

## 1 Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Life and Works

Catharine Trotter Cockburn was a remarkable playwright, writer, and philosopher. As a philosopher she contributed to a wide range of philosophical debates on issues in epistemology, metaphysics, moral philosophy, and religion.

### 1.1 Life and Career as Writer, Playwright, and Philosopher

Catharine Trotter (later Cockburn) was born in London in the 1670s, probably on 16 August 1679, as the second daughter of her parents David Trotter and Sarah Trotter (née Ballenden).<sup>1</sup> Her parents were both Scottish. Her father David Trotter was a sea captain, working as commander for the Royal Navy, but unfortunately died in 1684. His death left the family in difficult financial circumstances. Sarah Trotter received a widow's pension from Charles II, but following the king's death in 1685, the family had to rely on the support of family and friends and her pension was not renewed until 1702 when Queen Anne acceded to the throne.<sup>2</sup> Catharine grew up under these financially challenging circumstances and is said to have largely educated herself. For instance, she taught herself how to write and to speak French 'without any instructor' (Birch 1751: 1:iv), but, as her biographer Thomas Birch notes, 'she had some assistance in the study of the *Latin* grammar and *Logic*' (Birch 1751: 1:iv–v).

She started writing at a young age and her literary writings include poetry, a novella, and five plays, which were all performed in London. Her first published work is an epistolary novella, *The Adventures of a Young Lady*, which she published anonymously in 1693 in *Letters of Love and Gallantry and Several Other Subjects, All Written by Ladies* (Briscoe 1693).<sup>3</sup> In 1695 her first play, *Agnes de Castro*, was performed and published in 1696. This was followed by *Fatal Friendship* (1698), *Love at a Loss* (1701), *The Unhappy Penitent* (1701), and *The Revolution of Sweden* (1706).<sup>4</sup> As Kelley (2004) notes, '[h]er drama is notable in this period for its unusually rational and politically aware female characters'. During these years Trotter also started to engage with

<sup>1</sup> According to her biographer, Thomas Birch (1751: 1:iv), she was born on 16 August 1679, but Kelley (2002: 1 n. 1) has found a church record that suggests that she was born five years earlier and baptized on 29 August 1674. However, there is also other evidence that points to a more likely birthdate in 1679. For instance, her gravestone states that she died 'in the 70 year of her age' (Kelley 2002: 1 n. 1). Moreover, Cockburn mentions in a letter to Pope from 1738 that she will soon turn 60 (British Library, Add. MS 4265, fol. 31, Broad (2021: 124 n. 7)). See also Kelley (2004, 2006b: vii).

<sup>2</sup> See Birch (1751: 1:iii–iv), Kelley (2004).

<sup>3</sup> This work was retitled *Olinda's Adventures, or, the Armours of a Young Lady* and reprinted by Briscoe under her name in 1718; it is also reprinted in Kelley (2006a).

<sup>4</sup> *Fatal Friendship* is the only play that was reprinted in her *Works*. See Kelley (2002) for further discussion. See also Bigdon (2013: chs. 3 and 4).

the philosophical debates of her day and published her first philosophical work, *A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding*, in 1702, which I will discuss in Section 1.2.1.

Catharine Trotter was born into an Anglican family but converted to Catholicism at a young age. However, as she devoted more time to philosophical and religious studies and writing and as she also spent more time in philosophical and religious circles in London and Salisbury, she started to question her Catholic faith.<sup>5</sup> After thorough examination of both faiths, she converted back to Anglicanism in 1707 and published *A Discourse Concerning a Guide in Controversies* (*Works* 1:2–42) with a preface by Gilbert Burnet in the same year. This work outlines her criticism of the Roman Catholic Church. Gilbert Burnet, who was Bishop of Salisbury, his third wife, Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet, and Gilbert Burnet's cousin, Thomas Burnet of Kemnay,<sup>6</sup> played an important role in Cockburn's conversion back to the Church of England. Indeed, Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet went so far as to write to John Locke in June 1702 and to ask for his assistance to free her from 'a relegion that puts such schacles on the exercise of thought and reason' (Locke 1976–89: letter 3153, 7:638).<sup>7</sup>

In 1708 Catharine married the clergyman Patrick Cockburn (1678–1749), and they moved from London to Nayland, Suffolk, the same year, but returned to London in 1713. Patrick Cockburn lost his appointment as curate when George I became king and Patrick refused to take the oath of abjuration. The subsequent years were financially challenging for the Cockburn family. After further consultation, Patrick Cockburn eventually agreed to take the oath in 1726 and was appointed as minister of the Episcopal Church in Aberdeen. They lived in Aberdeen for over a decade until Patrick was required to take up residence in Longhorsley in Northumberland in 1737. Catharine joined him there sometime between late 1738 and 1740.<sup>8</sup> Catharine and Patrick had four children: Sarah, Catharine, John, and Grissel.<sup>9</sup>

It is often thought that Cockburn's family duties left her little time for writing and that this explains why she did not publish any works between 1708 and 1726.<sup>10</sup> However, as Melanie Bigold (2013) notes, 'presenting Cockburn's writing from this print-oriented perspective is unfaithful to her lifelong

<sup>5</sup> For further details concerning these intellectual circles, see Bigold (2013: ch. 3) and Broad (2002: ch 6).

<sup>6</sup> Selections of Cockburn's correspondence with Thomas Burnet are included in her *Works*.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet started corresponding with Locke in the 1690s. For further details, see Broad (2019: ch. 4).

<sup>8</sup> See Broad (2020: 189 n. 296).

<sup>9</sup> Her correspondence with Arbuthnot provides further insight into her family life (see Correspondence 125–253).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, see Birch (1751), Broad (2002: 156), Myers (1990: 164).

programme of reading and writing on literary, religious, and philosophical issues' (97). Bigold argues that it is important to consider Cockburn's unpublished manuscripts, in addition to her published works, to gain a fuller appreciation of her writings.<sup>11</sup> Bigold notes further that manuscript circulation was common in social and intellectual circles in eighteenth-century Britain and that not all manuscripts were intended for print publication. Moreover, Cockburn lacked the financial means to pay for publication costs herself and depended on patronage. Manuscript circulation helped her not only to share ideas, but also to find patrons to sponsor print publications (Bigold 2013: ch. 3).

Since I will comment further on her major published philosophical and religious works in the next section, I want to highlight here some of her other writings and correspondence that shed light on her philosophical thinking. Between 1731 and 1748 she was engaged in correspondence with her niece Ann Hepburn Arbuthnot. Cockburn takes on the role of mentor and encourages Arbuthnot's independent intellectual development and critical thinking.<sup>12</sup> Cockburn and Arbuthnot regularly exchange and discuss moral and religious books as well as novels and other literature. In their letters they discuss the moral philosophy of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Samuel Clarke, Joseph Butler, and various other philosophers. Additionally, Cockburn's correspondence with Thomas Sharp (*Works* 2:353–460)<sup>13</sup> and Edmund Law (Correspondence 254–65) sheds helpful light on her moral philosophy.

Although Cockburn rarely discusses the role of women in her published philosophical works, she was well aware of the challenges that women of her day faced, as her correspondence documents.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in her 'Letter of Advice to Her Son' (*Works* 2:111–21), she argues for the equality of men and women and criticizes the unjust ways in which many men treat women:

But do not imagine, that women are to be considered only as objects of your pleasure, as the fine gentlemen of the world seem, by their conduct, to do. There is nothing more unjust, more base, and barbarous, than is often practised towards them, under the specious names of love and gallantry; as if they had not an equal right, with those of the other sex, to be treated with justice and honour. (*Works* 2:119)

Cockburn continued her intellectual activities until the end of her life. She was well read in the philosophical and religious debates that took place in Britain during her day and engaged with them with wit and intellectual

<sup>11</sup> Cockburn's extant manuscripts can be found in the British Library, Add. MS 4264–7.

<sup>12</sup> See Cockburn, Correspondence 146, 149.

<sup>13</sup> For letters not included in her *Works*, see British Library, Add. MS 4264 and 4266.

<sup>14</sup> See also Broad (2014) and Hutton (2017) for further discussion of the challenges that women philosophers of the early modern period encountered.

sharpness, as her two major works in moral philosophy, *Remarks upon Some Writers* (1743) and *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford's Essay* (1747), make evident. She died in Longhorsley on 11 May 1749 and is buried next to her husband Patrick, who died a few months earlier, and their youngest daughter Grissel, who died in 1742.

Unfortunately, Cockburn did not live long enough to see the publication of *The Works of Mrs. Catharine Cockburn*, edited by Thomas Birch, in 1751.<sup>15</sup> Cockburn played an active role in helping with the preparation of her *Works* when the project was started with the help and advice of her male mentors in the 1740s. This collection contains not only many of her previously published works, but also many of her works and writings that remained unpublished to that day.

## 1.2 Philosophical Works

### 1.2.1 A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding

Cockburn's first philosophical work was *A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding*, originally published anonymously in 1702. In this work Cockburn (then Trotter) takes on the charge of defending Locke against objections made in three anonymously published pamphlets, *Remarks upon an Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (Anon. 1697a), *Second Remarks* (Anon. 1697b), and *Third Remarks* (Anon. 1699). Although it has been widely assumed that Thomas Burnet of Charterhouse was the author of these pamphlets,<sup>16</sup> Walmsley, Craig, and Burrows (2016) have offered convincing evidence that it is more likely that Richard Willis, successively bishop of Gloucester, Salisbury, and Winchester, was the author. Locke took note of the three pamphlets and made marginal notes in his copies of *Remarks* and *Third Remarks*.<sup>17</sup> However, he was not interested in responding publicly to them. Locke added 'An Answer to Remarks upon the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, &c.' (Locke 1823: 4:185–9) as a postscript to the publication of his reply to Edward Stillingfleet's letter.<sup>18</sup> Besides Locke's short dismissive remarks in this postscript, he did not engage again in print with *Remarks*, *Second Remarks*, or *Third Remarks*. In Cockburn's view the Remarker misunderstands and unfairly attacks Locke's *Essay*. Her *Defence* is not merely a 'defence' of Locke, but she

<sup>15</sup> Initially, William Warburton was meant to be the editor, but the project was handed over to Birch after Cockburn's death in 1749. See Bigold (2013: 94–5) for further details.

<sup>16</sup> This attribution has first been made by Birch (1751: xv).

<sup>17</sup> Locke's personal copies of these pamphlets with his marginalia can be found in the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>18</sup> Locke's public correspondence with Stillingfleet focuses on various metaphysical, epistemological, and religious issues (Locke 1823: vol. 4).

also builds on Lockean principles to develop clever arguments of her own that advance the philosophical debates of her day. As she puts it in one passage of her *Defence*, the question for her ‘is not what Mr. *Locke* thinks, but what may be proved from his principles’ (*Defence* 46). This intimates that she sees herself as a philosophical interlocutor among her philosophical contemporaries.

Cockburn’s *Defence* covers a broad range of philosophical topics. She discusses epistemological questions concerning the origin of ideas. Like Locke, she rejects innate ideas and regards sensation and reflection as the sources of our ideas and the basis of moral and religious knowledge. She also engages with various other topics in moral philosophy such as the role of reward and punishment and the role of conscience. In other parts of *Defence* she turns to topics in metaphysics and religion such as questions concerning the immortality and immateriality of the soul, persons and personal identity, and the question whether thinking substances can be material.

Locke thought very favourably of *Defence* and was eager to identify the author of this anonymously published work (Locke 1976–89: letter 3234, 7:730–1). Eventually he learned that Cockburn was the author from their mutual friend Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet (Locke 1976–1989: letters 3153 and 3164, 7:638, 650–1). Locke expressed his gratitude in a letter of thanks to Cockburn (Locke 1976–1989: 7:730–1) and also sent her books and money in appreciation.

### 1.2.2 A Letter to Dr. Holdsworth

Cockburn’s next major philosophical work was *A Letter to Dr. Holdsworth*, which she completed in 1724, but which was not published until January 1727. This work is a critical response to Winch Holdsworth’s *A Sermon Preached before the University of Oxford on Easter Monday, 1719* (Holdsworth 1720). Cockburn believes that Holdsworth unfairly accused Locke of being a Socinian and of denying the resurrection of the same body.<sup>19</sup> In her *Letter to Holdsworth*, Cockburn aims to defend Locke against both of these charges. Socinians question the Trinity, because they believe that there is no scriptural basis for it, and they regard the doctrine as illogical. Holdsworth assumes that Locke denies the Trinity and thus regards him as a Socinian. Against Holdsworth’s charge, Cockburn points out that Locke ‘had not in his *Essay*, or any where else, written one word directly or indirectly concerning the Trinity’ (*Letter to Holdsworth* 120). Cockburn’s main focus in her *Letter to Holdsworth*, however,

<sup>19</sup> Socinianism is named after the sixteenth-century Italian theologian Faustus Socinus and refers to a theological movement that opposes the Trinity and Calvinist views. See Lucci (2021: ch. 2) for further discussion of Socinianism in the context of Locke’s religious writings.

is to show that Locke, who was a careful reader of Scripture, argued for the resurrection of the dead, but not for the resurrection of the same body, because Scripture never mentions the resurrection of the same body. According to Cockburn, Locke's account of personal identity offers further support for his views concerning the resurrection, but she believes that Holdsworth has misunderstood Locke's thinking about identity and personal identity.

### 1.2.3 *A Vindication of Mr. Locke's Christian Principles*

Soon after the publication of Cockburn's *Letter to Holdsworth*, Holdsworth published *A Defence of the Resurrection of the Same Body* (1727) in response. This work has two parts. In Part I Holdsworth offers further 'proofs' that Locke was a Socinian, and Part II further explains Holdsworth's views concerning the resurrection of the same body. Cockburn was not satisfied with his response and wrote *A Vindication of Mr. Locke's Christian Principles* to further clarify Locke's and her view and to counter Holdsworth's position. Cockburn was not able to find a publisher for this work, and it was first published as part of her *Works* in 1751.

### 1.2.4 *Remarks upon Some Writers*

Cockburn completed another philosophical work, *Remarks upon Some Writers*, in 1740, but initially struggled to find a publisher willing to print her manuscript. This work was eventually published in August 1743 as part of *The History of the Works of the Learned* without her name on the title page. *Remarks upon Some Writers* begins with some 'Cursory Thoughts' (RSW 91–105) on metaphysical questions such as necessary existence, whether space is real and infinite, whether minds are extended and have a place in space. 'Cursory Thoughts' also contains a critical discussion of Isaac Watt's account of substance. The remaining parts of *Remarks upon Some Writers* focus on debates in British moral philosophy concerning the foundation of moral virtue and obligation. Cockburn critically engages with several authors who had criticized Samuel Clarke's moral philosophy. In particular, she challenges Edmund Law's Notes, which he added to his translation into English and edition of William King's *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* (Law 1732 [1731]),<sup>20</sup> John Gay's 'Preliminary Dissertation' (1732 [1731]), which was prefixed to Law's edition of King's *Essay on the Origin of Evil*, Thomas Johnson's *An Essay on Moral Obligation* (1731), George Johnston's *The Eternal Obligation of Natural Religion* (1732), and William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* (1738).

<sup>20</sup> Here and in the following I cite from the second edition, because Cockburn used this edition.

Cockburn's *Remarks upon Some Writers* provides good insight into her own moral theory, which is based on human nature and moral fitnesses, and how she uses this theory not only to argue against theological voluntarism and self-interested moral views, but also to show that atheists can be virtuous.

### 1.2.5 *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford's Essay*

After Thomas Rutherford's publication of *An Essay on the Nature and Obligations of Virtue* (1744), Cockburn penned another work in response, which was published as *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford's Essay* in 1747 with a preface by William Warburton. Cockburn rejects Rutherford's self-interested moral view and argues instead that self-love should be distinguished from selfishness and that self-love and benevolence do not exclude each other (RR 158–9). In her view, there are plenty of instances of disinterested benevolence. She also presents several counter-examples to Rutherford's view that virtue can be understood in terms of doing good to others (RR 151–5). For instance, she gives the example of a rich miser (RR 155) who saves up all his money to build a hospital after his death. Here we have an example of an action that does good to others, but in Cockburn's view it is not a virtuous action. Hence, the example is meant to show that some actions can do good to others without being virtuous. Contrary to Rutherford, she argues that it is more plausible that 'virtue consists in acting suitably to the nature and relations of things' (RR 152). Furthermore, Cockburn examines the causes of moral obligation, free agency, and the role of the will of God. She also reflects on various other moral questions such as the relation between humans and non-human animals (RR 183–9, 212–3) and offers teleological considerations concerning the purpose of God's creatures.

## 1.3 Summary

In the following sections we will take a closer look at Cockburn's philosophy. Section 2 focuses on her epistemology and metaphysics and shows that she regards sensation and reflection as the sources of our ideas and knowledge. The section further highlights how Cockburn draws attention to the limitations of human understanding and how she approaches metaphysical debates – such as debates concerning persons and personal identity, the materiality or immateriality of the mind, God's necessary existence, or the metaphysical constitution of space – through this lens. Section 3 examines her moral philosophy and pays special attention to her metaphysics of morality and her views concerning the practice of morality, as well as her arguments against theological voluntarism,

and her contribution to debates concerning self-interest and benevolence in British moral philosophy. Section 4 turns to her religious views and considers Cockburn's understanding of the relation between morality and religion, and her views concerning the resurrection and the afterlife. Section 5 highlights Cockburn's significant contributions to the philosophical debates of the early modern period and examines how her writings were received during the eighteenth century.

## 2 Epistemology and Metaphysics

Cockburn actively engaged with the epistemological and metaphysical debates of her day. Her epistemological views about the scope and the limitations of knowledge shape her metaphysical thinking. She engages with a range of debates in metaphysics, but her approach to all these debates is shaped by her awareness that human understanding is limited and that we are ignorant of many metaphysical facts. Section 2.1 introduces Cockburn's account of the sources, scope, and limitations of knowledge. Section 2.2 examines her contributions to philosophical debates about persons and personal identity, to the question whether minds must always be thinking, and to debates about whether minds or thinking substances are material or immaterial. Section 2.3 turns to Cockburn's contribution to metaphysical debates about God and the question whether he exists necessarily as well as to the question whether space exists and, if so, what kind of being it could be.

### 2.1 Knowledge and Its Limitations

#### 2.1.1 Sources of Knowledge

Cockburn, like Locke, rejects innate ideas and principles (*Defence* 51–2, 59–60, 72–5, 79).<sup>21</sup> This means that she believes that initially there is no content in the mind and that the mind acquires content or ideas by means of sensation and reflection (*Defence* 40–1, 50–2, 59–60, 81). It is worth noting that neither Locke nor Cockburn deny that humans are born with mental capacities such as the capacity to have sensations, to reflect, or to reason. We can regard these mental capacities as dispositions that need to be developed and improved over time. Before we take a closer look at what role sensation and reflection play in Cockburn's epistemology, let us consider one of her arguments against innate ideas.

Cockburn believes that Locke's arguments sufficiently establish that there are no innate ideas and principles (*Defence* 51–2). Nevertheless, she offers further

<sup>21</sup> See Locke, *Essay* I. Principles for Locke and Cockburn have the form of a proposition and are composed of several ideas.