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# Wollstonecraft on Marriage as Virtue Friendship

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Mary Wollstonecraft's claims in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that marriage ought to 'subside into friendship'<sup>1</sup> and that the 'security of marriage [is to be found in] the calm tenderness of friendship'<sup>2</sup> have led some commentators to conclude that amorous love has no place in her conception of marriage,<sup>3</sup> while others have found in her view a repressive attitude toward sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Still other critics have claimed that in grounding marriage in classical ideals of virtue friendship, Wollstonecraft has naïvely modeled marriage on 'perfect' friendship between men.<sup>5</sup> It is true that she sometimes suggests that amorous love is at odds with friendship,<sup>6</sup> and it is also true that she conceives of marriage as based in the merit and esteem typical of virtue friendships, but the relation of her view to classical conceptions of friendship—in particular to Aristotle's view—is more complex and interesting than critics have recognized. I provide an analysis of Wollstonecraft's claim that marriage is friendship by considering the distinction Aristotle draws between virtue friendships and friendships of utility, especially as

<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft (1995), *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (henceforth *VRM*) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (henceforth *VRW*), ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 205. All references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Abbey (1999), 'Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft', *Hypatia* 14 (3): 78–95.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Poovey (1984), *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press). Poovey argues that Wollstonecraft's view of sexuality was influenced by repressive codes of conduct typical of the eighteenth-century English middle class.

<sup>5</sup> Tomaselli, Wollstonecraft's *VRM* and *VRW*, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

<sup>6</sup> She writes, for example, '[i]n great degree, love and friendship cannot subsist in the same bosom'. Love includes 'vain fears' and 'jealousies', and these are at odds with 'the sincere respect of friendship'. Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 151.

these elucidate his conception of the marriage friendship. I argue that Wollstonecraft presents marriage as a virtue friendship in order to show that it is not a friendship of utility, and that her aim in doing so is to remove marriage from the realm of the transactional and place it in the realm of the moral.

Several recent commentators have taken note of the Aristotelianism present in both Wollstonecraft's moral theory and her political philosophy. Sandrine Bergès, for example, has argued persuasively that Wollstonecraft is a virtue ethicist and that her conception of the virtues mirrors Aristotle's in several ways: the virtues are habits of action, they are a mean between two vices of excess and deficiency, and they are ways of instantiating human excellence.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on Wollstonecraft's political philosophy, Natalie Fuehrer Taylor has argued that Aristotle's political theory provides Wollstonecraft with an alternative to the state of nature theories advanced by Locke and Rousseau.<sup>8</sup> I follow Bergès in taking Wollstonecraft to be working within an Aristotelian moral framework: I show that she conceives of the virtues as human excellences, as ways to *perfect* oneself, not as ways to *complete* oneself, and I argue that she rejects marriage as a friendship of utility on the grounds that such friendships are exchanges whose aim is to satisfy a need or a lack, to *complete*, rather than to *perfect* the friends. Wollstonecraft argues for woman's equality in marriage not by insisting that a wife should receive benefits from a husband equal to those she gives, but by rejecting altogether the idea that marriage is a friendship of utility.

The question whether Wollstonecraft was acquainted with the writings of the ancient philosophers has been addressed by several commentators and the results are inconclusive. Taylor suggests that she was familiar with Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Symposium*,<sup>9</sup> while Bergès thinks it unlikely that she read Aristotle's works.<sup>10</sup> Whether Wollstonecraft was familiar with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or not, the basic elements of the view of friendship presented there (and

<sup>7</sup> Sandrine Bergès (2013), *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London and New York: Routledge), ch. 4. For a discussion of the limits to this approach, see Martina Reuter (2014), "Like a Fanciful Kind of *Half Being*": Mary Wollstonecraft's Criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *Hypatia* 29 (4): 925–41. Reuter emphasizes the Platonist elements in Wollstonecraft's concept of virtue.

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Fuehrer Taylor (2007), *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York and London: Routledge).

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Bergès, *Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's Vindication*, pp. 66–7. Thomas Taylor, author of the satirical *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (1792) published a translation of Aristotle's works in 1812. This was long after Wollstonecraft's death, of course, but according to Lyndall Gordon, Taylor was the landlord of the Wollstonecraft family when Mary was eighteen years old; Lyndall Gordon (2005), *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Harper Collins), p. 154. It is possible that Wollstonecraft became acquainted with Aristotle's works through Taylor.

in the works of other classical authors, including Cicero, whom she certainly read) were accepted and repeated by the philosophers whose work she knew, admired, and criticized. These include Adam Smith, David Hume, Edmund Burke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In their writings, she found the following Aristotelian claims about friendship: first, that virtue friendship is a male-only affair, second, that *the* friendship between men and women is marriage—a friendship of utility whose purpose is procreation and family life—and, finally, that marriage is not a virtue friendship. Wollstonecraft addresses all of these claims in her analysis of marriage in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Thus, I suggest that reading her arguments against an Aristotelian backdrop provides a framework for understanding her insistence that marriage is a virtue friendship, not a friendship of utility. I begin, therefore, with a fairly detailed discussion of the Aristotelian theory of friendship.

## 2.1 Aristotelian Friendship

Aristotle regards friendship as ‘an absolute necessity’ for human life, claiming that ‘no one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other goods’.<sup>11</sup> A good life is not a life of isolation; it is a life created in association with others. Friendships are connections based on utility, pleasure, or virtue, and all three types are grounded in reciprocated and acknowledged good will.

In friendships of utility each friend seeks in the other what he lacks and needs. Aristotle often expresses these needs in terms of complementary characteristics, explaining that these friendships arise ‘between a poor person and a rich, or an ignorant person and a learned one, since each . . . is eager for whatever it is he happens to lack, and so gives something in return’.<sup>12</sup> In this kind of association and in friendships of pleasure, the friends are fond of each other ‘not in so far as the person they love is who he is, but in so far as he is useful or pleasant’.<sup>13</sup> In virtue friendships, on the other hand, not only is there reciprocated good will, but also a certain kind of partiality. Each friend loves the other for *who he is*, and this is a matter of his moral character. Both the good and the wicked, Aristotle says, ‘can be friends . . . for pleasure or utility [but] only good people can be friends for the sake of the other person himself’.<sup>14</sup> Even non-human animals can engage in

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle (2000), *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1155a4–5, p. 143. References are to this translation and henceforth referred to as *NE*.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1159b13–15, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1156a15–16, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1157a16–19, p. 148.

associations grounded in utility and pleasure,<sup>15</sup> but virtue friendships alone are the means through which human moral character is cultivated.

Of course, virtue friendships include benefits exchanged and pleasures shared between the friends. But the aim of the friendship is not the profit or pleasure one receives from it. It is an association created and cultivated for the sake of the characters of the friends themselves. This is why Aristotle considers it ‘friendship in the primary and real sense’,<sup>16</sup> while friendships of utility and pleasure are often described as ‘lesser’ or ‘imperfect’. Friendships of utility are further distinguished from virtue friendships in that the bond in the former arises from each friend’s deficiency in some respect, which the other can satisfy, whereas the bond in the latter does not arise from a lack. In virtue friendships, the friends are not striving to repair themselves; they are not ‘try[ing] to complete themselves through union with each other, as if they were two halves of one whole’.<sup>17</sup> Instead each friend is an ontological *whole*, and the bond is the means through which each friend *perfects* himself as a human being, not the means through which he *completes* himself in relation to someone else. This distinction between perfecting and completing oneself is essential to Wollstonecraft’s conception of the marriage bond, as we shall see in Section 2.3.

Friendship bonds are often contrasted with family connections in contemporary discourse, but the concept expressed by the Greek word *philia* includes relations of erotic love, connections with professional, religious, or political associates, as well as family ties.<sup>18</sup> Aristotle pays particular attention to the marriage bond in his discussion of friendship, and this has led some commentators to conclude that he is not completely uninterested in women’s capacity for friendship<sup>19</sup> and that he may be defended against the charge that he excludes

<sup>15</sup> In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle writes: ‘[Primary] friendship occurs only among humans, for they alone are conscious of choice, but the other forms occur also in the lower animals.’ Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics* (2011), trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1236b5–6, p. 116. All references are to this translation and referred to as *EE*.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1157a31, p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> Ronna Burger (2008), *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Burger writes: ‘As the discussion develops, *philia* comes to cover a range of relationships—familial, economic, social, political, erotic—that extends far beyond those we would ordinarily speak of as “friendship”’. *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, p. 166. John Cooper explains that the concept expressed by *philia* ‘covers not just the (more or less) intimate relationships between persons not bound together by near family ties... but all sorts of family relationships (especially those of parents to children, children to parents, siblings to one another, and the marriage relationship itself)’, John M. Cooper (1980), ‘Aristotle on Friendship’, in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), pp. 301–40, pp. 301–2.

<sup>19</sup> Howard J. Curzer (2012), *Aristotle and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 250, fn 5.

women from virtue friendship.<sup>20</sup> But these claims require further analysis. First, it is important to recognize that Aristotle's interest is in *wives*, not in women. His focus does not extend beyond a wife's connection to a husband. He does not consider female–female friendships or female–male friendships whose aim is not procreation and family life. Second, within the limited scope in which women's capacity for friendship is considered—that is, marriage—one needs to investigate the kind of friendship Aristotle takes this bond to be. Is it a friendship of utility, pleasure, or virtue? Here is what he says:

The friendship of man and woman also seems natural. . . . [H]uman beings live together not only for reproductive purposes but also to supply what they need for life. For from the start their characteristic activities are divided, those of the man being different from those of the woman. They supply one another's needs, therefore, by putting their own talents into the common pool. These reasons explain why this friendship . . . include[s] both utility and pleasure.<sup>21</sup>

Marriage is a friendship of utility and pleasure, then. Can it also be a virtue friendship? In fact, Aristotle says it can: 'it may also be a friendship for virtue, if they are good, since each has his or her own virtue, and can find enjoyment in this'.<sup>22</sup> But despite this optimistic claim, there are several stumbling blocks to conceiving of marriage as a virtue friendship. The main one concerns the moral inequality Aristotle claims exists between men and women, and consequently, between husbands and wives. This is a theme echoed in the works of Burke and Rousseau, and it has particular relevance for Wollstonecraft's analysis of marriage, as we shall discover shortly. But first we must consider why Aristotelian marriage turns out not to be a virtue friendship.

<sup>20</sup> Most commentators on Aristotle note that he excludes women from virtue friendship, but there is surprisingly little agreement about just how this happens. Suzanne Stern-Gillet, for example, claims that 'it is well known that Aristotle explicitly argued that women were incapable of the best kind of friendship', though she dismisses the matter as philosophically irrelevant, claiming that 'in this particular matter we must be content with the confidence that, had he lived today, Aristotle would most probably have revised his views on the nature of women': Suzanne Stern-Gillet (1995), *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 9. Others hold that the reasons for women's exclusion are implicit in other parts of Aristotle's philosophy, for example, in his treatment of women as biologically or intellectually inferior to men. For this view see Prudence Allen (1985), *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC–AD 1250* (Montreal: Eden Press), ch. 2; and in an entirely different vein, though arriving at the same conclusion as Allen, see William W. Fortenbaugh (1977), 'Aristotle on Slaves and Women', in *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 2, eds Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji (New York: St. Martin's Press), pp. 135–9.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1162a17–24, pp. 159–60.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1162a25, p. 160. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle says only that '[t]he friendship of man and wife is one of utility, a partnership'; he does not say that it may also be a virtue friendship: Aristotle, *EE*, 1242a31, p. 131.

## 2.2 Why Aristotelian Marriage is not a Virtue Friendship

In addition to dividing friendship into associations of utility, pleasure, and virtue, Aristotle provides another conceptual category: friendships of equality and of inequality. These involve ‘superiority’, he says, ‘of father to son... of older to young[er]... of man to woman, and of any ruler to his subject’.<sup>23</sup> The question is whether the sort of inequality that exists between men and women, as Aristotle sees it, disqualifies marriage from being a virtue friendship.

A fair number of commentators think that it does. For example, Dirk Baltzly and Nick Eliopoulos note that Aristotle’s claim in the *Ethics* that the marriage friendship may be for virtue is simply at odds with claims he makes elsewhere. Virtue presupposes practical wisdom, yet in the *Politics*, Aristotle claims that in women the capacity for rational decision-making is not as authoritative as it is in men. Baltzly and Eliopoulos conclude that ‘since it is distinctive of the person who possesses practical wisdom to deliberate well, this appears to preclude women possessing it and so possessing full virtue. And this would seem to preclude them from virtue friendships’.<sup>24</sup>

Other commentators suggest that the moral inequality between wives and husbands does not keep marriage from being a virtue friendship, but that the virtue friendship is *imperfect*. For example, Richard Kraut writes:

When two individuals recognize that the other person is someone of good character, and they spend time with each other, engaged in activities that exercise their virtues, then they form one kind of friendship. If they are equally virtuous, their friendship is perfect. If, however, there is a large gap in their moral development (as between a parent and a small child, or between a husband and a wife), then although their relationship may be based on the other person’s good character, it will be imperfect precisely because of their inequality.<sup>25</sup>

Kraut is suggesting that marriage is an imperfect friendship not because it is a ‘lesser’ friendship of utility or pleasure, but because the friends, though they are

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, 1158b12–14, pp. 151–2.

<sup>24</sup> Dirk Baltzly and Nick Eliopoulos (2009), ‘The Classical Ideals of Friendship’, in *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox), 1–64, p. 24. Many commentators follow this line of argument by noting the incompatibility between Aristotle’s explicit claims in the *Ethics* and in other works, including *On the Generation of Animals*, 737a27–28 and the *Politics*, 1260a13–14. See, for example, Leah Bradshaw, ‘Political Rule, Prudence and the Woman Question in Aristotle’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24 (3): 557–73; and Marcia Homiak (1996), ‘Feminism and Aristotle’s Rational Ideal’, in *Feminism and Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Julie K. Ward (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 118–37.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Kraut (2014), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ‘Aristotle’s *Ethics*’, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>>, accessed 25 May 2015.

virtuous, are unequally so. His analysis suggests that the virtues are gender specific, so that even though Aristotle thinks that men *as such* are morally superior to women, women may nonetheless excel or perfect themselves with respect to their own kind.<sup>26</sup> Natalie Fuehrer Taylor advances a similar reading of Aristotle, and, as we shall see in Section 2.3, of Wollstonecraft; one advantage of this reading is that it acknowledges that women (as wives) do partake of the virtues. But this acknowledgement comes at the cost of making the virtues *complementary*, and this underscores the fact that marriage in Aristotle's philosophy is a friendship of utility, not a virtue friendship.

To make this point clear, we must consider the difference between complementarity and reciprocity. All Aristotelian friendships are defined in terms of *reciprocated* good will. Without reciprocity there would not be a *bond*. But in friendships of utility the reciprocity is tied to *complementarity*, that is, to the fact that each friend lacks something that he gets from the other in the friendship. In virtue friendships, on the other hand, though there is reciprocated good will, it is not tied to complementarity. Rather, each friend loves the other for the friend's *own sake*, and the reciprocity is simply a matter of each friend having this love for the other. In loving a friend *for his own sake*, Aristotle is pointing to two characteristics of virtue friendship absent from friendships of utility. One, as I noted above, is that virtue friendships are partial: the friends love each other for a particular set of qualities, namely, their moral character. The other, which distinguishes reciprocity from complementarity, Aristotle explains by comparing virtue friendship to a mother's love for her child.<sup>27</sup> A mother wishes the child well selflessly—that is, for the child's sake, not for her own, and this is the case even if the child does not know of the mother's love. This selfless well-wishing—what we might call unconditional love—is essential to virtue friendship and distinguishes it from friendships of utility. In friendships of utility, the good will is conditional on each friend supplying what the other lacks.

This difference between reciprocity and complementarity explains why conceiving of the virtues as complementary makes marriage a friendship of utility, not a virtue friendship. Aristotle conceives of the virtues along gender lines, not in the way eighteenth-century theorists do—that is, in terms of distinct male and female virtues—but by holding that particular virtues are manifested differently in men and women. For example, with respect to the virtue courage, he claims

<sup>26</sup> John Cooper makes this argument. See 'Aristotle on Friendship', p. 307.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle writes: 'For a friend is taken to be. . . one who wishes the friend to be and to live for the friend's own sake—this is how mothers feel for their children' (*NE*, 1166a3–5, p. 169).

that '[t]he courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying'.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the form of courage a wife has *complements* the form of courage a husband has. But complementary virtues, like other complementary characteristics or goods, mark associations as friendships of utility, not as virtue friendships. Each friend has what the other lacks. Grounding a friendship in complementary *virtues* rather than in some other complementary characteristic does not make it a virtue friendship; it retains the structure of a friendship of utility. In a male–male virtue friendship in which both friends have the virtue courage, Aristotle's analysis is not that one friend commands and the other obeys. In this case the virtues are not conceived in complementary terms. It is only when the virtues are gendered that they become complementary. Kraut's attempt, then, to make marriage a virtue friendship—even an imperfect virtue friendship—by making the virtues gender complementary fails.

Thus, the moral inequality that Aristotle thinks exists between men and women cannot be overcome. The inequality between husband and wife is more like the inequality between humans and gods than between two unequally virtuous male friends. In the latter, the inequality can be overcome by the inferior friend's moral improvement. But the inequality in the marriage friendship is essential, rather than incidental to it.<sup>29</sup> No matter how 'good' a wife is, her virtues are relative only to those of her kind, and her moral improvement is relative not to her husband but to other wives. Aristotelian marriage, then, is not a virtue friendship. It is a friendship of utility, and therefore, it is not an association in which the friends fully participate in the moral realm by perfecting their characters.

### 2.3 Wollstonecraft on Marriage and Virtue Friendship

These matters concerning complementary male–female virtues and human perfectibility are fundamental to understanding Wollstonecraft's conception of marriage.<sup>30</sup> She, like Aristotle, understands friendship to be intimately tied to the development of the moral virtues, and she is concerned about the conditions

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Burger notes: 'Aristotle locates the inequality of partners as an essential feature in two spheres of life in particular—political relationships between ruler and ruled, on the one hand, and domestic relationships between members of the family, on the other'. *Aristotle's Dialogue With Socrates*, p. 170.

<sup>30</sup> Both Jane Duran and Virginia Sapiro note the perfectibility aspect of Wollstonecraft's view, but they connect it more to a Christian worldview than to an Aristotelian one. See Jane Duran (2006), *Eight Women Philosophers: Theory, Politics, and Feminism* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press), ch. 4; and Virginia Sapiro (1992), *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).



under which women acquire these virtues. To esteem others and be esteemed by them requires both sound judgment and virtuous character, and she argues that the ‘partial laws and customs of society’<sup>31</sup> keep women from developing either. Though *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* may certainly be read as a criticism of social norms that keep women from developing the virtues, it also provides a justification for conceiving of marriage not as an Aristotelian friendship of utility but as an Aristotelian virtue friendship.

Most of Wollstonecraft’s commentators acknowledge that she models marriage on classical conceptions of virtue friendship by noting that she often connects marriage with claims about esteem and respect. She writes, for example, that in marriage, ‘[a]dmiration . . . gives place to friendship, properly so called, because it is cemented by esteem’,<sup>32</sup> that ‘friendship [in marriage] is a serious affection . . . because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time’,<sup>33</sup> and that ‘[a]ffection in the marriage state can only be founded on respect’.<sup>34</sup> Yet, commentators conclude from these claims that Wollstonecraft refuses a place to sexual passion in marriage, or that she expresses a self-denying attitude toward female sexuality.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the issue is conceived in certain dichotomized terms: if marriage is a virtue friendship, then it excludes sexual passion. But, the discussion above of Aristotelian friendship provides another avenue for understanding Wollstonecraft’s position: marriage is a virtue friendship; it is not a friendship of utility.

To begin, we must note that Wollstonecraft’s conception of the virtues is straightforwardly Aristotelian in many ways. She conceives of the virtues as human excellences, as habits of action that must be learned, practiced, and developed over time. But a point on which she parts company with Aristotle is that the virtues are gendered. It is well known, of course, that she rejects ‘feminine’ virtues, first, because some of these alleged virtues—such as cunningness and duplicity—are not virtues at all, and second, because even praiseworthy traits, if not grounded in reason, cannot truly be considered virtues. But she rejects female virtues also because they are wrongly conceived as *relational* qualities grounded in utility rather than as *essential* qualities exemplifying human excellence. This

<sup>31</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft (1989), *The Wrongs of Woman: or Maria*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. 1, eds Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (New York: New York University Press), p. 83.

<sup>32</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 191.

<sup>33</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 151.

<sup>34</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRM*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> See Barbara Taylor (2003), *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Taylor is also critical of ‘modern scholars [who have censured] Wollstonecraft’s attitude toward sexuality . . . for its self-denying asceticism’, p. 112.

position provides the key for understanding Wollstonecraft's insistence that marriage is to be conceived as a virtue friendship.

Though she does admit that in certain ways women stand in relation to others, that they are 'connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers',<sup>36</sup> and that their moral duties fall out of these connections, Wollstonecraft nonetheless rejects the view that female virtues are to be formed as a complement to male virtues. She argues instead that every individual is 'a world in itself',<sup>37</sup> and insists that women's virtues must be formed in a way that develops their 'greatness of soul'.<sup>38</sup> Denying the 'many ingenious arguments [that] have been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character',<sup>39</sup> she notes that 'women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue'.<sup>40</sup> What really deserves that name are those traits that 'ennoble the human character',<sup>41</sup> whereas the alleged 'feminine' virtues give women 'artificial, weak characters' and make them 'useless members of society'.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, she objects to the many writers of her own era who insisted that female virtues were to be cultivated to the end of male pleasure and satisfaction. Rousseau, a favorite target, made this claim quite explicitly: '[T]he education of the women should be always relative to the men. To please, to be useful to us . . . to render our lives easy and agreeable: these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy'.<sup>43</sup> Burke, too, argued that 'respect and love are antagonist principles',<sup>44</sup> and was forced to conclude that women are commanded by God and nature 'not to cultivate the moral virtues', since such cultivation would 'interfere with the pleasing sensations they were created to inspire'.<sup>45</sup> Both Rousseau and Burke advance a standard eighteenth-century understanding of the virtues as gendered: there are distinct feminine and masculine virtues. Furthermore, they believe that what makes the feminine virtues genuine is that they are useful and pleasing to men. Wollstonecraft's rejection of these views is not aimed at making female-male relations equal exchanges of utility and pleasure. She does not argue that male virtues ought to be developed so as to be more pleasing and useful to women. To the contrary, she makes *utility* itself the target of her criticism. She objects that '[w]riters have too

<sup>36</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 95.

<sup>37</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 127.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (1987), *A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of the Author of The Rights of Woman* (New York: Penguin), p. 217.

<sup>39</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 90.

<sup>43</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 158.

<sup>44</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRM*, p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRM*, p. 47.

often considered virtue in a very limited sense, and made the foundation of it *solely* worldly utility',<sup>46</sup> and she insists that the virtues must be understood in terms of the perfection of human character traits. Only in this way can a person have a flourishing life. This is an important insight, one that sets her understanding of the virtues apart from Rousseau's and Burke's, and from Aristotle's gendered view of the virtues, and brings it closer to Aristotle's more considered position that the moral virtues are ways to express the excellences peculiar to humans.

Wollstonecraft's criticism of utility is grounded in several concerns. First, it is directed against those who advance an improper conception of the virtues. Wollstonecraft recognizes that though the virtues are cultivated in social relations, it does not follow that they are to be valued merely on the basis of their social utility, and she is particularly concerned about the tendency to conceive of female virtues in terms of the utility they provide to men. Noting that some seemingly praiseworthy traits, such as docility, good humor, patience, and flexibility are in fact 'negative' virtues because they are passive, requiring no 'vigorous exertion of the intellect',<sup>47</sup> she claims that these traits 'have no other foundation but utility, and of that utility men... arbitrarily... judge, shaping it to their own convenience'.<sup>48</sup> Her point is that conceiving of the virtues in terms of utility rather than human perfectibility, as Rousseau, Burke, and others do, makes them relative and unstable: they become subject to the 'wayward fluctuating feelings of men'.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the standard of virtue becomes taste. Furthermore, she warns that when utility is made the foundation of the virtues, the distinction between virtues and vices becomes blurred: '[a]lmost every vice that has degraded our nature might be justified by shewing that it had been productive of *some* benefit to society'.<sup>50</sup> Wollstonecraft rejects a conception of the virtues held by some eighteenth-century moral theorists that fails to regard these virtues as goods in themselves. While the virtues may (and do) have social benefits, the primary aim in cultivating them is to manifest or instantiate human excellence, not to be useful.<sup>51</sup>

Second, Wollstonecraft is concerned about the ontological commitments that underlie relationships grounded in utility. To make this point clear, let's return to the Aristotelian view that friendships of utility arise from a lack. In these associations, each friend lacks something but each possesses something, and each

<sup>46</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 150. See also *VRM*, p. 47. <sup>47</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 133.

<sup>48</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 124. <sup>49</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 150.

<sup>50</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRM*, p. 54. Indeed, Bernard Mandeville argued in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) just how beneficial to society vices could be.

<sup>51</sup> Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski explains: 'Pure virtue theorists deny that virtue is an excellence because it is a means to some external good, but that does not commit them to denying that virtue always brings about good to others.' Zagzebski (1996), *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 99. I take Wollstonecraft to be a pure virtue ethicist in this way.

receives benefits from the friendship that he or she would not have received otherwise. While the lack or deficiency points to social and political advantages that each brings to and receives from the friendship, we must not lose sight of the fact that Aristotle is also making an ontological claim. The friends *themselves* are incomplete; they are two parts of a whole, and their bond is the means through which they strive to complete themselves. It is precisely *this* conception of human relations as it is applied to the marriage bond that Wollstonecraft rejects. She denies, for example, that a husband and wife 'together make but one moral being'.<sup>52</sup> She rejects the view that 'man was made to reason woman to feel: and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character'.<sup>53</sup> Wollstonecraft insists instead that the moral virtues belong to a person *essentially*, while qualities of usefulness are relational properties that belong to a person *incidentally*;<sup>54</sup> consequently, she refuses to treat wife and husband as incomplete parts striving to complete themselves.

Natalie Fuehrer Taylor also understands Wollstonecraft to be concerned with female wholeness, but she sees this in terms of woman's unity as 'rational mother' and 'affectionate wife'.<sup>55</sup> An 'unfractured woman', on Taylor's reading of Wollstonecraft, is one 'who practices reason and virtue, but who is, nonetheless, an affectionate wife'.<sup>56</sup> Taylor thus sees female wholeness as a matter of completion rather than perfection, and this leads her to understand Wollstonecraft's view of marriage in terms very much like those advanced by Richard Kraut in his discussion of Aristotelian marriage. In fact, Taylor argues both that Aristotelian marriage *can* be a virtue friendship, though it is a friendship of inequality, and that Wollstonecraft's view of marriage is Aristotelian in precisely this way.<sup>57</sup> Taylor claims that Wollstonecraft conceives of marriage as an imperfect virtue friendship, one in which there is a moral inequality between husbands and wives. Though she correctly notes that Wollstonecraft attributes woman's moral inferiority to social conditions rather than natural ones, Taylor nonetheless contends

<sup>52</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 169.

<sup>53</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> This is a further example of Wollstonecraft's Aristotelianism. See Cooper, 'Aristotle on Friendship', p. 312; and also Julie K. Ward, who writes: '[I]n virtue friendships the thing loved (i.e., moral character) belongs to the one being loved and does not depend on some relation that the one who loves has to the loved one.' Ward (1996), 'Aristotle on *Philia*: The Beginnings of a Feminist Ideal of Friendship?' in *Feminism and Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Julie K. Ward (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 155–71, p. 163. She adds in a footnote: 'This is so because in the case of virtue friendships the thing loved is a *per se*, or essential property of the person loved, not merely an accidental, relational property that obtains between [one person] and the other, . . . such as being pleasant or useful', p. 247, fn 31.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, *Rights of Woman as Chimera*, p. 136.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *Rights of Woman as Chimera*, p. 138.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Rights of Woman as Chimera*, pp. 145–62.

that Wollstonecraft overcomes the inequality issue by holding that husbands and wives have different but complementary virtues. This is the reasoning advanced by Kraut, and, as I argued above, it does not succeed in making Aristotelian marriage a virtue friendship.

Taylor's reading makes Wollstonecraft a defender of the status quo with respect to marriage, whereas the reading I have been pressing makes her a critic of it. One cannot deny, of course, that part of Wollstonecraft's aim in the *Vindication* is to point out that the benefits received by wives and husbands are rather unequal. But, the target of her criticism is not the absence of *reciprocity* in the marriage bond; the target of her criticism is the *complementarity* in the marriage bond. Thus, her solution to marriage inequality is not to make marriage a more equal association of utility by arguing that male virtues ought to be cultivated in such a way that a wife would receive benefits and pleasures from a husband equal to those she gives. Instead, her approach is to abandon altogether the idea that marriage *is* a friendship of utility grounded in complementary character traits. Even on more equal terms of reciprocity between wives and husbands, the same problem would remain. The virtues would still be understood as a way to complete oneself, not as a way to perfect oneself. Wollstonecraft's solution is to conceive of marriage as a virtue friendship in the way I have suggested: as a friendship that *perfects* women as moral selves, not as a friendship that *completes* women in relation to men.

This brings us to the third and overarching factor motivating Wollstonecraft's attack on utility: her desire to remove marriage from the realm of the *transactional* and place it in the realm of the *moral*.<sup>58</sup> Echoing Cicero's claim that in friendship 'we do not make our feelings of affection into a business proposition',<sup>59</sup> Wollstonecraft writes, 'the basis of friendship is mutual respect . . . not a commercial treaty'.<sup>60</sup> In treating marriage as a virtue friendship, Wollstonecraft is emphasizing that the proper objects of moral assessment are character traits. This indicates, for one thing, that she is a virtue theorist, not a utilitarian.<sup>61</sup> But it also

<sup>58</sup> Many commentators have recognized that there is a moral dimension to Wollstonecraft's conception of marriage, but they sometimes misconstrue this moral aspect by claiming that she believed that women have a duty both to marry and to be mothers. See, for example, Abbey, 'Back to the Future', p. 81. An exception is Bergès, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's Vindication*, p. 121. Wollstonecraft does, of course, think there are certain duties entailed if one is a wife or a mother (or a husband or father) but she doesn't think *being* a wife is a duty.

<sup>59</sup> Cicero (1991), *De Amicitia*, in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis, IL: Hackett), pp. 79–116, p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRM*, p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> I disagree with those who think Wollstonecraft's moral philosophy is utilitarian. See Duran, *Eight Woman Philosophers*, p. 113.

shows that she believes that bonds grounded in exchanges of benefits are not associations in which the uniquely human excellences are manifested. In other words, she, like Aristotle, understands relations grounded in utility to stand outside the moral realm. Thus, if marriage is merely a friendship of utility, it is, Wollstonecraft thinks, nothing more than a set of transactional exchanges.

## 2.4 Wollstonecraft on Female Friendship

In addition to these criticisms of utility, Wollstonecraft identifies another problem with the failure to conceive of marriage as a virtue friendship: it impedes the formation of female friendships. She suggests that women are kept from forming virtue friendships with each other because their *role* virtues—that is, the character traits enabling them to perform well the functions of a wife, a sister, or a mother—undermine the development of their *moral* virtues, and this keeps them from forming bonds grounded in merit and esteem.<sup>62</sup> In the following passage she paints a clear picture of the way role virtues create a barrier to female friendship:

Girls who have been weakly educated, are often left cruelly by their parents without any provision . . . and are dependent on the bounty of their brothers. . . . These brothers . . . give as a favour, what children of the same parents had an equal right to. In this . . . humiliating situation, a docile female may remain some time. . . . But when the brother marries . . . she is viewed with averted looks as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house, and his new partner. . . . The wife, a cold-hearted, narrow-minded woman, and this is not an unfair supposition; for the present mode of education does not tend to enlarge the heart any more than the understanding, is jealous of the little kindness which her husband shews to his relations; and her sensibility not rising to humanity, she is displeased at seeing the property of *her* children lavished on a helpless sister. . . . The consequence is obvious, the wife has recourse to cunning to undermine the habitual affection, which she is afraid openly to oppose; and neither tears nor caresses are spared till the spy is worked out of her home, and thrown on the world . . . with a small stipend and an uncultivated mind, into a joyless solitude.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> This points to yet another Aristotelian aspect of Wollstonecraft's moral theory: role virtues. Role virtues, as Aristotle presents them, are character traits conducive to performing specific functions well—say, those of a citizen, or a sailor, or a wife, and they are distinct from moral virtues. Howard Curzer explains that 'insofar as the virtues of certain roles are incompatible with the virtues that characterize the good person, not only these roles, but also their associated institutions, are corrupt': Curzer (2010), 'An Aristotelian Critique of the Traditional Family', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (2): 135–47, p. 138. Curzer uses the distinction between role virtues and moral virtues to offer an Aristotelian criticism of traditional marriage. I'm suggesting that Wollstonecraft also used this distinction as a means to criticize marriage.

<sup>63</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, pp. 141–2. See *VRM*, p. 55 for another example of *right as a favor*.

There are two important points to note here: first, in none of these relations does one find the necessary condition for *any* friendship—reciprocated goodwill—or the necessary condition for *virtue* friendship—praiseworthy character traits. The sister is the recipient of the brother’s charity, not of his esteem. All she can offer him in return is a demeaned gratitude. Between the sisters-in-law, there are no virtues; there is only the passive docility of one and the cunning selfishness of the other. The second point is that Wollstonecraft is suggesting that marriage is a corrupt institution precisely because it creates women who not only fail to cultivate the moral virtues, but who, in fact, cultivate the moral vices. She continues:

These two women may be much upon a par, with respect to reason and humanity; and changing situations, might have acted just the same selfish part; but had they been differently educated, the case would also have been very different. The wife would not . . . wish to love [her husband] merely because he loved her, but on account of his virtues.<sup>64</sup>

Wollstonecraft is pointing out that when marriage is conceived of and practiced as a friendship of utility, women are interchangeable placeholders. In one situation a woman is a sister, in another she is a wife, and the more competently a woman fulfills her role, the more she either weakens her virtues (through passive docility) or strengthens her vices (through jealousy and cruelty). Thus, female bonds appear impossible.

How, then, does Wollstonecraft think female bonds are formed? What does she think grounds female friendship? Many commentators look to her works of fiction for answers to these questions, and in particular to her unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman: or Maria*, and they focus on two issues: solidarity and reciprocity. Some commentators understand Wollstonecraft to define friendship between women—in the characters of Maria and Jemima—in a solidarity grounded in protection or in an exchange.<sup>65</sup> But this reading seems problematic. Given Wollstonecraft’s irritation in the *Vindication* with ‘the insolent condescension of protectorship’<sup>66</sup> that men impose upon women, it seems unlikely that she would find guardianship an acceptable basis for forging female friendship bonds. Furthermore, though Jemima does act as Maria’s ally in engineering her escape from the asylum and though Maria does, in return, make Jemima a part of her household, it is unlikely—given her arguments against utility—that Wollstonecraft means to ground their friendship in a *quid pro quo* transaction. To the contrary, she seems more interested in establishing their bond through their

<sup>64</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 142.

<sup>65</sup> See Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, ch. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 211.

attempts to create themselves in ways that warrant the other's esteem. For example, it is precisely Maria's respect that Jemima fears losing when she relates the tale of the role she played in encouraging a tradesman, who had taken a liking to her, to turn out the young woman who was pregnant with their child, and who, as a consequence, kills herself. Jemima is filled with painful remorse over her complicity in the treatment of the young woman fearing that it 'will entirely deprive [her] of Maria's esteem'.<sup>67</sup> Wollstonecraft's point appears to be *not* that female friendship is grounded in creating a refuge from the arbitrary power of men, but that it must be founded on benevolence and esteem for each other's virtuous character.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Wollstonecraft believes that through virtue friendship a person becomes a fully articulated moral agent, one who gives and receives good will *for who she is*. In conceiving of marriage as a virtue friendship, Wollstonecraft is not blindly endorsing an ideal conception of friendship. Neither is she 'scorn[ing] romantic love'<sup>68</sup> nor expressing 'a violent antagonism to the sensual'.<sup>69</sup> She is rejecting one of 'the mistaken notions that enslave [the female] sex',<sup>70</sup> namely, a conception of the virtues based in utility rather than perfectibility.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs*, p. 117.

<sup>68</sup> Marilyn Butler (1984), *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 74–5.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> Wollstonecraft, *VRW*, p. 107.

<sup>71</sup> Versions of this chapter were presented at the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (McMaster University, 2011), the Northern New England Philosophical Association (University of Massachusetts-Lowell, 2012), the Eighteenth-Century Studies Seminar (Harvard University, 2013), Trinity College, Dublin, Philosophy Department Colloquium (2013), and the University of Helsinki, History of Philosophy Research Seminar (2013). I am grateful to Susan Lanser, Tim Nulty, Ville Paukkonen, Ruth Perry, Martina Reuter, May Sim, Ericka Tucker, Charlotte Witt, and to many others for their probing questions and helpful comments. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the volume editors, Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee, and to Lisa Lebduska, Dana Polanichka, Hyun Kim, Gina Luria Walker, Jessica Gordon-Roth, and John Partridge for their useful comments on a penultimate draft of this chapter.