

Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee (editors)
The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016 (ISBN 978-0-19-876684-1)

Reviewed by Catherine Packham, 2018

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Who does Mary Wollstonecraft belong to? The feminists? The literary critics? The historians? To thinkers, of all kinds and disciplines, about the condition of women, then and now? This valuable essay collection marks the increasing attention given to her writings by social and political philosophers, building on important studies of her work in these disciplines, including Virginia Sapiro's *A Vindication of Political Virtue* (1992), and the editors' own works. But was Wollstonecraft a philosopher, especially as we use the term today? She certainly evokes her "philosophical eye" in the concluding sentence of one of her major works, but the fact that that work is her understudied history of the early years of the French Revolution--*An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794)--raises the question of what exactly philosophy was in the late eighteenth century, and how it differs from today's philosophical practices and disciplines. What should we make of this attempt to read her writings in a range of genres (including fiction and history) as philosophy? Even if she considered herself a philosophical thinker, can we?

The volume's editors pitch the collection as part of the current ongoing recovery of the "historical contribution that women have made to the pursuit of philosophy" (2), a formulation that, beyond a brief earlier reference to the omission of women from a philosophical canon formed from the nineteenth century onwards, sidesteps the question of how the formation and practice of the discipline has historically operated to the frequent exclusion of women, both as readers and writers. These essays are best read as examples, often admirable, of what happens when philosophers read Wollstonecraft. They offer insights into intellectual influence, from Plato and Aristotle to Spinoza and beyond, and map Wollstonecraft's place in traditions of thought, paying particular and detailed attention, in line with current trends in the field, to varieties of republicanism. Here the reader will find essays that offer a deeper understanding of Wollstonecraft's thinking on several of her most important terms (among them: reason, passion, independence, rights, duty). Equally, a number of contributors offer extensions from Wollstonecraft's thought to consider their implications for our contemporary moment: Alan Coffee generalizes from Wollstonecraft's thinking on accommodating diversity in "plural populations" to consider what this might mean for the social pluralism and cultural diversity of modern democratic societies; Eileen Hunt Botting argues that Wollstonecraft "can reach beyond what Wollstonecraft intended" (9) to explore her writings as an "unprecedented theorist of the human rights of children" and of animal ethics.

Despite the disparate foci of the twelve essays, the collection confirms what we already know: the impossibility of reading Wollstonecraft without insight and stimulation to further thought. These intelligent essays offer numerous insights, especially when they reveal the depth and breadth of thinking of a writer whose work is fired by a passion (and at times, irony and sarcasm) that might, to some readers, obscure its intellectual range. Even where some chapters start on familiar ground in Wollstonecraft studies, they invariably deepen and extend our sense of the scope and weight of Wollstonecraft's thought, often by taking arguments in unexpected directions. Sylvana Tomaselli shows how Wollstonecraft's well-known attack on inequality is informed, in ways not previously considered, by her views on respect and love, and specifically demonstrates the influence of Plato, especially the *Symposium*, on the *Vindication of the Rights of Men's* rejection of a Burkean account of love. Laura Brace offers a brilliant account of Wollstonecraft's place in the "social imaginary" of antislave discourse in the 1790s, showing how Wollstonecraft's radical critique of slavery extended beyond the ownership of human persons to attack private property itself, and its potential for moral and rational corruption. Such essays convince that Tomaselli is right in asserting that Wollstonecraft's views are not simply a function of her feminism, and that she participated deeply in the intellectual debates, and radical politics, of her day.

The question remains, though, of how far it is possible, or desirable, to systematize this mobile and innovative thinker, who drew from disparate sources and wrote in multiple forms and genres; remaining also is the question of what might be excluded from the picture drawn in the process. Susan James's assumption, that Wollstonecraft is "systematic enough" to make possible the sustained investigation of key preoccupations in her thinking, is a sensible formulation that underlies her exemplary pinpointing of Wollstonecraft's place in the history of rights discourse, and its intersection with republican ideas of liberty. The rich context and traditions of republican thinking, from classical times onwards, that were available to Wollstonecraft are usefully sketched by Philip Pettit. Yet to read Wollstonecraft in relation to certain traditions, or philosophical topics, inevitably precludes others--an observation that perhaps enables us to understand Wollstonecraft's at times eclectic intellectual references as a valuable capaciousness that refuses oppressive containment within traditions of thought that themselves need to be opened up to serve the purposes of independence and liberty. That desire to be free surely is expressed in the increasing turn, over the course of Wollstonecraft's short career, away from the more systematic modes of writing present in her discursive *Vindications* (which themselves often struggle, digressively, with the demands of their form), toward more open textual genres, including her formally innovative final fiction, and the travel letters that move suggestively and powerfully between autobiography, diary, commentary, and reverie.

One important philosophical tradition underplayed in the volume is that of the Scottish Enlightenment, part of whose project--understanding the historical, social, and cultural forces that mold subjectivity and structure ethical behavior in modern commercial society--absolutely underpins Wollstonecraft's thinking, and whose terms--passion, imagination, sensibility, sympathy, reason--are revisited again and again in her writing. More reference to this context would further strengthen already insightful essays. Thus Martina Reuter valuably recasts a familiar story about the relationship between reason and virtue in Wollstonecraft with attention to the role of the passions in her account of moral thought and action. Uncovering Wollstonecraft's recognition of the role of the passions in stimulating experience, and hence enabling the growth of understanding, gives a renewed weight to Wollstonecraft's sense of them as a "necessary auxiliary to reason." But for this reader at least it is odd that a discussion of the role of passion in the deliberative processes of reason is conducted without reference to Hume. Catriona Mackenzie's teasing out of how autonomy and independence--

those Wollstonecraftian watchwords--are acknowledged by her to be derived relationally, through others, is a valuable deepening of our understanding of what independence might mean for her--as well as how difficult it might be for women to achieve it. But an account of Wollstonecraft as an early relational autonomy theorist, for whom self-respect is generated through the subject's status in the eyes of others, surely requires some reference to Adam Smith, the key thinker in Wollstonecraft's time on intersubjectivity and the spectatorial social formation of subject identity--not least as he is one of the few philosophers whom she quotes in her writing. And Nancy Kendrick's discussion of Wollstonecraft's view of marriage (in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*) as, ideally, an Aristotelian virtue friendship, a moral relation based on mutual esteem of the marital partner's virtue (as distinguished from transactional friendships of utility) certainly provides a valuable counter to readings that understand such statements only through the lens of authorial sexual puritanism or inexperience; it also adds to our understanding of the important theme of female friendship in Wollstonecraft. But the admission that Wollstonecraft may not have read Aristotle herself, but rather is likely to have accessed his ideas on friendship through more contemporary writers (they are present in Smith, Hume, Burke, and others) again raises important questions about how concatenations of philosophical ideas are traced or accessed, both for ourselves and for Wollstonecraft who, as a woman, received little formal education. Meanwhile, all this, in turn, has implications for the construction of traditions--call them canons--of philosophy into which this volume, however it demurs, seeks to include Wollstonecraft. As we all know, canons are power structures; the irony of attempting to include Wollstonecraft in one without more than a cursory critique of how it might operate in often exclusionary ways would be devastating.

Of course, it is difficult to avoid the ways in which forms of expertise in one direction entail occlusions in others. But some of what is missed from the picture of Wollstonecraft presented in this volume bears importantly on how we read her, philosophically and otherwise; this includes both the conditions in which she wrote (often in haste, in despair, and under heavy ideological fire), as well as the larger tumultuous historical and political context of her writings, valuably if briefly noted by Barbara Taylor in the volume's concluding pages. Equally, to read Wollstonecraft as a philosopher emerges, as might be anticipated, as an exercise that privileges her two *Vindications*, of the *Rights of Men* and the *Rights of Woman*; Mackenzie and Taylor find space to consider her important final novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*, but there is no attention to her first, *Mary*, with its would-be Rousseauian attempt to imagine the education and fate of female genius, or to her travel writings, which stage many repeated moments of philosophical reflection, including on the burden of existence and the problems and fate of commercial society. Her often overlooked account of the French Revolution, written in the Scottish Enlightenment tradition of philosophical history, receives extended treatment in only one essay, by Lena Halldenius, who uses it to ask what Wollstonecraft's understanding of political representation might have been. To consider Wollstonecraft as a social and political philosopher, then, as well as being a rewarding one, also appears an inevitably partial exercise, one that doesn't do justice to the full range of fronts on which she was working and thinking. But this volume's project, of plotting Wollstonecraft's relations to other traditions of thought, hers and ours, does reveal her to be a thinker of extraordinary breadth, capacity, power, and range, one whose lack of formal schooling arguably enabled her to work within and across the philosophical grain, bringing disparate traditions together in productive reshaping, in pursuit of a vision of human nature, ethics, and society whose critical force still resonates with us today.