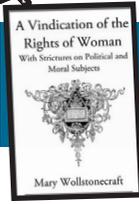




Classics



A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft

“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.” – Mary Wollstonecraft

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759-1797) IS perhaps best known for having written *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792. In this book Wollstonecraft delivers a pioneering and convincing argument for equality between men and women. The *Vindication* is typically classified as a feminist classic; however, her theories can be applied well beyond the issue of women in the eighteenth century. But, although she was possibly one of the most original thinkers of the Enlightenment, she is rarely taught in ‘Introduction to Philosophy’ or ‘History of Philosophy’ classes. In what follows, I will quickly sketch the main ideas and arguments in the book, in the hope that this will encourage you to learn more about the genius of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Education & Gender Construction

In Wollstonecraft’s time and society women were considered ‘by nature’ not able to think or reason as well as men, while at the same time they were mostly barred the opportunity of getting an education. Wollstonecraft starts her book by pointing out the question-begging nature of this position. How can anyone say that women lack intellectual capacity if they are not given any opportunity to develop it? To anyone who really believes that women are intellectually inferior, she proposes this challenge: educate women, then see if they indeed have inferior capacity for any subject.

What possible reason could society have to not try this out? Were its leaders afraid that women were not in fact inferior? Indeed, the entire book is an extremely convincing appeal to educate women, and I think her arguments on this topic are flawless.

In general, Wollstonecraft argues that people are not ‘by nature’ one way or the other – rather, that women were ‘socialized’ to be a certain way because of their station in society. In this she is an early thinker in the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate. She falls without a doubt on the side of ‘nurture’. Women

behave in specific ways because they’re raised to behave in those ways, not because there is some sort of ‘feminine nature’ that gives women certain ‘weak’ characteristics. They were encouraged to keep their constitutions feeble, for instance, by being barred from exercise as children. They were valued when obedient and unassuming, so reinforcing those characteristics, and their acquiescence was valued firstly because it was in the interest of their fathers – their ‘male owners’ in all but name. She concludes that it would be folly to assume that these traits are natural when women are so obviously raised to behave in this way.

Subjugation Perverts Both Sides

Wollstonecraft also argues that without freedom there is no possibility of virtue. Although this position is not developed in one single section of the book, it appears here and there from beginning to end.

She illustrates the idea with colorful examples. Subjugated women will use trickery and cunning to get what they want, and trickery and cunning are not virtues. Soldiers will be superficial for a similar reason, she says: they have to obey orders, and are told not to think. Little surprise perhaps then that they are also traditionally considered relatively dumb – just like women. She jokes, no wonder women have a fondness for men in uniform!

People who are subjugated are not free and so are not free to use reason to decide what the right and the wrong thing to do is. Thus they do not have the minimal requirements to act morally. With mere obedience left to them, virtue will be barred from them. So without freedom, there is no morality. Submission corrupts. However, subjugation will pervert not only the subjugated; those who subjugate will be failed or flawed moral beings too. They often act with impunity, and they will be obeyed, which will often lead to abusive behavior, which also can hardly be called virtuous. So power and subjugation corrupt both the powerful and the powerless. This is a no-win situation, where neither side achieves the moral maturity that can lead to happiness and a life well-lived. Wollstonecraft, therefore, argues for an end to subjugation, and for men and women to create a world with equality, for the good of both sexes.

These important points are enough to create for Wollstonecraft a place of honor in the history of philosophy, since she has possibly one of the most progressive positions of the Enlightenment. These ideas might also be considered the predecessor of philosophies such as Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘Slave

Morality’. Nietzsche claimed that Christianity was the morality of slaves, and the Romans had the morality of masters, then argues that neither of these moralities are acceptable, and that we need to move beyond both those perspectives – indeed, beyond good and evil.

Wollstonecraft’s ideas here can also be expanded into a criticism of inequality in general – going beyond sexual inequality to whenever there are situations of extreme inequality, such as wealth inequality. This also corrupts both the haves and the have nots, not leaving much space for real moral responsibility on either side. For instance, if you’re living hand-to-mouth, your moral choices are reduced to ‘Will you eat and be able to feed your children, or will you not?’ If this is your situation, you will do what it takes for you and your children to survive, whether it’s working for a corporation you despise, or taking whatever other kind of opportunities you have before you, whether they hurt others or not. You may feel that you cannot afford to be moral. On the other hand, if you have money for lawyers, you can be bailed out or otherwise escape justice. If you’re incredibly rich and/or powerful, you can generally get away with much, since you can leverage your power to not suffer the consequences of your actions. In such a position, your immorality goes unchecked, and so people will frequently end up being immoral as a result of extreme power. If all this is correct, then fighting subjugation and developing equality is still as essential today as it was in Wollstonecraft’s day.

A Visionary Advocate for Woman

Wollstonecraft’s book advocated a lot of things that ended up happening, for instance, a public school education where boys and girls study together. She argued that women should be able to pursue any education according to their individual abilities, just as men did. She also said that women should be able to participate in politics, and do socially significant jobs. All unthinkable at the time, now they’re givens.

Participation in politics was essential. Wollstonecraft thought women were artificially inculcated to focus on the minutia of home life just because they were not given the opportunity of engaging in larger social causes. This, she thought, was another cause of their moral confinement, since they were thus artificially barred from caring about the grander scheme of things. Their single-minded focus on family and social interactions made them less than they otherwise could have been.



Another aspect of woman's life that hindered their moral development, according to Wollstonecraft, was that they were socialised to remain in an 'infantile' state. In their upbringing they were guarded against any hardship or danger, while being told that their major goal in life should be to attract and please a husband. This, she thought, led to a weak constitution, both morally and physically. By not being allowed to engage in physical activity when young as freely as boys, their bodies became weaker, which would then incite the male protective instinct. But in fact, their lack of freedom to explore and grow led to a lack of responsibility. Wollstonecraft argues that

virtue does not develop in a bed of roses; on the contrary, hardship is necessary for fortitude, and to develop a truly virtuous character. But society women were shielded from all hardship, therefore becoming 'less virtuous' in the process. Here she again reminds me of Nietzsche, who also thought that pain is necessary for developing virtue; or rather that one needs to experience life with all its ups and downs in order to grow beyond Master and Slave moralities. The idea that God puts challenges before us to make us more virtuous is also part of a Christian response to the problem of evil. So maybe Nietzsche was not that far from Christianity after all!

Mary Wollstonecraft
by John Opie, 1797



Falling Into the Nature Trap

I think *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a work of great philosophical importance that was way ahead of its time. However, the one topic that doesn't age well to me is Wollstonecraft's apparent complete contempt for the society women of her time. She claims they frequently did not care about their children and instead only cared about ornamenting themselves in order to please their husbands. She argues that according to nature, women should be taking care of and breastfeeding their children, to avoid constant pregnancy and to make the children healthy. So in her opinion, women who did not take their motherly responsibility seriously and personally, relegating their childcare to servants, were not virtuous.

This part of the argument seems narrow-minded. First, it only addresses the issues of a certain class of women, ignoring those of all the others, such as farmworkers and lower-class women who did everything – childcare, working in the fields, etc, all the while not having freedom and frequently suffering at the hands of their husbands. Second, it fails to recognize that besides labor and breastfeeding there is no other natural imperative for mothers to be the sole caretakers of their children. Childcare can be shared independent of gender, and the responsibility can be taken up by one, two, or more people. There is nothing either natural or unnatural about that. What is important is that children grow up safe and loved, whatever configuration of care we provide for them.

Conclusion

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is an outstanding book which should be placed among the classics, and Wollstonecraft ranked alongside other philosophers of the Enlightenment. Her ideas are original, well argued, well written, and still meaningful today, both for women and for any groups who are subjugated. Until we find a way to remove subjugation from our societies, Wollstonecraft's views will remain as relevant as they ever were. Hers is a crucial voice, which should be heard in every Introduction or History of Philosophy class.

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