The Other Face of Catharine Cockburn

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The Other Face of Catharine Cockburn

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Senior Thesis

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Abstract

This paper explores the subtle nuances between John Locke and Catharine Trotter Cockburn, with an emphasis on Cockburn’s ideas on space and the Great Chain of Being. I argue that Cockburn meshes Lockean empiricism and 18th-Century Neoplatonism to create an idiosyncratic approach to the ideas of her time. I also show that Cockburn’s method can offer novel insights on Locke’s thinking matter.
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1 Finding Cockburn

There is a problem with the scholarship of Catharine Trotter Cockburn that attempts to value Cockburn in terms of her fidelity to John Locke. Many scholars have criticized Cockburn for inconsistency with Locke, the subject of her famous Defence. The literature has yet to settle on how to appraise Cockburn’s philosophy, shuffling between an understanding of Cockburn as an independent philosopher and her relationship with Locke. Some have argued that Cockburn does not do well in her project, as Emily Thomas has noted in her “Catharine Cockburn on Unthinking Immaterial Substance.”¹ These writers claim that “Cockburn is not a particularly acute or consistent thinker”² and that her work is inconsistent with Locke and, as such, with itself.³ Fortunately, scholars since have worked to combat this notion and view Cockburn as a novel thinker. The following study takes seriously Cockburn’s independence from Locke, viewing Cockburn as an fascinating figure in the history of philosophy. My specific argument is that that Cockburn has a completely non-Lockean “face” that informs much of her philosophy.

2 How Lockean is Cockburn?

Jane Duran in her 2013 paper “Early English Empiricism and the Work of Catharine Trotter Cockburn”⁴ argues that Cockburn nurtures a sort of “trenchant empiricism”⁵ in her work but also very importantly in her plays. Duran notes the similarities between Cockburn and Margaret Cavendish, noting the main difference that Cockburn earned her fame mostly through her plays.

²Ibid. 261
³This is not Thomas’ view. I am citing her claim that writers have treated Cockburn’s work in this way.
⁵Ibid. 485
Although these writers found their fame differently, Duran finds it important to note that a philosophical view runs through the veins of each philosopher’s work. Duran makes a strong claim that a “desire to buttress and support a Lockean empiricist stance” is what runs through Cockburn’s work.

Although some who had been most concerned about the “new” views—such as Henry More, and the circle of Cambridge Platonists in general—had developed other ontological constructions to try to account for the problems that they approached with either a straightforwardly materialist stance or a Cartesian view, others remained staunch defenders of Locke and empiricism in general.

Duran spends most of this paper showing how Cockburn defends Locke throughout all her work and across many issues. She notes Cockburn’s skillful defense of Locke against Thomas Burnet and even Cockburn’s Lockean motivations on the voluntarism debate.

Thus Duran differs from scholarship that attempts to prove Cockburn is inconsistent with Locke. Duran argues that Cockburn defends Locke throughout all of her work. She is different, however, from more recent scholarship that intends to set Cockburn apart from her Lockean writings. What I find most interesting about Duran’s paper is her focus on Cockburn’s plays, particularly in Cockburn’s *The Fatal Friendship*. Duran praises Cockburn for her acute ability to “[perform] a sort of theoretical defense of some of her ideas in her published plays.” Duran claims that *The Fatal Friendship* revolves around a central issue of “control with respect to the passions,” noting how Cockburn sides with Locke on the “nature of the will—both human and divine.”

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6 *Ibid.* 486
7 *Ibid.* 486
8 *Ibid.* 491
9 *Ibid.* 491
Duran represents a type of defense of Cockburn in that Duran intends to show Cockburn’s consistency against opposing claims. As I have previously noted, Duran differs from recent scholarship because of this claim of Lockean consistency. Jessica Gordon-Roth follows in Duran’s project of showing Cockburn’s consistency with Locke. However, Gordon-Roth notes that Cockburn’s *Defence* offers new claims about Lockean metaphysics that “[warrant] careful consideration and further study.”\(^{10}\) Gordon-Roth’s primary argument is that Cockburn succeeds in defending Locke against Burnet’s objections. As important as this argument is, we should note that Gordon-Roth argues that Cockburn’s treatment of Locke’s idea of personhood raises many questions about Cockburn herself. In particular, Gordon-Roth notes that Cockburn might have a different view of persons than Locke and that this possibility might tell us more about the complex philosophical system underlying Cockburn’s few philosophical works. According to Gordon-Roth, whether or not Cockburn viewed a person as a *substance* with consciousness or simply just as a *consciousness* is yet to be worked out. This question, however, makes it “clear that there is much to be learned about the debates over Locke on persons and souls through Trotter’s treatments of them.”\(^{11}\)

Gordon-Roth represents another philosopher that attempts to seat Cockburn in the Lockean tradition. By showing that Cockburn successfully defends Locke against Burnet, Gordon-Roth has given a full analysis of Cockburn’s Lockean “face.” On the other hand, Gordon-Roth has shown that this side of Cockburn might not give the whole picture.


\(^{11}\)Ibid. 72
3 The Other Side of the Story

Patricia Sheridan’s 2007 paper “Reflection, Nature, and Moral Law: The Extent of Catharine Cockburn’s Lockeanism in her Defence of Mr. Locke’s Essay” further explains the nuances that Gordon-Roth mentions. Sheridan’s most important claim is that Cockburn attributes an idea to Locke and that this attribution is mistaken in a way that tells us something about Cockburn’s particular philosophical system.

Cockburn took measures to show that this anthropocentric account of natural law is compatible with the traditional understanding of natural law as an expression of the divine will. She also suggested that the moral theory she expresses in the Defence is attributable to Locke. In what follows, I argue that there are serious obstacles to this attribution.

Sheridan argues that Cockburn differs from Locke on the origin of “the normativity of natural law.” Later in the paper, Sheridan claims that this difference might reveal Cockburn’s departure from the role of ideal Lockean defender. In fact, Sheridan believes this departure stems from Cockburn’s further understanding her own ideas on “the relationship between law and moral obligation.” Sheridan shows not only that Cockburn shows signs of departure from the Lockean view at the time her Defence but also that Cockburn explicitly rejects the Lockean view of morality in later works.

These considerations might lead one to believe that Cockburn might have been ignorant of her

\[\text{References}\]

13 Ibid. 134
14 Ibid. 134
15 Ibid. 145
own inconsistency with Locke. Against these claims, Sheridan points out that Cockburn’s *Defence* was written with Locke’s *epistemological* principles as its primary concern. Burnet had simply claimed that Locke’s principles were inadequate, and Cockburn took up her pen to show that these principles were indeed adequate. Once Cockburn’s *Defence* is seen in this light, Cockburn can be understood as independent of Locke. Cockburn stands apart from Locke even in her *Defence* because she shows Locke to be consistent with himself. This in no way requires Cockburn to subscribe to the Lockean worldview. Sheridan claims “Cockburn’s appeal to Lockean epistemology in grounding her own naturalistic account of moral obligation indicates a degree of intellectual independence that is simply missed if we assess her narrowly in terms of her fidelity to Lockean precedent in moral theory.”

Thus, the gauge of Cockburn’s value as a philosopher no longer hinges on her consistency with Locke. The question is no longer “Does Cockburn succeed in defending Locke within the Lockean framework?” Rather, we can now assess Cockburn for her own views that, to me, appear starkly different from Locke upon further investigation.

I believe Emily Thomas represents the most important example of scholarship following in Patricia Sheridan’s footsteps. Even Thomas’ title “Catharine Cockburn on Unthinking Immaterial Substance: Souls, Space, and Related Matters” already suggests a new way of studying Cockburn as an independent thinker. It implies that scholarship now focuses on Cockburn’s own ways of thinking as opposed to her fidelity to Locke. Thomas’ main argument is that Cockburn applies a Lockean principle to think about space in a new way. In this way, Thomas shows exactly how Cockburn interacts with Locke, and the result is that Cockburn seems to take advantage of Locke’s principles in order to create new Cockburnian ideas. The particular Lockean concept in mind is that immaterial substance need not think. Thomas shows that Cockburn uses this principle to give

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16 *Ibid.* 148
a new definition of space. Thus, Cockburn is seen not as a Lockean *per se*, but rather as a philosopher who exhibits a keen understanding of Lockean principles and who can use them to the benefit of her own ideas.

Specifically, Thomas notes Cockburn’s belief that “because we do not know the nature of immaterial substance, we must leave open the possibility of unthinking immaterial substances.”\(^{17}\) As a result, Thomas argues that “this possibility underlies her account of space . . . that the possibility of unthinking, immaterial substances is a necessary component of her account of space”\(^{18}\) Thomas shows that Cockburn uses Lockean principles in a way that attempts to not to defend the principles but to use them for her own purposes. This understanding of Cockburn follows in Sheridan’s desire for scholarship to focus on Cockburn’s own philosophical system instead of her system’s relationship with Locke’s. In the end of the paper, Thomas urges readers to view Cockburn’s philosophy in a more holistic manner.

I believe Thomas’ and Sheridan’s papers represents some of the best contemporary scholarship on Cockburn. In response to Thomas, though, I would like to show that Cockburn’s idiosyncratic argument in her *Remarks* uses principles that are not Lockean at all. Although I intend to show (like Sheridan) that Cockburn uses Locke’s epistemology, I intend to argue that Cockburn has a completely non-Lockean “face” that informs much of her philosophy. As Thomas has shown the interesting way in which Cockburn interacts with Lockean epistemology to make way for her definition of space, I hope to show that Cockburn interacts very seriously with Neoplatonism for the exact same purpose of defining space.

\(^{17}\) Thomas, *Unthinking Immaterial Substance* 261

\(^{18}\) Ibid. 261
4 What is Neoplatonism?

To understand the motivations of Catharine Cockburn and show how they enhance our understanding of her *Defence* and her *Remarks*, I will lay out what I see as the defining characteristics of Neoplatonism in Eighteenth Century thought with a particular focus on the Great Chain of Being, natural light of reason, and the principle of plenitude.

The first relevant tenet of Platonism (and later Neoplatonism) I will discuss is the *natural light of reason*. The idea has its roots in ancient philosophy, but shows up throughout the history of philosophy. Kim and Sosa’s entry in the *A Companion to Metaphysics* states that the phrase “natural light of reason” “refer[s] to a faculty of knowledge God gives to all people, by which they can know truths independently of divine revelation”\(^{19}\) Early notions include Plato’s cave analogy and Plotinus’ Intellectual-Principle. For Plato, the light metaphor is articulated in the cave analogy. Plato argues that the light of the sun outside of the cave creates shadows on the wall for those chained inside the cave. In this way, there is a light of reason that informs our thoughts. Plato’s example shows that the light of reason can be blurred, but this light still offers reliable information (even if that information is only a part of the truth).\(^{20}\) Plotinus thinks of reason in a similar fashion:

Soul . . . is yet a secondary, an image of the Intellectual-Principle: reason uttered is an image of the reason stored within the soul, and in the same way soul is an utterance of the Intellectual-Principle . . . Sprung . . . from the Intellectual-Principle, Soul is intellective, but with an intellection operation by the method of reasonings: for its perfecting it must look to that Divine Mind

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\(^{20}\) *The Republic* 514a-518e
Plotinus’ claim that “soul is an utterance of the Intellectual-Principle” suggests that reason itself shares in a higher power that allows some accuracy while also being somewhat imperfect. Reason, stored within the soul, shares in Intellectual-Principle and is perfected by the Divine Mind. These two examples show how Neoplatonism takes the reason of the mind quite seriously. On both accounts reason is a gift from a higher source, and reason reflects truth. This stands in stark contrast to empiricism, which claims that the only genuine data we can have comes through the senses.

The natural light of reason appears in the early modern period most obviously in the writings of Descartes. John Cottingham’s book *Descartes* reveals how Descartes’ methodology borrows from these previous notions of the light of reason. Cottingham notes that Descartes has a specific notion of knowledge and “desires a level of knowledge that is above the ordinary” since the philosopher is “the seeker after wisdom or understanding.” This should not be seen as Descartes’ endeavor into epistemology, but rather as an indication of his methodology. Descartes asserts that all *scientia* should be understood as “certain and evident cognition.” Later in the passage, Descartes explains that he believes knowledge should be attained through *intuition*. Here is where we can see Platonic roots. Descartes’ notion of intuition comes from the Latin verb *intueri*, which means “to consider” or “to look on.” Descartes uses a metaphor similar to the ancients already mentioned. Indeed, the similarity is all the more striking when considering Descartes’ use of the phrases “*lumen naturale*, *lumen naturae*, and *lux rationis* (‘natural light’, ‘light of nature’, ‘light of reason’).” It is worth noting, however, that the metaphor has deeper connotations than a simple similarity between Descartes and earlier ancient writers.

Cottingham describes the metaphor as follows: our vision can be hazy, but, in the best light,

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22 *Descartes* pg. 25
23 *Ibid.* pg. 25
some things appear so clearly that we do not need to question them. There is one proviso: if an
object is very detailed and I cannot see it very clearly, then the initial “sight” may not give all the
information. However, when the object is simple, unhindered sight is reasonably straightforward.
Descartes thinks of cognition in this way. I contend that this is not a new understanding of the
natural light of reason but rather a nuanced version of the same thinking. In Descartes’ example,
reason carries with it a certain weight similar to that envisioned by the Platonists. As opposed to
strict empiricism, Descartes’ notion of cognition gives much power to the faculty of reason, in the
same way the empiricist give to sight and, in general, experience. Thus, Platonism informs some
thinking of the early modern period through philosophers like Descartes who viewed cognition as a
system of intuitions, which carry certain epistemic weight, and beliefs, which carry little epistemic
weight.

The next tenet of Neoplatonism up for discussion is the Great Chain of Being (GCOB going
forward). The GCOB finds its earliest roots in Plato’s understanding of the way in “the ‘idea of the
good’ in the Republic . . . is fused with the demiurge of the Timaeus.”24 The idea also owes part
of its origin to Aristotle’s ranking of animals, and the Neoplatonists – Plotinus in particular – later
systematized the robust notion of the GCOB. At a very basic level, the most important premise of
the GCOB is that every thing in nature belonged to a certain ranking. The chain descends from the
deity all the way to things like dirt and basic matter. For Plotinus and the Neoplatonists of his time,
the chain descends from The One as a result of the way in which The One generates the world.

I believe the most important takeaway for this notion of the GCOB amongst the Neoplatonists
is the ontological status of the GCOB. For those proponents of the idea, the GCOB had a status

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akin to an axiom. It represented an established rule about the world. The rankings actually existed in the world, and each step represented an ontological difference between species. The GCOB for the Neoplatonists was not a guide to understanding things beyond our faculties but an explanation of how the world actually exists. This contrasts with the way Locke thought of the GCOB.

Locke organizes the world without the GCOB, which coincides more with empiricism than the ancient ideas do. Locke states clearly that “the ranking of Things in Species is done by us, according to the Ideas that we have of them not present before us.” Locke’s taxonomy is something that we impart on things. It suggests that the distinction occurs in the mind of the perceiver; these distinctions do not seem, at least on Locke’s view, actually to exist in nature. At the very least, Locke makes no positive claims about the ontological status of species. In fact, Locke has very much to say about the results of making such positive claims:

“yet if we suppose [the distinguishing of the species] to be done by their real internal Constitutions, and that Things existing are distinguished by Nature into Species, by real Essences, according as we distinguish them into Species by Names, we shall be liable to great Mistakes.”

Here is where I believe Locke diverges from the Neoplatonists. Locke makes a concentrated effort to show that his idea of species and rankings is only an action of the mind, not an axiom. Thus, a third tenet of Neoplatonism takes on a specific meaning in the context of 18th-Century empiricism. This important distinction between the Lockean and the Neoplatonic thought will become more important moving forward in this study.

A final facet of Neoplatonism to be discussed is the principle of plenitude. In his seminal work


\[26\] Ibid. 448
on the GCOB, A.O. Lovejoy calls the principle of plenitude the unnamed notion of the “fullness” that carries with it two idea of fullness. First, Lovejoy notes that fullness could mean “that the universe is a plenum formarum in which the range of conceivable diversity of kinds of living things is exhaustively exemplified.”27 In this context, the world realizes every type of being possible. Second, fullness also suggests that “that the extent and abundance of creation must be as great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a ‘perfect’ and inexhaustible Source, and that the world is the better, the more things it contains.”28

Like the other two principles, the principle of plenitude appears throughout 18th-Century thought. It leads to hypotheses about ether, suggesting that no space can be left unfilled. Even Cockburn’s notion of the GCOB in her Remarks relies on the assumption that plenitude requires every space to be filled. To be sure, a goal of this section is to show how 18th-Century empiricism might have created nuanced ways of thinking about these Neoplatonic ideals. However, these nuanced versions of the GCOB and the principle of plenitude seem not only nuanced but significantly different than their Neoplatonic origins, especially for writers like Cockburn. Going forward I will show how these three characteristics of Neoplatonism aid in our understanding of Catharine Cockburn. She toes the line between empiricism and rationalism in very interesting ways, and a firm understanding of Neoplatonism in the 18th-Century context will help to further define that line and Cockburn’s place along it.

28Ibid. 52
5 Neoplatonism in Locke and Cockburn

The following section discusses Neoplatonism in the context of John Locke and Catharine Cockburn. I will stick very closely to Locke’s *Essay* and Cockburn’s *Remarks* and argue that sections in Locke that seem Neoplatonic are disingenuous. Rather, Locke uses the GCOB to further explain empiricism’s differences from rationalism. I argue that Cockburn, on the other hand, takes these Neoplatonic ideas more seriously and appears to be influenced very deeply by their tenets.

It would be helpful to the current investigation to study each author’s work for ways in which Neoplatonic ideas interact with the writers’ ideas. Locke’s *Essay* most certainly explains whether or not Locke is a proponent of the natural light of reason, the GCOB, and the principle of plenitude. Cockburn, on the other hand, will require a little closer reading, as Cockburn’s writing is not nearly as extensive or explicit as Locke’s. Nevertheless, a thorough investigation of Cockburn’s project might reveal how closely she follows in the empiricist tradition that was quite popular during her time. To begin this investigation, I will begin with the natural light of reason.

Locke states very clearly what he thinks about the extent of human knowledge, as his *Essay* is primarily a work in epistemology. Locke believes the mind begins as a *tabula rasa* upon which experience must write ideas through the acts of sensation and reflection. The mind can “work with” these simple ideas in three ways. First, the mind can combine simple ideas to create complex ones. Second, the mind can compare simple or complex ideas. In Locke’s words, the mind does this by “setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one.”\(^{29}\) This action of the mind creates what Locke calls ideas of relation. Third, the mind creates ideas of abstraction. These are the three processes Locke believes the mind uses to create knowledge.

\(^{29}\)Locke, *Essay* II.12.23-26, 163.
Thus, the origin of all knowledge must clearly be *experience*. Assuming that Locke takes this notion to its full extent, which I believe he does, we can see very quickly how Locke’s account of knowledge differs from that of the Neoplatonists. The Platonic tradition holds that reason itself gives knowledge. We might find that the natural light of reason suggests that we can use reason to pick out truth from experience, but this still gives reason authority in discerning truth and thus creating knowledge. Moreover, the Platonic idea that the rational world is more real than the physical world indicates the way in which reason is more important than experience when it comes to knowledge.

I believe we can find further textual evidence from Locke’s *Essay* that represents his opposition to the Neoplatonists. Locke, like many philosophers of his time, takes up his pen to write about substance, although his views stand out against his contemporaries:

“*We have no such clear Idea at all, and therefore signify nothing by the word Sub-
stance*, but only an uncertain supposition of we know not what; (i.e. of something whereof we have no particular distinct positive) *Idea*, which we take to be the *substrat-
tum*, or support, of those *Ideas* we do know.*

Thus, Locke believes that a lack of experience about a thing, be it a concept or an object, must keep us from claiming knowledge about that thing. I believe the Neoplatonic reaction to such a phenomenon would appear quite different. Given that the natural light of reason, if reason suggests an explanation, the explanation can become knowledge. Thinking back to the previous example about Descartes and his idea of intuition, there are some things that reason can suggest and that occurrence *eo ipso* makes it knowledge. In this way, reason has the ability to create knowledge, which goes against Locke’s view that experience is the only source, or at least the only origin, of

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30 Locke, *Essay* I.4.18.29-33, 95
all knowledge. Both of these examples, I believe, show that Locke’s project is vastly different from and even in opposition to the that of the Neoplatonists.

It might be very difficult to distinguish Cockburn’s epistemological views from Locke’s, as much of Cockburn’s work either defends Locke or espouses Locke’s epistemological views for the sake of another argument. However, I do not intend to paint Cockburn as Locke’s opposite; Cockburn exhibits an acute ability to espouse Locke’s views even when they may seem to contradict her Neoplatonic motivations. I will address whether they do, in fact, contradict her empiricist tendencies in a later section. I will argue that Lockean epistemology goes against Neoplatonic notions and that Cockburn can sometimes write explicitly in the Lockean tradition even if her philosophy is not primarily Lockean.

The GCOB provides what I believe to be the most nuanced difference between the two. As I have previously discussed, Locke subscribes to the idea that species are only names given by the mind. These species do not represent any ontological differences in the things themselves and are only nominal essences as opposed to real essences. Locke believes there is nothing more to a species than a few characteristics given to the mind through experience and ascribed back upon the object by the mind. Most importantly for Locke, these characteristics cannot be proven to be based on the essence of the object in question. Indeed, Locke finds it very hard to say that “a Shock and a Hound, are not as distinct Species, as a Spaniel and an Elephant.”31 I believe this tendency in Locke shows how differently he thought about species in general. Moreover, Locke’s notion of the GCOB seems to exclude the basic notions of plenitude and continuity. Locke might have held some commitment to gradation, though, considering what was said in the previous section about the mind’s system of ranking.

31Locke Essay III.6.38.6-7, 463
Cockburn’s metaphysic owes more to the GCOB than Locke’s does. The main thrust of my argument depends on how Cockburn thinks about space in her *Remarks*. A genuine GCOB theorist must accept certain things about the GCOB in order to line up with the Neoplatonic idea. I will attempt to show Cockburn’s commitment to each major principle.

The principle of plenitude suggests that all gaps must be filled in the GCOB. In her *Remarks*, Cockburn states that “there is no manner of chasm left, no link deficient in this great chain of beings.” Clearly, this is an acceptance of the principle of plenitude itself. It implies that Cockburn’s methodology starts with an acceptance of the principle of plenitude rather than an acceptance of the Lockean methodology. I will speak more on this later. The second principle of the GCOB Cockburn must accept is that of continuity. Continuity requires that every gap in gradation along the chain must be filled. Cockburn states that “there should be in nature some being to fill the vast chasm betwixt body and spirit.” Once again, Cockburn’s words suggest full commitment to the principles of the GCOB. She sees the GCOB as an axiom, and this tendency reveals how different her idea of the GCOB is from Locke’s. Cockburn accepts that knowledge can originate from places other than experience since these species are given through reason and not through experience. This stands in stark contrast to Locke. The third principle Cockburn must accept is that of gradation. Cockburn asserts that “there is such a gradual progress in nature, that the most perfect of an inferior species comes very near to the most imperfect of that, which is immediately above it.”

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32 Remarks on some passages in the translator’s Notes upon Archbishop King’s Origin of Evil
34 Ibid. 97
35 Ibid. 97
to the GCOB than Locke. Locke speaks very little of the principles of the GCOB while Cockburn
mentions and makes use of them with apt understanding.

The final part of this section requires an understanding of how Locke and Cockburn think of the
principle of plenitude. Much has already been said of Cockburn’s notion of plenitude, but Locke’s
notion still wants of analysis. In Essay III.6.12, Locke discusses the probability of the GCOB with
no mention to its certainty. As Lovejoy makes note, Locke “does not insist upon the a priori neces-
sity of the plenitude and continuity of the chain.”

Thus, for Locke, gradation seems the only thing
discoverable by reason. Indeed, the principles of plenitude and of continuity seem only probable
and, as I read Locke, non-discoverable through experience. I believe this to be enough to show
how Locke thinks of the principle of plenitude, i.e., as another principle to be thrown away by the
empiricist movement.

Cockburn, as I have previously shown, makes specific mention to the principle of plenitude. I
will show her commitment is much stronger than a simple nod toward the Neoplatonists. Cock-
burn hypothesizes in her Remarks that space ought to be defined as “an immaterial unintelligent
substance, the place of bodies, and of spirits, having some of the properties of both.”

Cockburn’s argument, however, rests on the more rigorous commitment to the GCOB that I have drawn out.
Cockburn’s motivation for defining space appears to be a requirement of the GCOB. Cockburn
notes that there exists a “vast chasm betwixt body and spirit” and, if this chasm cannot be filled,
the whole GCOB must fail. Thus, space must be the substance that fills this space. What I think is
important here is that Cockburn not only makes mention of the GCOB, but one of her arguments
relies upon a certain understanding of the chain. If Cockburn were to take Locke’s stance, she

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36 Lovejoy, Great Chain of Being, 356N1
37 Cockburn, Philosophical Writings, 97
38 Ibid. 97
would have no reason to posit that space fills this gap. In fact, I believe Locke would simply show
that this is a level of knowledge our experience cannot reach and where our conclusions cannot
be grounded. He would not have been worried at all if the GCOB must fail as an axiom. Cock-
burn’s reliance on the GCOB expresses her Neoplatonist commitments. Without the GCOB, her
arguments would not succeed.

6 Thinking Matter and the Great Chain of Being

With the above, I have shown that Cockburn and Locke have vastly different motivations under-
lying their two systems. Although these systems differ in very important ways, I have used the
literature to suggest that the two philosophers’ views do not need to be incompatible. The fol-
lowing is an attempt to show that the two differing systems can be compatible in very interesting
ways. Specifically, I will attempt to show that Cockburn’s Neoplatonic tendencies (when they be-
come mixed with Lockean ideas) can offer a new understanding of Locke’s thinking matter. But
first Locke’s thinking matter warrants a quick explanation.

In Book 4.3.6, Locke floats a hypothesis that rests upon the extent of human knowledge. I find
it worth noting very quickly that Locke’s ideas on thinking matter are epistemological claims that
seem to me to make very few ontological or metaphysical commitments:

We have the Ideas of Matter and Thinking, but possibly shall never be able to know,
whether any mere material Being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the
contemplation of our own Ideas . . . to discover, whether Omnipotency has not given
to some Systems of Matter . . . a power to perceive and think . . . It being . . . not
much more remote from our Comprehension to conceive, that GOD can . . . superadd
to Matter a Faculty of Thinking, than that he should superadd to it another Substance,

with a Faculty of Thinking\(^{39}\)

This passage attempts to show two things. First, we simply cannot know through our experience – what Locke refers to in this passage as Ideas – whether or not God could have created thinking matter. Second, it is no less likely that God could “superadd” thinking to any other type of substance. The first claim rests on Locke’s idea that our Ideas do not extend far enough to give reliable information on the nature of substance or substratum. The second claim seems to suggest something a bit stronger. Locke not only says we cannot know whether or not God has actually superadded this property to systems of matter but also that it implies no contradiction. The notion that it might imply a contradiction formed the basis for an objection from Samuel Clarke.\(^{40}\) To sum it up: 1) considering that it implies no contradiction that God superadd a thinking quality to material substances and 2) that our experience (Ideas) cannot tell us whether or not God has actually superadded this quality to these substances, then 3) thinking matter is a possibility about which we must remain ignorant of its actual existence or ontological status.

Such is Locke’s view on thinking matter. Again, it is an epistemological claim that makes no ontological commitments. I believe Cockburn’s views, however, can offer a possible positive claim about the ontological status of thinking matter. Cockburn takes advantage of the GCOB to offer a definition of space in her Remarks. Cockburn starts by discussing why space has not been given real existence. She first prefaches her discussion by noting that “the only ground [she] can apprehend for denying the real existence of space, is, that we know not in what class of beings to

\(^{39}\)Locke, Essay 4.3.4, 540-541

place it.” She notes how Dr. Watts spends a lot of time trying to define space only to show that it is nothing since he cannot understand the kind of existence space exhibits. Specifically, Watts’ objection rests on the notion that our ideas do not give us sufficient information on the nature of space. Since we have so little information, we must say that space is nothing. Cockburn denies Watts’ method, claiming our ignorance of an object’s nature insufficient for excluding its existence from the world. She further notes other authors finding the same problem with space, but these authors “choose rather to plunge [themselves] ‘into that hideous abyss of conjecturing’”42. Cockburn thinks it not such a hideous abyss to conjecture that there may exist other substances than body and spirit. In fact, she leaps right into conjecture.

At this point, Cockburn refers to Addison and Locke’s explanation of the GCOB. Her argument follows by parity of reason to conjecture that “there should be in nature some being to fill up the vast chasm betwixt body and spirit; otherwise the gradation would fail, the chain would seem to be broken.”43 Thus what being fills the gap between intelligent immaterial substance and senseless material substance? Cockburn claims space is the perfect candidate to fill the gap between the two, as it shares in the attributes of both substances.

The important assumption here is the principle of continuity. She desires to show that certain features must be shared and others not shared for a substance to fill a gap between two other substances. In this case, the gap is between intelligent immaterial substance and senseless material substance. In this case, space shares immateriality with intelligent immaterial substance (spirit) without sharing in intelligence. In addition, space shares extension and senselessness with senseless material substance without sharing in materiality. The following illustrates the gap that

41Cockburn, Remarks, 96
42Ibid. 96
43Ibid. 97
Cockburn argues space fills:

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<th>Material</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
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<td>Space</td>
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Here Cockburn shows that, by the principle of continuity, a substance must exist to fill the gap between spirit and body. Each of these steps on the chain differ on two attributes: materiality and intelligence. Since both of these substances have stark differences and the principle of continuity prescribes that a gap substance must share something with the substance above it on the chain and below it on the chain, then space seems the most likely candidate to fill the gap.

Upon closer analysis, this argument works very interestingly in the way in which it interacts with Lockean techniques and Neoplatonic techniques. First, Cockburn wants an epistemological basis for making this claim. It would be difficult for an empiricist to posit this type of claim, as Locke claims the GCOB does not force itself upon the senses. Rather, it is a product of rational contemplation and far different from a complex idea or relation of ideas. Moreover, Locke himself has shown that the GCOB holds no ontological status in his system. I believe it fair to say that on Lockean terms, Cockburn would have to reach very far out of the Lockean methodological system to posit this definition.

However, Cockburn has indeed used Lockean methods to make this claim. As I have mentioned previously, Cockburn denies Watts’ method by showing our ignorance cannot exclude the existence of an object. I believe this resembles a Lockean move. Locke himself makes this type of move when describing the substratum; simply misunderstanding a thing cannot mean it does not
exist. Rather, we must remain in ignorance of that object’s nature and not necessarily of its existence. Thus we have Locke’s “I know not what.” Locke makes the simple epistemological claim that our minds cannot know yea or nay when it comes to things like this.

I believe here is where Cockburn steps away from Locke’s strict restriction of our knowledge and relies on a more Neoplatonic way of thinking. Once she has opened up the epistemological gates of conjecture (through Locke’s method) she can now posit definitions and new ways of understanding things that we do not experience firsthand. Cockburn finds a very interesting way of meshing two very different philosophical methods. Cockburn takes Locke as far as she can and uses another system to make new hypotheses and definitions. Indeed, using Cockburn’s hybrid method might also tell us new and interesting things about Locke’s ideas.

Cockburn’s conjecture has an important implication: it leaves room for one more conjecture regarding the GCOB. There are two options for Cockburn: immaterial unintelligent substances and, importantly, material intelligent substances. The following tables show the gaps filled by space and thinking matter:

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<tr>
<td>Space</td>
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<td>Body</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinking Matter</td>
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I would argue that Cockburn cannot ignore this implication since she shows that ignorance of the actual of existence of a subject is insufficient to exclude its existence. Although this conclusion was understandably excluded from the Remarks (her purpose was to define space), her argumen-
tation does leave open the possibility of thinking matter. Locke reached a similar conjecture in his *Essay*, but I find Cockburn’s method vastly different from Locke’s. For Locke, thinking matter is either 1) a wildly absurd example to show the inability of the human mind or 2) it is a hypothesis that cannot be ruled out. Either way, Locke does not use the GCOB to provide any basis for thinking matter. Whether or not Locke seriously believed in the possibility of thinking matter, I contend Cockburn’s method might require her to do so. Although Cockburn is working to define something already forced upon our senses, I see no reason why her argument cannot work the other way to posit something not forced upon our senses.

Once again, this conjecture would follow the same hybrid method of thinking. First, there is no reason to rule out thinking matter based on our ignorance of its nature. In fact, Locke himself argues this point in his *Essay*. Otherwise, he would not have sparked the interesting debates going on right now about thinking matter. Second, thinking matter can fill the gap that space fills just as well. In fact, there might be two spaces left to fill on the chain, and space and thinking matter might work in tandem to fill these spaces. If Cockburn truly commits herself to the GCOB, which I have argued that she most likely does, then Cockburn would most likely be open to this way of thinking about thinking matter. I believe this claim is a product of her hybrid method and reveals an interesting Cambridge-Platonist metaphysical worldview that offers another route to Locke’s thinking matter that goes beyond the simpler supposition that Locke poses.

My argument is that Cockburn goes beyond Locke’s method to create a hybrid, Cockburnian method. Indeed, Cockburn uses Locke’s method very well to find an opening in the epistemological framework. She uses that opening to move into the Neoplatonic territory of conjecturing (or the hideous abyss of conjecturing—your choice) about things not forced upon our experience. Once into this part of the argument, Cockburn uses the GCOB as a way to make a fascinating claim.
about understanding the ontological position of space. I argue further that this exact method can work in such a way to hypothesize about the ontological position of thinking matter. Locke would most likely not use this Cockburnian method, but it nevertheless stems from a philosopher highly committed to defending empiricism and its implications.

In response to the literature on Cockburn that demands a more holistic view of Cockburn, I contend this hybrid method shows that Cockburn’s Neoplatonic motivations deserve more attention. Cockburn has been shown as a Lockean empiricist by many writers, but few have focused on the nuanced ways in which she interacts with these ideas. Cockburn creates a new idiosyncratic method that I believe deserves more attention for its interesting place in the history of philosophy.

7 Looking Forward

I have shown that Cockburnian philosophy (1) stands independent of John Locke in interesting and subtle ways and (2) might have commitments that Cockburn did not state. Cockburnian arguments rely on Neoplatonic arguments in ways that Lockean arguments do not, and I believe this intriguing tendency in Cockburn is understudied. As scholarship has moved towards understanding Cockburn independently of Locke, we must move to understand the specific motivations underlying Cockburnian argumentation. Cockburn represents a special place in the history of philosophy for her apt ability to toe the line between empiricism and rationalism at a time when empiricism was gaining its hold on many thinkers. Cockburn goes beyond Locke’s method in many ways, but her conclusions still interact in unusual ways with those of her defendee. Cockburn’s method reaches conclusions that can help us understand Locke’s thinking matter in a Neoplatonic context. As scholars before me have noted, Cockburn’s idiosyncratic method deserves much more focused attention for its singular place in the history of philosophy.