

# DAMARIS MASHAM AND CATHARINE TROTTER COCKBURN

## Agency, Virtue, and Fitness in their Moral Philosophies

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Damaris Masham (1658–1708) and Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679–1749) shared interests across a wide range of philosophical topics, including metaphysics, theology, and more. In this chapter, I introduce these two innovative thinkers by focusing on their shared interests in moral philosophy, specifically, what Masham and Cockburn believe is required for fully realized moral agency. On this issue, Masham and Cockburn share remarkably similar views. For both thinkers, human nature itself is the guide to moral duty and obligation, and their accounts of moral agency arise out of a particular, and shared, conception of human nature and its virtuous self-expression. Cockburn and Masham both acknowledge that moral agency minimally involves the individual's conformity to explicit moral laws and a recognition of their responsibility for their actions, even in cases where the motivation to obey might arise solely from the fear of punishment or the promise of rewards. However, both thinkers identify an internalized, character-driven conception of moral agency, according to which the agent perceives the intrinsic value of moral principles as arising from their natures as human beings. This moral agent self-governs in a robust sense—reflectively owning the principles that guide choices definitive of her human ends.

Masham and Cockburn were both unusually prolific for their time. Masham published two major philosophical works, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous Christian Life* (1705). Cockburn wrote three philosophical works (she also published plays and several works of theology): *A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay* (1702), *Remarks Upon Some Writers in the Controversy Concerning the Foundation of Moral Virtue and Moral Obligation* (1743), and *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford's Essay* (1747). Her complete works (including the above-mentioned, along with her theological works, plays, essays, and correspondence) were published in two volumes under the editorship of Thomas Birch in 1751 as *The Works of Mrs. Catharine Cockburn*.

I will not attempt to draw specific lines of influence between Masham and Cockburn, though there are some grounds for doing so. Masham and Cockburn seem to have enjoyed a personal relationship, and had mutual acquaintances. In her correspondence, Cockburn makes clear that the two had met and they would seem to have been friends. In a letter of 1707, Cockburn writes, “I have not yet waited on Lady Masham, but hear her son has been ill of the small pox, which perhaps has hindered her coming to me” (1751b: 204). In another letter of 1708, Cockburn expresses her sadness on hearing of Masham's death, “having been at *Hyde-Park* with her not long before” (1751b: 207). Although we do not know if Masham read Cockburn's work (though Masham may

have, as Cockburn's first philosophical work, the *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay*, was published in 1702), it seems likely that Cockburn read Masham's work—in a letter of 1705, Cockburn makes reference to expecting a work of Masham's writing from a friend (1751b: 190).

Perhaps their most famous intellectual connection lies in the fact that both women were philosophically linked to John Locke. Masham's connection to Locke was both a personal and an intellectual one. Masham met John Locke early in her life and remained his friend and correspondent until his death in 1704. By the time of his death, Locke had taken up residence in Masham's home in Essex, where he had lived the last 13 years of his life. Cockburn's first philosophical work, her *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay*, was a defence of Locke's epistemology against one of his critics. Locke responded to the *Defence* with an appreciative letter and a gift of money and books (see Locke 2002: 309).

While both thinkers draw on Lockean principles to ground their moral theories, their intellectual independence from Locke is notable and I will return to this point below.<sup>1</sup> Given this shared connection with Locke's views, it is not unlikely that their similar moral outlook might have arisen, at least in part, from thinking through some of the moral implications and applications of Locke's epistemology. However, my central aim in what follows is to explore what I take to be a fascinating intellectual affinity between Masham and Cockburn and, perhaps most centrally, to draw attention to their shared account of moral agency as a virtue-ethical ideal.

I will begin with a consideration of Masham's account of agency and I will then turn to Cockburn and look at those aspects of her view that she shares with Masham.

### 37.1 Masham on Agency and Virtue

My discussion will focus on Masham's *Occasional Thoughts*, the primary aim of which is to make a case for a program of education aimed at the proper development of virtue. Famously, this work makes a sustained case for the education of girls. But, Masham's feminist arguments arise from a broader concern with the general lack of attention to raising children as rational and self-governing agents. What she calls "loose or careless Education" (1705, Preface) has resulted in abounding vice and immorality in society. The right kind of education, according to Masham, involves a combination of good principles and well-established habits. Taken together, these will lead an individual on the path of virtue. Central to Masham's view is the idea that mere obedience to moral rules only minimally constitutes moral agency. Masham also introduces a more robust conception of moral agency, involving the determination of one's actions from internal principles of right—principles which the agent herself understands as the proper guides for her true happiness.

It is fair to say that Masham's predominant concern lies in the apparent inability of individuals to govern their actions appropriately, which she characterizes as the "folly and madness of the Rational Creature's acting, as if they had no other principle to direct or determin (*sic*) them, than the Incitements of their Passions and Appetites" (1705: 2). Jacqueline Broad takes up the centrality of rational self-governance to Masham's notion of moral agency, including an examination of the intellectual influences among Masham, Locke, and Ralph Cudworth (Broad 2006). Broad focuses on Masham's notion of free will as it relates to her conception of moral accountability. Broad notes that for Masham liberty is a power for self-improvement, a "'determining' of oneself for better or worse" (2006: 506).

For Masham, the consequences of failing to self-govern in accordance with proper principles not only affect individuals and their happiness in the afterlife, but also have wide-ranging social impacts. Acting without proper attention to governing principles is a breach of the "Eternal Law of Reason." Such breaches, she writes, "disorder Common-wealths and Kingdoms; disturb the Peace of Families; and make by far the greatest part of the Private Infelicities of Particular Persons in this world" (1705: 2). Individual self-governance in accordance with right principles produces true happiness for individuals *and* has the radiant effect of creating order and harmony across

societies—both at the familial level and at the level of society as a whole. An individual's imprudent decisions affect not only her own happiness, here and in the afterlife, but affect all the people with whom she shares a significant social relationship, be it at the personal or larger social level. By setting this stage at the very outset, Masham is making clear that her program is one aimed not only at the virtue of individuals but, importantly, at individuals understood as standing in a relationship with a whole system of individuals, a system that stands or falls with the moral strength of its members. Regan Penaluna (2007) has explored the social and political dimensions of Masham's moral philosophy, arguing that Masham's concept of moral character is deeply enmeshed with her ideal of a Christian character—that is, of a person who follows God's laws as articulated in revelation. Masham's moral agent is clearly guided by Christian principles. However, as I want to show here, her morality is more fundamentally a form of virtue theory that is less focused on Christianity, *per se*, than it is on more broadly humanist values involving natural reason and the dictates of human nature (though she certainly believes that Christianity most perfectly incorporates these definitive aspects of humanity).

This broader vision of moral virtue is, I suggest, evident when Masham specifies her central working assumption about the action-guiding principles she has in mind. When we contemplate the moral failings of others, she asserts, the more honorable among us, those who are invested in the importance of virtue, are inspired to reflect on just what that notion involves. We take occasion to assess our own actions “by the true Rules and Measures of [our] Duty...too becoming Rational Creatures...not to please” (1705: 3). First and foremost, the principles that ought to govern us are principles arising from our natures as rational beings. We must, she writes, live “as becomes our Reasonable Nature” (1705: 27). For Masham, then, the problem to be solved is that of human moral inconsistency and, at worst, depravity. The answer lies within each of us and our innate capacity for reason. However, while many of us use reason as a tool merely for the gratification of our desires, this is, for Masham, a signal failure to live up to our human potential and, likewise, to achieve proper moral agency. Joanne E. Myers (2013) has argued that for Masham the individual makes moral decisions by a hedonistic calculus, based first and foremost on personal desires. This “instrumentalizing tendency” is, for Myers, the mark of Masham's “desiring self” (2013: 537).

While there are grounds for this interpretation, as Myers demonstrates, I want to suggest that Masham's account of virtue is aimed primarily at self-perfection in accordance with our natures. It is true that this brings us happiness, but it is a happiness that she sharply contrasts with sensory pleasure. As she writes, sensory pleasures lose their appeal if separated from “those concomitant satisfactions which accompany them only as we are rational Creatures” (1705: 65). This she specifies as “our greatest happiness” (1705: 66). Masham's ideal of agency is deeply entwined with her ideal of human happiness—both of which involve the authentic expression of our definitively human rationality. No one can be really happy, she asserts, if they “want that Knowledge which is requisite to direct their Actions suitably to the Ends which as rational Creatures they ought to propose” (1705: 206).

Moral self-governance thus requires strong critical reasoning skills and Masham proposes training individuals from an early age to assess for themselves what they ought and ought not to believe. This might involve moral standards that children are taught from an early age as well as biblical interpretations that children learn from others. However, if children are taught principles of morality and religion without allowing them to question and understand these principles for themselves, these lessons will never stick. Children will be more likely to ignore them or adopt an unwarranted skepticism about them simply because they never fully grasped the truth of these things for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Quite apart from the practical implications of rote or authoritative styles of teaching as simply ineffective, there is a more fundamental point that Masham wants to make—individuals ought to *own* their beliefs, seeing the truth of things themselves and

consciously adopting true beliefs as their own. It is not only the case that individuals will have a greater commitment to beliefs that they have adopted through rational inquiry. For Masham, it is also the case that arriving at one's beliefs rationally, and seeing the truth of them oneself, gives the act of rational assent a moral dimension. She writes:

It is as undeniable as the difference between Men's being in, and out of their Wits, that Reason ought to be to Rational Creatures the Guide of their Belief: That is to say, That their Assent to any thing, ought to be govern'd by that proof of its Truth, whereof Reason is the Judge; be it either Argument, or Authority, for in both Cases Reason must determine our Assent according to the validity of the Ground it finds it Built on. By Reason being here understood that Faculty in us which discovers, by the intervention of intermediate ideas, what Connection Those in the proposition have one with another.

(1705: 32)

Reasoning well allows us to determine whether a given proposition is true, false, or probable. Even divine revelation, or "Authority," must be assented to on rational grounds, for Masham. As she explains, while divine propositions may not be empirically or rationally evident to human reason, it is nevertheless the case that assenting to any proposition that is contrary to reason would, Masham writes, "make the Testimony of our Reason useless to us, and thereby destroy also the Credit of all Revelation" (1705: 35). However, of particular note here is her clear implication that human beings have an obligation to be rational, to live up to the demands of our natures. For Masham, using reason is not merely an instrumental good, it signals the expression of a certain kind of nature. The truly rational person is living a properly human life. She continues this quote with a warning that in failing to engage in this kind of reasoning, "we degrade our selves from being Rational Creatures; and deprive our selves of the only Guide God has given us for our Conduct in our Actions and Opinions" (1705: 33). Reflective and rational assent is not only necessary for distinguishing truth from falsehood; it is a moral imperative. For Masham, the individual's status as a moral agent depends on her capacity for intellectual independence, accountability, and ownership of the beliefs by which she will self-govern. And in so doing, the agent is living in accordance with her human nature. The moral agent therefore also directs her passions and appetites in accordance with reason, "that faculty which God has given [her] to that end" (1705: 215). For Masham, therefore, reason allows the agent to critically analyze her own beliefs, but perhaps more importantly to reflectively guide her actions in accordance with what she understands is definitive about human nature itself.

At this point, we have not seen what, if anything, Masham offers by way of substantive moral principles. Reason ought to guide our actions, and this involves critical reflection and the determination of true guiding principles. But, what are these going to look like? One answer might be that these are going to be God's commands, as articulated in revelation. Certainly, Masham spends a great deal of time talking about the importance of reason in the interpretation and assessment of biblical laws. But, this is only one part of the story for Masham. She writes at length, in this work, about virtue as a matter of following the rule, or law, of nature, which all rational beings ought to obey. These are dictates that are discoverable by reason and "are no less the Law of God to rational creatures than the injunctions of Revelation are" (1705: 52). Though the discovery of these is very difficult due to the vagaries of education and circumstance, it is, in principle at least, within our natural power to do so. It is worth noting here that for Masham revelation serves the purpose of making these natural laws explicit and, by tying sanctions to their observance, effectively enforced. Revelation was, she asserts, designed to "inforce Natural Religion" (1705: 59). I will return to Masham's view of the relationship between natural law and God's revealed commands further on. However, it is important to note at this stage that Masham clearly believes

that almost everything laid out in revelation, with regards to our moral duties, parallels whatever reason could, at least in principle, discover on its own. Revelation, she assures us, has “an exact correspondence with, and conformity to the Nature of Things” (1705: 81).

It seems clear that Masham holds out hope that a vigorous commitment to rational education may well lead us to discover our moral duty wholly independently, or at least get us some part of the way there. As it stands, she observes, for most of us our baser inclinations will get the better of us before we attain the rational capacity to “discover from the Nature of Things, the just measure of our Actions, together with the obligations we are under to comply therewithal” (1705: 53). But, this is far from a principled rejection of the possibility. There are, she laments, “very few reasonable People in the World ... who endeavour to live conformably to the Dictates of Reason, submitting their Passions and Appetites to the Government and Direction of that Faculty which God has given them to that end” (1705: 215). But, this is precisely the end we all ought to be aiming at. Masham spends a great deal of time in this work discussing natural law—both its discovery and its content. What is also clear from her work is that virtue, most perfectly expressed, is a matter of living in accordance with the law of nature discovered by reason alone. This should, of course, come as no surprise. Masham’s model of agency is a radically self-governing individual. While there is certainly a role for revelation in her work, she is arguably much more interested in laying out the potential of individuals as truth-seeking and self-directing. Her emphasis on human nature and its proper realization is crucial to this point. Human agency is, at its fullest, the expression of our ends.

So, what does the law of nature look like for Masham? She first defines it as a set of dictates that arise from the nature of things themselves. These are discoverable by reason, which can see things “to be what they are, and that they cannot but be what they are” (1705: 63). Opaque as this might sound, her elaboration makes clear that she is drawing on a brand of fitness theory:

From which diversity and immutability in the Nature of things, there necessarily arises a diversity of respects and relations between them, as unchangeable as the things themselves wherein the Will of the Creator in reference hereunto is reveal’d to every intelligent Agent, so far as he is made capable of discerning these relations, dependencies and consequences, and whatsoever with respect to his own Actions.

(1705: 63)

Fitness theory presumes that there is an order to nature, such that the proper functioning of the system of beings depends on the proper expression, on the part of each individual, of its specific nature. For non-rational beings this is effected through instinct. What marks out human beings is our capacity for rational self-governance—that is, our capacity to understand our natures, the natures of other things, and what constitutes appropriate relationships between ourselves and others. Agents, as such, have the liberty to choose to act suitably to their own natures and in consideration of their relationships to others. But, this requires that we have the intellectual commitment to do so. As Masham makes clear this does not come easily, although it does come naturally. True agency as a matter of reflective action, “requires that we attentively examine, and consider the several natures of Things, so far as they have any relation to our own actions” (1705: 64).

Ultimately, for Masham (and we’ll see this again in Cockburn), the harmonious order of relations indicates God’s will, which is “thereby dictated to [us]” (1705: 63). For Masham, the agent has the capacity to understand this natural order, their place in it, and the duties they have to act harmoniously within it. The agent, she writes, recognizes that God has made her “a part...of the whole” (1705: 63). It is worth pausing on this notion for just a moment, as it reveals a metaphysical assumption that lies at the background to Masham’s fitness view. The world is an orderly place. God, she writes, is “the Author of Order, and not of Confusion, [and] has fram’d all things with

Consistency, and Harmony” (1705: 72). Part of this order involves natural consequences for our actions. Human beings are driven by a desire for happiness. However, Masham explains, one of the chief impediments to virtue is mistaking happiness for pleasure. The pleasures of sense, she writes, pale in comparison to the “more obvious advantages accruing to us from [the] faculty of reason, [which] plainly make known the Superiority of its Nature” (1705: 65). Our “greatest happiness...is manifestly provided for in our being indue’d with this Faculty” (1705: 66). And this kind of happiness, tied as it is to acting in accordance with reason, forms the dictates of reason into effective law: “The Law of Reason,” she writes

Has its Sanction, *viz.* That, duly considering it, we shall evidently find our happiness or misery, are annex’d to the observance, or neglect of that unalterable Rule of Rectitude, discoverable to us by the Nature of Things, so that this Rule of Rectitude, or Eternal Will of God, has also the force of a Law given to it by that inseparable accord that there is betwixt our happiness or misery, with our obedience, or disobedience, hereunto.

(1705: 72)

We fail in our proper duties if, recognizing that God made us this way, we fail to use reason to measure our actions, and conform them to, the “discernable Natures of Things” (1705: 67). Reason shows us not only what we ought to do, but *that* we ought to do it. Understanding the order of relations is enough to tell any rational agent what kind of behavior is contradictory or inconsistent with their nature and that of others; the degree of happiness or misery that follows our actions is, by the same turn, a naturally sufficient reinforcement. The dictates of reason, Masham writes, carry the obligatory force of law quite independently of “any positive command of God to us, or his irresistible power over us” (1705: 69).<sup>3</sup>

Masham believes the grounds for this kind of self-governance lie in human nature itself. When we transgress moral law, for Masham, we not only fail to achieve the lasting happiness promised by divine reward, but we all naturally feel the self-reproach that comes with acting in opposition to reason. Few people, she writes, can endure the “uneasiness of that remorse...[the] constant Reproaches of their own Reason” that come with transgressions against our natural duty (1705: 158). God has given us this capacity with the intention that we will apply it properly and mindfully “to the consideration of the difference respects, consequences, and dependencies of Things, so as to discern from thence, the just measures of their actions in every circumstance and relation they stand plac’d in” (1705: 70).

For Masham, then, virtue therefore involves making the greatest effort one can at understanding one’s moral duties oneself—that is, of being guided by one’s own reason in determining one’s actions. This is difficult, and even the most virtuous of us get sidetracked by our desires and appetites. At worst, many of us are so poorly educated that we cannot make these determinations unaided by explicit commands and the threat of divine sanctions. Nothing is more evident, Masham argues, than that peoples’ actions “should be regulated, and directed by that Faculty in them which shows them the different properties, relations, and dependencies of things” (1705: 101). Attending to reason in this way is the path to the greatest virtue and happiness for Masham.

### 37.2 Cockburn on Agency and Virtue

In her 1747 work, *Remarks on Dr. Rutherford’s Essay*, Cockburn writes the following:

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 practices, 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*...No stronger restraint can be laid upon a *free agent*, even by the commands of God, and the sanctions of his laws, than that of forcing him to stand *self-condemned*.

(1747: 35)

Cockburn's conception of moral agency rests on several key assumptions: humans have access to internally derived ideas of moral right and wrong, an inherent motivation to act, and a capacity for self-reflection and self-assessment. For Cockburn, human nature itself is the source of moral understanding; through rational reflection and effective self-governance, agents may comprehend their moral duties and obligations quite independently of the institutions of civil society or God's explicit commands. The fully realized moral agent, for Cockburn, both understands and is devoted to upholding the values that define her obligations as a moral being. It is this robust sense of agency that lies at the foundation of her conception of virtue and it forms a very similar picture to that which we get from Masham.

As Cockburn states above, the perception humans have of moral distinctions along with our tendency towards moral virtue are deeply entwined with the fact that we are fundamentally rational beings. In fact, Cockburn believes that human reason represents a built-in capacity for discerning moral distinctions: "I take our consciousness of right and wrong to be the result of some perception, that every rational mind necessarily has of the essential difference between good and evil" (1747: 33). This does not mean that humans have innate ideas of morality. For Cockburn, it is through reflection on our own natures, and the subsequent perception that we are definitively rational, and social, beings, that gives rise to our understanding of morality and what it means to live a properly human life. Our nature, she writes, is "the reason and rule of moral good and evil" (1702: 58). Cockburn's morality is therefore best categorized as virtue theoretical, predicated as it is on the expression of one's properly human characteristics. For Cockburn, like Masham, morality is in its truest sense a matter of following nature.

Cockburn understands human nature teleologically—human nature is inherently directed towards the end of moral virtue. We have many impulses that motivate our behavior, but when governed by reason, we can, she thinks, see that our various passions, inclinations, and appetites, are conducive to our ends, which are "the preservation and perfection of our own being and the benefit of society" (1751b: 118). Cockburn does not think humans are always perfectly virtuous. But, she does think we all have an innate capacity for moral perfection, effected through rational self-governance or moral agency. While following the dictates of a legislator (civil or divine) that are enforced by sanctions is the expression of a certain kind of agency, Cockburn thinks humans are equipped to do much more.

Cockburn frames her discussion in terms of *fitness*—that is, the truest and best expression of any nature involves not only the realization of its definitive qualities but the appropriate expression of those qualities relative to a given situation and the natures of other things. According to Cockburn, the ideas we discover through reason reveal moral distinctions of right and wrong along with the understanding that justice, equity, goodness, and truth harmonize with "the reason and nature of things; from whence," she continues, "we conclude, that acting in conformity to them must be the *fittest* and best for a reasonable being" (1747: 71; see Sheridan 2018 for a detailed discussion of the role of moral fitness within Cockburn's larger moral metaphysics).

This is a very similar view to that we find motivating Masham's conception of moral agency and shares with Masham's view of its wholistic conception of fitness relations. Morality, understood as rational self-governance, sits within the larger sphere of fitness relations and the norms that govern the natural world as a whole; as Cockburn writes, "[t]he absolute fitness of virtue in general consists in its tendency to promote the order, harmony, and happiness of the world"

(1743: 433). The idea here is that if everything in nature fully realizes its nature, whether by a process of rational deliberation or, as for non-human animals, by instinct, the system of nature as a whole is orderly and harmonious—in a word, it expresses virtue. This systemic conception of virtue is particularly clear at the societal level. Humanity understood as a network of interdependent beings might be seen as requiring the same sort of harmonious, and virtuous, structure to function properly. “Mankind,” Cockburn writes, “is a system of creatures, that continually need one another’s assistance, without which they could not long subsist” (1743: 413). In fact, for Cockburn, sociability constitutes a key aspect of our ends—acting in accordance with our sociable nature is precisely what we were made to do. Human beings are, she writes, “designed to promote each other’s welfare, no part being made for itself alone” (1747: 7)<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that moral norms are founded internally, within human nature itself. However, Cockburn also needs to account for the source of moral obligation, or the normative force of morality, which elevates moral norms to level of moral duties. While external sanctions in the form of rewards and punishments are certainly a powerful motivator, Cockburn is deeply opposed to founding motivation purely in self-interest. This, she suggests, debases the potential for moral agency within each person. Duty, Cockburn writes, “becomes us as *moral agents*, and must arise from a consciousness, either of the fitness or unfitness of an action, or of the obedience due to an authority commanding it” (1747: 99). For Cockburn, then, the conception of moral obligation or duty is deeply focused on the agent herself and her own perception of the rightness or fitness of an action. Where there is no such perception of fitness, even where the command of a superior authority is involved, there is, she writes, “no foundation for duty” (1747: 99). Moral obligation of this kind is, properly speaking, an internal principle that, she writes, “affect[s] the conscience [in a way that...] *external motives never can do*” (1747: 48). The reflective moral agent feels the obligatory force of morality as a kind of affirmation of her own moral character. The agent feels the sting of moral failure personally, beyond whatever externally imposed consequences she may suffer. As Cockburn writes, “By obligation, I understand, *such a perception of an inducement to act, or to forbear acting, as forces an agent to stand self-condemned, if he does not conform to it*” (1747: 380).

As we can see, then, Cockburn draws a sharp distinction between internal and external motivations. The latter may work to some extent, but they do not constitute the robust form of agency that the former demand. The moral agent, robustly construed, is self-obligating and takes their reasons for acting—that is, the perception of fitness or unfitness—to be authoritative, or conclusive, reasons to act:

A free-agent must always be the *immediate* obliger of himself...it is...the perception and judgment of his own mind, or his *reason*, that obliges him to act accordingly, and this is so far from being an absurdity, that it is essential to *moral choice* and *free agency*.

(1743: 446)

The agent’s authority comes from the very fact that she has the capacity to determine her actions according to her own rational perception of moral right and wrong. Agency involves not merely following one’s natural inclinations but doing so reflectively and consistently with her rational and social nature. Though even God’s explicit commands are effective inducements to be moral, they are, she writes, “*not* the proper cause or ground of moral duty. Moral obligation must arise from the reason and nature of things, not from *external motives*” (1747: 102).

Cockburn reiterates this notion in a letter to her niece, making clear that any explicit commands from God must be consistent with the duties arising from our natures:

There can be no external evidence of any thing 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.

(1751b: 269)

Cockburn and Masham are both committed to the idea that there is a harmony between the natural dictates of reason and God's laws. The prescriptions of nature, if properly understood, are perfectly consistent with revelation, and provide both the content and obligatory force required to make them, effectively, a system of natural laws.

As we saw above, Masham's case for an education in natural virtue is twofold. On the one hand, the laws that are accepted on the basis of authority alone do not have quite the same force on the individual as those accepted on the basis of her own reason. The agent who accepts moral precepts on the basis of rational introspection will not stray from, or come to question, these rules. On the other hand, the obligatory force of these precepts is clearer to those of us who have the rational capacity to understand natural law for ourselves. Above, I mentioned that I would return to the role of natural law and God's revealed commands in Masham's morality. Masham is a great deal more anxious than Cockburn about the actual success of reason itself, without the enforcement of revelation, to ensure the constant obligatory force of natural law. As she writes, in making her case for revelation, humans in the state of nature could certainly reason themselves to a number of truths about God and morality, but

Nothing is more undeniably true than that from the meer Light of Nature Men actually were so far from discovering the Law of Nature in its full extent or force, as that they did not generally own, and but very imperfectly discern, its prescriptions or obligation.

(1705: 56)

And even when they do manage to do so,

The love of happiness (which consists in pleasure) is the earliest, and strongest principle of Humane Nature; and therefore whatever measures Reason does, or might, prescribe, when particular occasions occur, the sentiment of what Men find pleasing or displeasing to them, however contrary to those dictates of right Reason, is very apt to determine their choice.

(1705: 71)

Masham goes to great lengths to show that she is in no way suggesting that revelation is not a central feature of human moral life and, at times, does make it sound as though we could not be truly virtuous without it. I do not think Masham is inconsistent, though I do think she might be a bit on the pessimistic side where unaided human virtue is concerned.

While Cockburn certainly takes some pains to make a similar case for the importance of revelation, her message seems a great deal more focused on making a case for the realizable potential of human beings to self-regulate quite independently of revelation. For Cockburn, there is no external authority or influence that can guide an agent's decisions as effectively as can her internal perception of her moral duty. As Cockburn put it in the quote above, "no stronger constraint can be laid upon *free agent*, even by the commands of God, and the sanctions of his laws, than that of forcing him to stand *self-condemned*" (1747: 35). Cockburn is sharply critical of views that insist on the necessity of revelation for teaching humans their moral duties and enforcing their compliance with divine law. This, she asserts, depreciates human nature and religious duties. Let God, she writes, "be honoured by the dicates of our nature as well as by the assistances of revelation" (1747: 8). Even those she identifies as heathens and atheists are, she writes, "justly punishable for

the neglect of moral virtue” (1747: 107). They may not have revelation as their guide, but they are still accountable for their actions since duty arises ultimately “from that perception, which we have of the essential moral difference and fitness of things, *that law, which God has written in our hearts*” (1747: 107). While Cockburn does not dismiss appeals to God’s explicit commands and sanctions, such appeals must be consistent with reason and the principles of fitness. We have the capacity, as rational beings, to understand our moral duties prior to revelation. Our nature itself reveals our duties, and by extension the will of God who created those natures in the first place. Jacqueline Broad discusses the virtue of atheists in Cockburn’s view, concluding that while Cockburn acknowledges that knowledge of the will of God has a motivational force, “[n]atural human reason is still the touchstone of moral knowledge” (1747: 123).

I do not want to suggest that there is a wide chasm here separating Cockburn and Masham on the issue of morality’s independence of God’s explicit commands. Masham’s view of our potential for fully realized virtue can, at times, sound somewhat more pessimistic than Cockburn’s. She bemoans the fact that most of us will, at the end of day, be swayed by our passions regardless of what reason tells us. Revelation is, therefore, the best means of ensuring our compliance with moral law. Few people, she writes, would discern the law of nature completely through unaided reason alone. And even if they did, few “would find the inforcement thereof a sufficient Ballance to that Natural love of present pleasure which often opposes our compliance therewith” (1705: 53). Habits are too strong, she thinks, to be overruled by reason,

Whence it may justly be infer’d that the Christian Religion is the alone Universally adapted means of making Men truly Vertuous; the *Law of Reason, or the Eternal Rule of Rectitude* being in the Word of God only, to those of all capacities, plainly, and Authoritatively deliver’d as the Law of God, duly inforc’d by Rewards and Punishments.

(1705: 53)

That said, Masham’s insistence on an education in good reasoning and the formation of proper habits, coupled with her clear commitment to the innate capacity we have for the discovery of natural law would seem to suggest that she and Cockburn are not that far apart on this issue. If anything, Cockburn seems to find evidence of natural morality at work on even the most uneducated of us while Masham is more hesitant to offer empirical evidence of natural morality on the ground. She clearly, however, seems to subscribe to a similar view of humanity’s potential for natural morality and virtue. In either case, what stands out is that both thinkers share a conception, at least in principal, of the fully formed agent as a radically self-governing individual.

### 37.3 Conclusion

As I stated at the outset, I have not attempted to establish lines of influence between Masham and Cockburn, though their acquaintance may well be grounds for speculating that they discussed these issues with one another. But, both women were admirers of John Locke’s philosophy and I would like to finish with a brief exploration of that common source of inspiration. While a full accounting of Locke’s influence on their respective views would require more space than I have here, I will focus on one common Lockean theme that we find in both Masham and Cockburn.

As I have shown, they ground their respective moral philosophies in human nature, understood through a process of self-reflection. Cockburn makes explicit use of Locke’s epistemological principle of reflection as the mechanism for this self-knowledge. As Cockburn asserts, we cannot have any idea of morality “without reflection upon ourselves” (1702: 57). It is, she concludes, “in Mr. *Locke’s* way [that] we can perceive what is conformable, or not, to our own nature” (1702: 58; for further discussion of Cockburn’s use of Lockean reflection as a moral foundation, see Bolton

1993 and Sheridan 2007 and 2022). Masham makes a similar appeal to Locke's principles when she writes about the natural human faculty for reasoning:

Our Knowledge immediately received from *Sense*, or *Reflection*, is inlarge'd to a view of Truths remote, or future, in Application of which Faculty of the Mind to a consideration of our own Existence and Nature, together with the beauty and order of the Universe, so far as it falls under our view.

(1705: 61)

While this is not meant to imply that reflection is the only Lockean element of their views, it is a key one in their moral philosophies. And, it is notable that both Masham and Cockburn make use of this Lockean principle to establish the groundwork for a morality that seems distinctly unLockean. For Locke, reflection provides us with knowledge of the operations of our minds, e.g., willing, volition, etc. (*Essay*: 2.6.1–2). He also thinks we can, via reflection, have knowledge of our natures as a route to understanding God's nature (*Essay*: 4.10.6).

Locke never explicitly makes use of reflection, however, to establish the kind of anthropocentric morality we find in Masham and Cockburn. Nor does Locke develop a robust account of virtue in the *Essay*. Locke does, however, attend to the proper development of virtue in his work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. This is, notably, a work that Masham directly references in her *Occasional Thoughts*. In his work on education, Locke lays out a program of moral instruction that is heavily focused on the nurturing of rational independence, critical abilities, and a virtuous character. I would suggest, in closing, that Masham and Cockburn no doubt drew on Locke's epistemological principles as a foundation for their moral views but were by no means mere mouthpieces for Locke's position.

As I suggested above, they may have been inspired by some of the implications of Locke's principles, namely the potential of reflection as a route to understanding human nature and its moral significance. I have not, in this chapter, discussed possible other sources of inspiration on their thinking, but have sought to draw out what I see as a significant commonality in their views on moral agency and virtue. And, hopefully, to contribute a bit further to our understanding of their unique contributions to the history of moral philosophy.

## Notes

- 1 For further reading on the comparative philosophies of Masham and Locke, see: Frankl 1989; Hutton 1993; Ready 2002; Broad 2006; Penaluna 2007; Lascano 2011. For scholarship on the extent of Cockburn's Lockeanism, see: Bolton 1996; Sheridan 2007, 2018, 2022; Gordon Roth 2015; Thomas 2015; Lustila 2020).
- 2 Broad 2019 examines Masham's arguments for women's education and the positive social impacts of extending liberty of conscience to women.
- 3 The role of God's will and sanctions in Masham has generated some disagreement amongst recent scholars. Myers, for example, characterizes Masham's theory as a brand of hedonistic egoism, in which the agent is, Myers writes, "driven and obliged by calculations of personal desire" (Myers 2013: 535). This leads Myers to conclude that Masham is a voluntarist, who locates the foundation and obligation of moral law in divine authority and sanctions. In a similar vein, Penaluna argues that Masham locates the motivation to obey God's laws in divine sanctions, writing that although Masham makes room for an internal motivational mechanism, ultimately, for Masham, "it is only by fear of eternal damnation or reward that people have the proper incentive to follow God's laws" (Penaluna 2007: 118). Buickerood, in his introduction to the collected works of Masham, likewise holds that for Masham, Christianity is concerned primarily with salvation, which is achieved, he writes, "only through a rational fear of God and desire to satisfy his imperatives" (Buickerood 2004: xxix). Hutton does not specifically discuss the role of sanctions in Masham's account, but emphasizes the generally legalistic elements of Masham's view, according to which virtue is a matter of comprehending the will of God and governing ourselves

accordingly. Hutton writes that for Masham, “moral action entails the conformity of the will to God as we understand it from Scripture” (Hutton 2017: 133). Alternatively, Broad argues that Masham’s view is explicitly anti-voluntaristic (Broad 2006). According to Broad, Masham believes God’s will is guided by the law of right reason, which is non-arbitrarily founded in the relations and determinate natures of all things. God, in other words, is guided by the harmony and order of things, a system of nature that human reason can and should likewise be guided by. I believe there are grounds for both interpretations. I hope to have shown that while God’s sovereign command forms an element of moral obligation, for Masham, it does not exhaust the grounds for the normative force of morality. While it is certainly the case the Masham thinks it is beyond the capacities of most of us to attain this degree of moral self-understanding, she seems to hold this out as an end worth aiming for. I will return to this point further on, in comparing Masham and Cockburn on this point.

- 4 Both Cockburn and Masham suggest that while the virtuous agent is self-governing, she is not wholly self-sufficient. Virtue cannot be achieved in isolation from the sphere of social relations, within which the agent is embedded. Though I do not address the feminist dimensions of their work here, there is some excellent scholarship on centrality of human sociability for women moralists and the feminist implications of that emphasis: See Frankl 1989; Hutton 2007; O’Brien 2009. Hutton has argued, for example, that “the favoured discourse of...politically-conscious women of the eighteenth century was ethical rather than political.” Ethical issues, she continues, “were at the heart of their feminism” (Hutton 2007: 137).

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