



**Symposium on  
Eileen Hunt Botting's  
Wollstonecraft, Mill,  
and Women's Human  
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**Women's Human Rights,  
Then and Now**

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**Comments by Ruth Abbey**

This is a fitting sequel to Eileen Hunt Botting's first book, *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family*.<sup>1</sup> That book placed Mary Wollstonecraft in conversation with two other eighteenth-century thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Edmund Burke. In this more recent work, Botting traces Wollstonecraft's impact forward from her own time to ours, examining how her theologically based approach to women's rights resonates, or fails to, in contemporary women's rights thinking. Botting contrasts Wollstonecraft's religious approach to women's rights with that of her successor, John Stuart Mill, who agreed with many of Wollstonecraft's substantive recommendations about women's equality and freedom but justified them on a more secular, utilitarian basis.

Juxtaposing Wollstonecraft's "rational theology" and Mill's "liberal utilitarianism" in this way is very helpful. Having usually read and placed them in succession as pioneering theorists of women's rights, their juxtaposition forced me to think harder about their similarities and their differences. This led me to wonder if, while Botting emphasizes the differences in the foundations of their approaches to rights, they might be a bit closer than she allows. Rights could be seen as instrumental for both. Botting contrasts them on this score, saying, "Whereas for Wollstonecraft we claim rights as moral absolutes, for Mill we claim rights pragmatically as tools for the realization of individuality."<sup>2</sup> But the moral absolutes for Wollstonecraft, as I read her, are not rights as such but the good things they deliver—individual dignity, equality, respect, and liberty. If these things could be secured in some other way, then rights could conceivably be disposed of. So is it rights that Wollstonecraft is vindicating or the goods she believes them to ensure? Let's say, for example, that a society like that envisaged by Rousseau's social contract gave its members—men and women—equality, dignity, respect, liberty—but did not do this via rights. Wouldn't that society still be valued by Wollstonecraft? Isn't it the goods that rights protect rather than the rights themselves that are moral absolutes for her? If so, this brings her into greater proximity with Mill who basically makes the same argument: rights are not right for all societies everywhere at all times, but at the current stage of English liberal democracy they can help to secure the liberty that makes personal self-development possible.

While I fully agree with Botting about the need to recognize the theological foundation of Wollstonecraft's argument for rights, I don't fully follow her claim that Wollstonecraft's approach is capacious enough to include people who are not religious.<sup>3</sup> While Wollstonecraft would accord non-believers rights as rational agents, they would not understand their rights to be grounded in the same way as religious believers would. And that seems like a significant difference to me.

In chapter two, Botting portrays Wollstonecraft and Mill as holders of comprehensive doctrines and contrasts this with Rawlsian approaches to liberalism that are purely political.<sup>4</sup> But Botting does this without questioning whether Rawls' project to adduce a purely political form of liberalism fully succeeds. If the line between political and comprehensive doctrines is not as clean and bright as Rawls would have us believe, then this strengthens Botting's hand in defending Wollstonecraft and Mill as holders of comprehensive doctrines who are nonetheless relevant for contemporary rights thinking. So it might help Botting's project to follow some of the other commentators on Rawls and put some pressure on that Rawlsian distinction.<sup>5</sup> There is the additional consideration that comprehensive doctrines are so

labeled by Rawls not just because of their depth—they rely on metaphysical foundations—but also because of their breadth—they apply to areas beyond the purely political domain. Women’s human rights doctrines have to be broad enough to extend into the so-called private domain and it seems to me that for that you need something closer to a comprehensive doctrine—or maybe a partially comprehensive one.<sup>6</sup> So from these two considerations, the fact that Wollstonecraft and Mill offer comprehensive doctrines could emerge as something admirable about their work and the problem could lie more with Rawls than with them.

Citing the work of Brooke Ackerly, Botting’s introduction describes Mill as “an outsider social scientist”<sup>7</sup> looking in at the harm patriarchy does, whereas Wollstonecraft is an insider critic of patriarchy. But Mill can also be thought of as an insider. He is, after all, profoundly and persistently aware of the flip side of women’s oppression, which is the arbitrary privilege that all men enjoy just from being men. So he is an insider who sees his masculine privilege as just as unearned as Harriet Taylor’s disadvantages are. This is poignantly conveyed in his brief yet powerful 1851 “Statement on Marriage” issued at the time of his and Taylor’s marriage. He admits there the paradox of both parties entering an institution of which they thoroughly disapprove—at least in its current legal constitution. He identifies the immense but undeserved power the institution awards him, as a man, over his spouse. Unable to divest himself of this arbitrary power, he registers instead a formal protest against the laws of marriage and swears never to exercise the illegitimate privilege and prerogative they afford him.<sup>8</sup> Mill also discusses the power that men enjoy on the basis of their gender alone in chapter one of *The Subjection of Women*. It is a power that all men can exercise over women, irrespective of class: “it comes home to the person and hearth of every male head of a family.”<sup>9</sup>

Botting’s reflections on the insider/outsider positioning of Wollstonecraft and Mill is also relevant to her discussion in chapter four, “The Problem of Cultural Bias: Wollstonecraft, Mill and Western Narratives of Women’s Progress” of both thinkers’ implication in the Orientalism of their time. I appreciate her unblinking honesty on this, but I do think that there is a salient difference between the way Wollstonecraft and Mill essentialize and criticize non-Western cultures and the way their own wider culture does this. Wollstonecraft and Mill are, after all, saying that the us/them binary does not hold when it comes to women, because the things that they deem and condemn as Oriental are practiced right here, at home, on a daily basis. So the us/them, inside/outside distinction does not hold in the way they use Orientalist tropes and this is in significant contrast to the way their wider culture uses them.

I was really struck by Botting's creativity in using Mill's *Autobiography* in chapter five, "Human Stories: Wollstonecraft, Mill and the Literature of Human Rights." But in light of that use of the text, Mill's complete failure to mention his mother becomes even more curious and concerning. Even as he spends so much time describing his early education, his relationship with his father, his role as tutor to his younger siblings, Mill makes no mention whatsoever of his own mother who, to my knowledge, was alive this whole time. I have always found this silence mystifying, and reading this text through Botting's new framing renders the mother's absence even more conspicuous. One final small observation on the function of the *Autobiography* as a human story is that Mill's depiction of Taylor there is highly idealized. He is not just writing an honest account of their "messy and complex"<sup>10</sup> relationship; he is also eulogizing and mourning her. Just how much messier and more complex their relationship was, is evident in Taylor's *Collected Works*,<sup>11</sup> which includes her correspondence. She spent a lot of time there bemoaning the domestic duties that consumed vast amounts of her time and held her back from her intellectual pursuits and ambitions. Although Taylor was clearly a remarkable woman, things were not always as rosy for her or between them as Mill makes them out to be in his account of their relationship.

### Comments by Linda M. G. Zerilli

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a powerful global movement flying the banner of "women's human rights." At the International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria, in 1993, hundreds of women from around the world proclaimed the human rights of women and girls and condemned as human rights violations ethnic cleansing, forced pregnancies, rape as a systematic tool of subjugation during armed conflict, and violence against women in the home. Later, at the Fourth International Women's Conference in Beijing, delegates endorsed a document that framed issues of poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, the media, and the environment as women's human rights issues. Important successes in international juridical and peacekeeping arenas, such as the 1996 ruling by the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague that rape was a war crime, have furthered this global movement for women's human rights.

During these initial decades of expansion, the movement for women's human rights was relatively unreflective about the potential for philosophical and political critiques of the very concept of human rights. Already in 1949,

in the immediate aftermath of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1948, Hannah Arendt asked whether or not there really exist such human rights, independent of all specific political status and deriving solely from the fact of being human, that is, from nature.<sup>12</sup> Arendt famously questioned the attempt to reanimate the idea of *natural* human rights as a political foundation. Such an attempt, in her view, repeated in spirit and form the traditional declarations about natural rights formulated at the end of the eighteenth century without accounting for the very crisis that had befallen the idea of human rights since those rights failed in the face of totalitarianism. The idea of natural human rights, in her view, was less a stable basis upon which to expand the concept of political membership to disenfranchised populations than a troubled legacy that she characterized as "the aporias of the rights of man."

For many years, awareness of the potentially irresolvable internal contradictions within the concept of women's human rights was confined to a handful of thinkers. Recently, however, the political consensus built around the universalistic principle of women's human rights has come under intense scrutiny. Much of this scrutiny is a reaction to the appropriation of the idea of women's human rights by groups sometimes called the "new internationalists" and "new abolitionists," that is, a broad (if unlikely) coalition of secular feminist and evangelical Christian activists, nongovernmental organizations, and state agents. These organizations have since the late 1990s combated what they consider globally rampant practices of sexual servitude and slavery, which they locate mainly in the developing world, and see as the most pressing rights issue of the contemporary world. As Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn wrote in the *New York Times*: "In the 19th century, the paramount moral challenge was slavery. In the 20th century, it was totalitarianism. In this century, it is the brutality inflicted on so many women and girls around the globe: sex trafficking, acid attacks, bride burnings and mass rape."<sup>13</sup>

If the human rights arguments of this "women's crusade" are now being questioned, it is in large part because they draw much of their power from a now familiar and increasingly suspect opposition between the plights of women in developing countries such as Pakistan, on the one hand, and advanced industrialized countries such as the United States, on the other. Many critics also find cause for concern in the easy appropriation of the language of women's rights by groups that are otherwise unsympathetic to many goals of Western rights-based feminism, such as evangelical Christians opposed to reproductive freedom. Other critics have argued that attention to the use of human rights discourse in justifying military as well as humanitarian interventions (e.g., in Iraq and Afghanistan) should make

feminists more cautious about claims and actions taken on behalf of women's rights. Still others point out that international and juridical organizations, especially the U.N.-sponsored conferences, have relied on a Western liberal framework that is inattentive to crucially important cultural, social, and political national differences; that privileges civil and political rights over social and economic rights; and that tends to construe women in the developing world as victims of a stalled or failed modernization process. Consequently, as critics such as Inderpal Grewal argue, the concept of human rights as women's rights needs to become an object to interrogate rather than a goal to endorse.<sup>14</sup>

Ellen Hunt Botting's book is clearly addressed to political thinkers and activists who have become skeptical of claims about women's international human rights and their entanglement in Western imperialist and nationalist agendas. And though her book is an account of the contributions of historically distant figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill to the contemporary concept of women's human rights, the accusations of "cultural bias" animate her argument. I applaud Botting's attempt to answer these critics and also "to provide an international philosophical genealogy of the concept of women's human rights" by way of a return to the unlikely figures of Wollstonecraft and Mill. Unlikely, because both are paradigmatically European thinkers who wrote in the context of and in response to world-transformative but nevertheless European events such as the French Revolution, the European revolutions of 1848, or the expansion of the British empire. Making the case for the relevance of these thinkers in the current debate about the cultural bias of women's rights discourse is an unexpected, creative, and highly valuable undertaking. We need more books like this.

Since I take my role as commentator to be one of appreciative critique, allow me to explain how I think Botting's project goes astray of what I take to be its very important political theoretical agenda: to reclaim the concept of women's human rights in the face of accusations of cultural bias and to do so by providing a more acceptable basis or foundation on which to situate claims to rights. Most of my argument focuses on Wollstonecraft.

Botting sees Wollstonecraft and Mill as providing two alternative foundations for women's human rights. Whereas Wollstonecraft's is metaphysical, deontological, and religious, she argues, Mill's is empirical, consequentialist, and secular. Wollstonecraft's "rational Christian metaphysics stood in stark contrast to Mill's practical and secular utilitarianism," writes Botting, and in ways that would lead the author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to be eclipsed by the author of *The Subjection of Women* when it came to influencing contemporary debates on women's human rights.<sup>15</sup> Though I agree with Botting that Wollstonecraft has been so eclipsed, I think the reasons are different. What

has led to the neglect of Wollstonecraft is not so much her indebtedness to a form of moral absolutism derived from Christian theology that ultimately deprived her arguments of traction across cultural and historical divides. Instead, the problem lies in her reception as a liberal feminist for whom rights are more or less legal entitlements guaranteed by something extra-political (be it God, Nature, Reason, etc.), rather than a set of radical political practices that, being political, are fundamentally contingent and fragile.

To be clear: I am *not* saying that this is what liberal feminism is, and that because Wollstonecraft is received as a liberal feminist, that is what she is taken to be. I am saying that our entire conception of what liberal feminism is has been deeply influenced by the idea that liberalism is first and foremost a concern with rights, and that rights are first and foremost things that one *has* rather than things with which one *does* something, a political practice of making certain kinds of claims on certain kinds of addressees (e.g., the state or other citizens). This highly depoliticized and, I would add, strictly *philosophical* view of rights and of liberalism and its history distorts the radical character of the origins of liberal political thought in political protest and civil war. More important for our reading of Wollstonecraft, it also summarily dismisses by dint of association those like her who are many things, but not— not in this caricatured sense—liberals.

Botting too sees that Wollstonecraft and Mill have been dismissed as “liberal feminists,” where this label means “individualistic, rationalistic, and bourgeois.”<sup>16</sup> She seeks to rescue both thinkers by showing us that they were not “primarily liberals and secondarily feminists,” for if that were the case then feminists would have good cause to be wary. “Wollstonecraft and Mill exercise a critical style of feminist inquiry into the value of liberal ideas for women, which ultimately put feminism first and liberalism second,” writes Botting.<sup>17</sup> In this way, Botting would reclaim liberalism as a valuable tradition for feminism and Wollstonecraft and Mill as liberal feminist thinkers who did not sacrifice feminism to liberalism but sought to make liberalism worthy of its name.

I do not want to pursue a taxonomic argument about who belongs in what camp, so I will leave aside the question of whether either of these thinkers should be considered liberal. Without first agreeing on what liberalism is, the latter question cannot be answered. The more important matter is how the reception of someone like Wollstonecraft as a caricatured liberal has led not only to a total flattening out of her otherwise multifaceted political thought but to a loss of what is genuinely radical in her conception of rights: namely, that rights, whether or not they have moral or philosophical grounds, are first and foremost political. They are forms of public action; rights have to be claimed. Rights have their origins in practices of freedom.

In liberal democracies such as our own, it is easy to lose track of how rights arose and how they are sustained, for freedom is often understood in highly individualistic terms, housed in constitutionally guaranteed rights, and experienced as something that begins where politics ends. For the radical republican Wollstonecraft, however, freedom is something else: it is a creative and world-building practice, fundamentally inaugural in character, that establishes public relations of equality among citizens, men and women, where formerly there was only hereditary, patriarchal, and arbitrary rule.

This takes me to my next point, I believe that Botting could have strengthened her case for a return to Wollstonecraft not by emphasizing her commitment to feminism first and liberalism second, but rather by drawing out Wollstonecraft's intense involvement in the Pamphlet War of the 1790s, her 1790 argument in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* against Edmund Burke and others who argued in favor of hereditary arbitrary monarchical and patriarchal rule—in a word, her radical and revolutionary republicanism. As Angela Maione has argued in a path-breaking 2012 dissertation, *Revolutionary Rhetoric: The Political Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Wollstonecraft's legacy has been characterized by an unnatural splitting, whereby the author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* is read by thinkers interested in political theory and perhaps in the radical republican tradition and the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is read by feminists.

Wollstonecraft was part of a revolutionary tradition that sought to effect political change by impacting public opinion and creating the conditions for the formation of popular judgment around the question of radical democracy, which manifested itself in the (French) Revolution Controversy. This tradition has been overlooked by Wollstonecraft interpreters undoubtedly at least in part because the practice of writing and spreading thought was repressed when contingent historical developments ultimately resulted in the loss of the tradition. Republicanism and, to a lesser extent, cosmopolitanism became stigmatized in the British context because they were associated with the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror which appeared to threaten British political order. Many of the pamphleteers became suspects and some were eventually tried for treason and sedition. Feminism, associated with Wollstonecraft, became stigmatized as well, but through the defamation of Wollstonecraft's character as, after her death, she was transformed into a symbolic figure that represented the excesses of revolutionary politics [including an unrestrained female sexuality].<sup>18</sup>

It is not that Botting wholly ignores Wollstonecraft's republicanism, but her brief account of it is mostly contained in passages claiming that the two *Vindications* reflect their author's exposure to Christian dissent as espoused



by the radical preacher Richard Price and eventually the “full adoption of the Pricean approach to grounding human rights on a rational theological foundation.”<sup>19</sup> Now there is no question that Price and the emerging tradition of Christian dissent had a deep influence on Wollstonecraft. But can we trace what is truly transformative and continually relevant in Wollstonecraft’s thought to the construction of a rational theological foundation? Anyone who has read either of the *Vindications* will know that these hardly qualify as philosophical treatises trying to provide a metaphysical or theological foundation for rights. They are political writings par excellence. Their unabashedly polemical character is one, though surely not the only or most important, reason that they have been marginalized in the canon of political thought. As Maione shows, Mary Wollstonecraft enacted, through her speech, writing, and action, the practice of claiming rights that I described earlier. In this way she was an exemplar of her own radical conception of rights; she gave birth to something new: the public (writing and speaking) woman. She also became by the nineteenth century the woman with whom no public woman wanted to be identified for fear of being dismissed as immoral, crazy, or worse.

My point is not that Wollstonecraft did not seek to provide arguments along the lines described by Botting; rather, it is that those are not the arguments that we can retrieve to make the case for her relevance to the debate over human rights today, as Botting well knows. For Botting, the theological underpinnings of Wollstonecraft’s argument limits the contemporary reach of her work. But Wollstonecraft’s belief that the case for universal human rights needs a foundation is still relevant. If Wollstonecraft was indeed eclipsed by Mill “as a philosophical source for human rights arguments at the turn of the twentieth century,” as Botting observes, that is not—or surely not only—because of the “metaphysical and religious orientation” of the two *Vindications*.<sup>20</sup> It is because Wollstonecraft has been misunderstood not only as a liberal, in the caricatured way described earlier, but also as a thinker in need of some sort of philosophical/theological grounding or foundation for rights. And once that metaphysical or theological foundation no longer has political purchase, it becomes hard to see where Wollstonecraft’s continued relevance can possibly lie, just as it is hard for some of our students to see what could be relevant in an argument for women’s rights when, after all, such rights have already been won.

I understand and appreciate Botting’s objections to Rawlsians, who put forward a nonfoundationalist approach to rights. In her view, this approach

takes for granted a cultural and legal institutionalization of human rights that Wollstonecraft or even Mill could not presume. . . . Both of them were faced with the struggle of convincing people that women were human with the same

rights as men, and as such were deserving of popular recognition and legal protection of their rights like men. It made sense to them that they had to provide a solid moral foundation for this radical view, to give it philosophical validity. As masterful rhetoricians . . . Wollstonecraft and Mill also knew that coherence of their arguments for the foundations of universal human rights had implications for their persuasiveness in the public sphere. Their simple and elegant logic was in many ways their most powerful weapon in the rhetorical and political battle for the public recognition and legal institutionalization of women's human rights.<sup>21</sup>

I agree with Botting's assessment of the situation in which Wollstonecraft and Mill found themselves, though I do not think that the problem was one of providing a philosophically sound view for women's rights; it was a matter of persuading people politically. And though political persuasion surely can make use of existing commonplaces, things taken for granted in any given time or place, these need not be construed as amounting to a foundation in the philosophical sense of requiring all knowledge and justified belief to rest on a ground of noninferential knowledge or belief. There is no need for something absolute, something that cannot be questioned, for claims to rights should be understood not in terms of truth but in terms of what is right or just. "We *hold* these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" as Arendt once remarked of the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. Were the truths self-evident, it would be irrelevant whether we hold them to be so. That they are self-evident is a matter of public opinion and consent.

To conclude, recovering Wollstonecraft for the contemporary debate on women's human rights is a worthy and important project, and here Botting has made a crucial contribution. I remain skeptical, however, as to whether this recovery can succeed if we focus on the philosophical/theological foundation for her rights claims. At a certain point, it is the rights claims themselves, the political action itself, the woman speaking in public herself, which authorizes—or not—what is claimed. Wollstonecraft understood this. However, she may have made appeals to God, to universal morality, or to duty, she recognized that at the end of the day rights come down to people acting politically, taking the risk of claiming rights, and trying to persuade others to agree. That is one reason why she wrote such passionate prose. It was not just stories like *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* that provided the human story to readers or that balanced rational argumentation with affective expression. I agree with Botting that stories like *Maria* did put a human face on women's human rights, but Wollstonecraft's writing itself is unabashedly polemical and political. She

was part of a Pamphlet War after all. She was not a liberal, as we have come to understand that term, but a radical republican focused on rights as practices of public freedom.

### Comments by Alasdair MacIntyre

Thinkers as various as the authors of the American *Declaration of Independence* and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, as Jacques Maritain and Eleanor Roosevelt, have agreed that there are sound and compelling arguments for ascribing a set of rights to human individuals as such, even if they have disagreed as to what those arguments are. That individuals have such rights is taken to give us sufficient reason for affording every individual certain opportunities, for protecting every individual from certain harms and deprivations, and for insisting that certain inequalities are unjustified. But whether we have such reason surely depends upon whether or not the arguments advanced in support of the thesis that there are human rights are indeed sound and compelling. But what if they are not?

This is a crucial question for anyone concerned to interpret the narrative which Eileen Hunt Botting presents in her *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* and the unusually impressive and path-breaking character of that narrative makes the question all the more urgent. Here I cannot argue that there are no sound and compelling arguments for ascribing rights to individuals as such, if only because, in order to do so, I should have to show that each of the arguments advanced in support of the ascription of human rights fails, a book-length task. What I do note is Botting's recognition of the importance of what is at issue: "Wollstonecraft and Mill thus began with foundationalist approaches to the abstract rational justification of universal human rights."<sup>22</sup> And her account of Wollstonecraft's deontology and of Mill's utilitarianism makes it plain that if Wollstonecraft's arguments are sound, Mill's fail and vice versa. Suppose that both fail. How then are we to read Botting's narrative?

It is from this point of view the story of how Wollstonecraft and Mill were taken to have provided rational justifications for the ascription of human and so of women's rights only because they appealed to premises and to inferences to which the large majority of their readers assented. But on this view, both authors and readers were in fact victims of the same pre-suppositions and made the same mistakes. It seems to follow that Botting's narrative is no more than the story of an irrational progress in which bad arguments were put to effective rhetorical use. It does not follow that we should not welcome the resulting increased recognition of the need to

provide women with a wide range of opportunities and protections that had hitherto been denied to them. But the story of how this was achieved would be significantly different from the story as Botting tells it. For it is a presupposition of her narrative that there are sound arguments for asserting that there are human rights.

Happily, however, even if Wollstonecraft's, Mill's, and everyone else's arguments in favor of ascribing rights to individuals as such are indeed unsound, we do not need to understand the history of the achievement of women's rights only as an irrational progress. For central to that history are the successive refutations and defeats of a set of bad arguments advanced in this or that particular local context against affording women the relevant range of opportunities and protections. The premises of those bad arguments always include statements that women by their nature as women lack some set of capacities for functioning well that men possess, and those premises are false and over time have been shown to be false again and again. So there is a rational case for according to women the same rights as men, namely, that all the arguments against according women such rights have turned out to be bad arguments.

Botting's narrative would have taken a significantly different form, if episodes in which the bad arguments were seen to fail had found a place in it. Consider one easy and obvious example, that of the change in public, that is, in male opinion in the United Kingdom between 1914 and 1918 as to whether women should have the right to vote in parliamentary elections. In 1914, this was still highly controversial. By 1918 it had become relatively uncontroversial. How so? During those four years, well over four million men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one had been conscripted into the armed forces and seven hundred thousand had died. Who took their places in the work-force? Women. And how did women function in the work force? Quite as well as men. The contention that in spheres outside the home women could not function as well as men had been decisively refuted.

Neither Wollstonecraft nor Mill had to hand any example of this kind. But Mill must have been aware of at least one recent relevant striking example of enterprise and achievement by women and, oddly, he makes no reference to it in *The Subjection of Women*. *The Subjection of Women* was written in 1861 and published in 1869. In 1854, early in the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale landed at Scutari with fifty-two volunteer nurses, fourteen of them Catholic nuns recruited by the future Cardinal Manning. Under Nightingale's leadership—and she acted under the direct authority of the Secretary for War—the medical care of wounded British soldiers was transformed and their mortality rate reduced from 42% to 2%. When Nightingale returned to England, she proceeded to found the first secular

professional nursing school in the United Kingdom at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. Her combination of extraordinary political, organizational, and nursing skills with her singleness of will made her an exemplary figure for the British press and the British public. Yet when, in chapter three of *The Subjection of Women* Mill cites examples of women distinguished by their achievements, he names the sixteenth-century Queen Elizabeth and Catherine of Medici, but not the nineteenth-century Florence Nightingale. Why was Mill thus silent?

It may have been because he had learned that Nightingale herself had come to believe that women were generally inferior to men. But this silence may have had other sources. Mill's mode of self-presentation, both in the *Autobiography* and elsewhere, always raises questions about what he does not tell us as well as about what he tells us. We learn a good deal about Harriet Taylor but, for example, almost nothing about his five sisters, a good deal about his education, but almost nothing about his siblings' education. I shall not pursue the questions that these silences raise, since to do so would be to distract attention from the importance of Botting's narrative.

What she has provided is the definitive history of a discourse or rather of a sequence of discourses, of appeals to and defenses of abstract and general considerations that bear upon women's rights as human rights, and in that genre an unqualifiedly excellent history. But every history of a discourse or sequence of discourses is embedded in some larger history and can only be adequately understood when the nature and effects of that embedding are identified and acknowledged. So, some of the questions raised by Botting's narrative will only be answered when that larger history is written. Part of that larger history has as its subject matter those conflicts and struggles that issued in the enactment of legislation in particular countries that gave women equal rights with men in parliamentary elections or in marriage or in the workplace. Part of it is concerned with those changes in social structure and in culture that determine how hospitable a particular society is to egalitarian reforms. And we need to understand both, if we are to be able to say what the social and political effects the kind of discourse initiated by Wollstonecraft and Mill have been and how far that discourse was and is shaped by those other factors. (Remember Gertrude Himmelfarb's claim that the invention of the bicycle did more to liberate women than did feminism.<sup>23</sup>)

Botting's book is not only a history of a sequence of discourses, but by its invitation to its readers to understand that history in a particular way it is a further contribution to that same ongoing conversation as well as a necessary prologue to posing the further questions that I have identified. We will be discussing it for a long time.

### Response by Eileen Hunt Botting

Ruth Abbey asked the provocative question: Could Wollstonecraft have endorsed a society without rights for women or other people? Put differently, are rights merely instrumental to more important goods, such as dignity or liberty, in Wollstonecraft's moral and political theory? My answer to this challenging question is a decisive *no*—due to the resoundingly clear and systematic arguments that Wollstonecraft made across her two great *Vindications* of the “rights of humanity” published in 1790 and 1792.<sup>24</sup> Wollstonecraft could *not* endorse any society as a good society if it merely provided important goods for people without protecting their equal rights and encouraging the practice of their corresponding duties. Because of the theological basis for her groundbreaking theory of universal human rights, she thinks of rights as a “sacred” and indispensable part of the deep metaphysical foundation for her broader ethics and politics.<sup>25</sup>

Rights are non-negotiable for Wollstonecraft—as they were for her theological mentor the Reverend Richard Price, the Rational Dissenter—because they are moral correlates of duties. Duties are prescribed by God's universally applicable rational moral law. Duty—especially the duty to carry out God's moral law in all areas of life—is thus the ultimate moral foundation for her ethics and politics.<sup>26</sup> As in her contemporary Kant's moral philosophy, all rights derive from duties, but not all duties beget rights. A truly just society must realize in society, culture, and law the duties that obtain for each and every rational being made in the image of God.<sup>27</sup> In realizing these duties, such a just society must also realize the corresponding rights. One could not fulfill one's duties without concern for the provision and enjoyment of any rights (of oneself and others) that derive from those duties. As Wollstonecraft reminds her readers, “Rights and duties are inseparable.”<sup>28</sup>

The moral and political practice of duties and corresponding rights is integral to the realization of a Wollstonecraftian justice. The practice of “rights and duties” is also integral to the realization of a *eudaimonic*, Christian-Aristotelian conception of happiness as defined by virtue, or moral excellence.<sup>29</sup> Although the realization of happiness (of any sort) independent of justice (including rights) would not suffice to make a society truly good for Wollstonecraft, happiness is certainly a welcome by-product of justice for her. This is why she often made consequentialist arguments for the good outcomes of granting women rights. Such consequentialist arguments for the benefits of rights are supplemental and morally secondary to her primary, fundamental justification of rights in deontological (duty-based, theologically grounded) terms. Wollstonecraft's progressive and optimistic view of God's benevolent providence—which was most

strongly expressed at the time she wrote her twin *Vindications*—gives her a theological basis for seeing good outcomes such as happiness as consistent with her deeper deontological justification of rights.<sup>30</sup>

Zerilli wondered if rights, in Wollstonecraft's political theory, function more as political tools than as moral absolutes, despite Wollstonecraft's regular (and I would add, systematic) appeal to a rational theology as the grounding for her theory of universal human rights. Certainly, Wollstonecraft understood the political power of the moral concept of rights, especially for envisioning the radical (indeed, utopian) civil and political equality that women merited alongside men but had not yet been granted in society, law, and government. But her awareness of the political usefulness of rights talk did not "trump"—so to speak—her prior deontological justification for them. The persuasiveness or rhetorical power of rights was not their fundamental (i.e., moral) justification, which could only be stated in reference to God's rational, universal moral law. Zerilli's reading of Wollstonecraft on rights as political tools better fits Mill, whose youthful classical utilitarianism and mature, liberal rule-utilitarianism required him to conceptualize rights as instruments toward the happiness of the "whole sentient creation."<sup>31</sup>

I nonetheless share Zerilli's view that twenty-first century feminists should follow Wollstonecraft in appreciating the immense and enduring political power of the concept of women's human rights. Without the idea of women's human rights, women would have lacked a valuable tool for instigation of political change on behalf of their gender. The idea of women's human rights is a useful tool for politics on behalf of women because it allows feminists (of all schools) to articulate what women unjustly lacked in the past, why they deserve better in the present, and how a brighter future for each and every human being—regardless of sex, gender, sexuality, class, race, age, or disability—might be achieved through, not despite, politics itself.

Zerilli proposed the intriguing counter-thesis that it was not the Christian theology of the Rational Dissenters that made Wollstonecraft outdated in the eyes of later feminists, but rather, later feminists' own imposition of a narrow "liberal" label onto their philosophical foremother. While I would love to think that feminist readings of Wollstonecraft (liberal or not) can have this kind of power to shape opinion, I think broader social forces—especially changing practices of religion, gender, and sexuality during the nineteenth century—actually caused Wollstonecraft's eclipse by Mill and other feminist schools of thought. In chapter five, "Human Stories," I trace how Wollstonecraft's feminist take on the Rational Dissenters held great appeal for the Quakers, who led the nineteenth-century women's rights movement in the United States.

Although Wollstonecraft and her radical brand of post-revolutionary feminism was indeed "stigmatized," as Maione perceptively puts it, especially in

anti-Jacobin literature of the Napoleonic era, many women and men—particularly those in unorthodox sects born of the Protestant Reformation—continued to relate to her works, publicly and privately, throughout the nineteenth century. Wollstonecraft was popular and influential in the Americas, throughout Europe, and even in her cooler homeland of Britain, where her reception was dampened the most, due to the prim (yet secretly salacious) Victorian view of the Godwin-Shelley circle as a “league of incest.”<sup>32</sup> A persistent British Victorian bias against Wollstonecraft as a “fallen woman” has distorted modern scholarship on her legacies. Although she died very young, at age thirty-eight, Wollstonecraft’s “posthumous death” as a philosophical and literary figure has been widely exaggerated. Even through her death as a result of a childbirth infection, she ensured her literary immortality by her subterranean, psychological, and symbolic maternal presence in the work of her daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and many other subversively transformative feminist writers since.

Zerilli called for a reclamation of Wollstonecraft as a radical republican. While I applaud the recent explosion of interest in exploring Wollstonecraft’s republicanism from various theoretical and historical perspectives, I also feel some *deja vu*.<sup>33</sup> Decades of scholarship on Wollstonecraft had firmly established her as a kind of radical eighteenth-century republican who responded swiftly and insightfully to the events of the French Revolution and the debates on it in Britain.<sup>34</sup> My first book explored her development of a new and influential egalitarian model of the family in response to Rousseau and Burke, disputes on the French Revolution, and trends in late eighteenth-century theology.

My goal in *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women’s Human Rights* was to refresh the framing of Wollstonecraft for political theory in the present. No one had looked systematically at her relevance for contemporary theories and practices of women’s human rights. There had been no book-length comparative study of her and Mill, either. This book reboots the debate on the relationship between feminism and liberalism by giving one of the only truly global and cross-cultural political concepts of our time—women’s human rights—an intellectual history which is long overdue.

Though I continue to read Wollstonecraft as a revolutionary republican in her 1790s context, I also interpret her legacies for the evolution of what Amy P. Baecher and others have called “feminist liberalism.”<sup>35</sup> In the end, debates over whether Wollstonecraft should be called a feminist republican or a feminist liberal, a religious feminist or a radical feminist, miss the real point: she was in fact all of these things and more, so her political theory (and the politics it yields) allows for a variety of creative transgressions in how we conceptualize and implement complex, evolving ideas like women’s human rights.



Abbey also posed a challenging question about Mill's theory of rights. Isn't Mill's conception of who is capable of exercising human rights relative to, and therefore relevant only to, particular epochs and places, peoples and cultures? Most infamously, didn't *On Liberty* strongly suggest that civilized Englishmen were the only people ready, circa 1859, to freely and fully self-develop their individuality through the exercise of individual rights—especially the right to liberty? While Mill acknowledges that different peoples in different epochs and cultures may have different levels of capability for the exercise of rights (such as to self-governance), he never generalizes that some peoples or cultures are essentially, naturally, or absolutely excluded from such capability for the exercise of rights. In the case of British India, he argued that the colonists had an obligation to assist the indigenous peoples toward their realization of self-governance as soon as it was politically feasible. I join a growing consensus of Mill scholars who reject the view that Mill thought some peoples and cultures were actually by nature “barbaric” and therefore essentially or absolutely incapable of holding rights.<sup>36</sup> I would add that Mill could not have held with any philosophical consistency such an essentialist view of the natural inferiority of the “Other” alongside his long-held feminist view of sexual inequality as an artifact of arbitrary patriarchal power.

Despite her attempt to frame Mill as an essentialist with regard to racial and cultural Others, Abbey went on to suggest that I *overstated* the moral issues with his and Wollstonecraft's use of Orientalist and Eurocentric stereotypes in their arguments for women's human rights. Didn't they simply exploit the popular rhetorical salience of these Western stereotypes of the Oriental “Other” as a way of calling out the “barbarism” of persistent patriarchal practices in so-called civilized nations? On this view, Wollstonecraft and Mill primarily used Orientalism to condemn Europe for its lack of commitment to women's human rights.

Chapter four—the longest chapter in the book—argues that regardless of Mill's motives or intentions in using Orientalism to frame some of his arguments for women's human rights, such culturally biased rhetoric undermined in practice the universalism of his principled case for universal human rights. Toward this end, I charted the international history of the pernicious, prejudicial impact of the “feminist Orientalism” of Wollstonecraft and Mill on both *Western European* and *non-Western European* women's rights advocacy (in the United States, Russia, India, and South Africa) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>37</sup>

With this comparative historical background in place, I developed a general moral theory on why the use of culturally biased rhetoric is ethically problematic for human rights argumentation in any cultural context. First,

culturally biased rhetoric—in any form—compromises the universality of philosophical arguments for human rights, even if the philosophers themselves—in the abstract—had given sound reasons for why human rights apply to each and all regardless of social status. Secondly, culturally biased rhetoric—in any form—has pernicious, forward-looking political effects, regardless of the intentions of the users. A likely unintended effect of Wollstonecraft and Mill’s “feminist Orientalism” was the creation of an insidious yet influential rhetorical model for human rights argumentation that in practice contradicted the universality of abstract arguments for women’s human rights. Third, I provide an extended case study that shows how the cross-cultural engagement of Wollstonecraft and Mill by three nineteenth-century feminist liberals—Martina Barros Borgoño of Chile, Maria Tsebrikova of Russia, and Elvira López of Argentina—led them to shed the culturally biased rhetoric that marred their forebears’ otherwise noble efforts to defend human rights. None of these feminist liberals achieved a perfectly unbiased perspective, but each of them modeled the possibility of achieving a partial yet sufficiently ethical transcendence of cultural bias in their argumentation for women’s human rights.

Alasdair MacIntyre underscored my guiding assumption that there are sound (as in, coherent and internally consistent) arguments for understanding women’s rights as human rights. Indeed, I find some of the—if not *the*—most path-breaking of these arguments to be made by Wollstonecraft and Mill. Despite their different approaches to the justification of women’s human rights, both Wollstonecraft’s rational theology and Mill’s liberal utilitarianism each achieve a clarity and coherence of argument in their simple yet profound insistence that women’s inclusion is necessary for making the abstract concept of human rights truly universal in scope (i.e., applicable to each and every human being).

As MacIntyre indicates, I do not take a stand as to whether Wollstonecraft or Mill made the absolute “best” or “winning” argument for women’s human rights in terms of logic alone. As a political theorist, not an analytical philosopher, I am more interested in how Wollstonecraftian and Millian arguments worked in rhetorical and political practice. This is what I take Wollstonecraft and Mill to have wanted when they published these arguments. They wished their simple and elegant logic to gain traction in discourse and activism concerning women’s rights and human rights, which had been escalating since the French Revolution. On this score, I judge both schools of thought to have serious political advantages and disadvantages, as well as real moral virtues and vices. In chapter two, I underscore how Wollstonecraft’s and Mill’s respective approaches to defending women’s human rights have been and are still rhetorically powerful and politically salient for reform-oriented politics.

In different yet complementary ways, Wollstonecraft's and Mill's arguments for universal human rights are well suited for addressing contentious women's issues in conditions of cultural and religious pluralism. On the other hand, chapters three and four systematically treat what's wrong—ethically and politically—with their joint reliance on instrumentalist and culturally biased rhetoric to make claims for women's human rights.

Perhaps with some irony, MacIntyre noted that I did not structure the book around a story about how patriarchal arguments have failed, over time, to stand up to the test of feminist arguments. Indeed, my work in the archives of feminism prevents such an optimistic presumption in favor of the inevitable, linear victory of the movement. Rather, I structured the book's narrative around the historic, yet underappreciated, success of Wollstonecraft's and Mill's schools of thought. By "success" I mean these schools' tremendous international impact upon philosophical and activist discourse on women's rights as human rights, from the nineteenth century to the present. In turn, their success in shaping these feminist discourses contributed to concrete improvements in the lives of women and other historically oppressed people.

MacIntyre offered the alternative hypothesis that the success of the idea of women's human rights might be best understood as a by-product of broader social forces. His example was the economic impact of World War I on women's work outside the home, which altered public opinion about women's desert of other rights, such as suffrage. This example vividly illustrates how broader social forces can shape dramatic changes in public opinion about women's capabilities and rights. MacIntyre's point about social forces supplements rather than upsets the core thesis of my book, however. The idea of women's human rights—born of the schools of Wollstonecraft and Mill—became a political force precisely because of its reception, criticism, revision, and translation by readers and activists in their distinctive cultural contexts and amid broader social forces worldwide.

MacIntyre raised the interesting question of why Mill's *Subjection of Women* (1869) does not mention the achievements of many notable women of his time, including Florence Nightingale and her fleet of British nurses who courageously served in the Crimean War. Indeed, Mill had an extensive correspondence with Nightingale dating to the 1860s, which reveals his support of her ground-breaking work for the advancement of women in the nursing profession.<sup>38</sup> However, the omission of Nightingale from his short list of exemplary women is not surprising given how short the list is. Wollstonecraft is also excluded, despite the fact that Mill knew of her work at least since 1842, when Auguste Comte disclosed, in their correspondence on "the woman question," his early fascination with her feminist ideas.<sup>39</sup>

Mill's relative lack of recitation of exemplary women (past or present) is a product of his method of argument in *The Subjection of Women*. Like Wollstonecraft before him, he sought to make an abstract rational justification for women's human rights, albeit on different, secular and utilitarian, grounds than his predecessor. Unlike feminist thinkers from Christine de Pisan to Hannah Mather Crocker, Wollstonecraft and Mill did not rely on the exceptional examples of great women to nudge readers toward the lazy inference that women in general deserved greater opportunities for development of their human capabilities. Instead, they appealed to historical examples of great women solely as a starting point for a more forward-looking and abstract approach to the rational justification of women's human rights. The failure to advance women's education across cultures and epochs, and women's resultant deprivation of opportunities for the development of their capabilities relative to men, served as the factual impetus for a provocative counterfactual posed by both Wollstonecraft and Mill. If women had been given the same rights as men, then it would be known whether the genders had the same capabilities or not. Until that great social experiment was run, it could not be known for certain whether men were superior to women in any area of human achievement, no matter what history would seem to teach.

Both MacIntyre and Abbey drew attention to the silence of Mill's *Autobiography* on some of the women closest to him—his mother and his sisters. This silence is troubling in light of his arguments for women's human rights: How can Mill's feminism be consistent with the exclusion of his nearest female relatives from his archetypal story of individual self-development toward freedom and happiness? To answer this question in the spirit of the *Autobiography*, we must consider that it treats Mill's life as a template for thinking through the general conditions for individual human flourishing. The *Autobiography* is not a work of history or a family genealogy, but rather a complex literary and philosophical narrative that bridges the genres of biography, autobiography, and hagiography. It unfolds a powerful, intersubjective story about how one person's transformative experiences with love—of poetry, people, and political causes—made a life worth living to the very end, despite its grave and terrible losses. Its aim is not to record facts about a life, but rather to spur meditation on the meaning of a life in relation to the lives of other individuals, and, in turn, on the value of individual human lives in general.

While Mill excludes his mother and sisters from the *Autobiography*, he prominently includes the woman whom he claimed was "my strongest incitement" for all of his best philosophical work, particularly *On Liberty*.<sup>40</sup> That Harriet Taylor, his (extra-) marital partner of nearly thirty years, shared the first name of his mother must have resonated deeply with him each time he

wrote or spoke it. The power of a name to recall multiple personages makes Mill's mother a symbolic presence in the *Autobiography* to anyone who knew (or knows) him or his family well.

Abbey commented that Taylor functions as a symbol—and a highly romanticized one at that—in the *Autobiography*. This is one of the major themes of chapter five, which traces how the “human stories” of Wollstonecraft's and Mill's (auto)biographical works have sparked women's human rights activism (including the spread of feminist literature) around the globe. Like Zerilli, I share the view that Wollstonecraft's *Vindications* as well as her novels were at once personal and political works, drawing from a well of emotion and experience to make what Amartya Sen has called “wrathful yet rational” arguments for the rights of women and other humans.<sup>41</sup> Her skillful blending of reason and emotion in her writing is what made her works resonate deeply with women's rights advocates around the globe, across differences of gender and culture, motivating them to fight for a common political cause. From Prague to Maharashtra, and from Tokyo to Seoul, the iconic story of Mill's epic love for Taylor also moved intellectuals to translate the arguments of *The Subjection of Women* into their own cultural contexts, with the hope that they might instigate positive change for the women of their peoples and nations.

Abbey and MacIntyre were astute in noticing that Mill served as the primary tutor to his younger sisters throughout his adolescence, yet said almost nothing about his siblings' education in the *Autobiography*. I would add that the educational asymmetry between him and his sisters may have driven his omission of them. These women's literal absence from the book makes them (and their mother) all the more present to Mill (and his careful readers) as symbols of women's oppression to the point of social negation. Like most women in history, Mill's mother and sisters had been denied basic rights that he had been preferentially awarded on the arbitrary basis of sex. They had been marginalized and their needs overlooked without rational justification. By upholding “the Life” he shared with Harriet Taylor as a kind of allegorical antidote to this historic injustice against women, the elderly Mill placed his hope for feminism in the power of human stories of love and loss to win hearts and minds across time and place.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to its silence regarding the women of the Mill family, the *Autobiography* painstakingly assesses the moral and educational limitations of his father's (and Bentham's) classical utilitarianism. His father's controlling, cold approach to education imparted a heartless utilitarian worldview that nearly drove the young Mill to suicide. Mill may have strongly sympathized with the women in his family as fellow victims of the educational tyranny of patriarchs. Just as these and other women were reduced to mere drudges and social cyphers by patriarchal culture and laws, the young Mill

was almost killed by the severity of his father-patriarch's overly demanding classical utilitarian worldview.<sup>43</sup> In this light, the *Autobiography* is as feminist a text as *The Subjection of Women*, which was completed and published around the same time.

Mill, with this deeply personal sense of the moral arbitrariness of his male privilege, often thought and acted as an "insider" to the problem of gender injustice, according to Abbey. Although I find it illuminating to read Mill more as a "social scientist" who studies the problem of gender injustice from an "outsider's" perspective, in contrast to Wollstonecraft's "insider's" perspective on sexual discrimination, I never categorically describe either as an insider or an outsider. Rather, I present them as each advancing reasons for why we should try to bridge these insider and outsider perspectives as much as is practicable in human rights advocacy. I follow Ackerly, and before her, Patricia Hill Collins, on this crucial point—and likewise recognize the real difficulty of achieving such an insider-outsider perspective on issues where women's human rights come in conflict with other values and practices, such as religious and other cultural identities. In this vein, chapter two examines the issue of religious polygamy's compatibility with women's human rights—in nineteenth-century Mormon Utah and in twenty-first century Islamic Iran—through multiple lenses of insider, outsider, and insider-outsider perspectives. It is the dynamic interplay of different points of view on a contentious issue like religious polygamy that yields creative insight into how women's human rights might be seen as compatible with or even integral to practices and values with which they previously came into conflict.<sup>44</sup>

In response to what Rawls called "the fact of pluralism," Abbey quite reasonably wondered if Wollstonecraft's rational theological justification for human rights could truly serve as a "big tent" under which all people could find coverage for their rights.<sup>45</sup> The distinction between justification and persuasion is relevant here. In chapter two, I argue that a weakness of Wollstonecraft's theological approach to defending women's human rights is its greater persuasiveness to those who share those same or similar theological beliefs. At the same time, a strength of her theological approach is that its style of argument has resonated with a broad range of religious feminists from a variety of faiths, including Quakers, Congregationalists, Unitarians, Mormons, Muslims, Jews, and Roman Catholics, through the present day.

Regardless of its persuasiveness, however, Wollstonecraft's rational theology justifies all people's inclusion under the "big tent" of universal human rights. If nonbelievers or people of other faiths do not wish to recognize the "big tent" of human rights in the same metaphysical or theological terms as Wollstonecraft does, the tent still covers them. People need not be persuaded to hold her same theory of rights in order for their rights to be rationally

justified under her rubric. As conceived by Wollstonecraft, human rights apply to each and every person regardless of social status (including religion or lack thereof) or personal beliefs (including religious belief or nonbelief). Wollstonecraft's universalistic "big tent" of human rights is staked wide enough such that it covers everyone, while accommodating people's different understandings of the basis for those rights. Under Wollstonecraft's "big tent" of human rights, some people may share her (or another) religious perspective on the deep and absolutely firm moral foundations for equal rights. Others protected by the tent may prefer to locate the stakes supporting their rights in the shallower ground of law and political institutions, rather than in any deeper (and more contentious) metaphysical or theological foundation.<sup>46</sup>

Chapter two explains that Wollstonecraft's free-thinking, Rational Dissenter theology (and its attendant justification of human rights) is quite capacious in the sense that it allows for a variety of religious beliefs—at least within monotheistic traditions—to be compatible with it. This leaves open the possibility that people with a variety of religious beliefs could see their most basic moral and theological principles as consonant with her abstract rational justification for universal human rights. One could also imagine polytheists (as some hold Mormons to be) finding Wollstonecraft's abstract rational approach to justifying women's human rights quite convincing, even if they did not agree entirely on the theological grounding for it. This was in fact the case for the Mormon feminists of nineteenth-century Utah, who appealed to Wollstonecraft's "logical" critique of the "false sentimentality" of Rousseau as an inspiration for their own reformist work toward reconciling the contentious issues of religious polygamy and women's suffrage.<sup>47</sup> Regardless of their reaction or exposure to Wollstonecraft's ideas, however, all people (believers and nonbelievers, monotheists and polytheists) enjoy complete coverage for their rights under the "big tent" of her theory of universal human rights. Here lies the conceptual power of her metaphysical approach to human rights—it allows for a bird's eye (or God's eye) justification of rights for all people, despite people's ongoing failure to adopt such a cosmopolitan perspective on justice for each and all.

Given that Mill's secular liberal utilitarianism eclipsed Wollstonecraft's rational theology as the dominant approach to defending women's human rights at the turn of the twentieth century, Zerilli questioned whether Wollstonecraft's rational theology could still be relevant today for feminist political advocacy. In chapter two, I argue that Wollstonecraft is especially relevant today for resolving supposedly intractable conflicts between women's human rights and religious traditions. I point to Shirin Ebadi—the Nobel peace prize winner and Iranian Muslim feminist—as a living (and daring) embodiment of a Wollstonecraftian approach to reconciling religious tradition

and women's human rights. Speaking up from within her Muslim faith, the persecuted and exiled Ebadi makes clear and compelling arguments about the equality of all people made in the image of God and the need for Muslim women to study the Koran in order to combat patriarchal misunderstandings of its profoundly egalitarian message. With Ebadi and other religious feminists in mind, it is more precise to speak of a partial, not a total, eclipse of the religious Wollstonecraft by the secular Mill. Overall, religious feminists continue to have an edge over secular feminists in convincing religious people that women's human rights are resonant with—or even expressive of—their theological and metaphysical world views. While not every religious feminist argument will persuade a religious person to see the value of women's human rights, some of these arguments will have a special and versatile appeal within religious contexts that secular arguments, relatively speaking, will lack.

Abbey also queried whether it made sense for me to read Mill—as she and Jeff Spinner-Halev have done—as a metaphysical thinker with a (wholly or partially) comprehensive doctrine concerning the value of individuality. While I agree that Mill has an abstract and richly normative comprehensive doctrine concerning the value of individuality, and that it backs up his theory of human rights, I find no evidence that it is, strictly speaking, a metaphysical doctrine. I take Mill at his word, often-repeated, that he's *not* a metaphysical (supernatural or a priori) thinker, but rather a consistently empirically grounded (secular and a posteriori) thinker. This is one reason why I tend to read him as a social scientist.

Furthermore, I do not follow Abbey and Spinner-Halev in reading Mill as a holder of a “partially” comprehensive doctrine of any sort. The notion of a “partially comprehensive doctrine” is a contradiction in terms. A doctrine is either comprehensive (abstract, richly normative, and holistically prescriptive of a way of life) or it is not comprehensive—there is nothing, by definition, in between. The comprehensiveness of the doctrine does not depend on the presence or absence of any metaphysical feature, but rather its abstract and demanding moral content regarding the best way to live one's whole life. To be a Millian liberal utilitarian is to hold a comprehensive doctrine about the ultimate moral value of individual self-development—an abstract, demanding, and potentially divisive moral doctrine grounded on an empirical conception of utility, not any metaphysical ideas. In this way, my definition of a comprehensive doctrine diverges from Rawls, who often used the terms “comprehensive” and “metaphysical” interchangeably. While some comprehensive doctrines are metaphysical (such as Wollstonecraft's view that the soul and the moral rules for its salvation have no sex), others (like Mill's “principle” of individuality) are not.<sup>48</sup>

MacIntyre pushed me to think about how my philosophical narrative of the rise of the idea of women's human rights since the French Revolution is incomplete. I could not agree more. My work has been inspired in part by MacIntyre's view of narrative as a necessary framework for coherent moral



and political arguments punctuated by a beginning, a middle, and an end.<sup>49</sup> Like MacIntyre, I understand such moral and political narratives as unfolding in history. Written by authors in particular times and places, then revised and edited by readers and critics in other contexts, such stories gain new authors, editors, and narrative structures over time.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* provides an international philosophical genealogy of the concept of women's human rights, not a synoptic study of the development of feminist ideas and politics. As my long and winding road of research and writing taught me, it takes a village to narrate the vast and complex history of feminism. I stuck with this project for over a decade in order to inspire others—such as the rising stars Angela Maione, Madeline Ahmed Cronin, and Karie Cross—to take up the vital task of studying feminism within political theory and the history of political thought, especially from new comparative, international, postcolonial, intersectional, and other critical perspectives.<sup>51</sup> This book is thus the latest, though hopefully not the last, iteration of the arguments inspired by Wollstonecraft, Mill, and their philosophical and political respondents around the world.

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

1. Eileen Hunt Botting, *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006).
2. Eileen Hunt Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 90.
3. *Ibid.*, 85.
4. *Ibid.*, 20, 74, 101.
5. E.g., Ruth Abbey and Jeff Spinner-Halev, "Rawls, Mill and the Problem of Political Liberalism," *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 1 (2013): 1–13.
6. E.g., Ruth Abbey, "Back Toward a Comprehensive Liberalism? Justice as Fairness, Gender and Families," *Political Theory* 35, no. 1 (2007): 1–24.
7. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 15.
8. John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. XXI, ed. John M. Robson, introduction by Stefan Collini (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 97.
9. *Ibid.*, 268.

10. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 205.
11. Harriet Taylor Mill, *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, ed. Jo Ellen Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
12. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973).
13. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, "The Women's Crusade," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2009.
14. Inderpal Grewal, "'Women's Rights as Human Rights': Feminist Practices, Global Feminism and Human Rights Regimes in Transnationality," *Citizenship Studies* 3, no. 3 (1999): 337–54.
15. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 69.
16. *Ibid.*, 9.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Angela Maione, *Revolutionary Rhetoric: The Political Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Northwestern University: PhD Dissertation, 2012), 12–13.
19. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 52.
20. *Ibid.*, 14.
21. *Ibid.*, 74–75.
22. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 76.
23. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), 189.
24. *Ibid.*, 6.
25. *Ibid.*, 83.
26. Virginia Sapiro cogently argued that Wollstonecraft understood God's rational moral law as prescribing the same moral virtues for each and all, a view that has radical egalitarian implications for eighteenth-century republican politics. I supplement Sapiro's reading by indicating that the universal human duty to follow God's rational moral law technically precedes the dutiful specification and implementation of particular human virtues derived from that law. Duty is thus prior to virtue for Wollstonecraft. See Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43–45, 74.
27. Unlike Kant, "rational beings" for Wollstonecraft includes women, children, and the cognitively disabled, owing to her metaphysical view of humans as made in the image of their rational God. On a metaphysical level—with their souls stamped by God's rational image—each and every human creature has the *potential* to develop reason, independent of how it is *actually* enabled or disabled in embodied social practice. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 87.
28. *Ibid.*, 81.
29. There is a growing school of thought that Wollstonecraft's conception of virtue is indebted to Aristotelianism. See Natalie Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Routledge, 2007); Sandrine Bergès, *The Routledge Guidebook to Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Routledge, 2013); Nancy Kendrick, "Wollstonecraft on Marriage as Virtue Friendship," in *The Social*

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30. For more extensive examinations of Wollstonecraft’s theology and its evolution through three distinct stages (Anglicanism, Socinianism, and a Romantic Deism), see Eileen M. Hunt, “The Family as Cave, Platoon, and Prison: The Three Stages of Wollstonecraft’s Philosophy of the Family,” *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 1 (2002): 81–119, and Botting, *Family Feuds*, chapter four. See also Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 51–57, 80–81.
  31. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 92.
  32. Eileen Hunt Botting, Christine Carey Wilkerson, and Elizabeth N. Kozlow, “Wollstonecraft as an International Feminist Meme,” *Journal of Women’s History* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 13–38; Eileen Hunt Botting and Charlotte Hammond Matthews, “Overthrowing the Floresta-Wollstonecraft Myth for Latin American Feminism,” *Gender and History* 26, no. 1 (April 2014): 64–83; Eileen Hunt Botting, “Making an American Feminist Icon: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Reception in U.S. Newspapers, 1800–1869,” *History of Political Thought* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 273–95; Eileen Hunt Botting, “Wollstonecraft in Europe, 1792–1904: A Revisionist Reception History,” *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 4 (May 2013): 503–27; Eileen Hunt Botting and Christine Carey, “Wollstonecraft’s Philosophical Impact on Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Rights Advocates,” *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (October 2004): 707–22. For the view of the Godwin-Shelley circle as a “league of incest,” see Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley* (New York: Random House, 2015), 411.
  33. *The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Oxford, 2016) contains several new essays on Wollstonecraft’s republicanism, by Philip Pettit, Susan James, Lena Halldenius, and the coeditors Alan Coffee and Sandrine Bergès, among others.
  34. E.g., Marilyn Butler, ed., *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue* (Chicago, 1992); and Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996). Building on this tradition of reading Wollstonecraft as a feminist and republican, immersed in the debates on the French Revolution, is Lena Halldenius, *Mary Wollstonecraft, and Feminist Republicanism* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015).
  35. Amy P. Baehner, “Toward a New Feminist Liberalism: Okin, Rawls, and Habermas,” *Hypatia* 11, no. 1 (1996): 49–66.
  36. E.g., Mark Tunick, “Tolerant Imperialism: John Stuart Mill’s Defense of British Rule in India,” *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 8 (2006): 586–611; Margaret Kohn and Daniel I. O’Neill, “A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies and America,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 2 (2006): 192–228; Karuna Mantena, “Mill and the Imperial Predicament,” in *J.S. Mill’s*

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37. Joyce Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*,” *Signs* 18, no. 3 (1993): 592–617.
  38. Evelyn L. Pugh, “J.S. Mill and Florence Nightingale Debate Women’s Rights,” *Journal of British Studies* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 118–38.
  39. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 67–68.
  40. *Ibid.*, 228.
  41. Eileen Hunt Botting, “The Personal Is Political: Wollstonecraft’s Witty, First-Person, Feminist Voice,” in Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Eileen Hunt Botting (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 261–79, especially 264.
  42. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 232. Here and elsewhere I cite from Harriet Taylor’s writings, including her personal correspondence with Mill.
  43. Zerilli in her comments at the symposium suggested that Mill may have called his mother a “drudge” but I could find no evidence of it in his correspondence. He did lament the ways women in general were reduced by patriarchal society and marriage to be “merely a drudge.” See John Stuart Mill, “The Subjection of Women,” in *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1879), chapter two, accessed 8 March 2017 at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/347>.
  44. Pablo Gilabert, “Humanist and Political Perspectives on Human Rights,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 4 (May 2011): 439–67.
  45. In applying the metaphor of the “big tent” to describe Wollstonecraft’s universalistic, rational, yet theologically grounded theory of human rights, I was inspired by the radical rhetoric of Pope Francis. See Dorian de Wind, “Pope Francis Sees the Catholic Church as a Big Tent—a Field Hospital after Battle,” *The Moderate Voice*, September 20, 2013, <http://themoderatevoice.com/pope-francis-sees-the-catholic-church-as-a-big-tent-a-field-hospital-after-battle/> (accessed 8 March 2017).
  46. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, [1993] 2005); John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1999] 2002); Charles Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
  47. Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill*, 112.
  48. *Ibid.*, 90, 100–102.
  49. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 68–71, 217.
  50. Here my understanding of narrative and its productive revision by reader responses is more indebted to the fiction of Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino than to MacIntyre.
  51. Cronin, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Conception of ‘True Taste’”; Karie Cross, “Structural Violence, Intersectionality, and *Justpeace*: Evaluating Women’s Peacebuilding Agency in Manipur, India,” *Hypatia* 32, no. 3 (2017), forthcoming; Maione, *Revolutionary Rhetoric*.

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