

Contributi/5

Hierarchy of Beings and Equality of Men and Women in Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Philosophy

Sofía Beatriz Calvente  0000-0003-2041-7498

Articolo sottoposto a *double-blind peer review*. Inviato il 11/03/2024. Accettato il 23/07/2024.

In the early modern period the chain of being thesis was used by naturalists and philosophers to justify female subordination. My aim is to establish whether Catharine Trotter Cockburn's endorsement of this thesis entails that differences between sexes assigns differentiating places in the scale or not. I will review Locke's formulation of the ontological scale first, because Cockburn refers to his description. Locke's skepticism regarding our access to the real essence of substances hinders him from drawing unequivocal boundaries between species and even within human species. However, he states that wives must subordinate to husbands on the basis of a higher capacity and strength naturally endowed to men. Cockburn's understanding of the ontological scale rests on a realist conception where boundaries between species are clearly delimited because their nature is fixed and immutable. This insight into the ontological scale is employed to endorse natural equality between sexes, because if all members of a species share the same nature, they deserve equal treatment. Cockburn explains women subjection in terms of vicious notions and attitudes rooted in prejudice.

1. The Place of Women in the Scale of Beings

It is possible to assert along with Patricia Sheridan that the hierarchy of beings thesis – namely the view that all kinds of being are arranged on a gradual scale –, has a prominent role in the metaphysical and moral framework of Catharine Trotter Cockburn's works (1679-1749)¹. The metaphysical implication of this thesis is shown in *Remarks upon some Writers in the Controversy concerning the*

¹ P. Sheridan, *On Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Metaphysics of Morals* in E. Thomas (ed.), *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics*, Cambridge 2018, p. 264. For a different view on the role of the chain of being in Cockburn's metaphysics, see R. Boeker, *Catharine Trotter Cockburn*, Cambridge 2023, p. 28. A seminal work on the chain of being thesis is A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge MA 1936.

Foundation of Moral Virtue and Moral Obligation (1743)² where she posits that space is a kind of non-thinking immaterial being acting as an ontological link between bodies and spirits³. The moral implication is stated in *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr Rutherford's Essay* (1747)⁴ where she addresses the obligations and rights that pertain to human beings according to our place in the chain of being (RPR 184-187, 212-214).

My aim is to evaluate a moral aspect of the ontological hierarchy regarding the place human beings occupy in it. The thesis of the chain of being is rooted in antiquity, mainly in Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy⁵. From its very origins, it delineated humans privileged position in the universe. But women's place in the scale was not the same as men's because women were regarded as inferior to men in degree of perfection⁶. In the early modern period there were naturalists, physicians and philosophers who still insisted on employing it as an argument to endorse female subordination. On the one hand, there were Christian moralists who argued for women's inferiority on the basis of biblical precedent. The story of Adam and Eve was invoked as an evidence of women's spiritual and intellectual inferiority⁷. On the other hand, there were arguments which emphasized the differences between men and women in physiological terms. British physicians such as Robert Burton and Thomas Wright suggested that women were easily caught by violent passions due to their tender complexion. Thomas Sydenham, likewise, established a connection between women's physical complexion and their tendency to experience vehement passions. These kind of passions tended to obliterate reason and to corrupt judgment⁸. In the same vein, Nicholas

² C. Trotter Cockburn, *Remarks upon some Writers in the Controversy concerning the Foundation of Moral Virtue and Moral Obligation*, in C. Trotter Cockburn, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by P. Sheridan, Peterborough 2006, pp. 87-146. Hereafter cited as [RSW] followed by page number.

³ I dealt with the metaphysical implications of the scale of beings in S. Calvente, *Un problema metafísico en la filosofía de Catharine Trotter Cockburn: el espacio, el alma y la jerarquía de seres*, «Thémata. Revista de filosofía», 67, 2023, pp. 139-161, where I discussed some aspects of E. Thomas thesis in *Catharine Trotter Cockburn on Unthinking Immaterial Substance: Souls, Space and Related Matters*, «Philosophy Compass», 10, 2015, pp. 255-263.

⁴ C. Trotter Cockburn, *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr Rutherford's Essay on the Nature and Obligation of Virtue*, in C. Trotter Cockburn, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 147-223. Hereafter cited as [RPR] followed by page number.

⁵ See A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, ch. 2.

⁶ See N. Tuana, *The Less Noble Sex. Scientific, Religious and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature*, Bloomington 1993, p. 3; L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body. Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, New Brunswick 2013, pp. 147, 156.

⁷ See K. Ready, *Damaris Cudworth Masham, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, and the Feminist Legacy of Locke's Theory of Personal Identity*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 35 (4), 2002, p. 566. Ready mentions reverend Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling* (1673) as a representative of this kind of religious subordination argument (p. 572). On *The Ladies Calling* see also S. Apreti, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 2-8.

⁸ See G. Di Biase, *John Locke on Women's rationality*, «Philosophical Inquiry», 8 (20), 2020, pp. 23-26 for a thorough exam of the arguments of these physicians.

Malebranche asserted the natural origin of women's intellectual inferiority, which he explained by means of the delicacy of their brain fibers⁹.

Given the fact that Cockburn acknowledges the inequalities between men and women, and explicitly decries women subordination, my aim is to elucidate whether her endorsement of the chain of being might entail assuming that sex differences assigns differentiating places in the scale, or she explains these asymmetries between men and women by other means. From the arguments outlined above, we can infer that turning to the chain of being might entail assuming natural or theological causes to explain women subordination. These kinds of causes could be hardly modified because they are related to the design of the Creator, in the case of theological reasons; or to biological constitution, in the case of natural ones.

Firstly, I will review the ontological scale thesis as it appears in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*¹⁰, because Cockburn broadly follows his formulation (as well as Addison's) as a source of inspiration. My purpose will be to determine whether it contains traces that point out to a subordinate place for women in the ontological scale. On the one hand, Locke's skepticism regarding our access to the real essence of substances makes it difficult to come to a verdict because it hinders us from drawing unequivocal boundaries between different species and even within human species. On the other hand, in *Two Treatises of Government*¹¹, Locke points out that when entering into marriage wives must subordinate to husbands on the basis of certain qualities that men «naturally» possess to a higher degree than women. This alleged natural superiority of men above women is given no proper ground in Locke's texts. Secondly, I will turn to Cockburn's conception of the hierarchy of beings, which rests on a realist conception where the boundaries between the species are clearly delimited. This argument is grounded in her moral doctrine, which provides her with means to avoid biological or theological reasons for female subordination. Cockburn assumes all human beings have a fixed and immutable nature, which defines us as rational, social and sensible beings, regardless sexual differences. Even though there is a gradation of beings, due to their common nature, all humans are placed in the same step of the hierarchy and deserve to be treated on an equal footing. Therefore, men are not regarded as the standard of human species and women as incomplete or imperfect versions of this standard. Lastly, I will study

⁹ See N. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, trans. and ed. by Th. Lennon and P. Olscamp, Cambridge 1997, p. 130. Malebranche says that this delicacy gives women greater understanding of whatever is related to the senses but poses serious difficulties for abstract reasoning. Malebranche, as well as his British disciple John Norris, is mentioned in Cockburn's correspondence with Thomas Burnet. See C. Trotter Cockburn, *The Works of Mrs Catharine Cockburn*, 2 vols., ed. Th. Birch, London 1751, pp. 2, 162, 191 (cited hereafter as [WCC] followed by volume and page number).

¹⁰ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford 1975. Hereafter cited as [E] followed by part, chapter and paragraph numbers.

¹¹ J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Lasslet, Cambridge 1988. Hereafter cited as [T] followed by treatise and paragraph numbers.

what causes does Cockburn identify for female subordination, since they do neither reside in the hierarchy of beings nor in human nature. I will suggest that they are linked to vicious notions and attitudes rooted in prejudice.

2. Locke's Ambiguous Formulations

The scale of beings appears twice in Locke's *Essay* (*E* 3.6.12 and 4.16.12). The formulation, in both passages, is similar. Locke states:

In all the visible corporeal world, we see no chasms or gaps. All quite down from us the descent is by easy steps, and a continued series of things, that in each remove differ very little one from the other [*E* 3.6.12].

Finding in all parts of the creation, that fall under human observation, that there is a *gradual connexion of one with another, without any great or discernible gaps between, in all that great variety of things we see in the world*, which are so closely linked together, that in the several ranks of beings, it is not easy to discover the bounds betwixt them [*E* 4.16.12].

Applying the rules of analogy, it is plausible to think that the scale continues upward beyond our observation:

And that there are several ranks of intelligent beings, excelling us in several degrees of perfection, ascending upwards towards the infinite perfection of the Creator, by gentle steps and differences, that are every one at no great distance from the next to it [*E* 4.16.12].

The scale of beings appears for the first time in Book III of the *Essay*, in the context of the distinction Locke traces between real and nominal essences. This distinction emerges as a result of Locke's agnosticism regarding our epistemic access to the nature of substance (*E* 2.23.2, 5). Locke defines real essence in the Aristotelian sense, as that which makes a thing be what it is (*E* 3.3.15). He regards real essence as the internal constitution of things, «from which flow those sensible qualities which serve us to distinguish them one from another» (*E* 3.3.17)¹². Real essence belongs to particular entities and is unique and unrepeatable as the individual that possesses it. However, it is inaccessible to human understanding. Nominal essence is related to the naming and classification of particular entities

¹² While there are debates among Locke's interpreters regarding what that internal constitution refers to, most of them understand it in terms of underlying corpuscular microstructures, in line with the «new science» (see M. Atherton, *Locke on Essences and Classification*, in L. Newman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Cambridge 2007, p. 264; K. Winkler, *Locke on Essence and the Social Construction of Kinds* in M. Stuart (ed.), *A Companion to Locke*, Malden 2016, pp. 230-231. For an overview of interpretive debates about the role of the *Essay* within the new science see P. Anstey, *John Locke and Natural Philosophy*, Oxford 2011, ch. 1.

on the basis of certain qualities that we can detect in them (*E* 3.3.13, 3.6.26)¹³. We observe that objects have certain resembling features, and abstracting them from individuals we form general ideas (*E* 3.6.21). Nominal essences are the names we use to refer to these general ideas, hence they constitute classes or species of things (*E* 3.6.2, 3.6.35)¹⁴. Insofar as classes or species are made up by the human understanding (*E* 3.3.12), they are related to us and have no correlate in the inner constitution of things, which remains unknown (*E* 3.6.8-9)¹⁵.

Locke scholars discuss whether he considers that there are objective similarities in nature caused by a natural union of properties flowing from the real essence, which would constitute natural species¹⁶, or the classification into species is a social convention that is not necessarily related to the structure of nature, given that the infinite similarities that exist between particular entities would potentially create an innumerable number of classifications¹⁷. It is not clear if Locke's endorsement of the hierarchy of beings allows him to adhere at the same time to the existence of natural species or not¹⁸. On the one hand, the context of the two passages where Locke speaks of the hierarchy of beings (*E* 3.6.12 and 4.16.12) seems to favour a realistic interpretation of the existence of species in nature. The argument appears, on both occasions, to suggest that there are different species of spirits.

It is not impossible to conceive, nor repugnant to reason, that there may be many species of spirits, as much separated and diversified one from another by distinct properties whereof we have no ideas, as the species of sensible things are distinguished one from another by qualities which we know and observe in them [*E* 3.6.12].

By means of the chain of being thesis, Locke seems to suggest that there may be more species in nature than the nominal essences we can conceptually create from what we observe¹⁹. It is not contradictory to think that there are more species of spirits besides the human, which are endowed with greater and more diversified mental powers than ours, even though we lack epistemic resources to think about them. However, it is worth noting that in the ontological scale passages I have reviewed, Locke does not allude to properties that would mark sexual differences. The differences he mentions seem rather to distinguish human beings from the rest of living beings.

¹³ See A. Kuklok, *Locke on Essences*, in J. Gordon-Roth and S. Weinberg (eds.) *The Lockean Mind*, New York 2022, p. 310.

¹⁴ See K. Winkler, *Locke on Essence*, p. 221.

¹⁵ At this point, as K. Winkler, *Locke on Essence*, p. 223 notes, Locke departs from the Platonic tradition. While Platonism considers species to be ideas, it locates them in the divine mind, and thus regard them as ingenerable and incorruptible. We will see below that Cockburn keeps up with the Platonic way of understanding species.

¹⁶ M. Stuart, *Locke on Natural Kinds*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 16 (3), 1999, p. 280; P. Anstey, *John Locke*, p. 207.

¹⁷ M. Stuart, *Locke on Natural Kinds*, p. 277; A. Kuklok, *Locke on Essences*, pp. 311-314.

¹⁸ M. Atherton, *Locke on Essences*, pp. 267-271.

¹⁹ M. Atherton, *Locke on Essences*, p. 271; K. Winkler, *Locke on Essence*, p. 231.

Furthermore, clear boundaries between animals and human beings are not easily recognizable in all cases, a fact that seems to suggest a conventional interpretation of species. Locke regards the term «man» as a nominal essence, i.e. a species (*E* 3.3.12). And he states that the complex idea of «man» includes both males and females. It is created by «leav[ing] out of the complex idea they had of Peter and James, Mary and Jane, that which is peculiar to each, and retain[ing] only what is common to them all» (*E* 3.3.7 [619]). Even though this definition entails that there is something common to every individual we call «man», Locke argues on several occasions (e.g., *E* 3.6.22-27) that, as with other complex ideas of substances, it is very hard to establish the limits that would distinguish the species «man» from other species. Since we do not have epistemic access to the real essence of each individual, we cannot discern accurately what are the features that would mark a specific difference between human beings and other kinds of beings:

There are creatures in the world that have shapes like ours, but are hairy, and want language and reason (...) There are creatures (...) that, with language and reason and a shape in other things agreeing with ours, have hairy tails; others where the men have no beards, and others where the females have (...) Shall the difference of hair only on the skin be a mark of a different internal specific constitution between a changeling and a drill, when they agree in shape, and want of reason and speech? And shall not the want of reason and speech be a sign to us of different real constitutions and species between a changeling and a reasonable man? (*E* 3.6.22).

This passage is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, Locke stresses the difficulties in establishing what are the relevant features that mark a difference between human beings and other living beings. He also wonders whether lacking certain intellectual capacities while keeping human shape amounts to a difference in species or not. Secondly, he mentions that secondary sexual characteristics are not decisive marks to distinguish man from woman. The text suggests that the ability to fix precise and immutable boundaries between species is not within the scope of our understanding:

So uncertain are the boundaries of species of animals to us, who have no other measures than the complex ideas of our own collecting (...) And I imagine none of the definitions of the word *man* which we yet have, nor descriptions of that sort of animal, are so perfect and exact as to satisfy a considerate inquisitive person; much less to obtain a general consent, and to be that which men would everywhere stick by (*E* 3.6.27).

This means that even if there is some kind of natural ground for nominal essences, the enormous diversity and variation of cases found in experience and the inaccessibility to real essences prevents us to outline a precise and complete definition of «man». We can conjecture, then, that if we cannot arrive at a

complete definition of human being, neither will we reach a precise definition of differences between the sexes within human species²⁰.

Therefore, in the *Essay* we found no clear reference to a natural superiority of certain members of our species above others. But Locke's position is not that straightforward. When we turn to *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1689), published almost concurrently with the *Essay*, women are given a subordinate role within marriage on the basis of what he calls a «natural foundation» (*T* 1.47). In *Two Treatises* we find what seems to be two conflicting statements. One, in line with the scale of beings passages, claims all members of a certain species share a «common nature» that confers them a status of equality²¹. Given that women are members of the human species and that in the *Essay* we found no sign of a subordinate place for them in the scale of beings, we can conclude that in the state of nature, previous to entering the social contract, they are considered as equals and enjoy the same natural rights as men²². The other statement, in the context of one-to-one marital contract, entails women subjection to men. He asserts that «the Power of a Magistrate over a Subject, may be distinguished from that of a Father over his Children, a Master over his Servant, a Husband over his Wife, and a Lord over his Slave» (*T* 2.2). While in civil society there is a political relationship between equals, in conjugal society women are subject to their husbands. It is difficult to pinpoint the cause of female subjection within marriage, since it is not clear why Locke conceives that a woman, who apparently is free and equal in the state of nature, would accept to voluntarily submit to a man²³. When Locke distinguishes between conjugal power and political power, he argues that the subjection implied in the former is restricted to the private realm and concerns family affairs only. It is expressed in the priority given to the husband's will over that of the wife in certain situations that arise in conjugal life (*T* 1.48). He points out that it is not always possible to make decisions unanimously. In case of divergences, «it therefore being necessary that the last Determination, i.e. the Rule, should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the Man's share, as the abler and the Stronger» (*T* 2.82). The problem is that

²⁰ N. Hirschman and K. McClure, *Introduction* in N. Hirschmann and K. McClure (eds.) *Feminist Interpretations of John Locke*, University Park, PA 2007, pp. 2-4, arrive at a similar conclusion. They argue that Locke's ambiguity about gender operates at different levels and touches on different issues, such as human nature, the meaning of terms like rights and equality, the structure and operation of the social contract, and authority within the family.

²¹ R. Grant, *John Locke on Women and the Family*, in J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter concerning Toleration*, ed. by I. Shapiro, London 2003, p. 291.

²² This is a matter of intense debate among scholars. Authors such as T. Brennan and C. Pateman, *Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth: Women and the Origin of Liberalism*, «Political Studies», 27 (2), 1979, p. 159, suggest that social contract is celebrated between males, who are the only ones that qualify as «individuals». Conversely, R. Grant, *John Locke on Women*, p. 291, note 20, argues that when Locke says «men» he is making a generic use of the term, which also includes women. Grant's reading is consistent with the passage of the *Essay* quoted previously, where Locke explicitly states that the nominal essence «men» includes both males and females.

²³ R. Sample, *Locke on Political Authority and Conjugal Authority*, «Locke Newsletter», 31, 2000, p. 126.

Locke roots this subjection in nature, not in consent. Thus, it is unclear how we can be «naturally» equal and inequitable at the same time²⁴.

3. A Normatively Structured Hierarchy

We have just noted that there is an internal tension in Locke's attitude regarding the status of women that does not seem possible to be solved. When turning to the works of Cockburn, this tension is absent. Two of the main reasons for this absence of conflict is that her metaphysical conception of the hierarchy of beings is realistic in a stronger sense than Locke's is, and it is consistent with a moral doctrine she develops from her early works, which defines human beings as social and rational in their nature²⁵. These essential attributes, shared by all humanity, entail every member of the species deserves equal treatment (*RPR* 184). As we shall see, this metaphysics of morals proves to be favourable to her defence of the equality between the sexes.

When Cockburn introduces the ontological scale thesis for the first time in *Remarks upon some Writers*, she notes that «it has been observed by the curious and beautifully described by Mr Addison and Mr Locke» (*RSW* 97)²⁶. Just like Locke and Addison, she presents it as an *a posteriori* argument inferred from observation of the natural order, and describes it as an ascending progression: «the whole chasm in nature, from a plant to a man, is filled up by such a gentle and easy ascent, that the little transitions from one species to another are almost insensible» (*RSW* 97). And, following Locke, she believes it is plausible that the scale continues ascending gradually through beings of a superior nature than humans (*RSW* 97).

²⁴ We should acknowledge that in the letter Locke sends to Cockburn to thank her for writing *A Defence of Mr Locke's Essay*, he delivers highly complimentary words to her intellect: «Give me leave therefore to assure you that as the rest of the world take notice of the strength and clearness of your reasoning, so I cannot but be extremely sensible that it was employed in my defence» (J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-century England. Selected Correspondence*, Oxford 2020, p. 124). However, according to what he says in *Two Treatises*, when she eventually got married, she should subsume to Patrick Cockburn, whose strength and ability would naturally surpass her strength and clearness of reasoning.

²⁵ C. Trotter Cockburn, *A Defence of Mr Locke's Essay of Human Understanding*, in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 44. Hereafter cited as [DLE] followed by page number.

²⁶ Addison's reference appears in *The Spectator* No. 519. Addison, in turn, quotes the *Essay* passage where Locke mentions the ontological scale thesis. Addison's formulation of the thesis broadly follows Locke's approach. E. De Tommaso notes that Cockburn's first formulation of the chain of being thesis in *RSW* is a quotation of Addison's text rather than a paraphrase (*Il luogo dei corpi e degli spiriti. Cockburn in dialogo con Clarke, Law e Watts sull'ontologia dello spazio*, in D. Giovannozzi and E. De Tommaso (eds.) *Donne, filosofia della natura e scienza*, Roma 2024, p. 189). J. Broad mentions Ralph Cudworth as another source of influence for Cockburn's endorsement of the chain of being thesis, as this author is mentioned in Edmund Law's and Isaac Watts's texts which are discussed in *RSW* (see J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge 2003, p. 160).

While Cockburn manifestly adheres to the agnosticism regarding the nature of substance proposed by Locke (*DLE* 61)²⁷, this stance does not seem to permeate her conception of the ontological scale, as it does with her predecessor. In Locke's case, the impossibility of having epistemic access to the nature of substance leads him to distinguish between real and nominal essences. Cockburn adheres to Lockean nominalism and considers that what she calls «general natures» –which can be regarded as equivalent to nominal essences–, are abstract ideas we create from observing particular existences (*RSW* 132). But she also claims that the differences between species are fixed and clearly demarcated: «the *essential difference* between a circle and a square, an angel and a man, or between a moral good and evil I allow to be eternal, immutable and independent of any will» (*RSW* 133). This is because these differences are conceived by the divine understanding:

The eternal and immutable nature of things, their necessary relations, and essential differences, unalterable by any will, are sufficiently secured by being in the divine understanding, eternally and unchangeably what they are. If God sees the possible existence of a triangle, he sees, that it must *necessarily* be different from a circle, and that he cannot will it to be the same; for to will a thing to be the same with that, from which it is essentially different, is a contradiction, and therefore no object of power (*RSW* 133).

Differences between things exist in the divine understanding from all eternity, but they occur *in re* in the particular beings He chose to create: «that differences should be something subsisting distinctly from the things themselves, real self-existent entities, or [...] *real beings* is, I think, utterly inconceivable» (*RSW* 133). This suggests that Cockburn is inclined to a realist interpretation of species. We can infer from the passages quoted that the notions describing species are human constructs, just as Locke's nominal essences, but the differences between things, which support these general natures, has been immutably and eternally established by God²⁸. These differences stand independently from our epistemic access to them and our classifying ability.

Cockburn's conception of the hierarchy of beings is linked to a metaphysical assumption relevant to her moral philosophy, since the ontological scale evinces the normative structure that runs throughout the whole creation. This normative aspect does not show up in *Remarks upon some Writers*, where the

²⁷ Her agnosticism is made explicit while discussing the nature of the soul against Locke's critics. She maintains the same stance in her mature works too, see *RSW* 101.

²⁸ This point is made clear in the epistolary exchange between Cockburn and Dr. Thomas Sharp. See *WCC* 2.358, 382-383, also the footnote added to *DLE* 42-3). Undoubtedly this is a Platonic-inspired thesis, as is the hierarchy of beings itself (see J. Broad, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 142, 160-162). It may seem striking that Cockburn reconciles elements of Locke's philosophy with Platonic ones (see K. Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700-1800*. Cambridge 2014, p. 175), yet V. Nuovo (*Christianity, Antiquity and Enlightenment. Interpretations of Locke*, Dordrecht 2011, ch. 7), among others, has pointed out the presence of Platonic elements in Locke's philosophy too.

chain of being is mentioned for the first time, but becomes apparent in *Remarks upon the Principles*. Cockburn claims that, based on the eternal truths that are in the divine mind, God creates a system of beings conformable to them (WCC 2.382). Each creature is endowed with a certain nature, which is in accordance with the eternal truths, and is as fixed and immutable as these truths are. These beings enter into a set of mutual relationships that result in certain fitnesses between them. The fact that God creates each being according to a fixed nature is highly relevant to her morals, because that fixed nature determines which behaviour is fit or unfit for each kind of beings (*RPR* 214).

In *Remarks upon the Principles*, Cockburn's efforts are oriented to defend Samuel Clarke's doctrine of Eternal Fitness of Things²⁹. Her outline of the metaphysics of morals in this work runs along similar lines as Clarke's³⁰, whose doctrine, combined with the chain of being thesis, allows Cockburn to argue for the equality between the sexes. The normativity inherent in the universe, when arranged in a hierarchical order, establishes that the different kinds of relationships among creatures depend on their place in the hierarchy, a place which, in turn, is determined by their fixed and immutable nature. While creatures endowed with different natures –and thus placed in different steps of the scale–, should bear asymmetrical relations among them, creatures sharing the same nature and belonging to the same step deserve equal treatment.

Clarke argues that there is a metaphysical system of eternal and harmonious relationships which supports the order of the universe. These relationships are both natural and moral: «The differences, relations, and proportions of things both natural and moral, in which all unprejudiced Minds thus naturally agree, are certain, unalterable, and real in the things themselves»³¹. The order thus established is necessary, which means that it is independent of people's opinions, «prejudiced by Education, Laws, Customs or Evil Practices.» The normative aspect of this system has the same force as those statements that yield our necessary assent: «the Mind of Man naturally and unavoidably gives its Assent, as to natural and geometrical Truth, so also to the moral differences of things, and to the fitness and reasonableness of the Obligation of the everlasting Law of Righteousness; whenever fairly and plainly proposed»³².

²⁹ I wish to thank an anonymous referee for remarking the influence of Clarke's doctrine of Eternal Fitness of Things in *RPR*.

³⁰ M. Brandt Bolton, in *Some Aspects of the Philosophical Work of Catharine Trotter*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 31 (4), 1993, p. 576, notes that Cockburn does not develop her moral philosophy from Clarke's, since *DLE*, where the notion of moral fitness is outlined for the first time, was published in 1702. Clarke's Boyle Lectures, where the doctrine of Eternal Fitness of Things is stated, dates from 1705. Brandt Bolton suggests that both perspectives converge towards a similar aim, without one necessarily being a consequence of the other.

³¹ S. Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unalterable Obligations of Natural Religion and The Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, in *The Works of Samuel Clarke* vol. II, London 1788, p. 615. See E. De Tommaso, *Damaris Masham and Catharine Trotter on the Naturally Rational and Social Identity of Human Beings*, «The Proceedings Book Philhist'16/III» 2016.

³² S. Clarke, *A Discourse*, p. 615.

From these brief outline, we can notice that Clarke considers the natural order is fixed, real and objective. Cockburn endorses this view of the universe as being populated by creatures clearly differentiated by the necessity of their nature. Even though Clarke does not mention the chain of being thesis, he distinguishes between rational, irrational and inanimate beings. While these latter two necessarily «obey the Laws of their Creation; and tend regularly to the Ends, for which they were appointed», rational creatures are endowed with free will, «that glorious privilege of Liberty, by which they are exalted in dignity above the rest of God's Creation»³³. In this way, Clarke traces a basic gradation that differentiates between kinds of creatures, on the basis of being endowed with certain kind of attributes. Humans are above the rest due to reason and free will.

In *Remarks upon the Principles*, Cockburn refines Clarke's rough differentiation between kinds of beings in a way consistent with the ontological scale she introduced in *Remarks upon some Writers*. She argues that animals are inherently sentient beings and this character places them below humans in the scale. Humans, in addition to being sentient, are social and rational beings (*DLE* 44, *RSW* 119). These attributes not only places us higher in the hierarchy but also endow us with certain rights over animals. Cockburn states that «from that superiority, and the differences between their nature and ours, a cause may arise that will make it fit and reasonable to treat them in another manner, than would be fit from any of us to our fellow-creatures» (*RPR* 184). Thus, our place in the ontological scale indicates that it is fit to our nature that we make use of animals for food, clothing, and assistance in our labours. In doing so, we are following the design God established for us and we are acting in accordance with our nature (*RPR* 213).

Cockburn not only distinguishes between humans and animals –rational and irrational beings, as Clarke did– but also between a variety of hierarchically arranged species of animals, endowed with attributes such as strength, cunning, or speed, which place them in different steps of the ontological scale (*RPR* 213). This complies with the image of the chain of being portrayed in *Remarks upon some Writers*, where she notes the wide variety of beings that bespeak of «a gradual progress in nature» (*RSW* 97). Cockburn states that it is fit that creatures of a «lower rank» (*RPR* 184) are used to satisfy the needs of those higher up the scale of beings. This is expressed in the fact that «a large part of the animal creation do, by *natural instinct*, feed upon others of a different species, that, in some respects, are their inferiors» (*RPR* 184, see 213).

Within this frame, is it possible to regard women as creatures of a «lower rank» than men, as the theories mentioned at the beginning of this work stated? Cockburn rules this possibility out because men and women partake of the same species, which means they share the same place in the ontological scale. We are allowed to treat animals differently because they are below us in the hierarchy of

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 619.

beings, but under no circumstance we are granted to do the same with human beings, because members of the same species deserve equal treatment due to their shared nature. Thus, Cockburn concludes: «that *difference* of the nature of brutes from ours, which may make the same behaviour fit and reasonable towards them [...] would be irrational and wrong towards our own species, who are all by nature equal» (*RPR* 187).

Why this interpretation would have more plausibility than those theories that argue for the inferiority of the female sex? Cockburn argues that a relevant difference between humans and the remaining members of the ontological scale – at least those that are below us – is that we can get to know our nature via reflection³⁴. This means that we can be aware of our place in the scale and get to know the relationships that it is fit to maintain with the other beings. We can perceive «the essential difference of things, with the fitnesses and unfitnesses resulting from thence, and our consciousness of right and wrong» (*RPR* 170). The possibility of knowing our nature is essential to acting morally right³⁵. Our superior faculties grants us privileges with respect to beings of a «lower rank», but also establishes that, as members of the same species, all human beings deserve equal treatment. Thus, the plausibility of Cockburn's interpretation is guaranteed by an insight into our nature obtained by means of reflection.

The normativity inherent in nature expresses itself as morality at the level of human beings, but extends itself beyond human scope to encompass the whole range of beings³⁶. The normative dimension that pervades the scale of beings does not find a correlate in Locke's philosophy, but is a feature of Cockburn's metaphysics of morals, which is akin to Clarke's. Locke stresses the difficulties of drawing clear boundaries between species. In Cockburn's philosophy, these boundaries are not – and cannot be – diffuse, because they circumscribe the purpose and function of each being. Regarding humans, these boundaries establish the rights and responsibilities we bear with respect to our fellow creatures as well as to the rest of creation.

³⁴ *Prima facie* this seems to clash with Cockburn's agnosticism regarding our epistemic access to the nature of substance. However, we can conjecture that what is out of human reach is «that, which supports all the properties» we observe (*RSW* 102). Notwithstanding there be more to our nature than what we can grasp using reflection, we can form an idea of our nature from the properties, abilities or capacities that fall within the scope of human perception (*RSW* 101).

³⁵ This means that reflection has a central place in Cockburn's philosophy, even more than in Locke's. Not only does it amount to introspection of our mental operations, but it enables us to discover the moral law that should govern our actions (*DLE* 44, 73-74). See P. Sheridan, *Reflection, Nature, and Moral Law: The Extent of Catharine Cockburn's Lockeanism in Her Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay*, «Hypatia», 22 (3), 2007, p. 133-151; *Locke and Catharine Trotter Cockburn*, in J. Gordon-Roth and S. Weinberg (eds.), *The Lockean Mind*, pp. 27-32; R. Boeker, *Catharine Trotter Cockburn*, pp. 9-10. However, P. Sheridan, *Locke and Catharine Trotter Cockburn*, suggests that when Locke appeals to reflection in the context of his natural theology he seems closer to Cockburn, since he says that we can have ideas of pleasure and happiness from what we experience in ourselves (see *E* 2.23.33 and 4.3.18).

³⁶ P. Sheridan, *On Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 248, 262-263.

4. Hierarchy of Beings and Equality of Men and Women

The possibility of knowing our place in the scale of beings, as well as the relations and fitnesses creatures bear between them, becomes a means for supporting the equality of men and women, because such knowledge unequivocally reveals that members of each species possess homogeneous characteristics and merit equal treatment. Unlike Locke's suggestion in *Two Treatises*, we find no indication in Cockburn's works of a dissimilar distribution of attributes among humans based on nature, such as a passionate inclination in females and a rational one in males, which would lead them to occupy different steps in the scale, or which accounts for a submission of one to the other (*WCC* 2.118)³⁷. The dynamics of passions is not determined by sexual biases, but is subject to reason: «it is our fault if we suffer our passions or affections to be *our masters*; that indeed is not natural, tho' the affections themselves are so; for it is the province of reason to keep them in subjection, to regulate them, and to point out the proper application of them» (*RPR* 167)³⁸. The capacity for self-control does not depend on sex but on maturing factors: «as reason encreases, it is the proper director of all the passions, appetites and affections» (*WCC* 2.350).

We had the opportunity to note that inequalities between the sexes emerged in Locke's texts when he discussed marriage. Cockburn's references to marital relationship appear in her epistolary, particularly in her youthful exchange with her husband-to-be, Patrick Cockburn, and in *Letter of Advice to her Son*, one of the «Miscellaneous pieces» published posthumously in *The Works of Mrs Catharine Cockburn*. Two different kinds of relationship between the sexes can be traced in these texts. The first, which I will call 'virtuous', is that of prudent and pious persons, who regulate their conduct in accordance with what reason indicates to be our place and purpose within the scale of beings (*WCC* 2.118). The second, which I will call 'vicious', belongs to «the libertine part of the world» (*WCC* 2.117)³⁹, who do not conduct themselves in line with what is fit to human nature, but easily succumb to passions and inclinations. Let us examine the virtuous kind of relationship first.

Cockburn regards marriage as a voluntary engagement, because women, after evaluating the pros and cons of it, may accept to make that commitment or not (*WCC* 2.133, 237, 249). She considers virtuous marriage as an expression of the sociable part of our nature, because God «designed us to be useful, has thought fit to make us agreeable too to one another, to sweeten our cares and services.» (*WCC* 2.242). This means that, inasmuch as God created us sociable beings, getting married allows us to realize that part of our nature. She regards

³⁷ See A. Kelley, "In Search of Truths Sublime". *Reason and the Body in the Writings of Catharine Trotter*, «Women's Writings», 8 (2), 2001, p. 238; E. De Tommaso, *Damaris Masham and Catharine Trotter*.

³⁸ See E. De Tommaso, *Damaris Masham and Catharine Trotter*.

³⁹ Cockburn not only uses the term «libertine» and cognates such as «debauchée» to refer to abusive sexual behavior, but she also employs it to allude to disorderly behavior, excesses, and false reasoning connected to atheism. See *WCC* 2.112-113, 115.

marriage as a tender friendship between the sexes, without involving wife's subjection to husband (*WCC* 2.218-219, 2.240, 2.241-2)⁴⁰. Rather, marriage expresses an essential fitness between both spouses, which implies mutual duties and is an opportunity of exercising virtue: «you may some time or other meet with one to pass your life with, whose conversation would at once unbend, and strengthen your mind, and whose tenderness would endear the little services, and sweeten your cares, without any danger of transporting you from yourself» (*WCC* 2.219, see 2.249).

In *A Letter of Advice to her Son*, Cockburn writes a series of recommendations to guide her son, who has reached majority and is about to enter public life. She warns him about those kinds of relationship between the sexes that do not qualify as virtuous: «it is very imprudent and unsafe, to indulge an inclination, when it cannot end in a happy union; for no one knows how far their passions may carry them, if they once give way to them» (*WCC* 2.121). The vicious kind of relationship frequently entails pernicious and abusive practices against women (*WCC* 2.111). She denounces women are often treated as objects rather than as equals, because men deceitfully make them believe this kind of abusive relationship is an expression of love:

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 (*WCC* 2.119).

Cockburn regards this unscrupulous conduct as a consequence of «the notions and common practice of the men of the world» (*WCC* 2.118, see 121). These notions and practices reveal the existence of a moral double standard in society⁴¹. If a man tries to take advantage of the weakness, credulity or kindness of another man, this act will be judged as a sign of villainy, while «that same practice, directed at women, is taken as a trifle, as the amusement of a gallant man, and is usually taken as an object of presumption and triumph» (*WCC*.119). At the basis of this judgment is the biased idea that women are ontologically inferior to men, idea which endorses unequal treatment or plain and simple abuse.

Cockburn also denounces the use of arguments that appeal to «natural» sexual differences to explain abusive male behaviour toward women. Specifically, vicious male behaviour is understood in terms of a natural inclination that is deemed irresistible or inevitable: «[they] imagine that this strong bent of nature is sufficient excuse for all the irregularities it occasions» (*WCC* 2.117). Cockburn regards abusive conduct as a consequence of giving free rein to the sensitive aspect of human nature, and in doing so, deviating from the ends our rational

⁴⁰ See V. Nuovo, *Christianity, Antiquity and Enlightenment*, p. 258; K. Green, *The Rights of Women and the Equal Rights of Men*, «Political Theory», 49 (3), 2021, p. 422.

⁴¹ J. Broad, *Women Philosophers*, p. 149.

nature dictates (*WCC* 2.118-19). Those who are driven by these instincts behave as if they were animals, instead of being guided by reason, which is that part of our nature that places us above other animals in the ontological scale. Ironically, this argument would portrait men not as the «abler and stronger» but as the weaker ones, because they would be experiencing difficulties in keeping the «strong bent of nature» under control. Contrary to the arguments mentioned at the beginning of this essay, it seems that men, instead of women, are the ones who show signs of falling prey to violent passions.

Therefore, there are no reasons to suspect that women subjection is based on a «natural foundation». Neither is it restricted to conjugal relationships but is pervasive throughout all the realms of society, private as well as public. It arises precisely when we deviate from the way our nature dictates we should behave. Its foundation is not natural, because there are no natural differences between the sexes. Cockburn locates its grounds on prejudice. Prejudice manifests itself both in the private realm of affective relations and in the public realm of the «republic of letters», since women's rational capacity is often misconceived as being inferior than men's. Against this latter prejudice, Cockburn states: «it is not to be doubted, that women are as capable of penetrating into the grounds of things, and reasoning justly, as men are» (*WCC* 2.190). The difference we observe between the two, as a matter of empirical fact, is not due to a natural inferiority of female reason, but to unequal access to education: «men [...] have no advantage of us, but in their opportunities of knowledge» (*WCC* 2.190). The awareness of this intellectual prejudice against women is what led Cockburn to publish her first philosophical work anonymously, since «a woman's name would give a prejudice against a work of this nature; and truth and reason have less force, when the person, who defends them, is prejudiced against» (*WCC* 2.155, see 2.198, 2.190).

Cockburn does not delve into the nature of prejudice. But the contrasts she outlines between virtuous and vicious conduct suggest that prejudice is a consequence of a lack of reflection on our nature and moral duties, since such knowledge would reveal it is species what marks a difference in the ontological scale, not sexual difference. Whoever considers that women are intellectually or morally inferior is not judging on the basis of reason but on the basis of false presuppositions.

5. Conclusion

After reviewing the texts of Locke and Cockburn, I have found no direct correlation between the ontological hierarchy and female subordination in either of them. However, Cockburn's arguments proved to be more consistent than Locke's, who puts forward two positions, one in the *Essay* and the other in *Two Treatises*, which cannot be reconciled. This results in an assessment of equality and inequality between the sexes at the same time, both appealing to a sort of natural foundation. Cockburn's position, on the contrary, leaves no

room for ambiguity, but clearly affirms natural equality of all members of the human species, because we are endowed with a fixed and immutable nature that unmistakably determines our place in the scale of beings and guides our moral behaviour regarding our fellow creatures. In this scheme, female subordination cannot be grounded on a natural basis, but is explained in terms of social and cultural notions, which are shown in practices stemming from prejudice. Cockburn condemns this state of affairs as morally unacceptable because it is contrary to the normative structure that runs through the hierarchy of beings.

Sofia Beatriz Calvente
Universidad Nacional de La Plata
✉ vicentesofia@yahoo.com.ar

References

Primary sources

- Addison, J. 1712. *The Spectator* No. 519. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12030/12030-h/SV3/Spectator3.html#section519>
- Clarke, S. 1788. *The Works of Samuel Clarke*, vol. II, London, J. and P. Knapton.
- Cockburn, C. 1751. *The Works of Mrs Catharine Cockburn*, 2 vols., ed. by Th. Birch, London, J. and P. Knapton.
- Cockburn, C. 2006. *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by P. Sheridan, Peterborough, Broadview Press.
- Locke, J. 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Locke, J. 1988. *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by P. Lasslet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Malebranche, N. 1997. *The Search after Truth*, trans. and ed. by Th. Lennon and P. Olscamp, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Secondary literature

- Anstey, P. 2011. *John Locke and Natural Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Apetrei, S. 2010. *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Atherton, M. 2007. *Locke on Essences and Classification*, in L. Newman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

- Boeker, R. 2023. *Catharine Trotter Cockburn*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Brandt Bolton, M. 1993. *Some Aspects of the Philosophical Work of Catharine Trotter*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 31 (4), pp. 565-588.
- Brennan, T. and Pateman, C. 1979. 'Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth': *Women and the Origin of Liberalism*, «Political Studies», 27 (2), pp. 183-200.
- Broad, J. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Broad, J. 2020. *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England. Selected Correspondence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Calvente, S. 2023. *Un problema metafísico en la filosofía de Catharine Trotter Cockburn: el espacio, el alma y la jerarquía de seres*, «Thémata. Revista de filosofía», 67, pp. 139-161.
- De Tommaso, E. 2016. *Damaris Masham and Catharine Trotter on the Naturally Rational and Social Identity of Human Beings*, «The Proceedings Book Philhist'16/III», International Multitrack Conference on History of Philosophy, Istanbul.
- De Tommaso, E. 2024. *Il luogo dei corpi e degli spiriti. Cockburn in dialogo con Clarke, Law e Watts sull'ontologia dello spazio*, in D. Giovannozzi and E. De Tommaso (eds.), *Donne, filosofia della natura e scienza*, Roma, ILIESI Digitale (Ricerche), 2024, pp.174-196.
- Di Biase, G. 2020. *John Locke on Women's rationality*, «Philosophical Inquiry», 8 (2), pp. 9-30.
- Grant, R. 2003. *John Locke on Women and the Family*, in J. Locke. *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter concerning Toleration*, ed. by I. Shapiro, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Green, K. 2014. *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Green, K. 2021. *The Rights of Women and the Equal Rights of Men*, «Political Theory», 49 (3), pp. 403-430.
- Hirschmann, N. and McClure, K. 2007. *Introduction*, in N. Hirschmann and McClure, K. (eds.), *Feminist Interpretations of John Locke*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University Press.
- Kelley, A. 2001. "In Search of Truths Sublime". *Reason and the Body in the Writings of Catharine Trotter*, «Women's Writings», 8 (2), pp. 235-250.
- Kuklok, A. 2022. *Locke on Essences*, in J. Gordon-Roth and Shelley Weinberg (eds.), *The Lockean Mind*, Oxford, Routledge.
- Lovejoy, A. 1936. *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Nuovo, V. 2011. *Christianity, Antiquity and Enlightenment. Interpretations of Locke*, Dordrecht, Springer.

- Ready, K. 2002. *Damaris Cudworth Masham, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, and the Feminist Legacy of Locke's Theory of Personal Identity*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 35 (4), pp. 536-576.
- Sample, R. 2000. *Locke on Political Authority and Conjugal Authority*, «Locke Newsletter», 31, pp. 115-146.
- Schiebinger, L. 2013. *Nature's Body. Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.
- Sheridan, P. 2007. *Reflection, Nature, and Moral Law: The Extent of Catharine Cockburn's Lockeanism in Her Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay*, «Hypatia», 22 (3), pp. 133-151.
- Sheridan, P. 2018. *On Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Metaphysics of Morals*, in E. Thomas (ed.), *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Sheridan, P. 2022. *Locke and Catharine Trotter Cockburn*, in J. Gordon-Roth and S. Weinberg (eds.), *The Lockean Mind*, Oxford, Routledge.
- Stuart, M. 1999. *Locke on Natural Kinds*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 16 (3), pp. 277-296.
- Thomas, E. 2015. *Catharine Trotter Cockburn on Unthinking Immaterial Substance: Souls, Space and Related Matters*, «Philosophy Compass», 10, pp. 255-263.
- Tuana, N. 1993. *The Less Noble Sex. Scientific, Religious and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Winkler, K. 2016. *Locke on Essence and the Social Construction of Kinds*, in M. Stuart (ed.), *A Companion to Locke*, Malden, Blackwell.