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LOCKE AND CATHARINE TROTTER COCKBURN

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Catharine Trotter Cockburn published her *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay* in 1702.[1] This work was written in response to the *Remarks Upon an Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, a series of three pamphlets published between 1697 and 1699 that were sharply critical of Locke's views.[2] The *Remarks* were broadly aimed at Locke's theory of ideas, looking specifically at whether Locke's principles of sensation and reflection provide adequate foundations for knowledge of morality, God's nature, and the immortality of the soul. Cockburn's *Defence* addresses each of these themes, showing how, in each case, Locke's principles provide sufficient and appropriate epistemological foundations.

This chapter examines two of Cockburn's main arguments in defence of Locke's epistemology, beginning with Cockburn's use of Locke's principle of *reflection* as a basis for establishing the foundation of morality in human nature itself and following with Cockburn's reconciliation of Locke's legalistic account of moral obligation with her own anthropocentric moral theory. In both cases, Cockburn arguably departs from Locke's views in significant ways. However, I aim to show in this chapter that she nevertheless successfully demonstrates that Locke's principles themselves provide the fundamental underpinnings of an anthropocentric morality.

Locke's epistemology as a foundation for moral knowledge

The *Remarks* begin by considering the moral implications of Locke's epistemology, according to which complex ideas originate in simple ideas of sensation and reflection. The Remarker charges that Locke's epistemological principles cannot effectively account for our distinctions of good and evil, virtue and vice, gratitude and ingratitude, fidelity and infidelity, and so forth: 'I do not find that my Eyes, Ears, Nostrils, or any other outward Senses, make any Distinction of these Things, as they do of Sounds, Colours, Scents, or other outward Objects' (Burnet *et al.* 1984, *Remarks*: 4).[3] This apparent explanatory gap is further complicated, for the Remarker, by Locke's commitment to natural law theory. The Remarker grants that Locke seems committed to the idea that the distinction of moral good and evil is antecedent to human laws. However, the question remains what this distinction is founded on; is it, the Remarker asks, 'the Arbitrary Will of God, The good of Men, or the intrinsick Nature of the Things themselves?' (Burnet *et al.* 1984, *Remarks:* 6). This question gets to the heart of the Remarker's concerns. Without further clarification on the origin of the concepts of moral good and evil, Locke would seem to

be proposing a form of theistic voluntarism, according to which moral laws and their obligatory force arise solely from God's will and sanctions. And if this is so, the Remarker asks, 'has the Law-Maker no Rule to go by?' (Burnet *et al.* 1984, *Remarks*: 6). Is there, in other words, any intrinsic moral good to being just or charitable or are these good only by arbitrary fiat?

Cockburn shares the Remarker's concerns with voluntarism but sees Locke's epistemology as providing a route to establishing morality on objective and non-arbitrary grounds. Cockburn begins the *Defence* by noting that while the *Remarks* claims to be considering Locke's epistemological principles, the Remarker's singular focus seems to be restricted to sensation and its inadequacy as a route to moral knowledge. For Cockburn, the failure to address Locke's principle of reflection constitutes a serious oversight. Morality governs human action and takes its meaning with reference to human beings, our specific natures, and the relationships we stand in to others. Moral good and evil cannot be properly understood, she asserts, 'without reflection upon ourselves' (Cockburn 1702: 57). Moral knowledge, therefore, requires a certain kind of introspection, which Cockburn believes yields a fundamental understanding of ourselves as definitively 'rational, sociable, and dependent [on God]' (Cockburn 1702: 103). Locke's principle of reflection provides the mechanism for attaining this anthropocentrically grounded moral knowledge. It is, she writes, 'in Mr. *Locke's* way [that] we can perceive what is conformable, or not, to our own nature' (Cockburn 1702: 58).

Cockburn would seem to be employing Lockean *reflection* in a somewhat unorthodox fashion. For Locke, reflection is the means by which we come to understand the operations of our own minds. On the surface, it is not clear that reflection, as such, would yield the robust self-understanding that Cockburn's view requires. However, if we look at Locke's appeal to reflection in the context of his natural theology, we begin to see what Cockburn might be intending. For Locke, the complex idea we have of God is a function of the simple ideas we receive from reflecting on ourselves enlarged with the idea of infinity. As he writes in the *Essay*,

> having from what we experiment in our selves, got the *Ideas* of Existence and Duration; of Knowledge and Power; of Pleasure and Happiness; and of several other Qualities and Powers, which it is better to have, than to be without . . . we enlarge every one of these with our *Idea* of Infinity; and so putting them together, make our complex *Idea of God*.
>
> *(2.23.33)*

We might expect that Cockburn would employ reflection as a route to establishing the divine origin of natural law, however, Cockburn resists this move. Moral distinctions cannot, she argues, originate with reference to divine nature on pain of circularity:

> It must be then by reflecting upon our own nature, and the operations of our minds, that we come to know the nature of God; which therefore cannot *be to us* the rule of good and evil; unless we will argue in a circle, that by our notion of good, we know the nature of God, and by the nature of God, we know what is good.
>
> *(Cockburn 1702: 58)*

Since God's moral attributes can only be understood through reflection on our own natures, theology cannot provide the grounds for moral knowledge. Human nature is the standard by which moral right and wrong are understood and Locke's principle of reflection provides the means to this self-understanding.

Cockburn's use of reflection marks an interesting departure from Locke's stated views. As noted earlier, Locke never explicitly uses reflection to establish a naturalistic foundation for morality in the way Cockburn does. However, Cockburn's aim here is to establish the moral salience of Locke's epistemology and Cockburn arguably succeeds in offering a plausible interpretation of Locke's principle of reflection that establishes its efficacy as a foundation for moral knowledge and for an anthropocentrically grounded morality.

Obligation and divine will

A key question that remains unanswered for the Remarker is whether Locke's principles can account for the normative force of morality in the absence of divine authority and sanctions; the Remarker raised concerns regarding the implications of Locke's legalistic emphasis on God's sovereign authority, asserting 'you seem to ground your Demonstration [of morality] upon Future Punishments and Rewards' (Burnet *et al.* 1984, *Second Remarks*: 21). One of the most concerning implications in this regard, according to the Remarker, is that Locke's view suggests that human beings will only aim to be moral out of a selfish desire for reward or fear of punishment than from a commitment to moral goodness for its own sake: 'you lay no Foundation . . . for the Love of Vertue and Piety' (Burnet *et al.* 1984, *Second Remarks*: 25). Cockburn was deeply concerned with this issue and sought to reconcile divine reward and punishment with a principally anti-voluntaristic morality. In the *Defence*, Cockburn argues that while divine authority and sanctions have a role to play in an otherwise anthropocentrically grounded moral system, they are not the central, or only, means of assuring the normative force of morality. And, she argues that Locke's own views are consistent with this account.

In the *Essay*, Locke certainly seems to leave the door open for a voluntaristic account of moral normativity when he writes that natural law 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 . . . is the only true touchstone of *moral rectitude*; and by comparing them to this Law, it is, that Men judge of the most considerable *Moral Good* or *Evil* of their Actions; that is, whether as *Duties or Sins*, they are like to procure them happiness, or misery, from the hands of the ALMIGHTY.
>
> *(2.28.8)*

Thus, there are good textual grounds for the Remarker's assumption that for Locke the normative force of morality relies solely on God's sovereign authority. Cockburn appears to endorse this same view in the *Defence* where she writes

> [T]he 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 *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)*

However, Cockburn goes on to argue that divine sanctions may give morality the force of law, but they are not the sole basis upon which the obligatory force of morality depends. Locke's

language around God's will and sanctions, she argues, refers to morality understood only in a specifically legalistic sense: 'he is speaking of it, as it has the force of a law' (Cockburn 1702: 61). But, it seems to Cockburn that this is not the only kind of morality Locke speaks of. She quotes Locke on the demonstrability of morality, where he writes that

> The *Idea* of a supreme Being, infinite in Power, Goodness, and Wisdom, whose Workmanship we are, and on whom we depend; and the *Idea* of our selves, as understanding, rational Beings, being such as are clear in us, would, I suppose, if duly considered, and pursued, afford such Foundations of our Duty and Rules of Action, as might place *Morality amongst the Sciences Capable of Demonstration*.
>
> *(4.3.18)*[4]

For Cockburn, morality itself, as a system of rationally derived rules, can be understood quite independently of the juridical dimension of moral law. Though a law, strictly speaking, implies authority and sanctions, when we talk of the laws of reason, we may be using 'laws' in a somewhat less formal sense, but 'they are,' she writes, 'as effectual grounds of obligation, as if they were real laws, but they oblige us, not as *dependent*, but as *reasonable* beings' (Cockburn 1702: 61). We are, on rational grounds, obliged to do what we perceive to be right. And this, she argues, is not inconsistent with a view of these same laws as upheld and enforced by God's will and sanctions.

Cockburn concludes that although Locke argues that natural law derives its obligatory force from divine sanctions, Locke's own epistemological principles establish the grounds for morality, first and foremost, on a reflexive understanding of human nature. 'By [Locke's] principles,' she writes, 'to know what the will of God is (antecedently to revelation) we must know what is good by the conformity it has to our nature, by which we come to know the nature of God' (Cockburn 1702: 62). It is arguable that Cockburn is stretching Locke's meaning of reflection to rationalize her own commitments. Cockburn construes Lockean *reflection* to include the kind of introspection into human nature that Cockburn herself considers a central foundation for morality. In doing so, she effectively lays the groundwork of her own view, which rests on both a legalistic *and* an anthropocentric conception of morality, but arguably does so at the expense of an accurate representation of Locke's own view. Yet, when Locke suggested that morality could be understood as a demonstrable science, the basis for this claim lay in part in 'the *Idea* we have of ourselves as understanding, rational Beings, being such as are clear in us' (4.3.18). It seems, therefore, that Cockburn has at least some textual grounds for asserting that Locke held a conception of morality as arising not merely from God's express law but from human nature itself. More importantly for her purposes, however, is that Locke's principles allow for establishing morality and its obligatory force on human nature, regardless of the conclusion Locke himself draws. As she notes, 'the question is not what Mr. *Locke* thinks, but what may be proved from his principles'[5] (Cockburn 1702: 60).

Notes

1 Cockburn 1702. Hereafter referred to as the *Defence*. My discussion will focus on this work. Cockburn wrote two other major philosophical works: *Remarks upon some Writers* (Cockburn 1743) and *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherforth's Essay* (Cockburn 1747). Cockburn also wrote theological works and plays, which are all included, along with her substantial correspondence, in her *Works* (Cockburn 1751a), which was edited, with Cockburn's input, by Thomas Birch.

2 Hereafter referred to, respectively, as the *Remarks, Second Remarks, and Third Remarks*. All references to Burnet *et al*. 1984. Though published anonymously, the authorship of the *Remarks* has traditionally been attributed to Thomas Burnet. In a recent paper, J.C. Walmsley, Hugh Craig, and John Burrows (see Walmsley *et al*. 2016) have challenged this attribution. I will, in this chapter, refer to the author as the Remarker.
3 All three *Remarks* were published, along with Locke's answer and his marginalia, in Burnet *et al*. 1984. *Pace* endnote 2, I will continue to reference this work to Burnet consistently with reference-source attributions.
4 For further discussion of Locke's account of the demonstrability of morality in the context of the *Defence* see: Sheridan 2007: 139–143.
5 Bolton also notes that Cockburn's attempts to show that Locke endorsed a similarly non-voluntarist view of moral good do not entirely succeed. However, 'that is not essential to her main project' (Bolton 1993: 569). The central point, for Cockburn, is that Locke's principles are consistent with, and support, a view according to which humans can have natural knowledge of morality and of God's commands – a point that Bolton also iterates (Bolton 1993: 572).

Further reading

This is a partial list of key scholarly work on Cockburn's moral philosophy. For a more complete bibliography for further reading, see: Sheridan, Patricia 2005. 'Catharine Trotter Cockburn,' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/cockburn/.

Green, Karen, 2015. 'A Moral Philosophy of Their Own? The Moral and Political Thought of Eighteenth-Century British Women,' *The Monist*, 98 (1): 89–101. Green compares Cockburn metaethical views with those of Mary Astell and Catherine Macaulay.

Meyers, Joanne E., 2012. 'Catharine Trotter and the Claims of Conscience,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 31 (1/2): 53–75. Meyers discusses Cockburn's religious beliefs as they inform her moral philosophy, drawing on Cockburn's plays as a source of insight into her theological and moral views.

Sheridan, Patricia, 2007. 'Reflection, Nature, and Moral Law: The Extent of Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Lockeanism in her Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay,' *Hypatia*, 22 (3): 133–151. This paper makes a case for Cockburn's intellectual independence from Locke, despite Cockburn's borrowing from Locke's epistemology.

Sheridan, Patricia, 2018. 'Some Aspects of Cockburn's Metaphysics of Morality,' in *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics*, Emily Thomas (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 247–265. This paper explores the metaphysical underpinnings of Cockburn's moral philosophy and characterizes Cockburn as a virtue theorist.

Sheridan, Patricia, 2018. 'Virtue, Affection, and the Social Good: The Moral Philosophy of Catharine Trotter Cockburn and the Bluestockings,' *Philosophy Compass*, 13 (3), first online 07 March 2018, doi: 10.1111/phc3.12478. This paper compares Cockburn's virtue theory to that of the Bluestocking thinkers, concluding that they shared a similar virtue ethics.

References

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Cockburn, Catharine Trotter, 1743. *Remarks Upon Some Writers in the Controversy Concerning the Foundation of Moral Virtue and Moral Obligation*. In Cockburn 1751a: 380–450.

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Sheridan, Patricia, 2007. 'Reflection, Nature, and Moral Law: The extent of Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Lockeanism in her Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay,' *Hypatia*, 22 (3): 133–151.

Walmsley, J.C., Hugh Craig, and John Burrows, 2016. 'The Authorship of the *Remarks upon an Essay of Humane Understanding*', *Eighteenth-Century Thought,* 6: 205–243.