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Mary Wollstonecraft, Public Reason, and the Virtuous Republic

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One of Wollstonecraft's most significant observations was that legal and political rights alone would not enable women to secure women's freedom. A pervasive system of norms and social structures had grown up, limiting the opportunities available to women, placing strict expectations on them, and reinforcing the established perception that women were not suited to acting independently and on their own accounts. Although she was by no means the first person to recognize the impact that the cultural environment had in shaping the way that we behave, Wollstonecraft's analysis of its operation and effect was unique. Drawing on a republican framework in which freedom is understood in terms of independence from any sort of arbitrary power, she showed that we should understand the threat to freedom from oppressive ideas and social practices in exactly the same way as that from unjust laws or unaccountable rulers, namely that they were arbitrary in the republican sense of not being required to reflect the common good.¹ In each case, the remedy is identical: the dominating power has to be constrained so that it is no longer arbitrary. Ultimately, power is always held in check through processes that are guided by public reason or, in a particular sense of the term, virtue. This is because what is considered to be arbitrary must be established rationally and consensually. While republicans have traditionally focused on legal and political means of maintaining freedom, Wollstonecraft

¹ I give a full account of Wollstonecraft's republican commitments in Alan Coffee (2013), 'Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power of Social Domination', *European Journal of Political Theory* 12 (2): 116–35; and Coffee (2014), 'Freedom as Independence: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Grand Blessing of Life', *Hypatia* 29 (4): 908–24. See also Lena Halldenius (2015), *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism: Independence, Rights and the Experience of Unfreedom* (London: Pickering and Chatto).

shows not only that social and cultural threats, such as from prejudice, ignorance, and stigma, must not be forgotten, but that addressing these threats is logically prior to addressing the legal and political threats, and must be the starting point for a republican conception of freedom.

Wollstonecraft is rightly celebrated for her pioneering work advocating women's independence from men. Less widely appreciated is that in building her case she develops an innovative model of republican freedom that can be generalized and applied wherever power is exercised arbitrarily.² Her model differs in a number of respects from the dominant forms of contemporary republicanism. In contrast to Philip Pettit's influential ideal of non-domination, for example, Wollstonecraft does not regard freedom as a negative and non-moralized ideal that expresses a person's ability to make certain choices reliably. Freedom is understood, rather, as a complex ideal that comprises both protections and obligations, and in which an idea of individual and collective 'virtue' plays an integral role. Virtue, on Wollstonecraft's account, is not an instrumental value that is useful, even perhaps indispensable, for promoting and maintaining freedom in a population as the prevailing view now has it.³ It is a component element of freedom itself, so that a free republic is necessarily a virtuous republic. While the notion that virtue is part of freedom might strike modern readers as at best archaic, if not far-fetched or incoherent, I hope to show that properly understood it represents an important and relevant contribution to contemporary republican theory. Amongst the current concerns in which Wollstonecraft's approach can illuminate is the question of how to accommodate diversity in socially dynamic and plural populations without compromising either collective stability or individual freedom.⁴ This is, of course, a complex area that republicans have only recently begun to explore in detail. Nevertheless, while a complete

² Wollstonecraft herself applies some of the same arguments she uses to highlight women's domination to discrimination against the Dissenters: Wollstonecraft (1992), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin Books), pp. 326–7. Since the majority of my references to Wollstonecraft come from this book, I will refer to it subsequently as *Rights of Woman*. See also her analysis of the French Revolution in Wollstonecraft (1989), 'An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution', in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7 vols, eds J. Todd and M. Butler (London: William Pickering), vol. 6.

³ Philip Pettit, for example, distinguishes between those institutions that 'instantiate' freedom by preventing domination, and the '*buoni costume*' (good customs or morals) that support and enable those institutions to function: Pettit (1997), *Republicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 106–7, 240–2. The former are part of the ideal of freedom while the latter are instrumental to its success.

⁴ In applying Wollstonecraft's arguments in this way, I in no way suggest that the concerns of feminism and multiculturalism are the same or that the arguments from the one field can simply be lifted and reapplied to the other. Neither do I overlook the important insights Wollstonecraft had into the specific and unique nature of gendered power structures that cut across other social and

republican multiculturalism remains to be fully worked out, I shall venture that her work establishes a necessary precondition upon which such a theory must build.⁵

I will examine some of the distinctive features of classical republican freedom, before discussing Wollstonecraft's conception of virtue, the ways in which virtue can be corrupted, and then what it means and why it is so important to live in a 'virtuous' society. Finally, I briefly suggest how her arguments can be extended to form part of a wider contemporary republican political theory.

10.1 Republican Freedom

A distinguishing feature of the classical or Commonwealthman conception of freedom, upon which Wollstonecraft drew, is that two forms of freedom are always invoked simultaneously, the free man and the free state.⁶ These two ideas are linked and neither is possible without the other. In contrast to the now more familiar idea of freedom as consisting in the absence of interference in a person's intended actions, the classical conception builds from two directions, the individual and the collective. This is because personal freedom is understood in relation to a socially agreed idea of what is in the common good. As a result, freedom represents a complex idea with several components. In contrast to Berlin's belief that 'everything is what it is' so that 'liberty is liberty' rather than, for example, equality, fairness, or justice, republicans understand freedom as a broad term that embodies these other notions through the way that social relationships between free individuals are structured.⁷

Freedom itself is synonymous with independence, while its opposite, or dependence, is equated with slavery. Wollstonecraft uses these terms extensively, and it is central to her case that women, by being dependent on men, are not only

political boundaries. My argument is only that those insights are developed within a broader theoretical framework that she herself applies extensively.

⁵ A full theory will have to address a broader range of issues than freedom, including the claims of group rights, social cohesion, the rule of law, and how to deal with historical legacies. The republican literature on this is emerging but still at an early stage. Cecile Laborde's excellent *Critical Republicanism* examines such issues through the case of the hijab controversy in France, perhaps the most fully developed: Laborde (2008), *Critical Republicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). See also Frank Lovett (2010), 'Cultural Accommodation and Domination', *Political Theory* 38 (2): 243–67; and Pettit, *Republicanism*, pp. 143–6.

⁶ This was the conception of freedom used by Wollstonecraft and many of her colleagues and coactivists, including Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and James Burgh. I set out the details as they apply to Wollstonecraft and Price in anonymous reference. See also Quentin Skinner (1998), *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁷ Isaiah Berlin (1969), 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

unfree but are literally slaves. Independence has two parts, and we can think of these in light of the two perspectives of the individual and the collective. Individuals must be able to think for themselves and make their own decisions rather than simply following the direction or influence of others. The issue here is not simply that of being compelled to do things one might otherwise not want to do. It is, rather that independent people must be capable of scrutinizing the ideas, traditions, and received wisdom of their environment and of forming their own considered judgements. Not to be able to do that, according to Wollstonecraft, is to be dependent upon or captive to the other people's ideas, and therefore to be 'slaves of prejudices', locked into unreflective patterns of behaviour that one lacks the capacity to change.⁸ It is not enough, however, that people come to form their own opinions. They must also be able to put these into action. The right to act independently is guaranteed collectively by the state through the law.⁹ Laws, however, are reflections of the minds that create them, and so laws that guarantee independence must be made and maintained by people who are themselves independent.

Freedom has long been regarded as the central and pre-eminent value in republican theory.¹⁰ Beyond the positive case for promoting, extending, and maintaining opportunities for independence among the citizens, republican writers have insisted on a negative case. Dependence or slavery must not be permitted within the political community. There are strong moral reasons for this, of course. Wollstonecraft, for example, regards freedom as both the natural birthright of all human beings and indispensable for moral behaviour and Christian piety.¹¹ Alongside the moral case, however, republicans have traditionally offered a self-interested and pragmatic justification. Because freedom is a compound social ideal, for it to be possible requires several ingredients to come together at once. These various elements were understood to be internally connected and causally related. The absence of any one of its parts would have a corrosive effect that threatened to undermine the possibility of freedom

⁸ 'It is', she said, 'the right use of reason alone which makes us independent of everything': Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, pp. 219, 230. To submit to an unreflective opinion was to be guided by an arbitrary principle, since we could not be sure that it was reflective of the common good. It is always in our interests, by contrast, to follow reason as the Creator has guaranteed (p. 277).

⁹ For a detailed discussion, see Coffee, 'Freedom as Independence'.

¹⁰ This is especially clear in the writing of Richard Price. See also Quentin Skinner (2010), 'On the Slogans of Republican Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (1): 95–102.

¹¹ Wollstonecraft (1999) 'A Vindication of the Rights of Men' (in Sylvana Tomaselli (ed.), *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 7, and *Rights of Woman*, pp. 100–1, 142–6.

altogether. In other words, to the extent that we permit any individuals to be unfree, we jeopardize everyone's freedom. Wollstonecraft herself presents as her 'main argument' for the rights of women (ahead of her more celebrated moral case) that keeping women in a state of servitude posed a serious threat to men's own freedom.¹² Independence was seen as requiring two other features in particular. First, there had to be an equality of status between the citizens so that no one was either above the law or below its protection.¹³ The second element was virtue.

10.2 Independence and Virtue

There is a long republican tradition of emphasizing the tie between the freedom of state and the virtue of the citizens. Historically, it was said that there was a causal relationship that ran in both directions between independence and virtue, with each providing the conditions that enabled the other. Just as it was necessary for citizens to show restraint and to support the institutions that maintained their independence, so such virtue was said to be something that only independent individuals could be relied upon to show.¹⁴ Arbitrary power was seen to undermine or 'corrupt' the virtue of both those who wielded it and those who were subject to it.¹⁵ This focus on virtue has been downplayed in recent years, however, and hardly features in the most prominent neo-republican accounts other than in a general way connected to the standard models of reasonable behaviour for functioning democracies or as derived from the traditional platitude that 'power corrupts'.¹⁶ In contemporary republican accounts, virtue typically plays only an instrumental role in providing the background conditions

¹² *Rights of Woman*, p. 86. Her analysis of the causes of the French Revolution and the ferocity of the subsequent Terror is similarly based on the unequal nature of *ancien* society.

¹³ Both cases would lead to dependence. Where some people are above the law—and so able to circumvent its power to constrain—this leaves the rest of the population dependent on them. Wollstonecraft makes this very point in the case where the rich are able to buy favours in Parliament (*Rights of Men*, pp. 20–1). Anyone who is not protected by the law is, by contrast, dependent on all those who are. Even wealthy or middle-class women, for this reason are dependent on men (this is a prominent theme throughout her novel: Wollstonecraft (2005), *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (New York: Dover).

¹⁴ This was a constant theme in early republican literature from Roman times, through Machiavelli to Wollstonecraft's own period. See Skinner for a detailed discussion of its importance: Skinner (2002), *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

¹⁵ 'Inequality', Wollstonecraft says referring to situations of dependence, 'must ever impede the growth of virtue by vitiating the mind that submits or domineers': *Rights of Men*, p. 49.

¹⁶ Pettit, *Republicanism*, p. 211; Cecile Laborde and John Maynor (2008), 'The Republican Contribution to Contemporary Political Theory', in Laborde and Maynor (eds), *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Blackwell), pp. 1–30.

against which the necessary republican institutions can operate effectively. Wollstonecraft, however, regarded virtue as integral to, and constitutive of, the very notion of independence.

The idea of ‘virtue’ as behaviour that upholds the common good and helps preserve the institutions of state is as old as republican theory itself. Nevertheless, its precise meaning has shifted over time. At the birth of the Roman Republic, Livy notes that the people were not ready for freedom, being little more than a ‘rabble of vagrants, mostly runaways and refugees’.¹⁷ They had not had time to develop the necessary character traits and patriotic values that would sustain a free state, including respect for the family and a love for the soil. In his *Discourses* on Livy, Machiavelli develops the concept of virtue (*virtù*) to embrace any action or behaviour that strengthens the republican state virtuous, no matter whether this might otherwise be considered immoral or underhanded. ‘One’s country’ he says, ‘should be defended whether it entail ignominy or glory, and . . . it is good to defend it in any way whatsoever’.¹⁸ By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the idea of virtue had become firmly associated with the capacity to exercise and to be directed by reason in pursuing the common good, which is considered always to conform to rational principles.¹⁹ Reason keeps our thinking grounded and thereby providing the necessary foundation for virtue, which would otherwise be swayed by erroneous, irrational, or selfish inclinations. It is as using this last sense of virtue as being guided by reason that I shall frame Wollstonecraft’s model of political freedom.

In order to be virtuous, Wollstonecraft argues, one ‘must only bow to the authority of reason’.²⁰ This does not say, of course, that reason is sufficient for virtue, or indeed that acting in accordance with reason is synonymous with virtue.²¹ In actual fact, both ‘reason’ and ‘virtue’ in Wollstonecraft’s writing are

¹⁷ Livy (1960), *The Early History of Rome* (London: Penguin Books), Book II, p. 105.

¹⁸ Machiavelli (1983), *The Discourses* (London: Pelican), p. 514. In this context, the adventurer Castruccio Castracani is praised for possessing the following ‘virtuous’ characteristics: ‘he was kind to his friends, and to his enemies terrible; just towards his subjects, faithless to foreigners; never when he could win by fraud did he attempt to win by force—he used to say that it was the victory itself, not the way in which you had won the victory, which brought you glory’: Machiavelli (2003), *Life of Castruccio Castracani* (London: Hesperus), p. 33. Castracani’s virtue consisted in his doing whatever it took to defend and further the interests of the republic.

¹⁹ This use features prominently in the writing of both Richard Price and James Burgh. ‘Did reason govern mankind’ argues Burgh, ‘there would be little occasion for any other government so virtuous and happy would we be’: Burgh (2009), *Political Disquisitions* (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books), Book I, ch. 1.

²⁰ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 140–1.

²¹ Wollstonecraft’s notion of reason, for example, is not that of a detached application of abstract logic, but entails the application of rational principles while being guided by the imagination, knowledge, and experience. When Wollstonecraft asks ‘in what respect are we superior to the

rich and subtle terms. I cannot here hope to do justice to the complexities of either.²² My focus is, however, on virtue as a constitutive element of freedom as independence rather than its wider set of meanings. Sometimes Wollstonecraft speaks of virtue with reference to moral qualities or ‘human perfections’.²³ She refers, for example to ‘the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind’.²⁴ To the extent that a viable and decent society requires certain dispositions and behaviours from its citizens, this is something that no republican denies and so does not mark Wollstonecraft out in any way. But these are instrumentally useful to the maintenance of freedom rather than constitutive of it.²⁵ I set these aside and concentrate only on that aspect of virtue that is tied to the exercise of reason insofar as it forms part of the meaning of freedom.

Wollstonecraft gives two sets of arguments for linking the capacity to reason and independence. The first is connected to the ability to think for oneself, and the second to putting thought into action. While the first of these is important for Wollstonecraft herself, it does not affect the structure of her argument as I reconstruct it. I shall make no use of it and include it here only for completeness.²⁶ If we are not governed by reason, Wollstonecraft held, we must be governed either by emotion and caprice, or by ideas we have gleaned from other people. In both cases we would then be under the control of, and therefore dependent on, forces that could not be relied on necessarily to lead to behavior that was always in our interests. This is the very definition of an arbitrary power, and therefore neither of these options is consistent with independence. Reason, however, represented the ‘the nature of things’, and to use this as our guide was guaranteed to ‘promote our real interest’, which was both best for us as individuals as well as being right for society.²⁷ Independence requires

brute creation, if intellect is not allowed to be the guide of passion?, she adds that without the ‘feelings of the heart . . . reason would probably lie helpless in inactivity’: Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, p. 31. See Karen Green for much more on this topic: Green (1997), ‘The Passions and the Imagination in Wollstonecraft’s Theory of Moral Judgment’, *Utilitas* 9 (3): 271–90.

²² The contributions to this volume by Sandrine Bergès and Martina Reuter very helpfully explore different aspects of both reason and virtue in far greater detail.

²³ See, for example, *Rights of Woman* p. 125 and throughout ch. 5.

²⁴ *Rights of Woman*, p. 86

²⁵ Indeed, Wollstonecraft cautions against treating ‘virtue in a very limited sense’ that makes ‘the foundation of it *solely* worldly utility’ (*Rights of Woman*, pp. 168–9, her italics). ‘Virtues’ that come about to serve particular needs in particular situations often have unintended but harmful consequences. This has been especially damaging in the case of the duties of obedience imposed on women that in turn result in their being ill-equipped to raise independent children.

²⁶ I discuss her commitment to this idea in full in “Freedom as Independence”.

²⁷ *Rights of Woman*, p. 277.

individuals to think for themselves, scrutinizing their opinions and motives in the light of reason, rejecting those that they cannot justify.²⁸ Wollstonecraft's thinking here owes much to an eighteenth-century rationale that regarded a person's passions, emotions, and subjective inclinations as having originated outside their 'true' or rational selves. Pursuing this line would attribute to her a positive view of freedom as 'self-mastery' that is alien to the contemporary political discourse that most neo-Roman republicans position themselves within.²⁹ My aim, however, is not to present Wollstonecraft's own views in their entirety, but to build a 'Wollstonecraftian' position that contributes to this current discourse; I shall not pursue these considerations further.

Irrespective of the question of how we form our intentions, if we are independent we must be able to put these into practice. In a social context, this inevitably requires the presence of a suitable and effective institutional and legal structure within which independence is guaranteed. Since the law has coercive force, if it is to uphold rather than impede independence it must, like reason, promote or protect our interests.³⁰ The law must do this for each person over whom it has jurisdiction, since anyone whose interests are not promoted would not be independent. For this reason, the republican tradition has always held that the law is justified only where it is required always to uphold the population's common interests.³¹ What these common interests are, however, must be first identified and then justified. Ideally, Wollstonecraft says, the citizens would be individually and collectively motivated by 'reason, virtue, and knowledge', and would construct their laws accordingly.³² In reality, of course, she was all too aware that few of us are so enlightened. However, even if they were, this would not be sufficient for independence. It is not enough that the laws happen to uphold our interests. If we are to be independent, this must be guaranteed. It is essential for republican freedom, therefore, that everyone is able to represent themselves and their perspectives in public deliberations about what constitutes the common interest.³³ This can only be assured in a particular kind of environment.

²⁸ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 91–2, 100, 143.

²⁹ Pettit, *Republicanism*, pp. 25–7

³⁰ It should be noted that although Wollstonecraft says of reason that it will always 'promote our real interest', there is no question of the law claiming to do the same while pursuing the private interests of only a few. On Wollstonecraft's own definition of individual independence, individuals must always come to see what is rational for themselves. Unless they come to endorse the law's idea of what is rational, then this cannot be imposed without undermining their independence. This would be to violate the very justification for the law.

³¹ It is when we 'consult the public mind in a perfect state of civilization' or virtue, that we generate a 'government emanating from the sense of the nation', or the common good, which will 'be productive of the happiest consequences': Wollstonecraft: 'French Revolution', p. 212.

³² *Rights of Woman*, p. 91.

³³ 'Who made man the exclusive judge', Wollstonecraft asks, 'if woman partake with him the gift of reason?': Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, p. 87, adding that 'women ought to have representatives,

Wollstonecraft herself was wearily aware that, although she made a well-reasoned and highly rational case for women's independence, this alone would never be enough for her arguments to succeed. Invariably, other considerations, including people's prejudices, private inclinations, and powerful vested interests invariably would come into play and draw people's attention. Indeed, even if some of her arguments had succeeded, this would not be enough to secure independence unless there was a guarantee that they had succeeded for the right reasons. Women could only be independent in a society in which the best arguments, rather than any other factor, always carried the day. Anything less would leave them dependent on the vagaries of those other factors. So although I have said at an individual level, virtue in the sense of possessing a capacity and willingness to act in accordance with reason is not necessary for freedom, collectively it is a different story. Taken as an entity as a whole, an independent republic is a virtuous one. This does not require every individual to be virtuous so long as the institutions that define and uphold freedom are properly regulated. There must, however, be a sufficient stock of virtue in the community to guarantee the integrity of these institutions and to hold them in check.

The type of reasoning that is required by collective virtue is restricted to what we would now call public reason, although Wollstonecraft herself does not use this term. She does, however, insist that people must be both able to and prepared to justify the grounds on which they produce in public deliberation in terms that anyone could in principle accept (an 'obstinate persuasion for which we can give no reason' being nothing more than a prejudice).³⁴ Furthermore, arguments that are exclusive, such as the claim that women were incapable of reasoning, and so their perspectives should not be counted, are not legitimate.³⁵ This condition is necessary since if partisan or non-representative principles of this kind could be adopted then women (in this case) would be dependent on men by definition because they would not be able to represent themselves. They would be left at the mercy of men's discretion and goodwill. In the next section we will see why Wollstonecraft finds this so damaging. Since Wollstonecraft does not provide a full specification of public reason, for the purposes of this discussion it will be sufficient to think of it in terms of Pettit's formulation, according to which deliberation must be conducted using 'cooperatively admissible considerations'.

instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government' (p. 265).

³⁴ 'The moment a reason can be given for an opinion', Wollstonecraft adds, 'it ceases to be a prejudice, though it may be an error in judgment' (*Rights of Woman*, p. 220).

³⁵ *Rights of Woman*, p. 155.

These are defined as principles ‘that anyone in discourse with others about what they should jointly or collectively provide can adduce without embarrassment as relevant matters to take into account’.³⁶ This approach has the advantage of being widely understood today and so allowing Wollstonecraft’s approach into dialogue with contemporary republican thinking.

10.3 Dependence and Corruption

Just as independence requires virtue, so traditionally dependence has been said to corrupt it. Dependence corrupts not by tarnishing people’s moral character, but by impeding a particular disposition to submit to reasoned argument. Traditionally, two causes of corruption have been identified, concerning first the structure of motivation that is inherent in dependent relationships, and secondly the habits that are formed as a result. Wollstonecraft appeals to both, although it is her use of the second that sets her work apart from earlier republican treatments. We should also note at the outset that the corrupting effect of dependence affects parties on both sides of the relationship, dominator and dominated alike. Wollstonecraft stresses that the virtue of dominating men, no less than dependent women, has been compromised.

A virtuous person is defined as one who acts in accordance with the best reasons, whether considered from a moral or, as we are taking it, a publicly reasonable perspective. This is not always easy to do, of course, and may come at a considerable and unacceptably high personal cost. We cannot, Wollstonecraft notes, expect a wife who is completely dependent on her husband to act in defiance of his wishes, even where she may have the stronger arguments, for fear of losing her livelihood or protection.³⁷ It is only where people are secure in their basic rights and social standing, republicans have argued, that they can be expected to stand up for a principle instead of putting their own needs and preservation first. A woman, Wollstonecraft says in this context, cannot be ‘really virtuous’ without the full ‘protection of civil laws’, and that if she is to ‘emulate the virtues’ expected of a man, she must enjoy the same rights.³⁸ For this reason, it has long been held that independence, which entails full and equal legal protection, is a prerequisite for virtue. This is said to be true, moreover, not only in making the sort of difficult moral decisions involving self-sacrifice that are often associated with virtue, but also with committing to use and being bound by public reason.

³⁶ Pettit (2001), *A Theory of Freedom* (Oxford: Polity), p. 156.

³⁷ Again, this theme occurs throughout *Maria*. ³⁸ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 264, 327.

The republican focus on public reason, it must be remembered, is grounded in the need to identify the common interests of the citizens, which is the criterion by which the arbitrary power they oppose is understood, and then to ensure that this concept is consistently applied. Dependent people, however, are, formally speaking, slaves. Their interests, then, are not part of the common good at all, which is an ideal that includes only citizens and free men. Slaves have been left outside the social compact and have no reason to abide by its norms or to respect its code of public discourse. Wollstonecraft is explicit about this. As slaves, women, have no country because they have no rights, and ‘without rights there cannot be any incumbent duties’.³⁹ Slaves have no reason to respect any of the norms of society that excludes them from its benefits. Why, Wollstonecraft asks, would anyone ‘expect virtue from a slave from a being whom the constitution of civil society has rendered weak, if not vicious?’⁴⁰ Masters, for their part, have a corresponding motivation to secure their private interests rather than submitting to the outcome of public reason. They are in a privileged position. The temptation, Wollstonecraft notes, to prefer arguments that justify their advantage is almost irresistible. The experience of dominating others is both intoxicating and misleading, and ‘is an insuperable bar to the attainment of either wisdom or virtue’.⁴¹ The powerful are tempted to surround themselves with ‘flattering sycophants’ who inflate their egos and tell them what they want to hear.⁴² This is doubly damaging, since it means that they are often fed lies and misinformation by those around them, also discouraging them from facing up to the sorts of challenges that would build the skills and character necessary for making good, independent decisions.⁴³

The structural inequality between dominator and dominated means that instead of being united in seeking the common good, their interaction becomes simply a tactical game grounded in mutual suspicion, one-upmanship, and the desire for personal gain. Wives, for example, being in a subordinate position, cannot reason with their husbands openly but must instead resort to cunning, deceit, and coquetry to ‘govern their tyrants by sinister tricks’.⁴⁴ The strong must watch the weak very carefully, while the weak are inclined to use every opportunity to steal an advantage over their masters. This dynamic not only encourages bad habits in individuals but creates a climate that stifles fruitful public

³⁹ *Maria*, pp. 80–1 (women have no country). Wollstonecraft makes the point about duties being tied to rights twice in quick succession, *Rights of Woman*, p. 262 and again on p. 264: ‘Take away natural rights, and duties become null’.

⁴⁰ *Rights of Woman*, p. 135.

⁴¹ *Rights of Woman*, p. 96.

⁴² *Rights of Woman*, p. 92.

⁴³ They become instead, ‘extravagant freaks’ and ‘dead-weights’ on the community (*Rights of Woman*, p. 97).

⁴⁴ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 100, 262.

deliberation and has a devastating effect on public virtue. Rather than seeking to create an inclusive idea of the common good, the population divides into competing factions and interest groups. Public debate descends into an exercise in rhetoric, propaganda, and persuasion. Left unchecked, as we shall see, this has the potential to render rational public deliberation ineffective as a means of challenging arbitrary power, and so undermines the very foundations of republican independence.

Wollstonecraft notes two particular tendencies that follow from the breakdown in public reason. First, people stop scrutinizing the arguments they hear, falling back instead on their own prejudices. ‘A kind of intellectual cowardice prevails’, Wollstonecraft observes, whereby ‘men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they cannot trace how, rather than to root them out’. Once these views become widespread, they are very difficult to remove because people’s ability to reason becomes ‘clouded’ by their prejudice.⁴⁵ If anyone attempts to correct these falsehoods, or to argue against them by going ‘back to first principles’, their efforts are rebuffed. ‘A set of shallow reasoners are always exclaiming that these arguments prove too much’ until ‘truth is lost in a mist of words, virtue in forms and knowledge rendered a sounding nothing, by the specious prejudices that assume its name’.⁴⁶ In such an environment, the social elite and other powerful groups in society are able to use their influence to promote their own ideas and values so forcefully that they become established as the accepted baseline for public deliberation throughout society, allowing them to dictate the course that future arguments will take.

The result is the creation of a background cultural environment that exerts a very powerful hold over the way people are able to think and to argue.⁴⁷ Once this happens, it becomes very difficult for opposing or countervailing points of view to even be expressed. As an example, Wollstonecraft complains that the suggestion that women might represent themselves in government is more likely to ‘excite laughter’ than to gain any support.⁴⁸ Showing just how great the power of ideas is, Wollstonecraft goes so far as to identify 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’.⁴⁹ The resulting

⁴⁵ *Rights of Woman*, p. 91.

⁴⁶ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 91–2.

⁴⁷ It is, for example, men who write the books that underpin the ‘false system of education’ that does so much to keep women in a state of dependence (*Rights of Woman*, pp. 79, 103). Wollstonecraft points to the creation story in the Book of Genesis where Eve is formed from Adam’s rib, arguing that men have played on their superior physical strength to create a myth that legitimates and perpetuates the current system of social gender-ordering, providing it with a divine backing (p. 109).

⁴⁸ *Rights of Woman*, p. 265.

⁴⁹ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 154–5.

system of social prejudices and customs, Wollstonecraft describes as a ‘specious slavery which chains the very soul of woman’.⁵⁰ It is not only women, however, who are affected. ‘Men and women’ are, she argues, inevitably ‘educated in a great degree by a stream of popular opinions and manners of the society they live in’, adding that ‘in every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it’.⁵¹

10.4 Public Reason and the Virtuous Republic

We can now take our earlier observations about the traditional republican emphasis on independence a step further. As Pettit notes, historically there was ‘no other end for the state—no other justified end—besides that of furthering this freedom’.⁵² A republican society cannot permit or tolerate any form of arbitrary power within its midst because the dependence that this creates has the potential to undermine everyone’s freedom. However, since independence can only be secured through appeal to reasoned argument, the state’s most fundamental goal must be to promote and to safeguard the conditions necessary for virtue as public reason to flourish. Wollstonecraft shows us that even when we are focusing on collective virtue there are two distinct levels at which it enables freedom.⁵³ At the first, citizens deliberate about their common interests and define the non-arbitrary laws that are used to challenge the unconstrained use of power. More deeply, however, this deliberation can only function within a suitably accommodating and representative social and cultural background. If freedom is the supreme political value, then ensuring that the conditions necessary for this second level of virtue must be the first goal of the republic. To rework a well-known slogan, for republicans ‘the first virtue of social institutions’ is virtue itself.

Although Wollstonecraft has demonstrated how the collective lack of virtue prevented women’s subjection from being articulated and addressed, she does not limit her arguments to feminist concerns. ‘When any power but reason curbs the free spirit of man’, she notes, ‘dissimulation is practised’.⁵⁴ She points to the way that Dissenters had been stereotyped and stigmatized in public life, drawing a direct comparison with her arguments about women. The effect shaped both

⁵⁰ *Rights of Woman*, pp. 261–2. See Coffee, ‘Enduring Power of Social Domination’ for a detailed discussion of Wollstonecraft’s idea of ‘slavery to prejudice’.

⁵¹ *Rights of Woman*, p. 102. ⁵² *Republicanism*, p. 80.

⁵³ Alan Coffee (2015), ‘Two Spheres of Domination: Republican Theory, Social Norms and the Insufficiency of Negative Freedom’, *Contemporary Political Theory* 14 (1): 45–62.

⁵⁴ *Rights of Woman*, p. 326. Wollstonecraft singles out the effect that Samuel Butler’s then century-old satire *Hudibras*, which pillories Dissenters, continued to exert on the public imagination.

how Dissenters were seen by others, which in turn affected the characters of the Dissenters themselves:

Oppression thus formed many of the features of their character perfectly to coincide with that of the oppressed half of mankind; for is it not notorious that dissenters were, like women, fond of deliberating together, and asking advice of each other, till by a complication of little contrivances, some little end was brought about? A similar attention to preserve their reputation was conspicuous in the dissenting and female world, and was produced by a similar cause.⁵⁵

Wollstonecraft's arguments raise an important set of issues for modern democratic societies in which social pluralism and cultural diversity are integral features. Since no systematic patterns of dependence can be permitted, the members of every social class or group must be independent. If they are to be independent, individuals from minority or marginal groups must be able to promote their interests as part of a genuinely inclusive common good, voice their concerns, and defend themselves against arbitrary interference under the law, having a fair and reasonable chance of being taken seriously, and of having their arguments judged impartially. This is a demanding condition, but if it is not met, then those citizens whose perspectives are not included or represented will be dependent on the rest of the population because they will not be able to defend themselves against arbitrary power.

Independence is only possible in a virtuous deliberative environment, meaning one that is substantially free from prejudice and misunderstanding that would hinder rational debate. It must be stressed first of all that this does not imply that a republican state must be culturally homogenous. A representative and accommodating background culture is not the same as a uniform one. Moreover, a shared set of cultural expectations, values, and traditions is no indication of virtue. After all, Wollstonecraft was writing in what we might regard as a fairly uniform cultural setting by today's standards and yet she identifies both women and religious minorities as the victims of sufficient cultural misunderstanding to strip them of their voices. No matter how culturally uniform a population may appear to be at a given time, its internal divisions can always become the source of disadvantage, stereotype, or prejudice—based for example, on features such as gender, class, wealth, employment, region, sexuality, or religion—that enter unnoticed into the deliberative process.⁵⁶ That ideas and perspectives change over time is, in any case, inevitable and ongoing, as beliefs and attitudes shift in

⁵⁵ *Rights of Woman*, p. 327.

⁵⁶ Social division, according to James Madison, is 'sown into the nature of man': Madison (1987), *The Federalist Papers* (London: Penguin Books), p. 124.

response to events and experiences.⁵⁷ What is essential for independence is not what background cultural frames of reference people share so much as its openness and flexibility towards new and divergent perspectives. Since homogeneity could never be maintained, the basis for independence must lie in how divisions are handled.

It will not do for a society to be one in which there *happens to be* no prejudice or systematic social obstacles to freedom such as patriarchy. According to the republican standard definition of independence, we *must be sure* that there are none.⁵⁸ This might make independence seem to be an impossible goal. In general, however, the republican solution to threats of arbitrary power is not to attempt to remove them altogether—this is rarely possible—but instead to seek to constrain that power so that its effects will be non-arbitrary. Normally, they turn to the law to constrain arbitrary power, scrutinizing its operation through the lens of public reason. The law cannot reliably guarantee freedom from social domination, however, because prejudices have the potential to subvert its operation. Nevertheless, the republican standard for non-arbitrariness is still applicable. If the effect of the deliberative social background is to be non-arbitrary, then the network of ideas and values that shape public debate must satisfy the standard test. In the case of the law, it is deemed to be non-arbitrary only if it is required to be responsive to the shared interests of all those it governs, treating everyone as an equal, and giving each individual a voice and the opportunity to challenge its provisions. The imperative to maintain collective virtue, so that effective deliberation is possible has implications for both government and citizens.

There is, of course, an obvious difference between the deliberative background and the law. Whereas the latter consists of a coherent and codified body of principles, the former represents an unstructured and open-ended collection of ideas and attitudes that are in constant and unpredictable flux. Nevertheless, while the background cannot be controlled in the same way as the law, the government can strive to create and maintain an open and inclusive environment that is receptive to new ideas and aware of the ever-present danger of hidden prejudices by ensuring that citizens from all social groups have access to the important channels of influence, such as education, the arts, the media,

⁵⁷ Wollstonecraft notes that in any society certain particular ideas and ways of looking at things will arise quite naturally. These are typically based more on ‘a local expedient than a fundamental principle that would be reasonable at all times’ (*Rights of Woman*, p. 220). Over time, however, the original causes are often forgotten while the ideas they generated ‘assume the disproportionate form of prejudices when they are indolently adopted only because age has given them a venerable aspect, though the reason on which they were built ceases to be a reason, or cannot be traced’.

⁵⁸ Republican freedom is said to be resilient rather than contingent. See Pettit, *Republicanism*.

law, and politics. This would allow all sections of the population the opportunity to help reshape the way that their interests are presented and understood by others. Over time, and supported by a suitable institutional structure, an inclusive, diverse, and representative cultural setting can be created and maintained in which virtue, as the effective operation of public reason, can support individual and collective independence.

Citizens, for their part, not only have a right to be independent, they have an obligation to be so. Any form of dependence, whether accepted willingly on the part of the dominated party or not is said to have the same corrupting potential. Certainly Wollstonecraft often makes the point to women that they must be independent.⁵⁹ While this is in part a ‘duty to themselves as rational creatures’, we can see a theoretical grounding in the preceding arguments. Women can only be independent in a society in which their rational arguments are heard, understood, and have a fair chance of succeeding.⁶⁰ That society is one in which women’s perspectives have helped shape the public culture so that the kinds of pernicious ideas (such as that women are made rather to feel than reason) that impede their freedom cannot gain a foothold. It is for this reason that Wollstonecraft calls for a ‘revolution in female manners’, led from the front by women who, by reforming themselves, will go on to reform the world.⁶¹

This is one of Wollstonecraft’s conclusions that generalizes to other marginalized social groups, and which provides a foundational principle for a republican multiculturalism that is distinct from most mainstream liberal approaches.⁶² The members of each social group have a duty to be independent. If they are to be independent, they must be able to defend themselves against arbitrary power using public reason. This means that citizens from all social groups, but especially from those whose interests and practices are most misunderstood or least accommodated, must play some part in civil society to the extent that they are able to ensure that they can be adequately represented in public debate. Citizens from most minority groups, of course, would not find this duty burdensome since it is the lack of opportunity that is most often the cause for regret. Nevertheless, the literature on multiculturalism often discusses those kinds of groups whose members may wish to distance themselves from wider society and to live on their

⁵⁹ Women cannot fulfil their duties unless they are independent (*Rights of Woman*, pp. 264, 306). In particular, ‘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’ (*Rights of Woman*, p. 272).

⁶⁰ *Rights of Woman*, p. 262.

⁶¹ *Rights of Woman*, p. 133.

⁶² See Coffee, ‘Enduring Power of Social Domination’.

own terms as a separate group. These include, for example, small-scale indigenous peoples, ethnic, or subnational populations incorporated in past conflicts or by colonial expansion, and some ideological and religious communities.⁶³ If the price of their isolation is that they are not able to resist arbitrary power because there is insufficient mutual understanding with the rest of society, then these citizens will be dependent. Even if this is a price that the group members are prepared to pay, the potential for virtue to be corrupted means that a republican state must be very reluctant to permit such an arrangement. It is no justification for permitting dependence that the people concerned, individually or as group members, consent to their condition. Contented slaves, after all, are still slaves.

10.5 Concluding Remarks

Wollstonecraft's insight that social norms and prejudices represented sources of arbitrary power just like any other kind of unconstrained power represented an important innovation within the classical republican paradigm. It also sets her apart from contemporary republicans because it shows that freedom cannot be a solely negative ideal, consisting only in the absence of dominating power. Drawing a sharp distinction between 'contestatory' and 'participatory' approaches, contemporary republicans typically argue that freedom consists in rights to challenge arbitrary power without necessarily entailing positive rights to participate in the shaping of the environment in which freedom is exercised.⁶⁴ While freedom may be secured by resisting arbitrary power under the law, Wollstonecraft shows that the cultural environment in which the law operates could be corrupted thereby nullifying the law's power to prevent dependence. A non-arbitrary set of background cultural norms, however, must necessarily be made collaboratively by members of all sections of the community. Since citizens have a duty to preserve their independence, this entails a degree of civic engagement.

Although the duty to be independent is one that every individual shares, the requirements of participation and virtue are collective, meaning that they are conditions that the citizenry as a whole must fulfil without this entailing each individual member to do so. It is by no means a part of individual independence

⁶³ For example, and from different perspectives, see Will Kymlicka (2009), *Multicultural Odysseys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); and Chandran Kukathas (2003), *The Liberal Archipelago* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁶⁴ Pettit (2012), *On the People's Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Pettit does, of course, recognize the importance of citizen participation and virtue in his account of republican and democratic politics. These, however, play a strictly instrumental role in his understanding of freedom itself in contrast to Wollstonecraft.

that one is actively engaged in promoting civic virtue. Nevertheless, it is necessary for an independent republic to have a sufficient number of citizens from each constitutive social group to be engaged in this way. In seeing independence from both an individual and a collective perspective, Wollstonecraft is able to retain the subjective element in which persons are free only where they are able to act on their own terms according to their own lights while recognizing that this necessarily requires a cultural and institutional context that is disposed to bind itself to a genuinely inclusive idea of the common good. These two perspectives are integral to the single notion of freedom and are causally related to each other. Individual independence presupposes collective virtue, and while free individuals need not continually manifest virtue, should collective virtue waver they must then act virtuously or lose their freedom.