

Catharine Trotter Cockburn against Theological Voluntarism

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Abstract: Catharine Trotter Cockburn challenges voluntarist views held by British moral philosophers during the first half of the eighteenth century. After introducing her metaphysics of morality, namely, her account of human nature, and her account of moral motivation, which for her is a matter concerning the practice of morality, I analyze her arguments against theological voluntarism. I examine, first, how Cockburn rejects the view that God can by an arbitrary act of will change what is good or evil; second, how she challenges views that understand the initial creation of the world solely in terms of divine will and draws attention to the role that the divine understanding plays in God's creation; and third, how she argues that moral obligation does not require a superior lawmaker. I conclude by highlighting how Cockburn's arguments not only challenge voluntarist views, but also offer support for her moral fitness theory.

Keywords: Catharine Trotter Cockburn, eighteenth-century British moral philosophy, voluntarism, intellectualism, human nature, moral fitness theory, moral obligation, Edmund Law, William Warburton

1. Introduction

Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679?–1749) engages critically with voluntarist views developed by British moral philosophers and theologians during the first half of the eighteenth century. By closely examining Cockburn's writings on moral philosophy and her critical responses to voluntarist views held by her contemporaries, I aim to shed light not only on her own arguments for an intellectualist position, but also on the variety of arguments that her philosophical opponents developed in support of voluntarist positions.

Before I examine Cockburn’s arguments against theological voluntarism in detail, it is worth outlining her moral views. In her moral philosophy, Cockburn engages both with questions concerning the foundation or “ground” of morality – which we today might consider issues concerning the metaphysics of morality – and questions that concern the practice of morality, specifically moral motivation. Thus, I will begin by introducing her metaphysics of morality (§2) and then turn to her views on the practice of morality (§3). This will provide helpful background for turning to her arguments against theological voluntarism (§4). In particular, I examine first of all why she rejects a version of voluntarism that would allow God to change what is good or evil by arbitrary acts of divine will (§4.1). Even if one accepts Cockburn’s point that God cannot arbitrarily change what is good and evil after he has created the world, the question remains whether the initial creation of the actual world requires an act of divine will. I will show how Cockburn downplays the importance of the divine will during creation and instead shifts the focus to the divine understanding (§4.2). Furthermore, I consider her arguments against the view that moral obligation presupposes a superior lawmaker (§4.3). I conclude by showing how her arguments not only challenge voluntarist views but also offer support for her moral fitness theory (§5).

2. Cockburn’s Metaphysics of Morality

Human nature plays a fundamental role in Cockburn’s moral philosophy. Throughout her philosophical writings she states that human nature is the foundation, or “ground” of morality.¹ Cockburn regards sensation and reflection as the sources of knowledge, and in her view all our ideas are derived from sensation and reflection.² Reflection plays an important role in her moral

¹ See Cockburn, *A Defence of Mr. Locke’s Essay of Human Understanding*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Patricia Sheridan [hereafter: *Defence*], pp. 43–47; *Remarks upon Some Writers in the Controversy Concerning the Foundation of Moral Virtue and Moral Obligation*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Sheridan [hereafter: *RSW*], pp. 107, 114–115, 119, 124–125, 127–128, 130; *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford’s Essay on the Nature and Obligation of Virtue*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Sheridan [hereafter: *RR*], pp. 184–186, 195, 205–210.

² See Cockburn, *Defence*, pp. 40–41, 50, 52.

epistemology; more specifically, by reflecting on human nature we can come to understand what the essential components of human nature are and acquire moral knowledge.³ For Cockburn, a human being is “a *rational* and *social* as well as *sensible* being.”⁴ This statement makes explicit that rationality, sociability, and sensibility are all important components of human nature. Insofar as human beings are sensible creatures, they seek pleasure and try to avoid pain.⁵ Cockburn acknowledges that not only humans but also non-human animals have a capacity to feel pleasure and pain, but she argues that humans are “manifestly superior to them,”⁶ since humans are also rational beings. As rational beings, humans seek to act in accordance with reason. Furthermore, she regards humans as social beings who tend to promote the good of others.⁷ Cockburn emphasizes that all three components – namely, sensibility, rationality, and sociability – are jointly important. Indeed, she criticizes not only those philosophers who focus merely on sensibility, but also Stoic philosophers who focus only on rationality and sociability and neglect sensibility, for giving “a partial consideration of human nature.”⁸

While it is important for Cockburn that we begin by carefully examining human nature, she does not stop with describing human nature, but argues further that moral obligations arise from the fact that humans have certain natures. She maintains that because humans have certain natures, it is suitable, or “fitting” for them to act in accordance with their nature. For Cockburn

³ For further discussion of Cockburn’s moral epistemology, see Sheridan 2007, 2022.

⁴ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 119.

⁵ See *ibid.*

⁶ Cockburn, *RR*, p. 184.

⁷ See Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 119.

⁸ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 130. It is worth noting that Cockburn’s criticism of Stoic philosophers targets their analysis of the essential components of human nature, but she shares their ethical ideal of following nature. For further discussion of Cockburn’s account of human nature, see Boeker 2023, 29–37; Bolton 1993; Green 2015; Sheridan 2007, 2018a. Cockburn’s account of human nature is also discussed in De Tommaso 2017 and Sheridan 2018b, but these papers focus only on rationality and sociability and do not acknowledge that sensibility is a further component of her account of human nature.

this entails that humans have an obligation to act in accordance with their nature. She argues for this point as follows:

A rational being ought to act suitably to the reason and nature of things: a social being ought to promote the good of others: an approbation of these ends is unavoidable, a regard to them implied in the very nature of such beings, which must therefore bring on them the strongest *moral obligations*. To ask, why a rational being should choose to act according to reason, or why a social being should desire the good of others, is full as absurd, as to ask why a sensible being should choose pleasure rather than pain.⁹

Cockburn not only describes her account of the foundation of morality in terms of human nature, but also often uses the language of fitnesses, especially in her two late works *Remarks upon Some Writers* (1743) and *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasoning of Dr. Rutherford's Essay* (1747). Although she acknowledges that her terminology has shifted from her earlier works, she believes that her overall moral position has not changed.¹⁰ She continues to believe that human nature is the foundation of morality, but further specifies that different kinds of being have distinctive natures and that the various kinds of being form a “system of beings.”¹¹ In Cockburn’s view, the various kinds of beings stand in relations to each other, and these relations are necessary and eternal relations that are fixed by the natures of the kinds of being. She claims further that certain fitnesses or unfitnesses result from these relations.¹² Fitnesses in her view concern what is suitable for beings with a certain nature, or what beings with such-and-such a nature ought to do.¹³ This suggests that when we ask what is fitting for beings with a certain nature, we ask a normative question, namely, what beings with this nature *ought* to do, or what is *suitable* for them to do. Cockburn’s moral metaphysics is first and foremost grounded in human nature, but it also involves fitnesses and unfitnesses that result from relations among kinds of

⁹ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 119.

¹⁰ She makes this claim in a footnote which was added to the 1751 edition of *Defence*. See Cockburn, *Defence*, pp. 46–47n. For further discussion, see Green 2019.

¹¹ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 107.

¹² See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 106–108.

¹³ Several interpreters describe her moral philosophy as a moral fitness theory. For instance, see Green 2015; Sheridan 2007, 2019; Sund 2013; Thomas 2017.

beings, which in turn result from the nature of things. The fitnesses and unfitnesses concern normative issues, insofar as examining what it fit or unfit for beings with a certain nature is to consider what beings with this nature ought or ought not to do. This shows how normativity is built into Cockburn's moral metaphysics.

3. Cockburn on the Practice of Morality

Cockburn emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between “the *first grounds* of good and evil” and “the force of the law.”¹⁴ As we have seen already, for Cockburn the “first grounds,” or foundation of morality consist in human nature and the relations and fitnesses that arise from it. By contrast, when Cockburn speaks of “the force of the law” she is thinking about issues that concern the practice of morality, such as moral motivation.¹⁵ Although humans have a moral obligation to act in ways that are suitable or fitting to their nature, Cockburn also acknowledges that humans are not always sufficiently motivated to carry out their moral obligations. This makes it worth taking a closer look at her views concerning moral motivation. Following William Warburton (1698–1779), Cockburn maintains that the fitnesses of things, conscience (or moral sense), and the will of God “make a threefold cord,” and they each play a role with regard to moral motivation.¹⁶ Although Cockburn does not adopt all the details of Warburton's view, it is helpful to outline how Warburton accounts for the motivational role of each of the three principles. He writes in *Divine Legation*:

¹⁴ Cockburn, *Defence*, p. 47.

¹⁵ In a letter to her niece Ann Arbuthnot, dated 8 September 1738, Cockburn speaks of our “obligation to Moral practise” (Broad 2020, 186). For further discussion of Cockburn's views concerning the practice of morality, see Boeker 2023, 40–45.

¹⁶ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 109. Warburton (*The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* [1738], p. 38) mentions the “threefold cord.” For further discussion, see Sund 2013, chapter 3. Sund argues that the fitnesses of things, conscience or the moral sense, and the will of God form the foundation of Cockburn's theory of moral obligation. Her interpretation rests on Cockburn's letter to Ann Arbuthnot from 8 September 1738, in which she states that “all three [principles] together make an immoveable foundation <for> and obligation to Moral practise” (Broad 2020, 186). I read this statement as concerning obligation to moral practice, rather than just obligation.

On these Principles then, namely *the Moral Sense*, — *the Essential Difference in Human Actions*, — and the *Will of God*, is built the whole Edifice of *Practical Morality*: Each of which Principles hath its distinct Motive to enforce it; Compliance with the *Moral Sense* being attended with a grateful Sensation; Compliance with the *essential Differences of Things* being the promoting Order and Harmony of the Universe; and Compliance with *the Will of God*, the obtaining Reward and avoiding Punishment.¹⁷

Warburton observes that each of these three principles tends to act with stronger motivational force on some people than on others. He explains this with recourse to the varying degrees to which people are governed by the passions and/or reason:

The first Principle, which is the *Moral Sense*, would strongly operate on those, who by the exact Temperature and Balance of the Passions, were disengaged enough to feel the Delicacy and Grandeur of the Moral Sense; and had an Elegance of Mind to be charmed with the Nobleness of its Dictates. The second, which is *the Essential Difference* founded in the natural Relations of Things, will have its Weight with the Speculative, the abstracted and profound Reasoners, and on all those who excel in the Knowledge of Mankind. And the third, which resolves itself into the *Will of God*, and takes in all the Consequences of Obedience, is principally adapted to the common Run of Men.¹⁸

For Warburton it is important that there be these three different motivational principles, for this ensures that everyone, irrespective of “Ranks, Constitutions, and Educations” will be motivated to practise virtue by at least one of these principles.¹⁹

Cockburn is in agreement with Warburton that all three principles are relevant and that a problem with other moral views is that they focus on only one of the principles but neglect the others. She makes this point most clearly in a letter to Arbuthnot:

Whilst our Modern Moralists have contended to establish Moral Virtue, some on the Moral Sense alone, some on the Essential difference and Relations of things, and some on the sole Will of God, they have all been deficient; for neither of these Principles are sufficient exclusive of the others but all three together make an immoveable foundation <for> and obligation to Moral practise, the Moral sense or Conscience, and the Essential difference of things, discovering to us what the will of our Maker is.²⁰

¹⁷ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 37.

¹⁸ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, pp. 37–38.

¹⁹ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 37.

²⁰ Cockburn, letter to Ann Arbuthnot, 8 September 1738 (Broad 2020, 186).

Yet in contrast to Warburton, Cockburn puts less emphasis on the importance of the will of God. For Warburton, “*Compliance with the Will of God ... hath the highest degree of Merit*”;²¹ he also claims that a duty can only arise from the will of God.²² He even goes so far as to argue that an atheist cannot acquire knowledge of morality.²³ Cockburn rejects Warburton’s views concerning atheists, and claims that they can indeed be virtuous.²⁴ She is able to argue for the virtue of atheists because she does not follow Warburton in regarding the will of God as having a more fundamental status among the three principles. Rather, for Cockburn human nature provides the proper foundation of moral obligation. In her view, fitnesses or unfitnesses follow from the natures of things, and from these fitnesses follow moral obligations. For her, the moral sense or the will of God can offer a helpful additional motivation for the practice of morality, but neither is the first ground or foundation of it, and even conscience and God’s will are constrained by human nature and the fitnesses that arise from it.

On this basis, let us take a closer look at what role conscience and the will of God play in Cockburn’s account of moral motivation and how they form, together with the fitnesses of things, a “threefold cord.”²⁵ Cockburn acknowledges that conscience, or a moral sense, can play a motivational role and can influence the practice of morality.²⁶ While she is willing to use the terms “conscience” and “moral sense” interchangeably, it is important for her to make clear that

²¹ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 38.

²² See Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 37. Warburton reiterates this view in the preface that he wrote for Cockburn’s *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasoning of Dr. Rutherford’s Essay* (see Cockburn, *RR*, pp. 149–150).

²³ See Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 42.

²⁴ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 137–143. For helpful further discussion of Warburton’s and Cockburn’s views regarding the question whether atheists can acquire moral knowledge, see Broad 2021.

²⁵ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 109.

²⁶ Lustila 2020 offers helpful discussion of Cockburn’s account of conscience, but does not explicitly consider her views on conscience in relation to her two other motivational principles, namely, the fitnesses of things and the will of God; thus, Lustila may be said to overemphasize the role of conscience. For further discussion of Cockburn’s discussion of conscience in her early philosophical work *Defence*, see De Tommaso 2017; Waithe 1987–1995, 3:110–112. The role of conscience in Cockburn’s early plays is discussed in Myers 2012.

conscience, or the moral sense, is not a blind instinct.²⁷ Following other moral philosophers of her day, Cockburn ascribes the view that the moral sense is a blind instinct to Hutcheson.²⁸ She criticizes an instinctive account of the moral sense, for she believes that there has to be some prior moral standard that provides a foundation for moral approval or disapproval. For Cockburn, conscience, or the moral sense, is an internal principle by which we stand “self-condemned” if we fail to act in accordance with moral obligations.²⁹ As she states in the following passage, the important point is that conscience, or the moral sense, presupposes some prior obligation:

The uneasiness we feel upon the practice of anything contrary to what moral sense approves, is a *consequence* of the obligation, not the *foundation* of it, and only shows, that we are conscious of being obliged to certain actions, which we cannot neglect without standing self-condemned; self-condemnation manifestly presupposing some *obligation*, that we judge ourselves to have transgressed.³⁰

Cockburn is aware that not all human beings are sufficiently motivated to act in accordance with moral obligations, or as she would put it, suitably to the fitnesses of things. They also often lack sufficient motivation to follow their own conscience. This leads her to argue that the will of God and retributions in a future state can provide a helpful additional motive to act in accordance with our moral obligations.³¹ Otherwise, in the absence of divine sanctions, Cockburn claims, “many would be drawn by irregular passions, to deviate from the rule of their duty,”³² and as a result those who have steadily carried out their duty and acted in accordance

²⁷ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 109, 116–117; *RR*, p. 157; letter to Ann Arbuthnot, 20 November 1744 (Broad 2020, 224), letter to Ann Arbuthnot, 2 October 1747 (Broad 2020, 242–243).

²⁸ See Cockburn, *RR*, p. 157; letter to Ann Arbuthnot, 2 October 1747 (Broad 2020, 242). For Hutcheson the moral sense is a type of perception by means of which we approve or disapprove of morally good or bad actions. However, it is questionable whether he would have been happy to accept that some of his contemporaries and eighteenth-century critics describe it as a blind instinct. See Boeker (2022) for further details. Eighteenth-century moral philosophers, whose works Cockburn read and who describe the moral sense as a (blind) instinct, include Gay (1732 [1731], xxxi–xxxiii), Johnson (1731, 29–30), Rutherford (1744, chapter 5), Warburton (1738, 36).

²⁹ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 109. See also *Defence*, pp. 76–77, 79; *RR*, pp. 179–180.

³⁰ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 109.

³¹ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 114–115.

³² Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 114.

with moral obligations “would be liable to great disadvantages.”³³ Divine sanctions can rectify any unfair disadvantages experienced in this life. According to Cockburn, “it is plain” that taking into consideration God’s will and divine reward and punishment “introduces no *new moral obligation*, in the usual sense of that word;... on the contrary, the very notion of reward and punishment implies an *antecedent* duty or obligation, the conforming or not conforming to which, is the only ground of reward and punishment.”³⁴ She further writes:

When God was pleased to declare to the world this his determination, in making known to mankind more explicitly, that the law of their nature was likewise *the will* of their creator, he brought them indeed under an *additional* obligation to observe it, obedience to his will being one of the principal fitnesses resulting from the nature and relations of things. But in declaring, that he would eternally *reward or punish* those, who obeyed or disobeyed, he gave them only a new *motive* to the performance of their duty, but no new *foundation* of it: the rule, and reason, and obligation of virtue remained as before, in the immutable nature and necessary relations of things.³⁵

Cockburn goes even further, insofar as she argues that God cannot arbitrarily decide which actions he will command to be morally right or wrong; rather, God’s commands are constrained by the fitnesses of things. This means that because God understands and knows what is morally fit and right, he commands that human beings act accordingly.³⁶

Conscience and the will of God are motivationally important, but Cockburn also makes clear that they do not necessitate our actions. Rather, as free agents we have the power either to act in accordance with moral obligations or to act against them. This means that whether or not we follow our conscience or God’s will is up to our free choice.³⁷ If the opposite were the case and agents were necessitated to act in accordance with moral obligations, then, Cockburn argues, “there would be no longer any *choice*, and consequently no morality in actions; *obligation* would

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 114–115.

³⁶ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 121, 144.

³⁷ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 138–143; *RR*, pp. 170–171.

then differ nothing from *compulsion*.³⁸ Cockburn thus accepts that free agents have a power to act otherwise and can act contrary to moral obligations. However, if they act contrary to moral obligations, they will stand “self-condemned” by their own conscience.³⁹ The important point for Cockburn is that the three principles – the fitnesses of things, conscience, or the moral sense, and the will of God – mutually support each other and jointly provide strong motivation for the practice of morality.

4. Cockburn’s Arguments against Theological Voluntarism

So far we have seen that Cockburn regards human nature and the relations and fitnesses that arise from it as the metaphysical foundation of moral obligations. Although human nature and the fitnesses resulting from it are the only proper ground or foundation of moral obligations, Cockburn acknowledges that conscience and the will of God can provide important further motivation to carry out one’s moral obligations. It is now time to examine how Cockburn builds on her moral philosophy to push back against voluntarist views held by her contemporaries.

4.1 Arguments against Arbitrariness

Cockburn is critical of any form of voluntarism that would give God the power to change what is good and evil by an arbitrary act of will. She writes: “God having made man such a creature as he is, it is as impossible, that good and evil should change their respects to him, as that *pleasure* can be *pain*, and *pain pleasure*.”⁴⁰ As we have already seen, Cockburn defends an alternative view, namely, that human nature is the foundation or ground of moral laws. She puts this point as follows:

And as this unalterable relation makes the real and immutable nature of virtue and vice undeniable; so also from thence it is plain, *that nature of man is the ground or reason of the law of nature; i.e. of moral good and evil.*⁴¹

³⁸ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Cockburn, *Defence*, p. 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, Cockburn is aware that some of her opponents may be reluctant to agree with her view that moral good and evil are grounded in human nature. In particular, she acknowledges that the anonymous author of *Remarks upon an Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1697), *Second Remarks* (1697), and *Third Remarks* (1699) interprets Locke differently than she does. According to the Remarker,⁴² Locke was a voluntarist, and as Cockburn explains, the Remarker understands Locke's view as follows:

But the Remarker will object, that Mr. Locke does not establish morality upon the nature of man, and the nature of God, but seems to ground his demonstration upon future punishments and rewards, and upon the arbitrary will of the law-giver; and he does not think these the first grounds of good and evil.⁴³

In contrast to Cockburn, who founds morality upon human nature, the Remarker maintains that for Locke morality presupposes a superior lawmaker who can enforce moral laws by means of rewards and punishments. On this interpretation, God can, by an arbitrary act of will, decide which actions will receive reward and which punishment.⁴⁴ Cockburn does not regard this as a satisfactory interpretation of Locke, and she accuses the Remarker of failing to distinguish between “the force of the law” and “the *first grounds* of good and evil.”⁴⁵ She elaborates on this point in the following passage:

So that, though Mr. *Locke* says, that the will of God, rewards and punishments, can only give morality the force of a law; that does not make them the *first grounds* of good and evil, since by his principles, to know what

⁴² Here I follow Cockburn and refer to the anonymous author of *Remarks*, *Second Remarks*, and *Third Remarks* as “the Remarker.” Although it has been widely assumed that the author of these three pamphlets was Thomas Burnet of Charterhouse, convincing evidence has been offered by Walmsley, Craig, and Burrows 2016 that it is more likely that the author was Richard Willis, who was successively bishop of Gloucester, Salisbury, and Winchester.

⁴³ Cockburn, *Defence*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Locke argues in *Essay*, book 2, chap. 27, §§5–8 that a law presupposes a superior lawmaker who can enforce the law by means of reward and punishment. He distinguishes three types of law – namely, divine law, civil law, and the law of opinion or reputation – and argues that divine law is “the only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude*” (*Essay*, book 2, chap. 28, §8). See also Locke’s “Of Ethic in General.” The question whether Locke was a theological voluntarist or intellectualist is not settled among interpreters; for further discussion, see Green 2019; Randall Ward 1995; Tuckness 1999.

⁴⁵ Cockburn, *Defence*, p. 47.

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, which therefore may be to him the first ground or rule of good; though *the will of God, &c* can only enforce it as a *law*.⁴⁶

Although it is questionable whether Locke would agree with Cockburn's interpretation, her proposal to distinguish between the "force of the law," which includes moral motivation, and the "first grounds" of morality offers a path for avoiding voluntarism. On Cockburn's view, God's will can help to enforce morality and provide an additional motivation to act morally, but moral obligations have a foundation that is independent of God's will.

One advantage of Cockburn's position in comparison with the views of her opponents is that it makes it possible for us to acquire knowledge of our moral obligations by reflecting on human nature, and this requires neither divine revelation nor education by others.⁴⁷ Of course, it does not follow from this that everyone is sufficiently motivated to inquire about their moral obligations or to act in accordance with divine law; however, for Cockburn these motivational problems concern the "force of the law," which she separates from the "first grounds" of morality.

4.2 Arguments Concerning God as Creator

Cockburn's opponents may accept that God cannot arbitrarily change good and evil, or pleasure and pain, after humans and other beings have been created, but there is a further objection that those who believe that the will of God plays a more fundamental role than Cockburn acknowledges can raise: one can argue that God's nature and his will have a more fundamental status than human nature, because God creates the natures of humans and other beings by an act

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ In this respect Cockburn's view departs from Locke's moral epistemology, as Locke (*Essay*, book 2, chap. 28, §8) leaves open whether we come to know divine law by means of reason (the "light of Nature") or revelation. See Cockburn, RR, pp. 178–179, 207. Cockburn argues against Thomas Rutherford that even those who are not fortunate to have a guide to teach them their moral duties can acquire moral knowledge (RR, p. 207).

of will. In particular, one may raise the worry that human nature depends on God's will, since an act of divine will is required to create humans and their natures.⁴⁸

Here I want to focus on one type of response that Cockburn offers in *Remarks upon Some Writers*. In a nutshell, her proposal is that it is important to distinguish between the divine understanding and the divine will, and that abstract ideas of the natures of things exist eternally in the divine understanding but this does not depend on the divine will.⁴⁹

In *Remarks upon Some Writers*, Cockburn engages with writers who oppose Samuel Clarke's philosophy and who in Cockburn's words "introduced the doctrine of founding moral good and evil on the sole will of God, in order to establish *positive duties* on the same ground with *moral*."⁵⁰ She is critical of their attempt "to overthrow the most solid and immutable foundation of moral virtue, and even to take away our only certain criterion of the will of God, the *eternal immutable nature, and necessary relation of things*."⁵¹ One of Cockburn's targets is Edmund Law (1703–1787). Law argues in his notes on William King's *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* that we cannot imagine there to be relations that are "strictly *eternal* or *independent* of the Will of God, because they must necessarily presuppose the determination of that Will."⁵² For Law, relations presuppose the existence of things, and things come into existence upon the determination of God's will. Hence, Law infers that relations are dependent upon God's will. In response, Cockburn draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between the divine understanding and the divine will, and argues that the necessary relations exist eternally in the divine understanding independently of the divine will:

⁴⁸ See Cockburn, *Defence*, pp. 43–44; *RSW*, pp. 107–108, 121–122, 143–144.

⁴⁹ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 107–108, 122. See also *Defence*, pp. 42–43n. For a discussion of related issues in Leibniz's philosophy, see the chapter by Ursula Renz and Sarah Tropper in this volume.

⁵⁰ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 107.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Law, Remarks I, in *An Essay on the Origin of Evil by Dr. William King*, p. 85. Cockburn cites the relevant passage from Law in *RSW*, p. 107.

To this I answer, the necessary relations of all possible things are *strictly eternal*, as they are eternally perceived by the divine understanding to be unalterably what they are. This depends not on a determination of the will of God, tho' the bringing any possible nature, with its necessary relations, into *actual* existence, proceeds solely from that determination. This distinction the writers on the other side are very apt either *weakly* or *willfully* to overlook, though a very obvious and a very important one in this controversy.⁵³

We can assume that Law would not be satisfied by this answer. Indeed, he anticipates such a counterargument.⁵⁴ Law points out that there are multiple possible worlds that God could create and that God has to decide which of the many possible worlds becomes the actual world. Contrary to Leibniz, Law argues that there is no best possible world among the many possible worlds, because whatever possible world one considers it could have been made better “by making more Creatures, or 2dly, more variety, or 3dly, giving the Creatures that are made more and stronger Appetites.”⁵⁵ Yet as Law acknowledges, either of these options to make a world better can also lead to more evil in the world. Since there is no best world among the possible worlds, Law concludes that when God decides which possible world to make the actual world, he cannot be guided by his understanding, but rather is free to arbitrarily choose which world to create. Thus, for Law, the initial act of creation is based on an act of divine will and cannot be explained by an act of the divine understanding.⁵⁶

⁵³ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 107. Cockburn offers a similar response to Thomas Johnson, the author of *An Essay on Moral Obligation* (1731). Johnson claims that “every *Thing*, every *Relation*, every *Habitude*, every *Fitness* (or whatever other *Affection* soever may be ascribed to the Nature of things) is owing to God’s will in the first Instance, and ultimately referred to that” (*An Essay on Moral Obligation*, p. 22). According to Johnson, when God through an act of volition determines “the Existence of certain Things, he also determines their *Modes*, *Relations*, and every thing else belonging to them” (*ibid.*). This leads Johnson to conclude that even if morality is supposed to arise immediately from certain relations, “yet still it must be ultimately resolved into the *Will of God*, the Author of Nature, as its first and true Foundation” (*ibid.*). Cockburn challenges the conclusion that Johnson draws: instead of accepting his view that morality “must be ultimately resolved into the *Will of God*,” she argues that “morality may indeed be *ultimately* resolved into the divine *understanding*” (*RSW*, p. 122).

⁵⁴ See Law, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil by Dr. William King*, note Q, pp. 294–300.

⁵⁵ Law, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil by Dr. William King*, note Q, p. 297.

⁵⁶ See Law, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil by Dr. William King*, note Q, pp. 296–299; and note 53, pp. 301–314. Law’s argument is directed against Leibniz. For helpful further discussion, see Thomas 2017.

Cockburn gives Law credit for refuting Leibniz's view that there is "nothing equal or indifferent in nature."⁵⁷ Moreover, she argues that even if God arbitrarily chooses, by an act of divine will, which possible world he will bring into actual existence, this does not "at all affect ... the arguments of those, who maintain a fitness in things antecedent to the divine will."⁵⁸ Cockburn accuses Law of mingling these two issues together, which in her view are better kept separate:

The defenders of this antecedent fitness, have no need of supposing, that the present system is *absolutely best*. There may be many possible, indeed actually created, worlds as good or perhaps better than this: each of these may have different systems producing different relations, and fitnesses resulting from them, which will be as eternal and immutable as those of our system are asserted to be; for the relations of all *possible* systems must be eternally in the divine *mind*, as the translator owns; they cannot therefore be dependent on *will*.⁵⁹

Her point is that the view that there are antecedent fitnesses does not presuppose that there is one best possible world. She argues that irrespective of which world God chooses to create, "when he has fixed on any particular system, the relations and fitnesses resulting from it are necessary; and to act suitably to them, must be an immutable rule to that system of beings."⁶⁰ Building on her view that God cannot arbitrarily change what is good and evil,⁶¹ Cockburn here adds the further consideration that all creatures of the world form a system and stand in various relations to each other, from which certain fitnesses and unfitnesses result. Each possible world involves a system of kinds of beings, and the fitnesses that result from the necessary relations among the kinds of being are eternally perceived by the divine understanding. Once God has decided which particular world he intends to create, then the fitnesses and unfitnesses pertaining to this world, which were previously perceived in the divine understanding, will be the foundation of the moral obligations that actually obtain in the created world. This means that

⁵⁷ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 110.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ See section 4.1 above.

moral obligations are fixed in the divine understanding and cannot be changed after the initial creation of the actual world.⁶²

Cockburn draws attention to a further problem with the reasoning by Clarke's opponents in the appendix to her *Remarks upon Some Writers*.⁶³ There she returns to the objection that relations and the fitnesses that result from them cannot be eternal or independent of the will of God, since they presuppose the existence of things, and God's will brings things into existence. Cockburn claims that the reasoning of Clarke's opponents is fallacious, since they fail to distinguish between particular existences and general abstract ideas.⁶⁴ In her view, Clarke's opponents are mistaken to assume that Clarke and his followers accept that particular existences exist eternally and independently of God's will. Instead, relations and fitnesses involve general abstract ideas, and as Cockburn argues, "the relations and fitnesses, they speak of, are *truths eternally in the divine understanding*, which proceed not from any determination of his will, but are the rules, by which his will is itself determined."⁶⁵

To sum up, all of Cockburn's arguments considered in this section downplay the importance of the divine will and shift the focus instead towards the divine understanding. Law's aim was to show that the creation of the actual world cannot be explained solely in terms of the divine understanding and that it involves an arbitrary act of will or free choice. Cockburn does not deny that God's will is involved in the creation of the actual world, but she emphasizes that

⁶² Cockburn is mainly concerned with showing that it is possible to establish a moral fitness theory independently of the view that there is a best possible world. However, her discussion leaves open whether God has a criterion for choosing one world over the many other possible world. Her text does not explicitly address this issue.

⁶³ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 143–144.

⁶⁴ See Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 144. Cockburn sometimes switches from speaking about "eternal and immutable relations" to speaking about "essential differences of things" (*RSW*, pp. 140, 143). Her claim that eternal and immutable relations and the fitnesses that arise from them should be understood in terms of abstract ideas and distinguished from particular existence, can also be understood as the claim that (abstract) essences should be distinguished from (particular) existences.

⁶⁵ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 144.

the creation cannot be understood solely in terms of acts of divine will. Rather, she draws attention to the role that the divine understanding plays and how the divine will is bound by the divine understanding. Law and Cockburn may be said to agree that both the divine will and divine understanding play a role in God's creation, but Cockburn puts more emphasis on the importance of the divine understanding. Her God is guided by his intellect and cannot execute his will independently of the rules of the divine understanding.

4.3 Arguments Concerning Moral Obligation and the Role of a Superior Lawmaker

If we accept Cockburn's view that human nature is the foundation of morality and that moral obligations are grounded in the fitnesses that arise from human nature, then one may worry that her moral philosophy lacks the resources to explain what makes moral obligations binding. In particular, one may worry that if I establish the moral obligations then they will not be sufficiently binding, since I can easily release myself from acting in accordance with the moral obligations that I set for myself. William Warburton raises a similar objection in *The Divine Legation* (1738), directed against the philosophy of Pierre Bayle.⁶⁶ Since Cockburn comments on *The Divine Legation*,⁶⁷ she was aware of Warburton's worry that we cannot account for the bindingness of moral obligations unless there is a distinction between the obliger and the subject that is being obliged, or as one may also put it, between a lawgiver and the being that is subject to the law. Warburton argues:

Obligation in general necessarily implies an Obliger: The Obliger must be different from the Obligated: To make the same Man at once the Obliger and Obligated, is the same thing as to make him treat or enter into compact with himself, which is the highest of Absurdities, in the Matter of Obligation. For it is an unexceptionable Rule of right Reason, that whoever acquires a Right to any thing, from the Obligation of another towards him, may relinquish that Right. If therefore the Obliger and Obligated should be one and the same Person, all Obligation there must be void of course; or rather there would be no Obligation begun.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ See Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, pp. 47–48.

⁶⁷ See Cockburn, *RSW*, pp. 137–143.

⁶⁸ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 47.

If the obliger and the subject that is being obliged are identical, then one can easily stop adhering to the obligation, and this would undermine the obligation itself. Thus, Warburton believes that the obliger has to be different from the subject that is being obliged and has to be in a position to make the obligation binding for the subject to adhere to it.

Cockburn does not accept Warburton's line of reasoning. In response, she states that the word "obligation" as it is commonly understood "implies only a perception of some ground or reason, upon which it is founded, but not necessarily a superior will."⁶⁹ The point of dispute between Cockburn and Warburton concerns the question of whether the foundation of moral obligation can be internal to human beings or whether it is external and requires a superior lawgiver.

Let us consider whether Cockburn's response would satisfy Warburton. Warburton, who opposes Bayle (or "the Stratonian Atheist"⁷⁰), anticipates that his opponent will say that obligation is founded on "Right Reason."⁷¹ However, for Warburton this response highlights "the very Absurdity" he is concerned about, "because *Reason* is only an Attribute of the Person obliged, his Assistant to judge of his Obligations if he hath any from any other Being: To make *this* then the Obliger, is to make a Man oblige himself."⁷²

Cockburn offers a further consideration in response, namely, that moral agents are free. She writes: "Very true, but it is just the same, whatever principle we suppose obligation to be originally founded on; a free-agent must be always the *immediate* obliger of himself."⁷³ In this passage, Cockburn distinguishes between the original foundation of obligation and the immediate obliger. She acknowledges different possible candidates for the original foundation of moral obligation: the will of a superior lawmaker, necessary relations and essential differences of

⁶⁹ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 140.

⁷⁰ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.* Cockburn paraphrases and quotes parts of this passage from Warburton in *RSW*, p. 140.

⁷³ Cockburn, *RSW*, p. 140.

things, consciousness of right and wrong, and the prospect of rewards and punishments. But irrespective of what the original foundation of moral obligation is, Cockburn argues that in each case a judgement of the mind is involved, which means that it is “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*.”⁷⁴

Although Cockburn’s distinction between the original foundation of moral obligation and the immediate obliger is interesting, her response shifts the focus of the debate and might not fully satisfy Warburton or other philosophers who believe that the source of moral obligation is external to the moral agent. When Warburton asks what the foundation of moral obligation is, he seems concerned about the original foundation of moral obligation. His view is that nothing “except a Law ... can oblige a dependent reasonable Being endowed with a Will.”⁷⁵ Moreover, he is committed to the view that a law supposes a superior lawmaker, and believes that moral obligation is founded on this superior status of a lawmaker, since a superior lawmaker has the power to make it obligatory for dependent beings to act in accordance with the laws of the superior lawmaker.⁷⁶ Of course, this does not entail that humans lack the power to choose to act against moral laws. Nevertheless, I take it that Warburton would argue that if agents deliberate by means of reason about which choice to make, there is only one morally correct choice, namely, to act in accordance with the moral laws, or the divine will. This means that they will be guided by the original foundation of moral obligation, which for Warburton consists in the will of a superior lawmaker. Thus, contrary to Cockburn, Warburton would argue that agents cannot be immediate obligers; rather, in his view, the obliger is an external superior lawmaker.

Warburton also comments on the question of free agency, which sheds further light on his concerns about grounding morality in the nature of things. He assumes that nature is “blind”

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, p. 48.

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*

and “unintelligent” and governed by “the Law of Necessity,”⁷⁷ which leads him to argue that nature can neither be a lawgiver nor serve as a foundation for moral obligation.⁷⁸ Warburton here adopts a conception of nature that leaves no scope for agency, since for him nature is void of cognition and is a purely material, non-thinking entity that is governed by necessity. Though this argument was directed against Bayle rather than Cockburn, it is helpful to consider what resources Cockburn’s philosophy offers for avoiding the problem that Warburton raises. Cockburn does not share Warburton’s conception of nature. Her account of human nature does not presuppose any particular metaphysical constitution of the nature of human beings; rather, she remains largely agnostic about the exact details of their metaphysical constitution and does not take a stance on whether human minds are material or immaterial entities.⁷⁹ She is committed only to the view that humans are by nature sensible, rational, and social beings. Her account of human nature does not have to be understood in terms of necessity, and thus leaves room for free agency. Moreover, Warburton’s remarks about nature being blind and unintelligent do not apply to her account of human nature, since rational, social, and sensible beings are intelligent rather than unintelligent.

Cockburn’s arguments against Warburton bring to light that it is not necessary to postulate a superior divine lawmaker in order to explain the foundation of morality, and her position offers a viable alternative to views that claim that the source of moral obligation has to be external to human beings.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ The relevant passage reads in full: “Moral Obligation, that is, the Obligation of a free Agent, further implies a *Law*, which enjoins and forbids; but a *Law* is the Imposition of an intelligent Superior, who has Power to exact conformity thereto. But blind unintelligent Nature is no Law-giver, nor can what proceeds necessarily from it, come under the Notion of a Law: We say indeed, in common Speech, the *Law of Reason*, and *the Law of Necessity*; but these are merely popular and figurative Expressions: By the first, we mean the Rule that the Law-giver lays down for judging of his Will, and the second is only an Insinuation that *Necessity* hath, as it were, one property of a *Law*, namely that of *forcing*” (Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, 48).

⁷⁹ See Cockburn, *Defence*, pp. 60–61, 83–84; RSW, pp. 101–103. See also Boeker 2023, 14, 21–23.

5. Conclusion

Above we have seen that Cockburn offers several intelligent arguments that challenge the views of her voluntarist contemporaries. She rejects the view that God can by an arbitrary act of will change what is good and evil. One may concede this point and argue instead for another version of voluntarism according to which God's initial creation of the world is based solely on an act of divine will. Cockburn also challenges this version of voluntarism and draws attention to the role that the divine understanding plays in creation. Her point is that even if an act of divine will is involved in the initial creation, this does not undermine moral fitness theory, for the divine understanding also plays a role and the relations and fitnesses are perceived eternally in the divine understanding. She also distances herself from views that appeal to an external superior lawgiver in order to establish the bindingness of moral obligation. She further comments on this issue in a letter to Thomas Sharp:

But I would ask, if the will of God is supposed to be the *only* foundation of moral obligation, upon what grounds we are obliged to obey his will? I can conceive no other, but either his absolute power to *punish and reward*; or the *fitness* of obedience from a creature to his creator.⁸⁰

Cockburn disapproves of the first option, which would ascribe arbitrary power to God.

However, if this option is rejected, she argues, “the other returns us to that reason, nature, and essential differences of things, into which, I apprehend, all obligation must at last be resolved.”⁸¹

This means that the view collapses into her moral fitness theory. Here we see once more how Cockburn not only draws attention to the shortcomings of the views of her voluntarist opponents, but also highlights the advantages of her own preferred moral view.⁸²

⁸⁰ Cockburn, letter to Thomas Sharp, undated (probably August or September 1743), in *The Works of Mrs. Catharine Cockburn*, 2:359.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² I would like to thank Sonja Schierbaum and Jörn Müller for inviting me to contribute to this volume and for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. I presented an earlier version of this paper at the “Varieties of Voluntarism in Medieval and Early Modern Ethics” conference in July 2021 and would like to thank the audience for helpful comments and discussion.

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