

# 19

## VIRTUE AND MORAL OBLIGATION

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Did Early Modern women philosophers abandon virtue ethics in favor of theories of moral obligation? Or does looking at the history of philosophy from their perspective help tell a different story? Feminist historian of philosophy Karen Green has suggested that Early Modern women may well have a moral theory of their own (Green 2015). After all, the idea that we are obligated to others regardless of how it benefits us is not news to women, who, especially in the past, are responsible for caring for infants, the sick, and the elderly. It must also be noted that both ancient virtue ethics and Early Modern theories of moral obligation are problematic for women in that they expect them to abide by the same standards as men without receiving the same benefits. In both theories, as they were developed by men philosophers, women obey men and have no real political existence. So the realities of women's moral and political existence are not taken into account by ancient and Early Modern theories, and, perhaps because of this, they are never fully integrated as agents in those theories.

In this chapter, I show how Early Modern women philosophers in France and England tried to navigate the problem stated above by mixing elements from virtue ethics and theories of moral obligation, in particular, the concept of the body politic and the idea that reason and God are the sources of obligation, and/or the way of accessing it.

### **19.1 A Gendered Historical Account of How Virtue Gave Way to Moral Obligation**

In this first part, I look at the received line that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers perceived that virtue ethics, separated from its questionable teleological metaphysics, could not account for the “internal ought.” The internal “ought” is what moves us to do the right thing even when that thing seems to go against our interest, and the need for this kind of motivation is at the source of theories of moral obligation. I will argue that this way of locating obligation is derived from an understanding of moral decision-making that leaves out the sort of strategies for understanding obligation developed by women philosophers.

In his influential monograph, *The British Moralists and the Internal Ought 1640–1740*, Stephen Darwall explains that the move away from Aristotelian metaphysics is in great part responsible for the abandonment of virtue ethics (Darwall 1995). Aristotle's teleology, a view shared by many ancient philosophers from Plato to the Stoics, presupposes that all activity is measured according to an end, and that there is an end to human life, which fits into an ordered universe. The rejection of Aristotelian science was a product of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, with

the views of Copernicus and Newton dominating scientific research and a general philosophical move away from the all-powerful Catholic church which had adopted all things Aristotelian *via* Thomas Aquinas.

Without a teleological framework postulating the rightness of human flourishing or happiness, virtue ethics, it seems, operates as an egoistic theory. I develop my character and become virtuous because it is good for me and makes me happy. But there is no longer a tie between my happiness and the happiness of others (beyond certain personal and practical considerations), so if it turns out that doing the right thing by an unknown other goes contrary to my happiness, then I have no compelling reason to do it. Without the teleological framework, virtue ethics loses its status as a rather noble moral theory and becomes more like a form of “wellness” theory, where the main objective is for the individual to be healthy and happy and have good relationships, but whether they benefit society as a whole is only a side consideration.

Early Modern (male) philosophers, according to Darwall, saw the gap that had been created by their metaphysical change of heart and began to ask different questions: why should I do the right thing when it is not in my personal interest? What is the nature of my belief that I “ought” to do that thing?

Darwall considers a string of British Early Modern philosophers from Hobbes to Hume. Some of these, such as Cumberland and Butler, are not part of the canon, so that the picture he offers is more varied than many drawn in the late twentieth century. But the picture is still exclusively male, and because it is, we have a legitimate question to ask: did women philosophers also make the move from virtue ethics to moral obligation, and if so, were their motivations the same?

## **19.2 Women and Moral Theorizing**

If the history of Early Modern moral philosophy as we know it is gendered, then where should we look for a better account? In her 1985 paper “What do Women Want in a Moral Theory,” Annette Baier suggests that virtue ethics may be the best model of moral theorizing for women. Virtue ethics, she said, make the emotions central to morality, and it requires that we observe closely the situations in which we act, the reactions of others who are influenced by our actions. Virtue does not happen in an intellectual vacuum but in a society where people depend on each other. Baier further links virtue ethics to the ethics of care: indeed, her argument is motivated by having read Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, in which Gilligan argues that women’s moral deliberations are often motivated more by considerations of caring responsibility in a moral community than they are by disembodied principles and the application of reason to solving moral puzzles (Gilligan 1982).

Gilligan’s argument is motivated by a reading of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development. Kohlberg, who applies Piaget’s stagial development theory to moral reasoning skills, finds that the highest stage is Kantianism, while the lowest other than egoism is moral relativism. He also observes that while only a few men reach the highest stage, women tend to stay at the relativism stage. Gilligan challenges Kohlberg’s methods through his findings. Women, she argues, reason better with real-life moral problems. This is not some failure of abstraction on their part but a reflection of the fact that they are deeply embedding in a moral community where care and problem-solving are ever-present features. Gilligan illustrates her response to Kohlberg by recalling her reaction to one of Kohlberg’s lectures on abortion. The large majority of students debating the rights and wrongs of abortion were men. Gilligan reflected that there was something wrong about this, that the level of abstraction at which the discussion had to take place because none of those men would ever contemplate aborting, meant that the resulting moral discourse lacked the requisite depth.<sup>1</sup>

In order to gather data for her theory that women’s moral theorizing tended to be more applied and less abstract than men’s, Gilligan conducted a number of interviews. She spoke to women who were caring for children, struggling to make a living while doing so, sacrificing careers, or else

cutting corners in their domestic lives. This different perspective, she argued, was what made for the different voice. Did Early Modern women philosophers also have cause to develop a different voice? It is likely that the sort of concerns that motivated the women Gilligan spoke to also motivated women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – after all, it is not the case that having the main responsibility of caring for children has only recently become women’s responsibility. The circumstances that make up women’s moral universe have certainly not changed beyond recognition. Christine de Pizan, for instance, although a courtly author, was nonetheless responsible for running her household and bringing up her children, with the help of her elderly mother, and she was certainly responsible for earning their keep. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess, childless, and married to a man who encouraged her unconventional career as a published writer, still felt the pressure to engage in womanly activities such as weaving and making preserves in order to escape the criticisms of neighbors.<sup>2</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, who is sometimes dismissed as a bourgeois writer, brought up her first daughter alone, in Revolutionary France and in comparative poverty, with part-time help from a young maid, while writing her history of the French Revolution. It is quite safe to assume that even women who wrote were not free from the caring responsibilities they have now.

There is a big step between recognizing that women who wrote moral philosophy had the experience of caring for others (or the experience of being expected to care for others), to the claim that this experience translated into a different style of moral philosophizing, and again another step to the claim that this style was at least in part virtue ethical. In the following sections, I will begin to develop a narrative, starting from pre-modern philosopher Christine de Pizan, and going up to late Early Modern thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, showing that women philosophers did theorize their experience as part of a community of carers into a theory of moral obligation that owed something to virtue ethics.

### **19.3 An Enduring Love of Virtue: Aristotle from the High Middle-Ages to the Enlightenment**

Before showing how women philosophers claimed part of virtue ethics as their own when their male counterparts were turning away from it, it is important to acknowledge that Aristotelian virtue ethics was not a theory built for women. Aristotle takes pains to emphasize that women’s virtues are not the same as men’s, and that while men’s virtue is best demonstrated in the political forum or at war, for women, silent obedience is the most admirable character trait (Aristotle 1992: 96, 1260a24).

Christine de Pizan was a virtue ethicist perhaps of necessity – as a Renaissance, or High Middle-Ages philosopher, she came before Early Modern theories of obligation. Nonetheless, because she is philosophizing about the experience of being a woman in a society that does not value women as much as it values men, her approach is useful in understanding women philosophers that came later. The approach to moral theories may be different, but the attitude toward women was not.

Pizan’s most famous work, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1401), reads very much as a proto-feminist book. The author starts by complaining that male authors, from Aristotle onward, treat women unfairly and then proceeds to demonstrate, through references to history and mythology, that women are, in fact, equal to men in all respects. The “City,” which she builds in the book, with the help of the allegorical figures Ladies Reason, Justice, and Rectitude, is meant to be a refugee for women who want to grow to the full of their capacities without being hindered by the rampant and harmful sexism of society. Yet, the conclusion does not recommend that women, outside of the metaphorical city, should aim to achieve equality: Pizan tells women that they

should obey their husbands, even when these husbands are drunken and violent brutes (Pizan 1999: 404).

Why does Pizan draw this conclusion? Because, she argues, to be virtuous is to participate in the flourishing of one's community. And the most pressing concern for France, the book written during the hundred years war, is peace and stability. For women to rebel would compromise that peace and stability. Hence they must not. This theory of virtuous participation in a community is taken, in Christine's case, from Aristotle (Aristotle 1992: 61, 1253a29; Pizan 1994: 91). It is the theory of the body politic, whereby each individual flourishes as part of a political organism, much as a body part flourishes as part of a body. Each part has its own crucial role to play, and each part receives the sustenance it needs from the whole. For a member of a community to try and overturn the order of things would be tantamount to a hand severing itself or strangling the neck attached to the same body: destruction and no benefit for anyone (Pizan 1994: 58).

One may think that the cost of belonging to a body politic for some individuals is not worth the benefits one gets out of it: this is true of slaves, for instance, for whom death and destruction may be preferable to living in a state where they are possessions. And it may be true, to some extent, for women, who may well have felt, in some parts of the world or at some times in history, that they were the toenails of the body politic. But Pizan does not wish for destruction: on the contrary, when she wrote *The City of Ladies*, she, and almost everyone else in France, was desperate for order, for the English to go and the French monarchy to be restored. The hundred-year war between France and England had already occasioned plenty of "discord," and many who had decided to rise in protest against their rulers had indeed "perished together." This context gives us some insight into the apparent contradictions in Pizan's thought (Green 2007).

On the one hand, she needed to argue against women challenging their role in society because that was likely to lead to even more chaos, on the other, given her commitment to equality of men and women in all respects, she could encourage individual women to rise about their station and help bring back order. This explains why she dedicated a copy of her works to Isabelle of Bavière, the Queen Regent, and why she sang the praises of Joan of Arc, who defeated the English and led the king to be crowned. Thus Pizan's conservatism is deeply contextual and leaves open the possibility that some later political community may make it possible for women to claim a different role for themselves, to demand a rearrangement, if not the destruction, of the body politic. Women's agency is tied to their place in the body politic, but what matters is the survival and flourishing of all, so that in situations where change or reform does not endanger the whole, women could, in principle, take up a more equal role.

#### **19.4 Obligated to Obey?**

A growing philosophical alternative to Aristotelian ethics during the Early Modern period was ethical theories that attempted to derive moral obligation from God, reason, moral sense or even fear of punishment. We do what is right because we have a sense of obligation – philosophers agreed. It is not just that we are acting out some natural function, but we have a sense that we ought to do certain things, even if they appear to be against our natural interest. The obligation itself may come from theoretical or practical reasoning, God's command, or sentiment, including religious sentiment. Even if it is not the source of obligation, reason helps us by showing us that obeying God's command is our duty, and in some cases, reason is able to tell us what our duty is and why acting according to it is imperative (Darwall 1995: 17). The role of the divine law (or the law of reason) is to bind us to do what we do not perceive to be in our interest. In Hobbes's words, it is what stops us from claiming our "right to all things" say, killing our neighbor to steal his possessions, and what forces us to obey a ruler who tells us to pay taxes.

This way of explaining the need for a theory of obligation seems very odd. As an explanation, it is steeped in a world perceived as adversarial, where everyone thinks of their own interest first and of how they might enrich themselves. One leading question behind the philosophical quest for obligation seems to be, “Why can’t I have what he has?” Something has to stop us from infringing on others’ rights or safety, and the corresponding attitude of fearing that others will want to harm us to get what they want. As Hobbes says, before we can implement what the natural law says we should: a social contract, we are motivated by diffidence, glory, and competition (Hobbes 1985: 185).

However, if we approach the question of obligation from the perspective of a woman’s experience, we come up with very different questions. There are two kinds of obligations women typically need to make sense of. First, there is the sort of obligation that binds them to the will of a husband or father, regardless of whether they are reasonable masters, and often in conflict with what reason would tell them to do. “Why should I do what he says? Why should I stay?” are very reasonable questions from a woman’s perspective. But is this moral obligation rather than merely a lack of choice? For many women, it would have seemed that they were acting from an inner sense of obligation, i.e., of what was due from them toward others. But perhaps their sense of obligation was a form of self-deception, a way of glorifying a role they could not escape.

Secondly, women may well feel morally obligated to do something that no-one else will do in their stead, that is, care for babies. Here the question may not be “why should I stay?,” as in many cases, women do not wish to abandon their children, but “why do I feel obliged to stay?,” or “why is this more than just something I do because someone has to and it might as well be me?” This question is particularly salient as some women would have had the option of paying others to care for their infants and children, divesting themselves of the work, but nonetheless retained the obligation, in so far as they expected to be valued by their children in exchange for their parental care.

Early Modern women were overwhelmingly concerned with obligation as duty: marital – obeying their husbands – and parental – caring for their children. These obligations, however, are not entirely derivable from reason. They are reasonable in the sense that it makes sense for a woman to look after her child if she knows no-one else will and to obey her husband if she faces expulsion otherwise. But they cannot be derived from reason in the stronger sense that they follow from a principle that men are better suited to make decisions on behalf of women and that women are better suited to serve men and raise their children (beyond the immediate fact of giving birth and breastfeeding). Women as reasonable beings knew this and yet had to justify to themselves, somehow, the need to obey. But if reason cannot justify it, then what can?

For some women, this justification took the form of an argument from divine authority. Reason by itself is unreliable, according to such arguments, and must give way to divine command. So if reason appeared to tell women that they ought not to subordinate themselves to men, but divine authority said otherwise, then reason had to be put on a backburner at least concerning that question. An example of a woman philosopher trusting divine authority before her own reason is that of Jacqueline Pascal. Pascal was a Jansenist, i.e., member of a Catholic sect that followed the thought of Augustine. Augustine distrusted human reason and believed that to follow one’s reason is to commit the sin of pride. This would entail that any reason women might have to question their duty toward men would carry less weight. Pascal’s ambiguous relationship to reason as a source of obligation is the topic of Section 19.5.

A different approach toward the reconciliation of women’s actual subservience, and arguments that claim obligation is either derived from or revealed to us by reason, is one that begins a progress between Pizan’s attitude that women must remain in their place for the good of the community, and the belief that community should be reformed so that women can take their proper – equal – place in it. As a strategy, it uses a Stoic version of the Aristotelian concept of the

body politic and the view that virtue is aimed toward fulfilling our nature, which is to live well as a community. I will explore this strategy as it developed in the early eighteenth century through the writings of Catherine Trotter Cockburn in Section 19.6 and follow it to its conclusion at the end of the eighteenth century with Mary Wollstonecraft in Section 19.7.

### 19.5 Jacqueline Pascal and the Distrust of Reason

Jacqueline Pascal joined the Jansenist convent of Port-Royal in Paris in 1652, aged 27. She joined it against the wishes of her brother (Blaise), who wanted her to stay by his side, and fought her brother and sister (Gilberte Périer) for the right to dispose of her share of their father's inheritance as a dowry.<sup>3</sup> Like her brother, she became an important advocate for Jansenism, publishing a text about the education of girls in the convent and several letters in theology. The Jansenist church was already persecuted by the Vatican, and in particular, their creed book, *The Augustinius*, was declared heretical, and all members of the Jansenist sect were required to sign a *Formulary* saying that it was. The response of the sect's leader, Antoine Arnauld, was to draw a distinction between "*fait*" (empirical fact) and "*droit*" (right) and declare that as it was right to obey the catholic church, Jansenists should sign the *Formulary*, but that doing so did not constrain them to believe that, as a matter of fact, Jansenius's book was heretical. Jacqueline Pascal refused to sign nonetheless, and she encouraged other nuns at the convent to do the same. When the convent became the direct object of persecution, she agreed to sign, but with a codicil. She died shortly afterward.

The debate around the *Formulary*, which Pascal was asked to sign, is enlightening as to her thoughts on moral obligation. Whereas Arnauld thought that the Jansenists were obligated to obey the rule of the church no matter what, Pascal disagreed. Her disagreement can be interpreted both as in line with Augustine's theory of obligation and in reaction to the Aristotelianism of the Jesuits.

The key aspect of Jansenism (spelled out in Jansenius's *The Augustinius*) is an Augustinian reliance on faith and grace. For Augustine, the taint of original sin is such that it is impossible for human beings to rely on their earthly selves for moral improvement. Political arrangements have little or no effect on morality either, and as far as Augustine is concerned, they have to be borne in the sense that all earthly life has to be borne; if a choice is to be made, a stricter regime will be more beneficial as it will somewhat curb our worst sinful impulses.

Jansenists opposed the Jesuits precisely because they adopted a version of Thomistic/Aristotelian perfectionism, which allowed them to make judgments, on each occasion, as to what the right course of action is. *Phronesis* in the hands of the Jesuits becomes casuistry and moral laxity. So whereas a Jesuit would expect to find out what the right course of action would be through reasoning about the particular case in which they were called to act, the Jansenist distrusted this method and claimed that it amounted to the sin of pride (in so far as one's reason was a match for God's commandments) and a certain amount of disingenuity. Pascal's brother, Blaise, used this propensity of the Jesuits toward moral laxity to ridicule them in his *Provincial Letters*, where he cites the example of a monk temporarily defrocking himself to go to a brothel (Pascal 1847: 59–60).

Going back to the *Formulary*, it is clear that Pascal was modeling her own resistance on what she thought Augustine would recommend. She offers a hypothetical situation and argues that had Augustine been required to make a decision using a similar distinction between fact and right, he would have refused. The situation she describes is as follows:

Had a tyrant come to require Augustine to sign a document defending the plurality of worship in order to prevent the spread of Christianity, Augustine could have, she says, decided to read that document as a statement of the Trinity. But as it would be clear to him that the

intention of the document was to establish polytheism through political tyranny and had nothing to do with the Trinity, he would not have signed.

Although [the Trinity] is a truth no faithful Christian would doubt, this was not the time nor the manner to say so. You will easily understand the workings of this comparison.

*(Pascal 1845: 410)*

The distinction between “fact” and “right” here looks like little more than a Jesuit twisting of words and appealing to Augustine himself, Pascal shows that a Jansenist should have nothing to do with it.

*(Conley 2019: 74–75)*

Despite its rejection of casuistry, Pascal’s position sounds surprisingly Aristotelian: in order to judge what the right thing to do is, we should not look simply to the principle of action (tell the truth!) but to the circumstances in which one is called to act (the time, the manner). However, Pascal’s position is radically distinct from an Aristotelian one in other ways. The relevant obligation here is, to tell the truth simply, without looking for sophisticated ways of making it more palatable. A true disciple is one who has no will of their own, who has given their mind over to God entirely and has not sufficient pride to attempt to deceive the oppressor through clever conceptual manipulations. For Pascal, we are obliged to do as God tells us and to educate ourselves sufficiently to be able to understand what God wants from us, and not to use that education to deceive or manipulate, even in defense of the faith.

In the conclusion of the previous section, I suggested that for some women philosophers, appeal to divine authority as the source of moral obligation would be a way of accepting their own position of subservience to men in society. However, it seems clear that Pascal’s decision to place divine authority above her own reason does not do that. As far as she is concerned, men, as well as women, ought to refrain from being guided by reason. And in cases where it is not clear that divine authority has anything to say, as in the case of her dispute with her siblings about whether she could use her inheritance as a dowry, Pascal did not refrain from argument. Nor did she put her reasoning powers on hold when the male leader of her sect, Arnauld, asked her to sign a petition she did not believe right. So by claiming that reason is always less trustworthy than divine command, she places all reasonable beings on the same level, achieving a form of negative equality that went beyond social position.

### **19.6 Catherine Trotter Cockburn: Adapting the Body Politic to Early Modern Theories of Obligation**

One of the most interesting arguments seeking to reconcile reason and women’s subservience, perhaps, is one that also takes into account the eighteenth-century theories of moral obligation developed by male philosophers: Catherine Trotter Cockburn’s theory of moral fitness, developed more particularly in her defense of Samuel Clarke’s moral theory. Clarke’s view is that moral obligation is derived from the moral relationships that necessarily follow from the order of the universe, in particular, from the essential natures of God and humans. In that sense, it is as much connected to teleological virtue ethics as it is to Early Modern theories of obligation: the obligation is derived from the natural order of things, which includes human beings, God, and their relationship. Fitness theory is then the view that obligation comes from an understanding of human nature and its relation to God, i.e., that human beings are meant to obey God and therefore that it is right that they should.

Objectors to Clarke argued that the obligation still has to come from God’s divine nature or something derived from it, such as divine punishment, otherwise humans might decide that it is

not in their interest to obey. This objection relies on the following (mis)understanding of teleological virtue ethics. The only reason we have to be good citizens and to be virtuous is that by living in political societies we will be more successful human beings. One can, however, understand this and choose, for other reasons, to act in a way that is not virtuous. One can decide, for instance, that one had rather live fast and die young than flourish. So an understanding of human beings as living in a certain relationship to God is not enough – there is still a sense in which we are not obligated but simply acting in our own best interest. The only way to fix that, objectors to Clarke argue, is to introduce the fear of divine retribution, with the understanding that God’s rewards and punishment are such as to take out the element of choice completely from moral deliberation. All that is left is the reasoning about how best to fulfill our obligations, not whether to fulfill them.

Cockburn is quick to spot the weakness of this solution: threats and promises may help determine whether we act according to our obligations, the sense that we are obligated or not remains unaffected.

Having recourse to the will of God and the prospect of a future reward is not to supply the defects of the obligation but the defects of our strength and resolution to comply with it. The right of obliging may be full, the obligation indispensable, and yet there may be great need of assistance to our frailty for the discharge of it in cases of severe trial. The prospect of future rewards and punishments is allowed to be the only motive suited to all capacities and conditions: And therefore, no divines have more strongly pressed the consideration of the will of God, and of future retributions, than those, who maintain a full obligatory power in the relations and fitness of things.

*(Cockburn 2006: 115)*

Cockburn accepts Clarke’s moral fitness theory and rejects the opponent’s view that obligation is derived from consideration of rewards and punishment attached by God to the moral law, which is derived from his will. But Cockburn’s defense of Clarke is more than providing the obvious response to a poor objection. In that same text, she also offers an elaboration of moral fitness that is useful for our purposes as it appeals to the concept of the body politic and thereby ties her theory to that of Christine de Pizan.

Mankind is a system of creatures that continually need one another’s assistance, without which they could not long subsist. It is, therefore, necessary that everyone, according to his capacity and station, should contribute his part towards the good and preservation of the whole and avoid whatever may be detrimental to it. For this end, they are made capable of acquiring social or benevolent affections (probably have the seeds of them implanted in their nature) with a moral sense of conscience that approves of virtuous actions and disapproves of the contrary. This plainly shows that virtue is the law of their nature and that it must be their duty to observe it, from when arises moral obligation, tho’ the sanctions of that law are unknown; for the consideration of what the event of an action may be to the agent, alters not at all the rule of his duty, which is fixed in the nature of things.

*(Cockburn 2006: 114)*

Cockburn describes mankind as a “system” and claims that the nature of this system is to be social, rational, and sensible so that it is natural that we should feel an obligation to help one another and to obey God’s law. God makes these laws explicit and adds rewards and punishments as an aid to reason, which can otherwise only grasp the law dimly, and as an aid to motivation, which may fail us. But it is natural fitness, not God’s will, nor its manifestation in afterlife rewards

and punishments, which constitutes obligation. Her argument draws its influence from Stoicism. Cockburn would likely have known Cicero's *De Finibus* – a popular book at the time, and this discusses the social nature of humanity, drawing on Diogenes Laertius' Zeno and the Stoic concept of moral development, *oikeiosis*.<sup>4</sup> Epictetus also may have influenced Cockburn's version of Fitness Theory. The following passage from Epictetus is a clear example of the sort of arguments the Stoics used:<sup>5</sup>

As long as the future is uncertain to me, I always hold to those things which are better adapted to obtaining the things in accordance with nature; for God himself has made me disposed to select these. But if I actually knew that I was fated now to be ill, I would even have an impulse to be ill. For my foot too, if it had intelligence, would have an impulse to get muddy.

(Long and Sedley 1987: *Epictetus* 58J)

Indeed Cockburn does refer to the Stoics favorably when she says that their only error is a “*partial* consideration of human nature,” as they thought of us as “rational and social being[s] only,” omitting our “sensible” aspect (Cockburn 2006: 130). But this, she concludes, is a “noble error,” which an Early Modern theory such as hers and Clarke's can easily solve simply by reinstating the emotions into moral thinking.

Cockburn's insistence that “mankind is a system of creatures that continually need one another's assistance without which they could not long subsist” is in stark contrast with the contract theories of obligation of some of her contemporaries, which assume that the benefits of co-operation only become known to human beings as an afterthought. For Hobbes, as for Rousseau, human beings are fundamentally asocial, and they only come to rely on each other in order not to destroy each other. Cockburn's phrasing points to the absurdity of the belief – we cannot survive at any point of our lives without each other. We do not need the ability to trust each other merely when we meet a grumpy neighbor who might be inclined to hurting us or stealing from us, but from the very beginning of life, and right until the end (and especially at these two extremes of life). Human beings are not, Cockburn reminds us, perpetually young and always healthy men eager for a fight. They are also babies in need of feeding and people at various life stages in urgent need of care. There is no survival without care, no growing up to be mean to one's neighbor without a community that helps us reach that point.

For Cockburn, the understanding of our human nature brings obligation, not simply the understanding that we are God's creatures and that we must obey (and that it is good for us), but also the understanding that we only exist as part of a human community, and that we depend on its growth and stability for our wellbeing. This is very much a virtue ethical understanding of moral obligation and one that carries with it a different take on what is involved in understanding human morality, with less focus on the individual sense of obligation and more on the social nature of that obligation.

### 19.7 Beyond Resolution to Revolution: Mary Wollstonecraft

Cockburn's social-based moral fitness theory raises questions, of course, about the place of women and children in human societies. By arguing that obligation is grounded in the social existence of human beings and the constant dependence of individuals on each other, not just for their wellbeing, but for their survival, Cockburn is reasserting the place of women and children in philosophical debates. Women hardly feature in Hobbes (Sreedhar 2012). In the *Second Treatise* (chapter 7), Locke does discuss “conjugal society” and the civil existence of women and children, with the emphasis that although men should rule because they are naturally stronger and more able (section 82), their rule must allow the women some freedom, including the freedom to separate

(Pfeffer 2001). This would likely have been quite satisfactory for Cockburn in practice, for Locke was a great deal more progressive than most other philosophers at the time (and although this was perhaps a small step to propose, greater leaps are often harder to imagine).

But Locke's framework makes the relations between men and women, or adults and children, prior to, or even independent, perhaps from moral obligation. Moral obligation is what we owe after the "express promise and compact" that joins men and their families to a political society. Women and children need not be concerned with it, but as weaker dependents on men, it is in their interest to obey. Retaining the framework of virtue ethics – despite the obvious sexism of its early manifestation – is helpful in reinserting women and children into the debate. If the political community is as "natural" as the family community, then there is no call to account for the moral ties that hold a wife and husband together differently from those that force an individual and their neighbor to be civil to each other.

One major obstacle that the women philosophers discussed here, from Christine de Pizan onward, encountered in attempting to explain moral obligation was the expectation that women were always going to be obliged to obey their husbands and that in any body politic, women would never hold a noble place. But this changed in the late eighteenth century once women began to think that reform was underway. Between the American and the French revolution, there was a hope that women would be henceforth considered as citizens in their own rights. "Remember the ladies" wrote Abigail Adams, hopefully, to her husband, who was busy drafting the American Constitution. In France, Olympe de Gouges drafted a *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, matching the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* of 1791, clause by clause, but emphasizing marriage and family as part of humanity's civil existence.

One of the more significant attempts at including women in moral and political theories by offering a civil grounding for a moral obligation is perhaps that of Mary Wollstonecraft (Taylor 2007).

Virtue cannot be relative, she argues in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as otherwise, they are not virtues at all (Wollstonecraft 2014: 65). So if women are to be virtuous, they are to be so in the same way as men. She gives the example of chastity, arguing that too much is expected of women and not enough of men and that a proper appreciation of what is appropriate sexual behavior for both sexes is really what is called for (Wollstonecraft 2014: 153). At the same time, as she writes off Aristotle's almost foundational argument that women's virtues are specific to their (inferior) nature, she also addresses her contemporaries' belief that reason is what God gave us to help us become virtuous. This is true, she says. But like virtue, reason cannot be gendered, and it must be the case that men and women are equally capable of grasping their obligations to each other and God, and therefore should be given equal ranks in human societies. Only miseducation will make a human being, man or woman, unequal to the role of full citizenship.

Wollstonecraft's argument is powerful because it relies on tenets that her contemporaries, on the whole, accept: the correspondence between reason, knowledge, and virtue. Education is what makes us virtuous, but it has to be done according to reason, it cannot be merely "rote learning" without understanding. Wollstonecraft also argues that contemporary conceptions of femininity that weaken human nature in women and in men: fashionable sensibility, or the affectation of weakness and fragility, on the part of women, and extreme poetic sensitivity on the part of men. If we strip human beings of this nonsense, she argues, all we have left is reason and the capacity for knowledge and virtue. And because reason does not come in a male and female version, but is only strong or weak depending on the effort put into developing it, we owe it to both sexes to educate their reason. And because reasonable citizens are better for society than unreasonable ones, we owe it to humankind to educate all.

Wollstonecraft's argument is not instrumentalist here: she claims that we are obligated to treat men and women as equal and obligated to educate both in all classes. And the

reason for this obligation is that we are God's creatures and that we are created in his image, i.e., as rational beings. But in order to make that point, she needs to address the obstacles that her predecessors stumbled against: what about women's "traditional obligations," i.e., as wives and mothers?

Wollstonecraft's strategy in answering this question is motivated first by a recognition that society morals of her times are mostly hypocritical and that the concept of virtue for women has lost any connection it may have originally had to a genuine sense of right and wrong. Eighteenth-century women are taught to care for their sexual reputation and little else:

The leading principles which run through all my disquisitions, would render it unnecessary to enlarge on this subject, if a constant attention to keep the varnish of the character fresh, and in good condition, were not often inculcated as the sum total of female duty; if rules to regulate the behaviour, and to preserve the reputation, did not too frequently supersede moral obligations.

(Wollstonecraft 2014: 165)

The answer, she argues, is a progressive but radical transformation of society so that the same virtues are taught to women and to men, and the same behavior is expected of both. Chastity, in particular, she says, should be nothing more than a modest demeanor and fidelity to one's partner. Men and women ought not to rely on their sex appeal to get others to serve them, and they ought to treat each other with respect. Loss of reputation can, of course, happen to someone who is perfectly innocent, but it is only a big issue if reputation itself matters more than virtue. So in a society where morality is not fixed in appearances, a loss of reputation would not lead to social destruction.

Despite her view that morality is derived from reason and hence that it has to be the same for men and women because reason is universal, Wollstonecraft's theory of moral obligation still owes much to the Aristotelian framework of the body politic. Obligation, we saw, is what we owe each other as members of a flourishing society, a republic, where we are all equal. Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* was bound by the historical fact of a Kingdom in danger of total collapse – so her body politic had a king for a head and a society carefully divided into nobles, clergy, soldiers, peasants, men, and women. But for Wollstonecraft, the ideal society looks much more like a circle of equals, and there is no crowned head, no weapon carrying arm, and no laboring inferiors. The work of keeping the society healthy and flourishing belongs equally to all, in that all should have a say in its government. Of course, there will be soldiers and laborers, and some will be richer than others (very few eighteenth-century writers considered the possibility of economic equality), but none of this will affect their value as citizens. The body economic may still look like a humanoid, but the body politic no longer does.

There is one apparent exception to this in Wollstonecraft's writing: women, she says, when they are mothers, have a duty to feed their children themselves, and if they do not, they do not deserve the title of citizen. Caring for infants, she says, is a "grand duty," suggesting that it is a duty that supersedes others (although she does tend to overuse that epithet for rhetorical effect).

In this discussion, Wollstonecraft is reacting to a bit of historical context worth knowing: aristocratic English women did not breastfeed their own children but sent them out to live in the home of wet-nurses. This often had the effect of ill health for the infant and the absence of a family bond between the child and its parents (especially if a boy, as he would be sent to school just a few years after coming back from the wet-nurse). Rousseau denounced the practice in his *Emile*, and his enthusiasm for breastfeeding one's own (which he hardly experienced himself) infected women writers such as Wollstonecraft, at least in part because it made women important, somehow, giving them a crucial role in the upbringing of future citizens.

Wollstonecraft, who argued so vehemently against Rousseau's claim that men and women had different natures and hence had to be educated differently and held to different moral standards, now finds herself in agreement with Rousseau. It is nature, she says, that makes women *qua* mothers better suited for the job of caring for infants, therefore it is women's moral duty to do so when they are mothers.

However enthusiastic Wollstonecraft is about breastfeeding, and however harshly she appears to condemn women who do not (they do not deserve the title of citizen), it is good to take her pronouncement with a pinch of salt (Bergès 2016). First, she does not believe that the duty of mothers is more fundamental than their duty to themselves as rational beings, and the duties of motherhood are only part of their duties as citizens "in the current state of things." This can be taken as meaning two things. First, it is possible Wollstonecraft envisions a future in which women's duties to their infants are less demanding and more easily shared. But the present solution, she says, of sending children out to nurse, is not one we should tolerate. Secondly, there is a sense in which the nature of citizenship influences our duties. As Cavendish wrote, being excluded from the political forum makes one free from obligations. And it is not strange that women who are not treated as citizens should not grasp their obligation to feed future citizens. They may be forced to do so or prevented from doing it (by a husband who wants to keep his wife to himself), but this is not the same as being morally obligated. So a large part of what Wollstonecraft is saying is that women are more likely to be good mothers if they are considered citizens in the same way as men.

## 19.8 Conclusion

The question of moral obligation, like many questions of practical philosophy, is steeped in the lived experience of those who seek to answer it. And the lived experience of Early Modern women when it came to the problem of obligation was significantly distinct from those of Early Modern men to give rise to answers that were different in interesting ways. The story we tell about how moral obligation was a move away from virtue ethics, in particular, becomes less plausible when we look at the works of women philosophers of the same period. Women, it seemed, understood obligation best when they saw its subjects as members of a community, members who relied on each other for their wellbeing and survival. Hence their account of obligation retained some elements of virtue ethics: the idea that individuals flourish as part of a body politic. Virtue ethics brought with it a set of sexist attitudes that sat uncomfortably with women authors and that were not eliminated by men's theories of obligations. But it seems the solution once again could be found in the remnants of Virtue ethics: the body politic had to change; it had to assume a more woman-friendly shape.

## Notes

- 1 See Bergès 2012.
- 2 Although we do not have clear evidence that this was something she struggled with personally, her *Sociable Letters*, which are sometimes read as autobiographical, refer to an anecdote where the author is moved to act to prevent gossip. See Cavendish 1997: Letter 150. For a discussion of the letter, see Bergès 2018.
- 3 For a presentation of the Pascal family, see Conley. 2019. I owe my acquaintance with Jacqueline Pascal's philosophy, the dowry and Formulary controversies to a paper by Dwight K. Lewis and Daniel Collette presented at the Pacific APA in 2019: "Women's Autonomy in Jacqueline Pascal."
- 4 On the social nature of humanity in Cicero, see Elton 2015.
- 5 Whether Cockburn had this passage in mind depends on whether she read Greek, as Elizabeth Carter did not begin her translation till two years after Cockburn wrote her defense of Clarke, and it was not published till after her death. Patricia Sheridan (2018: 251–52) argues that the Stoics were a strong influence in Cockburn's moral theory.

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