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Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Democratization of Moral Virtue

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Abstract

This paper examines Catharine Trotter Cockburn's moral philosophy, focusing on her accounts of virtuous conduct, conscience, obligation, and moral character. I argue that Cockburn's account of virtue has two interlocking parts: a view of what virtue requires of us, and a view of how we come to see this requirement as authoritative. I then argue that while the two parts are ultimately in tension with one another, the tension is instructive. I use Cockburn's encounter with Shaftesbury's writings to help bring out this tension in her thought. I conclude that Cockburn's work marks a bridge in modern moral philosophy from seventeenth-century natural law theory to the naturalism of the eighteenth century—that of Gay, Hume, and Bentham.

Keywords: Catharine Trotter Cockburn; early modern philosophy; ethics; conscience; virtue; John Locke; Anthony Ashley Cooper; the third Earl of Shaftesbury

Introduction

Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1674–1749) remarks in a letter to her niece Anne Arbuthnot (née Hepburn) that Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, “proposed to bring the bulk of mankind to a love of virtue for its beauty ... and to give them all his refined taste; he might as well ... have proposed to make them all lords” (2006, 233). While many of Shaftesbury's contemporaries criticize his aestheticized morality as anti-Christian, Cockburn's dispute is with its aristocratic implications. If one can achieve moral virtue only by cultivating one's taste and mastering the graces of polite society, then a virtuous character will be difficult to acquire. As most people lack the resources and leisure necessary to craft themselves into a work of art, only those with a noble upbringing can reasonably hope to attain virtue. In response, Cockburn defends a model of virtue that offers a comprehensible guide to virtuous conduct for any reasonable person—that is, she democratizes moral virtue.

I examine two facets of Cockburn's democratization of moral virtue. First, she argues that morality is grounded in fittingness relations which obtain between certain conduct and our nature. She maintains that “all *moral good* consist in doing, willing, or choosing, for oneself or others, whatever is a *natural good*” (2006, 77). Since she defines natural good as happiness, moral good is just whatever produces happiness, or flourishing, for oneself or for others (I return to this topic below). The standard of virtue then requires one to promote the happiness of others and oneself. Such a standard is readily accessible provided one is sensitive to the interests of others. Second, Cockburn gives self-approval a central place in her moral theory, noting that there is “nothing ... more insupportable than to stand condemned in our own judgments; or more delightful, than the approbation of our own minds” (77). Once one acknowledges the standard of virtue, Cockburn

argues, one begins to regulate one's conduct by its lights, reducing the need for external sanction, whether social censure or hellfire.

This paper is divided into four parts. First, I examine Cockburn's standard of virtue. Second, I explore her view of conscience. Third, I discuss a tension that exists between Cockburn's standard of virtue and her account of moral obligation. I argue that recognizing this tension at the base of Cockburn's moral theory is crucial for us to appreciate her legacy as a transitional figure in the history of modern moral philosophy. I end by returning to her criticism of Shaftesbury. In highlighting these aspects of Cockburn's moral theory, I aim to contribute to the recently budding scholarship on her work and to make a case for her importance in the history of ethics, and in early modern philosophy more generally.

1. Getting right with human nature

Cockburn's theory of moral virtue consists of two parts: a standard of virtue (in our terms, a theory of right action) and an account of moral obligation.¹ The first gives us the aim of moral action, while the second tells us what sort of person we need to be to recognize this aim as authoritative. In this section, I discuss the former; on my reading, Cockburn maintains that we ought to promote the happiness of our fellow human beings, where happiness is not equivalent to pleasure but a kind of flourishing. In the next section, I argue that, according to Cockburn, ensuring that we see ourselves as obligated to act morally, we must develop certain dispositions associated with the perspective of conscience. A theory of moral virtue requires both a standard of virtue and a sense of moral obligation. The tendency to overlook the two interlocking parts of Cockburn's theory has led scholars to overlook that happiness promotion is central to her picture of virtue.² One of the purposes in reconstructing Cockburn's theory as I do is to reassert this aspect of her theory and show how it doesn't collapse into utilitarianism.

Cockburn's first philosophical work, *A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding wherein its Principles, with reference to Morality, Revealed Religion, and the Immortality of the Soul, are considered and justified: In answer to some Remarks on that Essay* (1702), is a defense of Locke against an anonymous author (henceforth "the Remarker") who argues in a series of pamphlets that his empiricism cannot account for the immutable distinctions of virtue and vice.³ While Cockburn began her philosophical career defending Locke, her later works—*Remarks upon some Writers in the Controversy concerning the Foundation of Moral Virtue and Moral Obligation* (1743) and *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford's "Essay on the Nature and Obligations of Virtue"* (1747)—are written in opposition to three prominent eighteenth-century Lockean moralists: Edmund Law, John Gay, and Thomas Rutherford.

Cockburn finds two things objectionable about this newer form of Lockeanism. First, it fails to render immutable the distinction between virtue and vice; second, it makes external sanction the

¹The term "standard of virtue" is admittedly old-fashioned but true to Cockburn's text, and to how eighteenth-century moralists discuss these matters. While some scholars may argue that these moralists are uninterested in moral action, treated as separate from character, I argue that Cockburn and others see action and character as under the heading of virtue but as playing distinct roles in a theory of virtue. To suggest otherwise is to imply that these moralists do not ask normative ethical questions. For more on this controversy, see Heydt (2017, 1–20).

²Scholars have overlooked Cockburn's normative ethical views in favor of her account of moral motivation and moral metaphysics. Consider the interpretation of Cockburn as a virtue ethicist, put forth by Patricia Sheridan in a number of articles (2007, 2018a, 2018b). When we pay attention to Cockburn's normative theory, two things happen: First, we bring into focus just how important happiness is to her account of virtue; second, we are forced to confront a tension that exists in Cockburn's account. More on this tension in section 3.

³Burnet, Locke, and Porter (1984). Traditionally, the *Remarks* were attributed to Thomas Burnet, an English clergyman who trained at Cambridge and studied under Ralph Cudworth. There have recently been questions about whether Burnet authored the remarks. For more, see Walmsley, Craig, and Burrows (2016). Since I consider the argument in this article to be convincing, I refer to the author of the *Remarks* as "the Remarker."

ground of moral obligation. To understand Cockburn's objection, we must say something about one of her targets: John Gay.⁴ For Gay, the standard of virtue is determined by God's will. Since he recognizes a conceptual connection between the standard of virtue and moral obligation, Gay assumes that one ought to do what one is most obligated to do. He then renders obligation hedonistically, noting that one is obligated to perform only those acts which contribute to one's happiness (1731, xix). Now, Gay points out, the degree of happiness one feels upon acting is determined by the sanctions attached to the action in question. He identifies three such sources of sanction: social sanction (i.e., praise and blame), political sanction (i.e., corporeal punishment), and divine sanction (i.e., hellfire). Unsurprisingly, divine sanction is the most severe because God has maximal control over our happiness and misery (xxi). Gay concludes that we are therefore morally obligated to do whatever God wills us to do.

But this view undermines the immutability of virtue and vice. Unless one is ready to argue that God's will is determined, one must admit that God either could have made the distinction between virtue and vice different than he did or that it is in God's power to alter this distinction were he to deem such an alteration proper. One is forced to conclude that the standard of virtue is arbitrary. Cockburn is particularly concerned with reaching a conclusion that supports the immutability of virtue and vice since she argued, contra the Remarker, that Locke is not committed to the arbitrariness of moral terms. For Cockburn, God sets the content of virtue but only *indirectly*—by organizing the world in a particular way. Virtue's content is fixed by the nature of things as opposed to the will of God. As she puts it, "God is indeed perfectly free to choose, which of them he will bring into existence; but when he has fixed on any particular system, the relations and fitnesses resulting from it are necessary; and to act suitable to them, must be an immutable rule to that system of beings" (2006, 110).

Cockburn argues that by "reflecting upon our own nature, and the operations of our minds," we can come to understand how we function and what most contributes to our optimal flourishing, both individually and collectively (2006, 44).⁵ At the most basic level, our experiences of pleasure and pain give us insight into how certain behaviors impact our well-being. As Cockburn points out, "God, having made man such a creature as he is, it is impossible, that good and evil should change their respect to him, as that *pleasure* can be *pain*, and *pain pleasure*, which no one in his senses will affirm" (43). Importantly, God has arranged our natures in such a way that we feel pleasure at the *right sorts of things*—we are only truly pleased by objects that contribute to the happiness of ourselves and that of others. By building normativity into our experiences of pleasure and pain, Cockburn is able to construct a moral theory out of these seemingly indifferent sensations.⁶ She notes that "all *moral good* consis[ts] in doing, willing, or choosing, for oneself or others, whatever is the *natural good*; and all moral evil, in doing, willing, or choosing whatever is a *natural evil*, to oneself or others" (43).⁷ Moral virtue therefore consists in the deliberate performance of actions that conduce to the good of oneself or of others.

While Cockburn holds a teleological conception of pleasure, she does not equate happiness with pleasure; when she argues that the standard of virtue requires us to promote happiness, she is not

⁴For more on Gay, see Heydt (2014) and Lustila (2018).

⁵For more on this aspect of her view, see Bolton (1993), Broad (2002, 148–50), and Sheridan (2007).

⁶Rossiter (2016) suggests this reading of Locke. It is possible that Cockburn also interprets him this way.

⁷Admittedly, Cockburn notes that "Respect to parents, gratitude to benefactors, are always fit in themselves, that is, have a rectitude in them, that makes them fit to be chosen, whether any benefit can accrue from them or not. And in whatever regards our duties to the supreme being, natural good seems not at all the criterion of them we are sure can receive no advantage by them" (2006, 108–9). This comment suggests that moral good does *not* consist in doing, willing, or choosing whatever is naturally good for others and oneself. However, Cockburn's aim here is to show that our approbation of respect, gratitude, etc. is not directly tied to its production of happiness but to our recognition of these attitudes as virtuous. We internalize the criterion of rightness *via* conscience and experience our duties regarding it as immediate (see section 2). It follows that there is no conflict between my experiencing the rectitude of beneficence as immediate and beneficent acts being morally praiseworthy because they contribute to the general happiness.

claiming we should merely seek to increase the pleasure experienced by ourselves and others. Cockburn instead sees happiness as a “*self-approving joy*,” which comes from a reflection on the proper functioning of one’s reason and affections (2006, 208). The problem that she has with those who construe happiness as pleasure is they fail to appreciate this “refined happiness,” and therefore the manner in which happiness and virtue are closely aligned (119; cf. 131). Otherwise, Cockburn claims, one must rely on rewards and punishments to demonstrate that virtue leads to greater happiness overall, as Gay, Law, and Rutherford do in their work. The injunction to promote happiness means supporting those capacities in ourselves and others which leads to the mutual perfection of our natures. As Cockburn points out, “the happiness of every being is dependent on, and in proportion to the perfection, which belongs to it” (136). She does not recommend *any specific* conduct that is productive of this end, though accepting her standard of virtue surely has widespread social and political consequences.⁸

The standard of virtue that Cockburn defends is democratic in the sense that it is both comprehensible and reasonable for any rational being: promote the happiness of others and oneself.⁹ While a complete moral science, viz., one that outlined the specific scope of virtuous and vicious conduct, would be based in a systematic understanding of human nature, this task can be safely left to philosophers; Cockburn does not think virtue requires such an understanding. She is adamant that our pleasure and pain, sociable instincts, capacity for reflection, and aim for truth—all of which connect us to our long-term, stable interests—are sufficient to lead us to acknowledge the *fact* of the standard of virtue. For Cockburn, knowledge of God’s nature is also unnecessary for coming to appreciate the nature of virtue; once we do so, she argues, experience is a trustworthy guide to which actions tend to promote the general happiness and those which fail to do so.¹⁰

Cockburn, Gay, Law, and Rutherford all argue that we ought to promote our own happiness and the happiness of others. Their disagreement lies, first, in how the standard is justified. For Gay, Law, and Rutherford the standard is grounded in the system of rewards and punishments laid down by God; for Cockburn, reflection on our nature provides us with the standard. She also disagrees with how they interpret the standard of virtue according to their hedonism. Cockburn construes happiness as a “self-approving joy” that comes from an appreciation of one’s proper functioning. Promoting the happiness of others requires that we provide them with the grounds to be virtuous. Lastly, Cockburn’s worries that the account of moral virtue that Gay, Law, and Rutherford defend has an adverse impact on how others relate to their moral duty. If one thinks, “I must be concerned for the happiness of others because God commands it,” then obligation is a purely external phenomenon, which Cockburn thinks makes people slavish in their commitment to morality. I now turn to the second aspect of Cockburn’s theory of moral virtue: her account of moral obligation.

2. Conscience and its discontents

Cockburn argues that the standard of virtue provides us with some motivation to act virtuously but this does not yet explain the grounds of moral obligation. For her, it is not the *fact* that the standard of virtue implores us to promote the happiness of others that we come to recognize it as authoritative; rather, God has provided us with a “moral sense or conscience, that approves of virtuous actions, and disapproves of the contrary. This plainly shows them, that virtue is the law of nature, and that it must be their duty to observe it” (2006, 114). This obligation to perform our duty

⁸For more on this, see Bolton (1993), Broad (2002, 145–48), and Sheridan (2018b).

⁹For more on the relation of Cockburn’s Christian universalism and her general whiggish temperament to her account of virtue, see Green (2015).

¹⁰In a letter to Thomas Sharp in 1743, Cockburn argues that “*the will of God is expressed in the creation, exhibiting those relations and fitnesses ... [which] have a right in themselves of obliging agents, whenever they exist, independently of any consideration of the will of God in them*” (2006, 245).

is experienced as a call from within, as opposed to being issued from an external authority. Following Joseph Butler, Cockburn quotes St. Paul as saying, “those who had not the law were a law unto themselves,” and adds that “the obligation of living suitably to a rational and social nature [is] plain” (114). Cockburn grounds moral obligation in conscience and the experience of self-approval, which places her closer to Butler than to Samuel Clarke.¹¹

Locke briefly discusses conscience in his *Essay*. To the suggestion that conscience might serve as an internal check on our conduct or as an insight into virtue, Locke responds that “conscience” is but the conviction we feel when considering an internalized moral rule. This conviction, he argues, can be replicated in cases where “education, company, and custom” have led a group of people to consider some law as a given. Conscience, for Locke, is nothing more than “our own opinion or Judgment of the Moral Rectitude or Pravity of our own Actions.” And since “some Men, with the same bent of Conscience, prosecute what others avoid,” he concludes that conscience fails to give us access to moral principles (1975, 1.3.8). That is to say, Locke puts forth a rather negative view of conscience precisely *because* it is motivationally efficacious, providing support to “Men’s Appetites” and making them appear as if they are “innate Moral Principles” (1.3.13). His position thereof is influential on later figures who cast doubt on intuition in favor of laws or explicit moral principles. Locke’s treatment of conscience also forms the backdrop of Cockburn’s own—she is similarly skeptical of certain ways that conscience is employed but nonetheless thinks it plays a crucial role in moral obligation.

Cockburn initially discusses conscience in response to the Remarker’s claim that it allows us to draw the distinction between virtue and vice “*without ratiocination*.” She argues that they confuse the ability to identify some action as good without ratiocination with the ability to do so “*before any ratiocination*” (2006, 76). As Cockburn points out, “conscience is nothing else but a judgment, which we make of our actions, with reference to some law, which we are persuaded ought to be the rule of them” (79). Once we have internalized a rule in thought—say, promote the happiness of others and ourselves—its application is experienced as a “sudden affection” but an affection that always flows from an agent’s acceptance of a rule (77). In this way, conscience is “of excellent use, when it is once *set on work by an enlightened judgment*,” but should not be treated as an “original rule and infallible director” since sound understanding of the standard of virtue must underlie its functioning (77). Fortunately for us, Cockburn specifies, the “precepts of natural religion may be clearly known by the light of reason, to any one, who sets himself to search” (79). While conscience can be led astray by faulty standards, rational beings can access the right standard by understanding a bit about themselves, their fellow beings, and the preconditions of their shared existence, and conscience will naturally fall in line.

Cockburn is ambivalent about whether conscience is an innate capacity, referring to it as “a principle in man ... whether innate or acquired” that distinguishes virtue from vice, and condemns the latter. She thinks there is reason to believe that conscience is an innate principle because it seems to operate in all human beings but she admits, “the exercise of it ... depends upon custom education, or whatever means and opportunities it has had of being informed” (2006, 117). We naturally distinguish virtue from vice but *how* we draw this distinction depends on which moral standards we accept. Let us say, for instance, that I subscribe to a view according to which I have no obligations to those outside of my family. I view “looking after my own” as virtuous and concern for strangers as misguided. I condemn any attempt to help others before my family. Because I possess a conscience, nothing will be more obvious to me than the fact that I should privilege my family above all others; however, this self-evidence proceeds from my acceptance of this moral theory. The link between

¹¹For an opposing interpretation of Cockburn on conscience, see Myers (2012). Myers argues that Cockburn views appeals to conscience as irreducibly subjective and that she is therefore skeptical of it playing a role in moral judgment. Myers draws on evidence from Cockburn’s plays, a source that is understudied by philosophers. While I agree that Cockburn’s optimism for the role that conscience plays in moral judgment is mitigated, Myers goes too far in rejecting any place it has in Cockburn’s moral philosophy.

conscience and a person's internalized moral standards lead Cockburn to conclude, along with Clarke, that "its determinations therefore can be no certain rule to act by, no solid foundation for morality" (117).

Where conscience is properly guided, Cockburn notes, "it is not easily perverted, or silenced, when once rightly set on work; and has a great influence on men's actions." The chief reason that conscience has this influence over us, for her, is because "nothing being more insupportable than to stand condemned in our own judgments; or more delightful, than the approbation of our own minds" (2006, 77). The pain one feels upon acting immorally comes with the awareness that one has failed to live up to an obligation: "the uneasiness we feel upon the practice of anything contrary to what moral sense approves, is a *consequence* of the obligation, not the *foundation* of it ... self-condemnation manifestly presuppose[s] some *obligation*" (109). The awareness that one ought to act in accordance with conscience causes one to distance oneself from any immoral tendencies or base motives. Failing to recognize the way in which we hold ourselves to standards is a problem Cockburn identifies with her hedonist contemporaries.¹² As she points out, "I do not know what notions the partisans of that doctrine can have of virtue and moral goodness, whilst they talk of it as nothing but a regard of *interest*" (136).

The weight of our conscience's judgments, normatively speaking, are dependent on the validity of the standards on which these judgments are rendered. Still, Cockburn is more positive about the role that conscience plays in morality than is Locke. There are two reasons for this mitigated optimism. First, she offers a standard of virtue that is comprehensible and reasonable: promote the happiness of ourselves and others. Because Cockburn thinks everyone can accept this standard, she is less concerned about conscience being misled. Second, she recognizes a greater role for conscience in moral motivation; Locke focuses on the condemnation of our fellows, the state, or of God.¹³

Cockburn imagines that people come to hold themselves responsible. Internal sanction is the second sense in which she democratizes virtue. Cockburn expands the scope of autonomy in her theory.¹⁴ Given the cultivation of mind, people begin to see the obligations of a properly directed conscience as authoritative. This recognition is not always motivating: no principle is "strong enough to restrain free agents, when they give a loose to their passions and appetites, instead of the obligations they are under of subduing them" (2006, 170). Still, conscience allows for self-rule and its connection to self-approval provides one with a motive to virtue. She refers to conscience as the "true ground of moral obligation," a claim which might be surprising considering her insistence that the "essential ... nature, relations, fitness of things" inform us of our moral duties (170; 172; cf. 169). What is distinctive about conscience, according to Cockburn, is the way in which we come to identify with its determinations; how our self-love is shaped through the course of moral development.

¹²Cockburn (2006, 116–18). On Cockburn's view of happiness as it relates to Law, Gay, and Rutherford, see Bolton (1993). The error of these figures, for Cockburn, lies in "failing to see that action in accord with our nature is constitutive of our happiness. Of course we value happiness, but acting in pursuit of other things we value is essential to personal happiness" (1993, 582).

¹³Some interpreters suggest that there is a larger scope for virtue in Locke's moral theory than I suggest here. See Corneanu (2011) and Sheridan (2015). While this interpretation surely has its merits, Cockburn does not defend this view of Locke and neither do her contemporaries. Both defenders and critics see Locke as following in the natural law tradition instituted by Pufendorf. I will therefore set this view aside for the purposes of this paper.

¹⁴Cockburn distinguishes her account of practical knowledge from that of Rutherford, who uses the mechanic as a model of virtue. She presents his view as follows: "the rational being is most perfect ... when his actions are perfectly rational. Our author applies this to a *mechanic*, who works by the exact rules of mathematical reasoning; and a *mariner*, who navigates his ship with perfect art" (2006, 206). Cockburn responds that the *practice* of virtue requires being able to "show [one's] art in managing *ambiguities*" (206). While the teachings of Christ and the Ancients implore us to follow our nature, what this means demands interpretation. Cockburn does not see virtuous conduct as rule-following but as an engagement with one's nature and one's surroundings in a manner that reveals the proper course of action in that instance. See Bolton (1993) and Sheridan (2018a).

That kind ... which is supposed to arise from our approbation of our own conduct, and to increase by our practice of moral good, must naturally incline us to continue in that practice, and to be the more beneficent, that we may perpetuate so just a foundation of our love and approbation of ourselves: Thus our virtue will be far from *fatal to itself* by strengthening our *self-love*, that our virtue will in return be strengthened by it. (2006, 159)

Once we have internalized the proper standard of virtue—promoting happiness—the self-approval we feel when conducting ourselves accordingly leads us to experience ourselves as the *sort of person* that recognizes the authority of conscience. In this way, our self-conception is crucial for understanding moral obligation, thus the role she gives conscience in her account of moral virtue. The clearest parallel for Cockburn is Butler, who she does not mention in her philosophical writings, except in her letters to Anne Arbuthnot, and always in a favorable manner (2006, 233; 235–37; 240). Clarke, a frequent topic in Cockburn’s later writings, is less favorable about there being a place for conscience in virtue; her interest with Clarke is in how he construes the *grounds of the standard of virtue*. Cockburn is less animated with Clarke’s view of the standard’s *content*, which has little to do with happiness. We can therefore see another case where normative ethics and matters of moral obligation come apart in her theory of virtue.

Cockburn’s theory of moral virtue is based in an account of human nature as sensible, sociable, and rational. She argues that reflection on this nature reveals the standard of virtue, which enjoins us to promote happiness of ourselves and others. However, the mere existence of this standard is insufficient to ground moral obligation. Fortunately, God has given us a conscience, which allows us to experience the standard of virtue as authoritative. Over time, we come to identify ourselves with our conscience; our self-love becomes refined, and we are increasingly connected to others and to God. Cockburn’s account of moral virtue is compelling—she manages to combine elements of Locke and Butler in an innovative manner. Scholars have yet to appreciate how Cockburn’s view is modern: how she treats matters of normative ethics and moral obligation as distinct. In the next section, I discuss a tension between her standard of virtue and her account of moral obligation and show how it is instructive for understanding the trajectory of eighteenth-century moral philosophy.

3. A different kind of tension

I have provided an interpretation of Cockburn’s moral theory that places her aim of happiness-promotion and her account of conscience front and center. In doing so, I have showed that Cockburn offers an account of virtue that distinguishes between the *standard of virtue* and the account of *moral obligation*. In this section, I diagnose a tension between these two components of Cockburn’s theory, which arises because she intends them to be mutually reinforcing. I argue that her account of moral virtue is too demanding. The aim of promoting happiness is problematic because one occupies a number of different stations in life, each of which involves positional duties. Overlapping duties create a problem for Cockburn’s account of moral obligation. For an agent to be obligated to act in line with the standard of virtue they must recognize its demands as authoritative. Complications regarding how to apply this standard render virtue arcane and endanger the possibility of autonomy for most people, thereby risking the “democratic” status of Cockburn’s moral theory. If agents cannot see how the standard of virtue applies to particular cases, they will fail to identify with this standard and to see its demands as binding. Under these circumstances, an agent will come to treat virtue as *imposed* rather than as *authorized*. I suggest that this tension in Cockburn’s thought is telling about certain developments in the eighteenth-century British moralist tradition.

According to Cockburn, human beings seek pleasure, aim at the truth, and desire the good of others. These aspects of our nature inform us of the standard of virtue. A life consistent with this standard is one wherein an agent’s conduct seeks to promote her own well-being and that of others.

Cockburn does not say much about which particular actions we are compelled to perform. She suggests that once I recognize the *fact* of the standard of virtue and its *authority* via conscience, the answer to the question “What ought I to do?” in any circumstance is obvious (2006, 209). In her later writings, Cockburn begins to adopt Clarkean language, claiming that in our treatment of others we should draw on the “principle of equity”: that “men, being all equal by nature, have a right to one another, doing unto them what, in the same circumstances, he would have had them do unto them” (191).

But things are not this simple. First, the duties that individuals have concerning one another are determined by the relations that hold between them. A parent’s duty to her own children is not a duty that transfers to others, so equity is hardly useful in these instances. Second, the relations that hold between family, friends, or loved ones cannot be cashed out in terms of rules. As Cockburn notes, “the scheme ... [of] moral fitnesses, were never pretended to be measured by mathematical proportions; but by the suitability of actions to the circumstances of the agent and the object” (2006, 183). Individuals are charged with exercising judgment about how to act based on the circumstances and actions currently available. Third, and most problematic, is that one occupies many different stations in life and different levels of commitment are expected with respect to these stations; if the duties are incommensurate, there is opportunity for conflict. Imagine the case of Sartre’s student, who is caught between duties to country and to his mother. In cases of conflict, it is unclear how these duties should be weighed against one another. So, what initially seems like a simple task—do unto others as one would have done unto you—ends up being a complicated exercise of practical reason that requires both a solid grasp of human nature and a sensitivity to the contexts in which one finds oneself.

Consider natural law theory, according to which morality consists of a series of laws pertaining to one’s station in life that are clearly articulated and backed by sanctions; anyone can be virtuous provided they are sufficiently attuned to their own self-interest. But Cockburn requires more of agents on two fronts. First, she does not see morality as lawlike, meaning that virtue does not consist in the internalization of rules laid down by an external authority (2006, 179). Second, Cockburn claims that virtue requires agents to not only act rightly but to do so for the right reasons; *fully virtuous acts* proceed from recognition of the ground of authority, or what conscience calls one to do. Self-interest helps explain the motives behind any action, moral or otherwise, but an agent must not see these motives as the source of her obligation to act (144). This account of moral virtue therefore allows for fewer instances of virtue, as it demands not only a contextual appreciation of human nature and the relations which populate our moral lives but also a recognition of conscience as the source of moral authority.

However, an interlocutor might respond, Cockburn’s moral theory is far from onerous. It is true for Cockburn that the goodness of an act is explained by its being in accordance with the standard of virtue, and that this standard is grounded in human nature and explained by reference to fittingness conditions that hold between actions and our nature as sensible, rational, and sociable creatures. But consider Cockburn’s comments about the “honest labourer ... [who] wears himself out with toils and cares to provide for his family, to feed and clothe a parcel of troublesome children.” When the laborer is asked *why* he works hard to care for his family, he makes no reference to relations of fitness but to the fact that his “wife and children [are] very dear to him” and he “thought it behoved of him to take care of them.” The laborer’s passions are sufficient to explain why he does what he does. As Cockburn points out, “these are the most natural sentiments of a well disposed, though uncultivated mind; and they arise directly from the relations and fitness of things, and a disinterested benevolence, which guide him to a virtuous practice, tho’ he never heard of any of those terms” (2006, 152).

Still, the relations of parent to child and husband to wife are a fragment of those which constitute the system of virtue. Cockburn recognizes that while we possess a sentiment of humanity, this sentiment is motivationally inefficacious where dealing with those outside of our narrow circle; in

such cases, we *do* require knowledge of the standard of virtue to act properly.¹⁵ Additionally, though it is obvious what it takes to discharge our duties as a parent, what is demanded of us as a friend or compatriot is less clear. Grasping the content of these duties requires reflecting on the relations we bear to others and what we are called on to do in light of our station. Law helps guide us in these matters, but only if it is backed by the standard of virtue and we understand why the law rightfully compels us (2006, 179). Say that one, on account of being a citizen, is obligated to register for the selective service. A magistrate may ensure registration by punishing instances of noncompliance. But a virtuous compatriot will view threats as unnecessary and those who heed them as undignified. Fulfilling many of our duties requires knowledge of moral relations that outstrips our sentimental connections.

Though the honest laborer may not require knowledge of the standard of virtue to regulate his conduct towards his children, he will need this knowledge to navigate relations with, for example, those with whom he interacts in commercial life. Once the laborer grasps the catalogue of duties meant to organize his life, he recognizes that these duties often pull him in different directions. When he thinks about how to weigh these duties against one another, the laborer comes to realize that the standard of virtue provides him no insight into the matter. In order to proceed, the laborer must either assign the duties a weight on the basis of an external authority or he must acquire knowledge about how these duties fit together in a system. While the philosopher aims to understand the whole duty of the human being it would be absurd to expect that anyone not possessed of the means should engage in this enterprise. It follows that, on Cockburn's account, the honest laborer does not have the proper knowledge for his conscience to register any of the associated duties as authoritative over his conduct. This consequence is not one that Cockburn derives though it falls out of her view.

Where does this problem leave the honest laborer, considering that, for Cockburn, true virtue lies in autonomy, or acting in accordance with the standard of virtue from a recognition of its authority *via* conscience? Consider Sheridan's reading of Cockburn, on which Cockburn's model of autonomy is Stoic. She notes that, for the Stoics, reason is the "definitive characteristic of human nature, [and] determines as the most appropriate way to live." On this reading, the "goal for a human life ... [is] the perfection of one's nature," which consists in imposing "a kind of systemic order on the entirety of a human life through the rational harmonization of one's passions, inclinations, and desires" (2018a, 251). Let us reconsider the honest laborer. On a standard conception of *officiis*, the laborer who "toils and cares to provide for his family" is performing his duty as a parent but would *not* be considered virtuous on Stoic grounds. Stoic virtue proceeds from knowledge regarding one's station and how it contributes to the functioning of the moral system. The Stoic executes her duties with an eye to her own self-perfection qua rational being as opposed to the good of her family, unlike the honest laborer.

This focus on self-perfection drives a wedge between the morally virtuous and morally decent. It also places Cockburn closer to Shaftesbury, from whom she wishes to distinguish herself (more on this in section 4). Consider the implication for how we interpret Cockburn's account of conscience. For her, conscience plays three roles in moral thinking: First, it unreflectively applies our principles to particular cases, thereby allowing us to make quick decisions; second, it connects our moral identity to our behavior by bestowing approval and disapproval on our conduct; third, it secures our

¹⁵Cockburn (2006, 169). Cockburn argues that our passions are insufficient for virtue: "though our passions, our benevolent affections, our love of truth, and the approbation of what appears to us right and fit, are natural, and implanted in us for good and useful purposes; yet the *application* of any of these, is not determined by nature, but it is in our own power ... it is our fault, if we suffer our passions or affections to be *our masters*: that indeed is not natural, tho' the affections themselves are so; for it is the province of reason to keep them in subjection, to regulate them, and to point out the proper application of them" (167). Though we feel benevolence for our loved ones, we often lack it for others. The job of reason, guided by the standard of virtue, is to help redirect our passions towards their proper objects. This aspect of Cockburn's view creates the tension in her account of moral virtue.

obligation to virtue by providing us with an internal sanction against vice. Importantly, conscience is not the source of virtue for Cockburn—it is trustworthy *only* insofar as it is informed by correct moral principles. If there is ambiguity about how to construe the moral standard and confusion about what it takes to be an exemplar of moral virtue, then conscience will hardly be a trustworthy guide to virtuous conduct. In lieu of such a standard, the result is a Lockean nightmare where individuals act with an unreflective self-certainty in a manner that inevitably leads to conflict. It is this concern, in fact, that leads Locke to downplay the importance of conscience in his moral theory.

Even if the ambiguity about what is required to be a moral exemplar can be clarified, we are left with a more worrying issue. Say there are two distinct moral characters: the decent and exemplary. The latter possesses a superior understanding of human nature; they also have a stock of practical knowledge regarding how conduct tends to lead to the perfection of themselves and others. Further, the exemplary moral character regulates and corrects certain common-sense attitudes that, despite being locally helpful, are detrimental to virtue more generally. The decent moral character, on the other hand, concerns themselves with the good of their narrow circle. Their love and affection for family and friends is sufficient to ensure their just treatment of these individuals; likewise, this person's grasp of equity is requisite for dealing with neighbors and others in commercial society. This seems like a defensible view of morality, until we remember that Cockburn does not see the exemplar as the *homo liber* but as a character attainable by any reasonably disposed person. It follows that the morally decent person should aspire to be exemplary, meaning that being decent is not the aim but merely a stage on one's journey to being exemplary. While the drive to be exemplary is surely praiseworthy, Cockburn initially presents her moral theory as one aimed at the common person, who often lacks the means to achieve the greatness suggested to us by Shaftesbury or the Ancients.

An additional problem is that being exemplary requires the decent person to reject their own conscience, in favor of what is commanded of them by a different standard of virtue. The result of this process is alienation, where this person feels pulled in two directions—one which recommends partial concern for their family and friends, and another which implores them to overcome this natural partiality and to seek to perfect themselves and humanity as well. Perhaps it is our lot as human beings to feel this way; to be human is to be torn between who we are and who we want to be. But this fact about humans creates problems for Cockburn's account of moral obligation. A decent person can only recognize the exemplary standard as authoritative if they can endorse it over their own brand of decency. Nevertheless, endorsement is difficult to attain if people feel caught between two different standards. The decent person has to instead conceive of exemplariness as an external standard to begin their journey to virtue. When this journey begins, the decent person acts exemplarily not because he sees this aim as genuinely authoritative but because it is instrumentally useful in some manner.

At this point we can take stock. On the one hand, by arguing that the standard of virtue tells us to promote our happiness and that of others, Cockburn provides individuals with a readily comprehensible moral standard. All human beings possess the tools necessary to recognize, endorse, and internalize this standard. On the other hand, because virtuous conduct proceeds from a studied, reflective understanding of our moral duties, Cockburn's exemplar of virtue is not the honest laborer guided by his unreflective love for those in his narrow circle, but rather the person with a wider appreciation of the moral universe that she inhabits, one who uses her knowledge of moral distinctions to fashion her desires, inclinations, and passions in the image of God. As Cockburn notes, "that God requires us to imitate him, and intends to reward us for it, is unquestionably a very solid principle of duty" (2006, 201). She provides us with two models of moral virtue with different levels of demandingness and appears to be ambivalent as to which she endorses.¹⁶ Maybe Cockburn

¹⁶One reader of mine suggested that Cockburn's two accounts of moral virtue are compatible because one can fulfill the conditions of moral decency by being exemplary. Perhaps the language of decency and exemplariness are misleading in this

is aware that these are different models and so means them to be portraits of the morally decent and morally exemplary person, respectively. But this would undermine the clearly democratic intention of her theory of virtue.¹⁷

It is possible that the tension tracks Cockburn's evolved understanding of Locke's writings.¹⁸ Perhaps early in her career, Cockburn interpreted Locke as providing something more minimal with his account of morality. On this view, Locke's aim is to provide a standard of conduct for the morally decent person. The authority of this standard is based in God's will, though the conduct it demands is comprehensible given a sufficient understanding of human nature. Over time, with the adoption of this interpretation by Gay, Law, and Rutherford, it is conceivable that Cockburn distanced herself from Locke, and found in Clarke and Butler a more attractive model of moral virtue; a model that was aspirational but nonetheless possible for beings like ourselves to emulate. Maybe this model of virtue connected with aspects of Locke's writings that Cockburn found to be aspirational, if understated. I am unsure of the soundness of this proposal. While Cockburn's attention shifts away from defending Locke in her later philosophical works (though noticeably not in her theological works), she continues to view the use of his work by Gay, Law, and Rutherford as a betrayal of the Lockean legacy.¹⁹

If what I have said thus far about Cockburn is right, then clearly she means to do more in her philosophy than simply defend Locke. On the contrary, I argue that what she calls her own "scheme," reflects a fundamental tension in the moral thinking of the time (2006, 234). In England, the theory of natural law comes to a head in Locke's writings. Whereas in the seventeenth century virtue is largely conceived of as a disposition to act rightly, eighteenth-century thinkers like Shaftesbury, Clarke, Hutcheson, Butler, Hume, etc. work to push considerations of virtue beyond the scope of natural law. The problem they run into is how demanding to make their accounts of virtue. For all its pitfalls, natural law is a theory for the morally decent, meaning that most people can achieve virtue. Once one models virtue on the exemplary, however, one runs the risk of constructing a morality that is of little use to the common person. Cockburn is stuck between these two views in a way that is instructive for us. She is equally unsatisfied with the neo-Lockeans and with the Shaftesburyian sentimentalist tradition. In response to the dearth of options available to moral philosophers, Cockburn develops a Lockean realism that is both attainable and edificatory; in doing so, she also articulates the prevailing tension in moral thinking of that era. In the last section, I explore this tension further by returning to the topic of Cockburn's letter to her niece, with which I began: Shaftesbury.

4. The Return of Lord Shaftesbury

Given the tension that exists in Cockburn's thought between her standard of virtue and her account of moral obligation, and the subsequent demandingness of her account of moral virtue, it seems

context. Consider, again, the case of the honest laborer. To hold up the laborer as a model of moral decency is to say that a sincere commitment to the happiness of one's inner circle, born of love and benevolence, is sufficient for virtue. The Stoic—the model of moral exemplariness—may be committed to the good of his inner circle; however, this commitment will proceed from an understanding of his role in the system of nature and a concern for his self-perfection, and not from love or benevolence. In this sense, the Stoic rises above and simultaneously does violence to the standards of moral decency expressed by the honest laborer.

¹⁷Thank you to an anonymous referee for suggesting this possible reading.

¹⁸Thank you to an anonymous referee for suggesting this interpretation.

¹⁹Cockburn spent her time after the publication of *A Defence* (1702) and her fifth and final play *The Revolution of Sweden* (1706) writing on matters of largely theological concern, the product of which was *A letter to Dr. Holdsworth, occasioned by his sermon preached before the University of Oxford: on Easter-Monday, concerning the resurrection of the same body. In which the passages that concern Mr. Lock are chiefly considered. By the author of, A defence of Mr. Lock's Essay of Humane Understanding* (1726). She also penned another work in response to Holdsworth that was left unpublished until Birch's publication of her *Works* (1751).

odd that Cockburn takes issue with Shaftesbury. After all, there is much overlap between their moral theories: both figures began as devotees of Locke and spent much of their career responding to him; they are equally concerned about basing moral obligation in external sanction, a move that limits the possibility of autonomy; they also share a realist impulse that fits awkwardly with their focus on self-perfection.²⁰ In this final section, I return briefly to Cockburn's comments on Shaftesbury to try to understand where she parts with his thought. Understanding the relation between them gives us a better appreciation of the tension in Cockburn's account of moral virtue, and of how she viewed the status of her work in the context in which she was writing. I suggest that Cockburn objects to the contempt that Shaftesbury shows for his fellow beings—an attitude inimical to virtue.

Cockburn notes two points of agreement between herself and Shaftesbury. The first is that human beings are sociable. She places Shaftesbury alongside Butler in defending “a *natural* disposition in mankind to benevolence” (2006, 236). This thesis is central to Cockburn's moral theory—as she puts it, “a disinterested benevolence and approbation of virtue are *natural* to man, and given him as proper excitements to good actions” (169). Cockburn also finds herself in agreement with Shaftesbury concerning the *ground* of moral duty, namely that it is not one's own interest.²¹ As she puts it in a letter to Arbuthnot, “I place morality solely and entirely on the *nature, relations, and fitness of things* ... our *obligation* to the *practice* of moral virtue ... is a distinct consideration ... but *interest* is no part of the ground of moral obligation in my judgment” (234). While interest plays a role in ensuring a “steady performance of our duty,” Cockburn distinguishes these considerations from what *makes us* obligated to do our duty. She connects this distinction back to Shaftesbury's writings, noting that all “who should conform to the laws of virtue, *merely* with a view to rewards and punishment, would not, according to my notions, be either a virtuous or a religious man. In this I am nearer to an agreement with Lord *Shaftesbury*” (235).

Still, Cockburn considers herself to be at odds with Shaftesbury. One explanation as to why lies in how she construes Shaftesbury's “moral sense.” Cockburn distinguishes her use of conscience from the “instinct” of virtue, a concern that goes back to her response to the Remarker. Cockburn bases her account of conscience on reflection, and distinguishes it from the “blind instinct,” a view she attributes to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson (2006, 238).²² As she notes in a letter to Arbuthnot:

You ask me, who it is, that calls the moral sense a *blind instinct* ... an *instinctive approbation of virtue &c* that is, they act without judgment by a kind of *Taste*; and therefore you see I several times express a doubt, whether the *moral sense* and *conscience* are the same thing. If they are the same principle or faculty in us, I think, at least, they are different ideas of it, and I take care to show, that by *conscience* I do not mean a *blind instinct*. (2006, 238. cf. 116–17, 157, 169)

It is the status of the moral sense as an instinct that sparks Cockburn's suspicion, as instincts are flimsy foundations for moral virtue. If God were to give us the ability to “sense” virtue in the same manner that we smell flowers, taste chickpeas, or hear birds chirping, then our relationship with virtue would be too passive. Cockburn grants that God gives us certain moral capacities, but she argues that reason is necessary to recognize the standard of virtue, and that a cultivated self-conception is needed to guide our conduct in accordance with this standard. Cockburn is incorrect

²⁰The aforementioned tension in Cockburn's moral theory also appears in Shaftesbury's writings. See Gill (2016).

²¹The second agreement with Shaftesbury is with his *criticism* of certain post-Lockean moral philosophers—that moral obligation cannot be based in self-interest. In other words, Cockburn and Shaftesbury are allies of convenience on this second point; their common ground here does not presume a wider agreement regarding their theories of virtue. Thank you to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.

²²Here, Cockburn says of Shaftesbury, “but if he found *virtue* on the *moral sense* as I think he does, his scheme and mine can by no means agree; for I found virtue solely on essential difference, nature, and relations of things, not on any instincts” (2006, 236).

to attribute to Shaftesbury the view that there exists an “instinct of virtue,” though attributing it to Hutcheson is fair.²³

Related is Cockburn’s suggestion that Shaftesbury is prejudiced against Locke “for his strong attachment to *Christianity*” (2006, 236). She puts elsewhere, “Lord *Shaftesbury*, who perhaps was a good Christian ... and wrote so like a divine; for no doubt his education led him that way. He was Mr. Locke’s pupil, and seems to have taken a prejudice against him at the same time, that he fell out with revelation.” She mentions that Shaftesbury’s prejudice against Christianity might have risen in response to witnessing the hypocrisy found amongst its members but responds that “a man of his penetration might have known mankind well enough to conclude, that the best religion in such hands must be mingled with the passions frailties, and mistakes of men; and should not have thought it reasonable to condemn the purest principles, for the sake of practices entirely opposite to them” (232). Cockburn thinks that Shaftesbury’s striving for purity led him to believe that Christianity is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral goodness and that it often undercuts moral development. She claims that this is naïve—whether or not belief in Christ is sufficient to be moral, the vast majority of people do require belief in Christ to be moral, and such belief fosters their moral development.

For Cockburn, more worrying than Shaftesbury’s view that Christian beliefs are unnecessary for virtue is his arrogance in making this proposal. As she notes, how “could he [Shaftesbury] know the world, and think, that morality, and by consequence the good of his country, would be less advanced by the belief of Christianity (even with his hard thoughts of its teacher) than by no religion at all? Without which it has never been thought practicable in any age, or country, to keep up any tolerable order in society” (2006, 232). Shaftesbury’s conceit leads him to find fault with his fellows for their all-too-human foibles. He distances himself from others by cultivating an aristocratic contempt for those around him and for the conventions of society. This contempt leads Cockburn to say that Shaftesbury “proposed to bring the bulk of mankind to a love of virtue for its beauty, and excellencies, and to give them all his own refined taste; he might as well have proposed to make them all lords” (233). The theory Shaftesbury proposes is fit for a lord like himself; one who is unable to see humans for what they are—creatures of God who, though basically good, require his light to maintain this goodness.

While discussing Shaftesbury’s criticisms of Locke’s ethics in a letter to Arbuthnot, Cockburn admits that she is not in total agreement with him. Though Cockburn does not find Shaftesbury’s criticisms to be terribly compelling, she ends the letter by saying:

I am not myself satisfied upon a review of what *Mr. Locke* has said on moral relations. His plan led him to consider them only with reference to the present constitution of things; and though he is very free from the charge of making the nature of morality uncertain, I fear he has given occasion to the interested scheme so much in fashion of late, but carried, I dare say, far beyond what he intended. (2006, 242–43)

This marks a rare admission by Cockburn of a connection between Locke and figures like Gay, Law, and Rutherford. The historical oddity is that the figures most animated by Locke’s writings developed theories from which Cockburn distances herself. She is thereby in a league of her own as a Lockean moral realist. Her elision of Clarke and Locke is surely illegitimate, and her theory is closer to Clarke, Shaftesbury, or Butler than it is to Locke, at least when it comes to moral metaphysics and moral obligation. Cockburn is a moral realist who holds that moral facts are inherently motivating, while Locke, and certainly the eighteenth-century Lockeanes, seem to fall in the voluntarist camp, and among those who base moral obligation in self-interest. There is overlap between Cockburn and Locke on questions of moral epistemology, and on the importance of an

²³This criticism of Hutcheson is employed by many eighteenth-century thinkers (Hume, Smith, Reid, Kant, etc.), though modern commentators have doubted the extent to which it undercuts his moral theory.

account human nature in a theory of virtue, but she is also in agreement with Gay, Law, Rutherford, and Shaftesbury on these points.²⁴

The groundwork for eighteenth-century British moral philosophy was laid by Locke. On my reading, Cockburn is the first major figure in this tradition. She bases morality in an account of human nature, offers a comprehensible standard of virtue, and argues that it is within reach for all human beings. In other words, Cockburn democratizes moral virtue. She takes morality out of the hands of theologians and those animated by perfectionist virtue and makes it a fully human endeavor. She also distances herself from natural law theories that base moral obligation in external sanction, or self-interest. Admittedly, there is a tension in Cockburn's writings. But this tension is instructive, as it teaches us about the development of eighteenth-century British moral philosophy. After Locke, the tradition split between those who adopted his account of moral obligation, those who sought to develop nascent moral science in his writing, and those who sought a ground for virtue in something more immutable. These strands are all present in Cockburn's thought and developed in a rigorous and compelling fashion. Her writings are therefore indispensable for understanding the trajectory of British moral philosophy in the eighteenth century.

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²⁴Thank you to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I distinguish between the agreement that Cockburn has with Locke on moral epistemology from her disagreement with him on moral metaphysics and the (partial) disagreement they have on matters of moral obligation.

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