

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

Susan Khin Zaw

Biography

Wollstonecraft used the rationalist and egalitarian ideas of late eighteenth-century radical liberalism to attack the subjugation of women and to display its roots in the social construction of gender. Her political philosophy draws on Rousseau's philosophical anthropology, rational religion, and an original moral psychology which integrates reason and feeling in the production of virtue. Relations between men and women are corrupted by artificial gender distinctions, just as political relations are corrupted by artificial distinctions of rank, wealth and power. Conventional, artificial morality distinguishes between male and female virtue; true virtue is gender-neutral, consists in the imitation of God, and depends on the unimpeded development of natural faculties common to both sexes, including both reason and passion. Political justice and private virtue are interdependent: neither can advance without an advance in the other.

1. Life and influences

Mary Wollstonecraft was born into a declining middle-class family. Her father became a heavy drinker who beat his wife, and possibly his daughter too. Wollstonecraft had little formal education and early sought independence as a lady's companion, a schoolkeeper, and a governess, before rejecting such conventionally female occupations for the usually male one of translator and reviewer for *The Analytical Review*, a periodical founded by the dissenting publisher Joseph Johnson. She achieved fame with two political tracts: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), attacking Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her most substantial work (see Burke, E.). She also published educational works, a novel, an account of the French Revolution, and a travel book; a second novel was unfinished at her death. All the work published in her lifetime was written for money, the two *Vindications* extremely rapidly, without revision. While living in France to study the Revolution of 1789 at first hand she had an illegitimate daughter; after return to London and rejection by the child's father she made two attempts at suicide. She then resumed her journalistic career and formed a liaison with the political philosopher William Godwin, whom she married on becoming pregnant with a second daughter (later to become Mary Shelley). She died of complications following childbirth. Wollstonecraft seems to have been influenced chiefly by the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, the educational theories of Locke and Catherine Macaulay, the dissenting, 'enlightened', politically radical circles round Joseph Johnson and Richard Price, who lived near the school she kept in Newington Green, and by wide and miscellaneous reading, particularly of Rousseau and Burke, opposition to whom formed her understanding of her own experience.

2. Wollstonecraft and philosophy

Wollstonecraft was not a systematic political philosopher aiming primarily at theoretical rigour, but something more like a *philosophe* as defined in Diderot's *Encyclopedie* (see Diderot, D. §1) For the *philosophe*, reasoning consisted in speculative generalization from experience, applied to the social issues of the day with an eye to practical improvement. Wollstonecraft combined ideas drawn from a variety of Enlightenment philosophies, from contemporary science, and from prevailing political, cultural and social movements into an explanation and evaluation of the current condition of women, of the state of society, and of her personal and professional experience within it. Her object was a rational programme of reform; her political works use philosophy only incidentally, to support political polemic.

Though this political polemic uses the language of liberalism, its philosophical foundations are, first, a speculative anthropology which distinguishes between natural and artificial human attributes, assigns most of human development to environmental influences, and expects progressive human improvement in morality and civilization; and second, a moral philosophy and psychology inspired by personal experience, current theories of the nervous system, and the suggestions of rational religion about the purpose of human life. This philosophical moral psychology achieved only fragmentary expression in Wollstonecraft's political works, but its outlines are fairly clear from her educational, fictional and travel writings.

3. Political philosophy

For Wollstonecraft, human beings were created to perfect their nature as rational and moral beings (see Perfectionism). Natural humanity is not unsocialized humanity, as in Rousseau, but humanity freely developing its capacity for self-improvement, which includes the capacity for socialization. The function of society is further improvement of humankind. Social and political arrangements which thwart or fail to recognize this corrupt human nature.

Eighteenth-century society and politics are corrupted by artificial distinctions of rank (such as the aristocracy), the products of historical accident, which impede the development of all ranks towards human perfection; relations between the sexes are similarly corrupted by artificial distinctions of character and capability, such as the association of reason and moral strength with men, and feeling or sensibility and moral weakness with women. These artificial distinctions impede the development of both sexes towards full flowering of their human faculties.

Such corrupted environmental influences produce social injustice, along with vice in the aristocracy and brutish insensibility in the poor; the best hope of virtue lies with the middle classes. But even among these, artificial rank and gender distinctions are maintained by factitious interests such as social snobbery, male interest in the reduction of women to docile sexual objects, and female enjoyment of the opportunity this affords for sexual tyranny over men.

Thus the effect of artificial distinctions on social relations and public and private morality is, in the public sphere, political tyranny, social enmity, and a distorted conventional morality assigning different virtues to the two sexes; in the private sphere, domestic tyranny and the degradation of both male and female nature, to the detriment of physical health, moral development and parenthood.

The remedy is the abolition of artificial distinctions through political and social reform and the education of potential future citizens of both sexes into a radically revised, gender-neutral morality, based on religious but rationally derived principles. This new morality will redescribe conventionally gendered and sexualized virtues such as courage and modesty in forms applicable to both sexes, enabling women to become independent moral agents and rational wives and mothers.

Moral re-education, however, will be effective only in a context of gradual institutional, cultural and political evolution towards a republican meritocracy. Political revolution without moral evolution is dangerous (though it may sometimes be necessary as the lesser evil), since individual and social moral development are interdependent; private virtue will be difficult and therefore rare unless supported by the appropriate social and political structures, which will in turn be unstable without private virtue. For instance, the destructive passions aroused by oppression are likely to wreak havoc if released from social and political control before development of the capacity for rational management of the passions in the oppressed. Hence the later excesses of the initially benign and rational French Revolution of 1789.

4. Moral philosophy

The purpose of human life is perfection of human faculties in the imitation of God, who is moral perfection; however human perfection can be achieved only beyond the grave. In this life imitation of God consists in virtue, that is, acting autonomously from moral principle derived by reason from the attributes of God. Moral principles are not specified, but the supreme principle seems to be universal benevolence, conjoined with or entailing a principle of justice; God's benevolence can be inferred from the convenient arrangements for his creatures manifested in nature. Benevolence prompted by sympathy for particular cases is a juvenile precursor, perhaps a precondition, of rational, adult morality motivated by principled universal benevolence.

5. Moral psychology

Moral development towards principled action depends on adequate development of the appropriate faculties, namely imagination, passion and reason, whose joint function is to reveal the true end of human life. Human beings come into the world endowed with appetite and the capacity to develop these higher faculties, though capacities vary with sensibility and development may be impeded by mistaken upbringing. Appetite, whose function is to preserve the body, proposes merely sensual, achievable objects of desire; imagination proposes ideal objects which make possible desire for something beyond the physically attainable. Such desires spring from the passions (fear, anger, love and so on), whose function is to elevate the mind. Sensibility (nervous sensitivity) is, or is linked to, capacity for imagination and passion.

Reason is developed by reflecting on efforts, especially frustrated efforts, to satisfy the passions and appetites. The reason which recognizes the function of the appetites, and tempers their satisfaction accordingly, is prudence; temperately satisfied appetite is earthly or animal happiness. The reason which recognizes the function of the passions, whose natural outcome is discontent, identifies the true end of human life, namely moral perfection or likeness to God; it produces virtue by transforming passionate desire into desire for perfection as the only object

which can satisfy it. Attainment of perfection is true human happiness, which is impossible in this life.

Since the development of virtue depends on reason's interaction with the appetites and passions, virtue is not served by premature or inappropriate attempts to curb or stifle these. Rather, social conventions and education which restrict the activities and aspirations of women prevent the development of both reason and virtue, thereby justifying and reinforcing conventional gender roles. Conventional female education, by encouraging attention to sensory attractions, and instilling outward propriety instead of virtue, discourages development of the higher functions of imagination and passion, thus depriving an already weakened reason of opportunities to acquire knowledge of the true end of human life, and hence adult virtue.

List of works

Wollstonecraft, M. (1989) *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. J. Todd and M. Butler, London: William Pickering, 7 vols.

(Contains all of Wollstonecraft's works, which are listed individually below.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1787) *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 4, 1989.

(Wollstonecraft's first published work; a handbook on female education probably based on her own practical experience.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1788) *Mary: a Fiction*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 1, 1989.

(A novel of ideas written to show 'that a genius will educate itself'; illustrates Wollstonecraft's early view of the course of ideal moral development, of the disadvantages of marriage for women, and of what would constitute an acceptable female social role.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1788) *Original Stories from Real Life: With Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 4, 1989.

(A children's storybook carefully designed to promote moral development; the most detailed working-out of Wollstonecraft's views on moral education.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1790) *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 5, 1989.

(An impassioned defence, by appeal to a rationalist as opposed to a sentimentalist moral philosophy, of Price's welcome of the French Revolution against Burke's attack; lays the foundation for Wollstonecraft's feminist politics.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Moral and Political Subjects*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 5, 1989.

(Attacks conventional female education, morality and gender role as presented by various contemporary authors of educational and conduct books, principally by Rousseau in *Émile*.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1794) *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced within Europe*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 6, 1989.

(Wollstonecraft's reaction to the increasing violence of the French Revolution; historically derivative but useful for signs of development in her political thought.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1796) *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 6, 1989.

(Provide probably the most accessible introduction to Wollstonecraft's thought; they suggest a movement away from rationalism towards a greater interest in imagination and sensibility under the impact of personal experience.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1798) *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, in W. Godwin (ed.) *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London: William Pickering, vol. 1, 1989.

(Unfinished; her first engagement with the wrongs of lower-class women; suggests that her earlier political and moral ideas, particularly on sensibility, were in a state of constant flux.)

Wollstonecraft, M. (1799) *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. R. Wardle, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

(Useful for following the development of Wollstonecraft's self-conception; also one of the few sources of knowledge of what she read.)

References and further reading

Barker-Benfield, G.J. (1992) *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.

(A sociocultural study of a key concept in Wollstonecraft's moral psychology.)

Blair, H. (1783) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell, W. Creech, 1787.

(A handbook of style summarizing Enlightened sentimentalist views on discourse; described by Wollstonecraft as 'an intellectual feast' (Letters: 138).)

Burke, E. (1757) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. Boulton, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.

(Burke's gendered aesthetic theory, partly an influence on Wollstonecraft and partly her target.)

Burke, E. (1790) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. C.C. O'Brien, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.

(A furious response to Richard Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1790, 3rd edn); defends British political traditions and correctly predicts some of the disastrous developments which followed. Criticized in Wollstonecraft's first *Vindication*.)

Coole, D.H. (1988) *Women in Political Theory*, Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, ch. 5.

(Places Wollstonecraft as a political theorist; good on the relationship with Rousseau.)

Khin Zaw, S. (1994) "'Appealing to the Head and Heart": Wollstonecraft and Burke on Taste, Morals and Human Nature', in G. Perry and M. Rossington (eds) *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth Century Art and Culture*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

(Analyses Wollstonecraft's philosophical debt to Burke in her *Rights of Men*.)

Locke, J. (1693) *Thoughts on Education*, in *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. J.L. Axtell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Macaulay, C. (1790) *Letters on Education, with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects*, London.

(Conduct literature grounded in contemporary philosophy; generously credited in Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication*.)

Rousseau, J.-J. (1762a) *Du Contrat social*, trans. and ed. D.A. Cress, with introduction by P. Gay, *On the Social Contract*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.

(Prime source of French Revolutionary political theory.)

Rousseau, J.-J. (1762b) *Émile: ou, de l'éducation*, trans. A. Bloom, *Emile: or, On Education*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

(Rousseau's theory of gendered education; praised and attacked by Wollstonecraft in her second *Vindication*.)

Sapiro, V. (1992) *A Vindication of Political Virtue: the Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.

(The first book-length study of Wollstonecraft's philosophy; generally reliable.)