Abstract

Independence is a central and recurring theme in Wollstonecraft’s work. This 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, are 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. Secondly, 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.
Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*¹

I

Independence is a fundamental ideal for Wollstonecraft. Its significance for her thought is difficult to overstate. Her description of independence as ‘the grand blessing of life’ comes in the first paragraph of her letter to Talleyrand which prefaces *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As the rest of the book unfolds, independence is revealed as the central organizing principle within which she expresses her observations and arguments about the oppression and domination of women.² To be independent is to be protected against the effects of arbitrary power. Independence in this sense is synonymous with freedom while its antonym refers to slavery. Women were slaves, Wollstonecraft showed, because men’s power over them was arbitrary. In response, her aim was to bring about the conditions necessary for women to be independent. An independent woman would be able to act in her own right, the equal of anyone in society, doing so on her own terms as a woman whose perspectives and interests may be different from a man’s.

Described this way, independence is surely a very attractive ideal. Nevertheless, the implications of her commitment to the classical notion freedom from arbitrary rule have been

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¹ Wollstonecraft 1992, 85.

² See Coffee 2012.
given very little full length or systematic treatment.³ And while it is not denied that women should be independent, many feminist writers baulk at the idea that independence alone can fulfill all the aims Wollstonecraft sets out for it.⁴ Anne Phillips, for example, argues that while independence is concerned with formal equality within the political framework, as an ideal it has comparatively little to say about the economic and social inequalities that continue to be so damaging to women (2000). It is also sometimes argued that independence is either itself symbolically ‘masculine’, or is bound up with a system of patriarchal concepts that dominate political discourse and systematically disempower and silence women by emphasizing ‘male’ over ‘female’ attributes and perspectives (Pateman 1989, Gatens 1991).

A third objection holds that independence is an individualistic concept that prioritizes rugged self-reliance over mutual interdependence and that obscures the role that community and human relationships play in our lives (Abbey 1999, Brace 2000).

³ A very thorough and helpful exception is Halldenius 2007.

⁴ Although a number of commentators do write positively about independence in Wollstonecraft (e.g. Mackenzie 1993, Ferguson 1999, Gunther-Canada 2001), the ideal of independence itself is typically seen as one of many values for Wollstonecraft, rather than as an overarching concept which accommodates and enables other values. As a result, its specific implications are not fully explored. More generally, Susan James does defend a comprehensive ideal of ‘freedom as independence’ from a feminist perspective (2012). Although she draws on Spinoza rather Wollstonecraft, James acknowledges that their respective structures have many parallels and are rooted in the same classical tradition. As I shall develop it, Wollstonecraft’s conception resembles the contemporary neo-republican notion of freedom as non-domination in a number of respects (Pettit 1997). While not often attributed to Wollstonecraft, the feminist credentials of freedom as non-domination are now being explored (Laborde 2008, Braithwaite 2004, Einspahr 2010).
I shall show that these objections rest on misconceptions of independence as Wollstonecraft understands it. Independence is neither opposed to community nor is individualistic. It is, rather, an essentially social ideal. We are all, she acknowledges, inevitably embedded within networks of social relationships that are not of our choosing which means that coercion and mutual reliance are part of life. There is nothing about this that need compromise independence so long as our relationships are not oppressive or open to the exercise of arbitrary power. We are independent, therefore, within our existing social networks. Indeed, Wollstonecraft argues that interpersonal relationships are better placed to succeed where each party relates to the other on an equal footing as an independent person. This is not true only of bilateral relationships, such as between husband and wife, but in the multilateral dealings that we have with society as a whole. Any instance of dependence, then, is not only a personal problem for the unfortunate victim. It is a problem for us all.

In Wollstonecraft’s hands, I shall argue that independence is a powerful tool both for diagnosing the nature and causes of women’s subjection and for showing what must be done if this subjection is to be overcome. I demonstrate this by drawing on three distinctive characteristics of independence. First, it is an egalitarian ideal that applies in every sphere of social life, whether in private or public, and applying as much to social and economic relations as to legal and political ones. Wollstonecraft also argues explicitly that the power exerted through conceptual and symbolic biases, such as through prejudices and cultural traditions, is also arbitrary and constitutes a potent threat to freedom. Secondly, independence is a flexible ideal that allows for men and women to interact and participate socially on differentiated and gendered terms. This allows men and women to act as biologically distinct but socially equal members of the community on terms that reflect their respective outlooks. This is a very controversial aspect of Wollstonecraft’s philosophy given the enormous role that gendered differences in social roles and expectations have played in entrenching and
prolonging women’s political, social, and economic marginalization and disadvantage. Difference, however, must be understood in light of both the egalitarian nature of independence and of its third characteristic. Independence is a collaborative ideal the social understanding of which must necessarily be established by both men and women in dialogue with each other. Far from upholding supposedly masculine virtues, or leaving patriarchal power structures in place, Wollstonecraft showed that women could not be independent until unequal symbolic representations had been dismantled and remade so that they are justifiable to the members of both sexes. Understood this way, I believe Wollstonecraft’s conception of freedom as independence to be of immense interest to any contemporary political theorists, but especially to those with feminist concerns.

Amongst the reasons that have contributed to the misrepresentation of independence, I single out two as having been especially influential. The first is a tendency to equate independence, as an ideal of personal freedom, with the more familiar and contemporary notion of autonomy. Independence and autonomy are not only quite distinct ideas, but they operate within different frameworks. To conflate them is not only to distort Wollstonecraft’s conception of freedom but to risk introducing an alternative paradigm that changes much of her message. Secondly, even where it is not tied to autonomy, independence is often understood in a restricted sense that signifies a rationally self-determining quality of mind.\textsuperscript{5} However, although the capacity for rational thought is constitutive of independence, it is not the whole of it and without taking the concept in its entirety, the extent of its protection for women, and the possibilities it opens up as a principle of social organization, will be obscured.

Wollstonecraft values individual freedom highly. Dependence, or servitude, she says, “debases the individual” (1992, 181). If women are to avoid this condition, they must not lack “individually, the protection of civil laws” (264) and must receive an adequate education, the purpose of which is “to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent” (103). However, while Wollstonecraft herself uses the word ‘independence’ to refer to personal freedom, this is often glossed by commentators as ‘autonomy’. Initially, this shift in terminology may not seem important since, although autonomy is a later coinage, both words carry a basic sense of being ‘self-governing’ or able to live according to one’s own reasons rather than being manipulated by others or coerced. Nevertheless, what exactly it means to be self-governing can be understood in a variety of ways. Historically, autonomy and independence have been used to represent two quite distinct accounts of personal

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6 Just as independence is said to be ‘the basis of every virtue’, so “liberty is the mother of virtue” (1992, 122). Abbey 1999, Brace 2000, Gunther-Canada 1999, Sapiro 1992 and Weiss 2009 all use the term ‘autonomy’ with reference to Wollstonecraft and freedom. In some cases autonomy is used interchangeably with independence (Weiss, Brace, Gunther-Canada) while in others, although independence is distinguished, autonomy is still used generally to refer to personal freedom.

7 Although Kant is sometimes said to have ‘invented’ the concept of autonomy (Schneewind 1998) it was not until the twentieth century that this became the dominant term to refer to personal freedom. Even in the nineteenth century, Mill, who is widely understood to advocate a liberal ideal of autonomy, still refers to ‘liberty’, ‘independence’, ‘individuality’ and ‘pagan selfassertion’ rather than ‘autonomy’ itself (Mill 1974).
freedom. And since freedom is such a foundational political concept, unless we are very careful the term we choose can make a significant difference to our understanding of Wollstonecraft’s work.

When autonomy is used in connection with Wollstonecraft it is often with a liberal sense of this term in mind (Abbey 1999, Eisenstein 1981, Jaggar 1983). This is often the case even Wollstonecraft is not considered to be a liberal, or at least not in a straightforward sense (Brace 2000, Sapiro 1992, Weiss 2009). Penny Weiss, for example, argues that Wollstonecraft is often regarded “as the liberal feminist theorist” (2009, 88, her italics). She goes on to describe one of the central aims of liberalism as being to maximize individual autonomy in such a way as to ensure that there is an equal opportunity for everyone to pursue their own interests as they perceive them. This is understood in the light of Mill’s well known claim that “the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it”. This, she argues, represents an inherently individualistic ideal (89).

One reason why autonomy is seen as being individualistic is that it is often tacitly associated with an additional principle of non-interference according to which our autonomy is compromised or reduced where we experience unwanted interference. As we shall see, non-interference is not part of the idea of ‘self-government’ itself. However, where autonomy

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8 Independence is associated with the neo-Roman tradition of political discourse that was very influential in European political discourse until well into the nineteenth century (Skinner 1998). In contemporary terms, there are many similarities between independence and ‘freedom as non-domination’. Autonomy, by contrast, is often used to denote a liberal ideal of freedom that is said to derive from Locke and be traceable through Mill (Pettit 1997).

9 See also Dietz’s discussion of the same quotation from Mill (2001, 379).
and non-interference are taken together, they give rise to a distinctively liberal requirement that individuals must give their consent to any coercion or interference that they experience if they are to remain autonomous or free.\textsuperscript{10} Ruth Abbey attributes this view to Wollstonecraft, saying that “as a liberal, she believes that if one human is to exercise power legitimately over another, such power must be based on rational consent” (1999, 85). Abbey argues that to focus solely on autonomous consent would not provide an adequate basis upon which to build community and relationships, which require “deep and lasting” bonds and a degree of mutual give and take. Accordingly, she interprets Wollstonecraft as arguing that in liaisons such as marriage, “individuals exchange some of their independence”, understood as autonomy, “for interdependence” (79).

The problem with Abbey’s reading, however, is that Wollstonecraft never encourages anyone to give up their independence, even in part. On the contrary, she values independence as something that makes community and relationships possible. Within marriage, for example, only an independent woman will have the requisite qualities to be “the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband” with all advantages this has for their relationship (1992, 113).\textsuperscript{11} It also takes an independent mother to raise the next generation of suitably independent and productive citizens (87, 272). More broadly within society, only independent individuals are said to possess the degree of reason, virtue and knowledge necessary to help devise the laws that bind communities and lead to happiness (1992, 91). This being so, any

\textsuperscript{10} See Pettit 1997.

\textsuperscript{11} Wollstonecraft frequently celebrates the virtues of friendship for marriage. As well as improving the quality of affection in the relationship, we learn that “children will never be properly educated till friendship subsists between parents” (1992, 326). See Frazer 2008 for a detailed account of friendship in Wollstonecraft.
account of Wollstonecraft’s philosophy must be able to reconcile her commitment to individual freedom with her emphasis on the importance of our social relations.

Weiss argues that the appearance of a tension in Wollstonecraft here is the result of a longstanding tendency to read her through the lens of earlier male writers such as Hobbes and Locke (2009, 89-90). If Wollstonecraft is a liberal, she goes on, then we should treat her as a “founding theorist of liberalism with a competing vision” of her own that aimed to “redefine liberalism itself”. To see Wollstonecraft as redefining liberalism, however, is still to see her as working with its basic conceptual framework, otherwise she would not be a liberal at all. And the most fundamental principle of liberalism, according to Weiss, is that of individual autonomy as we have defined it. I should emphasize at this point my intention is not to argue against liberalism as a political theory, or autonomy as a concept. Neither do I suggest that these cannot accommodate communitarian aims. There has been a long, and I believe fruitful, dialogue between various kinds of feminists, communitarians and liberals on this topic, including by liberal feminists (see Baehr 2004 for a very helpful collection of essays). I do not wish to add to this debate or to take any particular side. My concern is solely with how our understanding of Wollstonecraft is affected by placing her within that particular framework.

Virginia Sapiro also argues that Wollstonecraft’s challenges to liberalism are “securely grounded within that tradition” (1992, 167, her italics). Identifying individual autonomy and consent as the foundational elements of classical liberalism, Sapiro argues that the basic questions facing Wollstonecraft were these: “why would self-interested individuals voluntarily give up some of their autonomy to cooperate with other self-interested individuals

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12 Nevertheless, I agree with much of Sapiro’s analysis in what remains the finest full-length treatment of Wollstonecraft’s political theory.
in political and social life?” and, in this case, how can we consistently “bind people into a noncoercive democratic state?” (166-7). Once these questions are made foundational, however, the resulting debate will be conducted within the constraints imposed by the priority of individual consent. These questions are not, however, Wollstonecraft’s. They are not to be found in her texts and she does not attempt to answer them. Independence is not based on principle of non-interference without consent and is entirely consistent with interference so long as it is constrained. The fundamental question for Wollstonecraft is not how to reconcile individual autonomy with interference, but how to ensure that interference never becomes oppressive.

In order to position Wollstonecraft’s ideas about freedom and independence, we should not look first to Hobbes and Locke, but to the writers who were closest to her, including Richard Price, Joseph Priestley and James Burgh. Along with Wollstonecraft, the members of this group drew heavily upon the Commonwealth tradition of Protestant dissent that emphasized the importance of independence and civic virtue as defenses against the corrupting effect of arbitrary power. Wollstonecraft’s use of this framework is explicit in many of her works. In her reply to Edmund Burke, A Vindication of the Rights of Men, and in

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13 The potential pitfalls of such an approach are familiar to feminists. See Dietz 2001 for an excellent analysis.

14 Weiss is correct, however, to say that we should not read Wollstonecraft through the lens of male writers. As I show, Wollstonecraft makes important innovations to this conception.

15 Barker-Benfield 1989. Coffee 2012 and Halldenius 2007 develop systematic accounts of the specific notion of freedom as independence from arbitrary rule in Wollstonecraft’s writing.
her *History of the French Revolution*, for example, Wollstonecraft’s analysis of the events in France is articulated the characteristic republican language and imagery of independence and slavery, with the causes of and subsequent excesses being attributed to the deleterious effects of institutionalized arbitrary power on individual and collective character and virtue. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, written between these two works, the opening chapter makes clear that this same analytical framework will be applied to her analysis of the political and social domination of women. This theme continues with equal clarity in her unfinished novel, *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*.16

Power is arbitrary where it is exercised according to the discretionary will of another person, or as Wollstonecraft puts it, by “another fallible being” to whom one must “submit, right or wrong” (1992, 136). Not all power, however, is arbitrary. Where its exercise can be justified rationally, or according to the requirements of morality, power is non-arbitrary. It is no part of the definition of independence, therefore, that a person is free from all forms of coercion or unwanted interference. Human beings find themselves embroiled in all manner of complex domestic, social and institutional relationships. The government, for example, uses force to uphold the law and maintain peace and security, while parents hold sway over their children and employers control the actions of their employees. Although many of these relationships are not of our choosing, this does not reduce our independence so long as any control over us is contained within certain acceptable limits. These limits are determined with reference to an idea of the conditions that will enable all members of the community to live together freely and securely.17

16 See Coffee 2012.

17 For a detailed account of this understanding of independence, see Skinner 1998. I discuss this further in section V below.
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.\(^\text{18}\) The first of these governs the relationships between agents so that independence is possible, while the second is a capacity that each independent agent must possess. Equality indicates that all individuals have the same degree of protection against being dominated. As we shall see, this is a demanding standard that requires that one not has only 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.\(^\text{19}\) This capacity leads to the second element, virtue. To have virtue, in this context, means to be guided by reason rather than by passion or unreflective opinion, although we should not think of this as a detached or abstract activity. It is a part of reasoning, according to Wollstonecraft, to harness our passions through the power of our imagination and so give life and content to our rational and moral thinking.\(^\text{20}\) So construed, she argues, “it is the right use of reason alone” she says, “which

\(^{18}\) Halldenius (2007) describes the relationship between these ideals in terms of a triad comprising liberty, equality and virtue. I refer instead to a single principle of freedom as independence, where independence itself embodies equality, virtue and the absence of arbitrary power.

\(^{19}\) Wollstonecraft considers “women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties” (1992, 81). She also argues that independence is valued out of a respect for justice and humanity (1999, 9).

\(^{20}\) While reason sets human beings apart it cannot be employed by finite, emotional creations without input from the 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
makes us independent of everything – excepting the unclouded reason – ‘whose service is perfect freedom’” (1992, 230).

Although independence is always judged in respect to arbitrary power, it is useful to distinguish between two uses of this term, both of which are found in Wollstonecraft’s work. It must be stressed, however, that while one use is most closely connected to virtue and the other to equality, each conforms to the same basic pattern and these are two instances of a single overarching ideal. First, there is independence of mind which individuals display by thinking for themselves and not being led by the opinions of others. Instead, they reflect on their beliefs and intended actions, putting aside their own prejudices and scrutinizing them in the light of reason and morality (1992, 195, 272). 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 submit 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” (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, habit, 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. Phillips, for example, makes this claim, arguing that the equality that

\footnote{Wollstonecraft sets out the requisite characteristics in chapter 1 (91-2).}
Wollstonecraft “sought was to be measured in terms of of independence [of mind] rather than income of 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” (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 the ideal of independence is not of much use to feminists (290). I shall take this 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, however, that Wollstonecraft herself was neither indifferent to inequality nor thought that independence was not compromised by material want or lack of social status – this is shown, 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 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 commons and the maintenance of large estates that could be broken up (1999, 16, 60-1).

We are not independent until we are in a position to act on whatever decisions we come to. A woman, Wollstonecraft argues, cannot be “really virtuous” (independent of mind) unless she has the full “protection of civil laws” (1992, 264). Only then will she be able to act according to her own conscience without having to ask someone else’s permission. For if a

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22 2005 chapter 5 (especially 32, 38).

23 See Susan Ferguson for an illuminating account of Wollstonecraft’s “radical ideas” on poverty and inequality (1999).
woman is to “emulate the virtues” expected of a man, she must share the same rights as him (327). These are extensive, including rights to make contracts, to own property and to have security of income (since, where we cannot support ourselves we will be dependent on others for our basic needs). The importance of having 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 take control of her situation or to gain any redress. Her husband has control of all her property, irrespective of whether she brought it into the marriage (by inheritance) or earned it through her own efforts (2005, 80-1). When she decides to leave him, he has her imprisoned in an asylum without any right of appeal. She is, as she puts it, 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” (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 styles of behavior that are not virtuous. 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 will flatter their masters or deceive them so as to stay in their good books. In this context, Wollstonecraft notes that “whilst they are absolutely dependent on their

24 “Virtue is out of the question when you only worship a shadow, and worship it to secure your property” (1999, 21).
husbands [women] will be cunning, mean, and selfish” (1992, 257-8) and so, if they are to protect themselves, they must either “render them[elves] 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 do not have the strength of character to overcome their situation or because their frivolous behavior helps perpetuate an oppressive system.\(^{25}\) This criticism, however, is unfounded. In the first place, Wollstonecraft is explicit that servile behavior is what you always get from slaves. We cannot, she says, “expect virtue from a slave”, and again, “it is vain to expect virtue from women till they are… independent of men” (1992, 135, 257-8).\(^{26}\) 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” (1992, 49). She emphasizes this point in the opening chapter of the *Vindication* thereby setting in context her subsequent condemnations of women’s behavior (97-9). Dominant men have no more incentive than dependent women to develop virtuous characters. In their superior position, they grow complacent, becoming accustomed to the insincere adulation they receive from their fawning subordinates.\(^{27}\) Their opinion of themselves is inflated, and they become lazy. Lacking self-

\(^{25}\) 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 (1992, 135, 144-5) while Barbara Taylor suggests that “the Rights of Woman denounces women’s complicity in their oppression” (2003, 238).

\(^{26}\) This is a classical argument that Wollstonecraft appropriates explicitly in the cause of women’s independence (1992, 303). See Skinner 1998.

\(^{27}\) This is a major theme throughout the *History of the French Revolution*. 
discipline they do not learn to regulate their appetites and so become slaves of their own excess (96-9). Wollstonecraft illustrates this general point using the institutions of monarchy, the army and the church, as well as marriage, as institutions characterized by a pervasive lack of virtue. In hierarchical societies, she says, most people are involved in relationships in which they are, by turns, subordinate and dominant.28 And, while Wollstonecraft notes how 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 – she does not exempt women who could be equally domineering over their children and their domestic servants.29

It is, therefore, essential that all our relationships are securely grounded in social equality: inequality creates dependence, dependence corrupts the 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 (1999, 92-9). Indeed Wollstonecraft establishes as her “main argument” for the rights of women, that if a woman is dependent, “she 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” (1992, 86).

28 Individuals become doubly corrupt, both “submitting and tyrannising without exercising their reason”, becoming dead-weights on the community (1992, 97).

29 A dominated woman may “tyrannise over her servants; for slavish fear and tyranny are found together” (1787, 63).
IV

Equality, however, is not sameness. We must, therefore, ask whether Wollstonecraft’s ideal of independence is able to accommodate the different needs and perspectives of all those who aspire to its status. Here she has been severely criticized by from opposing directions. On the one hand, where independence is understood as autonomy, she is said to advocate a single model of the autonomous citizen who is self-reliant and self-owning, and who functions primarily in the public sphere (Pateman 1989, Gatens 1991). This is seen as a patriarchal ideal that takes no account of differences between the sexes and which confronts women with a troubling dilemma: either act independently on male terms, which may involve additional burdens, or remain dependent as women (Pateman refers to this as ‘Wollstonecraft’s dilemma’, 1989, 14). On the other hand, as we noted above, Phillips argues that where independence is understood only as a capacity for rational reflection, it has nothing to say about the deeply-entrenched and pervasive differences and imbalances in expectations about men and women’s respective social roles. It is possible, Phillips maintains, for women to be independent while remaining economically marginalized and culturally subordinate. Neither challenge is correct, I shall argue. Independence does allow differential forms of citizenship and is, therefore, responsive to gendered perspectives about social roles, responsibilities and interests. These differences, however, must conform to the overall requirement that all individuals have equal access to the protections and opportunities that go with being independent.

It is clear that Wollstonecraft does accept that men and women may perform different roles within society. She refers several times to women’s ‘peculiar duties’ and of both sexes’ ‘respective stations in life’. As far as women are concerned, their duties are understood to

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be grounded in their ‘nature’, specifically in their capacity to bear children.\textsuperscript{31} Although there is no indication that women have a special positive duty to be mothers,\textsuperscript{32} Wollstonecraft does specify that the requirements of citizenship could be satisfied through raising children.\textsuperscript{33} 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” (1992, 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.

\textsuperscript{31} Wollstonecraft refers to a mothers’ duties to ‘suckle their children’ (1992, 323, 264).
\textsuperscript{32} Although exceptional men and women may remain unmarried and childless, this will not be the experience of the great majority (1992, 157).
\textsuperscript{33} 1992, 263. It is sometimes argued that Wollstonecraft was an advocate of ‘republican motherhood’ in which the supposedly natural abilities of men and women respectively are equated with their specific civil duties. For women, this duty is said to be to bring up the next generation of patriotic and capable citizens, referring to Wollstonecraft’s remark that “if children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot” (1992, 87). For differing views, see Landes 1988, 129-138, Sapiro 1992, 321, and Gunther-Canada 1999.
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” (1999, 471).\textsuperscript{34} 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 take 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, and so we must first ensure that we are independent before we can fulfill our other duties. The duties of motherhood are not subordinated by independence. They are made possible. If virtue requires us to devote our energy to raising children, then this is our duty as independent women.

However, although the duties of motherhood are described as being ‘natural’, we should not take this establishing or 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 we should bring up the next generation responsibly and well – and Wollstonecraft thinks that it does – and that women are naturally fitted to perform at least certain aspects of this task, then this is their ‘natural duty’.\textsuperscript{35} Ultimately, then, the basis of all duties for men and women is the same.

\textsuperscript{34} Gunther-Canada’s purpose is to challenge a particular kind of essentialism often associated with ‘republican motherhood’, in which women are tied by their physical nature to specific maternal duties, rather than to analyse the relationship between independence and duty. To that extent, I accept Gunther-Canada’s reading.

\textsuperscript{35} See also Reuter’s contribution to this issue.
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” (141, her italics). Men will also have duties in respect to their children. “If women are to be good wives and mothers”, Wollstonecraft stresses, men must not “neglect the duties of husbands and fathers” (306). Nevertheless, while it is encouraging to read that both sexes have natural duties within the family, without further specification we cannot assume that men and women 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” (264, my italics). Although Wollstonecraft does not herself press home the distinction between natural and civil, or social, 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 somehow 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 themselves 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.

36 The chapters on “Parental Affection” and “Duties to Parents” address both sexes. Wollstonecraft also refers to the equal importance of the duties of “citizens, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and directors of families” (256).
In answer to Phillips’s claim, 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” (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 whilst also meeting their childcare responsibilities. This would be to succumb to the terms of ‘Wollstonecraft’s dilemma’. While some women may wish to combine these roles – and Wollstonecraft herself seemed capable of managing it – 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) goodwill and discretion of her husband 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, while 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, while a fulltime 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.

V

Formally speaking, the obligation to maintain the conditions necessary for independence represents the duty to prevent the exercise of arbitrary power. Power is non-arbitrary if its use is only permitted where this is consistent with what is understood to be in the common good, where this is determined with reference to the interests, ideas and perspectives of everyone who is subject to that power. There is no fixed notion of what our interests are. These must, rather, be determined by the people collectively. 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” (1995, 212). This is a necessarily inclusive and

37 The necessity of this relationship is evident in the light of what we have said about independence. 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. Although individually, independent agents submit to reason and morality according to their conscience (displaying independence of mind), in society with others they 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 their interests, that person is dependent. As we have seen, where there is dependence, there is corruption of virtue, and without virtue there is no independence. Therefore a non-arbitrary law always acts only for the common good.
collaborative process in which women must play a full part, since we can no more impose upon an independent agent an idea of what is in her best interests than we can compel her to act against her own rational judgment. Women, Wollstonecraft insists, must have their own input and representation in defining what constitutes arbitrary power, “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?” (1992, 265, 87).

If arbitrary rule is to be avoided, according to Wollstonecraft, the people who devise the laws that bind society must be guided by “reason, virtue, and knowledge” (91). They must, in other words, be independent. Since we all play a part in this process, it would seem that in order to build the conditions necessary for independence, we must first have a population of independent people. This may be all very well for society that is in the “perfect state of civilization” that she describes, but as we know, the real world is very far from perfect. This presents a very serious obstacle for Wollstonecraft, for it raises the prospect that independence represents a utopian ideal that cannot be applied to actually existing social situations. Wollstonecraft is all too aware of the problem. It is very difficult, she notes, to reason in the way that is necessary to arrive at a representative idea of the collective interest, in terms of both the skill and discipline that is required. Where people lack civic virtue, they are very likely to take the easy way out. Rather than discussing issues impartially, Wollstonecraft observes that men generally “employ their reason to justify prejudices… rather than to root them out” (prejudices being opinions for which the holder cannot give a credible reason) (92, 220). Individuals often mistake their prejudices for facts or obvious moral truths, which impairs their ability to listen dispassionately to arguments and to overcome their narrow horizons. Cumulatively, within a corrupted society the effects of prejudice are devastating.
Individuals are, Wollstonecraft says, shaped to “a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in” (102). Even the most open-minded citizens seldom appreciate how much they are influenced in their thinking by their environment. The ‘opinions and manners’ of our society – including its beliefs, values, norms and traditions – form the background ideas against which individuals make sense of their lives and interact with each other. These provide the baseline for our deliberations about the common good, and so where the background cultural norms and expectations are based on prejudices, and where the public virtue has been subverted through dependence, deliberation will not take place on fair terms. Instead, the dominant social groups will be able to control and influence the background ideas, thereby ensuring that discussion is biased towards their own interests. (Wollstonecraft frequently highlights, for example, the power that male writers had in shaping attitudes about women, 103, 109). This paves the way for patriarchal norms to become so deeply entrenched in the public consciousness that are very difficult to dislodge.

However, rather than being indifferent to the damaging potential of background social and cultural attitudes, norms and ideas, it is one of Wollstonecraft’s lasting contributions to our understanding of social freedom that she argues that independence is not possible under such conditions. Indeed, she cites the 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” (154-5). According to Wollstonecraft, the domination that results from oppressive background cultural ideas is no less arbitrary, and so threatening to freedom, than physical, political or economic forms of domination (Coffee 2012). In fact, it is far more

38 People rarely “perceive how much they themselves are indebted to general improvement for the acquirements, and even the virtues, which they would not have had the force of mind to attain, by their individual exertions in a less advanced state of society” (1987, 93)
pernicious because its causes were buried in the conceptual framework in which all discussion about freedom and independence take place. We cannot escape the influence of our culture, of course, just as we cannot avoid the coercive power of the law. Instead, the solution is to prevent its power from being arbitrary. This means that the background cultural values and norms must come to reflect the interests and perspectives of women as well as men. Independence will not be possible until the conceptual biases that disadvantage women have been replaced by ideas created by both sexes working together on equal terms.

There is no quick fix that can bring this about. If women are to be truly independent, Wollstonecraft concluded, there would first have to be a “revolution in female manners” (1992, 307, 325). This goes far beyond simply altering the way women behaved (although, by reforming themselves they would “reform the world”). It would require a wholesale transformation of legal, political, economic and social relations in respect of gender (Mackenzie 1993, 38; Mellor 1993). This, she concedes, will be a slow process. “The changing of customs of long standing” she says, “require[s] more energy”, than individuals possess (1987, 115) and so “it will require a considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices” that have been in place for so long (1992, 135). This does not mean that we should regard Wollstonecraft’s idea of independence as utopian, or as an abstract principle that cannot be applied to real women’s lives. Instead, she provides us with a blueprint for an extensive and robust form of social freedom against which our current social conditions can be measured.

Independence is an extensive ideal that secures an equal protection against arbitrary rule for all citizens within their existing relationships, providing freedom in every sphere of social and political life, cutting across both public and private spheres and addressing biases and imbalances in the cultural and conceptual framework in which freedom is exercised. It also allows women and men to act socially on their own terms, even where this may entail a
differentiated set of entitlements and expectations. Finally, independence is an inclusive ideal whose terms are worked out collaboratively by both sexes and requiring that the members of each are satisfied with the outcome. Little wonder, then, that Wollstonecraft considered it as the grand blessing of life.

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