

**Mary Wollstonecraft**  
**'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'**

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## Introduction

The influential 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'<sup>1</sup> earned Mary Wollstonecraft the reputation of a forerunner of gender equality. Moreover, Wollstonecraft's ideas that women should have the same rights as men, because both are human beings, makes her together with John Stuart Mill 'the primary philosophical architects' of Human Rights according to Eileen Hunt Botting.<sup>2</sup> Some consider her also to be the mother of feminism.<sup>3</sup> To this day, discussions about women's rights are ongoing, all over the world and from a variety of perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

For this essay two editions of Wollstonecraft's ground-breaking book have been studied. First the version edited by Jonathan Bennett<sup>5</sup> which offers quite some supplementary explanations. In addition to this edition, the one with an introduction and notes of Miriam Brody has been scrutinized. The quotations used in this essay come from one of these two editions, which are used alternately and interchangeably. Sylvana Tomaselli's<sup>6</sup> commentary has also been used to shed further light on Mary's work, as have some specific articles and books that elaborate on (one of) the main themes of the work under discussion.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Although her contribution was progressive in several respects, especially for the time in which it saw the light, it might not be called a great pioneering ethical work. Its ethical underpinnings rest on anthropological and sociological foundations, but also on theological premises, or on 'Rational Theology' as Botting coins it.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it might be called descriptive rather than normative ethics. Moreover, some classify it under 'feminist ethics', a kind of ethics that is not so much regarded as a branch of ethics, but rather "a way of *doing*

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, London, 1792, Reprinted, with Introduction by Miriam Brody, (London: Penguin Classics, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Eileen Hunt Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Ford, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and the Motherhood of Feminism', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> There exists a big variety of organizations who deal with Gender Equality and Women Rights. The following website lists a number of important organisations: Human Rights Careers (HRC), '25 Organizations Fighting for Gender Equality', (Austria Human Rights Career, 2022) ) <<https://www.humanrightscareers.com/about/>> [Accessed 14 April 2022]

<sup>5</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, ed. by Jonathan Bennett. 2017. edn, *Early Modern Texts* (Bowen Island, British Columbia: Early Modern Philosophy, 1792).

<sup>6</sup> Sylvana Tomaselli, 'Mary Wollstonecraft', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2020), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/wollstonecraft/>> [accessed 19 march 2022]

<sup>7</sup> Sandrine Bergès, 'Mary Wollstonecraft', in *De Filosofes*, ed. by Rebecca Buxton and Lisa Whiting (Amsterdam: Lontano, 2022), pp. 52-59.

<sup>8</sup> Botting.

<sup>9</sup> Bianca Amarasekera and H.U.A London, 'Philosophy ISP: The Feminist Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft Regarding Education for Women', *Philosophy*, (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Botting.

*ethics*",<sup>11</sup> hence also classified under applied ethics. And, as a further addition, it seems that Wollstonecraft draws on a range of views from different ethical disciplines such as deontology, utilitarianism, and Aristotelian or virtues ethics.<sup>12</sup>

This essay elaborates on her work and builds on an earlier essay<sup>13</sup> that concentrated on the progress achieved in the field on women's rights since and thanks to Mary Wollstonecraft. This time, the essay focuses on her ideas and critically examines her evidence for bringing them to the fore.

### **Women Should Have Rights**

The title of the book clarifies the main theme of the work, which is that women must have rights. The book contains a string of arguments as to why women should have rights, why these should be equal to those of men and what this ultimately benefits them but also society as a whole. The whole book is an underpinning, *a justification*, of her reasoning. The book could be called the first 'feminist declaration of independence'.<sup>14</sup>

The Dedicatory Letter to M. Talleyrand-Périgord, former Bishop of Autun, explains her point of view: '... I plead not for myself but for my sex. ... For many years I have regarded *independence* as the great blessing of life, the basis of every virtue'.<sup>15</sup> She continues:

...and the same motive leads me earnestly to wish to see woman placed in a station in which she would advance, instead of retarding, the progress of those glorious principles that give a substance to morality.<sup>16</sup>

She writes to Talleyrand-Périgord because he had published a report to foster public education in France.<sup>17</sup> But, although *enlightened*, his proposal for education for women was

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<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Norlock, 'Feminist Ethics', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019), p. 2.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-ethics/> [accessed 19 march 2022]. She is referring to Lindemann, Hilde (ed.), 2005, p. 4. *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, McGraw- Hill.

<sup>12</sup> Botting.

<sup>13</sup> Angelique Lombarts, 'Mary Wollstonecraft: Equal Rights and Education. What Progress Is Made since Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'', (unpublished essay, DCU, 2021). Essay written for the Human Rights and Social Justice subject part of the Ethics Master.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects, London, 1792, Reprinted, with Introduction by Miriam Brody Kramnick', (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. xi.

<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Ancien Évêque d'Autun, and Par ordre de l'Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport Sur L'instruction Publique, Fait Au Nom Du Comité De Constitution a L'assemblée Nationale, Les 10, 11 Et 19 Septembre 1791*, (des Imprimeries de Baudouin, 1791).

limited to domestic education for them. Her aim was to convince Talleyrand-Périgord that domestic education alone is not enough to have a moral and virtuous society. The letter exposes clearly the *main themes* Wollstonecraft cares about:

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.<sup>18</sup>

Wollstonecraft argues that if women are not educated in the same way as men, and if the then dominant view of 'the female character' is maintained, this undermines morality. In general. Hence, the reason why she has written her book which contains arguments on the central topics of (1) Rights of Women and (2) Education. For a more detailed analysis, these main concepts are subdivided in four sub-themes: (a) Women's Rights & Gender Equality; (b) Education & Knowledge; (c) Freedom & Independence; (d) Morality.

Already in her letter to Talleyrand-Périgord, she gives quite some arguments why women should have rights, should be educated or at least should have the right to education. In the following thirteen chapters, she repeatedly and exhaustively expounds these arguments.

'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' is a treatise on the oppression of women and the limited or lack of opportunities for them that continue to cause problems in both family life and society at large. Wollstonecraft describes how women are deliberately kept 'dumb' by being denied the same education as men. Even worse, women are taught about 'trivial' matters in Wollstonecraft's view. They are educated to pay attention to their appearance, to be modest, chaste, and beautiful, and to concentrate on their marriage and family. This makes them subordinate to their husbands and makes them slaves, or as she so pointedly puts it, keeps them in 'slavish dependence'.<sup>19</sup> Education serves to develop and promote one's reason and rationality, which are necessary to become a virtuous human creature and to behave morally. Moral appropriate conduct is desirable for both men and women. Therefore women should be allowed to obtain equal education as men. After all, she sees women as 'human creatures' and therefore logically as 'rational creatures'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Wollstonecraft. Reason and rationality are intrinsically linked to the Enlightenment, the era sometimes called "the Age of Reason". William Bristow, 'Enlightenment', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2017), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/enlightenment/>> [accessed 26 march 2022], p. 8.

## **Wollstonecraft's Main Concepts and Sub-Themes in Today's Light**

It is interesting to see if Wollstonecraft's main concepts and sub-themes mean the same today. First, the concept of *Women's Rights*. Wollstonecraft understands the same with this as what is meant with today. Although it has to be said that Wollstonecraft's understanding was not the general understanding in her epoch. The sub-theme *Gender Equality* is definitely not seen equally. In the late seventeen hundreds, equality did not exist anyway, as Wollstonecraft's frequent references to tyrants, slaves and women show.

Next, the concept of *Education*. Wollstonecraft's concept of education entails more than the discipline or methods of teaching and learning what nowadays would be called education. It comprises a training of both body and mind, in particular sharpening the mind, applying rationality in attitude and behaviour. This is an ongoing exercise and takes life-long training, starting with the earliest childhood at home and to be continued both in school and society. Knowledge then and now seems to be a comparable concept. The same counts for the sub-themes freedom and independence which have similar connotations in Wollstonecraft's time as actually. Morality is still being used as it was then and refers to someone's ethical conduct. The concept of virtues, however is used today in a different sense than in Wollstonecraft's era.

## **Women's Rights & Gender Equality**

Wollstonecraft contends that men and women are equal because they are both human beings and should therefore have equal rights. However, she also states that women are not treated equally, but are treated as slaves, without having any rights. Although women were not seen as slaves in those days, they were not considered *human beings* either. So she states:

I shall first consider women as **human creatures** who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to develop their abilities; and then I shall attend to the implications of the more specific label **women**.<sup>21</sup>

It is her conviction that through education, women can be freed from their chains of slavery and develop on an equal level with men: 'Let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man'.<sup>22</sup> Her principle of equality draws on the 'natural rights' thoughts of John Locke

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<sup>21</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Wollstonecraft, p.106.

and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>23</sup> While regarding men and women as equal, Wollstonecraft also underpinned their differences: physically by nature, mentally by nurture due to the lack of education for women. She attributes this difference to the laws of nature. Nonetheless she goes on to explain why women need to start behaving more masculine:

... if their target is the imitation of manly virtues, or (more accurately) the achieving of the talents and virtues that ennoble the human character and raise females in the scale of animal being when they are brought under the comprehensive label 'mankind', all those who view women with a philosophical eye must, I should think, join me in wanting women to grow more and more 'masculine' every day.<sup>24</sup>

When women show the same rationality as men, only then can there be equivalence, and thus morality, is her main message. She goes into great detail about the inequality between men and women, and criticizes in particular the way women are kept innocent and, moreover, contribute to remaining so themselves. According to her, children should be innocent, but when adults, both men and women, are called 'innocent' it is more of a disguising term that conveys their weakness. Weakness in this sense is mental weakness which hampers to strengthen the mind and thus obstructs to develop virtuousness. Throughout her justification she mentions frequently this innocence with regard to women. Very eloquently expressed she refers to one-day flies who are not worth to invest in as they only live one single day: 'If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence?'.<sup>25</sup> She gives various examples of this innocent behaviour that does not lead to any intellectual strength. It is mainly the domestic pursuits with which women engage, daily domestic trifles as she calls them: 'cheerful conversation, and innocent caresses' <sup>26</sup> 'listening to the idle chat of weak governesses or to be present at her mother's toilet',<sup>27</sup> or delving into novels, music, poetry and gallantry <sup>28</sup> turning them into emotional instead of rational beings. She asserts that ignorance is no good fundament to acquire morality. Furthermore, keeping women

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<sup>23</sup> Natalie Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (Routledge, 2006). Taylor outlines two dominant interpretations of Wollstonecraft, in one she is seen as a liberal in line with the ideas of Locke, in the other a Romantic in line with those of Rousseau, both proponents of natural rights. Taylor also makes it clear that Wollstonecraft found both their theories inadequate, particularly with regard to women's rights, the utopian chimera Wollstonecraft aspires to, which is not encompassed by either Locke's or Rousseau's theory.

<sup>24</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Wollstonecraft, p.42

innocent and thus weak, ensures that man remains superior and that gender equality is not possible as is often sustained by other (masculine) writers: 'man was made to reason, woman to feel; and together—spirit and flesh—they make the most perfect [see Glossary] whole, by happily blending reason and sensibility into one character'.<sup>29</sup> This convinced and even ardently promoted superiority of men by most of the then living popular writers, overwhelmingly male, underpins the gender inequality, Wollstonecraft is so strongly opposing. Moreover, she openly contests the convictions that the innate femininity makes women incapable or even hinders of further development beyond their sensibilities:

I can recollect my own feelings, and I have looked steadily around me [for a while she had earned her living as a governess]; and far from sharing his view about the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to say that a girl whose spirits haven't been damped by inactivity, and whose innocence hasn't been tainted by false shame, will always be a romp [= 'a lively playful girl'], and the doll will never interest her unless confinement allows her no alternative.<sup>30</sup>

Wollstonecraft not only criticizes the fact that women are supposed to be innocent and ignorant, she also strongly reproaches them for their behaviour, which is primarily aimed at pleasing men. To do so, women are constantly preoccupied by their own beauty, something of which the power is arbitrary, according to Wollstonecraft. Arbitrary because it is temporary and perishable:

The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sun-beams, and that they can't have much effect on her husband's heart when he sees them every day and when the summer of her physical beauty is past and gone.<sup>31</sup>

She lambasts men like Dr Gregory and Dr Fordyce, and the aforementioned Talleyrand-Périgord and Rousseau, whose views on the feminine natural tendencies of modesty, chastity and beauty are diametrically opposed to her ideas of feminine gifts. She abhors their paternalistic and patronising attitude towards women and she disagrees strongly with their views on women's education.

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<sup>29</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 43

<sup>30</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 30

<sup>31</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 18.

## Education & Knowledge

Central in her book is education. In her second chapter she describes 'the most perfect education':

...is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent.<sup>32</sup>

She fervently pleads to give men and women the same education and differs in this respect greatly from the abovementioned writers who mostly promote education of domestic tasks for women. She especially refers to Rousseau,<sup>33</sup> who thinks that women should be as perfect as men, but each should be limited to the attributes of their sex. Therefore, according to Rousseau women do not need such an extensive education as men, as many of his contemporaries agree with him.<sup>34</sup>

To obtain knowledge is essential to be able to act as a rational creature, is Wollstonecraft's firm conviction. Not without surprise, Wollstonecraft, being a prodigy of the Enlightenment, propagates rationality and reason. Humans differ from animals in that they can think and make decisions on the basis of their rationality, whereas animals act solely on the basis of their passions or instincts. In the introductory chapter, she writes:

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.<sup>35</sup>

And she continues:

In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that half is less than the whole; in Reason.

What acquirement exalts one being above another? Virtue; we spontaneously reply.

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<sup>32</sup> Wollstonecraft. p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education* (London & Toronto, New York: J.M. Dent & Sons 1921 E.P. Dutton 1921, 1762).

<sup>34</sup> Wollstonecraft esteemed Rousseau for his Enlightened thoughts but she disputes his views on the nature of man and woman and how they should therefore be educated in his opinion.

<sup>35</sup> Wollstonecraft. p. 21

For what purpose were passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes; whispers Experience.<sup>36</sup>

The focus on emotion and sentiment instead of on rationality leads to problems and she gives a variety of examples. Wollstonecraft disputes the feebleness of women's minds as something natural, innate, and asserts that the lack of a proper and equal education as men receive, makes and keeps women weak and stupid. She illustrates this also with ample examples. She speaks of 'brutal' or 'brutish' behaviour, behaviour that one exhibits when guided by passions rather than reason. She draws the comparison with soldiers who, young and inexperienced, obey orders without thinking for themselves. And she refers to the occasions when women present themselves as if they were merchandise in a market to be selected; she points out the subordination and the slavish dependence that the behaviour of women displays due to the lack of a proper education. Women's rights and education are preeminent to become independent and virtuous.

### **Freedom & Independence**

Her claim for freedom and independence are probably related to her early childhood and her love life. Coming from an aggressive family, rejected by her lovers, and having experienced the prevailing social attitudes in the ruling social class,<sup>37</sup> assures her that women should be able to take care of themselves:

Men have superior strength of body; but were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient to enable to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence;<sup>38</sup>

Again and again, she keeps repeating the same themes:

To become worthy of respect, women must use their understandings; there is no other basis for independence of character. I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the **modest** slaves of opinion.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> See for more background information on Wollstonecraft's life: Tomaselli; Bergès.

<sup>38</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 159.

<sup>39</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 35.

Which leads in her opinion to independence: 'I agree that a proper education—or, more accurately, a well-stocked mind—would enable a woman to live unmarried with dignity'.<sup>40</sup> Because, as she asserts: 'You can't expect virtue from women until they are to some extent independent of men'.<sup>41</sup> This independence of mind, to think for oneself and to be able to articulate one's own opinion, is essential to become a virtuous person, the fourth sub-theme which this essay will address.

## **Morality**

Morality, living a virtuous life, is considered important and is inseparable from reason, according to Wollstonecraft. Reason and rationality can only be acquired and improved by continuous education and training, in other words, by the development of knowledge. She asserts one cannot blame women for not behaving like virtuous creatures and she states: 'So I will venture to assert that until women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge is bound to meet continual obstacles'.<sup>42</sup>

Wollstonecraft particularly describes the importance of modesty as a virtue. She distinguishes between modesty and humility the latter being regarded as a form of self-depreciation. And again she links a trained mind to the ability to practice a virtue, namely modesty:

I want to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the most praiseworthy ambition is to obtain a character as a *human being*, whether male or female, and that lesser ambitions should be tested against that one.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, Wollstonecraft argues that knowledge, reason and virtue are so intertwined that it is extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, to become a virtuous person without having been rationally educated. Next to these anthropological and sociological premises, many of which are empirically substantiated, Wollstonecraft also underpinned her claims with ethical arguments.

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<sup>40</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 5.

## **Ethical Argumentation**

Just as throughout the book the main themes and sub-themes are intertwined, the ethical foundations are not always easy to disentangle. She draws on deontological, utilitarian, and Aristotelian or virtue ethic arguments. Next to these longstanding ethical theories, more recently, a new branch of ethics is distinguished, i.e. feminist ethics. This is "a way of *doing ethics*" rather than the theorising of one specific ethical perspective and its proponents engage in a variety of branches of ethics such as meta-ethics, normative theory, and practical or applied ethics.<sup>44</sup> Wollstonecraft's writings were the first to address the role and position of women in the social, economic and political spheres, as well as women's morality.<sup>45</sup> Until then, the prevailing ethical approaches, the aforementioned deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics, were mainly written from a male perspective. Wollstonecraft expounds that the disparity in educational opportunities and the limited social and economic opportunities for women obstructed them from becoming fully respected and independent human beings. Although it was not recognised as such at the time, she laid the foundations for feminist ethics, or care ethics as it later came to be called or as some prefer to call it.<sup>46</sup> Feminist ethics acknowledges different identities and perspectives accepting females experiences. Moreover, philosophers like Susan Moller Okin assert that the Human Rights thinking is pervaded by a masculine bias which need to be neutralized or at least needs to include the female perspective in order to be Human Rights for all human beings.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Norlock, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Norlock.

<sup>46</sup> Kathryn MacKay, 'Feminism and Feminist Ethics', in *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics*, ed. by George Matthews (2019), pp. 65-75.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Moller Okin, 'Feminism, Women's Human Rights, and Cultural Differences', *Hypatia*, 13. Special Issue: Border Crossings: Multiculturalism and Postcolonial Challenges (1998), p. 34.

### *Feminist Ethics Arguments*

Wollstonecraft elucidates the male bias most obviously in the chapter criticizing her 'opponents' such as Rousseau, Gregory, Burke and of course the aforementioned Talleyrand-Périgord. The most fiercely attacked is Rousseau, whose portrayal of Emile and Sophie as the stereotyping of men and women respectively serves as an example. 'Sophie, says Rousseau, should be as perfect a woman as Émile is a man, and to make her so he has to examine the character that nature has given to the 'female' sex'.<sup>48</sup> 'Emile' as a *pars pro toto* for men, physically and mentally strong, 'Sophie' representing womanhood, 'weak and passive'. This premise by Rousseau that because women are weak, they must therefore be passive, must behave agreeably to please men, is an abomination to her. He uses this as his main argument why women need not to have a proper education apart from the feminine-apt education of that time. Likewise, she opposes Talleyrand-Périgord for his biased thoughts on this subject. It sounds more than reasonable that she rejects Rousseau's argument, because he links mental strength to physical strength. With her examples also about soldiers, she indicates that these are not inextricably linked and that women, although often less physically strong, can also train their knowledge.

Another feminist ethic with the same bias that hinders gender equality is her substantiation that the idea of men's superiority was not just a male prejudice, but rather a commonly held view at the time. To elucidate this, she gives the opinion of a few female contemporaries who share this view: 'Indignantly have I heard women argue in the same track as men, and adopt the sentiments that brutalize them, with all the pertinacity of ignorance'.<sup>49</sup> And then she refers to Mrs Piozzi and to Baroness de Staël. The second one in particular annoys her.<sup>50</sup> Wollstonecraft not only castigates de Staël's adoration of Rousseau but also the extravagant glorification of her father Jacques Necker, as John Cleary elucidates.<sup>51</sup> Wollstonecraft then lashes out at Madame Genlis: '... her views are narrow, and her prejudices as unreasonable as strong'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 188.

<sup>50</sup> Vanessa Van Puyvelde, 'Dilemmas of Representation: Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine De Staël on the French Revolution and Sexual Difference', (Master, Ghent University, 2019). In her dissertation, Van Puyvelde extensively sets out the ideas of both ladies and also dwells on Wollstonecraft's criticism of De Staël, but also indicates that their 'views on women and on Rousseau were not as different as these criticisms might imply', p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> John Cleary, 'Madame De Staël, Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft', *Romance Notes*, 21 (1981). Cleary's take on Wollstonecraft's criticism of the Staël is considerably more vigorous than what Van Puyvelde maintains.

<sup>52</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 192.

Besides all her criticism of women, there are also ladies whom she praises and brings to the fore to underpin her opinion that intelligence and knowledge are not exclusively male features. Also this underpinning makes perfect sense. She particularly appreciates the work of Catherine Macaulay, whom she considers to be her predecessor and example.<sup>53</sup> They both share an aversion to Burke and his ideas on women's education, as well as ideas on gender equality.<sup>54</sup> In fact, both should therefore be seen as the forerunners of feminist ethics, whereby it is clear that Wollstonecraft has occupied a more prominent place in history.

### ***Virtue Ethics Arguments***

Perhaps the clearest substantiation of her arguments is to be found in her arguments deriving from or relating to Aristotelian or virtue ethics. For example, when referring to modesty she asserts that it's a virtue enabling to form one's own thoughts and having a good self-image. At one extreme, she sees humility as a vice, namely self-abasement. At the other extreme, there is the vice arrogance, which makes man think too highly of himself. Modesty is the right mean between these two vices.<sup>55</sup> This argument makes perfectly sense.

Arguments based on the intellectual virtues, i.e. the rational part of the soul as described by Aristotle, comprise the references to knowledge and reason. For Wollstonecraft, shown above, virtuousness is inseparable from having knowledge: 'Without knowledge there can be no morality! Ignorance is a frail basis for virtue!'.<sup>56</sup> As highlighted in the above section on education and knowledge it is preeminent to be educated not only to become physically strong, but also to become mentally strong. Knowledge as a prerequisite for virtuousness.<sup>57</sup> And rationality as a prerequisite to be able to obtain knowledge. The lower animals, not being in possession of reason, will never gain knowledge and be able to behave virtuously.<sup>58</sup> The conditionality of the possession of knowledge in order to be virtuous is a debatable argument. Arguable or rather ambiguous for several reasons. There are many people who lack knowledge

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<sup>53</sup> Wollstonecraft, pp. 193-194.

<sup>54</sup> Devoney Looser, "' Those Historical Laurels Which Once Graced My Brow Are Now in Their Wane": Catharine Macaulay's Last Years and Legacy', *Studies in Romanticism*, 42 (2003).

<sup>55</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 75. See for more examples amongst others p.1 and p. 35, and many references in the seventh chapter for instance: 'A modest man is steady, a humble man is timid, and a vain one is presumptuous—or so my observation of many characters has led me to believe. Jesus Christ was modest, Moses was humble, and the apostle Peter was vain', p. 75.

<sup>56</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> See also reference 43.

<sup>58</sup> Reference 36 states this is very explicitly. In Brody's version the term 'brute creation' is used, whereas Bennett uses the term lower animals.

and yet are virtuous. In addition, there are also countless people who possess knowledge and yet do not behave virtuously.<sup>59</sup>

A final Aristotelian argument concerns happiness. Aristotle claims that a virtuous life is closely connected to a happy life. To achieve this, man must constantly optimise his function and improve his virtues. This requires constant training. Wollstonecraft argues, as shown earlier, that the function of the wife is not only to please the husband, to be beautiful and chaste. These are transient characteristics. If she is to be a man's companion throughout their life together, she must have the knowledge to be virtuous herself so that she can influence her husband and children to be virtuous too. This argument holds truth although perhaps even more today than in Wollstonecraft's own era.

So the perfection of our nature and capacity for happiness must be measured by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge that •distinguish the individual and •direct the laws that bind society; and it is equally undeniable that, taking mankind as a whole, knowledge and virtue naturally flow from the exercise of reason.<sup>60</sup>

### *Consequentialist Arguments*

In the introduction, reference was made to Human Rights. Only in 1948 was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) drafted, in which equal rights for all people were proclaimed. Excluding women, there could be no universal rights, for half of humanity would be excluded, as Wollstonecraft asserts:

...to see one half of the human race excluded by the other half from all participation of government is a political phenomenon that can't possibly be explained according to abstract principles.<sup>61</sup>

She repeats this remark in similar terms at the end of the introductory letter to Talleyrand-Périgord. His New Constitution, based on the Enlightenment doctrines of natural rights and

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<sup>59</sup> An interesting example is the Dutch politician Thierry Baudet, who holds a doctorate in philosophy. His statements are considered by many to be racist and anti-Semitic and, although not punishable by law, racism and anti-Semitism are not considered to be virtuous in the Netherlands. Politieke Redactie, 'Geen Vervolging Tegen Fvd-Leider Thierry Baudet Om Racistische Apps', in *AD*, (Rotterdam: PCM Uitgevers NV, 2022) <<https://www.ad.nl/politiek/geen-vervolging-tegen-fvd-leider-thierry-baudet-om-racistische-apps~a7107fb7/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>> [accessed 26 march 2022]

<sup>60</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 2.

founded on Reason, cannot, in Wollstonecraft's eyes, exclude women from humanity without a valid and appropriate explanation. That would be contrary to these principles and unjust. A valid argument as the natural rights were aimed to be universal.

Wollstonecraft is also consequentialist in her belief that all people, not just men, must live virtuously to be happy: 'Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, ...'.<sup>62</sup> This may help one to be happy, especially in her time when these virtues were given such great importance. But it is a stretch to say that this is the only way or the only right way to be happy. And she keeps citing the knowledge argument to prove that only knowledge makes people more virtuous, and again she thinks this is true for all human beings alive:

But I still insist that not only the *virtue* but also the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree; and that women, considered not only as moral but as rational creatures, should try to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of *half*-being, one of Rousseau's wild inventions.<sup>63</sup>

This knowledge argument makes sense and certainly from a natural rights perspective there should be no difference between the sexes.

### ***Deontological Arguments***

The juxtaposition of consequentialist and deontological arguments shows that many of Wollstonecraft's examples can be interpreted both consequentialist and deontological. This is not entirely surprising, since her views are strongly inspired by those of Locke. Central to his political philosophy are the concepts of natural law and natural rights, with the former implying duties and the latter rights.<sup>64</sup> Wollstonecraft speaks of virtues often in the sense of duties, which both men and women must fulfil in order to live a happy life, such as the above example clarifies

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<sup>62</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 257.

<sup>63</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 26

<sup>64</sup> Alex Tuckness, 'Locke's Political Philosophy', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/locke-political/>> [accessed 26 march 2022]

everyone's duty of chastity, modesty, etc.<sup>65</sup> And also the following argument is based on justice and embedded in natural rights to which every individual is entitled, and thus also makes sense:

So let an enlightened nation run an experiment to discover how far *reason* would bring women back to nature and their duty; let them share the advantages of education and government with man, and see whether they become •better as they grow •wiser and become •free. They can't be injured by the experiment, because it's not in the power of man to make them more insignificant than they are at present.<sup>66</sup>

It has already been mentioned several times, the concepts and various ethical theories are very much entangled. Therefore the text becomes repetitive and somewhat long-winded. The Dedicatory Letter contains in essence all the main issues, the subsequent chapters seem to be mere underpinnings and illustrations to convince the readers who were in Wollstonecraft's time primarily men. Botting explains very well how and why Wollstonecraft's ethical concepts are so intertwined.<sup>67</sup> She identifies all the ethical theories dealt with in this essay and draws many comparisons with, in particular, John Stuart Mill as another protagonist of women's rights. She also considers Wollstonecraft to be a literary innovator, something that will not be elaborated on now, but the numerous (auto)ethnographic examples illustrate this.<sup>68</sup> In brief, the text could be more concise and better structured and the ethical concepts better elaborated.

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<sup>65</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 257. See also reference 62.

<sup>66</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 96.

<sup>67</sup> Botting.

<sup>68</sup> Botting.

## Summary and Conclusions

Although in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>69</sup> equal rights for all human beings are claimed, there seems to be a gap between wish (or moral obligation) and reality with regard to gender equality. Illustrative, especially in the Global North,<sup>70</sup> are the persistent pleas for gender quota in corporate boards.<sup>71,72,73,74</sup> It seems that the qualities of women are still judged differently, read less, than the capacities of men. This judgement is primarily based on... the opinion of men.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, it took till 1948 that the right to education was recognised as a general right for every person.<sup>76</sup> 'Education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty', reads the first sentence of the fourth Sustainability Development Goal (SDG).<sup>77</sup> As Wollstonecraft elucidated in her book, education and knowledge are important means to obtain independence, a view which is generally alleged nowadays for both men *and* women. Nevertheless, it is obvious that there exists still a gender gap: 'Girls are still more likely than

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<sup>69</sup> Alison Bisset, *Blackstone's International Human Rights Documents*. 12th Edition (Oxford University Press, 2020), p.10.

<sup>70</sup> Christine E. Bose, 'Patterns of Global Gender Inequalities and Regional Gender Regimes', *Gender and Society*, 29 (2015). Whereas in the so-called Global South countries, women's rights are often violated and gender equality is far from being achieved, there are also many discussions on gender equality in the more democratic countries of the Global North. Despite Bose's criticism on the inefficacy of the geographic dichotomy between the Global South and North, Bose shows that gender inequality is greater in the Global South than in the North and that there are greater disparities between the areas/countries belonging to the South as well as that the inequality is stronger in the Global South than in the North. Various websites and databases such as the UN Women site provide detailed and up-to-date statistics on a wide variety of gender (in)equality issues. UN Women, 'About Un Women', (New York: Un Women, 2021) <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women>> [Accessed 9 February 2022].

<sup>71</sup> Siri Terjesen, Ruth Sealy, and Val Singh, 'Women Directors on Corporate Boards: A Review and Research Agenda', *Corporate governance: an international review*, 17 (2009), 320-37.

<sup>72</sup> Mari Teigen, 'Gender Quotas on Corporate Boards', *Gender and power in the Nordic countries*, (2011), pp. 87-109.

<sup>73</sup> Ruth Sealy, Elena Doldor, and Susan Vinnicombe, 'Increasing Diversity on Public and Private Sector Boards', *International Centre for Women Leaders*, (2009), pp. 19-34.

<sup>74</sup> Cathrine Seierstad and others, 'Increasing the Number of Women on Boards: The Role of Actors and Processes', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 141 (2015), 289-315.

<sup>75</sup> Joris Luyendijk, *De Zeven Vinkjes. Hoe Mannen Zoals Ik De Baas Spelen*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Pluim, 2022). This recently published book clearly explains why a small white elite section of society belonging to the same peer group and/or social class retains the power, and therefore the control. It reads as a substantiation of feminist ethics theories.

<sup>76</sup> Alison Bisset, *Blackstone's International Human Rights Documents*. 12th Edition (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 12. Article 26 reads:

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."

<sup>77</sup> United Nations, 'Sustainable Development Goals (Sdg)', ed. by United nations (New York 2021).

boys to never set foot in a classroom, despite the tremendous progress made over the past 20 years'.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, freedom and independence cannot be separated from the concepts of education and knowledge as the SDG's underline. Something that Wollstonecraft, as a fervent adherent of John Locke's natural rights, the forerunner of what today is called Human Rights, already made clear.

In short, it can be concluded that the concept of human rights has evolved in comparison with Wollstonecraft's time, when women's rights were not considered in the same way as men's rights. Nevertheless, women's rights, and more specifically gender equality, are certainly not self-evident today. The same goes for the right to education for women.

In conclusion, there is still much room for improvement, both in terms of gender equality and in terms of the right to education, especially from the point of view of women.

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<sup>78</sup> UNESCO and Institute for Statistics, 'Gender Equality in Education ', (Montreal: UIS, 2022) <<http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/gender-equality-education>> [Accessed 9 February 2022].

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