

On the Necessity for Gender Equality: Anna Doyle Wheeler and William Thompson and 'Equality in Community'

JIM JOSE

A genuine community requires equality among its citizens. In 1825 Anna Doyle Wheeler and William Thompson mounted a strong refutation of James Mill's argument against the enfranchisement of women in his Essay on Government. There was no rational basis for the subordination of women, but under the individualist dispensation of classical liberalism, marriage was tantamount to white slavery. Against the prevailing individualism they advocated cooperative socialism. Their work had implications for cosmopolitanism as they argued for a radical restructuring of society on the basis of full gender equality in the workplace and the home. In their view, this was the necessary prerequisite for all other forms of equality and the realisation of a free and just society.

Within and between cultures, across the generations, the 'quest for community' (Nisbet 1953) has occupied the thoughts of many a political philosopher. What sort of community is appropriate for realising human happiness? Should human happiness be the rationale for community? Irrespective of particular goals, how should an ideal community be organised? Are there necessary connections between particular goals and the organisational structures of a community? And so on. These questions are certainly familiar and feature prominently in writings speculating on what an ideal community might look like. Communities exhibit many characteristics and may be organised on the basis of any one of (or combination of) kinship, religion, race, gender, trade, conquest, revolutionary history or some other commonality around which people are willing to mobilise and establish a coherent identity that endures over time (Nisbet 1973: 1). However, the basis of and for a community is one thing, its characteristic features are another. At a minimum these characteristics should include 'a modest standard of living, [be] conservative of natural resources, [have] a low constant fertility rate and a political life based upon consent' and be successfully adapted 'to its environment and ha[ve] learned to live without destroying itself or the people next door' (Le Guin 1982: 96). This is a view of community as humanly inhabitable, and one that would be consistent with a cosmopolitan approach (e.g. Delanty 2009; Cheah 2006; Nash 2003; Beck 2002; Turner 2002; Archibugi et al., Held and Köhler 1998). Of course, not everyone would agree that a community need exhibit any or all of these characteristics, especially those who see communities in terms of rigid hierarchies and all-powerful authority figures (Nisbet 1973), and hence would deny a need for egalitarian social relations, consent based politics,

human regulated fertility, and perhaps coexisting peacefully with its neighbours.

The principle of egalitarian social relations, in particular the goal of gender equality, has been a key concern in discussions of ways to realise humanly habitable communities. With a few notable exceptions men's dominance over women and the masculinist basis for social and political organisation has been taken as self-evident for most historically enduring communities. Indeed, the opening sentence of Nisbet's study of community and social philosophy notes that '[t]he history of Western social philosophy is, basically, the history of men's ideas and ideals of community' (Nisbet 1973: 1). To be fair to Nisbet, in the context of his academic heritage, his use of 'men' most likely was intended to be understood generically (as inclusive of men and women). It is unlikely that he was commenting on the masculinist basis for community or the masculinist biases within Western philosophical thought. However, his comment provides a useful segue to consider a remarkable work published in 1825 that provided a vision of a humanly inhabitable community within which egalitarian gender relations were at its centre.

The book in question was *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women: Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political, and Thence in Civil and Domestic, Slavery; in Reply to a Paragraph of Mr. Mill's Celebrated 'Article on Government'*. The Appeal was formally attributed to William Thompson (1775-1833), an Irish landowner, socialist utilitarian and feminist who by

1800 was spending most of his time in London. However, there are strong grounds for attributing co-authorship to another person, namely Anna Doyle Wheeler (1785-1848?), also born in Ireland but by 1825 was living in London where she hosted an intellectual salon. Space precludes explaining the extent and significance of Wheeler's authorship and why she should be given equal credit with Thompson. Suffice it to say here that there is sufficient textual evidence to warrant granting her authorial status (see Dooley 1996: 56-7, 69-70, 89-90), not to mention Thompson's own acknowledgment of her significant contribution in his 'Introductory Letter to Mrs Wheeler' with which the *Appeal* begins (1970: iv-xiv). Both had established reputations as intellectuals of note – Thompson was known to and debated with John Stuart Mill (Mill 1873: 128) and was described by his Irish critics as the 'red republican' (Pankhurst 1954: 4) and Wheeler was known in France as the 'goddess of reason' (Pankhurst 1954: 73) – and both were frequent (and welcome) guests at liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham's residence in Queen's Square (Dooley 1996: 22-24, 67-68; Pankhurst 1954: 15-17).

The *Appeal* was a book length response to James Mill's claim in his 1820 'Essay on Government' that women did not need to be enfranchised. The essence of the *Appeal* was aptly captured by the phrase, 'equality in community', the title of Dooley's (1996) excellent study of the writings of Thompson and Wheeler. The *Appeal's* emphasis on the interdependent nature of gender equality and community would be sufficient to render it a remarkable work. However, there are a number of other reasons that also contribute to the standing of this book. First, it provided a definitive refutation of Mill's arguments against the enfranchisement of women, and in so doing it demonstrated that meaningful gender equality is the necessary basis for a genuinely humanly inhabitable community. Without gender equality the idea of community remains incomplete. But it is remarkable for a number of other reasons that should be noted but which unfortunately cannot be pursued here. Second, the *Appeal* provided a clear demonstration of the weaknesses of liberal utilitarian premises upon which Mill's argument rested (Thompson and Wheeler 1970: 171-73; Dooley 1996: 134-7). Third, it also produced one of the most radical statements ever published in favour of women's full social and political freedom, even more so than Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) influential treatise published over 30 years earlier. And fourth, it provided James Mill's son, John Stuart Mill, with many of the core arguments with which the younger Mill's reputation as a nineteenth-century feminist now rests.

The *Appeal* is divided into two parts preceded by a preface by Thompson entitled 'Introductory Letter to Mrs Wheeler'.

The preface acknowledged publicly Thompson's debt and commitment to Wheeler's feminist analysis. The first part of the essay examined the structure and key moves of James Mill's general argument. The second part then proceeded with a close examination of three questions. The first question looked at whether in fact women's interests, either as daughters or as wives, could be included within their men's interests. That is, were such interests identical? For the second question they asked, even if it is the case that men's interests can subsume women's interests, does this in itself constitute a sufficient reason for denying women civil or political rights? The third question was whether any guarantee of equality could be given without at the same time granting civil and political rights. Their short answer to all three of these questions was No: women cannot rely on men to take care of women's interests, nor can this be a reason for denying women political rights, and genuine equality for men and women cannot be achieved on the basis of unequal civil and political rights.

Both Thompson and Wheeler embraced a general utilitarian approach, but from a socialist perspective. For Bentham the principle of utilitarianism was that 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number ... is the measure of right and wrong' (Bentham 1791: 93), and which for Bentham was the basis for government. Bentham's principle of utility also derived from the idea that humans are largely pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding creatures. However, for Thompson and Wheeler, this did not mean that being pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding entailed being selfish by definition, nor did it follow that human beings were by nature aggressive. People would only be aggressive and selfish, argued Thompson and Wheeler, in a society that encouraged that to be a norm. Thus Thompson and Wheeler drew the conclusion that the emerging socio-economic system of their time, what they termed 'competition' (Thompson and Wheeler 1970, 151), needed to be transformed so that more appropriate values and behaviour were possible. They thought that taking into account the feelings and interests of others was quite consistent with the principle of maximising the greatest happiness for the greatest number. That is, being able to empathise with others and being sensitive to their needs and having sympathy for others would enable greater happiness to emerge. In this way a more benevolent, as opposed to selfish, community focused outcome could be developed.

Thompson and Wheeler rejected the view of human nature assumed by James Mill. For Mill, human beings were pleasure-seeking, selfish individuals who pursued power to further their own selfish ends. That is, each individual would pursue what was in his (or her) own best interests at the expense of all others if needs be. This Mill

regarded as a universal law of human nature, what he called a 'grand governing law of human nature (cited in Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 7). It applied to each and every human being. It brooked no exceptions. This was the very foundation of Mill's rationale for the political rights of men. It was the argument that he and others following him in the liberal tradition used to justify the nature of some degree of democratic representative government. Each man had different interests that were specific to him. He would pursue these as he saw fit. No other man could act for him, or at least judge on his behalf what were his best interests. Thus men had to have political and civil rights to enable each to pursue their own best interests. In this way they would achieve what was best for themselves as individuals, and consequently the sum total would be to the betterment of the wider society.

Thompson and Wheeler used this very premise, the very foundation of Mill's argument for men's political and civil rights, to show that this was precisely why women needed these self-same rights. They pointed out that this 'grand governing law' was supposed to cover all humans, yet women and children did not seem to be covered by it. If it was the case that men were such selfish, power-seeking individuals then how was it, in their relations with women and children they suddenly became benevolent and caring? It must be a modern miracle; or as Thompson and Wheeler (1825: 11) exclaimed at this point, 'wonderful alchemy of modern philosophy in the hands of such a magician'. On Mill's own premise there were no grounds for assuming that individual men would look after anyone's interests but their own. There were consequently no grounds for assuming that, despite this, men would look after women's interests. This alleged identity of interest was grounded then not in principle, but in custom or habit. Thompson and Wheeler were willing to concede that the habit of privileging men might have had its origins in historical periods when women's lack of physical strength relative to men told against them (Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 155). They conceded that superior strength might once have been the basis for political rule. They also acknowledged that physical prowess with respect to labour meant that in the past the rewards for labour could therefore be justified as belonging disproportionately to the stronger (Nyland and Heenan 2003: 251). Thus, men by virtue of their generally superior physical strength could lay claim to greater entitlements and hence shaped relations between men and women to suit themselves.

However, Thompson and Wheeler also pointed out that in the newly emerging industrialising economy, physical strength was increasingly unimportant as new production processes changed the physical nature of work. Of key importance for their argument was the fact that physical strength was no longer the basis for political rule. In

the political arena it was persuasion and consent that now formed the basis for political rule. This was one of the key tenets of liberal political philosophy. But if men wanted to argue that superior strength was the basis for political participation then it was still not necessary that it be a sex-specific quality. Thompson and Wheeler suggested that 'the simple test for the exercise of political rights, both by men and women, be the capacity of carrying 300 lbs weight' (Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 120). In their view, superior strength as well as superior intelligence was merely a means to a further end such as greater happiness for the greater good. However, such means cannot 'constitute the title', that is the entitlement to, or justification for, happiness. They concluded that in the absence of a logical or principled basis for women's subordination, the only rational explanation for its continuation must be because men like such an arrangement.

Throughout the *Appeal* there is a running critique of the institution of marriage to demonstrate the falsity of Mill's claims about the identity of interests of husbands and wives. For Thompson and Wheeler (1825: 64-65) marriage was little better than a 'white slave code' and wives were, in every sense, literal slaves of their husbands. One of the arguments against women's rights that they tackled was the argument from debilitation. That is, women should not be granted the same political and civil rights as men because they were periodically debilitated by pregnancy and childbirth. Women were the ones who give birth, and this occasionally leaves them indisposed and unable to participate in various activities to the same extent as men. Yet neither of these issues was, for Thompson and Wheeler, of much relevance in the modern era. They also pointed out that pregnancy and child-bearing was not as debilitating as it was made out to be. Moreover, men get sick and debilitated, often as a result of self-indulgent behaviour, but no liberal thinker suggested that this should be ground for denying them political and civil rights. Thompson and Wheeler also constructed an interesting argument to counter the claims that time devoted to child-bearing would mean that women could not discharge their civic duties properly (1825: 143-5). Their discussion of the child-bearing issue highlighted two things that were often implicit in men's arguments about women's capacity to engage in civic duties. First, men's arguments were no more than special pleading to justify their non-involvement in such work. Second, their arguments were really about retaining their privilege of not having what they regard as their normal routines interrupted.

Thompson and Wheeler also took their critique a step further by arguing that it was not enough for there to be changes merely within the existing society. So long as the

system of 'individual competition' prevailed, equal political rights were never going to be enough. In their words:

Yes, it is only under the system of voluntary associated labor and exertion and equal distribution, that justice can have free scope, that the equal rights of all can prevail, and that women can become in intelligence, virtue and happiness, the equals, of regenerated men. How much unlike, how much superior to, the bullying, suspicious, and mere sensual creatures that are now called men (Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 150).

By 'voluntary associated labor' they meant a cooperative form of socialism, a community of equals. Hence the socio-economic system itself had to change, not just its political shell, but also its central organisational features. Thompson and Wheeler argued for a different social system in which labour was performed in a cooperative fashion. Men and women would work together in smallish communities, pooling their resources such that they would be equally available to all. Each would contribute according to their talents and capabilities. Women would not necessarily have to labour as much as men. Their contribution would depend on their physical capacities at the time. But the same would also be true for men. Moreover, the whole community would be responsible for the care and education of the children. If a woman should lose the father of her children then she would still have the community as a whole to turn to for support. There would be no need for her or her children to resort to more desperate measures such as prostitution to survive.

For Thompson and Wheeler, relations between the sexes would only become truly free and equal, and therefore form a proper basis for the realisation of human happiness, when the socio-economic system was changed. This would remove the 'means of persecution' from men in that women's love and respect then would have to be earned not bought. This required not just equal civil and political rights but a change to social institutions within which these rights were understood and applied. In this way 'all useful talents and efforts for the common good [would] be equally appreciated and rewarded' and hence provide a 'true haven for the happiness of both sexes, particularly of women' that would remove the motivation for 'men to practise injustice' and concomitantly for 'women to submit to injustice' (Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 202-3). For central to their understanding of community was the view that the organisation and structure of the community also shaped the nature and behaviour of its inhabitants. This is underscored in their phrase cited above, 'creatures that are now called men' and their expectation that men of the future would be 'regenerated'. They recognised that neither women nor men were by nature inferior and

superior respectively. Rather it was in the organisation of the society and its institutions that produced women, and men, with natures, psychologies, sexualities, and behaviours that lent themselves to particular relations of domination and subordination (Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 55-67, 76-81). The issue was not just about gaining equal rights. It was about liberation and hence it would entail some significant changes to the social structure. But the benefits as they saw them would apply equally to both women and men, as is revealed in the very last sentence of their book where Wheeler (see Cory 2004: 116-119) exhorts her women readers to take action: 'As your bondage has chained down man to the ignorance and vices of despotism, so will your liberation reward him with knowledge, with freedom, and with happiness' (Thompson and Wheeler 1825: 213).

In their view gender equality could not of its own accord be meaningful unless the community in which it was expected to prevail was also a community committed to equality in all its spheres – the workplace no less than the home. Formal political equality in the public sphere would be meaningless if it had to co-exist with private inequality, whether in the domestic sphere of the household or the pseudo-private space of the workplace. For Thompson and Wheeler neither the household nor the workplace was exempt from the need for gender equality. While the historical moment for their solution of 'voluntary associated labour' might have passed, though that is itself debatable, their key point about the relationship between gender equality and the community in which it is to exist still stands as strongly today as in 1825. Gender equality means equality in community (Dooley 1996), and there can be no equality in community without meaningful gender equality.

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Author

Jim Jose PhD is Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Newcastle and Assistant Dean of Research for the Faculty of Business and Law. He is the author of *Biopolitics of the Subject: An Introduction to the Ideas of Michel Foucault*; and a contributor to *Anarchists and Anarchist Thought: An Annotated Bibliography*. He has published numerous journal articles on political theory, feminist theory, and Australian politics and public policy. He has essayed the concept and the practice of 'governance' as a manner of organising political power.

Removal Method Mindscape

Cage-pipe perception fogged like a paramour's first looking glass, display case

Cage-pipe perception knuckle clamps snapped off outside after library floor flood

Gooseneck nirvana dream-drip filtered down, filed off by cuticle pushers on high dosage infotainment-innocence

Gooseneck heaters slid atop rusty steam radiators during jackhammer-rodeo deconstruction

Yellowcake confabulator-escalator was overcrowded with ghost-ferry Driver's Ed buccaneers

Yellowcake search party tumblers floated on cash register withdrawal condensation

Ebola vroom-whirling past stocked perfume counter foreground big screen

Ebola tourist brochure duct taped to the elephant's undertrunk for future understory

DAVID S. POINTER,
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