

*Wollstonecraft's Feminist Virtue Ethics: Friendship and
the Good Society*

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Introduction

This paper will show that Mary Wollstonecraft developed a modern feminist version of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is an all-encompassing moral theory which holds that the best life for individuals is commensurate with a good society. Simply, self-interest and our public duties are argued as identical and not at odds when we realize what is truly good for ourselves and for others. In the Western philosophic cannon, the most common version of virtue ethics is Aristotle's, with the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the definitive presentation. Wollstonecraft's argument for the political, social, economic, and personal equality of women utilizes ideas that are reminiscent of classical virtue ethics. Her novel and effective addition is to show that the explicit inclusion of women requires a reconsideration of the duties needed for happy lives to be led and for a good society, and good families, to exist.

To show Wollstonecraft's virtue ethics innovations as being fundamental for the production of a good society this paper will proceed as follows. First will be a very brief and focused review of Aristotle's discussion of self-love. Next, an overview of Wollstonecraft's reflections on virtue, self-interest (self-love), good families, and a good society will be conducted. This paper will conclude with an endorsement of a feminist virtue ethics as important in our current age. This is especially the case given the continual failures of men and women to treat each other as true friends and not as mere means.

Aristotle on Self-Love

The *Nicomachean Ethics* can, at times, seem to be a narcissistic work with a focus on an individual's happiness.¹ This intuition is most obviously mediated by Aristotle's discussion of justice in Book V and his comments on the importance of education and politics that concludes the work. Still, of greater importance is Aristotle's discussion of friendship, which he devotes the entirety of Books VIII and IX. His treatment of friendship extends beyond private relationships between peers to encompass political friendship and friendship in families. Topics of major importance are his comments on self-love, since this discussion brings together, into a common end, individual advantage and social advantage.

In Book IX Aristotle provides a typology of the kinds of self-love, which are classified as two: a bad kind and a good (or enlightened) kind. Self-love is usually understood as undesirable for society because most find it to serve only our base desires. This is the bad kind of self-love, as Aristotle explains:

Those who make self-love a matter for reproach ascribe it to those who award the biggest share in money, honor, and bodily pleasures to themselves. For these are the goods desired and eagerly pursued by the many on the assumption that they are best. (Aristotle 1168b16)

In contradistinction, enlightened self-love is the bringing together of what is good for others and what is good for ourselves, even if the objects that are enjoyed by either party are different:

And when everyone strains to achieve what is fine and concentrates on the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good, and each person individually will receive the greatest of goods, since that is the character of virtue. And so the good person must be a self-lover, since he will both help himself and benefit others by doing fine actions. (Aristotle 1169a10)

It is quite true that, as they say, the excellent person labors for his friends and for his native country, and will die for them if he must; he will sacrifice money, honors, and contested goods in general, in achieving the fine for himself. (Aristotle 1169a20)

¹I agree with an anonymous reviewer that the claim of Aristotle's virtue ethics being perceived as narcissistic needs to be substantiated. In short, a narcissistic reading is a mistake that one can fall into if the entirety of Aristotle's system is not considered, especially his discussion of self-love.

When the virtuous person performs fine actions the public and her friends enjoy the physical results. At the same time, the virtuous person enjoys an even greater good for themselves, a good act.

Wollstonecraft's Virtue Theory

Wollstonecraft appears to have not been substantially influenced by Aristotle. She extensively discussed the leading moral philosophers of her time: Smith, Hume, Kant, and, especially, Rousseau. Nonetheless, her moral theory is unique and far-ranging for her age since she establishes connections between moral action, self-interest, the best life, good families, and a good society. Her moral theory achieves the same harmonious relationship between self and society that Aristotle championed in his own work.²

Wollstonecraft provides a striking contrast between her ideal of virtue, acquired through education, with the current model of her own time for the behavior and goals of women:

... I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, ...

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of that weaker vessel, I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; ... (Wollstonecraft 73)

Wollstonecraft's contrast is rooted within the political aspirations of her time, where republicanism is best for rational beings; and aristocracy, luxury, and elegance are anathema to the usefulness of knowledge, work, and independence (Wollstonecraft 129). She appeals to Enlightenment ideals to demonstrate that the current education of women, practically and morally, is akin to aristocratic cultivation, which is contrary to desirable human attributes of virtue of character and applied learning (Wollstonecraft 83 and 90). Aristocratic ideals prize

²In a comment, André Luiz Cruz Sousa helpfully pointed out that Aristotle's notion of the human good, which applies to individuals and the city (1094b7-10), has an important overlap with Wollstonecraft's project. Also, Dirk Schuck insightfully noted in his comments that there are Platonic elements in Wollstonecraft's presentation based on an ideal of friendship between the sexes.

parasitical dependence on others, a stultification of understanding the organization and operation of the natural and social worlds, and kinds of pleasure seeking that sees other people as mere mechanisms for satisfaction (Wollstonecraft 112-113). In contradistinction, Wollstonecraft prizes self-reliance, usefulness to one's family and society, and a development of character that treats people as friends and moral agents (Wollstonecraft 95, 118, and 130).

Similar to Aristotle, Wollstonecraft distinguishes between unreasonable and reasonable forms of self-interest, which are structured around not only performance of service to family and society, but also, moral friendship between women and men. She notes that men commonly seek to maintain the subordinate position of women in society since they view them as devices for the attainment of pleasure. The same as despots fostering ignorance to maintain servile subjects:

... as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the later a play-thing. (Wollstonecraft 90)

In addition, such conditions create the social and political conditions for the subordination of women. It is rational to cultivate superficial, self-interested, and manipulative abilities to secure modicums of economic security when one's legal position is akin to children and animals:

Before marriage it is their business to please men; and after, with a few exceptions, they follow the same scent with all the preserving pertinacity of instinct. ...

Is it then surprising that when the sole ambition of women centers in beauty, and interest gives vanity additional force, perpetual rivalships should ensue? ...

... I shall immediately agree that it is woman's duty to cultivate a fondness for dress, in order to please, and a propensity to cunning for her own preservation. (Wollstonecraft 276)

Such conditions of domination and subordination, dependence and insecurity fosters uncivil and competitive interests. Thus, it is unsurprising that injustice is perpetuated given the imperative of self-preservation:

Women, it is true, obtaining power by unjust means, by practicing or fostering vice, evidently lose the rank which reasons would assign them, and they become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants. (Wollstonecraft 113)

Wollstonecraft's solution to such ills is two-fold. First, there is the establishment of the economic independence of women through useful education and the obtaining of political representation in government (Wollstonecraft 227-230).³ Second, women and men should cultivate moral friendship towards themselves and each other (Wollstonecraft 68 and 95-96).⁴ Men and women must see each other as moral and rational beings in order to overcome our tyrannical and exploitive history:

The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other. This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending it to every virtue. Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, or they will be cultivated to little effect. (Wollstonecraft 219)

Final Comments

Unfortunately, other aspects of Wollstonecraft's moral philosophy cannot be touched on due to space constraints. Nonetheless, the importance of the cultivation of virtue has been shown not only as desirable in itself, but also as essential for friendship between women and men. Her focus extends beyond the mistreatment, subjugation, forced ignorance, and exploitation of women, important as these topics are to understand our selfish behaviors. Additionally, Wollstonecraft identifies a moral failure to bring our institutions into alignment with virtuous actions and intentions. A desire for moral outcomes will be subverted by the counter-intentions of others and social structures that reinforce selfishness at the expense of the public good. These institutions will prevent the desirable development of an individual's capacities. This is important for our own time, since we are realizing that legal reform is insufficient when individuals lack virtue. In closing, we should ask ourselves a question that, I find, Wollstonecraft perpetually asked in her books and novels: Do we seek the good for others, or only the good for ourselves; and if we choose the latter, at what expense?

³In reference to Wollstonecraft's criticism of empty elegance, André Luiz Cruz Sousa noted that there are parallels with Aristotle's advocacy of virtue and his criticism of a life of honor. This observation also has clear application to Wollstonecraft's chapter on reputation.

⁴Emma Cohen de Laura suggested that Rousseau's work had an influence on Wollstonecraft's conception of friendship. This is an intriguing point that merits further study given Wollstonecraft's complex engagement with Rousseau's philosophy.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Hackett, 1999.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Right of Women and A vindication of the Rights of Men*. Oxford World Classics, 2008