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Some Aspects of Catherine Trotter Cockburn's Metaphysics of Morality

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Introduction

Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679-1749) accomplished a rare feat in early modern Britain—in addition to being a successful playwright, she wrote and published philosophical works. In these works, and in her voluminous correspondence, Cockburn advanced original theories of morality, metaphysics, epistemology and theology.[1] In what follows, my aim is to explore the metaphysical underpinnings of Cockburn's moral philosophy.[2]

In October 1747, Cockburn wrote to her niece Ann Arbuthnot to clarify her views on moral obligation. In this letter she wrote the following: 'I contend, that there are principles in [man's] nature, that direct him to regard what is right and fit, and to desire

[1] Cockburn was of such stature as a playwright, essayist, and philosopher that, near the end of her life, Thomas Birch elected to compile an edition of her collected works (see Cockburn 1751a and 1751b). This collection includes Cockburn's philosophical and theological works, selected correspondence, and her plays.

[2] Though there are hints of her moral metaphysics in her earliest philosophical work, *A Defence of Mr. Locke's* Essay (1702), I draw, in the main, from her later works *Remarks upon some Writers* (1743) and *Remarks upon the Principles and most Considerable Passages of Dr. Rutherforth's* Essay (1747), wherein we find her view most thoroughly developed and articulated.

the good of others; and that these are therefore proper grounds of obligation'. (Cockburn 1751b: 333) Here we find all the elements at play in Cockburn's moral theory: the natural foundation of moral principles of right and of fitness, the inherence of benevolence, and the internal basis of moral duty. Throughout her philosophical writings, Cockburn consistently espoused the view that morality can only properly be understood with reference to human nature. She believed that a minimally dutiful life can be lived according to explicit moral commands, but our potential as moral beings lies in more than simple obedience; humans have within their natures all that is needed for discerning moral distinctions and for appreciating their obligatory force. For Cockburn, it is indeed a kind of fulfillment of human nature's potential to recognize and respond to the moral imperatives that nature prescribes.

As the above quotation suggests, and as I will further elaborate upon below, Cockburn espouses a version of moral naturalism, one that encompasses both natural teleology and the eudaimonistic emphasis of traditional virtue ethics. She develops a version of what Allan Millar has called 'the Follow Nature doctrine', the view that 'virtue consists in following nature'. (Millar 1988, 165)[3] In the context of early modern moral philosophy, the idea of an ethics based on following nature is somewhat underspecified. Arguably, a committed Hobbesian could maintain that morality consists in following nature, but, as we shall see, what the Hobbesian would have in mind by this would be quite remote from anything Cockburn meant to endorse. In discussing the metaphysical

[3] Millar uses the term primarily for the purposes of expositing the moral theory of Joseph Butler. However, considering that Cockburn herself acknowledges the similarity of her views with those of Butler, the use of this term to describe her view seems entirely appropriate.

foundations of Cockburn's moral philosophy, I hope to bring into relief some of the more distinctive features of Cockburn's conception of morality as following nature.

In the first section below, I will provide a sketch of Cockburn's moral philosophy with the aim of highlighting the sense in which it depends on a broader metaphysics of the natural order. In the second section, I will show how Cockburn's moral metaphysics conditioned her understanding of one the more pressing issues confronting theistic moralists in her time — the issue of morality's relationship to divine authority. With respect to this issue, I will argue that Cockburn's metaphysical investments led her to a qualified view of the *independence* of morality from divine authority, though leaving a place for such authority in establishing morality's status as natural law. Finally, I will comment on what strikes me as perhaps the most distinctive feature of Cockburn's approach to morality—namely, the manner in which it construes morality as grounded in a *comprehensive* system of nature. I will argue that for Cockburn, nature as such is imbued with a kind of normative structure, a structure which expresses itself as morality at the level of human valuation, but which extends well beyond specifically human dimensions.[4]

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[4] The metaphysical dimension of Cockburn's morality has been variously explored in the literature on Cockburn. Most notably, Martha Brandt Bolton's pivotal paper on Cockburn's moral philosophy drew early attention to Cockburn's teleological conception of human nature and its role in her broader account of moral obligation (Bolton, 1993: 571-72). In a previous paper of my own (Sheridan 2007), I have discussed Cockburn's distinction of moral obligation (understood within her teleology of human nature) from the juridical dimensions of natural law. Joanne E. Myers has explored Cockburn's account of human nature and her metaphysics of fitness as they are expressed thematically in Cockburn's plays. (Myers 2012). Myers offers a great deal of insight into Cockburn's religious views as they bear on her moral thinking. Karen Green has also discussed Cockburn's moral metaphysics, in comparison with other early modern women, including Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay (Green 2015). Green identifies Cockburn's view as a synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, on the one hand, holding

I. Cockburn's Moral Naturalism

Cockburn's moral theory is predicated on the notion that the created universe exhibits a teleological order wherein the nature of each created being dictates appropriate activities and processes for beings of its kind. Morality, for Cockburn, is a specification of the larger system of nature with respect to the distinctive nature of human beings. Like everything in nature, human beings are possessed of natures that determine their proper ends. In contrast to lesser beings, humans are naturally endowed with rationality and sociability and it is this endowment that accounts for the specifically moral character of humanity's situation within the natural order. To this extent, Cockburn is committed to an anthropocentric view of morality, but it is a view that nevertheless takes morality to be a function of the broader natural order. As Cockburn puts it in *Remarks upon some Writers*, 'the obligation to *moral virtue* is ultimately founded on the *eternal and immutable nature of things*'. (Cockburn 1743: 382)

Cockburn's clearest articulations of this view come in those of her writings she devotes to the defence of Samuel Clarke's moral theory.[5] Of principal interest to

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that sensation and reflection reveal what human happiness consists in, and on the other, that reason discovers the truths, the guiding principles, that lead us to virtue. For Green, Cockburn is naturalistic to a point, but not deeply so, given the role of God's will in her account. In what follows, I hope to suggest a route for understanding God's role within the compass of her naturalistic metaphysics. What I aim to contribute is an exploration of Cockburn's overarching metaphysical system as a natural moral order.

[5] Cockburn explicitly sets out to defend Clarke's principles in *Remarks Upon Some Writers* and again in *Remarks upon the Principles.* It is worth noting that Cockburn's view did not clearly originate with her reading of Clarke; Bolton has shown that Cockburn develops an incipient version of the view that morality and obligation originate in human nature in the *Defence* in 1702, several years before Clarke's own articulation of the theory. See Bolton 1993.

Cockburn was Clarke's view of moral virtue and obligation as deriving from relations of "fitness" among human beings and between humans and God. In *Remarks upon the Principles and most Considerable Passages of Dr. Rutherforth's Essay* (hereafter referred to as *Remarks upon the Principles)*, she writes

> That the perception we have of the essential difference of things, with the fitnesses and unfitnesses resulting from thence, and our consciousness of right and wrong, have a *tendency* to direct us to virtue, and a *right* to influence our practice, seems to me as clear and certain, as it is, that we are reasonable beings, and moral agents; and that therefore they are both *true causes or grounds of moral obligation*. (Cockburn 1747: 35)

In every case of virtuous action, there is, Cockburn writes, 'a suitableness to certain relations *&c.* and, on the contrary, an unsuitableness in every vice, without exception; and…actions are accordingly judged to be right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, by the natural notions of mankind'. (Cockburn 1747: 11)

For Cockburn, the relations of fitness that determine virtuous character and conduct derive from nature in a very strong sense. Though Cockburn readily grants that the creation of a particular system of natured beings is the result of God's will, she also maintains that it is a function of the natures so created, and thus not strictly a matter of God's will, that the associated relations of fitness should be realized. As she puts it in *Remarks upon Some Writers*, 'To suppose, that [God] may will [beings] to have other relations, *&c*. is to suppose, that he may will them to be another kind of beings than he determined to create; for if they are the same, the relations and fitnesses resulting from their nature, are necessary and immutable.' (Cockburn 1743: 405) Thus, God could create

a different system of fitness relations if he were to will that beings of a different nature than those he actually created were to exist, but given the natures of the beings he actually did choose to create, the resulting fitness relations are 'necessary and immutable'.

Care must be taken over what Cockburn means by 'necessary' in this context. If the necessities of fitness are to play any part in a theory of *morality*, it cannot be that fitness relations are *realized* as a matter of factual necessity. What Cockburn means to imply, rather, is that the fitnesses associated with human nature ought to be realized as a matter *normative* necessity. Another way to put the point is to say that, for Cockburn, fitness relations are normatively prescribed as part of the telos of human nature. Relatedly, that fitness relations are immutable does not imply that there can be no such thing as moral failures. Rather, it suggests that the norms of fitness are as fixed as the natures to which they pertain. They are immutable as a matter of natural teleology which, when properly discerned, provides moral agents with tendencies toward virtue.

The naturalism and teleology of Cockburn's outlook may seem to bear strong traces of an Aristotelian approach to morality. However, it is likely that Cockburn's view drew as much from ancient Stoicism as it did from Aristotle. In *Remarks Upon Some Writers,* Cockburn describes the Stoics' idea of virtue as a state of happiness arising from '*Fitness, rectitude, agreeableness to nature, [and] to relations, &c*'. (Cockburn 1743: 104) Epictetus captures the essence of 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) The Stoic philosophers believed that living according to nature required living in accord with requirements of human nature specifically, where

the exercise of reason is understood as primary among those requirements. As Diogenes Laertius reports in Book VII, 86-88, the Stoics held that 'when reason by way of a more perfect leadership has been bestowed on the beings we call rational, for them life according to reason rightly becomes the natural life'. (Diogenes 1925: 195) For the Stoic, following nature does not mean acting on any impulse that nature might supply, but following what reason, as the definitive characteristic of human nature, determines as the most appropriate way to live. The end or goal for a human life is self-realization, or the perfection of one's nature. For Zeno following nature, 'is the same as a virtuous life, virtue being the goal towards which nature guides us'. (Diogenes 1925: 125) The Stoics understood that our natures comprise a variety of capacities or inclinations, but the rational person prioritizes these with a view to fitness and stability. Human capacities and inclinations are thus harmonized under the guidance of reason, which induces a kind of systemic order on the entirety of a human life. We see this clearly in Chrysippus, for whom "virtue is the state of mind which tends to make the whole of life harmonious". (Diogenes 1925: 197)

The likelihood that Stoicism exercised a strong influence on Cockburn is further reinforced if we consider that the stoic view of virtue was also endorsed by some of the moralists with whom Cockburn allied herself most closely. Notable among these thinkers was Samuel Clarke. In his *Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, Clarke references Cicero numerous times, describing him in one passage as 'the greatest and best Philosopher, that *Rome,* or perhaps any other nation, ever produced'. (Clarke 1706: 222) Joseph Butler, a moralist whose moral outlook Cockburn compared approvingly with her own, wrote in the Preface to his *Sermons* that the intention of his work was to explain

more fully a view he ascribes to the Ancient moralists, 'that Man is born to Virtue, that it consists in following Nature'. (Butler 1729: vii) Butler explains that his goal is to elucidate 'what is meant by the Nature of Man, when it is said that Virtue consists in following, and Vice in deviating from it'. (Butler 1729: vii)

The kind of Stoic naturalism endorsed by Cockburn and her philosophical kin stands in sharp contrast to another form of naturalism that was prominent, perhaps notoriously so, in the period. In one perspective, Cockburn's approach to morality can be understood as sustained response to the kind of reductivist naturalism that she saw emerging in thinkers such as Hobbes and Mandeville. According to these thinkers, the facts of morality are ultimately explicable with reference to non-moral facts about human psychology and physiology. Humans have no intrinsically moral motivations, nor does nature afford any objective basis for moral guidance. Though reason does provide a basis for establishing principles and rules aimed at maximizing the satisfaction of egoistic aims, these aims are amoral. Indeed, morality emerges only as a kind of veneer laid over natural, egoistic impulses in the context of civil society. Though Cockburn shares with the reductivists the view that natural inducements in some sense underlie morality, she foreswears the view that such inducements consist only in amoral, natural impulses. On views such as these, she writes in *Remarks upon the Principles*, 'none of those actions, which are called morally good or evil, were in their own nature *better or worse* than another, till they were made so by *positive institutions*'. (Cockburn 1747: 39) This stands in sharp contrast to Cockburn's view of the relationship between nature and morality, according to which human nature itself provides an intrinsic moral standard of conduct, and does so independently of the institutions of civil society.

Relatedly, Cockburn sees human reason and agency in a very different light from the reductivists. For Cockburn, reason's role in agency is not principally that of an instrumental aid to the satisfaction of natural impulses. Rather, reason is that part of our nature that provides us with the capacity to comprehend our nature as a whole in terms of its proper telos. With respect to agency, reason orders, prioritizes, and directs choices, but it does so by affording a comprehensive understanding of their place in the broader spectrum of humanity's natural endowment. She puts this point clearly in the essay *A Letter of Advice to her Son,* in which she cautions her son to avoid libertines who thoughtlessly indulge their passionate impulses. Of such libertines, she writes:

> "they rank themselves with those animals, who have no other principle of action, but natural instinct; and that one great use of reason, by which we are chiefly distinguished from them, is to examine, for what ends our passions, inclinations, and appetites, were given us, and so regulate them as may best conduce to those ends; which in general are, the preservation and perfection of our own being, and the benefit of society. (Cockburn 1751b: 118)

Thus, for Cockburn, the role of reason in moral life is both cognitive and agential. With respect to agency, reason serves as a basis for the regulation of natural inclinations and appetites in matters of conduct. However, it discharges this role by discerning that our inclinations and appetites are designed to serve in the fulfillment—i.e. 'the preservation and perfection'—of our nature.

In rejecting the reductivist version of moral naturalism, Cockburn was opposing one version of the view that morality's normative force derives from a source extrinsic to human nature. On the reductivist view, the natural aim of conduct consists of nothing

more than the determination to satisfy natural impulses. It falls to reason to discern those principles most conducive to this end, but it falls to the conventions and authority structures of civil society—i.e., its 'positive institutions'—to imbue those principles with the normative force of morality. We shall see that Cockburn's rejection of this externalist conception of normativity is far reaching indeed.

II. Human Nature and the Independence of Morality

Given the centrality that Cockburn's moral theory accords to human nature in establishing virtue, it should come as no surprise that the theory evolves a fairly complex conception of what human nature comprises. In this section, I will outline some of the salient features of Cockburn's understanding of human nature and show how they serve to bolster her conception of moral normativity as independent of extrinsic sources. As Martha Brandt Bolton has ably shown, Cockburn's early work, particularly her *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding* (hereafter referred to as the *Defence*), was largely devoted to defending Locke's views against the charge of religious voluntarism—the view that moral distinctions—such as, e.g., that between good and evil, justice and injustice—are ultimately based on the will of God and the sanctions (rewards and punishments) he associates with actions falling under those headings.[6] However, in the *Defence*, Cockburn's advocacy of Lockean doctrine focused primarily on his epistemological principles. In particular, Cockburn argued that *reflection*—i.e., the epistemological principle Locke describes as the basis for knowledge of the operations of our own minds—provides a basis for knowledge of human nature sufficient for

[6] See Bolton 1993.

grounding morality.[7] Arguably, it is the conception of human nature that Cockburn develops, both in the *Defence* and at greater length in subsequent writings, that serves to parry the threat of religious voluntarism and which, as I shall argue, dissolves the specter of any kind of external grounding for morality.

Cockburn holds a tripartite conception of human nature, a view developed in both of her later works; we are, she tells us in *Remarks upon some Writers,* '*rational* and *social* as well as a *sensible* being[s]'. (Cockburn 1743: 419) Each of these components represents a motivating tendency in human nature. Speaking to this idea in the *Remarks upon the Principles*, she explains that these components work as a unit in the moral agent and, taken together, 'concur to direct him to the practice of virtue'. (Cockburn 1747: 34) Sensibility is our natural capacity for feeling pleasure or pain. Cockburn acknowledges that we share this aspect of our nature with other sentient beings. As with any sentient being, sensibility provides us with innate inclinations towards natural goods befitting our natures. Pleasure is always suitable and pain always unsuitable as an end to a sensible nature. As she explains in *Remarks upon some Principles*, to say of any inclination that it is agreeable for a sensible being means that 'it tends either to the happiness, the perfection, or the preservation of it; and by *repugnant to its nature*, the direct contrary'. (Cockburn 1747: 50) However, not all sensible beings are created equal, for as Cockburn points out in *Remarks upon some Writers*, 'the happiness of every being is dependent on, and in proportion to the perfection, which belongs to it'. (Cockburn 1743: 441) What

[7] I have argued elsewhere (Sheridan 2007) that Cockburn's central ambition in the *Defence* is to advocate for Locke with respect to epistemological principles, and that the moral theory she endorses both in that work and in later works departs in significant respects from Lockean precedent.

makes human beings distinct from other sensible beings in the order of natural perfection is that sensibility forms only a part, indeed a subordinate part, of our natures.

For Cockburn, the second principal component of human nature is rationality. As beings endued with rational capacities, we are capable rational choices where natural pleasure and pain are concerned. In *Remarks upon some Writers,* she explains that even as rational beings, we are under a special obligation 'to choose natural or sensible good', (Cockburn 1743: 420) but since our natures comprise more than mere sensibility, it is not the case that wanton pursuit of pleasure serves our natural ends. A case in point is the debauchée, held up as an object lesson in *A Letter of Advice to her Son.* The debauched individual may well ridicule the person of virtue who refuses to join in the merriment, but, Cockburn writes, 'one may always venture to affirm, that he does not really think temperance, sobriety, *&c.* to be ridiculous things; and that the raillery, or rather pity, may be returned upon him on much better grounds'. (Cockburn 1751b: 113) Thus, for the agent that is both sensible and rational, the fact that a course of conduct yields sensible pleasures is not sufficient to morally endorse that course of action, for the requisites of human nature encompass more than the satisfaction of sensibility. Although sensible beings have a natural inclination to choose what brings them pleasure, there is an obligation for humans to pursue happiness of a more comprehensive kind. As Cockburn writes in *Remarks upon the Principles*, 'the happiness of all beings consists in the perfection of their nature; and…a rational being is most perfect, and consequently most happy, when its actions are perfectly rational'. (Cockburn 1747: 84)

In addition to our sensible and rational natures, humans are also *sociable* beings, whose happiness is conditional on the happiness of others. This is so clearly natural,

Cockburn explains in *Remarks upon some Writers*, that we observe in all human beings a tendency to benevolence and a concern for the well-being of those around them. 'Men need not be *taught'*, she writes, 'they *feel,* that their happiness is not independent on that of others'. (Cockburn 1743: 427) The selflessness of parental affection is, for Cockburn, a prime example of this human capacity. The connection between a mother's happiness with that of her child is, she explains, 'owing solely to her kind affections, an association of *nature's* forming'. (Cockburn 1743: 428) In *Remarks upon the Principles*, she asserts that it is a perverse denial of the obvious to contest the innateness of benevolence and that such a position cannot possibly convince anyone who honestly consults their own feelings and considers the numerous examples of 'affectionate parents and children, brotherly love, generous friendships, or public spirit, in the world'. (Cockburn 1747: 81) Our natural capacity for benevolence is, as we might expect, not entirely selfless. For Cockburn, benevolence is an especially interesting tendency, since it is at once an other-regarding tendency and one that serves the agent's own happiness. While this might sound contradictory, 'these things are', she writes, 'by no means inconsistent'. (Cockburn 1747: 81) Though benevolence is unlike sensible pleasure in that it affords no animal satisfaction to the agent, the pursuit of benevolent ends incontrovertibly makes us happy. This, for Cockburn, signals a natural tendency that serves us both in the individualistic sense of achieving one's own ends and in the social sense of achieving the ends of one's kind. In fact, Cockburn observes that felicity in the one sense is impossible without felicity in the other. Our happiness, she writes, seems 'unavoidably interwoven with each others'. (Cockburn 1747: 98) 'Men', she writes, '*feel* their own happiness so involved

with, and dependent on that of others, that they pursue both together, even without reflecting on the connection'. (Cockburn 1747: 81)

Though Cockburn clearly believes that the kinds of fitness relations that emerge as a function of our natures are proper objects of reflective knowledge—this was the principal thesis of her *Defence*—she does not maintain that the requirements of fitness need explicit theoretical, or even doctrinal formulation, in order to induce us to moral virtue. For Cockburn, it is the natural endowment of human nature itself, and not the theorization thereof, that conduces to virtuous conduct. To illustrate, she offers the case of the honest labourer, in *Remarks upon the Principles*, who burdens himself with work in order to take care of his family. While he is unlikely to cite the fitness with respect to natural human ends as the basis for his conduct, his actions nevertheless aim at precisely this. Such actions are, Cockburn maintains, the most natural actions, since 'they arise directly from the relations and fitness of things, and a disinterested benevolence, which guide [one] to virtuous practice'. (Cockburn 1747: 11) When virtue *is* explicitly articulated in the form of moral maxims, such maxims are naturally comprehended, even if their theoretical grounding in natural fitness relations is not. '*To do unto all men, as we would they should do unto me*, which is the sum of all the social virtues, is plainly deduced from the natural relation of equality we bear to each other, and a fitness resulting from hence: yet nothing is more easy and intelligible to common capacities.' (Cockburn 1747: 12)

The above observations serve to suggest how, for Cockburn, human nature provides both natural dispositions toward virtuous conduct and a natural basis for our knowledge of the requirements of virtue. Dispositions toward virtuous conduct are

accounted for in terms of the broadly eudaimonistic view that happiness, for beings like us, is achieved by fulfilling the requirements of fitness attendant upon our nature. As far as knowledge is concerned, even in the absence of theoretical knowledge, the requirements of virtuous conduct are 'intelligible' since nature supplies us with 'common capacities' by which we are readily apprised of them. These aspects of Cockburn's moral philosophy perhaps suffice to show how she sees human nature as sufficing as a basis for moral conduct. However, they do not show morality to be fully grounded in human nature since, taken on their own, they would appear to provide no account of morality's *obligatory force*. Consider again the reductivist position discussed above. On the reductivist view, the raw materials upon which morality works are egoistic impulses—desires and aversions—which must be regulated in order to be turned to good effect. A Hobbesian reductivist suggests that reason has a role to play in this, since it is reason that counsels general principles which, when observed, lead to the kinds of social accommodations most apt to satisfy our impulses. However, on the reductivist view, it is not such accommodations on their own, but, rather, the institutions of *positive law*, that confer obligatory force on the principles and mechanisms of communal morality. Again, Cockburn's reductivist sees no moral significance in any kind of conduct in the absence of 'positive institutions'. Even if we grant that Cockburn's account of human nature surpasses the reductivist view with respect to the variety of natural inducements toward virtue, were Cockburn not to view such inducements as *inherently* carrying the force of obligation, she would be in much the same position as the reductivists in that she would require an some kind of *external* grounding for moral normativity.

This, however, would be quite opposite to Cockburn's intentions, for it is clear throughout her writings that she *does* take the obligatory force of morality to reside inherently in human nature. As much as Cockburn is concerned to show that morality's foundation requires nothing like the external grounding in positive institutions assumed by the reductivists, she is equally concerned to show that not even the external imposition of divine command is necessary as a basis for morality. Martha Brandt Bolton has argued persuasively that despite Cockburn's not explicitly addressing the issue in her *Defence* of Locke, the thesis that the requirements of human nature carry the force of moral obligations is presupposed by one of her main arguments defending Locke against the charge of religious voluntarism.[8] If Bolton is right about this, then Cockburn was committed to the thesis from a very early stage, but whether or not Cockburn endorsed the thesis in the *Defence*, there can be no doubt that she did so in her later work. In *Remarks upon the Principles,* Cockburn writes:

> That the perception we have of the essential difference of things, with the fitnesses and unfitnesses resulting from thence, and our consciousness of right and wrong, have a *tendency* to direct us to virtue, and a *right* to influence our practice, seems to me as clear and certain, as it is, that we are

[8] Bolton's argument (Bolton 1993: 574-575) focuses on Cockburn's attempt to show that Locke's investment in natural law as promulgated in the form of divine commands does not commit him to religious voluntarism. In brief, Bolton argues that Cockburn's strategy for defending Locke could not have worked if she were presupposing that God's commands were necessary in order to make the inducements of human nature obligatory. If those inducements were morally neutral, then God's commanding compliance with them would be arbitrary in just the sense required by voluntarism. It is only if the inducements of nature carry obligatory force *independently* of God's commands that those commands can be seen as non-arbitrary. I will come to the matter of Cockburn's understanding of divine commands in relation to morality below.

> reasonable beings, and moral agents: and that therefore they are both *true causes or grounds of moral obligation*. (Cockburn 1747: 35)

For Cockburn, then, the fitness relations deriving from our nature, and the perception we have of them are 'causes or grounds of moral obligation'. On its own, this is perhaps compatible with the view that they become such grounds in light of divine fiat that they should be so. However, Cockburn explicitly rejects this view. Later in the same work, Cockburn writes:

> [I]f the law, which God has *set to himself to work by*, were of an *arbitrary* nature, depending merely on his *will*, and changeable at pleasure, there might be room for such doubts as these: we could not in that case know by what law God governed his own actions, nor consequently, whether he expected, that we should observe the same: But since the law, to which he constantly conforms, is immutable, and founded on the nature of things; it cannot be peculiar to the divine nature, but must necessarily oblige all reasonable beings; and therefore we may be certain, that God expects we should guide our actions by the same rule. (Cockburn 1747: 89)

The argument of this passage is that if the law by which God governs his own activity were arbitrary—i.e., purely a function of his will—it would be opaque to us, or if it were not opaque, then it would at least be unclear as to whether he intended that we should similarly abide by it. It is only if the law by which God governs himself is independent of his will—i.e., 'founded on the nature of things'—that we can be assured that the law unto God is the same as the law unto 'all reasonable beings'. In short, Cockburn is arguing that nature itself must impose obligations on both God and his creatures (at least those

possessed of reason) if we are to be assured of any moral harmony between human and divine purposes. This, I would suggest, is a very strong statement of nature as a metaphysical grounding of morality—one that, moreover, would seem to locate moral *obligation* squarely within the array of nature's endowment.

Cockburn's view that morality's foundation, including the foundation of its obligatory force, is independent of any form of external imposition led her to an interesting conception of the relationship between morality and natural religion. In a letter to her niece dated March 1732, Cockburn praises the view of moral virtue her niece had come across in the work of Shaftesbury but claims the view is more adequately expressed by Clarke. In this context, Cockburn encourages her niece to recognize how, on Clarke's view 'morality may be capable of demonstration, as it is founded on the very nature of things; and our obligation to it on that relation, in which we stand to God and our fellow creatures'. (Cockburn 1751b: 268) Cockburn suggests that morality's foundation, considered as inclusive of our relationship to God, is 'properly called natural religion', but she further suggests that 'morality may be distinguished [from natural religion] when the consideration of the author of our being is left out of the scheme, for that is what makes it religion'. (Cockburn 1751b: 268) It is clear that Cockburn doesn't wish to make too much of this distinction, since she urges that a scheme that divorces morality from natural religion will be 'very defective'. For present purposes, what is of interest in the letter is Cockburn's diagnosis of the defects:

> But such a scheme will be very defective, because many moral duties arise from our relation to God; nor can virtue have the force of law without that

> regard, how highly soever the beauty and tendency of it to the happiness of mankind may be extoll'd and admired. (Cockburn 1751b: 268)

Whatever else Cockburn might have in mind by duties arising from our relation to God, or by the regard for God necessary for imbuing virtue with 'the force of law', she cannot mean that the obligatory force of morality *as such* derives from divine imposition, since she goes on in this letter to argue that the natural obligation to virtue itself constitutes our most certain evidence for what God wills:

> The reason of this is, that there can be no external evidence of anything being the will of God, more certain, than we are, that those duties, which arise from the very frame of our nature (which we are sure is his workmanship) must be his will; and therefore nothing can be received for such, that is contrary to our natural notions of justice, goodness, veracity, *&c*. since God cannot have two contrary wills. (Cockburn 1751b: 269)

Here again is Cockburn's point that the obligations prescribed by nature are independent of God's will, albeit in a more epistemic guise. It is our assurance of what *our nature* prescribes in the way of obligation that provides the best evidence that those prescriptions are willed by God. To think otherwise would be to invite the absurdity that God's will could be in conflict with itself.

If Cockburn is willing to go this far in asserting the independence of morality from external imposition (divine or otherwise), then what are we to make of her suggestion that it is only in regard of God that we can consider virtue as carrying 'the force of law'? Indeed, what sense is to be given to Cockburn's claim that that 'many moral duties arise from our relation to God' if it is not premised on the idea that God's

will provides a basis for moral obligation, either through explicit laws or by other means? In taking up these questions in the next section, I hope provide some sense of how extensively metaphysical Cockburn's conception of morality ultimately was.

III. Natural Law and the System of Nature

Cockburn's determination to characterize morality as bearing the force of law is in evidence as far back as the *Defence* of Locke. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2.28.8) Locke maintained that moral knowledge is concerned with natural law, which is 'that Law which God has set to the actions of Men, whether promulgated to them by the light of Nature, or the voice of Revelation'. (Locke 1975: 352) Thomas Burnet had criticized Locke on the grounds, among others, that he had failed to clearly identify the foundations of natural law, leaving it uncertain whether those foundations were to consist in 'the Arbitrary Will of God, The good of Men, or the intrinsick Nature of things themselves'. (Burnet *et al.* 1984: 6)[9] Among these possibilities, Burnet supposed that God's arbitrary will was the likeliest candidate to be

[9] These criticisms appeared in a series of three pamphlets, the *Remarks Upon an Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (*First*, *Second*, and *Third*, respectively), published 1697-1699 (see Burnet, *et al*., 1984). The authorship of these pamphlets was first attributed to Burnet, posthumously, by Thomas Birch in his 1751 preface to Cockburn's *Collected Works.* Scholars of Cockburn and Locke have customarily accepted this attribution and Burnet is generally named as the author of the *Remarks*. A recent paper, however, has revisited the question of the provenance of these pamphlets. J.C. Walmsley, Hugh Craig, and John Burrows (see Craig, *et al.,* 2016) have found that there is little evidentiary support for Burnet's being their author; this attribution, they write, 'can no longer be considered secure' (Craig, *el al,* 241). Walmsley, *et.al.* suggest that there is a good case to be made for Richard Willis (1664–1734), a clergyman and author, as the Remarker in question. I will, in this paper, continue to refer to Burnet as the author of the *Remarks* for the sake of continuity with the current scholarship; in light of these findings, Burnet's attributed authorship might stand, for the time being, as little more than scholarly convention.

Locke's intended foundation, and he criticized Locke by claiming that this foundation committed him to a voluntarist view of morality. In her *Defence*, Cockburn took up the task of defending Locke against this charge, arguing that Locke's commitment to natural law is fully compatible with the view that natural law has its foundation in human nature once it is acknowledged that God's authorship of human nature is itself an expression of his will:

> [T]he nature of man, and the good of society, are *to us* the reason and rule of moral good and evil; and there is no danger of their being less immutable on this foundation than any other, whilst man continues a *rational and sociable creature*. If the law of nature is the product of human nature itself ... it must subsist as long as human nature; nor will this foundation make it the less sacred, since it cannot be doubted, that it is originally the will of God, whilst we own him the author of that nature, of which this law is a consequence. (Cockburn 1702: 58)

Here, Cockburn's idea seems to be that humans are bound by natural law as a function of their nature as 'rational and sociable' beings, but that natural law can equally be seen as an expression of God's will insofar as God chose to create beings endowed with just such a nature. Natural law is 'a consequence' of the will of God in that he chose to create rational and sociable beings, but it is the nature of such beings that provides the foundation for morality.

There is, however, another way in which Cockburn sought to address the status of morality as law in the context of the *Defence*. She urges upon Burnet that in those places where Locke most emphasizes the will of God and the application of sanctions (i.e.

rewards and punishments) in the promulgation of natural law, he is speaking of morality strictly as it carries 'the force of law' and not in terms of its ultimate grounding. She writes,

> the remarker cannot deny, whatever he thinks, *the first grounds of good and evil*; or however clearly we may see *the nature of these things*, we may approve or condemn them; but they can only have the force of a *law* to us, considered as *the will of the Supreme Being*, who can, and certainly will, reward the compliance with, and punish the deviation from that rule, which he has made knowable to us by the light of nature. (Cockburn 1702: 61)

In this passage, Cockburn is apparently distinguishing between 'the grounds of good and evil'—or the 'rule which he [God] has made knowable to us by the light of nature'— and those factors which imbue those grounds (or that rule) with the force of law. For Cockburn, the latter comprise not only the fact that the natural grounds of morality are expressions of the divine will, but also the fact that the supreme being rewards compliance with, and punishes deviation from, the rule of natural morality. Given that Cockburn thus distinguishes between the foundation of obligation, on the one hand, and 'the force of law' attaching to natural obligation, on the other, I would suggest that she has something like the following picture in mind: For Cockburn, morality *as such* is founded on the system of nature, which prescribes and makes known the natural obligations of beings endowed with rational capacities and social dispositions. However, it is only in connection with the will of God that the obligations associated with such a system can properly be understood as constituting a system of law, with law's requisite grounding in authority and its attendant sanctions.

I have already noted that in her later work Cockburn takes God's activity to be morally constrained by the same 'rule' as constrains human moral conduct. This on its own would seem to suggest that she takes God to be a moral agent in somewhat the same sense that human creatures are, a view which is further confirmed in her response to Rutherforth's criticisms of Clarke. In *Remarks upon the Principles*, Cockburn again argues for the claim that the rule by which God governs his own conduct must be one and the same as the rule that nature sets to human conduct, but this time her reasoning proceeds from a reflection on our knowledge of God's perfections:

> Now we can have no knowledge, that those are moral perfections, which we ascribe to the deity, but from our own ideas of the essential difference of good and evil, right and wrong, and of the agreement of justice, equity, goodness, and truth, with the reason and nature of things; from whence we conclude, that acting in conformity to them must be *fittest* and best for a reasonable being, and that therefore God himself makes this the invariable rule of all his actions. (Cockburn 1747: 71)

What this passage makes apparent is Cockburn's determination to view God as subject to the same system of natural, moral imperatives as bears on the conduct of his creatures. Indeed, she goes on to suggest that

> [w]e are obliged to govern our actions by the same rules, to which the will of God is always conformed, because they are such, as must oblige all reasonable beings, whom he has made so far like himself, as to be capable of distinguishing good and evil, and of choosing one and refusing the other. (Cockburn 1747: 72)

This statement again shows Cockburn conceiving of God and human creatures as subject to the same system of moral evaluation, with the moral community between God and human creatures being established by their common (if unequal) rationality and capacities for moral choice.

These reflections begin to suggest just how comprehensive Cockburn took the normative dimension of the system of nature to be. For Cockburn, the norms of natural fitness—both their content and their obligatory force—bear equally on divine and human conduct. Indeed, it is only with reference to our judgement of God's conformity to these norms that we are capable of ascribing the divine perfections. This, I would suggest, is in keeping with a broader metaphysical view of normativity that Cockburn seems to have espoused throughout her philosophical career. For Cockburn, there is a certain sense in which reality *in toto* is animated by a comprehensive normative structure. This is part and parcel with her view that virtue consists in sustaining relations of *fitness*—relations not only between human themselves, or between human and God, but between humans and all beings. For Cockburn, humans have an obligation to maintain the proper order of relations with all creatures. Though she does not give many examples, she does write at some length of human relationships with other animals. In *Remarks upon the Principles,* she writes that since humans share the trait of sensibility with non-human animals, then '[i]f we regard ourselves only as *sensible* beings, the brutes are upon a level with us; and in that case it must appear as wrong to give them pain, as to give it to any of our own species'. (Cockburn 1747: 53) Cockburn goes on to argue, however, that

> as reasonable beings, we are manifestly superior to them; and though this implies no right to give them pain *without a cause*, which must in all cases be self-evidently wrong; yet from that superiority, and the differences between their nature and ours, a cause may arise, that will make it fit and reasonable to treat them in *another manner*, than would be fit from any of us to our fellow-creatures.' (Cockburn 1747: 53)

Cockburn does indeed find that a 'cause' for the differential treatment of non-human animals. The very fact that there is a hierarchy of animal natures intimates the fitness of subordinating the interests of lesser animals to the needs of superiors:

> It was obvious likewise to observe, that a large part of the animal creation do, *by natural instinct*, feed upon others of a different species, that, in some respects, are their inferiors; and since the author of that instinct thoroughly knows the nature of all beings, it must be supposed, that, on some account or other, the most proper means of supporting the lives of such animals is by other living creatures of a *lower rank*, and that therefore the thing cannot be *unfit* in itself, or contrary to nature. This was sufficient to satisfy men, if animal food was the most nourishing and strengthening for them, that it must be fit and reasonable, and that they had the permission of their Creator, for the support of their own lives, to take away the life of creatures so much *inferior* to them, and of so much less importance. (Cockburn, 1747: 54)

What is perhaps most striking in this passage is the manner in which Cockburn extends the notion of 'fitness' beyond the purview of strictly human conduct. Cockburn *does* mean to suggest that the moral permissibility of humans' use of animals for food is

grounded in the fitness of subjecting lesser beings to the needs of superiors, but she is willing to suggest that the principle of fit subordination (as we might call it) applies within the animal hierarchy even at sub-human levels. One may assume, then, that Cockburn sees fitness relations between superiors and inferiors as pervading the hierarchy of natural creation.

This, I would suggest, is one way in which Cockburn sees the normative dimension of nature as ranging beyond the sphere of human morality. Another way, perhaps more telling for present purposes, is in her conception of 'the great chain of beings'. Although Cockburn makes only a single reference to this notion— in her *Remarks upon some Writers*—it is a significant reference to a concept that seems to lay at the heart of her metaphysics. In the passage in question, Cockburn is discussing the possible existence of a substance that unites spirit and body, something that shares the qualities of both and acts as a kind of link or bond between them. Perhaps, she suggests, space might have this function. What leads Cockburn to this conjecture is the idea that everything in nature differs by degree, and that the modifications that distinguish one being from another are gradual. There are shared qualities from one level of being to the next, with a progressive complexity as we move up the hierarchy. Cockburn writes,

> in the scale of beings, there is such a gradual progress in nature, that the most perfect of an inferior species comes very near to the most imperfect of that, which is immediately above it: that the whole chasm in nature, from a plant to a man, is filled up by such a gentle and easy ascent, that the little transitions from one species to another are almost insensible. (Cockburn 1743: 391)

But Cockburn clearly does not think that 'man' in any way constitutes the pinnacle of the scale, and she goes on to suggest that

> if the scale of beings rises by such a regular process so high as man, we may, by parity of reason, suppose, that it still proceeds gradually through those beings, that are of a superior nature to him; that there is no manner of chasm left, no link deficient in the great chain of beings. (Cockburn 1743: 391)

Though Cockburn is not explicit on the point, her willingness to conjecture the continuity between humans and those 'that are of a nature superior to him,' naturally suggests that she takes God to stand at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of beings. But this, in conjunction with her gradualist thesis that there is 'no link deficient' in the chain, suggests in turn that God is not external to the hierarchy. For Cockburn, though God is perfect in excess of any of his lesser creatures, he is nevertheless situated *within* the normative hierarchy—at the top tier, as it were—and thus subject to the same system of fitness requirements that bear upon the lesser beings he chose to create.[10]

It is difficult to say with any assurance that investment in a metaphysical scheme of this kind constituted Cockburn's *basis* for rejecting the variety of externalism that views morality, either in its content or its obligatory force, strictly as a function of God's will and authority. However, her investment in such as scheme coheres extraordinarily

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[10] Emily Thomas offers an analysis of Cockburn's Great Chain of Being view as underpinning her argument for substantival space (see Thomas, 2013). Here, Thomas argues that Cockburn makes novel use of the Great Chain thesis to make a case for conceiving of space as something both substantial *and* possessing divine properties. Although space may possess such properties, its existence within the Great Chain of Being prevents it from being 'a second God'. (196) Jacqueline Broad also discusses Cockburn's unique use of the Great Chain of Being as a plank in her argument for substantival space, producing, Broad notes, 'an independent metaphysical position' that combines Lockean philosophy with a Cambridge Platonist-inspired conception of nature. (Broad 2002: 160-162)

well with her understanding of morality as based upon the *nature* of those beings God chose to create—at least those of them possessed of rational and moral capacities—and with her contention that God subjects himself to the same 'rule' as bears upon their conduct. For Cockburn, though morality itself is an expression of normativity that ranges no more extensively that the sphere of rational conduct, the norms of fitness are comprehensively expressed in the system of nature. Thus could Cockburn claim in *Remarks upon some Writers* that 'the absolute fitness of virtue in general consists in its tendency to promote the order, virtue, harmony, and happiness of the world', (Cockburn 1743: 433) and thus could she maintain in *Remarks upon the Principles* that 'it is not the *authority* of God's example, but the *perfection of the pattern*, that obliges us to imitate him'. (Cockburn 1747: 72)

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