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Freedom as Independence: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Grand Blessing of Life

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Abstract

Independence is a central and recurring theme in Mary Wollstonecraft's work. Independence should not be understood as an individualistic ideal that is in tension with the value of community but as an essential ingredient in successful and flourishing social relationships. I examine three aspects of this rich and complex concept that Wollstonecraft draws on as she develops her own notion of independence as a powerful feminist tool. First, independence is an egalitarian ideal that requires that all individuals, regardless of sex, be protected to a comparable extent in all areas of social, political, and economic life, no matter whether this is in the public or private sphere. Second, so long as this egalitarian condition is not compromised, independence allows for individuals to perform differentiated social roles, including along gendered lines. Finally, the ongoing and collective input of both women and men is required to ensure that the conditions necessary for social independence are maintained. In Wollstonecraft's hands, then, independence is a powerful ideal that allows her to argue that women must be able to act on their own terms as social and political equals, doing so as women whose perspectives and interests may differ from men's.

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Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue. (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 85)

Mary Wollstonecraft's description of independence as the grand blessing of life comes in the opening paragraph of her preface to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Used in its classical republican sense, independence is synonymous with freedom understood as the absence of arbitrary power, whereas dependence indicates slavery. As the book unfolds, this ideal emerges as the central organizing principle through which she expresses her observations and arguments about the oppression and domination of women. Women were slaves, literally, because the power that men had over them in all areas of social life was arbitrary. They would not be free until social and political power had been constrained so that its exercise was justifiable only by reasoned argument in which women participated on equal terms with men. Only then, she argued, would women be independent, able to act in their own right and on their own terms.

Despite its prominence in her work, Wollstonecraft's commitment to independence and its implications as a philosophical concept have been given very little full-length or systematic treatment.¹ One reason for this may be that, although her republican commitments are becoming more widely acknowledged, republican theorists themselves have been slow to accept Wollstonecraft into their canon and so to consider the contribution of her work to their discipline. Philip Pettit, for example, whose neo-republican model of freedom as non-domination is perhaps the most prominent currently in use, refers only briefly to Wollstonecraft's work in alluding to its feminist potential without developing this connection any further (Pettit 1997 , 61, 138–40). Feminists, in their turn, have long been fairly cold toward republican theory, understandably so given its history of excluding women from citizenship and so from the benefits of independence.² More recently, this stance has thawed somewhat with a number of studies reconsidering the relationship between feminism and republicanism, although seldom in the context of Wollstonecraft.³ Rather than entering directly into these debates here, my focus will be on examining the logic internal to the concept of independence and its subsequent role as a central principle in Wollstonecraft's thought.⁴ In so doing, I hope to show that she develops this idea into a powerful and versatile analytical tool that remains relevant in contemporary political theory.

Independence is sometimes understood to refer only to the capacity for rational self-determination, leading some critics to suggest that it has comparatively little to say about the economic and social inequalities that continue to be so damaging to women (Phillips 2000 , 290). I shall argue, however, that this capacity is only one aspect of a broader concept that is always two-pronged, entailing the ability both to think for oneself and to act on one's decisions. In simultaneously addressing these two requirements, independence can be seen to be a complex ideal that brings together a number of separate values that we find in Wollstonecraft's work—including freedom, equality, reason, and virtue—providing them with a natural framework in which they are shown to be mutually reinforcing. An advantage of this approach is that, although Wollstonecraft is often regarded as an unsystematic writer, by understanding her as concerned primarily with freedom as the avoidance of slavery in

whatever form it might take, we can identify a coherent structure that unites her analyses of several key themes, including domestic life, employment, legal and social relations, and women's cultural standing.⁵ We will also see how Wollstonecraft reconciles the respective demands of individual freedom and communal engagement by considering independence as a socially constructed ideal.⁶

I outline three distinctive characteristics of independence. First, it is an egalitarian ideal according to which men and women must necessarily be protected to the same extent in all areas of their lives. Where this condition is not met, Wollstonecraft argues, the social bases for independence become unstable, jeopardizing everybody's freedom. Second, independence is a flexible ideal that allows for both sexes to interact and participate socially on differentiated terms that reflect their respective outlooks and interests. Although each political community may set its own criteria for the social division of labor, this is always subject to the proviso that it does not result in any section of the population becoming dependent on the arbitrary power of any other. I illustrate this in the context of Wollstonecraft's own emphasis on what she sees as women's "natural duties" concerning motherhood, arguing that the unequal burdens that this generates must always be offset by a corresponding "civil duty" owed by the community collectively to preserve everyone's independence. Equality is maintained alongside difference by a third characteristic. Independence is a collaborative ideal according to which the social and political terms of freedom, including the balancing of protections, duties, and burdens, must necessarily be established collectively by both women and men in dialogue with each other.⁷



As Wollstonecraft uses it, the term *independence* should be understood in the context of the republican or Commonwealthman tradition in which freedom is contrasted with slavery (Barker-Benfield 1989 ; Halldenius 2007 ; Coffee 2013). To be free was to be independent in the sense of having the capacity to act in one's own name without having to ask permission or rely on the goodwill of others. To lack this right was the mark of a slave. Independence enabled individuals to follow their consciences and was seen as being essential for the development of moral courage and the habits of civic virtue. An independent, virtuous citizenry represented, in turn, the surest defense of a society's freedom against the corrupting effects of arbitrary power. These ideas were prominent in eighteenth-century political discourse. They formed part of the rhetoric and arguments of other writers in Wollstonecraft's own circle, such as Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, as well as of several of her intellectual sources, including Rousseau and Catherine Macaulay.⁸ Wollstonecraft herself uses this framework extensively, including in both *Vindications* and in her analysis of the French Revolution (Wollstonecraft 1992 ; 1995).

As it is often understood today, "independence" can seem to be a highly individualistic ideal, indicating perhaps an aloofness from community with others, or seeming to celebrate the notion of the "self-made man" who "did it his way," while denigrating those, such as the elderly or infirm, who require the help of others. Indeed, the imagery traditionally used by republicans can seem to reinforce this impression. Price, for example, gives, as the paradigm of independence, hardy yeomen "trained to arms, instructed in their rights, clothed in homespun [and] drawing plenty from the ground" (Price 1992 , 145). I do not defend this historical emphasis. On the contrary, I shall argue that this rugged tone is not part of the meaning of "independence" itself and that individualism does not play any part in

its formal structure. In its republican sense, a person's independence is judged only with respect to the *arbitrary* exercise of power (Pettit 1997, 22–35). To say that I am independent, therefore, does not imply that I have no need of any assistance from others, but only that I do not depend on anyone's grace and favor for the essential things in life. For example, although physically incapacitated people may require full-time care, if this is guaranteed by the community as a matter of right, they would not be considered to be dependent because they are not placed at anyone's mercy for their care needs. In this, they stand in stark contrast to slaves who have no rights or entitlements and so must always trust in their masters' being disposed to provide for them.

Wollstonecraft herself saw no contradiction in trenchantly advocating independence for women while acknowledging that mutual reliance between people (or *inter* dependence) is essential in fostering the strong emotional and lasting bonds that underpin family and community life. Independent adults, for example, are first brought up and educated by their parents. Independent parents, in their turn, have duties to look after their children properly (Wollstonecraft 1992, 270–306). Within marriage itself, Wollstonecraft argued that independence would enable rather than undermine intimacy by allowing couples to relate to each other as friends and equals (Wollstonecraft 1992, 112–18; Frazer 2008).⁹ Nevertheless, although mutual reliance is consistent with Wollstonecraft's conception of independence, it would not be accurate, as is sometimes suggested, to substitute the term *interdependence* in order to dissociate the concept from any potentially individualistic connotations (Abbey 1999, 79).¹⁰ In the first place, independence is the word that Wollstonecraft uses, and this has a place within the wider republican literature. By emphasizing the relational structure of independence, her work can be read as making an important contribution to contemporary neo-republican debate.¹¹ Second, although communitarian themes are prominent in her work, writing at a time when women lacked so many important legal, political, social, and financial protections, Wollstonecraft's unambiguous focus is on preventing the devastating effects of their vulnerability to men's unrestrained power. Once secured, however, she sees independence as an enabler of flourishing community by allowing people to develop their own characters and interests and so to cooperate and live together on an equal footing (Wollstonecraft 1992, 257–69; Weiss 2009, 84–90).

Although independence is synonymous with freedom, it has a distinctive structure that differs in several respects from the familiar notion of negative freedom, understood as the absence of interference from others, that is characteristic of most forms of liberal theory (Skinner 1998). Republican freedom is always understood in the context of a social and political community of cooperating and mutually reliant agents under a non-arbitrary law that acts for the good of all. In this respect, it is a necessarily relational ideal in a way that non-interference freedom is not. For this reason, where she has been read through the lens of liberalism and non-interference, Wollstonecraft has often been thought to endorse a subjective notion of freedom expressed, in Mill's phrase, as “pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs” (Weiss 2009, 89), where the aim of politics is to maximize this freedom such that individuals are coerced only insofar as they give their consent (Abbey 1999, 85).¹² Once this idea is made foundational, Wollstonecraft is taken to be confronted by certain basic questions. Virginia Sapiro identifies these as: “why would self-interested individuals voluntarily give up some of their autonomy to cooperate with other self-interested individuals in political and social life?” and, in this case, how can we consistently “bind people into a noncoercive democratic state?” (Sapiro 1992, 166–67). Expressed this way, the imperative to promote individual liberty can be seen as being in tension with the needs of a community that is built

upon relationships of deep, lasting mutual trust.¹³ As we shall see, however, these questions are not Wollstonecraft's. They are not to be found in her texts and she does not attempt to answer them. Independence is not based on the principle of non-interference without consent and is entirely consistent with interference so long as this is constrained.

Wollstonecraft discusses independence in two different contexts. It may refer to the rational or moral capacity to think for oneself (independence of mind) or to the legal or social capacity to act *sui iuris*, in one's own right (civil independence). However, although these may appear to be distinct, I shall argue that for Wollstonecraft moral and civil independence are considered together as part of a single, overarching ideal. Independent people must be able *both* to think rationally for themselves *and* to have the necessary rights and opportunities that will enable them to act on their decisions. Indeed, in the next section we shall discuss how Wollstonecraft understands these two capacities to be causally linked, so that if we are dependent in either sense this will inhibit, or "corrupt," our ability to be independent in the other.



Social relationships inevitably involve some people exercising a degree of control or power over others, such as in the family, in employment, and under the government. Indeed, Wollstonecraft observes, most people are at different times both controller and controlled (Wollstonecraft 1992, 97). So long as, however, any power that others have over us is not arbitrary in nature, this will not compromise or diminish our freedom. Arbitrary power is discretionary and unconstrained. Those who hold it do not have to consider the interests or opinions of others but are able to act at their own pleasure. Their decisions, Wollstonecraft says, cannot be "disputed, unless they happen to be in a good humour" (277). Those who are subject to arbitrary power are, therefore, dependent, being forced to "act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong" (136). Not all power is arbitrary, however. Where its exercise has to be justified rationally or morally to those who are subject to it, power is non-arbitrary. In this case, independence is not threatened because non-arbitrary power is constrained by law so that it can be exercised only within acceptable limits and according to collectively agreed standards that enable all members of the community to live together independently and securely, taking all their interests into account (Wollstonecraft 1995, 211–13).

Independence is intricately bound up with two other values—equality and virtue—such that the absence of any one of them undermines and inhibits the presence of the other two. Equality governs the relationships between agents, indicating that all individuals have the same degree of protection against being dominated, thereby providing the conditions that make independence possible. We shall see that this turns out to be a very demanding standard that requires that one not only have an equivalent legal and political standing to others but also comparable material and social conditions, and a similarly effective public voice. We qualify for equal protection on account of our equal moral status as human beings capable of rational behavior.¹⁴ It is because of this faculty that we are able to have virtue, which is a capacity that every independent agent must possess. In this context, to have virtue simply means to be guided by reason rather than by passion or unreflective opinion. We should not, however, think of this as a detached or abstract activity. According to Wollstonecraft, it is a part of reasoning to harness our passions through the power of imagination and so give life and content to our

rational and moral thinking.¹⁵ So construed, “it is the right use of reason alone” she says, “which makes us independent of everything—excepting the unclouded reason—”whose service is perfect freedom” (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 230).

Independence of mind is most closely associated with virtue, and civil independence with equality. In both cases, however, people are independent for the same underlying reason; namely, that they are free from any arbitrary form of control. To be independent of mind, we must think for ourselves instead of blindly following the opinions of others. We must reflect on our beliefs and intended actions, putting aside our prejudices and scrutinizing them in the light of reason and morality (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 195, 272).¹⁶ This is the sense of independence referred to in the opening quotation to this paper. The language Wollstonecraft uses is certainly austere and seems to reflect her Puritan leanings.

Philosophically, however, her point is that the power of reason is non-arbitrary since it is always in our best interests to adhere to its requirements. “To submit to reason,” she argues, “is to submit to the nature of things, and to that God, who formed them so, to promote our real interest” (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 277). If we follow our passions, by contrast, or act according to our pre-reflective beliefs or opinions, then we are governed arbitrarily because we defer to external forces not under our control. We must, of course, determine for ourselves what reason requires. If we depend on custom or received wisdom then we allow others to make our decisions for us.

It has been suggested that the capacity to judge rationally for oneself is all that is meant by independence. Anne Phillips, for example, makes this claim, arguing that the equality that Wollstonecraft “sought was to be measured in terms of independence [of mind] rather than income or positioning in the social division of labour; and she saw no intrinsic reason why men and women could not be equally independent even while assuming very different responsibilities and roles” (Phillips 2000 , 289). “This,” she adds, “is the point that has proved so troubling to later feminists, for Wollstonecraft does not seem particularly perturbed by a division of labour that allocates familial and domestic responsibilities to the women and leaves most fields of public employment to the men.” Since this issue has been central to women's oppression, Phillips believes that freedom as independence is not of much use to feminists (290). I shall take her criticism in two parts, addressing the relationship between independence and equality in this section before discussing the question of differential social expectations in section IV. We should note first that Wollstonecraft herself was not indifferent to inequality and did regard independence as being compromised by material want or lack of social status. We see this, for example, in the story of Jemima who was “chained” to slavery by both her poverty and her “infamy” (from being born out of wedlock) (Wollstonecraft 2005 , ch. 5, especially 32, 38). Wollstonecraft was also vocal in her opposition to legislation and practices that reinforced social and economic inequality, such as the Game Laws and the enclosing of the commons (Wollstonecraft 1999 , 16, 60–61).¹⁷

We are not independent until we are in a position to act on our decisions. Wollstonecraft makes clear that a woman cannot be “really virtuous” (and so independent) without the full “protection of civil laws” because she would not be able to act according to her conscience without having to ask someone else's permission (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 264). If a woman is to “emulate the virtues” expected of a man, she must share the same rights as he (327). These rights are extensive, including to make contracts, to own property, and to have security of income.¹⁸ The importance of these rights is powerfully illustrated in *Maria* . The protagonist marries a drunk and abusive man. However, by the

time she realizes this, she is powerless to alter her situation or to gain any redress. Her husband controls all her property, irrespective of whether she brought it into the marriage (by inheritance) or earned it through her own efforts (Wollstonecraft 2005 , 80–81). When she decides to leave him, he has her imprisoned in an asylum without any right of appeal. She is treated as part of “her husband’s property.”

Individuated rights against arbitrary power, however, are not sufficient. To be independent, we must live in a community of independent agents. Wollstonecraft makes this point several times. “Virtue,” which is necessary for independence, “can only flourish amongst equals,” she says, adding that “among unequals there can be no society” (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 64, 39). There is an important theoretical reason why this is so, which is that dependence is said to corrupt virtue. Dominated individuals do not have the luxury always to do the right thing because, as the story of Maria shows, their destiny is not in their own hands. This uncertainty is said to encourage non-virtuous behavior. Slaves, for example, are not motivated to make tough decisions that might upset others. Instead they adopt coping strategies to “manage” those who hold power over them. Rather than telling the truth, for example, they flatter their masters or deceive them to stay on their right side. Here, Wollstonecraft notes that “whilst they are absolutely dependent on their husbands [women] will be cunning, mean, and selfish” (257–58) and must either “render them[selves] alluring” or “govern their tyrants by sinister tricks” (262).

It is sometimes alleged in this context that Wollstonecraft blames women for their own dependence, either because they lack the strength of character to overcome their situation or because their frivolous behavior helps perpetuate an oppressive system.¹⁹ This criticism is, however, unfounded. For one thing, Wollstonecraft is explicit that dependence always produces servile behavior. “It is vain,” she says, “to expect virtue from women till they are... independent of men” because we cannot “expect virtue from a slave” (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 257–58, 135). More significantly, it is not only slaves whose virtue is corrupted by dependence. “Inequality of rank,” Wollstonecraft says, “must ever impede the growth of virtue by vitiating the mind that submits or domineers” (49). She emphasizes this in the opening chapter of the *Vindication* thereby setting in context her subsequent condemnations of women’s behavior (97–99). Dominant men have no more incentive than do dependent women to develop virtuous characters. In their superior position, men grow complacent, becoming accustomed to insincere adulation from their fawning subordinates.²⁰ Their opinion of themselves is inflated, and they become lazy. Lacking self-discipline, they do not learn to regulate their appetites and so become slaves of their own excess (96–99). In hierarchical societies, she says, most people are involved in relationships in which they are, by turns, subordinate and dominant.²¹ And, although married men were particularly liable to exhibit this pattern of behavior—ingratiating themselves to their superiors at work and then victimizing their wives at home—Wollstonecraft does not exempt women who could be equally domineering over their children or domestic servants.²²

It is, therefore, essential that all our relationships are securely grounded in social equality: inequality creates dependence, dependence inhibits virtue, and without virtue we are slaves to our passions. Since dependence corrupts our character, any form of social inequality has a corrosive effect that threatens to undermine virtue within the whole community (Wollstonecraft 1999 , 92–99). Indeed, Wollstonecraft establishes as her “main argument” for the rights of women that a dependent woman “will stop the progress of knowledge, for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with

respect to its influence on general practice” (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 86).

IV

In republican theory, social equality is closely tied to the concept of citizenship, since it is the equal independence of citizens that is guaranteed. Equality, however, is not sameness, so the question arises as to whether there is a single model to which the members of both sexes alike must conform as citizens, or whether our duties and responsibilities may be differentiated along gendered lines. Either option is potentially problematic. A unified model must be genuinely gender-neutral rather than tacitly embodying existing cultural biases that favor the male perspective, something that is very hard to demonstrate or achieve (Dietz 2001).²³ However, as we have already noted, where each sex is primarily attached to a different sphere of social and political life, the historical pattern has been that women are not only marginalized but that this disadvantage is legitimized and so prolonged. Phillips argues, in this context, that women may often meet the formal conditions for independence while remaining economically and socially subordinate (Phillips 2000 , 290). In theory, either the unified or the differentiated approach to citizenship could be compatible with independence so long as it was not arbitrarily imposed and it met the conditions for equality and virtue. As we shall see, Wollstonecraft favors the latter route, accepting that there may be separate, gendered forms of citizenship. I shall argue, however, she does this within the context of a prior and overriding commitment to independence that guarantees that any subsequent unequal social burdens must be offset.

Wollstonecraft refers several times to women's “peculiar duties” and of both sexes’ “respective stations in life” (see Wollstonecraft 1992 , 157, 260, 263, 292, 303, 307). As far as women are concerned, their duties are said to be grounded in their “nature,” specifically in their capacity to bear children.²⁴ Although there is no indication that women have a special positive duty to be mothers,²⁵ Wollstonecraft does specify that the requirements of citizenship could be satisfied through raising children.²⁶ It is equally clear, however, that mothers are to be independent. Wollstonecraft is explicit that “the being who discharges the duties of its station is independent” and for women, this means that their “first duty is to find themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens is that, which includes so many, of a mother” (263). Women's capacity to be good mothers follows from their being “rational creatures and free citizens” (306). “To be a good mother” Wollstonecraft explains, “a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands,” for if a woman is not capable of governing herself, “she will never have sufficient sense or command of temper to manage her children” (272). In light of this, we must ask how Wollstonecraft understands the relationship between motherhood and independence.

One approach would be to suggest that there is an order of priority between our different kinds of duties. Citing the passage quoted above in which we are told first to “find ourselves as rational creatures” before taking on our civic duties, for example, Wendy Gunther-Canada argues that for Wollstonecraft “a woman's maternal duty was secondary to her primary moral and political responsibility to herself” (Gunther-Canada 1999 , 471).²⁷ It would be misleading, however, to take Wollstonecraft's words as diminishing the duty of motherhood in any way. It is not that we have a duty to ourselves to be independent that takes precedence over our other duties. Rather, independence is a prerequisite for virtue of any kind, and therefore for acting dutifully as opposed to acting under

compulsion. We must ensure that we are independent before we can fulfill our duties. The duties of motherhood are not subordinated by independence. They are made possible.

However, although the duties of motherhood are described as “natural,” we should not take this as sanctioning a potentially unequal system of responsibilities. All duties are grounded in reason. There is no special significance to a duty being natural other than what can be discerned rationally. If reason tells us that we should bring up the next generation responsibly and well—and Wollstonecraft thinks it does—and that women are naturally fitted to perform at least certain aspects of this task, then this is their “natural duty.” Ultimately, the basis of all duties for men and women is the same. Although “women may have different duties to fulfil... they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them must be the same” (Wollstonecraft 1992, 141; her italics). We should not forget, therefore, that “if women are to be good wives and mothers,” men must not “neglect the duties of husbands and fathers” (306).²⁸ Nevertheless, although it is encouraging to read that men have natural duties within the family, without further specification we cannot assume that both sexes would be burdened equally. Historically, they have not.

Natural duties, however, are not the only, or even the most important, duties that Wollstonecraft discusses. If a woman is to “discharge her *civil* duties,” she argues, she must not “want individually the protection of civil laws” (Wollstonecraft 1992, 264; my italics). Although Wollstonecraft does not herself press home the distinction between natural and civil duties, the fact that she identifies both is telling. Natural duties, such as they may be, are inevitably exercised in a social context that gives rise to social, or civil, duties. As we have seen, within any community there is an overriding collective imperative to promote and maintain the social conditions that prevent dependence. Natural duties do not trump social duties. Rather, alongside every natural duty is a corresponding social obligation to ensure that the conditions for mutual independence are not violated. Even if the duties associated with child-bearing and motherhood are seen as being more demanding than those of fatherhood, Wollstonecraft’s commitment to independence means that men would have to assume any additional burdens necessary to prevent women becoming dependent.

In answer to Phillips, then, there can be no question of the social division of labor “leaving most fields of employment to men.” For one thing, a woman “must not be dependent on her husband’s bounty for her subsistence” (Wollstonecraft 1992, 264). Furthermore, her opportunities for work must not be limited to a few menial jobs. Work offers not only financial independence but also the opportunity to develop independence of mind. Just as men “unfold their faculties by becoming soldiers and statesmen,” so women must have the full range of careers and occupations available to them (260). Bemoaning “the few employments open to” them, Wollstonecraft asks “how many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practiced as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry” (267). This does not mean, however, that mothers are compelled to take up demanding careers while also meeting their childcare responsibilities, as one horn of “Wollstonecraft’s dilemma” would have it. Although some women may wish to combine these roles—including perhaps Wollstonecraft herself—it is not part of what it means to be independent. Independence is wholly compatible with accepting the mutual interdependence that is integral to family life. What is required is that in any relationship each party must be in a position to relate to the other as an equal.

Irrespective of whether a woman chooses to work outside the home, from the perspective of

independence what matters is that she must not be forced to rely on the (arbitrary) good will of others for her protection. This means, for example, that the support that is needed for raising a child cannot be discretionary but is a civic entitlement. So, although men should doubtless take a greater responsibility for domestic work, on a wider scale what is most important for Wollstonecraft's position is that the laws and social conventions that govern the organization of work and family life must guarantee independence for all. A mother who is not in paid employment has a right to financial support, and a full-time working mother can expect to be supported in balancing her responsibilities. In contemporary terms, measures such as state child-benefit payments, flexible working arrangements for parents, and accessible childcare facilities should be seen not as concessions but as rights owed to women as independent agents and citizens.²⁹

V

No matter how a population resolves to organize its social relations, the final arrangement is subject to a strict condition that all its adult members are fully independent and protected to an equal extent. In principle, this gives women, collectively, the opportunity to determine for themselves the basis for their own social participation. If theory is to be made a reality, however, there must be a reliable means of identifying a system that is acceptable to everyone, and of reaching agreement on how the relative burdens are to be shared and any differences are to be compensated.

Historically, republicans have understood independence as a function of living under a non-arbitrary law, where this means that the law is required to reflect the people's considered common good (Skinner 1998 , 26). As Wollstonecraft puts it, "to consult the public mind in a perfect state of civilization, will not only be necessary, but it will be productive of the happiest consequences" (Wollstonecraft 1995 , 212). She makes the point that, of course, women must have their own representation "instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government," adding "who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?" (Wollstonecraft 1992 , 265, 87). We should note, however, that this is not only a normative point but is entailed by the logic of independence since an idea of what is in an agent's best interests cannot be imposed upon her but must be something that she endorses for herself.³⁰ Nevertheless, even under a fully inclusive and deliberative set of arrangements, the task of drawing up non-arbitrary laws that reflect everyone's interests is a daunting one at best. Assuming, for example, that everyone were to accept that some form of childcare benefit was owed to women by right to protect their independence, the level of its provisions would still have to be established and balanced against other social costs and obligations. Given the difficulties inherent in such tasks, Wollstonecraft concludes that those who devise the laws that bind society must be guided by "reason, virtue, and knowledge" (91). The people who make the laws must, in effect, be independent.

As citizens we are all lawmakers. This creates a very serious problem for republicans generally, because it means that in order to create the laws that are necessary for independence, we must first have a population of independent citizens. That may be all very well for a society in the "perfect state of civilization," but as we know, the real world is far from perfect. The prospect is raised, then, that independence may be a utopian ideal that cannot be applied to actually existing social situations. Wollstonecraft is all too aware of the problem. Whenever people come together to deliberate about

their shared concerns, she notes, they do so within a social context that determines their ability to discern rational arguments. Individuals are, she says, invariably shaped to “a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in” (Wollstonecraft 1992, 102). Although this need not be harmful in itself, the problem comes when learned cultural attitudes and beliefs impair people's ability to think differently. “In every age” Wollstonecraft observes, “there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it” such that whenever people try to challenge it, the “truth is lost in a mist of words... and knowledge rendered a sounding nothing, by the specious prejudices that assume its name” (102, 91–92). In other words, collectively, the virtue necessary to create the laws that protect people's independence in such a society has been corrupted. People's vested interests come to guide public debate instead of “reason and knowledge.”³¹ This favors the powerful groups in society, creating inequalities that ultimately lead to dependence or slavery. As an example of how powerful this effect can be, Wollstonecraft cites the widespread belief that women were “created rather to feel than reason” as the source of the endless variety of “meanness, cares and sorrows into which women are plunged” (154–55).

Wollstonecraft's response is derived from her understanding of independence as we have described it, and I have argued elsewhere that her solution is both highly innovative and represents a significant contribution to contemporary republican theory (Coffee 2013). She showed that the general structure of independence, as the guaranteed protection against the effects of arbitrary power through the application of a non-arbitrary law, does not go far enough. Another step is required. Even the most virtuous laws cannot guarantee equal protection where a society's prejudicial, or non-virtuous, cultural beliefs prevent fruitful rational discourse. Wollstonecraft analyzes this situation in terms of dependence using the basic formula as we have given it. Women remain dependent on men's arbitrary power, only in this case it is not because the law directly discriminates but because it cannot be applied fairly. This keeps women in servitude, although now they are, in a literal sense, “slaves of prejudices.”³² If they are to be independent, the arbitrary effect of prejudicial social beliefs must be disarmed. The cultural background, in other words, just like the law, must be constrained so that its impact is non-arbitrary. Since this cannot be legislated, the only way that women can be independent is for them to have a secure and effective public voice of their own that will allow them to challenge all those prevailing ideas that do not meet the standards of equality and virtue. A new set of background social norms, values, and beliefs must then be created, inclusively and collaboratively, that reflects the input and perspectives of women as well as men.³³ Only in this way will reason (which is non-arbitrary) rather than prejudice (which is arbitrary) be the determining factor in how our social relationships are arranged. This is the fundamental condition necessary for independence.

Achieving this will take time, as Wollstonecraft acknowledges.³⁴ More than two centuries on, there is still much that needs to be done. Nevertheless, in probing the logic of independence and expanding its application from legal and economic relations to include cultural forms of domination, she has developed a comprehensive account of the conditions necessary for women's social freedom. By articulating independence in terms of the ability both to think for oneself (requiring virtue) and to act in one's own right (requiring equality), Wollstonecraft demonstrates how the various aspects of our individual and collective lives, from the personal and domestic to the political and cultural, are related and that dependence in one area undermines freedom in the others. She applies a single standard to the different kinds of oppression facing women, showing what must be done at each level of social and political life if this is to be overcome. This approach is as relevant now as it was then. Little wonder,

then, that Wollstonecraft considered independence to be the grand blessing of life.

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Symposium on Mary Wollstonecraft and the Enlightenment in Lund (February 2012) and at a meeting of the Society of Women in Philosophy in Dublin (November 2012), as well as at seminars at Birkbeck College London, University College Dublin, and the University of Cape Town. I benefited greatly from the comments and insights offered by the participants at each of those gatherings. I am also very grateful to Sandrine Bergès, Lena Halldenius, and Martina Reuter for their input, and to Iseult Honohan for her close reading of a previous draft. Finally, I would like to thank the editors at *Hypatia* and the anonymous referees for their critical but invaluable observations.

- 1 A notable exception is Halldenius [2007](#) . In addition, Catriona Mackenzie examines independence as part of an idea of self-government, although not from a republican perspective (Mackenzie [1993](#)).
- 2 Anne Phillips and Carole Pateman ask whether it is time to reconsider this attitude, both deciding against it (Phillips [2000](#) ; Pateman [2007](#)). Pateman's own position, nevertheless, shares much with republicanism as I understand it, although she rejects the label.
- 3 Susan James shows the feminist value of Spinoza's republicanism (James [2012](#)). Cécile Laborde develops a critical republicanism that focuses on the *hijab* controversy (Laborde [2008](#)). Victoria Costa takes a favorable view of Pettit's model with some reservations (Costa [2012](#)).
- 4 I make my own case for a feminist republicanism inspired by Wollstonecraft in Coffee [2013](#) .
- 5 Given the historical importance of independence as an ideal, focusing on it allows us more easily to bring her work into dialogue with other early feminist writers (see Botting and Carey [2004](#) , 710–11, 719–20).
- 6 Although many writers now acknowledge that Wollstonecraft wants to emphasize both themes, it is not always apparent how she can do this consistently. Penny Weiss, for example, sensing a tension between the demands of each, suggests that we should see Wollstonecraft as attempting “to redefine liberalism itself,” leaving it for us to “imagine the possibilities” (Weiss 2008, 90). A republican structure, I argue, provides a more natural resolution.
- 7 Rather than reflecting a male-centered perspective that leaves patriarchal power structures in place, as is sometimes suggested (Brace [2000](#) , 434), independence requires that accepted norms have to be renegotiated, so that they are acceptable to both sexes.
- 8 I show how Price's structure of independence is reflected in Wollstonecraft's work, and was subsequently developed and extended by her as she addressed the social and cultural forms of

power that oppress women beyond their legal exclusion (Coffee [2013](#)). Lena Halldenius also compares Wollstonecraft's and Rousseau's respective ideas about independence (Halldenius [2007](#)). Although Wollstonecraft indicates that she is extending Rousseau's concept to include women, she can be seen to employ her own innovative notion of independence. Both Halldenius and I argue that Wollstonecraft's ideas on independence form part of the neo-republican tradition, allowing her work to be read in dialogue with the contemporary discourse on freedom as non-domination. Catherine Macaulay, whose work Wollstonecraft cites with warmth and approval (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 210, 252), also wrote within this tradition employing a framework that has a number of similarities to that used by Price and Wollstonecraft. Although Macaulay's long-overlooked ideas have recently been the subject of renewed attention from feminists (see Reuter [2007](#) and Green [2012](#) for excellent analyses), contemporary republicans have yet to identify her as an important theorist in their own tradition. I am not aware of any extensive and systematic treatment of her conception of freedom as independence as a neo-republican political ideal.

- 9 As well as improving the quality of affection in the relationship, “children will never be properly educated till friendship subsists between parents” (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 326).
- 10 Iseult Honohan has also pressed me on this point.
- 11 See note 29 below.
- 12 Wollstonecraft is commonly described as a liberal theorist (or even as “*the* liberal feminist” [Weiss [2009](#)]). My intention is not to label Wollstonecraft as a “republican” rather than a “liberal” and my analysis is confined solely to her use of the idea of independence. I do not find it helpful generally to draw a sharp distinction between the republican and liberal political traditions, which share an overlapping history, nor to classify historical writers as belonging to one or the other side.
- 13 Although many feminists have been highly critical of this perceived individualism (Dietz [2001](#)) over the last few decades, liberal theorists have responded by developing more nuanced accounts of society. There has been a long, and I believe fruitful, dialogue between various kinds of feminists, communitarians, and liberals on this issue (Baehr [2004](#)).
- 14 Wollstonecraft considers “women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties” (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 81). Independence is also valued out of respect for justice and humanity (Wollstonecraft [1999](#) , 9).
- 15 Although reason distinguishes human beings, as finite and emotional creations we also draw upon our passions. So when Wollstonecraft asks “in what respect are we superior to the brute creation, if intellect is not allowed to be the guide of passion?” she acknowledges that without the “feelings of the heart... reason would probably lie helpless in inactivity” (Wollstonecraft [1999](#) , 31). Karen Green gives an excellent analysis of reason, passion, and imagination in

Green [1997](#) .

- 16 Wollstonecraft sets out the requisite characteristics in chapter 1 (especially Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 91–92).
- 17 See Ferguson [1999](#) for an illuminating account of Wollstonecraft's “radical ideas” on poverty and inequality.
- 18 “Virtue is out of the question when you only worship a shadow, and worship it to secure your property” (Wollstonecraft [1999](#) , 21).
- 19 Moira Ferguson argues that Wollstonecraft is proud of her own resistance to the social pressures that have kept lesser women in a state of dependence (Ferguson [1992](#) , 135, 144–45); Barbara Taylor suggests that “the *Rights of Woman* denounces women's complicity in their oppression” (Taylor [2003](#) , 238).
- 20 This theme recurs throughout her analysis of the history of the French Revolution (Wollstonecraft [1995](#)).
- 21 Individuals become doubly corrupt, both “submitting and tyrannising without exercising their reason,” becoming dead weights on the community (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 97). Think of institutions such as the monarchy and the church, says Wollstonecraft.
- 22 A dominated woman may “tyrannise over her servants; for slavish fear and tyranny are found together” (Wollstonecraft [1787](#) , 63).
- 23 Pateman discusses this in the context of what she calls “Wollstonecraft's Dilemma” (Pateman [1989](#) , 14).
- 24 Wollstonecraft refers to mothers' duties to “suckle their children” (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 323, 264).
- 25 Although exceptional men and women may remain unmarried and childless, this is not the experience of the great majority (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 157).
- 26 Wollstonecraft is sometimes said to be an advocate of “republican motherhood” in which the supposedly natural abilities of men and women respectively are equated with specific civil duties. Women's principal duty is to bring up the next generation of patriotic and capable citizens (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 87). For differing views, see Landes [1988](#) , 129–38; Sapiro [1992](#) , 321; and Gunther-Canada [1999](#) .
- 27 Gunther-Canada's purpose is to challenge essentialist arguments tying women to specific maternal duties. She does not address the relationship between independence and duty.

- 28 Wollstonecraft also refers to the equal importance of the duties of “citizens, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and directors of families” (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 256).
- 29 This addresses a criticism Costa levels at Pettit that freedom as non-domination does not guarantee benefits such as childcare for women (Costa [2012](#) , 14).
- 30 For me to be independent, any power to which I am subject may coerce me only insofar as it acts in my best interests. Wollstonecraft notes that it is always in our interests to submit to reason and the moral law. As an individual, I submit to reason and morality according to my conscience (displaying independence of mind). Socially, however, I must also submit to the law of the land. If the law is to be non-arbitrary, it too may coerce me only where it acts in my best interests. If this is true of me, it must be true for everyone over whom the law is sovereign. If the law coerces anyone against his or her interests, that person is dependent, and where there is dependence, there is corruption of virtue. Without virtue there is no independence. Therefore a non-arbitrary law always acts only for the common good.
- 31 “Men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices... rather than to root them out” (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 92).
- 32 On this point, see Coffee [2013](#) , 124.
- 33 There must be a “revolution in female manners” (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 307). See Mackenzie [1993](#) , 38; Coffee [2013](#) , 128.
- 34 “It will require a considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices” that have kept women dependent (Wollstonecraft [1992](#) , 135).

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