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 89.

<sup>168</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 85, 160n.

<sup>169</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 156.



with Wollstonecraft as well, since she desired that society change in such a way as to allow freedom for all people.

Included in Rousseau's conception of freedom is the freedom to choose. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the "determining cause" for our choices, according to him, is that that we are not free to choose what is bad for us. In this lies our freedom, says Rousseau, since we are free to will "only what is suitable to [us], or what [we] deem to be such, without anything external to [us] determining [us]."<sup>170</sup> Moreover, to choose the good is to be moral.<sup>171</sup> It seems he is saying that we are free only when we choose rightly; to choose badly is to make ourselves un-free. However, Rousseau also holds that man has a right to freedom and moral liberty. For him, moral liberty is "the only thing that makes man truly the master of himself; for to be driven by our appetites alone is slavery, while to obey a law that we have imposed on ourselves is freedom."<sup>172</sup> Despite the apparent paradox, this viewpoint, in fact, conforms to Wollstonecraft's conception of true freedom. Wollstonecraft, as we have seen, also links freedom to virtue; one is not free unless one is virtuous.

Rousseau also understands some rights as being natural. Rousseau comes to an understanding of natural law by "meditating on the first and most simple operations of the human soul." In doing so, he finds two principles that are "prior to reason": interest in well-being and self-preservation and a "natural distaste for the suffering of sentient beings, especially people." From these, he concludes, flow all the "rules of natural

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<sup>170</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 280.

<sup>171</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 281.

<sup>172</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 59.

right.”<sup>173</sup> For him, then, the foundational rights are those which are necessary for people’s welfare and safety, and, as discussed previously, he views liberty as a natural right. However, Rousseau is emphatic that to be free is to choose what is suitable.

There is a tension here between his view of natural rights and what may be deemed suitable when considering questions of welfare and safety. If liberty is choosing only that which is moral, and what is moral is only that which ensures the welfare and safety of ourselves and others, then Rousseau’s conception of liberty may not be as free as we would like. Put another way, Rousseau’s conception of liberty is to choose what is suitable. What is suitable will conform to the interests of well-being and self-preservation and an avoidance of suffering, but will not conform simply to appetite. This tension is even more evident when we consider his statement that “virtue is nothing other than this conformity of particular wills to the general...”<sup>174</sup> However, he does make clear that the general will (that of the state), is to governed by the rule of justice,<sup>175</sup> and, moreover, a nation is virtuous if its people love their country. In order to truly love their country, they must be safe; in fact, the safety of individuals is the necessary condition for the development of the civil state, and the state must provide more security than the state of nature in order to be worthy of people’s love. Indeed, if it does not, then Rousseau states that:

subjected to the duties of the civil state, but without enjoying even the rights of the state of nature, and unable also to use their own strength in order to defend

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<sup>173</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men,” in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 35.

<sup>174</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Political Economy,” in *The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>175</sup> Rousseau, “Political Economy,” 7.

themselves, they would be in the worst condition that free men can be in, and for them the sense of the words ‘my country’ could only be hateful or ridiculous.<sup>176</sup>

Thus, Rousseau’s conception of the natural right of liberty recognizes the tension that will exist in a civil society between natural rights and the needs of citizens within a state. Despite this tension, it is evident that even in civil society, Rousseau recognized that people have definite rights that should not be abrogated, and that such rights are connected to their ability to act morally.

During the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries, then, free human agency was understood to be the “necessary precondition for the possibility of morals. Without it, moral education seemed a mere illusion, and social improvement through education, in the widest sense, was impossible. Moral freedom was the necessary presupposition of moral personality seen as the basis of civil society...”<sup>177</sup>

It is apparent that Wollstonecraft’s moral and rights theories bear marked resemblance to other philosophers previous to and contemporaneous with herself, namely Locke, but certainly also Price and Rousseau. It is also apparent that Wollstonecraft holds intellectual freedom as the single most important liberty for both a moral person and a moral society. Indeed, Wollstonecraft views the connection of rights to morality in such a way that for her, if rights are not connected to morality, then there is less of a basis for rights in general. If liberty is not needed in order to decide upon and act upon what is virtuous, and avoid that which is wrong, then one can be both moral and a slave. Such a conclusion is intolerable for her. Thus, it is apparent that she develops a theory that retains rights in order to obtain morals.

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<sup>176</sup> Rousseau, “Political Economy,” 18.

<sup>177</sup> Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 188-189.

As Tims, one of Mary Wollstonecraft's several biographers, points out, Wollstonecraft was often more in tune with succeeding centuries than with her own. Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men* drafts a plan of co-operation between classes that Tims considers to be a nineteenth-century ideal,<sup>178</sup> but is perhaps even more so an ideal of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, Wollstonecraft sketches a picture of farming communities that, while still owned by the gentry, would be "decent" with "plenty smile around", and "watched over with fatherly solicitude" by the one benefitting from the labour of the tenants.<sup>179</sup> Although the language may strike modern readers as patronising or utopian, the principle of her plan is suitable for the modern worker just as much as the eighteenth-century farmer. Those whose labour enriches someone else should be treated fairly and provided with decent working conditions in which smiles can abound. The poor, she states, have a "right to more comfort than they at present enjoy..."<sup>180</sup>

Stirling Taylor, Wollstonecraft's early twentieth-century biographer, described her ideas as socialist.<sup>181</sup> Given the history and meaning attached to that word one hundred years later, referring to Wollstonecraft as a socialist carries much more baggage than it did in 1911. However, some statements in *Rights of Men* portray that she was not supportive of the current class situation and called for the end of the "inequality of rank" which she felt "must ever impede the growth of virtue."<sup>182</sup> The following series of her questions is indicative of the direction of her thoughts:

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<sup>178</sup> Tims, *Social Pioneer*, 117.

<sup>179</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 93.

<sup>180</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 92.

<sup>181</sup> Stirling Taylor, *Economics and Romance*, 12.

<sup>182</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 81.

Why cannot large estates be divided into small farms?...Why are huge forests still allowed to stretch out with idle pomp and all the indolence of Eastern grandeur? Why does the brown waste meet the traveller's view, when men want work?...Why might not the industrious peasant be allowed to steal a farm from the heath?<sup>183</sup>

She concludes that the status quo is deeply degrading to society:

...virtue can only flourish amongst equals, and the man who submits to a fellow-creature, because it promotes his worldly interest, and he who relieves [poverty/suffering] only because it is his duty to lay up a treasure in heaven, are much on a par, for both are radically degraded by the habits of their life.<sup>184</sup>

Since the government was responsible for the Enclosure Acts, and indeed, for the present landholding and industrial system, she mandates that society should be “regulated on a more enlarged plan,”<sup>185</sup> which would develop equality and true virtue in its members, and so would make a better society.

Wollstonecraft, unfortunately, does not present an organized view of the “enlarged plan” to which she refers. Rather, she paints a picture of what society could be and contrasts it to what is. She makes a call to humanity:

give the earth...all the beauty it is capable of receiving, and...shed abroad all the happiness which human nature can enjoy; -- he who, respecting the rights of men, wishes to convince or persuade society that this is true happiness and dignity, is not the cruel *oppressor* of the poor, nor a short-sighted philosopher...<sup>186</sup>

Yet, this is not what she sees happening. Instead, she claims that “the lash resounds on the slave's naked sides; and the sick wretch, who can no longer earn the sour bread of unremitting labour, steals to a ditch to bid the world a long good night...”<sup>187</sup> In addition,

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<sup>183</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 94.

<sup>184</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 94.

<sup>185</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 94.

<sup>186</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 95.

<sup>187</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 95-96.

she takes philosophers to task, who “talk most vehemently of the native rights of men,” but “bow down to rank, and are careful to secure property; for virtue, without this adventitious drapery, is seldom very respectable in their eyes.”<sup>188</sup> Despite what she sees, though, she closes *Rights of Men* by declaring that “neither open enmity nor hollow homage destroys the intrinsic value of those principles which rest on an eternal foundation...”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 98.

<sup>189</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 98.

### Chapter Three: An Educated Freedom: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

Wollstonecraft, a fervent admirer of the French Revolution, dedicated *Rights of Woman* to Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, minister of finance in the French revolutionary government. She states:

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? unless [sic] freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good?<sup>190</sup>

*Rights of Woman*, then, aims to explain the ways in which women and society have been negatively impacted by women's lack of education, and then sets forth a plan for a national education system. Fundamental to her conception of the good society is her conception of the marital relationship and family life, thus, she also describes the necessity of education and reason in marriage and child-rearing. In the opening quote Wollstonecraft's views connecting freedom, reason, virtue, and education as being necessary for the good of society as a whole are made apparent. Indeed, it is not possible to remove any singular element from her formula, since her theory depends on their complete interrelatedness. Furthermore, not only are these elements intertwined, but familial relationships are connected with society-at-large so that the success of one is dependent upon the success of the other.

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<sup>190</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 102.

## Life and Writings

Wollstonecraft's personal life and her writings reflect each other, particularly regarding male and female relationships and familial responsibilities. As discussed in the previous chapter, between the writing of the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* and the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft provided a great deal of support to her youngest brother, Charles, and dealt with continual financial pressures due to the assistance she gave to her family. Additionally, just as the remainder of her family seemed to be attaining independence from her (James was back at sea, Charles off to America, and both sisters were employed as governesses),<sup>191</sup> she expressed great concern that she would be saddled with her father, writing that "respecting my father I live in continual fear of having him thrown upon me for his whole support..."<sup>192</sup> This is her only mention of this fear, though, so perhaps she finally felt relatively free of familial responsibilities. In December, 1792, after the disappointment of her hopes for a closer friendship with married artist Henry Fuseli, whom she met through Joseph Johnson, she left for Paris.<sup>193</sup>

Interestingly, although Fuseli assisted in procuring a place for Everina in Paris in 1788, when Wollstonecraft sent her there to further her knowledge of French,<sup>194</sup> he is not often mentioned in Wollstonecraft's extant letters to family and friends. Moreover, her letters to him have not survived, except for one dated long after their relationship was

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<sup>191</sup> See note 86, Wollstonecraft to George Blood, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1791, *Letters*, 188-189, and notes 421-422.

<sup>192</sup> Wollstonecraft to George Blood, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 192.

<sup>193</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 65.

<sup>194</sup> Wollstonecraft to George Blood, January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1788, *Letters*, 145-147, note 336.



over, in which she asks that her letters be returned.<sup>195</sup> What we know of their friendship is based on Fuseli's biographer, John Knowles, and some general references by Godwin. Knowles had access to the letters in 1831, when he published his *Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*.<sup>196</sup> Subsequently, the letters disappeared.<sup>197</sup>

What we can glean from Knowles and Godwin is that she became enamoured with Fuseli to the point that she was rather unproductive at work. Godwin recounts that over the space of a year, she produced only a "few articles for the Analytical Review [sic]," and she worked on a sequel to *Rights of Woman*. Of this sequel, nothing was extant even when Godwin was writing her memoir. Similarly, Knowles states that she wrote only some criticisms for the Analytical Review for "more than twelve months."<sup>198</sup> Additionally, Godwin tells us that Wollstonecraft loved Fuseli, but was, for a time, content to live within the rules she prescribed for her conduct, given Fuseli's circumstances. These rules, which Godwin does not spell out, seem to be her contentment with a close affectionate friendship, without the slightest desire for a physical relationship.<sup>199</sup> Wollstonecraft's few references to others about Fuseli make far less of the relationship, although her admiration of his talents is evident. She mentions his "original genius and uncommon diligence,"<sup>200</sup> and states that she is "sorry Mr. F. has

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<sup>195</sup> Wollstonecraft to Henry Fuseli, c. late 1795, *Letters*, 336.

<sup>196</sup> John Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 163f, Google Books, [http://books.google.ca/books/about/The\\_life\\_of\\_Henry\\_Fuseli.html?id=Av41AAAAMAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.ca/books/about/The_life_of_Henry_Fuseli.html?id=Av41AAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y) (accessed November 1, 2012).

<sup>197</sup> See Todd, ed., *Letters*, note 471.

<sup>198</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 65, and Knowles, *Henry Fuseli*, 167.

<sup>199</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 60-62.

<sup>200</sup> Wollstonecraft to Joshua Cristall, March 19<sup>th</sup>, c. 1790, *Letters*, 167, and see note 383.

not more encouragement, for I should be vext [sic] to see his fancy spent in brooding over disappointments.”<sup>201</sup> She also alludes to him as “an indulgent warm friend,” but she does not explicitly state that she is speaking of Fuseli in this instance.<sup>202</sup> If it were not for Knowles and Godwin, the impact of Fuseli on her life would be unknown.

There is no mention by Knowles or Godwin that Fuseli’s and Wollstonecraft’s relationship was ever physical. Indeed, Godwin refers to it as platonic and Knowles calls it a “strength of feeling unalloyed by passion.”<sup>203</sup> However, Knowles refers to some extremely passionate statements made by Wollstonecraft. She wrote that “I always catch something from the rich torrent of his conversation, worth treasuring up in my memory.”<sup>204</sup> Moreover, Knowles describes that to some of her friends she claimed “that although Mrs. Fuseli had a right to the person of her husband, she, Mrs. Wollstonecraft, might claim, and for congeniality of sentiments and talents, hold a place in his heart; for “she hoped,” she said, “to unite herself to his mind.””<sup>205</sup> Thus, even though Fuseli was married, Wollstonecraft’s proposal, recounted by Knowles, was that she live with him and his wife as a companion for Fuseli, for she told Mrs. Fuseli, “I find that I cannot live without the satisfaction of seeing and conversing with him daily.”<sup>206</sup> Mrs. Fuseli quickly put an end to Wollstonecraft’s association with Fuseli, and Wollstonecraft soon left for Paris. Writing to William Roscoe, Wollstonecraft alluded to her disappointment: “I

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<sup>201</sup> Wollstonecraft to William Roscoe, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 197.

<sup>202</sup> Wollstonecraft to Eliza Bishop, c. late 1790, *Letters*, 183.

<sup>203</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 64, and Knowles, *Henry Fuseli*, 166.

<sup>204</sup> Knowles, *Henry Fuseli*, 165.

<sup>205</sup> Knowles, *Henry Fuseli*, 165.

<sup>206</sup> Knowles, *Henry Fuseli*, 167.

intend no longer to struggle with a rational desire, so have determined to set out for Paris...<sup>207</sup>

### **Arguing for Education and Equality**

While Wollstonecraft's proposal seems remarkable in its naïveté, it is understandable, given the importance she places on correct relationships in *Rights of Woman*. She places little merit in either the physical component of married relationships, or in being 'in love', believing that sexual attraction would disappear over time. In fact, she states unequivocally that "[t]his is, must be, the course of nature. – Friendship or indifference inevitably succeeds love."<sup>208</sup> For, she warns, "the security of marriage, allowing the fever of love to subside, a healthy temperature is thought insipid, only by those who have not sufficient intellect to substitute the calm tenderness of friendship, the confidence of respect, instead of blind admiration, and the sensual emotions of fondness."<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, fulfilment of adult responsibilities in marriage requires that the "master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion."<sup>210</sup> Thus, she concludes, both partners should be virtuous and focus on building a relationship based on genuine respect and affection; for affection in marriage, she proclaims, "can only be founded on respect."<sup>211</sup> She considered friendship to be "the

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<sup>207</sup> Wollstonecraft to William Roscoe, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 206, and see note 473.

<sup>208</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 140.

<sup>209</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 139-140.

<sup>210</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 140.

<sup>211</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 54, and see *Rights of Woman*, 136, 192, 249.

most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time.” Therefore, young people should formulate a plan to “regulate a friendship which only death ought to dissolve.”<sup>212</sup> The importance that she places on this rational affectionate family life is, in fact, the basis of her political philosophy.

It is during this period, before she left for France, that Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. It is thus apparent that the relationship she strove to have with Fuseli reflects the ideal relationship described in *Rights of Woman*, albeit, minus the physical phase. Since she considered respect necessary for true affection, people, including women, had to be worthy of respect. She states that “the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex,” and so was “anxious to render [her] sex more respectable members of society...”<sup>213</sup> Regarding married women she asserts “her first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself.”<sup>214</sup>

Also obvious is her increasing frustration with the unnecessary limitations of femaleness. “For man and woman,” she maintained, “truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same...Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfil; but they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same.”<sup>215</sup> She goes on to declare of women:

To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say that

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<sup>212</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 192.

<sup>213</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 112.

<sup>214</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 137.

<sup>215</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 165.

they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the *modest* slaves of opinion.<sup>216</sup>

Yet, given the state of the educational situation of women at the time, Wollstonecraft was unsurprised that “women every where [sic] appear a defect in nature...they neglect their understandings, and turn all their attention to their persons[.]”<sup>217</sup> Her concern is two-fold: first, she is concerned with the effect that women’s lack of reason has on society, since they make up half of society; secondly, she is concerned with the negative effect that neglecting “their understandings” has on women themselves. Given that truth is the same for men and women, and given that both sexes should be regulated by the same principles for both societal and individual good, there should be no differences in liberty between the two.

For Wollstonecraft, reason and liberty were inextricably linked. In fact, she equates the limited education of women with their “slavery” and their lack respectability. Of Dr. Gregory’s plan<sup>218</sup> for women she claims that it shows “how absurd and tyrannic it is thus to lay down a system of slavery; or to attempt to educate moral beings by any other rules than those deduced from pure reason, which apply to the whole species.”<sup>219</sup> Gregory wrote such advice as “[t]his modesty, which I think so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company...”<sup>220</sup> He also advised his daughters to that if they are not sure that a man returns their “attachment” to him, “to lay the heart

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<sup>216</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 165.

<sup>217</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 244.

<sup>218</sup> John Gregory, a physician and moralist, is the author of the posthumously published female conduct book, *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters*, in 1774.

<sup>219</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 143.

<sup>220</sup> Dr. Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (London: Strahan, Cadell, and Creech, 1774), 28, [http://www.usask.ca/english/barbould/related\\_texts/gregory.html#conduct](http://www.usask.ca/english/barbould/related_texts/gregory.html#conduct) (accessed February 11, 2013).

open to any person whatever, does not appear to me consistent with the perfection of female delicacy.”<sup>221</sup> Such advice was very opposite Wollstonecraft’s advocacy of female independence and equality.

In fact, she ruefully comments that “all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been...”<sup>222</sup> Furthermore, she holds that when “morality is settled on a more solid basis” it will not be doubted that women are moral agents, and so man “when he treats of the education of women,” will not “assert that they ought never to have the free use of reason...”<sup>223</sup> She continues by stating plainly that “[l]iberty is the mother of virtue,” and explains that man’s “scepter, real or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man...the conduct of an accountable being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason...”<sup>224</sup> Thus, since women are moral agents and rational creatures, there should be no difference in their education; women should be expected to develop their reason and be rational, and so conduct themselves as free moral agents, deserving of respect.<sup>225</sup>

Inherent in Wollstonecraft’s conceptions of liberty is the idea that not only should people freely respond to the various situations of their lives, but the situations themselves

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<sup>221</sup> Gregory, *Father’s Legacy*, 67-68.

<sup>222</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 129.

<sup>223</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 146.

<sup>224</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 147.

<sup>225</sup> The whole of *Rights of Woman* is concerned with this topic. Specifically see chapters two through four.

should be products of people's rational participation in their own lives.<sup>226</sup> She writes that the "being who can govern itself has nothing to fear in life..."<sup>227</sup> Yet, she laments that women are "wanting a due proportion of reflection and self-government...",<sup>228</sup> and are "educated for dependence; that is, to act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong, to power..."<sup>229</sup> Her call is for a change in this circumstance. She recognizes that "[m]en and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in,"<sup>230</sup> and "human character has ever been formed by the employments the individual, or class, pursues; and if the faculties are not sharpened by necessity, they must remain obtuse."<sup>231</sup> The unfortunate "necessity" of women was that they were denied "employments" that would satisfactorily shape their characters. Wollstonecraft continually reiterates that since women are rational creatures, they "should be incited to acquire virtues which they may call their own, for how can a rational being be ennobled by anything that is not obtained by its *own* exertions?"<sup>232</sup> Thus, the connection between learning and experience in one's environment, or culture, is obvious. The "employments" of the individual and class shape the character, and one's "own exertions" realise the potential of a rational being.

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<sup>226</sup> For this articulation of freedom, which I find very applicable to Wollstonecraft, see Stephen Engel, "Political Education in/as the Practice of Freedom: a Paradoxical Defence from the Perspective of Michael Oakeshott," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 3 (2007): 325-349, and particularly page 327, Wiley Online Library, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00560.x/pdf> (accessed September 6, 2012).

<sup>227</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 226.

<sup>228</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 185.

<sup>229</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 161.

<sup>230</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 128.

<sup>231</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 165.

<sup>232</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Women*, 165.

Indeed, for Wollstonecraft the necessity of educating women properly was based, in large part, on the benefit this would bring to society. As Fuehrer Taylor articulates, “[i]t is Wollstonecraft’s expectation that the improved character of woman would improve not only her private relationships, but also her public stature.”<sup>233</sup> For example, Wollstonecraft states that “[p]ublic spirit must be nurtured by private virtue,” and “private virtue [is] the cement of public happiness.”<sup>234</sup> Furthermore, she describes the ideal wife as “an active citizen...But, to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws...”<sup>235</sup> Thus, men must “snap [women’s] chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience” in order for women to be “better citizens.”<sup>236</sup>

However, Wollstonecraft recognized that there were those in power who desired to retain the status quo. For instance, in reply to Rousseau’s statement: “[e]ducate women like men and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us,” Wollstonecraft wrote, “[t]his is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.”<sup>237</sup> She continues by recognizing that a similar argument, that instruction will remove people from their proper place, has been used to deprive the poor of education as well. Yet, she declares, “[w]ithout knowledge there can be no morality! Ignorance is a frail base for virtue!”<sup>238</sup> Consequently, women are “more

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<sup>233</sup> Fuehrer Taylor, *Rights of Woman as Chimera*, 164.

<sup>234</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 275, 282.

<sup>235</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 284.

<sup>236</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 288.

<sup>237</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 363, and Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 179.

<sup>238</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 179.



useless members of society” than they could be, and a poor person is often “transformed into a ferocious beast.”<sup>239</sup>

Wollstonecraft argues that people are rational, and so should be allowed to exercise that rationality through education and “employments.” This is not only necessary for the good of the individual, but also for the good of society. She makes it clear that:

...the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively.<sup>240</sup>

These conclusions regarding the equality, indeed, the sameness of men and women as rational beings, the need for education for the development of reason, and the individual and societal importance of the exercise of reason were paramount in the educational plan she sets forth in *Rights of Woman*.<sup>241</sup> Her aim is:

...to enforce the necessity of educating the sexes together to perfect both, and of making children sleep at home that they may learn to love home; yet to make private support, instead of smothering, public affections, they should be sent to school to mix with a number of equals, for only by the jostling of equality can we form a just opinion of ourselves. To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle; but how can that be expected when only one is allowed to see the reasonableness of it? To render also the social compact truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles, which alone can meliorate the fate of man, women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 129, 179.

<sup>240</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 117.

<sup>241</sup> See Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 304-313.

<sup>242</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 317.

## The Educational Program

Her program called for the government to institute a national educational program for all children. In this program, children of both sexes and all economic classes would be educated together from ages five through nine. At this stage, it should be completely free of charge to the students. She states that in her plan, “boys and girls, the rich and poor, should meet together. And to prevent any of the distinctions of vanity, they should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline...”<sup>243</sup> After that, they should be separated according to abilities and goals: those needing or desiring to pursue a trade would continue in one vein, while those with the ability and financial means to pursue increasingly advanced education would move in that direction. However, the sexes should still be educated together. For those pursuing a trade, girls and boys would be together in the morning and separated in the afternoon for more specific training. Higher education, though, would remain completely co-educational. “Girls and boys still together? I hear some readers ask: yes,” answers Wollstonecraft. In this way, she maintains, males and females would cease to be a novelty to each other and would counteract gendered weaknesses such as “debauchery” in males and “indolence and frivolous pursuits” in females.<sup>244</sup> Moreover, this should, she claims, “be a sure way to promote early marriages, and from early marriages the most salutary physical and moral effects naturally flow.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 311.

<sup>244</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 312.

<sup>245</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 311.

The idea that government would provide for the education of its citizens was still in its infancy. The idea that women and lower classes should have equal access to education was certainly novel. In fact, it was not until 1880 that Britain introduced universal compulsory attendance.<sup>246</sup> Although Wollstonecraft does not explicitly state that children be required by law to attend the national schools, she is definitive that parents should not be the only ones concerned with the education of children. She states that:

The good effects resulting from attention to private education will ever be very confined, and the parent who really puts his own hand to the plow, will always, in some degree, be disappointed, till education becomes a grand national concern....In order to open [children's] faculties they should be excited to think for themselves; and this can only be done by mixing a number of children together, and making them jointly pursue the same objects.<sup>247</sup>

It is just this recognition of the importance of education for both the individual and society that portrays Wollstonecraft's theories of liberty as foreshadowing positive liberty. In addition to recognizing that liberty includes the freedom to reason and develop mentally, Wollstonecraft also recognized that a free society begins with its children and an education that assists in developing internal freedom. Her solution to the inadequacies of boarding schools, which she says make boys "gluttons and slovens [sic],"<sup>248</sup> and the limitations of home tutoring, which she claims makes children "acquire too high an opinion of their own importance, from being allowed to tyrannize over

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<sup>246</sup> Peter Gordon and John White, *Philosophers as Educational Reformers: the Influence of Idealism on British Educational Thought and Practice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 79.

<sup>247</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 298.

<sup>248</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 299.

servants...and treated like men when they are still boys,”<sup>249</sup> is her system of national day-schools. She argues:

Thus, to make men citizens two natural steps might be taken, which seem directly to lead to the desired point; for the domestic affections, that first open the heart to the various modifications of humanity, would be cultivated, whilst the children were nevertheless allowed to spend great part [sic] of their time, on terms of equality, with other children.<sup>250</sup>

She is adamant that “unless virtue be nursed by liberty, it will never attain due strength...the being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority, but that of reason.”<sup>251</sup> Given the importance of reason and virtue as individual and social concerns, the government should be involved. As R. P. Chamberlin states in her dissertation:

in liberal democratic societies, such as our own, the relationship between what is claimed about the value of liberty and what goes on in our schools, homes and communities is less close than it might be...in discussions on how we should live, what people should be allowed to do, and what are the values that should govern our dealings with each other, children are largely forgotten. We can sustain a false view of ourselves as a society of independent individualists, owing little or nothing to anyone else and having only the obligations we have chosen for ourselves, only because we do not include children as part of that society.<sup>252</sup>

Wollstonecraft is addressing these same sorts of issues almost two hundred years earlier, but Wollstonecraft must also add women to the ‘forgotten’.

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<sup>249</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 299.

<sup>250</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 300.

<sup>251</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 340.

<sup>252</sup> R. P. Chamberlin, “A Philosophical Investigation of Political Liberty and Education,” (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 1987), 7.

## Education and Positive Liberty

Wollstonecraft desired that society change in such a way as to allow true freedom for all people. In fact, her educational program is an example of a kind of law, or system of laws, that she endorses as necessary for freedom, providing as it does, for all children and youths to obtain the learning necessary for the correct use of their reasoning abilities, as well as providing them a means of independence.<sup>253</sup> Indeed, it is her education, such as it was, that has provided her with her employment. She refers to her plan as one for “national establishments,” and states that day schools “should be established by government.”<sup>254</sup> Such schools would create a better society, since happiness and freedom depend on virtue, and these schools would be “schools of morality.”<sup>255</sup>

It is, in fact, in her connections between freedom and virtue, or morality, that Wollstonecraft presents us with both the promise and problem of positive liberty. The promise is that proper education will develop virtue and freedom (these qualities are interdependent in Wollstonecraft’s philosophy), and so develop a better society. The problem with positive liberty, as Berlin points out, is the fear that government could become totalitarian under the guise of enforcing positive liberties.<sup>256</sup> So, the danger with Wollstonecraft’s plan is that government could use a national educational system to force a certain conception of virtue or morality on its citizens. Wollstonecraft is unconcerned with the possibility of the government abusing positive liberty; indeed, she makes no mention of the possibility.

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<sup>253</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 302-318.

<sup>254</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 304, 310.

<sup>255</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 312.

<sup>256</sup> See Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 39-58, and specifically 44-45.

What she outlines, without using the language of positive and negative, is a plan for legislation that would remove both external barriers to education for women and the poor in order that education would in turn remove their internal obstacles to the development of virtue. In advocating for national education, she advocates for the removal of external obstacles to all people receiving an elementary education. Also, implicit in her plan is the opening of higher educational institutions for women.<sup>257</sup> She does not stop with that, though, but advocates for education as a means of removing internal obstacles to the development of reason and virtue. She writes that at present, “*littlenesses*” such as concerns for gowns, or baubles, make up most of women’s daily concerns because they are confined to “their needle [sic]” and barred from “all political and civil employments.”<sup>258</sup> As a result, their minds are “narrowed” and “they are rendered unfit to fulfil the peculiar duties which nature has assigned them.”<sup>259</sup> In other words, she is presenting a view of governmental action that fits with aspects of both negative and positive liberty. Thus, she does not present liberty as being merely non-interference.

Moving forward to the twentieth century, Charles Taylor describes a similar position; he claims that the iteration of a definitive line between positive and negative liberty is misguided and untenable because it “involves abandoning some of the most inspiring terrain of liberalism, which is concerned with individual self-realisation...”<sup>260</sup>

In his important response to Isaiah Berlin’s essay “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Taylor

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<sup>257</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 311.

<sup>258</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 312.

<sup>259</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 312.

<sup>260</sup> Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” in *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 193.

explains that the archetypal, or what he calls the “caricatural” version of negative liberty is concerned with “freedom simply as the absence of external physical or legal obstacles.”<sup>261</sup> However, as Taylor points out, there is an unresolved difficulty inherent in self-fulfillment if only external obstacles to freedom are considered obstacles, since it cannot be denied that often internal obstacles stand in the way of self-fulfillment. Taylor states:

Our attributions of freedom make sense against a background sense of more and less significant purposes, for the question of freedom/unfreedom is bound up with the frustration/fulfilment of our purposes. Further, our significant purposes can be frustrated by our own desires, and where these are sufficiently based on misappreciation, we consider them as not really ours, and experience them as fetters. A man’s freedom can therefore be hemmed in by internal, motivational obstacles, as well as external ones.<sup>262</sup>

Wollstonecraft prefigures the blurring of the line between positive and negative liberty that is apparent in Taylor’s conception of liberty. In particular, Taylor’s statement that “our significant purposes can be frustrated by our own desires, and where these are sufficiently based on misappreciation, we consider them as not really ours,” since the whole of *Rights of Woman* is concerned with the fact that women’s desires are based on misappreciation, and so are not women’s true desires. For example, Wollstonecraft identifies that women are only taught to please others, men in particular, and so, when her charms cease to “have much effect on her husband’s heart” she will not have “sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort [or] cultivate her dormant faculties...” but will “try to please other men...”<sup>263</sup> Moreover, she identifies the training of women in frivolity and ‘pleasing’ as being imposed upon them from girlhood:

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<sup>261</sup> Charles Taylor, “Negative Liberty,” 176.

<sup>262</sup> Charles Taylor, “Negative Liberty,” 191.

That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend at her mother's toilet, will endeavour to join the conversation, is, indeed, very natural; and that she will imitate her mother or aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her...is undoubtedly a most natural consequence...Pursuing these reflections, the fondness for dress, conspicuous in women, may be easily accounted for, without supposing it the result of a desire to please the sex on which they are dependent. The absurdity, in short, of supposing that a girl is naturally a coquette, and that a desire connected with the impulse of nature to propagate the species, should appear even before an improper education has, by heating the imagination, called it forth prematurely is so unphilosophical...<sup>264</sup>

It is apparent in this quote that women are trained to have desires that are not their own, but merely result from their severely limited exposure to anything other than dressing and pleasing men. Wollstonecraft's frustration with this system is evident when she states that "women should either be shut up like eastern princes, or educated in such a manner as to be able to think and act for themselves." She is also aware that it would "require some time to convince women that they act contrary to their real interest on an enlarged scale..."<sup>265</sup> Thus, Wollstonecraft also acknowledges that desires resulting from misappreciation are not truly one's desires, and therefore, acting on such desires works against one's real, or significant, desires.

Wollstonecraft's conception of women's significant purposes includes, as discussed, being a good citizen, and her idea of a good citizen includes patriotism and two primary roles for women: motherhood and financially independent adulthood. Women, she claims, need to acquire a "rational affection for their country, founded on

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<sup>263</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 136.

<sup>264</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 154.

<sup>265</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 160.



knowledge...” in order to be “truly useful members of society...”<sup>266</sup> In addition, she writes that women:

denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence, have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts, though the private duty of any member of society must be very imperfectly performed when not connected with the general good.<sup>267</sup>

Since the “private duty” needs to be “connected with the general good”, she mandates that mothers also need to be educated so they are able assist their children in developing reason and patriotism. Children should receive attention that “will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions...and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity...”<sup>268</sup> Since this is the case, and society deems child-rearing as the “peculiar destination of woman,” women’s minds must “take in much more..., or they will never become sensible mothers.”<sup>269</sup> Yet, even though Wollstonecraft allows that child-rearing falls mainly to women, she still advocates that women will not “fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men...”<sup>270</sup> Further, she asks “[h]ow many women thus waste life away...who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads...”<sup>271</sup> If this was the case, and women realized

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<sup>266</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 340.

<sup>267</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 330.

<sup>268</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 128.

<sup>269</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 337.

<sup>270</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 307.

<sup>271</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 287.

their true desires and purposes, they would “render their private virtue a public benefit” and they would have a “civil existence in the State...”<sup>272</sup>

Of course, Wollstonecraft acknowledges that government must change in order to remove all barriers to women having a civil existence, but changing government is part of her goals, as evidenced by her national education plan. She also desired a change in the “very constitution of civil governments,” since the constitution, such as it was, “put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding...”<sup>273</sup> Furthermore, she links virtue and usefulness to civil duties, and so, women need the protection of civil laws. Such protection included, for Wollstonecraft, representatives in government who were there to represent women. She does not, however, specify whether this means female representatives, or representatives chosen by women. Either way, though, she is advocating for a governmental change, since she writes “the whole system of representation is now, in this country, only a convenient handle for despotism....”<sup>274</sup> Moreover, she asks “is not that government then very defective, and very unmindful of the happiness of one half of its members, that does not provide for honest, independent women...?”<sup>275</sup> Therefore, she declares, women should “share the advantages of education and government with man...”<sup>276</sup> Her desires for governmental change incorporate, again, negative and positive liberty. Not only does she

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<sup>272</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 287.

<sup>273</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 169.

<sup>274</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 285.

<sup>275</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 287.

<sup>276</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 310.

wish that obstacles to women's participation in government be removed, but she advocates that the government "provide" for women.

The idea of provision includes, implicitly, the idea of care as a responsibility of government, and such an idea is one of positive liberty. Daniel Engster also recognizes Wollstonecraft's version of liberalism as something other than classical liberalism. He rightly claims that she rejects the classic separation of public and private spheres. Instead, he points out that she "emphasizes the importance of care-giving activities, and sets her sights on creating a more dutiful and caring citizen body...she asserts the importance of private care for the development of public virtue."<sup>277</sup> Thus, she advocates for governmental action, that is, governmental care, on behalf of the weak, which she found sadly lacking at the time. She states that "[n]ature having made men unequal, by giving stronger bodily and mental powers to one than to another, the end of government ought to be, to destroy this inequality by protecting the weak. Instead of which, it has always leaned to the opposite side..."<sup>278</sup> Engster refers to Wollstonecraft's theory as "an Ethic of Justice and Care." Since positive liberty implies caring and community, this is consistent with the contention herein that Wollstonecraft was promoting positive liberty. In fact, the above quote, first published in 1794, and which Engster also uses, is a clear demonstration of Wollstonecraft promoting positive liberty.

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<sup>277</sup> Daniel Engster, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Nurturing Liberalism: Between an Ethic of Justice and Care," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 586, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118234> (accessed September 26, 2012).

<sup>278</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the effect it has produced in Europe, Volume the First*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, electronic edition, vol. 6, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London:Pickering & Chatto, 1989), 17, Intelix Past Masters, <http://library.nlx.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/xtf/view?docId=wollstonecraft/wollstonecraft.00.xml;chunk.i d=div.wollstonecraft.pmpreface.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.wollstonecraft.pmpreface.1;brand=default> (accessed December 15, 2012).

## Chapter Four: Family, Community, Liberty: The Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and Letters from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway

While in France, Wollstonecraft's ideas of domesticity and its relationship to society became increasingly set. Furthermore, she continued to hold the government accountable for societal conditions and called for changes to laws that allowed some people to benefit at the expense of others. She had begun to develop her ideas regarding the connection between the public and private spheres in *Rights of Woman*, and they become more evident in her last two works. In fact, even some of her letters demonstrate the importance she placed on 'correct' family life. For instance, she writes of her lover, Gilbert Imlay, reading to her while she mends her stockings, and iterates that she does "not want to be loved like a goddess; but [wishes] to be necessary to [Imlay]." <sup>279</sup> Certainly in this quote there are echoes of the womanhood aimed at in *Rights of Woman*. In that work, she states that "it is the indispensable duty of men and women to fulfil the duties which give birth to affections that are the surest preservatives against vice," and describes the natural affections of family as growing "out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy." This can only be accomplished if the family remains living together and caring for each other. Hiring wet-nurses and sending children off to school were unacceptable to Wollstonecraft. <sup>280</sup> It becomes obvious from *Rights of Woman* and her observations in France and Scandinavia that she continued to be convinced of the direct connection between the public and the private spheres; she realizes that the basic unit of society was not the individual, but rather, the family, and she called for governments also to recognize this and actively promote better family life.

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<sup>279</sup> Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1793 and January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1794, *Letters*, 237, 239.

<sup>280</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 291.

## Life and Writings

Wollstonecraft arrived in Paris in December, 1792, and immediately, family began to make demands of her again. Eliza, never having been to France, desired that Wollstonecraft find her a position in Paris, in order that she might learn French as Everina had done several years before. Wollstonecraft promised, in several letters, to find her a place.<sup>281</sup> Todd, drawing on Eliza's letters, describes Eliza as torn between "faith in her eldest sister's ability to rescue her and envy at her fame and more exciting life."<sup>282</sup> Eliza stated, rather sardonically, that she was not "so sanguine as to expect my pretty face will be thought of when matters of State are in agitation."<sup>283</sup> Indeed, bringing an Englishperson to France at this time was less than desirable, due to the Revolution, and Wollstonecraft never acquired a place for her. Additionally, James was once again in London, and asking for money to purchase a lieutenantcy. Wollstonecraft wrote that she would have to ask Johnson for money again, but there is no record of her having done so.<sup>284</sup>

The year 1793 brought significant changes to Wollstonecraft's life. She obtained a passport for Eliza, but since France declared war on England on February 1<sup>st</sup> and Wollstonecraft was required, in order to avoid imprisonment as a British subject, to leave Paris for Neuilly in the spring, the passport was of little use. Of greater importance, for her own life and work, Wollstonecraft began an affair with the American, Gilbert Imlay,

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<sup>281</sup> Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 200; Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, December, 1792, *Letters*, 212, and note 493; Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1792, *Letters*, 214; Wollstonecraft to Eliza Bishop, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1793, *Letters*, 217.

<sup>282</sup> Todd, ed., *Letters*, note 461.

<sup>283</sup> As quoted by Todd, ed., *Letters*, note 461.

<sup>284</sup> Wollstonecraft to Eliza Bishop, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1793, *Letters*, 218.

and began writing her work on the French Revolution. According to Godwin, the affair began in mid-April. In September, France passed a law threatening to imprison British expatriates. To protect Wollstonecraft, Imlay registered her at the American embassy as his wife. Wollstonecraft was then able to return to Paris, yet Imlay did not remain long with her there. Business took him to Le Havre, where, in November, Wollstonecraft wrote to him to say that she was expecting their child.<sup>285</sup> In early 1794 Wollstonecraft moved to Le Havre to be with Imlay. Their time together there was the first in Wollstonecraft's experience of the sort of domestic life in which she believed. While in Le Havre, she and Imlay lived together as a family, and Wollstonecraft completed the first volume of *The French Revolution*.<sup>286</sup> Alas, her domestic situation proved too short. Their daughter, Fanny, was born in May, and in September Imlay departed for London. This was to prove the end of their relationship, though according to Todd, Imlay continued to support her.<sup>287</sup>

In April, 1795 Wollstonecraft returned to London with the belief that her family was to be reunited. Imlay, however, had already formed another connection, unbeknownst to Wollstonecraft. All she knew was that he refused to live with her. Unable to bear her grief and the burden of single-motherhood in eighteenth-century Britain, Wollstonecraft attempted suicide in the end of May. Little is known of the particulars of this attempt, but Godwin suggests that Imlay learned of her attempt in time to either stop or remedy it. Very soon afterward, Wollstonecraft, Fanny, and her maid,

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<sup>285</sup> Godwin, 68-71; Wollstonecraft to Eliza Bishop, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1793, *Letters*, 225-226; Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay, November, 1793, *Letters*, 232-233.

<sup>286</sup> Wollstonecraft to Ruth Barlow, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1794, *Letters*, 252.

<sup>287</sup> Godwin, 77-78, and Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 267, 281, 285.

Marguerite, departed to Scandinavia on business for Imlay. He had invested in a ship carrying silver, which seemed to have disappeared.<sup>288</sup> Wollstonecraft's journey is notable for several reasons: she travelled without male accompaniment, she travelled to do business, and she produced her last completed work: *Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*.<sup>289</sup>

Wollstonecraft can be forgiven for her difficulty in accepting the end of her relationship with Imlay. When she returned to London the first time, Imlay set her up in a house, and then sent her to Scandinavia to settle some business matters for him. It was not a definitive end to their relationship, and Wollstonecraft was unaware of Imlay's mistress until she returned from her trip to Scandinavia. Upon learning the truth of Imlay's situation from a servant, she attempted suicide again, this time by jumping off a bridge into the Thames. She did not sink as quickly as she thought she would, and even though she passed out, she was rescued and revived. Her desperation for a relationship with Imlay continued; in fact, she proposed to live with him and his mistress, in order that he "learn habitually to feel for [his] child the affection of a father."<sup>290</sup> This proposal, of course, was not accepted. The relationship was at a complete end, finally, in March, 1796, three years after it had begun, but a year-and-a-half after their intimacies were ended.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 303.

<sup>289</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 81-85.

<sup>290</sup> This account is quoted in Godwin, 91, but is not taken from any extant letter. It is perhaps taken from conversations between Wollstonecraft and Godwin, as Todd surmises in *Letters*, note 695.

<sup>291</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 86-95.

## Public Virtue, Private Virtue

Of *Letters Written*, Godwin writes, “[i]f ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book.”<sup>292</sup> The book is, on the surface, a travel narrative; however, Wollstonecraft allows her feelings to shine through more than in any other of her non-fiction works. It is perhaps the revealing of Wollstonecraft’s vulnerabilities that most appeals to Godwin. A telling example of Wollstonecraft’s longing for family life is the pretty picture she paints of an idyllic family life. Wollstonecraft describes a pretty scene she saw out her carriage window while traveling from Sweden to Norway. She writes of the sight of a father returning home, carrying one child, who had come out to meet him, and leading another child on his horse, while the third child was on the wagon keeping the sheaves from falling. She watched as they arrived at their cottage, where the mother was preparing their meal. She states that although she hates cooking, she “envied the mother” and felt a “pang” that her child would not know a “father’s care or tenderness.” This picture reveals, rather poignantly, Wollstonecraft’s ideal of a family making a life together as they worked for each other.<sup>293</sup> This can be analyzed in comparison with her description of some other families she encountered on her travels in which the men were so uncouth, that if the women had not also been rather crude, she claims that they would only have loved their

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<sup>292</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 84.

<sup>293</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, electronic edition, vol. 6, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), 315, Intellex Past Masters, <http://library.nlx.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/xtf/view?docId=wollstonecraft/wollstonecraft.00.xml;chunk.i d=div.wollstonecraft.pmpreface.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.wollstonecraft.pmpreface.1;brand=default> (accessed December 15, 2012).



husbands because they were their husbands, and not because the men were worthy of genuine affection.<sup>294</sup>

*Letters Written* is not only an engaging travel narrative, but also has much to say about her political ideas. Wollstonecraft, like many during the Enlightenment, was a believer in the progress of societies from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized’. For her, the family was both the starting point and the building block of a virtuous, free society. She viewed Norway as being very free, and so concludes that it was advancing in an orderly manner toward an existence that would “[afford] leisure for the cultivation of the arts and sciences, that lift man so far above his first state.”<sup>295</sup> As well, she points out that at present, Norwegians “love their country, but have not much public spirit. Their exertions are, generally speaking, only for their families...” This will change, she says, as they become more involved with politics, which will “enlarge their understanding.”<sup>296</sup> Because they begin from the position of strong familial ties, she is very hopeful for their advancement. Indeed, unlike classical liberalism’s clear distinction between the private and public spheres, Wollstonecraft’s ideology did not delineate between the two. In several places she reveals her belief in the connection between the private and public, using the French as an example. For instance, she claims:

All that could be done by a body of manners, without a soul of morals, to improve mankind, had been tried in France—the result was polished slavery, and such an inordinate love of pleasure, as led the majority to search only for enjoyment, till the tone of nature was destroyed. Yet some few really learned the true art of living, giving that degree of elegance to domestic intercourse, which, prohibiting

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<sup>294</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 296.

<sup>295</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 289.

<sup>296</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 274.

gross familiarity, alone can render permanent the family affections, whence all the social virtues spring.<sup>297</sup>

Indeed, Wollstonecraft views the development of the ‘civilized’ person as proceeding from an understanding of those closest to the person and extending ever outward until one’s “researches embrace all human kind.”<sup>298</sup>

Botting considers Wollstonecraft’s familial ideal a “modern social imaginary”.<sup>299</sup>

By this Botting refers to Charles Taylor’s definition of a social imaginary:

something much broader than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.<sup>300</sup>

In fact, Taylor mentions that Wollstonecraft was a “brave and innovative” figure that did not adopt the idea that patriarchal and political power “operated on quite different principles.”<sup>301</sup> Botting takes this even further, stating:

this article...aims to give Mary Wollstonecraft due credit for crafting one of the most important, and influential, philosophical models of the egalitarian family for the modern Western tradition...Wollstonecraft, thus, represents one major philosophical source for the growing modern Western understanding of the substantive overlap and interdependence between our social imaginaries of the family, the public sphere, and popular self-governance.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 147.

<sup>298</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 223.

<sup>299</sup> Botting, “Enlightened Legacy,” 688-689.

<sup>300</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ubc/docDetail.action?docID=10207684> (accessed December 10, 2012).

<sup>301</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 147.

<sup>302</sup> Botting, “Enlightened Legacy,” 688-689.

It is this overlapping space that forms the basis of the communitarianism that can be found in Wollstonecraft, and linked to Taylor. Indeed, as Taylor and Botting at least partially recognize, Wollstonecraft was again ahead of her time.

Wollstonecraft's conception of the private as the basis of the public is obvious in her conceptions of marriage. As Ruth Abbey argues:

[i]f liberal theory is to move forward, it must take the political nature of family relations seriously. The beginnings of such a liberalism appear in Mary Wollstonecraft's work. Wollstonecraft's depiction of the family as a fundamentally political institution extends liberal values into the private sphere by promoting the ideal of marriage as friendship.<sup>303</sup>

As discussed in chapter three, a better education was necessary for women if they were to remove and avoid the dangers inherent in current training, which only aimed at making women pleasing to men. Wollstonecraft makes clear that if women are trained only to please, they will continue to do so after marriage. Unfortunately, when a wife finds that her "charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day," she will look for other men to respond to her charms.<sup>304</sup> Yet, her theory is focused not only on women, but also on men, whose duties are to be a husband and father. In fact, she considers the duties of mothers and fathers to be so interrelated that if one does not perform his or her duties with care and propriety, the other will have difficulty. She declares "make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers; that is – if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers."<sup>305</sup> Moreover, due to the ignorant

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<sup>303</sup> Ruth Abbey, "Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Hypatia* 14, no. 3 (1999): 78, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810487> (accessed September 20, 2012).

<sup>304</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 136.

<sup>305</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 323.

nature in which women are kept, they tend to frustrate “any plan of education that a more rational father may adopt; for unless a mother concur, the father who restrains will ever be considered as a tyrant.”<sup>306</sup> It is evident that for Wollstonecraft, not only were women dependent on men, due to their inequality, but this very inequality frustrated even the intentions of the best fathers. Furthermore, she clearly states that the “two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other. This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending it to every virtue.”<sup>307</sup>

The necessity of education and equality, and the importance of correct relationships is reiterated in *Letters Written*. Wollstonecraft’s observations about the Danes are similar to her observations about the British. Of the wives, she notes that even though they are “notable housewives,” they are ignorant, making them “weak, indulgent mothers, who having no principle of action to regulate their feelings, become the slaves of infants...”<sup>308</sup> About the Swedes, Wollstonecraft admits that they are “attached to their families,” but that “after youth is flown the husband becomes a sot, and the wife amuses herself by scolding her servants.”<sup>309</sup> Wollstonecraft reasons that this cannot but be expected “in any country where taste and cultivation of mind do not supply the place of youthful beauty and animal spirits[,]” since “few people have a principle of action sufficiently stable to produce rectitude of feeling...”<sup>310</sup> When in Denmark, she asked,

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<sup>306</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 338.

<sup>307</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 275.

<sup>308</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 321.

<sup>309</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 318.

<sup>310</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 318.

rhetorically, “is not man then the tyrant of the creation?”<sup>311</sup> She continues, explaining that courtship is the “only period of freedom and pleasure that the women enjoy” because “men are domestic tyrants...”<sup>312</sup>

Wollstonecraft argues that a lack of education and cultivation of the mind leads to “gross vices.” She states that the “virtues of a nation...bear an exact proportion to their scientific improvements.”<sup>313</sup> While her meaning is not explicit, a previous passage assists in explaining at least a part of her meaning. While she was in Denmark there was an execution, after which two people came forward to drink a glass of the criminal’s blood as a cure for apoplexy. Wollstonecraft, upon hearing of this, exclaimed that this was “a horrible violation of nature...”<sup>314</sup> Yet, she was reproved by a Danish lady who overheard her comment. Wollstonecraft declares that this is “a remnant of exploded witchcraft,” that cannot be rooted out “till the acquiring a general knowledge of the component parts of the human frame becomes a part of public education.”<sup>315</sup> This is an example of the meaning she attached to “scientific improvements.” Additionally, she states that the “sensuality so prevalent appears to me to arise rather from indolence of mind and dull senses, than from an exuberance of life...”<sup>316</sup> An example of the “indolence of mind” found in Denmark was the attitude taken toward religion, in this case, toward Lutheranism. She observes that “Lutherans, preaching reformation, have

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<sup>311</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 325.

<sup>312</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 326.

<sup>313</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 327.

<sup>314</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 324.

<sup>315</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 324.

<sup>316</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 326.

built a reputation for sanctity on the same foundation as the Catholics,”<sup>317</sup> that being public worship. Yet, she concludes that it is “quite as easy to prevaricate with religious injunctions as human laws, when the exercise of their reason does not lead people to acquire principles for themselves...”<sup>318</sup> In other words, the Danes are indolent because they have not exercised their reason to discover principles, both scientific and religious, for themselves.

Wollstonecraft was adamant that since virtue and equality require liberty and the exercise of reason, they do not exist where there exists master and servant. However, she is not referring only to technical delineations of master and servant, but rather, the inequality that arises from the rich and strong devouring the poor and weak. She declares:

...inequality of conditions, which makes wealth more desirable than either talents or virtue, has so weakened all the organs of the body-politic, and rendered man such a beast of prey, that the strong have always devoured the weak till the very signification of justice has been lost sight of...<sup>319</sup>

Rather than instituting systems of justice, the strong institute systems of charity, which Wollstonecraft refers to as the “most specious system of slavery.”<sup>320</sup> She reiterates this viewpoint in *Letters Written*, stating that charity is used by bigots to “cover their sins,” and so they do “violence to justice.”<sup>321</sup> Furthermore, for some, “benevolence is merely tyranny in disguise; they assist the most worthless, because [they are] the most

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<sup>317</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 326-327.

<sup>318</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 327.

<sup>319</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 46.

<sup>320</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 46.

<sup>321</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 326.

servile...”<sup>322</sup> Thus, she understands charity to simply be a means of creating inequality. For Wollstonecraft, equality is a common societal good, or at least, it should be. Thus, although she does not mandate that the government outlaw charity, she is adamant that the government protect the weak as a means of creating equality, and included in the weak are women.<sup>323</sup>

Likewise, in the interests of true economic and political equality, she is unsupportive of the government viewing property protection as its primary duty. For her, property is not a common good. In fact, she maintains that an over-accumulation of wealth “destroys the balance of liberty,”<sup>324</sup> and “an adoration of property is the root of all evil.”<sup>325</sup> Thus, although she is not against private property, she is against the inequality that arises from the systems governing the distribution of property. For instance, regarding the changed situation in revolutionary France, she states that “by the destruction of the rights of primogeniture, a greater degree of equality of property is sure to follow...”<sup>326</sup> In Norway, she praised their property system, stating that their system of small farms “produces a degree of equality which I have seldom seen elsewhere...”<sup>327</sup> This harkens back to her call in *Rights of Men* for small farms and better use of undeveloped land.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 337.

<sup>323</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 17.

<sup>324</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 273.

<sup>325</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 325.

<sup>326</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 231.

<sup>327</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 273.

<sup>328</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 92, 94.

Indeed, political and economic equality are, for Wollstonecraft, the most important common goods. Equality is central to her arguments that opportunities to advance reason and understanding and opportunities for employment are common goods to be promoted by the government. Yet, for her, equality is based on the right of freedom and the capacity for virtue in each person. She asks of France, “[w]hen will a change of opinion, producing a change of morals, render thee truly free?--When will truth give life to real magnanimity, and justice place equality on a stable seat?”<sup>329</sup> In her own nation, she calls for the government to actively encourage women to “fill respectable stations.” Yet, she realizes that this requires women to have a “civil existence in the State.”<sup>330</sup> Thus, she pleads that “an enlightened nation then try what effect reason would have to bring [women] back to nature, and their duty; and allowing them to share the advantages of education and government with man, see whether they will become better, as they grow wiser and become free.”<sup>331</sup> She realizes that as women are educated and learn to “think justly in one track,” they will “extend [their] intellectual empire...” and will not blindly submit to “the social laws which make a nonentity of a wife.”<sup>332</sup> Her one lament about Norway is that knowledge was not yet necessary for most people to live comfortably, so it was not yet considered a common good for society. Yet, she mentions that some were even then working to establish a university within Norway, and so, ideas of the common good were changing.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 85.

<sup>330</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 287.

<sup>331</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 310.

<sup>332</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 322.

<sup>333</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written*, 277.



Wollstonecraft is explicit that the family may be termed “a state.” Yet, as such it is not isolated from the national state. In fact, Wollstonecraft is clear that:

...every family might also be called a state. States, it is true, have mostly been governed by arts that disgrace the character of man; and the want of a just constitution, and equal laws, have so perplexed the notions of the world wise, that they more than question the reasonableness of contending for the rights of humanity. Thus, morality, polluted in the national reservoir, sends off streams of vice to corrupt the constituent parts of the body politic; but should more noble, or rather, more just principles regulate the laws, which ought to be the government of society, and not those who execute them, duty might become the rule of private conduct.<sup>334</sup>

Yet, the flow of virtue goes both ways. She also recognizes that “[p]ublic spirit must be nurtured by private virtue...”<sup>335</sup> Most importantly, though, is that Wollstonecraft advocated that a “benevolent legislator always endeavours to make it the interest of each individual to be virtuous; and thus private virtue becoming the cement of public happiness, an orderly whole is consolidated by the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre.”<sup>336</sup> Here it is apparent that she does not separate the public and private, but understands the two to be fundamentally connected and reliant on each other. Neither the public sphere nor the private can develop successfully (virtuously) alone.

Although Wollstonecraft is here discussing conceptions of the state and society which later are referred to under the umbrella of positive liberty and communitarianism, it is necessary to elaborate on the connection between the two. Nicholls, writing of the positive liberals during the last half of the nineteenth century, writes that they “held a conception of society, not simply as a heap of atoms, but as a community of mutually

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<sup>334</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 322.

<sup>335</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 375.

<sup>336</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 282.

interacting beings; these beings are continually influencing each other.”<sup>337</sup> Moreover, these liberals recognized that liberalism was becoming synonymous with “negative state policy”. Yet, Nicholls recounts how one positive liberal of the time argued that “there is no inconsistency in the same party struggling for the removal of bad restrictions and also for the imposition of good ones, both for the purpose of increasing freedom.”<sup>338</sup> Thus, it becomes evident that from the start of support for positive liberty, the idea of community and positive state policy were interlinked. In fact, several British politicians also recognized this connection during the same time period. Nicholls quotes the Earl of Asquith, who stated that:

The collective action of the community may and ought to be employed positively as well as negatively; to raise as well as to level; to equalize opportunities no less than to curtail privileges; to make the freedom of the individual a reality and not a pretence.<sup>339</sup>

Here it becomes evident that the community was recognized as being in relationship with individuals, and was called upon to provide freedoms for its members.

## **Communitarianism**

As Charles Taylor clearly explains, the community is not simply a collection of individuals; rather, people in community are in a dialogic condition, that is, they produce a common action that transcends the individual. Shared experiences and needs must be addressed from a collective standpoint.<sup>340</sup> Taylor’s foundation for giving priority to

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<sup>337</sup> Nicholls, *Positive Liberty*, 122.

<sup>338</sup> Nicholls, *Positive Liberty*, 122.

<sup>339</sup> As quoted in Nicholls, *Positive Liberty*, 124.

community life is based on the belief that “democratic society needs some commonly recognized definition of the good life...”<sup>341</sup> Taylor describes this as dialogic, using the following example. One person may have an opinion of the weather, just as another person has an opinion of the weather. However, when they begin a conversation about the weather, they are engaging in something beyond their individual opinions about the weather. Importantly, once in dialogue with each other, a “common action” is undertaken other than each individual simply recognizing the weather on his/her own.<sup>342</sup>

Interestingly, patriotism also plays an important role in Taylor’s theory. He defines patriotism as “strong citizen identification around a sense of common good,”<sup>343</sup> and contrasts the idea of a common good with that of convergent individual good. The difference between the two is subtle, but important. For example, individuals wish to be educated, so people in general support an educational system. However, that does not tell the entire story. There is a common good in that an educated society is more successful and responsible, thus, society supports an educational system. Taylor’s critique of classical liberalism is that it produces a fragmented society, in which the “members find it harder and harder to identify with their political society as a community.” The cause and result of fragmentation lies, according to Taylor, is social atomism: the centering of “fulfilment on the individual, making his or her affiliations purely instrumental...”<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Charles Taylor, “Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate,” *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 166-167.

<sup>341</sup> Charles Taylor, “Cross-Purposes,” 160.

<sup>342</sup> Charles Taylor, “Cross-Purposes,” 167.

<sup>343</sup> Charles Taylor, “Cross-Purposes,” 173.

<sup>344</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 58.

One solution, says Taylor, is “successful common action.”<sup>345</sup> Also linked to the idea of “common action”, for Taylor, is patriotism, which he claims rests on a common sense of identity and history; citizens hold certain values in common.<sup>346</sup>

Wollstonecraft also recognizes the importance of patriotism for society at large. Specifically, she states that “if the pure flame of patriotism have [sic] reached [women’s] bosoms, they should labour to improve the morals of their fellow-citizens...”<sup>347</sup> Moreover, the denial of a civil existence to women draws their interest from “the whole community to that of the minute parts,” since the “private duty of any member of society must be very imperfectly performed when not connected with the general good.”<sup>348</sup> She defines patriotism as the “expansion of domestic sympathy, rendered permanent by principle,”<sup>349</sup> and laments that “private virtue” has not yet “become the guarantee of patriotism.”<sup>350</sup> These statements reveal that just as Taylor’s theory links the individual to the common good, so does Wollstonecraft’s. They realize that a firm line between the private and the public cannot be drawn, since both make up a community, and the common, or general, good is essential to a successful community.

Thus, Wollstonecraft’s conception of a free society, written in the 1790s, requires that the government and the people recognize certain common goods, namely, freedom, virtue, and reason, equality and education. Recognition of these common goods

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<sup>345</sup> Charles Taylor, *Ethics*, 117.

<sup>346</sup> Charles Taylor, “Cross-Purposes,” 174.

<sup>347</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 102.

<sup>348</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 330.

<sup>349</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 54.

<sup>350</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, 85.

necessitates that government protects the weak and facilitates virtue, while members act collectively to develop private virtue, so that public virtue and patriotism accrue for the betterment of society as a whole. The mingling of public and private for the development of a common good and the requirement of government to act on behalf of the common good reveal Wollstonecraft's position as a forerunner of positive liberty and communitarianism, especially as described by Taylor in the twentieth century.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

Walter Benjamin, philosopher and social and literary critic, writes that “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.”<sup>351</sup> This study of Wollstonecraft’s political theory seeks to uncover her thoughts in just such a space: time past, but also time that is continuing to be ‘filled by the presence of the now’. Although Charles Taylor speaks very little of Wollstonecraft, this does not preclude making connections between their ideas. The investigation of ideas is not as simple as following a life. There is no specific birthday for an idea, nor is there a moment of death. Rather, certain ideas can be found cropping up earlier than one expected. This is what I have sought to portray here. Wollstonecraft articulated ideas that later came to be labelled ‘positive liberty’ and ‘communitarianism’, even if such ideas developed apart from her work in the centuries succeeding her.

At the time of their publication, the four books discussed here were generally well received. *Rights of Men* was moderately successful, and a second edition came out only three weeks after the first edition of November, 1790. While she at first published it anonymously, the second edition carried her name.<sup>352</sup> Reviews of the work were somewhat mixed. The *English Review*, *General Magazine and Impartial Review*, and *Gentlemen’s Magazine* were very critical. The *English Review* stated that “[i]f our author reviews his hasty work with cool deliberation, he will find something which he will perhaps choose to omit, and several passages that he would probably alter.”<sup>353</sup> The

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<sup>351</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 261.

<sup>352</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 166-167.

*General Magazine and Impartial Review* gently scoffed at her, writing that her pamphlet was “more witty than wise; for this good lady, in her zeal for what she conceives to be the Rights of Men, forgets those without which society could not exist.”<sup>354</sup> The *Gentlemen’s Magazine* advised that “[e]very experimental philosopher should first try the experiments on himself before he electrifies a whole kingdom.”<sup>355</sup> The *Monthly Review* provided a modestly approving review, accusing Wollstonecraft of presenting too many and too mixed ideas, but recognizing the “ardent love of liberty, humanity, and virtue, which evidently actuates the heart, and directs the pen of the very ingenious author.”<sup>356</sup> The *Analytical Review* and *English Review* were very favorable. The former praised the work, saying that it “abounds with just sentiments, and lively and animated remarks...”<sup>357</sup> The latter explains her boldness by stating “when women undertake to write on masculine subjects, and reason as Miss Wollstonecraft does, we wish their language to be free from all female *prettinesses*, and to express with energy and perspicuity, the ideas they mean to convey.”<sup>358</sup>

*Rights of Woman* was even more popular, making her a “minor celebrity”<sup>359</sup> in Great Britain and in America. American historian Mary Beth Norton quotes Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, who said that “in very many of [Wollstonecraft’s] sentiments, she, as

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<sup>353</sup> *Critical Review* 70 (1790): 694-696, as quoted in D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf, eds., *The Vindications: The Rights of Men, The Rights of Woman* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997, 420-421.

<sup>354</sup> *General Magazine and Impartial Review* 4 (1791): 26-27, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 423.

<sup>355</sup> *Gentlemen’s Magazine* 61, no. 1 (1791): 151-154, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 429.

<sup>356</sup> *Monthly Review* 4 (1791): 95-97, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 430.

<sup>357</sup> *Analytical Review* 8 (1790): 416-419, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 419.

<sup>358</sup> *English Review* 17 (1791): 59-61, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 422.

<sup>359</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 188.

some of our friends say, *speaks my mind.*”<sup>360</sup> Of *Rights of Woman*, the *Analytical Review* wrote “that if the bulk of the great truths which this publication contains were reduced to practice, the nation would be better, wiser and happier, than it is upon the wretched, trifling, useless and absurd system of education which is now prevalent.”<sup>361</sup> Similarly, the *Monthly Review* strongly approved of her arguments, stating that in “the class of philosophers, the *author* of this treatise—whom we will not offend by styling, authoress—has a right to a distinguished place.”<sup>362</sup> Neither the *English Review* nor the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* published a review of the work, unfortunately. However, the *Critical Review* did so in two separate volumes during 1792. Both sections were lengthy and harsh. The first reviewer rejected Wollstonecraft’s arguments outright, claiming that the book consisted of “vague inconclusive reasoning, strung together with little art, and no apparent plan...”<sup>363</sup> The second reviewer was perhaps even harsher, consigning “miss [sic] Wollstonecraft at least to oblivion: her best friends can never wish that her work should be remembered.”<sup>364</sup> This last reviewer could not have been more wrong, since this became the most well-known of all Wollstonecraft’s work, and is still in print today.

*French Revolution*, though the least read of all her work,<sup>365</sup> also made its way across the Atlantic into John Adams’ hands. He proclaimed its author “a Lady of a

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<sup>360</sup> As quoted in Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 251.

<sup>361</sup> *Analytical Review* 12 (1792): 248-249, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 431.

<sup>362</sup> *Monthly Review* ns 8 (1792): 198-199, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 448.

<sup>363</sup> *Critical Review* ns 4 (1792): 389-398, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 440.

<sup>364</sup> *Critical Review* ns 5 (1792): 132-141, as quoted in Macdonald & Scherf, 448.

<sup>365</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 480, note 4.



masculine masterly Understanding [sic].”<sup>366</sup> Yet, as Todd points out, although philosophical magazines generally approved of it, the political climate for such a publication was to a great detriment to its popularity, since Britain and France were at war.<sup>367</sup>

*Letters Written* was published to great success, and was soon translated into Swedish, German, and Dutch. Britain’s future poet laureate, Robert Southey, waxed poetic about *Letters Written*, saying it “made him fall in love with ‘a cold climate, and frost and snow, with a northern moonlight.’”<sup>368</sup> As Todd states, this was an “imaginative triumph since there was no snow in the book.”<sup>369</sup> Yet it had a romantic effect on Godwin as well, since he claimed “[i]f ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book.”<sup>370</sup>

Despite the reception of her work during her life, it was all but forgotten during much of the nineteenth century. There are two significant reasons that Wollstonecraft’s work was overlooked by liberal theorists after her death. First of all, Godwin’s *Memoirs* severely damaged her reputation. One review states:

[The *Memoirs*] may act, however, as a warning to those who fancy themselves at liberty to dispense with the laws of propriety and decency, and who suppose the possession of perverted talents will atone for deviations from rules long established for the well government of society, and the happiness of mankind.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> As quoted in Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 256.

<sup>367</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 263-264.

<sup>368</sup> As quoted in Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 370.

<sup>369</sup> Todd, *Revolutionary Life*, 370.

<sup>370</sup> Godwin, *Memoirs*, 84.

<sup>371</sup> *The European Magazine*, 33 (April 1798): 246-251, as quoted in Godwin, *Memoirs*, 341.

Another writes that “the doctrines upon which she has principally insisted are unfriendly to human happiness, and, if practically followed, would injure the sex they were intended to vindicate and protect.”<sup>372</sup> Yet another sorrowfully proclaims that “we should be sorry, could we suppose the moral taste of the world to be so vitiated, as that these Memoirs would be much read without exciting lively emotions of disgust and concern.”<sup>373</sup> Not surprisingly, given her support for the French Revolution, perhaps her harshest critic was the writer of the review in *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*. The reviewer accuses her of wishing to escape to America to avoid her creditors and of having many *amours*, and states that although Godwin intended the biography to be “a beacon, it serves for a buoy; if it does not shew [sic] what it is wise to pursue, it manifests what it is wise to avoid.”<sup>374</sup> Indeed, Barbara Taylor writes that even in 1842, London women, including some radicals, pronounced the book “an *evil* book!”<sup>375</sup> In fact, Taylor points out that the budding women’s movement was often less than enthusiastic and could be “bluntly hostile.”<sup>376</sup>

The second reason Wollstonecraft has been overlooked by political theorists is the appropriation of her work by feminism in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Olive Schreiner found Wollstonecraft’s promotion of sexual change most impressive.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared, “[w]e have had enough women sacrificed

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<sup>372</sup> *The Critical Review*, 22 (April 1798): 414-419, as quoted in Godwin, *Memoirs*, 341.

<sup>373</sup> *The New Annual Register for the Year 1798*: 271, as quoted in Godwin, *Memoirs*, 347.

<sup>374</sup> *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 1 (July 1798): 94-102, as quoted in Godwin, *Memoirs*, 343, and see Godwin *Memoirs*, 344.

<sup>375</sup> Flora Tristan, *London Journal*, 1842 (London: Virago, 1982), 253, as quoted in Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 248.

<sup>376</sup> Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 248-249. Not everyone was as opposed. Ultra-democrats and “utopian socialists” remained supportive of Wollstonecraft’s work. However, that was not necessarily helpful in assisting Wollstonecraft’s work into more widely accepted circles.

to...sentimental prating about purity. We have crucified the Mary Wollstonecrafts...<sup>377</sup>

For some time, suffragist Elizabeth Wolstenholme modelled her life on Wollstonecraft's pattern, until finally persuaded to marry her lover.<sup>378</sup> This is not to say that feminism should not stake a claim on Wollstonecraft. Rather, the flood of work produced investigating her from a feminist standpoint seems to have created the conclusion (or illusion) that she has been thoroughly studied. Indeed, Gunther-Canada claims that Wollstonecraft would not even desire inclusion in the canon of political writers, and so, she should not be considered in that light. She writes that "it is no simple task to add her voice to the conversation of political thought, because her words represent a forceful challenge to the androcentric discourse created by the fathers of the canon."<sup>379</sup> Certainly Wollstonecraft's words do 'represent a forceful challenge,' yet, that is exactly why they need to be added to the conversation.

Charles Taylor describes himself as providing a communitarian critique of liberalism, and so, not as a true liberal in today's sense. Importantly, though, he recognizes that many earlier liberals, such as Tocqueville, Mill, Hobhouse, and Green would also be difficult to define as 'liberal' by today's standards. Also, he agrees with Ruth Abbey that Wollstonecraft "could be another figure in this resurrection of a richer liberalism."<sup>380</sup> Taylor explains social life in terms of "shared goods, of language and other factors that cannot be accounted for by nor reduced to individuals—factors that I've

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<sup>377</sup> Quoted by Miriam Brody in her introduction to the 1982 Penguin edition of the *Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth, 1982), 66-67, as quoted in Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 250.

<sup>378</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 251.

<sup>379</sup> Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 3.

<sup>380</sup> Abbey and Taylor, "Communitarianism," 4.

called ‘irreducibly social’.”<sup>381</sup> Furthermore, he rejects the idea of a neutral state, in part, because he views it as impossible in the real world.

Likewise, Wollstonecraft rejects the notion of social life as a collection of completely separate individuals, each pursuing individual goals by individual means. She recognizes that social life is just that—social. For her, the greatest shared goods in society—freedom, reason, and virtue—cannot be achieved or practiced in isolation. Knowledge and virtue result from reason, and reason requires freedom in order to develop. Yet, reason needs more than simple freedom from interference: it needs education to assist its development. Thus, private, or individual, virtue will develop and produce the virtuous society. Because virtue is such an important shared good, the government should not even attempt to be neutral, but should legislate for the means of producing virtue. Specifically, the government should protect the weak, the women and the lower classes, improve the educational system, open up professions to women, and allow women to be represented in government.

By advocating for these things Wollstonecraft complicates the artificial separation of public and private by drawing attention to the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the two. For her, just as virtue, reason, education, and liberty cannot be separated, neither can personal and national virtue. She calls for government to recognize that positive actions need to be taken for the good of the whole, and illuminates three important areas most in need of change: the socio-economic system that perpetuated poverty, education, and the situation of women. In the works of Charles Taylor, we find the echoes of Wollstonecraft’s ideas, and so, recognize her as a

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<sup>381</sup> Abbey and Taylor, “Communitarianism,” 3.

forerunner of positive liberty and communitarianism. It is most fitting to leave off with Wollstonecraft herself, and the following quotes state her position most succinctly:

...every family might also be called a state. States, it is true, have mostly been governed by arts that disgrace the character of man; and the want of a just constitution, and equal laws, have so perplexed the notions of the worldly wise, that they more than question the reasonableness of contending for the rights of humanity. Thus morality, polluted in the national reservoir, sends off streams of vice to corrupt the constituent parts of the body politic; but should more noble, or rather, more just principles regulate the laws, which ought to be the government of society, and not those who execute them, duty might become the rule of private conduct.<sup>382</sup>

and:

Moralists have unanimously agreed, that unless virtue be nursed by liberty, it will never attain due strength – and what they say of man I extend to mankind, insisting that in all cases morals must be fixed on immutable principles; and, that the being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority, but that of reason.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 322.

<sup>383</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 340.

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