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Wollstonecraft and Edmund Burke: Instinct, Improvement and Revolution

Mary Fairclough

1. Introduction

This essay considers Wollstonecraft's engagement with her antagonist Edmund Burke in their responses to the French Revolution, in particular, their shared use of a language of feeling. I draw on recent critical analyses of the polemical use of sentimental language in the 1790s, but focus on Wollstonecraft and Burke's appropriation of a particular language of feeling: the embodied processes through which people and animals think, react, and develop reasoned responses to the world. Both Wollstonecraft and Burke are fascinated by the operation of instincts, and their relation to reason. They understand the importance of instinct in social and political life very differently, however, and Wollstonecraft's critique of Burke's use of a language of instinct lays the ground for her challenge to his account of the French Revolution in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Wollstonecraft's sustained engagement with instinctive processes forms a crucial part of her response to Burke in her *Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), and also informs her analysis of gendered inequalities in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Rather than make gender relations my focus in this essay, I assess the degree to which Wollstonecraft's account of instinctive behaviours affects her account of political revolution and activism. I focus on the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, but end by considering Wollstonecraft's representation of revolutionary crowds in her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794). Wollstonecraft's faith in the improvement of individuals and societies is shaken by the events of the Terror, which seem to demonstrate the

destructiveness of instinctive political action. As Eileen Hunt Botting has noted, Wollstonecraft's response to the Terror even brings her work unexpectedly close to that of Burke (2006, 177).

In stressing Wollstonecraft's interest in embodied processes of communication and intellectual development, I follow recent critical accounts which emphasise the importance of the body in Wollstonecraft's political writing. In her account of Wollstonecraft's 'medico-politics', Amy Mallory-Kani stresses that Wollstonecraft's 'use of medicine… is not metaphorical, but a literal component of political change' (21), a claim echoed by Diana Edelman-Young (688), and Sharon Ruston (31). These critics have focused on Wollstonecraft's work for the *Analytical Review*, where she reviewed medical and natural history texts (Mallory-Kani 31; Edelman-Young 683-4; Ruston 29). I discuss Wollstonecraft's reviewing below, but rather than focus on medicine, I build on Ruston's work, to consider the importance of natural history for Wollstonecraft's account of the potential for improvement in individual and societies. This focus on Wollstonecraft's understanding of embodied thinking and feeling processes offers an important rejoinder to claims that in celebrating the power of reason, her work creates a 'mind-body binarism' in which the body is secondary (Keane 2000a, 30). Like Edelman-Young I suggest that Wollstonecraft's use of natural history 'dismantles the gender divide not only at the rhetorical level, but also at the level of the body' (Edelman-Young 685). This knowledge also arms Wollstonecraft for her critique of Burke.

Burke too is fascinated by and well-informed about the complexity of instinctive bodily and mental processes. Commentators have noted the importance of the body in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Garret Jeter argues that in the *Enquiry* 'Burke privileges sense-experience… over the intellect as the dominant

source of a human being's phenomenological /epistemological experience and understanding' (240). David Dwan concurs, but notes that Burke's claim that our intuition of beauty is 'an *instinct* that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence' suggests bodily feeling is not obviously instrumental in the *Enquiry*, but rather operates beyond the control of reason (578). Neither focus on the connection between Burke's claims for the aesthetic in the *Enquiry* with his later political writings, but Richard Barney analyses Burke's use of medical language in the *Reflections*, as well as the *Enquiry*, showing how Burke's use of a language of contagion demonstrates that a 'system of physiology could be provisionally mapped onto… France's thoroughgoing scheme of revolutionary reform' (233). Though persuaded by these accounts, I move away from assessments of Burke's use of disease imagery in the *Reflections*, to consider the instinctive actions of the body.

Like Wollstonecraft, Burke's engagement with physiology and natural history may well result from his labours as a periodical writer. Burke edited the *Annual Register* from its first edition in 1759 until at least 1765, and maintained involvement perhaps until 1790 (Bromwich 1; Copeland 226-28). The periodical was an annual production, which included a 'historical article', poetry, antiquarianism, book reviews, miscellaneous essays, natural history, and accounts of 'useful projects'. The contents were written and published anonymously, so it is difficult to state Burke's authorship with certainty, but scholars have tended to agree that Burke wrote most or all of the content up to his entry into the House of Commons in 1765 (Copeland 228). Here I investigate three *Annual Register* pieces from the 'Natural History' or 'Essays' sections, in the years 1764 and 1765. I proceed on the principle that if Burke did not write these pieces he would have had oversight of them as the *Annual Register*'s editor.

An essay ‘On the importance of an inquiry into the human mind’ (1764) notes that ‘the fabric of the human mind is curious and wonderful, as well as that of the human body’ (190). It focuses on the ‘instincts habits, associations, and other principles, which operate before we come to the use of reason’ (193), noting that these are ‘the powers which we have in common with the brutes’ (191). While human reason is distinct from animal instinct, it is impossible to ‘trace’ the steps by which we move from instinctive to rational thought, and the essay therefore suggests a spectrum of intellectual development on which both humans and animals exist (193). In 1765, an article ‘On the great and extensive power of sympathy over the human frame’, examines the physiological phenomenon of sympathy, ‘a sense in human nature… so powerful, that it often disconcerts and overthrows the most obstinate designs and resolutions’ (81). The essay analyses examples in which instinctive sympathy causes individuals and groups to act irrationally, but does not read this as problematic or threatening. It concludes: ‘the foundation of arts, discipline, and the knowledge of the brightest things, is placed in the structure of the body’ (81). Despite the potentially violent effects of instinctive sympathy, the essay offers a remarkably matter-of-fact account.

This calm tone is echoed in a review essay from the same edition, on the ‘Advantages of the social principle over a great understanding towards promoting the happiness of individuals’ (1765), which declares: ‘There is an universal principle of imitation among mankind which disposes them to catch instantaneously… the resemblance of any action or character that presents itself. This disposition we can often check by the force of reason… at other times, it is insurmountable’ (232). The essay presents examples which match those of the previous essay on sympathy, noting that ‘the communication of nervous disorders… is often so astonishing, that it has been referred to fascination or witchcraft... it is a fact well established, that… there is such a principle in nature as an healthy sympathy as well as a morbid infection’ (233).

Though these 'disorders' are physical in nature and resist explanation, the essay does not present them as a problem, suggesting instead that they can be used to cure social ills like loneliness and misanthropy. These essays suggest that Burke was aware of and may have written accounts of instinctive processes and their effects on social life. Each of these essays seems comfortable with instinct that operates beyond the control of reason, and even with the suggestion that human and animal instincts are manifestations of the same processes. Wollstonecraft however demonstrated none of this comfort, as the distinction between human reason and animal instinct was fundamental to her programme for personal and social improvement.

Wollstonecraft reviews many natural history texts for the *Analytical*, and natural historical methods and arguments inform her political writings in important ways (Chandler 13; Edelman-Young 686). But Wollstonecraft's use of natural history to support her claims finds a limit in her discussion of instinct. Ruston has traced the significance of Wollstonecraft's account of instinct, understood as 'a mechanical, natural, or an unthinking response to the world', for her critique of gendered customs in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (50). I focus here on Wollstonecraft's account of social and political relations more broadly, but follow Ruston's claims that Wollstonecraft's reviews for the *Analytical* demonstrate the foundations of her thinking about instinct. Contemporary definitions of instinct emphasise, like the *Annual Register* pieces, that it is associated with animals. Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* declares it 'a Disposition or natural Sagacity wherewith animals are endued… It bears some Analogy to Reason, and supplies the Defect of it in Brutes' (vol. 2, 394). Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* defines it as a 'Desire or aversion acting in the mind without the intervention of reason or deliberation; the power determining the will of brutes' (vol. 1). Chambers makes instinct and reason 'analogous', whereas Johnson makes them independent,

but both make it a property of animals, or animal-like behaviour in humans. In her reviews of natural history texts, Wollstonecraft echoes Johnson's claims, stressing that instinct functions in opposition to reason.

Wollstonecraft's most sustained engagement with instinct comes in her review of William Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History* (1790), in which Smellie argues that human reason is a more developed form of the instincts of animals. She notes: 'With respect to the distinction between reason and instinct we are still in the dark', but nonetheless offers a detailed critique of Smellie's claims, declaring: 'We cannot agree with Mr S. that instinct is only a lesser degree of reason' (*Works* 7, 295-96). Wollstonecraft objects, first, that in insisting on the connections between humans and animals, Smellie threatens 'to deprive us of souls'. Second, she notes that animals might seem rational, but they do not evolve and 'improve' from generation to generation: 'If the beaver, the bee, or the termites, are directed by reason; the faculty of thinking, of comparing ideas and profiting by experience, they are superior to men; yet we do not find that their… senses ever enables them to transmit any portion of their acquired knowledge to their posterity' (296). In contrast to human society, which develops and improves, 'the result of their instincts seemed to be too sure for improvement, and too subtile for transmission' (298).

It proves difficult, however, for Wollstonecraft to dispel the link between human and animal that Smellie suggests. She notes of imitation, the instinctive way in which animals and people copy those around them, that

> [t]his principle in brutes continues in its full force throughout life, whilst that of man gives place to reason; this [Smellie] allows, when he says, 'that the less a man has cultivated his rational faculties, the more powerful is the principle of imitation over his

> actions and his habits of thinking!'… If reason, thought, or mind, is not something distinct from instincts or senses, what power compares the information they convey to us?... But we are straying into metaphysical labyrinths till we forget our province (*Works* 7, 299).

Rather than operating as opposing faculties, instinct and reason appear here on a continuum. Humans, for Wollstonecraft, develop beyond instinctive imitation to reason, but the processes through which this occurs are lost in 'metaphysical labyrinths'. More worrying is the suggestion that some humans never develop their 'rational faculties' to enable them to move beyond imitation. As Ruston notes, 'it is important to Wollstonecraft that virtue is not an instinct, but is instead something that can be learned and worked towards' (31); however, as Wollstonecraft's political writings show, humans display this capacity for reason in varying degrees. Here and in her *Vindication*s, human and animal behaviour do not seem to be absolute categories; rather they exist on a scale which makes humans capable of improvement, but also susceptible to a process of brutalization in which being treated like animals enables a loss of humanising reason and virtue (Ruston 33; Edelman-Young 688; Sapiro 80; Botting 2016, 110-11). Here I investigate Wollstonecraft's use of such ideas in her responses to Burke, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*.

2. *Vindication of the Rights of Men*

In the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft's critique of instinctive actions enables her to attack one of Burke's major rhetorical strategies in the *Reflections*, in which he claims his response to events in France to be 'natural'. Burke declares of the reformer Richard Price: 'Why do I feel so differently from the Reverend Dr. Price…? For this plain reason - because it is *natural* I should… because in those natural feelings we learn great lessons; because in events like these our passions instruct our reason' (174-75). Burke's account of 'natural feelings'

seems to come close to the *Annual Register*'s representation of instinctive actions as an interesting but unproblematic phenomenon. Wollstonecraft takes issue with Burke's suggestion. As Barbara Taylor has shown, despite the importance of reason in Wollstonecraft's scheme, she does not argue with Burke's claim that 'our passions instruct our reason' (Taylor 52). Instead, in her 'Advertisement' to the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft notes: 'my indignation was roused by the sophistical arguments, that every moment crossed me, in the questionable shape of natural feelings and common sense' (Wollstonecraft 1790, iii). Wollstonecraft's suggestion that Burke's arguments are 'sophistical', and display false emotion is fundamental to her critique. But in addition, she throws doubt on the ethical weight of unscrutinised 'natural feelings'. For Wollstonecraft, such feelings come too close to an unthinking, instinctive response. She makes this claim repeatedly in the *Vindication*, moving from her assertion that Burke 'has a mortal antipathy to reason' (9), to the instruction to 'go hence, thou slave of impulse, look into the private recesses of thy heart' (56). For Wollstonecraft, Burke's 'natural feelings' bypass both the heart and the head.

Wollstonecraft develops this argument in the *Vindication* in a passage where she notes the limitations of a purely physical response to suffering or injustice:

> Men who possess uncommon sensibility… soon forget the most forcible sensations. Not tarrying long enough in the brain to be subject to reflection, the next sensations… obliterate them… The sight of distress, or an affecting narrative, made… the heart, literally speaking, beat with sympathetic emotion. We ought to beware of confounding mechanical instinctive sensations with emotions that reason deepens, and justly terms the feelings of *humanity*. This word discriminates the active exertions of virtue from the vague declamation of sensibility (136-37).

Feeling is central to Wollstonecraft's account of virtuous humanity. But such feeling must be connected with memory and reflection, to move it beyond a merely instinctive response. However, Wollstonecraft does not only find evidence of a tendency to instinctive responses in Burke's language; she also detects it at the root of his model of political society.

Burke declares in the *Reflections* that political wisdom, as well as political and economic power, should be inherited by each generation: 'the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation… without at all excluding a principle of improvement… Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete' (122). Burke, like Wollstonecraft, argues for a process of 'improvement' but makes this dependent on the experience and authority of previous generations. This model allows Burke to appeal again to feeling; he recommends 'binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections' (122). In addition, Burke argues that such inheritance is 'natural' and therefore right: 'Through the same plan of a conformity to nature in our artificial institutions, and by calling in the aid of her unerring and powerful instincts, to fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason, we have derived several other… benefits' (122-23). For Wollstonecraft, 'unerring' natural instincts should not be obeyed, but rather interrogated, if political actors are to act like humans and not beasts. Burke's model of political inheritance is pernicious, because it corrupts humans' true inheritance from God, the capacity *not* to act merely on instinct.

In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft counters Burke's valorisation of tradition and precedent, taking on the language of the *Reflections* to declare: 'It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above

the brute creation by their improveable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights' (22). The political stakes of Wollstonecraft's argument against a continuum between humans and animals becomes apparent. As Eileen Hunt Botting has discussed, for Wollstonecraft, humans, unlike animals, have the capacity for reason and therefore have natural political rights (an argument she develops in more detail in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*) (2016, 97). However, this is not a triumphant statement. Humans only inherit 'improveable faculties', the capacity to reason. This capacity has to be acted upon, and is not self-fulfilling. Wollstonecraft reiterates that this is not an inevitable process. The improvement of individuals and of society can be reversed, a threat made more urgent by Burke's claims: 'There is no end to this implicit submission to authority - some where it must stop, or we return to barbarism; and the capacity of improvement, which gives us a natural sceptre on earth, is a cheat, an *ignis-fatuus*, that leads us from inviting meadows into bogs and dung-hills' (23). Reason and improvement must be protected and cherished, Wollstonecraft declares, or humans face the possibility of sliding down the scale that separates them from animals.

Burke emphasises the corporeality of his political tenets, their basis in physical human relations, in contrast to the 'metaphysical abstraction' of the revolutionists (93). He connects such embodiment with key aspects of his creed, in particular his defence of 'prejudice', which he presents as the result of 'untaught feelings' (182):

> We have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate, those inbred sentiments which are… the active monitors of our duty… We have not been drawn and trussed, in order that we may be filled, like stuffed birds in a museum, with chaff and rags, and paltry blurred shreds of paper about the rights of man. We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and

> entire… We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. We fear God; we look up with awe to kings… and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is *natural* to be so affected (181).

Here the 'inbred sentiments' which enable reverence for the inherited past and the status quo are associated explicitly with physical feeling. In his reference to 'entrails' Burke alludes to the consent of the different parts of the body, centred in the guts (Fairclough 33-34). Dwan and Bullard have both noted the 'rational dimension' of prejudice for Burke, but in this passage he makes it a 'natural' product of the body (Dwan 588; Bullard 169).

In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft counters Burke's suggestion that revolutionary discourse negates the body. She declares: 'I still preserve my bowels; my heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies - and I fear God!' (78). However, she suggests that Burke flirts with a corporeality that threatens human reason:

> What do you mean by inbred sentiments? From whence do they come? How were they bred? Are they the brood of folly, which swarm like the insects on the banks of the Nile, when mud and putrefaction have enriched the languid soil?... The appetites are the only perfect inbred powers that I can discern; and they like instincts have a certain aim, they can be satisfied – but improveable reason has not yet discovered the perfection it may arrive at – God forbid! (74-75).

While Burke connects the instincts of the body with social and political structures, Wollstonecraft relegates 'inbred sentiments' exclusively to the behaviour of animals. Throughout the passage, she notes the difficulties that beset attempts to employs reason:

> [W]hen we eagerly pursue any study, we only reach the boundary set to human enquiries… But these are only the trials of contemplative minds, the foundation of virtue remains firm. - The power of exercising our understanding raises us above the

> brutes; and this exercise produces that 'primary morality,' which you term 'untaught feelings' (77).

Wollstonecraft praises difficulty, because in overcoming such obstacles, humans develop reason, virtue and 'morality'. Such morality is not an instinct, but is attained through the exercise of reason. Thus, Wollstonecraft declares: 'If virtue be an instinct, I renounce all hope of immortality' (77); such instinctive behaviour would preclude the improvement of society and make humans no more than animals, and, as Sapiro notes, 'gross inequality, violence and indignities for the vast majority… [would be] all there is' (52).

As Wollstonecraft notes, Burke's emphasis on fellow feeling does not preclude distinctions between the privileges of rich and poor. Indeed, in the *Reflections*, his 'inbred sentiments' necessitate strict inequalities: 'Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people… must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination, by art rooted out of their minds' (360). Burke declares the distinction between the 'people' and their rulers to be natural. In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft counters such rhetoric by noting that 'among all your plausible arguments, and witty illustrations, your contempt for the poor always appears conspicuous' (142). This 'contempt' takes the form of promoting that brutalization which threatens the reason that make humans human. Wollstonecraft notes that even Burke's calls for benevolence dehumanize the poor, by offering them as charity what they should claim as a right: 'If the poor are in distress, [the rich] will make some *benevolent* exertions to assist them… Benevolence is a very amiable specious quality; yet the aversion which men feel to accept a right as a favour, should… be extolled as a vestige of native dignity' (133). The result of the inequalities shored up by such 'benevolence' is mutual mistrust. She notes: 'The poor consider the rich as their lawful prey; but we ought

not too severely to animadvert on their ingratitude' (133). Wollstonecraft's use of animal imagery signals the pernicious effects of Burke's distinction between rich and poor, his tendency 'to consider the poor as only the live stock of an estate, the feather of hereditary nobility' (32). Those in need will indeed display the behaviour of animals, but that may be in submission or aggression.

In the *Vindication,* Wollstonecraft mostly sets aside her concerns about the brutality of the poor. Instead she focuses her critique on Burke's descriptions of political collectives. Burke's most infamous account of the revolutionary mob comes in his account of the march from Paris to Versailles and invasion of the palace of Versailles on the night of 5-6 October 1789. He declares:

> A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with… blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just had time to fly almost naked … [T]he royal captives… were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women (165).

Burke appeals for special sympathy for the royal family, declaring that '[i]nfluenced by the inborn feelings of my nature… the exalted rank of the persons suffering… adds not a little to my sensibility on that most melancholy occasion' (168). Burke's appeal to 'inborn feelings' anticipates Wollstonecraft's statement that he is the 'slave of impulse', and in her response to this passage in the *Vindication*, she draws parallels between Burke's account of the rioters and his own instinctive responses, reversing his claims for the inhumanity of the poor. Quoting Burke's 'horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances', Wollstonecraft responds: 'Probably you mean women who gained a livelihood by selling vegetables or fish, who never

had had any advantages of education; or their vices might have lost part of their abominable deformity, by losing part of their grossness' (67-68). Wollstonecraft skewers Burke's aestheticizing of inequality in the *Reflections*, by quoting his words back at him, but more importantly, she refuses his attempt to dehumanize the rioters, noting that this is acquired, not 'natural' behaviour. These women are not condemned by biology to be sub-human; they may develop improving reason if they are given access to education.[i] Wollstonecraft notes that Burke, in contrast to the rioters who have no choice, wilfully jettisons his own humanity in his perverse appeal to feeling.

Wollstonecraft thus uses Burke as a cautionary example. By appealing solely to sensibility, which 'never received the *regal* stamp of reason', he acts solely on instinct. Wollstonecraft expands on the nature and effects of this instinct:

> A kind of mysterious instinct is *supposed* to reside in the soul, that instantaneously discerns truth, without the tedious labour of ratiocination. This instinct, for I know not what other name to give it, has been termed *common sense*, and more frequently *sensibility;* and, by a kind of *indefeasible* right, it has been *supposed*… to reign paramount over the other faculties of the mind (68-69).

Wollstonecraft builds on her critique of Burke's appeal to 'nature' to show that he makes unthinking 'instinct' paramount. Such instinct resists analysis and interrogation and therefore insists on its authority, though it is inconsistent, its 'point is always shifting' (69). Wollstonecraft demystifies claims to sensibility, demonstrating the distinction between such claims and those of virtuous humanity, as 'virtue is really an acquisition of the individual, and not the blind impulse of unerring instinct' (70). Despite Burke's claims, he comes closer to animal behaviour than the rioters he condemns:

> In what respect are we superior to the brute creation, if intellect is not allowed to be the guide of passion? Brutes hope and fear, love and hate; but, without a capacity to improve… they neither acquire virtue nor wisdom. - Why? Because the Creator has not given them reason. But the cultivation of reason is an arduous task, and men of lively fancy, finding it easier to follow the impulse of passion, endeavour to persuade themselves and others that it is most *natural* (70-71).

Wollstonecraft's language in the *Vindication* closely echoes her insistence in the *Analytical Review* piece that humanity must be cultivated and kept distinct from animal behaviour. Burke's appeals to 'nature', therefore, show him again unwilling to undertake the difficulty, the 'arduous task' of attempting 'the cultivation of reason' and therefore compromising the distinction between man and brutes.

3. Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution

Wollstonecraft's rejoinders in the *Vindication* to Burke's claims in the *Reflections* are structured by her understanding of the distinction between instinctive and reasoned behaviour, and between humans and animals. However, Wollstonecraft does not consider the latter distinction as categorical. Rather, the behaviour of humans and animals exists on a scale which may shift. In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft uses this understanding to criticise Burke's methods and ideas, in particular his man of feeling persona, and his phobic accounts of the lower classes. But despite the differences in their accounts of the animal-like behaviour of the poor, both Wollstonecraft and Burke display anxiety about the social and political effects of the poor acting *en masse*. While Wollstonecraft sets aside such anxiety in the *Vindication*, she finds it more difficult to do so in her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. Wollstonecraft remains opposed to Burke in both her partisanship and her philosophical account of reason, and she attacks Burke's accounts of the mob. Yet at times her accounts come

close to those of Burke. This shift is not just a reaction to the increased violence of revolutionary collective action in France. It is also tied to Wollstonecraft's sense that commercial corruption and counter-revolutionary backlash might stymie the improvement of individuals and nations (Keane 2000a, 33).

In the *Historical and Moral View* Wollstonecraft moves between a representation of the Revolution as individual and social improvement in action, and more anxious worries about violence and reaction. To a greater degree than in the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft sees people of different social ranks acting against each others' interests:

> It is a palpable errour to suppose, that men of every class are not equally susceptible of common improvement: if therefore it be the contrivance of any government, to preclude from a chance of improvement the greater part of the citizens of the state, it can be considered in no other light than as a monstrous tyranny... For all the advantages of civilization cannot be felt, unless it pervades the whole mass, humanizing every description of men (*Works* 6, 220).

Wollstonecraft offers a positive vision of improvable reason as a universal human characteristic, but she also articulates a gloomy account of the way 'tyranny' functions to 'preclude from a change of improvement the greater part of the citizens of the state' (Sapiro 94).

Events in France certainly offer Wollstonecraft examples of the improvement she had attempted to conjure in her earlier writings: 'Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face, beaming with benevolence… The image of God implanted in our nature is now more rapidly expanding; and, as it opens, liberty with maternal wing seems to be soaring to regions far above vulgar annoyance, promising to shelter all mankind' (*Works* 6, 22). Here reason has divine

qualities; it is the faculty which link humans with God. The success of this ‘new spirit [that] has gone forth’ is all the more remarkable, given that the people of France had been treated like animals for so long. Certainly it proves too novel for the authorities to diagnose and contain in the early days of the revolution: ‘the court [were] still so stupidly secure as not to see, that the people, who at this period dared to think for themselves, would not now be noosed like beasts… heard with astonishment the bold tones of men speaking of their rights (*Works* 6, 44). Yet the legacy of the brutalising effects of inequality is difficult to overcome, and Wollstonecraft presents incidents in which the response to such brutalization is retribution and violence.

Wollstonecraft notes that acts of violence are not the result of the moment, but are produced by long-standing systems of inequality, and that time is required to undo such damage. In making these claims, she echoes her earlier arguments that reasoned improvement is always more salutary than instinctive action, even if that action is benevolent:

> People are rendered ferocious by misery; and misanthropy is ever the offspring of discontent. Let not then the happiness of one half of mankind be built on the misery of the other, and humanity will take place of charity…
>
> Several acts of ferocious folly have justly brought much obloquy on the grand revolution, which has taken place in France; yet… the people are essentially good… knowledge is rapidly advancing to that degree of perfectibility, when the proud distinctions of sophisticating fools will be eclipsed by the mild rays of philosophy, and man be considered as man (*Works* 6, 46).

The sudden movements of this passage between hope and condemnation, diagnosis of present corruption and prediction of future ‘perfectibility’ seems characteristic of the complexity of Wollstonecraft’s task in the *Historical and Moral View*. Perhaps following the example of her

natural history reading, she treats events in France as a test of the potential for human improvement, but events in practice serve to complicate that narrative.

Wollstonecraft's representations of collective political action offer striking examples of her mixed enthusiasm and concern. She praises the 'public spirited dignity [which] pervaded the whole mass' at the fall of the Bastille and in its aftermath (*Works* 6, 97, 100). But later events prove less easy to defend, as Wollstonecraft acknowledges that both the nobility and the people consult their feelings over reason:

> So weak is the tenderness produced merely by sympathy… compared with the humanity of a cultivated understanding. Alas! - It is morals, not feelings, which distinguish men from the beasts of prey… [W]hilst despotism and superstition exist, the convulsions, which the regeneration of man occasions, will always bring forward the vices they have engendered (*Works* 6, 127).

While Wollstonecraft's account of such 'convulsions' tend to share the blame between the people and the nobility, at times she offers phobic accounts of collective action distinct from anything in the *Vindication*.

Wollstonecraft returns to the events of 5-6 October 1789, which enabled her in the *Vindication* to condemn both Burke's treatment of the mob, and his own impulsive thinking. In this new account, rather than show the rioters as possessed of innate if neglected humanity, she suggests they are void of reason, which leaves them open to exploitation:

> From the enjoyment of more freedom than the women of other parts of the world, those of France have acquired more independence of spirit than any others; it has, therefore, been the scheme of designing men… [to work] them up to some desperate act, and then

> terming it a folly, because merely the rage of women, who were supposed to be actuated only by the emotions of the moment (*Works* 6, 195).

Wollstonecraft sustains a degree of pity for the women rioters, and presents them as an example of the broader inequalities she critiques in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. But in her long description of the attack on Versailles her prose takes on characteristics of Burke's account of the same event. In the early part of her account, she attempts to distinguish between this mob, and the positive forms of collective action which she had earlier praised: 'The concourse… consisted mostly of market women, and the lowest refuse of the streets… They were strictly speaking a mob, affixing all the odium to the appellation it can possibly import; and not to be confounded with the honest multitude, who took the Bastille' (*Works* 6, .220). As Wollstonecraft's account continues, however, it proves more and more difficult to sustain this distinction between 'public spirit' and instinctive riotous action.

Like Burke, Wollstonecraft describes the crowd in inhuman terms: 'the restless mob… began to prowl about... the whole gang of ruffians, rushed towards the palace, and… entered like a torrent' (*Works* 6, 204). Again following Burke, Wollstonecraft saves her sternest condemnation for those who attempted violence on the queen, decrying 'the fury of the monsters, who were still hunting after blood or plunder' (*Works* 6, 205).[ii] Yet Wollstonecraft distinguishes her account from Burke's, suggesting that her choice of inhuman imagery is a deliberate strategy to condemn the transgressions of this particular event, and not all collective action. The rioters at Versailles are monstrous because their action is exceptional. It is 'one of the blackest of the machinations that have… disgraced the dignity of man, and sullied the annals of humanity… [T]hese wretches… show[ed] in every instance, by the difference of their conduct, that they were a set of monsters, distinct from the people' (*Works* 6, 206). Wollstonecraft returns to her distinction between humane and brutal behaviour, but it is

difficult to trace a clear distinction in the chaos of the events of the Revolution. She expresses disappointment that the National Assembly of France does not uphold such distinctions by condemning the behaviour of the rioters. She notes that this 'omission' is likely to

> produce the most fatal consequences, because impunity never fails to stimulate the wretches… to commit… still more atrocious crimes; and it is by suspending the decrees of justice, that hardened miscreants, made so by oppression, give full scope to all the brutality of their sanguinary dispositions…
>
> The altar of humanity had been profaned - The dignity of freedom had been tarnished… Yet these brutes were permitted triumphantly to escape - and dignified with the appellation of the people (*Works* 6, 209).

Wollstonecraft insists that for the aims of the Revolution to be realised, the principles by which its actors are motivated must be analysed and articulated. The excesses of mobs can be explained if they are understood as exceptions to the diffusion of reason through the people. But by failing to condemn the actions of the mob at Versailles as such an exception, the National Assembly makes them representative of the Revolution, thereby connecting its principles with the actions of 'brutes' rather than of 'humanity'.

Events in France shake Wollstonecraft's optimism for the improvement of society. The march on Versailles and response of the National Assembly demonstrate that the French people are not a straightforward example of the principles of humanity in action. Rather, they demonstrate the ease with which humankind might slide back down the scale to brutality (Taylor 206). Wollstonecraft's critique of instinctive action is a highly effective counter to Burke's rhetoric, but it proves difficult to sustain in 1794. However Wollstonecraft is determined to end the *Historical and Moral View* on a hopeful note, and in doing so, she adopts a bodily metaphor. She declares of France:

> [A]s in medicine there is a species of complaint in the bowels which works its own cure, and, leaving the body healthy, gives an invigorated tone to the system, so there is in politics: and whilst the agitation of its regeneration continues, the excrementitious humours exuding from the contaminated body will excite a general dislike and contempt for the nation; and it is only the philosophical eye… that will be able to discern the cause, which has produced so many dreadful effects (*Works* 6, 220).

This image enables Wollstonecraft to make a positive case for the future of France. Like the body, political states find their own equilibrium, and what looks like poison and disorder might be incipient cure. But this image is very different from the discourse Wollstonecraft has taken from natural history, and deployed against Burke. Wollstonecraft does not discuss actual bodies here, but uses the analogy of the body politic. Only at this level of abstraction can she offer a firmly positive vision of the future. Meanwhile Wollstonecraft's claims for the rational improvement of individuals and social structures are muted, if not abandoned.

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[i] As Marso notes, Wollstonecraft's 'analysis of the market women is entirely in keeping with her… comments on gender in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.' (50). See also Youssef, who emphasises the radical and unusual nature of Wollstonecraft's stance (Youssef 2015).

[ii] Keane and Jones note that Wollstonecraft follows a number of conservative commentators here (Keane 2000b, 116-17; Jones 302-3).