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June 20, 2018

Philosophy ISP: The Feminist Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft

Regarding Education for Women

I. Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the first British feminist philosopher, made revolutionary claims during the Enlightenment such as “I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (1792, 56). She subverted longstanding societal expectations for women a century before word ‘feminism’ even came to fruition (Cott 1987, 3). Wollstonecraft was famous for advocating her radical philosophy and infamous for actively practicing it since she was a teenager (Botting and Wilkerson 2004, 707). Wollstonecraft wrote one of the first feminist texts, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), which became her legacy. In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft primarily centers her argument on the necessity of education for women, the lack of which, she believed, was the reason women seemed inferior to men. Wollstonecraft was not the first to publish a text advocating for women to be educated. However, she was able to present her feminist ideas more convincingly than her predecessors. Wollstonecraft’s feminist philosophy was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, which promoted liberalism and reason. Wollstonecraft used societal progression to support her demand for the independence of women from men. This essay will focus on Wollstonecraft’s radical claim that women have the right to education, by providing a close reading of selected passages from *Rights of Woman*, by surveying the reactions that this

tract provoked among Wollstonecraft's 18th century contemporaries, and by tracing the subsequent impact of *Rights of Woman* on the history of women's education.

The essay will explore Wollstonecraft's progressive, and sometimes unelaborated, thoughts on education for women and how she adapted other Enlightenment philosophers' claims to support her own. In addition, the essay will attempt to analyze evidence regarding how her claim was understood differently in the 18th and the 19th century.

II. Mary Wollstonecraft's Lifestyle and its Impact on her Philosophy

Unlike other famous philosophers, Wollstonecraft did not come from a distinguished family nor did she receive an excellent education. She described her formal education as "predictably meagre" (Wollstonecraft 1792, 9). One of her friends explained, "like the majority of [Wollstonecraft's] sex, her studies were desultory and her attainments casual, pursued with little method, under the direction of her taste, or as her feelings took the lead" (Hays 1800, 459), which shows that Wollstonecraft's lack of education did not limit her. She relied heavily on her privileged friends to loan her books from their libraries. Her best friend, Fanny Blood, refined her writing, which enabled Wollstonecraft to be one of the first women employed as a professional writer. Wollstonecraft was, atypically, forced to provide the household income in order to support her siblings and extended family as her alcoholic father's debt grew (Berges 2013, 3). Wollstonecraft, with the help of Fanny and her sisters, opened two short-lived schools for girls in 1783. Both were located in London, one in Islington and the other in Newington Green, a hotbed of Rational Dissent.

In 1788, Joseph Johnson hired Wollstonecraft for his periodical, *Analytical Review* (Stewart 1984, 187). She wrote over two hundred reviews for *Analytical*, which accustomed her to writing opinionated responses quickly. Wollstonecraft's background as a reviewer is evident

in the writing of *Rights of Woman*. The text is not a literary masterpiece, instead it conveys timeless messages regarding women's rights and education standards (Coffee, personal communication, June 13 2018; Godwin 1798, 85).

In December 1792 after having published *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft scandalously started an affair with an American diplomat, Gilbert Imlay. She passed herself off as his wife in public once she became pregnant and gave birth to their daughter, Frances Imlay, out of wedlock (Godwin 1798, 118). Her tumultuous relationship with Imlay led to two suicide attempts. Wollstonecraft's philosophies became discredited once these events were revealed as they "[represented the] tragedies would befall women if they assumed [the natural rights for women]" that Wollstonecraft advocated for (Smith 2016, 340). In between her suicide attempts, she took their daughter on an unusual three-month trip around Scandinavia to help Imlay's business (Godwin 1798, 119). In the 18th century, women travelling alone, especially with a young child, was unorthodox. The trip was an attempt, albeit failed, to reclaim Imlay. As a result, in 1795, she officially ended her relationship with Imlay. She published her famous travel narrative, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, the following year, which continues to discuss her feminist philosophy amongst mundane thoughts. She later went on to start a relationship with fellow philosopher, William Godwin. Despite her feminist beliefs, Wollstonecraft married Godwin once she became pregnant with their child. She died ten days after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Shelley née Godwin.

III. Influences on Wollstonecraft's Philosophy

The Enlightenment was filled with countless philosophers revolutionizing beliefs through questioning. The philosophy community made significant advancements by studying and refuting each other's claims. For example, Wollstonecraft often critiqued and contrasted her

philosophies to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was arguably the most significant writer on the education of girls before Wollstonecraft published *Rights of Woman* (Berges 2013, 109). Rousseau's, in addition to John Locke's, philosophies on development of the self of adults and the character of children were vital to Wollstonecraft's education philosophy. However, Locke and Rousseau were men commentating on women's education. As a result, Wollstonecraft's most significant influence when discussing education was a woman and controversial Whig republican historian, Catherine Macaulay. In late 1790, Wollstonecraft published a positive review of Macaulay's *Letters on Education* for the *Analytical*. Recently, letters were found that prove Macaulay and Wollstonecraft communicated during late 1790 (Hill 1995, 179). Despite, Macaulay dying before Wollstonecraft published *Rights of Woman*, the text contains praise for Macaulay's educational views (Frazer 2011, 604). Wollstonecraft held Macaulay's opinions on women and education in high regard due to the fact that Macaulay also believed that the rights for women are natural. The belief was fundamental to Wollstonecraft's advocating for women's education. "The ideas that infuse [Macaulay's and Wollstonecraft's] thinking are very much part of the general heritage of progressive, oppositional 18th-century intellectual culture" (Frazer 2011, 605). The two women utilized Locke's and Rousseau's texts on education as sources and expressed similar strong opinions on the underlying philosophies. "Lockean themes pervade both Macaulay's and Wollstonecraft's views of education: experience as the only efficacious instructor, the superiority of reason over instinct, ...topics of instruction, and so forth" (Frazer 2011, 607). Conversely, Rousseau's misogynistic views of women and their education prevalent in *Emile* went against Wollstonecraft and Macaulay's beliefs. Furthermore, the approach to education Rousseau takes, preserving children's innocence through segregation from the rest of the world, is vehemently refuted by both women. While Wollstonecraft and Macaulay promote

an immersive and firsthand education, they agree with Rousseau that educated children should retain their innocence (Frazer 2011, 607).

Regardless of the fact that Wollstonecraft's views were similar to Macaulay's, Wollstonecraft's views achieved significantly more popularity than Macaulay's. The late 18th century intellectual environment was conducive to feminist claims and education reform. However, Macaulay had acquired a bad reputation while she was living (Coffee, personal communication, June 13 2018). More importantly, Wollstonecraft was distinctive for advocating for gender and socio-economic equality in education.

IV. Inspiration for and the Reactions to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Mary Wollstonecraft strongly disagreed with the 1791 report to the French National Assembly written by Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a French Bishop and politician. The report concerned education reforms and reinforced the contemporary view that the only education women should receive is domesticity. Therefore, Wollstonecraft wrote *Rights of Woman* to dispute the report's pronouncements regarding education for women. *Rights of Woman* was the second text of its type published by Wollstonecraft. The first was her lesser known, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), which was a reaction to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. *Rights of Woman* continues to expand on Wollstonecraft's reaction to *Reflections*. *Rights of Woman* emphasizes egalitarian social philosophy, which the French Revolution prized. Egalitarianism concerns equality. Therefore, egalitarian social philosophy covers topics of equality in society. Wollstonecraft extended Burke's argument to women due to the fact that she strongly believed in equality between men and women.

Wollstonecraft's raw conveyance of her unusual perspectives enthralled her readers when she released the text. The twelfth chapter of the *Rights of Woman*, titled "On National

Education”, was immensely popular as the education reforms she was proposing were beneficial to women and the lower classes. “Her specific recommendations were firmly in the forefront of eighteenth-century educational discussion” (Janes 1978, 302). The text gained an international audience. Since it was partially inspired by the French Revolution and addressed to France, it was very popular in France. A French translation was published. *Rights of Woman*’s popularity also extended to America. The fact that the text had to be reprinted within a year attests to its popularity. British reformers and progressives embraced her philosophy. “Periodicals of radical inclination, sharing Wollstonecraft’s philosophical assumptions, sympathetic towards the rights of man and events in France, distressed by Edmund Burke’s lack of consistency, approved the work” (Janes 1978, 293). The initial critics were conservative women, instead of men. However, *Rights of Woman* indicates that Wollstonecraft anticipated a negative response from her own gender (Berges 2013, 37).

Wollstonecraft and *Vindication*’s popularity diminished after Wollstonecraft’s widowed husband, William Godwin, published her biography, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, shortly after her death. Godwin’s *Memoir* was negatively received once readers learned about the scandalous life Wollstonecraft led. Her reputation suffered a lingering disregard until later feminists revisited her works. The reception to *Rights of Woman* is constantly changing. It was immensely popular while Wollstonecraft was living; however, it did not regain a wide readership until almost a hundred years after her death, as a consequence of renewed interest sparked by the feminist suffrage movement. However, in the 21st century, Wollstonecraft and her philosophies are not widely known, except in academia.

V. The Natural Rights of Women

Wollstonecraft compares women to slaves throughout *Rights of Woman*. She believes women can only be emancipated from their shackles to men through receiving an education equal to men's education. "Let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated," Wollstonecraft declares in *Rights of Woman* (1792, 162). She then theorizes that women can be equal to men because both genders are human. However, she believes that women are treated as less than human, hence the claim that they are slaves. She elaborates that once women are given the same rights and education as men, they will be as rational and intelligent as men.

In the 18th century, women were not thought of as slaves by the general populace, however, they were not considered to be human either. Therefore, Wollstonecraft states, "I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties" (1792, 23). By making this claim she is able to apply other radical Enlightenment philosophies such as the concept of self and defending one's rights.

Wollstonecraft believes that women are slaves to prejudice and would be subject to immense hatred and ridicule for activities reserved solely for men in the 18th century, such as receiving an education (Wollstonecraft 1792, 101 and 53). Thus, she presents the emancipation of women to be beneficial to men as well. Slavery degrades the slave but also the slave owner. Wollstonecraft compares slavery of women under men to slavery in ancient Rome. The power the slave owners possessed over their slaves caused them to gain a hubris. Consequently, the slave owner becomes corrupt (Wollstonecraft 1792, 19 and 42). As previously mentioned, society during the 18th century valued preserving innocence and remaining uncorrupt. In

addition, patriotism was immensely important in imperial Britain. However, Wollstonecraft argues, “a woman has no country because she is not a citizen” (Coffee, personal communication, June 13 2018), she is a slave. As a result, women cannot be true patriots.

Women naturally have rights. However, men took them away. Wollstonecraft labels women slaves in order to reobtain equal rights for women. Her arguments to convince men to emancipate women are vital in convincing them to reform education for women.

VI. Wollstonecraft’s Philosophy on the Education of Girls

The focus of Mary Wollstonecraft in *Rights of Woman* is the reformation of women’s education rather than an exculpation of female rights, as the title suggests. Wollstonecraft without a precedent demands for both sexes to be educated together, at the same level. Furthermore, partly inspired by Talleyrand-Périgord’s derogatory claim regarding education for women, she advocates education for all classes and for it to begin at a young age so that a patriotic spirit could be instilled. As a result, Wollstonecraft, addresses the text to Talleyrand-Périgord. She makes the argument that women are rational beings and not as delicate as society believed them to be. Previously, Condorcet, an influential French philosopher, argued the same point. However, Wollstonecraft believes that some women will resist being given more rights, which can be traced to social conditioning during childhood to become wives and mothers (Berges 2013, 56). Wollstonecraft compares women to flowers to convey that the strength women possess has been sacrificed for their beauty. She believes women are disregarded before they mature and explains that

“One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women

than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives” (20).

This claim is a blatant challenge of conventional societal expectations of women. Wollstonecraft enjoys playing on the word ‘barren’ throughout *Rights of Woman*. She uses ‘barren’ to indicate an absence, instead of the word’s tradition meaning, the inability to have children. She draws attention to the fact that education is structured by only men, including explanations of women’s minds. Hence, she places great importance on education and calls for reform of education, especially regarding women. She claims the rationality of some women is not obvious, due to their lack of education, which prevents them from them from realizing their rights to an education (Berges 2013, 56).

Wollstonecraft lays out her philosophy in the introduction of *Rights of Woman*. However, she does not elaborate on some of her claims later in her four-hundred-page text, possibly because she was not used to academic writing or she was swept up in her impassioned defense of women. Some of Wollstonecraft’s arguments do not fully embrace modern feminist values because she either knew her philosophy would be dismissed outright if she claimed women should be given other life options than to be wives and mothers or could not open her mind to such possibilities.

Wollstonecraft implores women to think for themselves and to develop a sense of curiosity. She believes most women are unable to do so without an education. In the last chapter of *Rights of Woman*, she clarifies the statement by saying that the little early education offered to some girls, in the 18th century, only trains them to become malleable and diminutive, thereby crushing whatever innate ‘animal spirit’ they may have originally possessed. “But I still insist...the knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that

women...ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half being” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 39). In this statement Wollstonecraft addresses the issue that women are provided a different set of societal standards than men, most of which demean them. While boys are encouraged to go to school and develop into an intelligent man, women are sent instead to dress fittings and etiquette classes so that they may find a husband to support and bear children for.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft outlines two key demands: one, for girls to be educated alongside boys and two, for the education curriculum to be changed. She states, “only that education deserves emphatically to be termed cultivation of the mind which teaches young people how to begin to think” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 217). Wollstonecraft aims for education to be wholesome and comprehensive. She wants both genders and all social classes to be educated together in order to diminish inequalities. She proposes children live at home and go to the school during the day only. Therefore, instead of having boarding schools for the rich, the timings for school would be similar to country day school (Wollstonecraft 1792, 132-134). She believes that day schools would also be beneficial as there should be a balance between home and school; a good home life equates to success in school (Berges 2013, 122-123).

Wollstonecraft links the success of a child’s education to the success their parents’ relationship. This concept directly correlates to her claim that girls should receive the same education as their male counterparts in order to be the ideal spouse. She claims “by cementing the matrimonial tie, secures to the pledges of a warmer passion the necessary parental attention; for children will never be properly educated till friendship subsists between parents” (1792, 256). Thus, a healthy relationship between parents is vital. Wollstonecraft emphasizing that children look to their parents as examples. Hence, Wollstonecraft’s logic is a father treating a mother as

an equal will theoretically perpetuate with the son, his wife and their children. In addition, she places a high value on the bond between mother and child, which was disregarded in the upper echelons. Reiterating that a stronger bond between a mother and child equates to mother who provides a better example for her child to look up to. Thus, Wollstonecraft subtly implies that knowledge and behavior is cyclic. She uses patriotism as another example by posing a rhetorical question, “If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot” (1792, 9). She aims to convince men that education for women is vital by claiming it will further two important topics: patriotism and successful marriages.

Wollstonecraft asserts that women are not true patriots because they have not received a comprehensive education that teaches them about patriotism. She also asserts that girls being educated alongside boys during their formative years will allow them to “learn to interact with each other, [therefore] it is more likely that, as adults, they will be able to sustain relationships of mutual respect and friendship” (Berges 2013, 165).

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft insists that it is beneficial to educate all children together, regardless of socio-economic status or gender. To bridge the gender gap, Wollstonecraft demands that the government should establish co-education day schools. To bridge the economic gap, Wollstonecraft demands that schooling should be compulsory and free for all children between the ages of five to nine (1792, 140). Wollstonecraft proposes the use of identical clothing, uniforms, to prevent differentiation between both gender and class. She places emphasis on the comfort of children, theorizing that children cannot absorb information if they are not comfortable. As a result, the children’s uniforms should be comfortable and allow them to play outside. Wollstonecraft believes that fresh air and exercise, being able to run freely is detrimental to a child’s wellbeing. She associates women’s fragility and dependence on men to

their confinement since childhood (Berges 2013, 164). She assumes that girls spending time playing outside, as boys do, would free them from slavery sooner. She also believes that a child's attention span is no longer than an hour, hence the breaks outdoors would be greatly beneficial. Wollstonecraft also proposes that lectures would be more beneficial to children if they were Socratic seminars (Berges 2013, 166). To encapsulate, Wollstonecraft presents similar education philosophies to ones practiced today. However, due to Wollstonecraft being discredited during most of the 19th century, she did not inspire educational reforms.

VII. Impact on Educational Reform

Wollstonecraft failed to make any significant impacts on educational reforms. She died in 1797, five years after publishing *Rights of Woman* and before she could finish writing a follow-up text. Thus, she was not able to advocate for implementation of philosophies. Maria Montessori proposes similar educational reforms similar to ones that educational philosopher Maria Montessori makes over a century later, however, there is no evidence that she took inspiration from Wollstonecraft (Berges 2013, 165). The revival of *Rights of Woman* only occurred during the late 19th century, most prominently in America. “The sheer volume of references to Wollstonecraft in American print culture indicates that her story was widely recognized as a moral warning to substantiate an argument in favor of chaste and reserved females” (Smith 2016, 340). These texts were used during the feminist suffrage movement. Lucretia Mott, a 19th century women's right advocate, carefully studied *Rights of Woman* and propagated Wollstonecraft's ideals. “Mott's ideal form of coeducation includes “physical, intellectual and moral” education – the three basic tenets, in the same order of importance, of the proposed in the *Rights of Woman*” (Botting and Wilkerson 2004, 713). Mott's proposed ideal

education was not implemented (“Lucretia Mott”). Therefore, there is no evidence that Wollstonecraft, or her followers, made a significant impact on educational reforms.

VIII. Conclusion

Mary Wollstonecraft’s advanced thoughts superseded her time. Although Wollstonecraft poses radical theories, such as women are slaves to men, her ideas were well received during the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, her death prevented further promotion and implementation of her philosophy on women and education. No one made significant reforms based on her philosophy because her theories were rejected after Godwin revealed her salacious lifestyle. In *Rights of Woman*, she does not presume that women will gain rights and equal education in the near future, citing that the behavior prevalent in the 18th century has been ingrained in men and women for centuries. This presumption has proved to be true, the journey to equality of women has been a slow process. *Rights of Woman* remains relevant today as equal rights for women has not yet been achieved. In developing countries, even education for women remains to be an issue (Field and Ambrus 2008, 886). Wollstonecraft’s egalitarian philosophies on education, similar to the ideals for 21st century educational philosophy, should be compulsory and free for both gender and all social classes. Wollstonecraft’s work establishes a strong foundation for women’s rights and education. Her most universal theory, women will be emancipated through education, will continue to inspire and appeal to people.

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