

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.  
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

**Author(s):** Reuter, Martina

**Title:** Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft on the imagination

**Year:** 2017

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Reuter, M. (2017). Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft on the imagination. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25(6), 1138-1160.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1334188>

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.



## Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft on the imagination

Martina Reuter

To cite this article: Martina Reuter (2017): Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft on the imagination, British Journal for the History of Philosophy, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2017.1334188](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1334188)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1334188>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 436



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft on the imagination

Martina Reuter 

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

### ABSTRACT

The article compares Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's views on the imagination. It is argued that though Wollstonecraft was evidently influenced by Rousseau, there are significant differences between their views. These differences are grounded in their different views on the faculty of reason and its relation to the passions. Whereas Rousseau characterizes reason as a derivative faculty, grounded in the more primary faculty of perfectibility, Wollstonecraft perceives reason as the faculty defining human nature. It is argued that contrary to what is often assumed, Wollstonecraft's conception of the imagination is not primarily characterized by its Romantic features, but rather by the close affinity she posits between reason and the imagination. This close affinity has several consequences. One consequence is that she is less worried than Rousseau about the imagination wandering without external constraints, because she believes in reason's ability to guide the imagination by choosing its objects. Ultimately the difference between Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's views on the imagination helps us understand why she was a passionate philosopher of the Enlightenment while he was one of its first, perceptive and most articulate critics.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 2 July 2016; Revised 12 February and 9 May 2017; Accepted 21 May 2017

**KEYWORDS** Imagination; Mary Wollstonecraft; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; education

The faculty of the imagination has a long history, particularly if we assume some continuity between the ancient faculty of *phantasia* and the imagination as it was known by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797).<sup>1</sup> One feature combining otherwise different

**CONTACT** Martina Reuter  [anna.m.reuter@jyu.fi](mailto:anna.m.reuter@jyu.fi)  P.O. Box 35, FI-40014, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

<sup>1</sup>John Lyons has examined this continuity and argued that Early Modern conceptions of the imagination were a revitalization of Stoic views (Lyons, *Before Imagination*, 1–31). Discussing Rousseau, he claims that 'Rousseau was quite conscious of the traditional, scholastic, theory of imagination as a faculty that intervened between raw stimulus of the senses and the generalizing, abstract power of judgment' (194).

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

conceptions of the imagination, is the view that ideas of the imagination are particular. We find this view clearly expressed by Rousseau, who writes that 'Every general idea is purely intellectual; let the imagination tamper ever so little with it, it immediately becomes a particular idea' ('Discourse on the Origin and Foundations', 102). The focus on the particularity of imagined ideas has set the imagination apart from reason, understood as the faculty capable of perceiving general ideas.

In what follows, I argue that Wollstonecraft's understanding of the imagination is particularly interesting because she is emphasizing a close interaction between reason and the imagination, which also blurs a clear cut distinction between the particular ideas of the imagination and the general ideas of reason. Rousseau and Wollstonecraft both considered the imagination to be one of the most important mental faculties, alongside reason and the passions, but though Wollstonecraft was evidently influenced by Rousseau's views, we do also find some significant differences. I argue that in order to capture these differences, we need to consider their different conception of reason and the relation between reason and the passions.

In the first section I discuss Rousseau's view on the roles of the imagination by first locating them in the more general framework of his understanding of the faculty of perfectibility and then examining the roles the imagination plays at the different stages of Emile's education. In the second section I compare Wollstonecraft's and Rousseau's views on reason and its relation to passions and impressions. In the final section I develop a detailed discussion of Wollstonecraft's understanding of the imagination and compare it with Rousseau's understanding.

### Rousseau on imagination, finitude and education

As Mira Morgenstern quite rightly puts it: 'Rousseau does not give us a direct definition of the imagination. Rather, he chooses to describe it in terms of its effects' (*Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity*, 72). These effects are closely connected to human perfectibility. According to Rousseau, it is the faculty of perfectibility that distinguishes humans from other animals. He argues that humans are not made human by an innately existing faculty of reason, as claimed by many of his predecessors and contemporaries (including, as we will see in the next section, Mary Wollstonecraft), but by a potentiality to develop mental faculties. In 'Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Mankind', Rousseau explains that it 'is the faculty of perfectibility [...] which, as circumstances offer, successively unfolds all the other faculties, and resides among us not only in the species, but in the individuals that compose it' ('Discourse on the

Origin and Foundations', 96, see also 112).<sup>2</sup> The unfolding faculties include reason, but reason is a derivative faculty and Rousseau emphasizes that its development is preceded by other faculties, not least by the passions. He claims that it 'is by the activity of our passions, that our reason improves: [...] it is impossible to conceive, why a man exempt from fears and desires should take the trouble to reason' (97).

The development of the passions, on their part, is dependent on the imagination. Passions have their origin in needs and in the case of 'savage man [...] his desires never extend beyond his physical wants' (97), but aided by the imagination and intertwined with the progress of civilization, humans develop desires that have imaginary objects. In *Emile*, Rousseau makes an explicit distinction between physical needs, which are based on natural necessity and which can be satisfied by providing the needed object, for example food, and desires, which have their origin in the imagination and which cannot be satisfied exactly because their objects are imaginary (*Emile*, 80–1, 333).

Perfectibility is intrinsically connected to human freedom. Whereas other animals satisfy their needs guided by their instincts, humans are distinguished by their 'quality of a free agent'. 'Nature speaks to all animals', Rousseau emphasizes, but whereas 'beasts obey her voice', man 'feels the same impulse, but he at the same time perceives that he is free to resist or to acquiesce' (Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Origin and Foundations', 95). Human freedom is thus based on the capacity of deliberation, which requires development of the mental faculties, including the imagination. We should note that Rousseau connects freedom with the unlimited and infinite. He characterizes perfectibility as an 'almost unlimited faculty' (96) and emphasizes that 'the imaginary world is infinite' (*Emile*, 81). Infinity is contrasted with the finitude of the real world, which puts necessary limits on what can be achieved. Human freedom, important as it is for Rousseau's entire political corpus, is thus far from unproblematic. Grounded in perfectibility, freedom creates a clash between what we desire and what we can achieve, and this clash is, Rousseau claims, the chief cause for human unhappiness (*Emile*, 80–1, 'Discourse on the Origin and Foundations', 96).

According to Rousseau, two particular problems arise from the activity of the imagination. First, as noted above, imagination has the ability to create imaginary objects of desire, which transcend the limits of what is possible to satisfy. Second, imagination makes comparison possible. The ability to

---

<sup>2</sup>There is much dispute about exactly how Rousseau understands the relation between the faculty of perfectibility, shared by all humans, and the historical and environmental circumstances which condition the development of the faculty. For an overview of the discussion and an interpretation emphasizing that where there are human beings there is always also nascent perfectibility, see Einspahr, 'The Beginning that Never Was'.

compare allows for deliberation and thereby freedom, but it does also create a tendency to compare oneself with others, which Rousseau claims to be characteristic of civilized man. In *Discourse on Inequality*, he explains that the problematic passion of *amour-propre*, a frequent source of conflicts and unhappiness, is born only in society, where men are able to compare themselves with others ('Discourse on the Origin and Foundations', 146).<sup>3</sup> The ability to compare is directly connected to the imagination in a passage where Rousseau distinguishes between 'what is moral and what is physical in the passion called love'. Whereas the:

physical part of [love] is that general desire which prompts the sexes to unite with each other; the moral part is that which determines this desire, and fixes it upon a particular object to the exclusion of all others, or at least gives it a greater degree of energy for this preferred object.

(109)

Rousseau uses 'moral love' in order to describe the form of love, which is dependent on perfectibility, and this love, characteristic of civilized man, combines both problems connected to the imagination. Imagination determines desire by fixing it upon a particular object, which is given imaginary features, and makes it possible to compare this object as well as oneself with others. Rousseau concludes by emphasizing that the:

imagination, which causes so many ravages among us, never speaks to the heart of savages, who peaceably wait for the impulses of nature, yield to these impulses without choice and with more pleasure than fury; and the need once satisfied, all desire is lost.

('Discourse on the Origin and Foundations', 109)

Contrary to the easily satisfied need of the savage, moral love is a passion particularly difficult to satisfy if the imagination is not regulated in order to produce an appropriate object of desire.

In addition to romantic love, the imagination does also mediate other human relationships, including friendship.<sup>4</sup> Friendship is grounded in pity, which is in *Discourse on Inequality* described as 'a natural sentiment, which, by moderating in every individual the activity of *amour-propre*, contributes to the mutual preservation of the whole species' (Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Origin and Foundations', 108). In *Emile*, Rousseau describes how a careful education can use the imagination in order to develop pity into

---

<sup>3</sup>*Amour-propre* has been translated variously as self-love, selfishness, pride and vanity. Due to the fact that this term has many meanings and cannot be reduced to its negative implications, I follow the practice of keeping the French term untranslated. For an influential interpretation emphasizing that *amour-propre* is not only a threat, but also a possibility, see Neuhausser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*.

<sup>4</sup>On the connections between love, pity, friendship and the imagination, see also Morgenstern, *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity*, 55–119; Reisert, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Friend of Virtue*, 78–105; Einspahr, 'The Beginning that Never Was', 448–54; and Shuffelton, 'Rousseau's Imaginary Friend', 312–14.

friendship and thereby limit the dangers of unrestricted sexual desire as well as *amour-propre*. He emphasizes that the:

first sentiment of which a carefully raised young man is capable is not love; it is friendship. The first act of his nascent imagination is to teach him that he has fellows; and the species affects him before the female sex.

(Rousseau, *Emile*, 220)

When combined with pity, 'Imagination puts us in the place of the miserable man rather than that of the happy man' (*Emile*, 221). This tendency is beneficial not least because it combines the goals of pity and *amour-propre*. 'Pity is sweet', according to Rousseau, because when comparing ourselves with somebody who is worse off, we 'feel the pleasure of not suffering' (221). Pity strengthens our happiness, whereas putting oneself in the place of a happy person creates envy and makes us unhappy. Rousseau's discussion of pity and the imagination is one of the instances where it becomes very clear that in addition to creating dangers, the imagination does also contribute to restricting these dangers.

Due to the faculty of perfectibility, human life is coloured by the paradoxical tragedy of having more mental powers than are needed for self-preservation. This creates particular challenges for education. Unhappiness consists, according to Rousseau, in 'the disproportion between our desires and our faculties' (*Emile*, 80). The goal of education cannot be to diminish our desires, because 'if they were beneath our power, a part of our faculties would remain idle, and we would not enjoy our whole being' (80). But neither can we extend our faculties, because that will only extend our desires in proportion and we become even unhappier. Instead, education must aim at 'diminishing the excess of the desires over the faculties and putting power and will in perfect equality' (80). In the case of the imagination, the 'most active' of all faculties, this means that we have to restrict the potentially infinite world created by the imagination in accordance with the finite real world (81).<sup>5</sup>

Since reason is a derivative faculty, which is dependent for its development on the passions and the imagination, it cannot be trusted as the faculty which controls the others. Rousseau emphasizes that of all the faculties 'reason, which is, so to speak, only a composite of all the others, is the one that develops with the most difficulty and latest' (89). He shows no mercy for educators who want to use reason 'in order to develop the first faculties! [...] This is to begin with the end, to want to make the product the instrument' (89). The criticism is aimed at John Locke, whom Rousseau accuses of assuming children

---

<sup>5</sup>Contrary to what is sometimes claimed (see, e.g. Lines, 'Shackling the Imagination'), Rousseau's aim is not to shackle the imagination, but rather to redirect it in ways that does not threaten human happiness.

to be reasoning creatures at a too early age.<sup>6</sup> Because the passions and the imagination cannot be directly regulated by reason, particularly not in children below the age of 12, when reason has not yet developed and ‘errors and vices germinate without one’s yet having any instrument for destroying them’ (93), the tutor must instead regulate from the outside, by regulating circumstances and guiding what kind of impressions children and adolescents are allowed to receive.

Regulation of circumstances must take different forms with children of different ages. In the case of children below the age of 12, discussed in book I and II of *Emile*, the imagination is put on the right track by answering the child’s needs, not his or her wishes. Rousseau emphasizes that ‘your child ought to get a thing not because he asks for it but because he needs it’ (*Emile*, 89). In order not to create excessive wishes, it is particularly important that parents do not become the servants of their children. A child’s inclination to command is excited by the parent’s or tutor’s willingness to serve, not by the child’s natural needs as such. Rousseau insists that children must learn to accept the limits set by necessity before they learn that the will is free (89). Otherwise they will spend their lives trying to command and manipulate the wills of other people as well as the necessities of nature. Rousseau’s emphasis on necessity is directly connected to his criticism of reasoning with children. He argues that before ‘the age of reason’ a child cannot have any idea of moral being and social relations. Therefore the parent or tutor must avoid all words connected to the moral realm, such as obey, command, duty and obligation, and instead use words directly connected to ability, such as strength, necessity, impotence and constraint (89).

In book III, when *Emile* has turned 12 and reached the age of reason, Rousseau turns his focus from necessity to utility: ‘Up to now we have known no law other than that of necessity. Now we are dealing with what is useful’ (167). *Emile* is introduced to the world of knowledge and he is encouraged to develop a desire for appropriate knowledge by strengthening the connection between utility and knowledge. The process is still very much guided by the tutor, but the regulation becomes more indirect. Rousseau points out that:

you should be well aware that it is rarely up to you to suggest to him what he ought to learn. It is up to him to desire it, to seek it, to find it. It is up to you to put

---

<sup>6</sup>On Locke’s position, see Locke, *John Locke on Education*, 65. It has been claimed that Rousseau exaggerates the difference between Locke’s position and his own, see, for example, Parry, ‘*Emile: Learning to be Men, Women, and Citizens*’, 253. This is true in the sense that Locke strongly emphasizes that reasoning with children must be different from reasoning with adults, an emphasis overlooked by Rousseau in his attack on Locke, and much of Locke’s practical advice resembles Rousseau’s own. But if we take seriously how Rousseau’s definition of reason as a derivative faculty (which is not only the last faculty to fully develop, but which does not exist before it develops out of the other faculties) differs from Locke’s understanding of reason as a separate faculty, there is an essential difference, which Rousseau is perhaps not exaggerating.



it within his reach, skilfully to give birth to this desire and to furnish him with the means of satisfying it.

(179)

At this point the main threat is that Emile becomes directed by people's opinion and becomes vain, desiring knowledge in order to show off (173–5). In book IV Emile reaches adolescence and enters the moral world and its human relationships. This is when it becomes important to develop pity and friendship in order to restrict sexual desire and prevent *amour-propre* from developing its disastrous aspects of becoming 'pride in great souls, vanity in small ones, and [feeding] itself constantly' (215). Towards the end of book V, the tutor tells Emile that when 'you entered the age of reason, I protected you from men's opinions. When your heart became sensitive, I preserved you from the empire of the passions' (443). This is an apt summary of the tasks of books III and IV. In book V Emile cannot anymore be preserved from the empire of the passions because he has to learn how to love. The beginning of the book describes the characteristics of Emile's ideal wife and 'the spirit in which Sophie has been raised' in order to become this wife (393).<sup>7</sup> Sophie's education is in some respects freer than Emile's. Rousseau claims that it is conducted 'with more care than effort, and more by following her taste than by hindering it' (393). We are also told that Sophie has 'a very sensitive heart, and this extreme sensitivity sometimes makes her imagination so active that it is difficult to moderate' and here this characteristic seems to be more for the good than the bad (393). In Sophie's case there is no tutor regulating circumstances, but the difference from Emile's case should not be overemphasized. In the third section I argue that when it comes to regulating the imagination, Sophie's mother plays a role quite similar to the role played by Emile's tutor.

The main part of book V is dedicated to the task of making Emile and Sophie fall in love and enter a happy and lasting marriage. The task includes the imagination, which must present them as desirable in each other's eyes, and this is one of two instances where Rousseau makes an exception to his generally negative attitude towards books. On a general level Rousseau claims that 'The child who reads does not think, he only reads' (*Emile*, 168). Books are problematic because like the imagination in general they mediate reality and give only representations, not the 'facts' in themselves (see also Parry, 'Emile: Learning to be Men, Women, and Citizens', 257).

---

<sup>7</sup>For discussions capturing Sophie's education on Rousseau's own terms, see Morgenstern, *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity*, 108–19; and Shell, 'Emile: Nature and the Education of Sophie'. Rousseau's view on the education of women has raised fierce feminist criticism from Mary Wollstonecraft onwards. Though I find this criticism in many respects justified, it is not the topic of the present article. See footnote 9 for references to the literature on Wollstonecraft's criticism of Rousseau on women. For an interesting recent study of Rousseau's early feminist views on women, see Botting, 'The Early Rousseau's Egalitarian Feminism'.

According to Rousseau, one must do without books whenever one can, but in some cases they are necessary and the first case appears in book III, when Emile gets Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as 'the first exercise [...] given to his imagination' (*Emile*, 184). Rousseau indicates that this book is not only suitable but necessary, because it describes 'a situation where all man's natural needs are shown in a way a child's mind can sense' (184). It is often claimed that Rousseau chooses *Robinson Crusoe* because, as Geraint Parry puts it, the book depicts 'the individual's lone struggle to come to terms with natural necessity' ('Emile: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens', 257), but Denise Schaeffer has interestingly argued that Defoe's novel is necessary, not because it tells about how to survive in the state of nature, but rather because it teaches the utility of society. She argues that the 'experience of the novel does not simply maintain Emile as a physical being but moves him beyond (or at least prepares him to move beyond) a merely physical appreciation of the world' (Schaeffer, 'The Utility of Ink', 131).<sup>8</sup> *Robinson Crusoe* is necessary because the book teaches Emile about what it means to be a moral (rather than merely physical) man before his desires are awakened and he actually moves into the moral realm of book IV. I find Schaeffer's interpretation particularly interesting because it points towards an important similarity between the necessity of *Robinson Crusoe* and the other book Rousseau finds necessary, François Fénelon's *Telemachus*. It is by reading the latter book that Sophie falls in love with Telemachus and indirectly with Emile, who turns out to be, in the words of Sophie's mother, 'the new Telemachus' (Rousseau, *Emile*, 415). Both books are necessary, because they teach how to desire something that needs to be desired but has to be imaginary, since it is not yet present in the factual world. This is one of the instances where Rousseau clearly thinks that the imagination is necessary.

I now turn to a discussion of Wollstonecraft's thought and to a comparison between her and Rousseau's views. In the next section I focus on their conceptions of reason and its relation to the passions, and in the final section I compare their views on the imagination.

## Reason and the passions

There are good grounds to claim that Rousseau was Wollstonecraft's primary intellectual interlocutor. She read *Emile* while working as a governess in Dublin in 1787 and told her sister how she 'love[s] his paradoxes' (Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 114). We find clear influences from Rousseau in everything Wollstonecraft wrote after this first encounter and she is an interesting

<sup>8</sup>Schaeffer's interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Rousseau characterizes *Robinson Crusoe* as 'the first exercise [...] given to the imagination' (*Emile*, 184). We saw above, when discussing friendship, that in book IV Rousseau points out that the 'first act of his nascent imagination is to teach him that he has fellows' (220). The imagination is introduced when it is needed in order to mediate human relationships.

reader of Rousseau not least because she combines admiration with criticism. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she exclaims that ‘warmly as I admire the genius of that able writer, whose opinions I shall often have occasion to cite, indignation always take place of admiration [...] when I read his voluptuous reveries’ (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 93). Wollstonecraft’s criticism of Rousseau is philosophically innovative particularly because she uses Rousseau against himself, as when writing that ‘it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau’s opinion respecting men: I extend it to women’ (90).

The most evident aspect of Wollstonecraft’s disagreement with Rousseau concerns his views on women in general and his description of the education of Sophie in particular. This criticism has been well documented and analysed in the scholarly literature,<sup>9</sup> and here I will engage with more subtle, but philosophically more fundamental aspects of her disagreements with his views. Wollstonecraft’s interpretations of Rousseau’s works are not always correct and they are clearly influenced by his reputation as a detractor of civilization, longing to go back to nature. My aim here is not to evaluate the correctness of her explicit criticism of Rousseau, or even to discuss it in any detail, but rather to explicate some philosophically essential differences between their views and thereby also explicate in what respect her views include an implicit criticism.

Wollstonecraft agrees with Rousseau that the development of reason is dependent on the use of other mental faculties, such as the passions and the imagination, but she disagrees with his understanding of perfectibility as a specific faculty, which replaces reason as the line to be drawn between humans and other animals. Right at the beginning of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she rhetorically asks: ‘In what does man’s pre-eminence over the brute creation consist?’ and answers that it ‘is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason’ (81). The human being, considered as a whole, is an animal that has a rational soul and is therefore free from the determining ‘shackles of matter’ (116). When she refers to perfectibility, she refers to ‘the perfectibility of human reason’ (122), not to perfectibility as a separate faculty. In her usage perfectibility means ‘advancing gradually towards perfection’ (122), though never reaching this state, which is conceivable only as ‘the perfection of God’ (84). The reference to the perfection of God is followed by a famous sentence, where Wollstonecraft positions herself in relation to Rousseau: ‘Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd

<sup>9</sup>For accounts of Wollstonecraft’s criticism of Rousseau on women, see Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, 9–26; Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, 166–72, 184–5; Green, *The Woman of Reason*, 82–103; Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer*, 13–39, 97–122; Bahar, *Mary Wollstonecraft’s Social and Aesthetic Philosophy*, 73–8, 85; Botting, *Family Feuds*, 189–214; Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera*; O’Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 177–80; Bergès, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft’s*, 109–14; and Reuter, ‘Like a Fanciful Kind of Half Being’.

of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will *be* right' (84). Wollstonecraft's optimistic belief in the possibility of 'true civilization', which is neither a *status quo* nor Rousseau's 'ferocious flight back to the night of sensual ignorance' (87), is grounded in her understanding of the perfectibility of reason as a capacity by which humans, though in themselves imperfect creatures, can follow 'the invariable rule' by which God's perfect reason 'regulates the universe' (116).<sup>10</sup>

The difference between Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's conceptions of reason is also closely connected to the fact that they locate the origin of human freedom differently. Whereas Rousseau grounds freedom in perfectibility and attributes it to deliberation and the will, Wollstonecraft grounds freedom in reason. She holds that humans are capable of free agency exactly because they are reasoning creatures.<sup>11</sup>

Wollstonecraft's conception of reason places her very much in the traditionalist camp Rousseau is criticizing. It is outside the scope of this article to decide if Rousseau's understanding of perfectibility as a separate faculty or Wollstonecraft's understanding of perfectible reason is philosophically more plausible. We can note, though, that while Wollstonecraft's position relies on the theological assumption that there exist created rational souls, an assumption that Rousseau avoids, Rousseau has to solve the question of how reason can unfold if it is not already there.<sup>12</sup> Rather than solving this question, my more humble aim is to explicate what consequences their different notions of reason have for how they evaluate the dangers posited by the passions and the imagination. When Wollstonecraft emphasizes that the development of reason and judgement is dependent on the passions and the imagination, as we will soon see she does, she agrees with a broadly

<sup>10</sup>Wollstonecraft's belief in true civilization has providentialist features, which she shares with Richard Price, who in *Discourse on the Love of Country* (1789) saw the three great revolutions, the Glorious revolution in 1688 and the more recent American and French revolutions, as providential signs, indicating that 'the dominion of kings [will be] changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests [give] way to the dominion of reason and conscience' (*Political Writings*, 195). Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was a defense of Price's *Discourse* against Edmund Burke's criticism. I discuss the relation between Wollstonecraft's and Price's views on providence in Reuter, 'Revolution, Virtue and Duty'. On Rousseau's quite different view, see Marques, 'The Paths of Providence'. I briefly discuss the relation between Wollstonecraft's and Rousseau's views in Reuter, 'Like a Fanciful Kind of Half Being'.

<sup>11</sup>Freedom is a fundamental concept in Wollstonecraft's political philosophy which I will not discuss here. Recent scholarship has placed her thought in the context of Republicanism and argued that her concept of liberty is best understood as freedom from arbitrary rule. Such freedom must be both internal and external, as stated by Price, when he refers to freedom from the dominion of kings as well as reason's freedom from the dominion of priests (see footnote 10). For interpretations that place Wollstonecraft in a Republican framework and discuss the relation between independence of mind and the social and political conditions for independence, see Halldenius, 'The Primacy of Right'; 'The Political Conditions for Free Agency'; and *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism*, 24–7, 75–90; and Coffee, 'Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power'; 'Freedom as Independence', and 'Mary Wollstonecraft, Public Reason, and the Virtuous Republic'. See also Mackenzie ('Mary Wollstonecraft: An Early Relational Autonomy Theorist?'), who gives an interesting account of Wollstonecraft's understanding of independence, including independence of mind, by comparing it to twenty-first-century relational conceptions of autonomy.

<sup>12</sup>On Rousseau's problem, including a suggested solution, see Einspahr, 'The Beginning that Never Was'.

empiricist understanding of the interaction between experience and unfolding reason, not with Rousseau's definition of reason as an in a strong sense derivative faculty.<sup>13</sup>

Wollstonecraft shares Rousseau's conviction that the infant mind must be protected from harmful impressions. In *Rights of Woman* she dedicates a chapter to 'the effect which an early association of ideas has upon the character' and considers this effect to be 'determinate' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 185). In phrases very much reminiscent of Rousseau, she emphasizes that the modes of association established 'during the period that the body takes to arrive at maturity, can seldom be disentangled by reason' (186). The infant mind needs to be protected in order not to fall into 'habitual slavery' unable to 'break associations that do violence to reason' (186). But already here, when discussing children below the age of 12, Wollstonecraft argues that one must simultaneously restrict impressions and strengthen reason. She holds that 'dry employments of the understanding, tend to deaden the feelings and break associations that do violence to reason' and argues that girls are therefore worse off than boys, who are encouraged to exercise their understanding, while the female mind is 'weakened by being employed in unfolding instead of examining the first associations, forced on [it] by every surrounding object' (186). Rather than passively unfolding, the mind must actively exercise the understanding by examining associations. Wollstonecraft clearly thinks that reason exists as a faculty that can be developed already at this early stage, even if it has not yet matured. Her position is closer to Locke's claim that even if reason matures only later, children understand reasoning 'as

---

<sup>13</sup>Some scholars have assumed that Wollstonecraft's epistemology is Lockean since she begins her *Thoughts Concerning the Education of Our Daughters*, a title in itself referring to Locke's treatise, with the claim that she will 'follow Mr. Locke's system' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 4, 9). For the assumption, see Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 76, and for a criticism of it, see Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera*, 90–108. Taylor argues that Wollstonecraft differs radically from Locke by holding that the principles of truth are innate. I agree with parts of Taylor's argument and it is strengthened by the fact that Wollstonecraft was influenced by Price, who articulated a Platonist criticism of the empiricist claim that all ideas derive from experience (Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, 15–57), but I think Taylor exaggerates the difference between Locke and Wollstonecraft. In her early *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft claims 'that principles of truth are innate' (*Works*, 4, 9) and this claim might be inspired by Price, whose influence was particularly strong during her early career. Taylor is right when claiming that her *Thoughts* is not particularly Lockean, but in *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft refers to innate ideas only in a mocking context, as 'a rant about innate elegance' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 97). The other quote Taylor uses as evidence for her interpretation, 'that soul be stamped with the heavenly image' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 122), does not imply that there are innate principles or ideas, but rather that the human soul is created in the image of God, a very widely held theological assumption. The claim that Wollstonecraft's epistemology relies on innate principles can be questioned by her description of reason as the 'power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 123). I agree with Taylor that Wollstonecraft attributes stronger innate features to the faculty of reason than Locke wants to account for, but when interpreting her mature views as they are explicated in *Rights of Woman*, one must not put too much emphasis on the early remark about innate principles. Wollstonecraft holds that reason has a capacity to know principles of truth (be they moral or for example geometrical), but she does not seem to claim that these principles are innate. Therefore, I find it appropriate to place her in a broadly empiricist framework (see also footnote 15).

early as they do language' (Locke, *John Locke on Education*, 65) than it is to Rousseau's warnings against reasoning with children at this early point of their lives.

When discussing how adolescent girls and women are deformed by their defect educations, Wollstonecraft does not primarily blame the lack of protection from harmful impressions. Quite to the contrary, she claims that 'one reason why men have superior judgement, and more fortitude than women, is undoubtedly this, that they give a freer scope to the grand passions, and by more frequently going astray enlarge their minds' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 179). Wollstonecraft argues that the exaggerated protection of girls prevents them from developing their faculties. In another passage she emphasizes that 'it is not against strong preserving passions; but romantic wavering feelings that I wish to guard the female heart'. These feelings or 'paradisiacal reveries' are 'oftener the effect of idleness than of a lively fancy' (143). The primary problem is thus neither strong passions nor a lively imagination as such, but rather idleness and a lack of the right kind of impressions and passions.<sup>14</sup> Wollstonecraft's latter emphasis on the dangers of idleness more or less repeats Rousseau's remarks that one must keep boys as well as girls from 'dangerous idleness' (*Emile*, 231, 369). But the former claim, that 'frequently going astray' can be a beneficial way of enlarging one's mind, goes against the grain of Rousseau's analysis of the dangers of perfectibility and is, as we will see, based on Wollstonecraft's different understanding of the interaction between reason and passions.

This difference can be further explicated by comparing a passage from Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* with a similar, but still profoundly different passage from *Emile*. Wollstonecraft writes:

The passions are necessary auxiliaries of reason: a present impulse pushes us forward, and when we discover that the game did not deserve the chase, we find that we have gone over much ground, and not only gained many new ideas, but a habit of thinking. The exercise of our faculties is the great end, though not the goal we had in view when we started with such eagerness.

(*Works*, 5, 16)

Let us compare this passage – and particularly the metaphor of moving in space – with the following passage, where Rousseau writes:

It is imagination which extends for us the measure of the possible, whether for good or bad, and which consequently excites and nourishes the desires by the hope of satisfying them. But the object which first appeared to be at hand flees more quickly than it can be pursued. When one believes that one has reached it, it transforms and reveals itself in the distance ahead of us. No longer seeing

---

<sup>14</sup> I discuss Wollstonecraft's views on the passions in more detail in Reuter, 'The Role of the Passions in Mary Wollstonecraft's Notion of Virtue'.

the country we have already crossed, we count it for nothing; what remains to cross ceaselessly grows and extends. Thus one exhausts oneself without getting to the end, and the more one gains on enjoyment, the further happiness gets from us.

(*Emile*, 81)

Wollstonecraft is focusing on 'present impulses', without specifying if they have their origin in the imagination, whereas Rousseau focuses explicitly on the particular kind of desires that are raised by the imagination, but both authors discuss impulses to chase an object that turns out to have been in vain and they interpret the impact of this mental endeavour quite differently. Whereas Rousseau sees the crossing of new land as an exhausting and ultimately pointless chase, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that even though the object may turn out to have been imaginary or in some other sense unworthy of our interest, the chase has developed our mental capacities, including our reason. This difference is, I claim, directly connected to Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's different concepts of reason. According to Wollstonecraft, reason is, in addition to being always already there, also 'immutable' (*Works*, 5, 9).<sup>15</sup> Though dependent on other mental capacities for its development, reason has a core, which is not mutilated, but rather unfolded by erroneous passions and impressions. This understanding of reason is different from Rousseau's view, according to which reason lacks an immutable core. In Rousseau's view, imaginary desires can only develop distorted forms of perfectibility and make us unhappy, but in the case of Wollstonecraft, similar impulses and desires can exercise the faculty of reason and develop the faculty of judgement.

Wollstonecraft is well aware of the difficulty to equally strengthen the passions and the understanding, and to find a balance between the two. She writes:

I am, indeed, persuaded that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation; [...] And, perhaps, in the education of both sexes, the most difficult task is so to adjust instruction as not to narrow the understanding, whilst the

<sup>15</sup>Here Wollstonecraft uses 'immutable' to characterize truth, not reason, but in her *Letters on Education*, Catherine Macaulay writes about 'immutable principles', which are the 'principles of reason and truth' (*Letters on Education*, 198, 201). She argues that reason is 'able to discern the moral difference of things' and thereby establish 'an immutable and abstract fitness in a more satisfactory manner than what is called a moral consciousness from innate principles' (Macaulay, *Letters on Education*, 193–4). Wollstonecraft reviewed the *Letters* for the *Analytical Review* and quotes Macaulay's reference to immutable principles approvingly (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7, 314). It is very likely that they share a similar understanding of immutable principles of reason and truth, which is not dependent on the existence of innate principles. The comparison with Macaulay strengthens my criticism of Natalie Taylor's interpretation (see footnote 13). See also Green (*A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe*, 7, 173, 178–81), who characterizes Macaulay as an in many respects Lockean thinker. Taylor's argument about Wollstonecraft's belief in innate principles would make my claim about the immutability of reason even stronger, but I do not think that we need to go that far. It is sufficient to assume that there is an immutable capacity of generalization and abstraction, and that this capacity leads us towards immutable truth, even if we often go astray before we reach our goal.

heart is warmed by the generous juices of spring, [...] nor to dry up the feelings by employing the mind in investigations remote from life.

(Works, 5, 135)

An adequate education needs to neither narrow the understanding nor dry up the feelings and this is achieved by equally cultivating and strengthening both. This goal is similar to the goal of Emile's education and Wollstonecraft's warning against 'employing the mind in investigations remote from life' is in close accord with Rousseau's similar warnings, for example when he elaborates on how natural science must be taught through experience of the real world, not through books or astronomical devices, in order to raise the right kind of curiosity and desire for useful knowledge (Rousseau, *Emile*, 165–184). Concerning the goal itself, Wollstonecraft simply wants to extend Emile's education to both sexes, but when it comes to the dynamics of the interaction between the understanding and feelings, there are, as we have already seen, more profound differences between Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's views. These differences are very much reflected also in their understanding of the imagination. I will now turn to a discussion of Wollstonecraft's views on the imagination and compare these with those of Rousseau.

### Wollstonecraft on the role of the imagination

Wollstonecraft's interest in the imagination is articulated already in her early writings on education. In the preface to *The Female Reader* (1789), a collection of texts explicitly aimed for female pupils, she points out – very much in line with the passage quoted above – that '[r]easoning must be tedious and irksome to those whose passions have never led them to reason' and that 'works addressed to the imagination [...] tend to awaken the affections and fix good habits more firmly in the mind than cold arguments and mere declamation' (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 4, 56). In *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), the tutor Mrs Mason explains the difference between humans and animals to her two female pupils. Animals, it is explained, do not improve – 'the first nest they make and the last are exactly the same' – and they 'have not the affections which arise from reason'. These characteristics are attributed to the fact that 'we neither see imagination nor wisdom in them' (*Works*, 4, 372). The latter passage is very much in accordance with Rousseau's understanding of the imagination as an important aspect of perfectibility and thus as a feature, which distinguishes humans from other animals.<sup>16</sup> Wollstonecraft repeats the same idea several years later, in a letter to Gilbert Imlay, where

<sup>16</sup>For discussions of the connections between Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's views on the imagination, see also Khin Zaw, 'The Reasonable Heart', 101–3; Whale, *Imagination under Pressure 1789–1832*, 70–4; Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, 73–85; and Reuter, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Love and Friendship'; 'Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft on the Will'; and 'Like a Fanciful Kind of Half Being'.



she points out that animals may be said to have a portion of reason and more exquisite senses than humans, but 'no trace of the imagination' (Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 264).<sup>17</sup>

In his discussion of Wollstonecraft's views on education, Alan Richardson describes the role of the imagination in *The Female Reader* as a sign that '[w]ell before *Maria*, one can detect a Romantic strain in Wollstonecraft's writing' ('Mary Wollstonecraft on Education', 28). He overlooks the fact that the imagination is present also in *Original Stories* and contrasts *The Female Reader* with *Original Stories*, which he claims 'is often seen as the antithesis to the nascent Romantic cult of childhood innocence and imagination' (28). Richardson's oversight is due to the fact that he restricts the imagination to the Romantic concept of the creative imagination and overlooks that the imagination has been attributed important roles in human cognition long before Romanticism. Wollstonecraft's interest in the imagination certainly has Romantic features,<sup>18</sup> but must not be reduced to a Romantic interest in geniuses and rule-transcending creativity. She clearly thinks that the imagination plays an important role in all human cognition, not only in the creative exaltations of the genius. When Wollstonecraft discusses early impressions in *Rights of Woman*, she in fact emphasizes that she is not primarily interested in 'the man of genius', but in the 'habitual association of ideas', which is characteristic for all of us (*Works*, 5, 186). Again, her position, particularly as it is articulated in her educational works including *Rights of Woman*, is not that different from Rousseau, who, as Judith Shklar puts it, was not 'in the least interested [...] in the creative imagination' characteristic of 'the artist-hero' (*Men and Citizens*, 54), but who, as we saw in the first section, focused on the imagination as a faculty characteristic of all human beings and analysed particularly the problems it created, but also the possibilities it provided.

Though Rousseau and Wollstonecraft share a general understanding of the imagination as a cognitive faculty which distinguishes humans from other animals, there are significant differences in how they characterize this faculty. In what follows, I argue that these differences are not primarily due to the fact that Wollstonecraft has more sympathy for a Romantic conception of the creative imagination, which she indeed has, but rather to the fact, discussed in the previous section, that she understands the relation between

<sup>17</sup>There are two problems involved in using Wollstonecraft's letters to Imlay as a philosophical source. First, they are private love letters that were not intended for publication. Second, and perhaps more alarmingly, the original letters are lost and we only have the edition posthumously published by William Godwin. We know that Godwin wanted to present Wollstonecraft as a 'female Werther' and we do not know how much he may have edited the letters, even if a comparison between the letters and the rest of her writings do not indicate that they are heavily edited, see Todd, 'Introduction', xiv. I find it justified to refer to Wollstonecraft's letters to Imlay when they are in accordance with her published writings, but not in cases where there appear contradictions.

<sup>18</sup>These Romantic features are explored particularly in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), the posthumous *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), and her private letters to Imlay.

reason and the other mental faculties differently from Rousseau. Rousseau and Wollstonecraft have similar aims in the sense that they want to educate pupils who learn to think for themselves. Towards the end of book III, Rousseau emphasizes that 'Forced to learn by himself', Emile 'uses his reason and not another's' (*Emile*, 207). This is exactly the 'exercise of [one's] own reason' which Wollstonecraft recognizes as Rousseau's aim concerning Emile and wants to extend to women (*Works*, 5, 90). But the roads they take towards this goal are partly different and these differences involve the imagination.

At the beginning of book IV, Rousseau discusses how the 'imagination determines [the] bent' of the passions (*Emile*, 219). He asks:

But is man the master of ordering his affections [...] Without doubt, if he is master of directing his imagination toward this or that object or of giving it this or that habit. Besides, the issue here is less what a man can do for himself than what we can do for our pupil by the choice of circumstances in which we put him.

(219)

Here Rousseau is discussing the adolescent Emile, who has reached the age of reason, learned about the utility of knowledge and is to become a man capable of living in society, which includes coping with his awakening sexual desires. Still, at this late stage of Emile's education, Rousseau emphasizes that the imagination is regulated primarily by regulating external circumstances. Later, in book V, he takes a similar standpoint concerning the regulation of Sophie's sentiments and writes:

The most dangerous of all traps, and the one reason cannot avoid, is that of the senses. If you have the misfortune of falling into this trap, you will no longer see anything but illusions and chimeras; your eyes will be fascinated, your judgment clouded, your will corrupted.

(*Emile*, 401)

In order to avoid this trap, Sophie, who can be her own judge so 'long as [her] blood is cool', is told to 'as soon as you are in love, return yourself to your mother's care' (401). As we know, Sophie's love for Emile is formed by her reading of Fenelon's *Telemachus* and though her encounter with the book is presented as accidental (404–5), it is very much part of the pedagogical plot of the 'romance' Rousseau admits to have written (416). *Telemachus* is indeed a chimera, but a chimera corresponding exactly to the person Emile has been brought up to be. Interestingly, the only time Rousseau wants to let the 'imagination wander without constraint' is when he encourages the reader of *Emile* to contemplate the story about the two young lovers (424). Here the imagination may wander, but only inside the limits set by the author of that book.

Wollstonecraft does also emphasize the importance of regulation, but as was the case with the passionate impulses discussed in the previous section, she thinks that the imagination can be allowed to wander without creating permanently distorted passions. Letting the imagination wander a little can instead, in the long run, strengthen one's thinking and judging. The following passage, discussing the role of books, describes her attitude:

Yet, when I exclaim against novels, I mean when contrasted with those works which exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination. – For any kind of reading I think better than leaving a blank still a blank, because the mind must receive a degree of enlargement and obtain a little strength by a slight exertion of its thinking powers; besides, even the productions that are only addressed to the imagination, raise the reader a little above the gross gratification of appetites, to which the mind has not given a shade of delicacy.  
(Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5, 256, see also 257)<sup>19</sup>

Here Wollstonecraft is not only distancing herself from Rousseau's restrictive attitude towards books, she is also simultaneously relying on and, I argue, redirecting his idea of the imagination as a source of particularly human desires, which are distinguished from 'the gross gratification of appetites', characteristic of other animals.

Karen Green has suggested that Wollstonecraft conceives the imagination as a necessary complement to reason, which 'integrates feeling into judgement' (Green, 'The Passions and the Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Theory of Moral Judgement', 281). In order to see what this may mean we must, I think, focus on the relation between reason and the objects of the imagination. Wollstonecraft seems to think, contrary to Rousseau, that reason has an internal ability to direct the imagination by choosing its object. In one of her letters to Imlay she writes: 'The common run of men, I know, with strong health and gross appetites, must have variety to banish *ennui*, because the imagination never lends its magic wand to convert appetite into love, cemented by according reason' (Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 297). This remark could indeed be a description of Rousseau's views on accurately moderated moral love, but the very context of the remark, the fact that Wollstonecraft is telling Imlay not to follow his appetites, but rather use his reason and imagination in order to fix the object of his love, indicates that she thinks that reason can collaborate with the imagination in order to achieve this goal.<sup>20</sup> A similar connection between reason, passion and the

<sup>19</sup>For an excellent analysis of how Wollstonecraft uses her own novels *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria* (1798) in order to spell out philosophical arguments, see Halldenius, 'The Political Conditions for Free Agency' and *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism*, 51–74.

<sup>20</sup>Wollstonecraft writes: 'you will ask, what is the result of all this reasoning? Why I cannot help thinking that it is possible for you, having great strength of mind, to return to nature, and regain a sanity of constitution, and purity of feeling – which would open your heart to me' (*Collected Letters*, 297). The letter is indeed Wollstonecraft's (unsuccessful) attempt to convince Imlay not to leave her for another woman, but I do not think that this biographical context diminishes the philosophical claim she is articulating,

imagination is described in *Rights of Woman*, where Wollstonecraft asks: 'would not the sight of the object, not seen through the medium of the imagination, soon reduce the passion to an appetite, if reflection, the noble distinction of man, did not give it force' (*Works*, 5, 180). As we see in this quote, Wollstonecraft posits a close connection between imagination and reflection and these capacities, as well as reason (81), are all in several contexts characterized as 'the distinction of man'. The connection is so close that Wollstonecraft seems to almost identify the activities of 'seeing through the medium of the imagination' and 'reflection'. The same close connection is repeated in another passage where she writes that '[s]olitude and reflection are necessary to give to wishes the force of passions, and to enable the imagination to enlarge the object, and make it the most desirable' (*Works*, 5, 127).<sup>21</sup> Here reflection is necessary in order for the imagination to enlarge a chosen object. According to Wollstonecraft, human freedom originates in reason and reflection understood as the use of one's reason is a voluntary mental activity. The close connection between imagination and reflection incorporates imagination in this realm of voluntary mental action. The imagination, as understood by Wollstonecraft, is, as John Whale aptly puts it, 'not only a passive faculty operated on for good or ill by outside forces' (*Imagination under Pressure 1789–1832*, 70), but, as I argue, an active faculty able to voluntarily combine and dissociate ideas and impressions. Reason cannot govern the passions directly, but by using the imagination as a medium and creating desires towards an object chosen by reason it is able to regulate meaner passions. This is what is at stake in Wollstonecraft's letter to Imlay as well as in the passages cited from *Rights of Woman*. Rousseau does also characterize the imagination as 'the most active' of all faculties (*Emile*, 80), but in his case the activity of the imagination is not voluntary exactly because it cannot be internally guided by either the will or reason.<sup>22</sup>

Wollstonecraft's indication that reason is able to choose objects that are then enlarged by the imagination has consequences also for the ontological status of imagined ideas. Rousseau conceives all objects of the imagination as imaginary, even if it may turn out that an imaginary object such as Telemachus is in fact identical with the existing person Emile (who of course also exists only in an imaginary context). Wollstonecraft does not think that all

---

particularly not since we find similar claims articulated in other contexts. My emphasis on the differences between Rousseau and Wollstonecraft is in no way meant to diminish the strong similarities. Wollstonecraft's suggestion that Imlay must 'return to nature' is of course one more sign of Rousseau's influence.

<sup>21</sup>It is very likely that Wollstonecraft's emphasis on solitude is in itself inspired by Rousseau. She reviewed the second part of his *Confessions* for the *Analytical Review* (Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7, 228–34) and mentions his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* in one of her letters to William Godwin (*Collected Letters*, 349). See Barbara Taylor ('Separations of Soul') for a discussion of the connections between solitude and the imagination in Rousseau and Wollstonecraft.

<sup>22</sup>On the involuntary character of the imagination according to Rousseau, see also Lyons, *Before Imagination*, 199.

imaginary objects are real, of course, but she thinks that objects chosen by reason and enlarged by the imagination are real existing entities. These objects can be either particular individuals, such as the object of friendship and love based on reason, or abstract entities, such as truth, justice and virtue. Inspired by John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Wollstonecraft asserts 'that human love led to heavenly, and was only an exaltation of the same affection' (*Works*, 5, 46). Here we see a Platonist love of particular human others expand into a love of abstract Deity and this expansion involves the imagination, which makes us desire the highest of all objects.<sup>23</sup> Wollstonecraft's remarks about loving abstract entities mostly have a strong theological bent, but 'love of [God's] perfection' (46) is simultaneously a love of essential philosophical concepts such as truth, justice and virtue, which are all included in his perfection. Wollstonecraft does not develop any systematic discussion of whether the imagination can have general or abstract ideas as its object, but she clearly hints in that direction and blurs the distinction between the particular ideas of the imagination and the general or abstract ideas of reason, taken for granted by many previous authors.

Now I will conclude by making a few remarks on how Wollstonecraft's understanding of reason and the imagination is connected to her views on the possibilities of education and political change. In the realm of education, Wollstonecraft takes a quite optimistic view of the possibility to correct damage caused by previous negligence and corruption. Though Wollstonecraft shares Rousseau's conviction that in an ideal case education must begin during infancy, she is less preoccupied with such ideal cases and more aware of the fact that in real life most educators have to educate children who have already received harmful impressions. Elizabeth Frazer has pointed out that whereas Emile's tutor is able to begin his mission when Emile is still uncorrupted, the tutor in Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* is facing two profoundly corrupted girls (Frazer, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on Education', 610). At the beginning of this book, Wollstonecraft points out that 'These conversations and tales are accommodated to the present state of society; which obliges the author to attempt to *cure those faults by reason*, which ought never to have taken root in the infant mind' (*Works*, 4, 359, my emphasis). The girls educated by Mrs Mason are already 12 and 14 years old and it is impossible to step back in time and regulate the impressions they receive previous to the age of reason. This setting determines Mrs Mason's pedagogical strategy, which consists of conversations drawing general moral conclusions from particular – often affective – examples. The strategy relies on reason's ability to cooperate with the

---

<sup>23</sup>See Taylor (*Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*) for a detailed discussion of Wollstonecraft's views on the love of God.

imagination in order to make the girls overcome their corrupted state and come to desire what is morally just.

In the realm of politics we must note Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's different views on futurity and finitude. As we saw in the first section, Rousseau is worried that imaginary objects transcend the limits of finite reality and create desires that cannot be satisfied. Wollstonecraft's understanding of reason's ability to choose objects that can be enlarged by the imagination makes her less worried about this aspect of the imagination. Though human reason is imperfect and finite, she thinks that it is able to approach divine perfection, which includes perfect reason. Whereas Rousseau perceives reality as finite material reality, Wollstonecraft, though certainly not denying material reality and its physical laws, perceives reality as ultimately based on divine reality characterized by perfect reason. Whereas Rousseau perceives necessity as the necessity of the material world, Wollstonecraft perceives necessity as ultimately based on the necessity of reason. From Rousseau's point of view, imaginary objects transcend finitude and necessity, but from Wollstonecraft's point of view imaginary objects chosen by reason may point towards true possibilities. These possibilities may never be actualized, but they do not transcend the limits of necessity as long as they are in accordance with reason. This is how the imagination can help humans envisage a more just society and make them desire political change. Rousseau also acknowledges cases where we need imaginary objects in order to prepare for futurity. The need for the novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Telemachus* is a clear case. But here the imaginary objects have to be strictly regulated by someone who knows what is going to happen exactly because Rousseau cannot count on any internal ability to regulate imaginary objects in accordance with the principles of reason.<sup>24</sup>

The revolutionary aspect of Wollstonecraft's views on the imagination has been aptly described by John Whale. He argues that from Wollstonecraft's point of view 'the very fact that [the imagination] is characterised by the quest for an object rather than the possession of an object, makes it the faculty most suited to thoughts of futurity' (*Imagination under Pressure 1789–1832*, 74).<sup>25</sup> It is also, according to Whale, 'important that imagination is a spur to moral action and that it is never self-satisfied by gratification in the present moment' (74). The latter remark illuminates the difference between Rousseau's consistent emphasis that in order to be happy one must be 'content with the present hour' (*Emile*, 411) and Wollstonecraft's emphasis on futurity, on contemplating 'the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization' (*Works*, 5, 87). Ultimately the difference

<sup>24</sup>See also Einspahr, who notes Rousseau's 'generally hostile attitude toward change and especially revolution' ('The Beginning that Never Was', 460).

<sup>25</sup>On Wollstonecraft's views on the connection between the imagination and the possibilities of future civilization, see also Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*.

between Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's views on the imagination helps us understand why she was a passionate philosopher of the Enlightenment while he was one of its first, perceptive and most articulate critics.

## Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Lund University, Central European University, University of Pennsylvania and University of Jyväskylä. I thank the organizers of these workshops and seminars – Lena Halldenius, Mike Griffin, Karen Detlefsen and Miira Tuominen – and the audiences for their insightful comments. Special thanks to the anonymous referees of this journal, whose perceptive and generous comments significantly improved the final version of the paper.

## ORCID

Martina Reuter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8955-0193>

## Bibliography

- Bahar, Saba. *Mary Wollstonecraft's Social and Aesthetic Philosophy: 'An Eve to Please Me'*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- Bergès, Sandrine. *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Botting, Eileen Hunt. 'The Early Rousseau's Egalitarian Feminism: A Philosophical Convergence with Madame Dupin and "The Critique of the Spirit of the Laws"'. *History of European Ideas* (2017). doi:10.1080/01916599.2017.1314154
- Botting, Eileen Hunt. *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Coffee, Alan. 'Freedom as Independence: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Grand Blessing of Life'. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (2014): 908–24.
- Coffee, Alan. 'Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power of Social Domination'. *European Journal of Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (2013): 116–35.
- Coffee, Alan. "Mary Wollstonecraft, Public Reason, and the Virtuous Republic". In *The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee, 183–200. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Einspahr, Jennifer. 'The Beginning that Never Was: Mediation and Freedom in Rousseau's Political Thought'. *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 2010 (2010): 437–61.
- Frazer, Elizabeth. 'Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on Education'. *Oxford Review of Education* 37, no. 5 (2011): 603–17.
- Gatens, Moira. *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Green, Karen. *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Green, Karen. 'The Passions and the Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Theory of Moral Judgement'. *Utilitas* 9, no. 3 (1997): 271–90.
- Green, Karen. *The Woman of Reason: Feminism, Humanism and Political Thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.
- Gunther-Canada, Wendy. *Rebel Writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Politics*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001.

- Haldenius, Lena. *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism: Independence, Rights and the Experience of Unfreedom*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015.
- Haldenius, Lena. "The Political Conditions for Free Agency: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft". In *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, vol. 2, edited by Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, 227–43. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Haldenius, Lena. 'The Primacy of Right: On the Triad of Liberty, Equality and Virtue in Wollstonecraft's Political Thought'. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 75–99.
- Khin Zaw, Susan. 'The Reasonable Heart: Mary Wollstonecraft's View of the Relation Between Reason and Feeling in Morality, Moral Psychology, and Moral Development'. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (1998): 78–117.
- Lines, Patricia M. 'Shackling the Imagination: Education for Virtue in Plato and Rousseau'. *Humanitas* 22, nos. 1–2 (2009): 40–68.
- Locke, John. *John Locke on Education*. Edited by Peter Gay. New York: Teachers College Press, 1964.
- Lyons, John D. *Before Imagination: Embodied Thought from Montaigne to Rousseau*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Macaulay, Catherine. *Letters on Education, with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects*. Facsimile of the 1790 edition. London: William Pickering, 1996.
- Mackenzie, Catriona. "Mary Wollstonecraft: An Early Relational Autonomy Theorist?" In *The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee, 67–91. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Marques, José Oscar de Almeida. 'The Paths of Providence: Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake'. *Cadernos de História e Filosofia da Ciência*. Campinas: CLE-UNICAMP, Série 3, 15, no. 1 (2005): 33–57.
- Morgenstern, Mira. *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture and Society*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Neuhouser, Frederick. *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- O'Brien, Karen. *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Parry, Geraint. "Émile: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens". In *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, edited by Patrick Riley, 247–71. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Price, Richard. *Political Writings*. Edited by D. O. Thomas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Price, Richard. *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*. 3rd ed. London: T. Cadell in the Strand, 1787.
- Reisert, Joseph R. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Friend of Virtue*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Reuter, Martina. "Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft on the Will". In *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400–1800*, edited by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, 149–69. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007.
- Reuter, Martina. "'Like a Fanciful Kind of Half Being': Mary Wollstonecraft's Criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau". *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (2014): 925–41.
- Reuter, Martina. "Mary Wollstonecraft on Love and Friendship". In *Philosophical Aspects on Emotions*, edited by Åsa Carlson, 119–39. Stockholm: Thales, 2005.



- Reuter, Martina. "Revolution, Virtue and Duty: Aspects of Politics, Religion and Morality in Mary Wollstonecraft's Thought". In *The Body Unbound: Philosophical Perspectives on Politics, Embodiment and Religion*, edited by Marius T. Mjaaland, Ola Sigurdson, and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir, 107–22. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
- Reuter, Martina. "The Role of the Passions in Mary Wollstonecraft's Notion of Virtue". In *The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee, 50–66. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Richardson, Alan. "Mary Wollstonecraft on Education". In *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by C. L. Johnson, 24–41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Mankind". Translation reworked by Lester Crocker. In *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, edited and with an introduction by Susan Dunn, 69–148. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Sapiro, Virginia. *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Schaeffer, Denise. 'The Utility of Ink: Rousseau and Robinson Crusoe'. *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 1 (2002): 121–48.
- Shell, Susan Meld. "Émile: Nature and the Education of Sophie". In *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, edited by Patrick Riley, 272–301. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Shklar, Judith N. *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Shuffelton, Amy B. 'Rousseau's Imaginary Friend: Childhood, Play, and Suspicion of the Imagination in Emile'. *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (2012): 305–21.
- Taylor, Barbara. *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Taylor, Barbara. 'Separations of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History'. *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 640–51.
- Taylor, Natalie Fuehrer. *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Todd, Janet. "Introduction". In *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd, ix–xxix. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Todd, Janet. *Mary Wollstonecraft: a Revolutionary Life*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2000.
- Whale, John. *Imagination under Pressure 1789–1832: Aesthetics, Politics and Utility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Edited by Janet Todd. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vols 1–7. Edited by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, with assistant editor Emma Rees-Mogg. London: William Pickering, 1989.