Received: 1 May 2017 | Revised: 9 October 2017 | Accepted: 15 November 2017

DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12478

ARTICLE

WILEY

Virtue, affection, and the social good: The moral philosophy of Catharine Trotter Cockburn and the Bluestockings

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Abstract

This paper explores the intellectual relationship between three eighteenth century women thinkers: Catharine Trotter Cockburn, and the Bluestockings Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot. All three share a virtue-ethical approach according to which human happiness depends on the harmonization of our essentially rational and sociable natures. The affinity between the Bluestockings and Cockburn, I show, illuminates important new avenues for thinking about the Bluestockings as philosophers in their own right and for thinking about the feminist dimensions of Cockburn's morality. Further, their shared moral outlook sheds interesting light on the burgeoning feminism of the eighteenth century and the contributions of Cockburn and the Bluestockings to a new and growing discourse about women and their social and political role.

1 | INTRODUCTION

On August 20, 1751, Elizabeth Carter wrote to her friend Catherine Talbot inquiring about her thoughts on the newly minted collected works of Catharine Trotter Cockburn: 'I have read but little yet', she writes, 'but she seems to have had a most remarkable clear understanding and an excellent heart'. (Carter, 1809, Vol.2: 49) Talbot replied on September 27th of the same year that Cockburn indeed 'had an honest, upright, affectionate heart, that I honour'. (Carter, 1809, Vol. 2: 52)[1] Cockburn published an impressive number of philosophical works in her lifetime. Her collected works, to which Carter and Talbot refer, were published posthumously in two volumes in 1751 and stand as a testament to her prodigious accomplishments.[2] Cockburn engaged with some of the most vocal moralists of her period, advancing an original and sophisticated moral philosophy in response to the weaknesses she detected in the predominating moral systems of her day. Carter and Talbot might, therefore, seem to be trivializing Cockburn's intellectual achievements with their emphasis on her sympathetic character.

The fact is, however, that Carter and Talbot were two prominent members of the Bluestocking circle, a community of British thinkers that formed in the 1750s, notable for its commitment to fostering women's moral and

intellectual advancement. Though Cockburn was a generation earlier than the Bluestockings and did not make up a member of their society, the Bluestockings evidently read her work and took inspiration from her ideas. They shared with Cockburn a view of human excellence and moral virtue according to which reason and sentiment are perfectly harmonized. It seems, therefore, both revealing and characteristic of their commitment to these principles that Carter and Talbot praised both the understanding *and* the heart of Cockburn's work. What might sound like faint praise is actually quite illuminating of Carter and Talbot's affinity with Cockburn and her work.

In what follows, I will explore this intellectual affinity. I will not be concerned with delineating the direct influence of Cockburn on the Bluestockings' ideas. That they read Cockburn is well documented not only in their correspondence but also by the fact that the names of both women appear on the subscription list of Cockburn's *Works*.[3] And while it can fairly be assumed that her writings had some impact on their thinking, it is certainly the case that her morality resonated with their own views.

My discussion takes its cue from recent scholarship suggesting a philosophical link between the Bluestockings and Cockburn. O'Brien (2009), Bigold (2013), and Green (2015) have each noted that Cockburn was a significant precursor to the Bluestockings in that they share with Cockburn a morality that balances social affections and reason; a morality, notably, that sees the social affections as essential to the achievement of happiness and virtue. In addition to this literature, Hutton (2007) and Wright (2007) have explored the themes of rational self-governance and self-perfection in the writings of the Bluestockings and their predecessors, as expressions of a feminist virtue theory inspired by ancient Stoicism.

Building on this literature, I will explore the private and public dimensions of social affection in the moral philosophies of Cockburn and the Bluestockings. For all three thinkers, I will show, the private realm of social affections turns out to be the proving ground for moral character and the basis for civic virtue.[4] In this way, they broaden the scope of moral agency by blurring the distinction between private and public good; the virtuous expression of social affections, in any social context, serves the well-being of society. With their shared assumption that women are rational and sociable to the same degree as men, their views effectively suggest that women, like men, are moral agents whose social efficacy extends from the good of their personal relationships to the good of their larger society.

2 | COCKBURN'S MORAL THEORY

Cockburn's moral theory rests on the belief that all human beings, including women, have the capacity to reason and, more than this, to self-govern. In a letter of 1704, Cockburn makes this plain in defence of the seventeenth-century philosopher Damaris Masham—There was a rumour to the effect that John Locke had in fact written her work. To this Cockburn responds, tellingly, '[i]t is not to be doubted, that women are as capable of penetrating into the grounds of things, and reasoning justly, as men are, who certainly have no advantage of us, but in their opportunities of knowledge'. (Cockburn, 1751b: 190)[5]

It is not only in point of rationality that women lay claim to the capacity for moral agency. Cockburn's view of moral agency includes a well-developed capacity for benevolence, or what she also calls the *sociable passions*. The failure to take personal relationships such as parenting or close friendships into account when judging a person's moral character leads, she believes, to an impoverished conception of what it means to be a virtuous person.

Cockburn believes that humans are inherently equipped for moral excellence; our natural inclinations, if properly regulated through rational introspection, hold the key to moral agency and virtue.[6] For Cockburn, morality is a matter of following nature.[7] Cockburn understands human nature within the compass of a broadly teleological framework—Human beings are naturally equipped with an understanding of their proper ends and with a sense of their own perfectibility. What gives human nature its specifically moral character is the capacity within each of us to self-govern in the interests of self-perfection, or what Cockburn otherwise understands as virtue. The goal of any moral agent is to achieve the most proper and perfect expression of the defining aspects of her nature—which are rationality and sociable, benevolent, affection. This is expressed by Cockburn in terms of fitness.[8] In a nutshell, reason is our capacity for

regulating our emotional responses in accordance with what any given situation demands. Reason, thus, allows us to act fittingly, or appropriately, in consideration of our own natures and the natures of other things involved. In this way, benevolent affection and reason are, in equal parts, essential elements of our humanity and of our morality. They must be harmonized for the achievement of virtue.[9]

For Cockburn, humans are motivated towards virtuous action by self-love, though she is quick to specify, '*[s]elf love* is not *selfishness*' (Cockburn, 1747: 20). Self-love is a principle that guides us towards moral perfection and the happiness that comes from self-fulfillment. Self-love is manifest by feelings of self-approval or self-esteem—We experience self-love when we act in accordance with our natures. Virtue and self-love, she writes, 'go hand in hand together, and mutually support each other' (Cockburn, 1747: 20). Self-interest, or selfishness, prioritizes the gratification of what she calls our private interests (e.g., our desires and passions), and it is motivated by a misguided conception of happiness. Self-love guides us towards our moral ends, towards what is right and fit. Since benevolence is a defining aspect of our moral nature for Cockburn, benevolence and self-love are inextricably linked—In caring for others, we care for our own moral well-being, and vice versa. True benevolence is, in Cockburn's terms, *disinterested*. Although the agent's interests are, in some sense, at play when she/he acts benevolently, the immediate motivation is strictly the welfare of others. The happiness that results for the agent is a kind of moral contentment, or as Cockburn puts it, 'the approbation of his own mind, for having done what is right and fit, but in no case the motivation for his acting' (Cockburn, 1743: 412). For Cockburn, our sense of moral self-worth is therefore contingent on our capacity for benevolent, social affection.

That we have such a capacity seems, to Cockburn, abundantly evident from the mundane and, often involuntary, affections we feel regarding the welfare of others, and in the admiration we express when we witness actions motivated by those feelings:

> *Men need not be* taught, *they* feel, *that their happiness is not independent of that of others, they find themselves unavoidably involved, or affected with the miseries of others, and can form no idea of happiness, into which some kind of communication with others does not enter. (Cockburn, 1743*: 427*)*

The evidence, she believes, seems overwhelmingly to be on her side. It is commonly the case that loneliness will overwhelm even the most prosperous and well-satisfied individual. It is hard to enjoy one's own good fortune when those around you are suffering and in need. And most exemplary of all is the love of a mother for her child, which, she writes, 'must be owing solely to [the mother's] kind affections, an association of *nature's* forming' (Cockburn, 1743: 428). It seems to require a perverse denial of the obvious to maintain the view that humans are not naturally disposed to value the welfare of others: '[A]s long as there are any such things as affectionate parents and children, brotherly love, generous friendships, or publick spirit, in the world, 'till there are no more, mankind will assert *a natural disinterested benevolence*' (Cockburn, 1747): 81).

In a letter to her niece, Ann Arbuthnot, in October 1747, Cockburn responds to Arbuthnot's suggestion that disinterested benevolence might be a cultivated skill rather than a natural tendency. Her response here is worth noting for its appeal to the most ordinary acts of kindness in our personal relationships and in the kindly attentions of people in our society. She writes,

> *I think you may have observed a great deal of it, even in the small place where you are. Pray what is all that concern among you for the sufferings of your country, when you do not share in it yourselves, but disinterested benevolence? What* deceitful appearance *was there in Major* Petrie's *kind intentions for your son? Or in the brotherly affection of the* Barclay's*? And what deceit in the friendship between you and your cousin* Kitty*? I could give many more particular instances… (Cockburn, 1751b*: 331)

Our commonplace feelings of love and concern for others are expressions of disinterested benevolence, and it is this natural capacity that makes possible not only the formation of personal relationships but of human society itself. 'Mankind', she writes, 'is a system of creatures, that continually need one another's assistance, without which they could not long subsist' (Cockburn, 1743: 413). For Cockburn, the fact that we are so naturally and pervasively sociable seems to

suggest that we are designed for this very thing. Reprising the idea that human society is a system of social beings, she observes that we are 'designed to promote each other's welfare, no part being made for itself alone' (Cockburn, 1747: 7).

What shines through in Cockburn's theory is her consistent blurring of the lines between public and private where moral virtue is concerned. The person of virtue does not attain their moral eminence through strictly public or civic generosity and benevolence. We see this in Cockburn's example of the rich miser. He denied himself and his family all but the most basic comforts in order that his accumulated wealth might fund a hospital after his death. Here, she writes, is an action motivated by benevolence, but that fails to be virtuous: 'the generality of mankind would, *upon the whole*, perceive such a disagreement in it to nature, and reason, and fitness, as would not allow them to esteem it a virtuous action' (Cockburn, 1747: 15). While Cockburn believes that the sociable affections have as their very end the 'good and preservation of the whole' (Cockburn, 1743: 413), she never suggests that virtue involves prioritizing acts aimed directly at public, rather than private, good. The sociable affections motivate us to act for the good of others, no matter how limited the scope of those actions. In fact, Cockburn considers the love of parents for their children to be exemplary of human benevolence.[10] For Cockburn, virtue is measured not by quantifiable outcomes but by the capacity of any individual to take the good of others to be their fundamental motivating concern. The person of virtue acts, she writes, 'upon no other consideration, than that [their] conduct is the fittest to procure the welfare of the whole, *and* of every particular' (Cockburn, 1747: 78 (my italics)). The practice of virtue, she writes, is the means by which each agent can 'contribute his share towards the natural and moral good of the society' (Cockburn, 1747: 78). This is why the miser failed to be virtuous, despite his benevolence. He acted in the interest of public good at the expense of his private relationships, and this signals a gross misunderstanding of what it means to live a life of virtue.

Cockburn's holistic conception of virtue effectively serves to widen the scope of women's moral agency. Women, as rational and social beings, are under a duty, as such, to express their sociable capacities in accordance with reason *and thereby* contribute to the general good; women, like men, cannot, in any meaningful way, be virtuous from the sidelines of the public sphere. It is a moral approach we find reprised in the Bluestocking writers who clearly adopted a way of thinking about morality and virtue that is deeply resonant with Cockburn's own ideas. O'Brien (2009: 38) argues that women moralists of the period 'attempted to develop an ethics and a theology rooted in the notion of men and women's innate sociability, and favourable to female social action'. Hutton has similarly noted that many women intellectuals and activists of this period chose the language of virtue, rather than that of rights, in their petitions for social change. 'The favoured discourse of … politically-conscious women of the eighteenth century was', she writes, 'ethical rather than political' (Hutton, 2007: 137). Ethical issues, she continues, 'were at the heart of their feminism' (Hutton (2007): 137). The Bluestocking women represent this *zeitgeist*, as does Cockburn. For all of these thinkers, agency is understood through the lens of private virtue and its public good.

3 | BLUESTOCKING MORAL THEORY

The Bluestockings were a community of British intellectuals brought together at the home of the famed woman of letters Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800). Montagu's vision was that her salon would realize the enlightenment ideals of equality, rationality, sensibility, and civic virtue; to that end she invited into her circle men and women devoted to progressive and broadminded conversation and debate. In time, the Bluestocking group became a locus for women intellectuals, advancing programs for women's education and moral advancement within an atmosphere of friendship and mutual support.[11] The Bluestockings have held an uneasy place in the feminist canon, for their apparent conservatism regarding women's social role.[12] However, recent scholars have reconsidered their feminist significance.[13] A number of these scholars have found in the Bluestockings a conscious defence of women's innate potential for rational self-governance and autonomy—A potential that the Bluestockings believed could be realized with the proper education of women and their inclusion in the intellectual sphere. In what follows, I want to build on this understanding of the Bluestockings and examine their specific conception of moral agency. I will draw particular attention to their idea of private virtue as a fundamental public good. Cast against the backdrop of their feminist consciousness, their communitarian conception of private virtue lay

the groundwork for a moral theory that, like Cockburn's, encouraged the realization of women's, as well as men's, moral agency and effectively broadened the sphere of women's moral ends.

Talbot and Carter were prominent figures within the Bluestocking circle, and both women published original works and essays and left a voluminous correspondence.[14] In what follows, I will not enter into any detailed analysis regarding the finer distinctions of their respective views. I intend to draw out the common themes in their work and, particularly, those themes that they share with Cockburn. While neither Carter nor Talbot produced the kind of full-blown moral theory that we find in Cockburn, this does not mean that we cannot trace predominating themes in their work that constitute a coherent morality.

For Cockburn, as we have seen, virtue and happiness are achieved by the appropriate and suitable expression of our rational and sociable natures. This aspect of her view is echoed by Talbot, when she writes 'just in Proportion to the Improvement of those Faculties, with which Heaven has intrusted us, our Beings are ennobled, and our Happiness heightened' (Zuk, 1999: 74). Carter, in a similar vein, asserts: 'Whoever would be really happy, must make the diligent and regular Exercise of his superior Powers his chief Attention, adoring the Perfection of his Maker, expressing Good-will to his Fellow-creatures, and cultivating inward Rectitude' (Hawley, 1999: 413). Here, we see the familiar themes of self-governance, the harmonious balance of reason and benevolence, and the naturalness of virtue. For the Bluestockings, morality is a matter of refining the expression of these fundamentally human traits, but though human rationality is the governing means of doing so, all aspects of our natures contribute to making human virtue. As Talbot writes, '[n]o Part of our Constitution was given us, without important Reason' (Talbot, 1780: 115).[15]

Central to their moral outlook, therefore, is the idea that morality is more than merely a matter of following rules but a practice of perfecting our intrinsic moral qualities. The Bluestockings believed that human nature contains within it the capacity for, and tendency towards, moral goodness. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Bluestockings professed an admiration for ancient Stoicism.[16] Elizabeth Carter was celebrated in her day for her translation of the works of the ancient Stoic Epictetus, a work she began at Talbot's request.[17] A number of scholars in recent years have begun to look at the eighteenth century and the feminist motivations behind women's embracement of Stoic morality (e.g., Hutton, 2007; Wright, 2007). Hutton (2007: 143) argues that the attraction of Stoicism for eighteenth-century women seems to lie in the fact that 'it focuses on the possible, or what is "in our power"'. Wright offers a similar assessment in her discussion of the appeal of Stoicism to eighteenth-century women. Referring in particular to Mary Chudleigh, a precursor to the Bluestocking women, Wright (2007: 332) suggests that Stoicism offered 'a means whereby thoughtful women might better regulate their own lives, and thus achieve "a happy disposition of mind": a term which seems to imply not only personal contentment but also an enlarged sense of intellectual agency and potential' Though Chudleigh was a generation earlier than Carter, we find the resonance of this idea in Carter's assessment of the advantages of reading the Stoics: 'Even now, their Compositions may be read with great Advantage, as containing excellent Rules of Self-government, and of social Behaviour' (Hawley, 1999: 27).

With its conception of self-perfection as the most proper and perfect expression of human nature, these women took inspiration from the Stoic view of human nature as inherently equipped for moral excellence. For the Stoic, the virtuous individual achieves contentment and self-fulfillment by expressing her natural capacities appropriately and with the greatest degree of harmony and self-regulation.[18] We find this echoed, for example, in Talbot's picture of the noble character, for whom a 'calm and even Cheerfulness of Temper, a regular and uniform Conduct, that shall make them for ever happy in themselves' (Zuk, 1999: 89). The Stoics believed that the route to moral perfection required living in accordance with nature mindfully and rationally, acting always with a view to realizing those aspects of our nature that allow us to be our best and fulfil our natural function. This is achieved, for the Stoics, through rational self-regulation and the moderation of our passions. Talbot appeals to this language in a letter to Carter of 1748, where she writes of their friendship that it should 'be moderated by a sense of superior duty, and kept calm by reason, and an ease of temper'. Friendship and affection, she continues, 'give … happiness and dignity to human life, and lay the first foundation for joys that shall survive it … surely there is more need of moderating, and regulating, than heightening these dispositions which are so liable to run wild' (Carter, 1809, Vol. 1: 290). The language that we find here of self-regulation and moderation as a moral duty is strongly resonant of Stoic themes.

The Bluestockings, however, departed in significant ways from what they perceived as the Stoic ideal of the virtuous agent—a definitively rational and self-sufficiently dispassionate individual. The Stoic agent seemed to the Bluestockings to present an incomplete characterization of human nature. As Carter writes, they failed to understand 'Man in his mixed Capacity' (Hawley, 1999: 13).[19] For the Bluestockings, the happiness of the virtuous moral agent is inextricably bound with the well-being of others on account of our natures as rational *and* sociable beings. The affections are not so much controlled by reason as refined to best effect for the agent and her relationships with others. We act, according to the Bluestockings, not merely from reason but from our innate passions. This signals an important feature of the Bluestocking conception of moral agency—For them, the agent is understood in a relational sense, and her self-perfection is deeply bound up in her emotional relationships with others. This idea is captured by their notion of self-love.

Like Cockburn, the Bluestockings appealed to the concept of self-love as a kind of attentiveness to one's moral happiness. However, for them, as for Cockburn, it is entirely mistaken to think that self-love and love of others might in any way come into conflict. On the contrary, virtue depends on a kind of self-love that depends on realizing one's benevolent tendencies. For example, Talbot writes of self-love that while it might be construed, on first blush, as an exclusive regard for my own welfare, it is, on reflection, 'one of the strongest Ties to social Virtue' (Talbot, 1780: 120). A selfless concern for the welfare of others is she continues, the 'truest Support, and most rational Pursuit of [self-love]' (Talbot, 1780: 120–21). Carter echoes this view, observing '[i]n social active Life, Difficulties will perpetually occur; Restraints of many Kinds will be necessary: and studying to behave right in Respect of these, is a Discipline of the human Heart useful to others, and improving to itself' (Hawley, 1999: 414). The steady refrain of the Bluestockings is the moral advantage each individual gains from social interaction and benevolent goodwill.

Benevolence is understood by both Carter and Talbot, as it was with Cockburn, to include a wide range of sociable affections that underlie our relationships with others. Their vision of morality was, therefore, one grounded in purely natural and prosaic feelings of concern for the well-being of others. Carter identifies the morally praiseworthy characteristics of human nature as 'the soft Feelings of Humanity, the Sympathies of Friendship, all natural Temptation to the Care of a Family, and Solicitude about the Good and Ill of others, with the whole Train of Domestic and social Affections' (Hawley, 1999: 417). In a similar vein, Talbot praises 'human Love, Kindness, Compassion, mutual Care, mutual Assistance, mutual Forgiveness of a thousand little Blemishes and Errors' as the ingredients for the 'preservation and happiness of society' (Zuk, 1999: 85). In fact, for Carter and Talbot, the measure of a person's moral rectitude is founded entirely on the quality of their social relationships and the depth of their commitment to those relationships as intrinsic goods. Even the seemingly banal social standard of politeness signals the kind of attentiveness to one's social conduct that forms the basis of moral virtue; a deficiency in politeness signals a deficiency of character so essential to virtue. It is, Talbot writes, in an essay entitled, 'On Politeness', 'a Restraint laid by Reason and Benevolence, upon every Irregularity of the Temper, which, in Obedience to them, is forced to accommodate itself … ' (Talbot, 1780: 59).

Moral error amounts to a kind of inattentiveness to the proper expression of one's benevolent affections. With attentive self-knowledge, the fundamental value of our social relationships becomes clear. Talbot recommends thoughtfulness, and a methodical and frequent reflection on one's own character and the social efficacy of one's actions. A virtuous person, for her, will act, at all times, mindfully on her affective impulses. She will act not merely passionately but out of a sense of moral rectitude, and with a robust awareness of her social efficacy. In a letter to Carter, Talbot laments time taken away from her own course of self-improvement, writing,

> *I want leisure to acquire those dispositions, to form those tempers, to ensure those aids which alone can make every change of this world not only supportable but happy, and in the meanwhile fit one better for supporting one's part in society. I want time to study my faults and correct them. (Carter, 1809, Vol. 3: 124)*

Note that for Talbot, self-improvement has everything to do with the quality of her relationships with others. To think of herself as a wholly autonomous agent seems to be a principal moral failing, which will lead her to act selfishly

and solely in her own interest. Carter, likewise, writes of the predominating, divine, moral order that 'tends to the regulation and perfection of every individual nature, and, consequently, to the promotion of universal virtue and happiness' (Hawley, 1999: 423). Again, the suggestion here seems clearly to be that my own self-perfection is bound inextricably with the good of others. Their conception of individual flourishing requires a deep commitment to the individual's relationship with others—In fact, a solitary person could never, for them, achieve true virtue. We must, Carter cautions, '[r]eturn from the contracted Views of Solitude, to the proper Duties of a relative and dependent Being … [and maintain] those Chains of Benevolence and social Affection, that link the Welfare of every Particular with that of Whole' (Hawley, 1999: 414).[20] No human being, it seems, can self-perfect in solitude from others and without an appreciation of their duties to the welfare of their broader society.

Friendship is a fundamental aspect of this program of self-perfection. Carter and Talbot consider it a kind of proving-ground, if you will, which tests our virtuous character. The intimacy of friendship makes a special kind of demand on our benevolent affections, depending, as it does, on the ongoing and steady exercise of these affections. As Carter writes, God 'has bestowed the blessings of friendship so far as it is necessary for the exercise of our social dispositions, the mutual improvement of our talents and our virtues … ' (Hawley, 1999: 424). Carter notes that heaven is represented as a society, and the blessed, in recollecting their good acts in life most likely contemplate the 'mutual improvements of friendship' that made them as good as they could be (Hawley, 1999: 425). Friendship exemplifies what is best in our natures and represents a key to our virtuous self-perfection. Considered in this light, it signifies the very essence of virtuous practice—Understood within their general conception of morality, friendship constitutes a central aspect of our social lives that, if practiced reflectively, contributes to self-perfection. It is, perhaps more than our other social affections, potentially transformative if practiced mindfully. As Talbot writes, friendship is so powerful an affection that it changes the 'Sentiments and Tempers of Persons' (Zuk, 1999: 93). Recalling that for Carter and Talbot morality is a matter, not of following prescribed rules, but of perfecting the defining aspects of our natures, it should be no surprise, then, that we have a moral obligation to form and preserve close relationships with others. Friendship demands of us the pure kind of benevolence that forms our moral characters. As Talbot writes 'Whoever to the Faith and Constancy of Friendship sacrifices the Interests of Fortune, or the Indulgence of an Inclination, pursues still his true and essential Interests; since he is strictly performing an important Duty' (Zuk, 1999: 93). We cannot, it seems, be fully virtuous without friendship; our agency itself depends upon its conscious practice.

For Carter and Talbot, the virtuous agent is both self-governing and deeply committed to her relationships with others. From small acts of kindness to larger acts for the public good, the virtuous agent lives a life devoted to the proper expression of her benevolent nature. Carter and Talbot never distinguish private virtue from public virtue, suggesting rather that virtuous self-expression, in whatever social context, contributes to social good. In this way, as we saw with Cockburn, their conception of virtue is not only amenable to women, as rational and sociable beings, but effectively makes the case for the broader social efficacy of women's moral agency. Women's virtue, like men's, extends far beyond the private domain. For the Bluestockings, the moral choices agents make, no matter how personal the social context, serve the good of the society as a whole. It is impossible, therefore, to be virtuous to the exclusion of the larger social sphere.

4 | CONCLUSION

Considering that for all of these thinkers, society as a functioning system depends on the effective moral virtue of each of its individual members, their moral outlook had wide-ranging implications. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft asserts that

> *a truly benevolent legislator always endeavours to make it the interest of each individual to be virtuous; and thus private virtue becoming the cement of public happiness, an orderly whole is consolidated by the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre. (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 234)*

Here, Wollstonecraft signals that a well-functioning political state requires attention, first and foremost, to the virtue of its citizens. Wollstonecraft was building off a long tradition of women's theorization about individual virtue as a basis for human moral life in the public realm. I do not want to overstate the radicalism of Cockburn and the Bluestockings. However, it is by no means a trifling fact that they sought to improve society by the piecemeal moral improvement of individuals and that women, as rational *and* affective members of that society, would play an equal role to men in realizing that vision.

ENDNOTES

[1] Their years are Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679–1749), Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), and Catherine Talbot (1721–1770).

[2] Between the years 1702 and 1747, Cockburn wrote and published five major philosophical and theological works. She also maintained a voluminous intellectual correspondence, in addition to writing and publishing five plays. These works and much of her correspondence appear in *The Works of Mrs. Catharine Cockburn* (see Cockburn, 1751a; Cockburn, 1751b), edited by Thomas Birch.

[3] Catherine Talbot is listed as 'Miss Talbot', and Elizabeth Carter, who was residing in Deal, England, at the time, is listed as 'Miss Carter of Deal'. The full list of subscribers can be found in Cockburn (1751a), immediately following the table of contents.

[4] *Private* and *public* are designations that can be understood in a number of ways. In this paper, I am working with a notion of private virtue as concerning the well-being of family and other personal relations and public virtue as concerning the well-being of society taken as a whole. Public virtue, thus understood, involves acting directly for the public good. One problematic outcome of this distinction is that private virtue can be construed as being relatively inconsequential to the public good. This is a problem that I believe Cockburn and Bluestockings were aiming to resolve.

[5] For extended discussion of Cockburn's feminist defence of women's rationality, see the following: Kelley (2002) looks at Cockburn's philosophical and dramatic works to illustrate her position regarding women's rational, and moral, equality to men's; Broad (2002: 145–150) discusses Cockburn's feminist case for women's rationality, as arising out of her conception of moral agency as, fundamentally, rational self-governance; Ready (2002) explores Cockburn's feminism within the context of a Lockean theory of personal identity. Ready argues that this view allowed thinkers like Cockburn to establish the grounds for women's rational equality to men.

[6] Cockburn's morality has been the subject of growing scholarly interest. Waithe (1991), Bolton (1993), Kelley (2002), Sheridan (2007), Nuovo (2011), Bigold (2013), and Green (2015) have all explored aspects of Cockburn's moral philosophy and have discussed the grounds of virtue in her view.

[7] See Bolton (1993) and Sheridan (2007) for further discussions of Cockburn's moral naturalism.

[8] Cockburn's view that virtue, and happiness, is achieved by individual self-perfection, is evocative of ancient Stoic ethics. In fact, Cockburn references the Stoics a number of times throughout her works, including a quotation of Chrysippus on the title page of her *Remarks upon … Rutherforth's Essay* (Cockburn, 1747). In this work, she asserts that the Stoics hold a conception of virtue that includes *'[f]itness, rectitude, agreeableness to nature, to relations'* (Cockburn, 1747: 104). Not incidentally, these are all key aspects of her own definition of virtue. I will not, in the scope of this paper, have time to explore the intellectual affiliation between Cockburn and Stoicism in great depth, though it has been discussed at length in Nuovo (2011). I will, however, return to this topic in the next section, where I discuss the influence of Stoicism on Bluestocking moral theory.

[9] Green (2015) also points out this complementary relationship between reason and the social affections in Cockburn's moral philosophy. Green likens this view to that of Sarah Scott, who was closely connected to the Bluestocking circle and can be counted in their ranks. (98)

[10] In making her case for natural benevolence, Cockburn not only appeals to the selfless mother's 'tender concern for the happiness of her child' (Cockburn, 1743: 427) but also to the 'honest labourer', and his devotion to the well-being of his children; this devotion arises not from any cultivated or grand conceptions of virtue but 'directly from the relations and fitness of things, and a disinterested benevolence, which guide him to virtuous practice' (Cockburn, 1747: 11)

[11] The society of Bluestocking women included, in addition to Montagu, Carter, and Talbot, Frances Burney (1752–1840), Hester Chapone (1727–1801); Hannah More (1745–1833), Clara Reeve (1729–1807); Sarah Scott (1723–1795); Anna Seward (1742–1809); Elizabeth Vesey (1715–1791), to name just a few. Eger (2010) offers an extensive discussion of many of the women who were associated with the Bluestockings. Also, see Blathwayt (2002) for a list of Bluestocking writers and a bibliography of, and about, their works.

[12] For example, Bodek (1976: 195) argues that the Bluestockings, despite their emphasis on self-education and their awareness of the injustice of women's socially enforced ignorance, were feminists in only a qualified sense: They were, Bodek asserts, 'too conventional, too traditional, too hemmed in by their generation and their sense of propriety' to count as true champions of

women's autonomy and intellectual freedom. Similarly, Leranbaum (1977) considers the Bluestockings to be working within conventional assumptions regarding women's educational potential. She argues that due to their prevailing 'impersonality and conservatism' (300), it would 'seem strange to call them pioneers'. That said, Leranbaum suggests that they were, in spite of themselves, pioneering as learned women who defied the social restrictions of their society—They stand as important role models and advocates, though it is not clear that they 'reprehended the true meaning of what they were saying'. (301)

[13] In addition to the works I cited in the introductory section of this paper, the following mark some of the significant contributions in recent years: Pohl and Schellenberg's (2003) collection of essays explicitly devoted to reconsidering the Bluestockings as a feminist group of women intellectuals (see particularly, Harriet Guest's 'Bluestocking Feminism': 59–80); and Eger (2010). In addition, Gary Kelly (as general editor) and volume editors Elizabeth Eger, Judith Hawley, Jennifer Kelly, and Rhoda Zuk, have produced a six-volume collection of primary works of the Bluestockings, *Bluestocking Feminism*, predicated on what the editors consider a conscious programme on the part of the Bluestockings to advance the interests of women: Kelly et al. [Eds] (1999). And, no list of important works on Bluestocking feminism would be complete without Myers (1990). Though not as recent as those mentioned above, Myers offered one of first major reconsiderations of the Bluestocking writers, arguing that their commitment to learning and virtue, combined with an explicit identification of themselves *as* a community of women, signifies an emerging feminist consciousness. (See, particularly, Chapter 5, 'Feminist Consciousness': 121–150).

[14] Carter was most famous for her translations. Foremost of these was *All the Works of Epictetus* (Carter, 1758). She also translated Algarotti's *Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy Explain'd for the Use of the Ladies* (Carter, 1739a; Carter, 1739b) and Crousaz's *An Examination of Mr. Pope's Essay on Man, From the French of M. Crousaz* (Carter, 1739a; Carter, 1739b). She also published her *Remarks on the Athanasian Creed* (Carter, 1753), *Poems upon Particular Occasions* (Carter, 1738), and *Poems on Several Occasions* (Carter, 1762). In addition, she edited the posthumous two-volume collection of Talbot's works *Essays on Various Subjects* (Talbot, 1772), and Carter's letters were posthumously published in a four-volume edition (Carter, 1809). Talbot wrote extensively in the form of essays and poetry but did not publish a great deal in her lifetime. Her main body of work was published posthumously in the aforementioned volumes edited by Carter (Talbot, 1772) and reprinted with some revisions in 1780 under a different title in a single volume (Talbot, 1780). Her *Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week* was published posthumously, also edited by Carter, in 1770 (Talbot, 1770) (this was also included in the 1780 edition of her collected works). Her letters were also included with Carter's letters in Carter 1809

[15] My main reference source for Carter is Hawley, 1999 and for Talbot is Zuk 1999, which are volumes II and III, respectively, of the Kelly 1999 collection. In cases where I quote from writings not included in the aforementioned volumes, I will refer to Carter and Talbot's original publications.

[16] Though I do not have space in this paper to discuss Cockburn's Stoical influences, Cockburn's references to the Stoics make clear her affinity with their moral outlook: See Endnote 7 above.

[17] See Carter (1758). This work, which is included in Hawley (1999), went through several editions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, it was used as the basis for several editions of Epictetus's works. See Hawley (1999): 1–3 for a discussion of its print history.

[18] Epictetus sums up the Stoic view in his *Handbook (or, Enchiridion)*, when he asks 'But what is it that I wish?' and answers 'To understand Nature and to follow it' (Epictetus, 2009: 247). Likewise, Zeno asserts that nature, 'is the same as a virtuous life, virtue being the goal towards which nature guides us' (Diogenes, 1925, Vol. 2: 195).

[19] Carter acknowledges the divergence of her view with that of the Stoics in the introduction to her translation Epictetus' works. They viewed human nature in its most perfect state, she writes, as 'pure Intelligence' and exalted humans as 'independent, uncorrupted, and sufficient'; a false presupposition, Carter believed, that would lead to pride—'a Vice not only dreadfully mischievous in human Society, but, perhaps of all others, the most insuperable Bar to real inward improvement' Hawley (1999): 13.

[20] Here, Carter is engaging with in an imaginary conversation with *Religion*, who, as Carter's mouthpiece, accuses Superstition of seeking to break the chains that bind us to others.

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How to cite this article: Sheridan P. Virtue, affection, and the social good: The moral philosophy of Catharine Trotter Cockburn and the Bluestockings. *Philosophy Compass*. 2018;13:e12478. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12478