

## Theories of the State

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I

The early modern period was pivotal in our contemporary understanding of the nature, role and limits of the state. As absolute monarchy and principles of heredity gave way to constitutional and representative forms of government, the discussions and political conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have bequeathed us a canon of familiar writers whose names fill almost all introductory texts to, or university courses on, the history of political philosophy – names such as Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, and Burke. As so often in the history of philosophy, no women are included in this list. And as just as often, this is both misleading and a detriment to the discipline. Women not only took an active – and often prominent – part in the debates through which the concept of the state comes down to us, but their ideas continue to resonate and remain applicable today as we grapple with the legacy of this period in our own relationship with the legitimacy, authority and relevance of the state.

In one sense, of course, it is undeniable that women have made a lasting contribution to the theory of the state. The question of where women stand in relation to the state, and the demand for full and equal legal standing, strikes at the heart of the fundamental moral and political principles from which that concept is constructed – such as justice, liberty, equality, inclusion, citizenship, rights to name just a few. The history of early modern feminism is, for that reason, necessarily bound up with the development of the modern conception of the state. It is not only indirectly, through ‘the woman question’, that women have intervened in this subject, however. As we shall see, women also made significant contributions to the general question of the nature of the state, irrespective of the issue of female standing.

My focus is on the theory of the state developed by Catharine Macaulay (1731-91), various aspects of which were taken forward by, most famously, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), but also by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) whom I discuss in the final section. Macaulay wrote in the radical and revolutionary republican tradition, inspired heavily by the Commonwealthman ideals of the English Civil War period as well as by its Renaissance and classical antecedents, applying its lessons and principles critically to the politics of her own time across party lines. Macaulay was no mere inheritor of ideas, however, but an innovative thinker who, though largely forgotten after her death, can reasonably be described as the pre-eminent republican philosopher of her generation (Coffee 2017, 2019).

It is not just to the radical and revolutionary tradition, of course, that women have contributed to political philosophy, but across the ideological spectrum. Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), for example, developed arguments for individual liberty of conscience and religion within a royalist framework that prioritises peace and stability over personal latitude for action. Writing slightly later, Mary Astell (1666-1731) argued for women’s education based on their intellectual equality and offers a critique of the prevailing ideas of marriage as a form of bondage while remaining committed to High-Church Tory principles. I have chosen to restrict my scope for several reasons. The primary reason is that the complexities of Macaulay’s thought are deserving of a sustained treatment. A second reason is that, in contrast to the standard picture of republicanism as a thoroughly masculine and patriarchal tradition that was hostile to feminist values, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were

an especially rich period for women writing within a republican framework and drawing on its fundamental principles. Macaulay provides an excellent gateway into this literature, even if each philosopher deserves to be studied on her own terms. Amongst the others, in France Olympe de Gouges (1748–93), Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland (1754–93), and important aspects of the philosophy of Sophie de Grouchy (1764–1822) can all be usefully understood through a republican lens (Bergès forthcoming), while in the United States, women writing on both feminist and abolitionist themes, often framed their arguments in the republican terms popularised during the American Revolution, including Sarah Moore Grimké (1792–1873), Frances Wright (1795–1852) and Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) (Vantin 2016, Falchi 2016, Mocci 2018). In Britain, alongside Macaulay, Wollstonecraft and Barbauld, Mary Hays (1759–1843) and Mary Shelley (1797–1851) also make extensive use of republican themes (Coffee 2020).

As political philosophers, collectively and individually, these women have long been overlooked, misunderstood or discounted. Their work is, however, currently the subject of considerable recent scholarship as part of the wider movement to recover, reappraise and recognise women’s historical philosophical contributions and its potential continuing relevance. From one perspective, this may seem surprising to some since it goes against a longstanding – and not inaccurate – feminist suspicion of the republican tradition, viewing it as patriarchal and as being constructed around masculine norms and ideals. Nevertheless, what we find by listening to, and examining, what women have written in this tradition is that the tools of emancipation – freedom from arbitrary power, equality, citizenship, democratic voice – are available for women to both use and adapt to their needs and purposes. Indeed, the three philosophers that I discuss in this chapter show us is that the full recognition and inclusion of women on equal terms with men is a theoretical necessity, not simply for consistency or by merely by extending its principles to embrace women as well as men, but because a failure to do so unleashes a corrosive causal effect that corrupts the virtue of society that is necessary for the freedom of men. Gender inequality, in other words is incompatible with a free state.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I first set out the context in which Macaulay wrote and then outline her basic theory of the state, focusing on the central idea of liberty as a function of equality and civic virtue. In the fourth section, I examine the feminist themes that run through her work, ending with an argument that Wollstonecraft develops further into a classic call for female citizenship rights. In the final section, I briefly introduce Barbauld’s use of Macaulayan themes and arguments.

## II

Catharine Macaulay produced by far the most developed, and the most influential, political philosophy of any woman in the early modern period. She was a prolific writer, most widely known as the author of an eight volume *History of England* covering the period from the accession of James I to the installation of William and Mary. She also wrote a supplementary volume written as a series of letters to a friend that brought the work up to date, a philosophical *Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth*, several significant political tracts, and a discourse on education. It is hard to overstate the extent of Macaulay’s celebrity as a public intellectual in the 1760s and 70s. She was celebrated in art, satirised in plays, gossiped about in the press, and her image was used to sell commercial memorabilia. Beyond her role as a public intellectual, Macaulay was regarded as being amongst the most able and exacting of critics by her major interlocutors, which included David Hume and Edmund Burke. Macaulay’s *History* was widely understood as a republican response to Hume’s own multi-volume *History of England* in which he defends principles that were favourable to royalists and Tories, and thereby a threat to the cause of liberty that she held preminent. Macaulay also replied to Burke with her own

*Observations* on two of his tracts written at significant political moments, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* and *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1770 and 1790).<sup>1</sup>

Even as Macaulay's fame began to wane in England, she found a ready and enthusiastic audience amongst patriots and radicals in America and France who were attracted by her republican ideals and her justification of revolution as a legitimate means of securing liberty. She counted as friends, admirers or correspondents figures such as George Washington, John Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland, and the Comte de Mirabeau (Hays 1994, Bergès 2016).<sup>2</sup> Macaulay's domestic popularity began to decline from 1768, with the publication of the fourth volume of the *History* which ends with a stirring endorsement of the execution of Charles I as an "eminent act of justice" in defence of liberty, something neither the public nor many readers were ready to accept (1783, vol. 4, 418). The unpopularity of revolutionary and republican politics after her death in the years that followed the Reign of Terror and the wars with France perhaps sealed her fate as a philosopher whose ideas no longer found an audience. The gendered way in which the canons of history, politics and philosophy have been created meant that once she slipped from public view, though republican political ideals would once again be appreciated, it would be with her contemporaries, such as Thomas Paine, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, that these would become associated.

A central pillar of Macaulay's theory is that "Government is the mere creature of human invention", (415). Its purpose is "the protection of the people" and in particular, the securing of their natural rights. It follows that government is held on trust, accountable to the people and "may be changed or altered according to the dictates of experience and the better judgement of men" (415-6). In this, Macaulay was a purist, an Old Whig who held to the values that had motivated the Civil War a century earlier. She looked back to the early theorists in the Commonwealthman tradition, including James Harrington, John Milton, Algernon Sidney, John Locke, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, arguing that her contemporary aristocratic Whigs had lost sight of the spirit and guiding principles of their intellectual and political predecessors. A central and distinctive aspect of her analysis was her strong criticism of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and its legacy. It was not its underlying rationale that concerned her. On the contrary, she regards the revolution as having correctly established the end of "hereditary indefeasible right" and that sovereign power must "flow from no other fountain than that of a contract with the people" in which "allegiance and protection were declared reciprocal terms" (1778, 4). The problem was that the plan of settlement "was neither properly digested nor maturely formed" (5). Rather than taking the form of a fully worked out transition of power to the people, there was a compromise between factions that allowed raw personal and partisan interests to take advantage of a deceived population, born of the "irrational prejudices which... detestable doctrines... had sown very deep in the hearts of the people" to bolster the power of the crown (4). The opportunity was not taken to cut off all the prerogatives of the monarch with devastating effects since, she argued, this was sufficient to undermine and circumvent the role of parliament so that ultimate power remained in the hands of the monarch.

At root, hereditary right was not the real issue but only a manifestation of the deeper problem which was vice, or lack of political and moral virtue. Unless there is a strong institutional design, built around the correct principles that support liberty and natural rights, unscrupulous and ambitious

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<sup>1</sup> Burke wrote to a friend in 1770 that, "Mrs Macaulay's performance was what I expected; there are, however, none of that [radical] set who can do better", describing her as the "greatest champion among them" and adding that "I have been afraid to answer her" (1844, 230).

<sup>2</sup> Roland aspired to "be the Macaulay of my country" (Bergès 2016, 108).

parties will inevitably emerge to sow discord and take advantage, invariably aided by the bigoted and easily led. Whereas in the past, this pattern revolved around the monarch and the politics of the court, the same dynamics of power and ambition are just as well suited to an ill-defended parliamentary system. In one sense, then, the failing of the Glorious Revolution, then, was that it did not go far enough, and was, in Barbara Schnorrenberg's phrase, an opportunity missed (1991). This failing was, however, both predictable and inevitable. Macaulay believed that governments have never, historically, been formed for the right reason (for the "full and impartial security of the rights of nature"). They were instead "the produce of lawless power or accident, acted on by corrupt interest" (1770, 8, 9). We can never, therefore, expect the transfer or redistribution of power to be conducted peacefully or on principled grounds ("in all the great struggles for liberty true reformation was never by the ruling party either effected or even intended"). The flaws in the system left by the Revolution were, then, as expected, leaving "full opportunity for private interest to exclude public good". History, Macaulay regrets, does not furnish us "with one exception to this rule; that when the succession in the government is changed, without a substantial provision for the security of liberty, its total destruction is accomplished, by the measure intended for its preservation" (5).

### III

The purpose of the state, according to Macaulay, is to "secure the virtue, liberty, and happiness of society" (1769, 29). These three goals are, as we shall see, all connected. Liberty is the primary value. Virtue is constitutive of, and necessary for, liberty while happiness, or welfare, follows from it. This free, virtuous and happy condition can only be met in a state that is organised in the right way, which Macaulay defines as a "democratical system, rightly balanced". By this she means a representative system wholly accountable to the people governed. The state, she argues, is designed for the benefit of the people rather than for any particular or factional interest groups, something "instituted for the protection of the people, for the end of securing not overthrowing the rights of nature" (1783, vol. 4, 415-6). These natural rights are crystallised in, and best protected by, the value of liberty that is the government's chief purpose to establish. To achieve this, the laws and policies of the state must be virtuous. This entails that they are both rational and moral, grounded in the natural law that can be known by reason. The natural law is not only moral but it represents what is in human beings' best interests, being the surest way to secure our collective happiness and well-being (1783b, vi).

It is not just the state that is supposed to embody the values of virtue and liberty, but individuals too. The chief individual goal is that of being free. Liberty, Macaulay tells us in the first paragraph of the *History of England*, "lies latent in the breast of every rational being, till it is nipped by the frost of prejudice or blasted by the influence of vice" (1763, vii). These caveats are significant. Liberty, for Macaulay, is not licence. It entails conforming one's life to the dictates of both reason (as opposed to prejudice) and the moral law (as opposed to vice). Liberty, therefore, requires and follows from virtue. "Rational agency", she argues, corresponds to "a rule of right" whereby "pleasurable sensation is sacrificed to the conviction of judgement, and to the dictates of a well informed understanding" (1783b, 129). This is a high standard, of course, but certain important features follow. First, there are two parts to liberty, which Macaulay often refers to interchangeably as 'independence', where this means that a person is independent of any form of arbitrary controlling power (Coffee 2017, 2019). One part is internal to the person and consists of a freedom or independence of mind whereby a person is willing and able to think for themselves, scrutinising their beliefs in the light of both reason and their knowledge and experience in order to arrive at the best judgement rather than following habit, inclination, selfish interests or received wisdom. The other is external to the person, represented by a civil form of liberty to act on one's own account rather than

having to rely on the permission of others. The two sides to liberty work together. Free persons must be able both to think for themselves and act on their decisions.

The value of liberty to individuals is twofold. People can do what best suits them personally, regarding their interests, needs and situation. More importantly, they can pursue and discover moral and empirical truth, which is said to be a good in itself. The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is of paramount importance for both individuals and society which should be run on the most up to date knowledge and soundest principles available. Of course, individuals can, and frequently do, make mistakes about moral and empirical matters (“else why have we schools to train our youth in knowledge, and habits of virtue? Why are treatises written... to inform the understanding, in a manner as shall enable her to be a proper guide to the will?”, 1783, 194-5). The pursuit of truth and knowledge, therefore, should be thought of as a collaborative and collective endeavour. For one thing, we rely on other people for our upbringing and education. More significantly, our whole social environment unavoidably contributes to the formation of our minds and character. If we are not careful to maintain the integrity of this environment, the consequences can be disastrous consequences (“every error thrown out in conversation, every sentiment which does not correspond with the true principles of virtue, is received by the mind, and like a drop of venomous poison”, 1790, 103). It is an urgent matter, then, for a free society to develop a robust science of politics, morals and rational interests, just as has been done in the physical sciences. Sadly, however, while the natural sciences of her day were making significant progress, Macaulay regretted that this had not been matched in politics and morals (169-70).

Alongside civic virtue, necessary for a free state is equality. So closely tied are “political equality, and the laws of good government”, Macaulay argues, “that one never can exist to perfection without the other” (1769, 16). Government, she adds, is to be “a fair and equal representation of the whole people”, accountable to them all and run in their collective interests (1790b, 48). In part, the reason for this is grounded in natural law (“the natural equality of men”, 1790a, 160, which gives rise to “equal rights in men”, 1783, vol. 4, 409).<sup>3</sup> In part, however, the reason is more pragmatic, since inequality is said to undermine the civic virtue necessary for a free society. In the sense Macaulay uses it, equality is a demanding idea. Fundamentally, the duty and role of the state is to guarantee the equal freedom of the citizens (“governments are formed on principles which promise the equal distribution of power and liberty”, 1783, vol. 5, 19). Liberty is linked to power since free individuals must have the power to direct their lives as independent agents. This means, first, that they must have equal standing under the law, equal protection, equal representation of interests, and an equal opportunity to access public debates by which law and policy are made. Independence also entails a high degree of material inequality. It is sometimes suggested that Macaulay was not concerned with financial equality. Bridget Hill, for example, refers to Macaulay’s remark that she was not “arguing against that inequality of property which must more or less take place in all societies” but only against “political distinctions” (1992, 176, referring to 1790a, 167). This is, however, misleading since shortly afterwards, Macaulay condemns that “inequality of property, which is incompatible with a wise and just government” (190). Nevertheless, what concerns Macaulay in this later passage is not the economic equality for its own sake, but the effects that material inequality has on liberty and virtue.

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<sup>3</sup> See also vol. 3, 78 where Macaulay refers to “the equal rights of men”. Karen Green identifies this as the first occurrence the phrase the ‘equal rights of men’ in English, pre-dating the familiar uses by Paine and others at the end of the seventeenth century (2016). Macaulay also uses the “natural equality of men” to apply to people of all races, including not only their moral equality but also that of their aesthetic and mental qualities (1790a, 160).

The three values of liberty as independence, virtue, and equality are conceptually and causally connected so that where any one of these is missing, this undermines the other two ultimately making the freedom of the state as a whole impossible. Any significant forms of inequality, whether material or otherwise, that leaves some people dependent on others is incompatible with a free society. This is true of both poverty and excessive wealth. In the case of the latter, Macaulay gives the example of allowing corporations to grow too powerful: “the addition of above thirty millions capital would give such power to the South-Sea company as might endanger the liberties of the nation; for by their extensive interest they would be enabled to influence most, if not all, the elections of the members, and consequently overrule the resolutions of the house of commons” (1783, vol. 5, 299). Inequality does not only directly subvert freedom by creating dependence and giving opportunity to bypass the law, however. It also leads to the corruption of virtue by allowing people to cultivate unvirtuous attitudes (“as envy and covetousness are two passions which act powerfully on the peace and harmony of the mind, the virtue of citizens will be in a greater security where the wholesome restraint of sumptuary laws, or taxes properly imposed banish those objects from society, which are adapted to inflame cupidity, and excite a vicious emulation”, 1790a, 190-1).

If the state is to uphold and protect the liberty of its citizens, then, it must ensure that the conditions are right for the development and maintenance of their civic virtue. The collective loss of virtue is a constant threat to the nation. It is, Macaulay laments, “an observation too well grounded on the experience of all times, that human nature, deprived of that education and that train of fortunate circumstances which give birth to virtue, and support its stability, and when tempted with equal opportunities to gratify inordinate inclinations is the same corrupt and inconsistent being, in all ages, in all countries, and throughout every period of revolving time”, adding that “every page of the history of Great-Britain... exemplifies this melancholy truth” (1778, 273). Her own account of the English history from the accession of James I bore this out.

Macaulay identifies two kinds of problem: the quality of people’s thinking and poor institutional structure. The remedy is, first, to improve the education of the people who must be taught to think rationally based on immutable moral truths (there is “no cultivation which yields so promising a harvest as the cultivation of the understanding; and that a mind, irradiated by the clear light of wisdom, must be equal to every task which reason imposes on it”, 1790a, 31). Part of the solution is found in improving formal education. This is, however, not sufficient. We learn far more from the example of others around us than we do from abstract instruction, particularly in cultivating the depth of moral feeling that must accompany our intellectual grasp (1790a 72; Coffee 2017, 851-2). Government has a significant role to play here. High standards should, for example, be set on the behaviour of its officials and magistrates who serve as examples to us all. Public policies should also be designed to create a broadly egalitarian society in which public displays of wealth are discouraged, and which foster social cohesion, such as by rehabilitating former criminals back into society (1790a, 176-209). The government can also stimulate suitable artistic, religious and cultural practices to improve the morals and habits of the population.

Having trained people to think rationally and morally, the second part of the remedy is to motivate them to support and pursue the public good over their own private interest. It is one thing to understand the benefits of pursuing the common good (“when the happiness of an individual is properly considered, his interest will be found so intimately connected with the interests of society of which he is a member, that he cannot tact in conformity to the one, without having a proper consideration for the other”, 1790a, 169) but it is another thing to live by it (“but reason will revolt against a service for which it finds no adequate return”). Good governance, then, is essential. Where the state is run on the principles of equal liberty and the happiness of all the people, reason is

rewarded and so, “the common good becomes the common care” (1783, vol. 5, 19). Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to rely on people’s becoming virtuous and public spirited in this way. There will always be corrupt individuals ready to exploit the trust of the people for selfish gain. With this in mind, institutional design becomes the vital constraint. Macaulay cites the flaws in the system that was put in place after 1688 that “left full opportunity for private interest to exclude public good, and for a faction” to appear to quash one malign influence in the machinations of court only to leave a less obvious but equally destructive one in the royal prerogative (1770, 34).

In a letter to the exiled Corsican revolutionary leader, Pasquale Paoli, Macaulay gives an outline of a constitution that she believes answers to the stated goal of securing equal liberty, virtue and happiness by making “all interests unite in the welfare of the state” and by “depriving every individual, order, or class, of the power of hurting it” (1769, 34). She proposes a bicameral system divided between an advisory senate of experts and an executive chamber of elected representatives. There is a strict separation of powers, rotation of offices, and a set of term limits placed on all official roles. These measures will, she argues, limit the potential for abuse and so direct the ambition and energies of the elite cabinet of senators towards identifying and pursuing what is in the public rather than their own private interest. A key part of Macaulay’s constitutional design focused on land reform. Her purpose, she tells us, is to ensure an equitable distribution of land and to prevent the “aristocratical accumulation of property” (27).<sup>4</sup> It is notable, however that she provides only for the division of land between male heirs, and bans women from bringing dowries into their marriages. This sits awkwardly with the analysis given above about equality, independence and the common good. To some extent, Macaulay attempts to mitigate this with provision to be made for the education of girls, and for widows and unmarried women. This is, however, clearly inadequate since it maintains the condition of female dependence which is not only harmful to the women themselves but, on her own analysis, liable to undermine the freedom and virtue of the rest of society.

#### IV

These remarks on women have proved puzzling for Macaulay scholars and troubling for feminists. The issue at stake, however, runs more deeply than her constitutional arrangements. Throughout her work, Macaulay never mentions the issue of citizenship for women or discusses the idea of equal legal or political rights. It is not until her final book, the *Letters on Education*, written shortly before she died, that she makes an explicit or sustained argument for women’s equality, though even then, she stops short of discussing the idea of citizenship for women. This omission stands in stark contrast to the boldness with which she advances radical and revolutionary ideas, such as on the justness of the regicide, the legitimacy of the American and French Revolutions or the failings of contemporary English politics. Furthermore, she often couches her arguments in abstract, universal and gender neutral terms, such as of natural rights or the whole human species, that would include women, and she frequently explicitly extends her provisions for equal liberty to include other maligned groups such as Catholics and people of colour.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Hume specifically rejects the rotation of offices and reform of the agrarian along these lines in his critique of Harrington’s *Oceana*, which closely resembles Macaulay’s own measures (1777, 515). On Macaulay’s intellectual differences with Hume, see also Green 2011.

<sup>5</sup> On Catholics, Macaulay writes that “the Irish committee, who were all of them Papists, shewed, that they looked on that privilege to be the common right of men of all persuasions, and that they took a brotherly concern in the interest of that conquered country” (1783, vol. 3, 61). On racial equality see 1790a, 160 (note 3 above).

Women, of course, were not simply just another marginalised group. As Halldenius remarks, female citizenship at this time represented a contradiction in terms (2015, 3). It may, therefore, have been that the idea of political life was so infused with masculine norms and patriarchal attitudes that Macaulay simply was not able to make the necessary conceptual link to apply her generic arguments for equality and independence to women. It would, of course, take a brave critic to suggest that Macaulay lacked intellectual imagination. In any case, such an argument is unnecessary since, as Susan Staves highlights, the relevant conceptual leaps between women and citizenship had already been made often enough since the late seventeenth century, in satire and comedy at least, if not necessarily in political philosophy itself (1989, 170). Indeed, Macaulay's argument in the *Letters* shows that she is, precisely, aware of the power of patriarchy to obscure things from our conscious minds and to make women's inequality appear wrongly to be part of the natural order of things. A close attention to Macaulay's across her career, however, from the writing of her *Histories* onwards, shows that she did engage with the question of women's condition and subordination in a subtle and nuanced, but distinctive and significant way.

As we have noted, Macaulay's principal concern is not with monarchy but with arbitrary rule in whatever form it is found. Monarchy may have been the paradigm of bad government that preoccupied her political writings, but the corrupting effects of tyranny were entirely general (Coffee 2017). What we see in the *Histories*, as Wendy Gunther-Canada has shown in great detail, is how Macaulay closely ties state tyranny in government with domestic tyranny in the household as part of a broader attack on the arbitrary nature of patriarchy, on which both monarchy and family relations were grounded (Gunther-Canada 2020). Macaulay's critique Gunther-Canada argues, "exposed the courtiers who bowed to a divine right king as one and the same with the husbands and fathers lording their authority over wives and children in patriarchal families" (7).<sup>6</sup> Macaulay frequently exploits the fact that monarchy was historically and logically tied to patriarchy via its hereditary principle, although, in her *Loose Remarks* on Hobbes, she develops a more general attack on patriarchy directed at the social contract, still rooted in republican principles and the family (Macaulay 1769, Gunther-Canada 2006). Male philosophers of the period, whether pro-monarchical (such as Hobbes or Hume) or anti- (such as Harrington or Locke) did not make the connection between domination in these spheres, state and domestic, not only having the same structure (the exercise of arbitrary power) but also as having the same pervasive corrupting effect on the public and private virtue necessary for a free state. Certainly in republican terms, this is an innovation that originates with Macaulay.

Macaulay's arguments in respect of women's political role are not only theoretical. Several scholars have noted the contrast between her treatment of women throughout her *Histories* and other contemporary narratives, all naturally written by males, including Hume. As Philip Hicks put it, Macaulay frequently focuses on or draws attention to the actions and interventions of women whom others had "unjustly ridiculed, omitted, praised for the wrong reasons, or not praised highly enough" (2002, 187-8). Given Macaulay's pioneering role as the first prominent female historian, this was, again, an innovation. Hicks argues that Macaulay shows in her writing of history that "women were capable of any particular virtue or accomplishment", foreshadowing what she was to say explicitly and at length in the *Letters* (2002, 196). Hicks cites this passage from the *History* as an example: "it is education and circumstances which alone form the man... [A] large measure of indulgence is to be given to the foibles, the infirmities, and even of every man or woman, who has not received the benefits which from a perfect form of education" (1783, vol. 8, 62, 59). In so doing, Hicks concludes,

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<sup>6</sup> This was a point that Wollstonecraft was to expand upon in her own analysis, noting that a dominated woman may in turn, "tyrannise over her servants; for slavish fear and tyranny are found together" (1787, 63).

Macaulay shows that women can and do act politically, thereby undercutting a core cultural assumption about gender (2002, 198). Staves makes a similar point, focusing on one event in which a group of women petition parliament for protection (1989, 165-9). She contrasts the dismissive treatment of this event given by Hume with Macaulay's vivid account that takes the women seriously and brings them to life. Although Staves's overall arguments are different from Hicks's, her conclusion is that Macaulay is addressing the social construction of gender which in the conditions of the day "can be more powerful than the rhetoric of rights" (180).

Gunther-Canada takes the theme of Macaulay's involvement of women in her account of history further, arguing that, "her studied observations on monarchical government and sexual politics include women *qua* women in the life of the commonwealth", giving the women a centre stage as instigators of events, animating them as independent agents and demonstrating their political effectiveness even though they were legally and conventionally subject to men (2020, 29). "With each volume of the History", Gunther-Canada goes on, "her consideration of women's condition occupied a larger portion of the pages, underscoring how patriarchy was encoded in the social contract, and elements of monarchical rule reflected in the marriage contract" (35).

In spite of all this, it remains the case that Macaulay never overtly made a demand for women's full and equal citizenship. This much said, in the *Letters* she does develop an unambiguous argument for women as independent agents based on their moral and mental equality, laying the philosophical foundations for Mary Wollstonecraft's subsequent direct plea for citizenship and political representation for women. While there are differences between Macaulay and Wollstonecraft, at a suitable level of abstraction, Wollstonecraft shares the basic theoretical commitments and conception of the state that I have outlined in this chapter (Coffee 2019). Taking nothing away from Wollstonecraft's own originality and significance as both a feminist and philosopher – I regard her contribution to republican theory to be of immense contemporary value – Macaulay should be acknowledged as the giant upon whose shoulders Wollstonecraft stood.

Macaulay's position is based on two key premises. First, virtue is grounded on immutable principles (Letter XXI). It is therefore accessible to, and useful for, all rational agents. Since, "the doctrine of innate ideas and innate affections, are in a great measure exploded", it follows that men and women have the same underlying rational, moral, and spiritual faculties" (1790a, 127). There can, therefore, be no characteristic differences between the sexes with respect to these features (Letter XXII). "There is", Macaulay deduces, "but one rule of right for the conduct of all rational beings; consequently... true virtue in one sex must be equally so in the other" (1790a, 125). The attempt to set up distinct and complementary gendered differences will inevitably lead to one sex dominating the other. (Interestingly, in her rebuttal to Rousseau on this issue, Macaulay expresses it in terms of men exercising their "prerogative" over women which leads to "confusion and chaos in the system of human affairs" echoing her argument against monarchy, 1790a, 129). Secondly, false ideas can easily become entrenched in the public consciousness. Under conditions of social inequality, these ideas will be those that are to the advantage of the dominant group. In the end, "every part of morals becomes fluctuation; and customs, manners, sentiments change according to the notions of those in power" (1790a, 96). She concludes that "it is from such causes that the notion of a sexual difference in the human character has, with a very few exceptions universally prevailed from the earliest times, and the pride of one sex, and the ignorance and vanity of the other, have helped to support an opinion which a close observation of Nature, and a more accurate way of reasoning, would disprove" (1790a, 127).

This sets up a problem that Macaulay cannot easily resolve. Given the corrupt state of the nation, with false and pernicious views not only of the sexes but, more generally concerning views inimical to liberty and equality, what can be done in response? The dominant, after all, have their

ideas lodged in the public consciousness, skewing public debate in their favour. They will not easily let that go. Macaulay remains optimistic about the power of natural reason to overcome error and vice. With a system of national education that equips and motivates individuals to critically reflect on their beliefs, she is confident that immutable principles will prevail and prejudices will be overcome, paving the way for a more virtuous society.<sup>7</sup> This seems unrealistic.

At this point that Wollstonecraft takes the argument further (Coffee 2013, 2014). She explicitly builds on Macaulay's argument that virtue admits of no difference but is less sanguine about the possibility of reforming society on rational principles from the current conflicted starting point. "In every age" Wollstonecraft observes, "there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it" such that whenever people try to challenge it, the "truth is lost in a mist of words... and knowledge rendered a sounding nothing, by the specious prejudices that assume its name" (2014, 47, 38). Under these circumstances, there is little that education can do. Children educated on rational principles, for example, would be turned against their parents who would still be governed by their former prejudices, dividing families and society (2014, 187). Her refrain is that "till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education" (2014, 47, 187). For Wollstonecraft, then, it is not education that is prior but social reform. It is not the rational principles that come first but the cultural medium through which these are inevitably and necessarily filtered. If we are to reason clearly, then the social conditions must be suitable. There must not be any dominating power group that can influence the social construction of ideas to their own advantage. In other words, it requires an egalitarian society in which all parties can contribute to the creation of the concepts, values, beliefs and norms through which they will themselves be viewed by others. This is the "revolution in female manners", which Wollstonecraft calls for at the end of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a collaborative venture between men and women to redefine the social, political, and economic relations between the sexes (2014, 224). Only against this background can the equal citizenship and full legal and political rights for women that Wollstonecraft champions operate.

V

Macaulay and Wollstonecraft both died in the 1790s. At the same time, another writer who moved in the same radical and dissenting circles was becoming increasingly politically vocal. Although better known as a poet both then and now, Anna Laetitia Barbauld was an astute political thinker who probed the logic of republican theory with great clarity. She worked with the same underlying structure that we have discussed – based around independence, equality, and virtue – and she would bring a similar radical critique of arbitrary power, political corruption, and social inequality into the nineteenth century. Like Macaulay, Barbauld was a prominent public intellectual who was also notable for being an outspoken woman intervening on controversial political matters. Barbauld had also engaged critically with Burke, in poetry at least, if not in a tract, although she had intended to answer him in that way. Sadly, like Macaulay, Barbauld would be subsequently largely forgotten for her political contributions. Even today, while there are some excellent studies of her overall intellectual thought (e.g. McCarthy and Murphy 2014, Clery 2017) I am not aware of any sustained treatment of Barbauld as a political theorist in her own right.

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<sup>7</sup> Again, it is interesting to note that while Macaulay first stipulates that boys and girls should be educated together in this manner, she later speaks of the education of the citizen (1790a, 32, 123). Given that she is emphatic that "the two sexes are so reciprocally dependant on one another that, till both are reformed, there is no expecting excellence in either", this may hint that she was moving towards an express case for women's citizenship (1790a, 135).

One reason for this neglect may have been that, again like Macaulay, Barbauld rarely wrote about the condition of women and did not directly address the matter of female citizenship or rights. Indeed, on the few occasions when she does mention aspects of women's social standing, she has not been favourably interpreted.<sup>8</sup> This has meant that Barbauld has not attracted the attention of feminists, who over the last half century have pioneered the reappraisal of early modern women philosophers and political theorists. Until fairly recently, Barbauld was often referred to as a conservative, in contrast to both Macaulay and Wollstonecraft (e.g. McDermid 1989, 320).<sup>9</sup> In part this may have been because of her literary affinities with the establishment-leaning Bluestockings, as well as because of her perceived views on the social role of women. Nevertheless, this interpretation belies Barbauld's association with the radical publisher Joseph Johnson and her position on religious freedom, equal citizenship, the abolition of slavery, the French Revolution, imperial expansion, and the wars with France.

As with Macaulay and Wollstonecraft, Barbauld understands the state as being representative of, and accountable to, its citizens, rooted in "the natural equality of men" (2002, 281). Government should be based on "universal jurisprudence" rather than being "adapted to local prejudices" (305). Freedom as independence is the central value but, she says in 1793 with the Terror raging in France, it cannot be imposed at "the point of a bayonet". Far more strongly than Macaulay, Barbauld emphasises the need for political reform at a speed that the people can internalise and embrace. "Endeavouring to overthrow any system *before* it is given up by the majority, is faction", she argues, while "the endeavouring to keep it *after* it is given up by them, is tyranny" (305). Both proceed from the same cause, she continues, which is the lack of a minority of citizens to conform their actions to what she describes as the "general will" based on the common interests of all (316).

Equality, for Barbauld, is both formal and material. Formally, equality reflects our common dignity – everyone has the "right to bear the brow erect, to talk of rights" (274) – as well as our equal standing before the law (266). Even more so than Macaulay and Wollstonecraft, however, Barbauld is also committed to a high degree of material equality between citizens. The accumulation of wealth, she argues "generates *power*, and here begins the mischief, for power embanks and confines the riches which otherwise would disperse and flow back in various channels to the community at large" (347). Power allows the rich to pervert the law to suppress the poor, and to reinforce this with the propagation of justifying myths ("all the salutary prejudices"). The cumulative effect of large scale material inequality is the erosion of civic virtue. Here, Barbauld again goes further than Macaulay to identify what she sees as natural laws of society which are akin to the laws of nature. These are levelling principles which limit the extent and effect of inequality. These include the "*secret combination of the poor against the rich*", whereby the rich are routinely fleeced by the poor on the grounds that they can afford it (351). While Barbauld justifies this behaviour both practically and normatively (being "founded on the interest of the many, and the moral sense of all" [352]), the effect is disastrous for public virtue, implicating both classes alike and undermining their respective commitment to the common good which is necessary for freedom. In order to rectify the results of material inequality, we must equalise material conditions. "Let every man know what it is to have property", Barbauld reasons, "and you will soon awaken in him a sense of honesty. Make him a citizen, and he will love the constitution" (355). We should also ensure that everyone has access to an adequate education and we should minimise the distinctions and hierarchy of class and rank. She also

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<sup>8</sup> On Barbauld's feminism, see McCarthy 2001 and Bradshaw 2005 for excellent treatments.

<sup>9</sup> In fairness to McDermid, she was writing to correct earlier dismissive misconceptions of nineteenth-century women's writing. The republican conception that I attribute to Barbauld had not yet returned to prominence in the 1980s.

emphasises the importance of rich and poor mixing socially with each other. So, where religious societies for the reformation of the manners of the poor aimed at spiritual and moral improvement, Barbauld sees the practical benefits of bringing people together socially.

With all republican theories, the maintenance of collective civic virtue is of paramount importance. Barbauld identifies the sins of the government with those of the individual. Since the nation is comprised of individuals, so the faults of the nation are rooted in the same vices – “pride, selfishness and thirst for gain” – that afflict private persons (301). This generates a need for government to constrain these behaviours. Significantly, Barbauld understands this as having implications both internally and externally (302). Internally, there must be just laws that uphold the common good, democratically and inclusively determined (requiring that “some well contrived and orderly method be established for ascertaining” the public will [303]). Justice, however, extends equally to our relations with other states and other peoples. The golden rule, she argues, applies as much in the Antipodes, or on the coast of Guinea, as in our native fields” (310), adding that there are “some *darker-coloured children* of the same [human] family, over whom we assume a hard and unjust control”, referring to the West Indies and the slave trade (308). The same principles of the mutual corruption of virtue in dominator and dominated alike arising from conditions of inequality and dependence can be seen to have implications not only nationally but internationally. Sadly, space does not permit me to discuss Barbauld’s arguments here, but Jessie Reeder perceptively reads Barbauld’s final poem, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, as providing an example in the context of British commercial interests in Latin America (2014, see also Clery 2017). Britain was unavoidably conflicted in supporting political independence for South American countries while simultaneously subjecting them to new forms of economic dependence. The resulting inequality and the erosion of liberty and virtue that accompany it, would lead inexorably to the destruction of the British Empire.

### **Concluding remarks**

Macaulay, Wollstonecraft and Barbauld have been written out of the history of political theory. This is especially true of Barbauld, but even as Macaulay and Wollstonecraft are now receiving more attention, there is considerable work to do on the logic and detail of their philosophies. What we can see, however, is that together, they have produced a rich, innovative and compelling theory of the state. Their work builds on the once radical ideas that now shape our contemporary political debate – the state’s accountability to its people, and that the benefits of citizenship are to be shared by all those subject to its power – but presses continually at the ideals of equality, inclusivity and representation that are implicit. By bringing a gendered perspective, their ideas serve as an invaluable internal critique of republican politics that is of genuine and lasting value.

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