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# From Age to Age the Same: The Providential Ethics of Joseph Butler

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## I. Introduction

In order to understand anyone's thought and writings, it is necessary to understand their historical situation: whom were they responding to? What issues were under heated discussion at the time, and why? How did his background shape his character and thinking? Finally, we need to interact with other critics to see what help they can provide to our understanding. Where was Butler's system strong? Where did it fall short, and why? Did he accomplish what he intended to his own satisfaction, if not to ours?

To this end, we shall first provide a brief survey of Bishop Butler's age, especially in areas that affected his later writings. We will study several key components of his ethical system, and along the way, we will interact with several more modern critics of Butler to see what help they can provide in our task. Finally, if Butler's views on ethics are compelling, we need to ask how they might be applied to our more tolerant age.

## II. Butler's era

The 17th and 18th centuries saw the rise of a number of newer philosophical movements that rebelled against older and more traditional ideas. Prominent among these was *deism*, which was in part a reaction to skeptical arguments that had attacked Christian belief. Deists wanted to keep what they saw as the essentials of the faith: belief in a supreme being who had created the universe, traditional morality which could be identified and practiced via reason, and a final judgment based on our good works in this life. However, they also desired to attack the traditional doctrine of special revelation, of believing God had spoken to humanity in and through an inspired sacred text. Therefore, things of a more supernatural nature—the Incarnation, miracles, above all the resurrection of Christ—were taboo. These beliefs had simply exposed Christians to various charges of superstition and fanaticism. The deists initially saw themselves as preserving what was best in Christian theism, setting it on a more logical foundation, but as they gathered steam they began to more aggressively attack orthodoxy, led by English writers such as Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648):

[In 1645] Lord Herbert published an enlarged edition of his [*On Truth, as it is Distinguished from Revelation, the Probable, the Possible, and the False*], which included an explicit attack on revealed religion. The rational, generally acknowledged common notions were not simply central truths of institutional religion. They now served as a kind of launching-pad to attacking religion based on revelation. He urged that all religion should be investigated historically and be tested by the common notions. He criticized bibliolatry, and denounced the idea of an infallible church. The attack on revealed religion in the name of reason, morality and historical truth was the central theme of Deism. (Brown, 204)

Attacking deism was a chief reason for Butler's *Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature*; there is some irony in this, because students of Butler have recognized aspects of deism in his own writings—in particular, his reliance upon “nature.”

Other movements, particularly in the area of ethics, grew up in response to the ethical philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes's materialistic foundation for morality emphasized that humans are selfish by nature; only the social contract provides protection from the greed and aggression of others. Most thinkers immediately after Hobbes continued to wrestle with his work, trying to devise systems that would provide a defense against what they perceived as the moral arbitrariness expressed in the *Leviathan*. Carlsson (33-62) provides a helpful overview of four different schools that began to develop.

First were the *Cambridge Platonists* including, among others, Ralph Cudworth. Cudworth, an epistemological rationalist, held that moral verities existed external to humans, but that our senses were useless in discovering them. They could only be discerned by reason, which imitated the same faculty in God. Cudworth believed virtue to be dependent on the latter, rather than the divine will. This implied that not even God could decide to change his ethical precepts once he had called them into existence. Ethics in this sense had an independent essence, and if the Creator could not change them, his creatures certainly could not. If understood in this manner, Butler would have had little to quarrel with in Cudworth's thought, though he would have maintained that special revelation could (and had) been added to human moral knowledge. The Cambridge Platonists preceded both Butler and the two later schools of rational ethics, and so influenced the former only indirectly via the latter.

One of these earlier systems that influenced Butler was the *natural law moralists*, whose ideas were most fully summarized by John Locke and Richard Cumberland. Locke believed there were no innate ideas, including ethical ones, but that humans, via our sense experience and reason, could come to a knowledge of an *external* law that God has established—since laws imply a lawgiver. Because God has created and sustains us, we are obligated to obey this law (or moral good)—not only out of duty, but because God in his benevolence has linked virtue with pleasure and vice with pain in our natures. A forerunner to utilitarian ethicists, Cumberland, in his *Laws of Nature*, agrees with Locke in many areas but also emphasizes the concept of benevolence to morality:

Cumberland finds that the fundamental proposition of reason is that the greatest benevolence of every rational agent towards all other rational agents constitutes the happiest state of everyone in general and of each individual in particular. Benevolence is the necessary prerequisite in order to attain the happiest state of existence to which all men aspire to the extent it is within their power to procure it, and therefore, the common good of all is the supreme law. (Carlsson, p. 48)

Butler was heavily influenced by the natural law school; he too saw the universe functioning in an

orderly manner under the rule of God. Just as humans could know physical laws via study of the universe (Newton's influence on the age is here evident), so too we could know moral truth via our rational faculties. Carlsson writes,

Butler views the universe as an organic whole functioning by laws. Because God is the kind of a being that he is, Butler maintained that He had fixed pleasurable consequences to virtuous actions and disagreeable consequences to vicious actions. In this manner, by pursuing pleasure and turning away from pain, man is able to ascertain how he should act. Although Butler did not hold that man should act according to utilitarian principles as did Cumberland, it is sometimes said that Butler thought God had so constituted the universe so as to provide the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of men. Butler also agreed that the individual's pleasure could only be attained by consideration of others. (p. 49)

The third group of theorists, the *rational moralists*, included the man who was one of Butler's closest personal friends, Dr. Samuel Clarke. In his *Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Relations of Natural Religion* (1705), Clarke lays out his ethical framework. Humans are to imitate their Maker by using reason to judge the fitness or unfitness of relations between things. This should lead us to self-evident truths about morality, Clarke believes. He has little patience with skeptics: just as we would not say that principles of mathematics do not exist because some do not possess adequate mental faculties to discover them, the same is true of morality. Just because some people, due to ignorance or perversity or an arrogant skepticism, think independent moral laws do not exist, this is no reason for sane and rational people, who follow the dictates of conscience, to agree with them. Clarke also believes that "virtue is its own reward," that God has so designed us that we normally desire to do the good and receive intrinsic pleasure from doing so. Other external considerations, such as God's commands or human positive law (including rewards and punishments), while important and necessary to a degree, should only be of secondary importance as motivations for us to act morally. Butler probably imbibed much of his rationalistic approach to ethical theory from Clarke, though he makes use of conscience far more than does the latter.

The final group of thinkers we shall consider in our brief survey is the *moral sense school*, which included Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson. In his *Enquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*, Shaftesbury provides a more psychological approach to ethics than we have yet seen. Each creature, he believes, has a private good which his nature compels him to seek, an end to which he must be directed. But these things, for Shaftesbury, are always relative to a system or a larger whole. Carlsson writes,

In order to deserve to be called virtuous, a man must have all of his inclinations and affections, his dispositions of mind, suitable to and agreeing with the system in which he is included and of which he constitutes a part. Therefore, virtue is to have one's affections right and complete not only in respect to oneself, but also in respect to society. This, of course implies that there is no opposition between public and private virtue. In fact, to be well affected towards one's own interest as well as the public interest is not only consistent, but inseparable. Since the same regularities of affection which promote the individual's own good also promote the good of others, virtue and interest will be found to agree. (57-58)

Another moral sense theorist, Francis Hutcheson, held that actions were good that proceeded from benevolence towards others. An agent should also rationally consider how she could do the greatest good for the greatest number, making Hutcheson an obvious forerunner of Bentham and Mill. Hutcheson is not

very clear in spelling out why this moral sense is authoritative or very precise in how it functions, though he does make use of the disinterested observer—who approves or disapproves of various moral acts based upon their level of benevolence to others.

While it is clear that Butler's idea of conscience is similar to the moral sense of Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, and that Butler agreed with the latter that virtue was the greatest source of happiness to the agent, Butler appears more of a rationalist than either, and he finds fault with Shaftesbury for not recognizing the intrinsic authority of "reflex approbation" (Carlsson, 62). Having considered the intellectual milieu of Butler's age, we are now in a better position to survey and understand his basic ethical framework.

### III. Butler's ethical system

#### *On human purpose*

Butler viewed himself as continuing a long and noble tradition of moral reflection which had started with the Greeks, who had concluded humans were "born to virtue":

That the ancient moralists had some inward feeling or other, which they chose to express in this manner, that man is born to virtue, that it consists in following nature, and that vice is more contrary to this nature than tortures or death, their works in our hands are instances. (Raphael, 325)

Butler shares their view in a general sense, but wants to further clarify what this might mean. Along the way, he hopes to address concerns raised by his immediate predecessors as well as his contemporaries.

Butler adopts the Aristotelian view that everything has a purpose or function, and that purpose is what determines whether a creature or object should be approved: if a watch is telling time accurately, it is fulfilling its *telos* and should be considered "good". But a watch is also a system composed of multiple parts, each of which must be present and performing its due function, yet without disrupting the system as a whole. The same theory applies to humans:

Appetites, passions, affections, and the principle of reflection, considered merely as the several parts of our inward nature, do not at all give us an idea of the system or constitution of this nature: because the constitution is formed by somewhat not yet taken into consideration, namely by the relations, which these several parts have to each other; the chief of which is the authority of reflection or conscience. It is from considering the relations which the several appetites and passions have to each other, and above all the supremacy of reflection or conscience, that we get the idea of the system or constitution of human nature. And from the idea itself it will as fully appear, that this our nature. . . is adapted to virtue, as from the idea of a watch it appears, that its nature, i.e. constitution or system, is adapted to measure time. (Raphael, 327)

To go against one's nature, to regularly practice vice, is to disrupt and ultimately destroy the system itself. It is here, perhaps, that we Shaftesbury's insistence on the "system" exerting its influence on Butler.

One complication in understanding Butler's view of virtue is his insistence of its being grounded in human nature. It might be possible to construe some kind of gap between the two, so that our nature leads us to perform actions that are in fact morally wrong or opposed to conscience. Can Butler deal with this issue without invoking a *deus ex machina*? Brinton (325-332) thinks he can:

. . . Butler does not have the problem which [some attribute] to him, and [he] neither has, nor *feels*, the need to

invoke the power and goodness of God to close a gap between following nature and virtue. There is more than textual support, though, for the primacy of constitutional over material virtue in Butler's moral philosophy. There is also *contextual* support. In early eighteenth-century preaching there was a well-established conceptual framework in which virtue was identified with a species of following our nature in the government of the passions (for example in the sermons of Samuel Clarke, Charles Hickman, and Henry Grove). Butler would have expected in his *Sermons* to have been understood as thinking in terms of that framework. (331)

### *On conscience*

To clarify the analogy, Butler describes his overall position: humans have various instincts and passions, like the brute animals, some of them leading to public good and others to private benefit. Unlike the animals, humans have reflection or conscience, and while animals act according to their constitution and their circumstances, humans do the same— but with one major difference: in us, conscience acts as the moral umpire, the faculty which should rule over all other passions. If it does not, we are not acting in accordance with our true nature:

Whereas in reality the very constitution of our nature requires that we bring our whole conduct before this superior faculty; wait its determination; enforce upon ourselves its authority, and make it the business of our lives, as it is absolutely the whole business of a moral agent, to conform ourselves to it. This is the true meaning of that ancient precept, *Reverence thyself*. (Raphael, 330)

Butler thinks that ignoring conscience in our ethical theorizing is a serious flaw. He remarks, for example, that Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue* is incomplete: how would we know what to do, Butler wonders, when we are confronted by a situation, not at all uncommon, of having some kind of internal conflict of interest, where we have a desire to do both good and evil in the same situation and where both will bring some manner of happiness? What will decide the outcome? Here is where conscience should rule, Butler maintains, providing the final ruling as to which course of action leads to virtue. We never have recourse to moral skepticism, he maintains, as conscience always can provide the answer. Butler here seems to posit that conscience involves some manner of *thinking* (or reason) and *feeling* (or affection), which were already to be found in Shaftesbury's reflex approbation:

For that mankind upon reflection felt an approbation of what was good, and disapprobation of the contrary, [Shaftesbury] thought a plain matter of fact, as it undoubtedly is, which none could deny. . . . Take in then that authority and obligation, which is a constituent part of this reflex approbation, and it will undeniably follow, though a man should doubt of everything else, yet, that he would still remain under the nearest and most certain obligation to the practice of virtue; an obligation implied in the very idea of virtue, in the very idea of reflex approbation. (Raphael, 331)

From this particular passage, several questions arise. If Shaftesbury's view of reflex approbation already contained feelings or emotions, what does Butler gain by adding conscience, other than providing a ruling faculty? Doesn't Shaftesbury already provide, in one sense, a sovereign passion-- when we see, for example, a virtuous action, we know it is superior through our automatic approbation? Further, how does the conscience make judgments? What faculty or faculties does it use to do this-- the will? If we remove reason and the affections, what remains *other* than the will? These are confusing issues, and one could wish that Butler had explained them with greater clarity.

Butler himself often seems to use the term *conscience* almost interchangeably with reflection, which

implies that conscience is a faculty of reason:

[There] is a principle of reflection in men, by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove their own actions. We are plainly constituted such sort of creatures as to reflect upon our own nature. (Raphael, 341)

Butler gives the example of the love that parents have for their children: upon reflection we realize that such love is appropriate, and we give it to our children—and such approval by conscience will carry us further through the hardships of life than mere affection acting alone.

But why can't we just automatically *have* the approval of conscience simultaneously with the affection we have for our children? Indeed, why can't they be the same thing? Butler responds by asserting that they are distinct (though their often being conjoined leads us to infer that they are not): “. . . for men often approve of the actions of others, which they will not imitate, and likewise do that which they approve not” (Raphael, 342). He appears to mean that Bill could see an old lady being attacked and feel fear that keeps him from acting virtuously, but when John defends her (ending up in traction for his heroism) Bill's conscience approves. This leads Bill to the recognition that he *should* have felt outraged and courageous. On the other hand, Bill may rob the old lady himself, though he feels shame as he does so.

We simply cannot deny the existence of this principle in human nature, Butler insists. He asks the reader to imagine a man who sees an innocent person in trouble and helps him; this same, apparently noble, fellow then goes and injures his friend for no reason whatsoever:

[Let] the man who is supposed to have done these two different actions, coolly reflect upon them afterwards, without regard to their consequences to himself: to assert that any common man would be affected in the same way towards these different actions, that he would make no distinction between them, but approve or disapprove them equally, is too glaring a falsity to need being confuted. (Raphael, 342)

Butler appears intent also on establishing that humans are bound by conscience *even if* there are no divine rewards or punishments for our actions (a thesis he nevertheless finds highly questionable). If this is true, then all of us can be held accountable by others when we transgress conscience, regardless of our particular religious affiliation, or lack thereof:

For in whatever sense we understand justice. . . upon this bold supposition, ignorance or disbelief of the sanction would by no means exempt even from this justice: because it is not foreknowledge of the punishment, which renders obnoxious to it; but merely violating a known obligation. (Raphael, 332)

One of the most complex issues in understanding Butler is trying to discern just how he grounds the authority of conscience: why is conscience authoritative? Why should we listen to its decrees?: “It is said that Butler defines virtuous acts to be those which conscience approves, and then makes conscience the faculty which determines and approves virtuous acts. We disapprove immoral actions, and immoral actions are those which we disapprove” (Lefevre, 399; see also MacIntyre, pp. 165-66). How can Butler escape the charge of circular reasoning?

Darwall (244-83) suggests that one fruitful way to understand this problem is to view Butler as a sort of proto-Kantian who, perhaps unbeknownst even to himself, was developing a form of the

reciprocity thesis, trying to ground the authority of conscience in its own inherent autonomy as the head of an internal constitutional order:

A key to answering this question, I suggest, is to appreciate the central role that the idea of *autonomy* or *self-regulated constitutional order* plays in Butler's thought. What conscience gives an agent is the capacity to guide her life by normative practical *judgment*, and this capacity, Butler seems to be saying, is a condition of the very possibility of autonomous rational (and moral) will and, for that reason, of an agent's having reasons to act. (275-76; Millar, 330)

This view correctly stresses the importance for Butler of the human moral life as a kind of constitutional system.

However, one objection to this approach is that it at least partially reads into Butler more than Butler intended to say, and it forces upon him a Kantian ethical approach which depends *only* on autonomous human reason, rather than on conscience perceiving external truth that may be apprehended as the final human *telos*. For Butler, conscience was more than simply practical reason; it contained an element of certain moral *affections*, as well as a more holistic account of human moral action:

The standard by which conscience or 'practical reason' judges is the nature of the agent as an organic whole-- not what would be the nature of an imaginary agent whose nature was nothing else than pure reason, a purely rational being. It is on account of this difference that we find Butler always abiding by the concrete, while Kant logically must end as he began, in an abstract formalism. For Butler, virtue is not bare logical consistency, but self-consistency, and vice is not bare logical contradiction, but self-contradiction. (Lefevre, 407-08)

Lefevre (401) has a different answer as to how Butler could escape the "circular reasoning" charge. Butler is not claiming, he thinks, that conscience simply pronounces *ex cathedra* what is virtuous; it no more creates virtue "than the eye creates the thing it sees, or the feeling of shame that which is its ground and cause and explanation, or, to use another of Butler's illustrations, than the watch creates the time it measures:

Conscience is simply the capacity for virtue. It does not make morality, but it makes moral action possible. That which renders beings capable of moral government, is their having a moral nature, and moral faculties of perception and action." [*Diss. on Virtue*, Sect.I] It is the possession of this potentiality, the highest prerogative and attribute of human nature, that renders a man a moral agent and a law unto himself [Sermons, II, Sects. 11-12]. (410)

Darwall himself, almost as an afterthought, provides another way of approaching this problem: "Of course, it might be argued that [Butler's] argument does not rely on intuitional metaphysics, since it would amount to an argument to it as the best explanation of our having the moral faculty. No premises regarding the eternal fitnesses would be required" (footnote 41, p. 269).

#### *On self-love*

Along with conscience, Butler spends time developing his theory of self-love and its role in ethics. To his credit, Butler appears to hold that humans are complex moral beings who normally act with a variety of motives and passions (here, perhaps, Butler provides a thoughtful historian of psychology with much interesting material). Like others of his time, or just preceding it, Butler believes self-love is an

important concept to understand in order to make sense of human moral choices. Where he disagrees with some of his contemporaries is in concluding that self-love and benevolence were not mutually exclusive; indeed, Butler believes they are intertwined. All of us engage in self-love if we define the term as various passions and interests that are motives to action to benefit ourselves-- but Butler adds an Aristotelian twist. He insists that self-love, truly understood, is behaving in such a way that brings what is *best* for us, and what is best are the ends for which nature made us: as we have seen, for Butler this is *virtue*.

Butler distinguishes between self-love and the passions: the former, presumably, includes all things necessary for our own survival and beneficence, with virtue being the ultimate goal. This, of course, will often involve various passions. However, we can act from our passions alone, and this will lead to consequences which can easily involve various vices. Thus Butler makes his case that self-love is not automatically the evil that others have maintained (though a false form of it can indeed lead to evil), and it is not to be set against benevolence, as if the two are always mutually exclusive opposites (though they may be in some instances):

[W]hoever will consider all the possible respects and relations which any particular affection can have to self-love and private interest, will, I think, see demonstrably, that benevolence is not in any respect more at variance with self-love, than any other particular affection whatever, but that it is in every respect, at least, as friendly to it. If the observation be true, it follows, that self-love and benevolence, virtue and interest, are not to be opposed, but only to be distinguished from each other; in the same way as virtue and any other particular affection, love of arts, suppose, are to be distinguished. Every thing is what it is, and not another thing. . . Self love in its due degree is as just and morally good, as any affection whatever. Benevolence towards particular persons may be to a degree of weakness, and so be blameable; and disinterestedness is so far from being in itself commendable, that the utmost possible depravity, which we can in imagination conceive, is that of disinterested cruelty. (Raphael, 334-35)

Butler here thinks he has set forth a compelling case for believing that self-love, properly understood, is virtuous, and that it can provide a much healthier basis for even a non-religious social life-- certainly better than mere pleasure, will or appetite acting alone. Further, stating what we might call the "invisible hand" theory of self-love, Butler thinks that even when we are acting only with regard to personal ends (assuming those ends are virtuous), we will help society at large: what produces health in one part of the body must, since the various parts are organically connected, help all members. Finally, with characteristic moderation, Butler reminds us that find true happiness receding:

Every one of our passions and affections hath its natural stint and bound, which may easily be exceeded; whereas our enjoyments can possibly be but in a determinate measure and degree. Therefore, such excess of affection, since it cannot procure any enjoyment, must in all cases be useless; but it is generally attended with inconveniences, and often is downright pain and misery. This holds as much with regard to self-love as to all other affections. The natural degree of it, so far as it sets us on work to gain and make use of the materials of satisfaction, may be to our real advantage; but beyond or besides this, it is in several respects an inconvenience and disadvantage. Thus it appears, that private interest is so far from being likely to be promoted in proportion to the degree in which self-love engrosses us, and prevails over all other principles; that the contracted affection may be so prevalent as to disappoint itself, and even contradict its own end, private good. (Raphael, 368)

Even self-love is to be guided by conscience so that it assumes the proper place in our constitutional order:

That self-love must take its place in the ranks to obey the commands of conscience is not for a moment in doubt. . . [Self-love] is superior to [the particular affections] as a principle of organization, but nevertheless it must submit to the supreme principle in man which seeks the organization of his whole nature, including benevolence. (Townsend, 86)

### *On benevolence*

As self-love is to the individual, so benevolence is to society. When we find in ourselves any degree of love for another or a desire for another's happiness, Butler thinks we have ample evidence of the principle of benevolence in human action and proof of our being designed to this end (among others). However, he goes further and posits that self-love and benevolence are closely intertwined and that we can hardly pursue the one without the other:

I must however remind you, that though benevolence and self-love are different; though the former tends most directly to public good, and the latter to private: yet they are so perfectly coincident, that the greatest satisfactions to ourselves depend upon our having benevolence in due degree; and that self-love is one chief security of our right behaviour towards society. It may be added, that their mutual coinciding, so that we can scarce promote one without the other, is equally a proof that we were made for both. (Raphael, 339)

This idea might be taken in two ways. Perhaps Butler here means that, since we are naturally designed for virtue, and since self-love *is* a virtue, we will naturally want to perform actions that are helpful to others: by doing so we are by definition helping ourselves *and* others as we aid them through acts of benevolence. On the other hand, Butler seems to lean towards a kind of pragmatism at this point: actions that help others lead them to regard us with favor, which is necessary for our own acceptance and flourishing in society. Perhaps he intends both interpretations, and he certainly views the co-mingling of self-love and benevolence in our nature as by the design of Providence, an example of “. . . our Maker's care and love both of the individual and the species, and proofs that he intended we should be instruments of good to each other, as well as that we should be so to ourselves” (Raphael, 341).

Though there may be a limited rivalry between self-love and benevolence, Butler is clear that the latter is subservient to the former, as are all the affections:

I hope it has been fully proved. . . that there is no peculiar rivalry or competition between self-love and benevolence; that as there may be a competition between these two, so there may also between any particular affection whatever and self-love; that every particular affection, benevolence among the rest, is subservient to self-love by being the instrument of private enjoyment; and that in one respect benevolence contributes more to private interest, i.e. enjoyment or satisfaction, than any other of the particular common affections, as it is in a degree its own gratification. (Raphael, 372-73)

This lends some confusion as to how Butler's system fits together in this area. In other passages (including the one above, p. 339), self-love and benevolence seem to be acting like a cord with two equal strands, in an almost seamless fashion. In this passage (pp. 372-73), Butler indicates that benevolence is only, in a sense, one tool among many that self-love may decide to use to bring gratification (although he also states that benevolence is to some degree its own reward). The relationship here among the parts--what influences what to do what and with what-- is difficult to discern.

But as we have seen earlier in the case of self-love, Butler thinks even benevolence, if acting alone, is not enough to create a just society. He asks us to consider a world where *only* this kind of good-will

toward others was in our hearts as a motive to just action. Such a world, he thinks, would still have its share of problems:

That is, we should neither approve of benevolence to some persons rather than others, nor disapprove injustice and falsehood upon any other account, than merely as an overbalance of happiness was foreseen likely to be produced by the first, and of misery by the second. (Raphael, 383)

Perhaps it is pressing Butler's analogy too far, but wouldn't it be impossible for one who has only benevolent motives to act in any other way toward others? That is, how can a totally benevolent person even consider lying or unjust actions, even if only as a means to an end? Perhaps Butler's meaning here is an example of "killing with kindness": doing a certain kind action towards someone when perhaps firm discipline is required in that particular instance. Even if this is true, however, wouldn't the discipline in this case *be* benevolent, or does the connotative use of this term for Butler involve only warm, empathic uses?

One way to gain a clearer understanding of benevolence in Butler's thought is to clarify its position in his hierarchy of values. Not everyone agrees that for Butler, self-love occupies a higher position than benevolence: Riddle (356-62) provides a helpful summary here: benevolence is both a general principle for Butler *and*, at times, one of the various passions:

Benevolence has thus a dual place in the hierarchy; at the top stands conscience, with the two general affections, self-love and benevolence, directly below it, subordinate to it, and parallel but not contrary to each other. Beneath these, and properly to be used in their service, though, as everyone knows, subject to abuse, are the particular affections, appetites, and passions, some of them, such as hunger and thirst, primarily private, and others, such as compassion, benevolence, generosity, and resentment, primarily public. Among the particular affections, appetites, and passions, almost any one may be either occurrent and occasional, or continuant and habitual. . . and we, and those around us, will be happy or unhappy in proportion as we choose those which lead to "the temper of tranquility and freedom" in accordance with the general affections of self-love and benevolence. (362)

While this classification helps bring clarity, we must not make the mistake of thinking that Butler viewed self-love and benevolence as functioning in this truncated way in reality: he merely divides them in this manner to see each one more clearly. This *methodological* dualism should not lead us to false conclusions when interpreting his system (or each human being) functioning as a whole: "[Self-love and benevolence] are simply different aspects of reason, which lead to different aspects of the common end of man":

Like self-love, benevolence imposes its own obligation, but it also, equally with action from self-love, receives a higher sanction, since our moral faculty approves of the contrary, as such, and considered independently of consequences. Thus rational benevolence too becomes a 'virtuous principle' associated with conscience; or, in other words, it also is to be viewed as an aspect of the moral faculty, and benevolence, like prudence, becomes a strictly moral duty and a province of the domain of virtue. (Lefevre, 187)

Butler's stress on benevolence also makes more sense when we consider that he sees humans as being created not only for virtue, but (again borrowing from Aristotle) *for each other*: a truly independent being does not—indeed, cannot—exist. We are communal by design and,

And therefore to have no restraint from, no regard to others in our behaviour, is the speculative absurdity of

considering ourselves as single and independent, as having nothing in our nature which has respect to our fellow-creatures, reduced to action and practice. And this is the same absurdity, as to suppose a hand, or any part to have no natural respect to any other, or to the whole body (343)

### *On motivation*

We reach now a very tangled skein, the area of motivation. Butler's views are vague here. We are left to wonder if conscience does more than simply arbitrate. In other words, while Butler clearly sees conscience as ideally binding and the producer of the moral "ought," is it conscience that motivates us as we reflect on our actions? If this is true, isn't reason itself part of motivation? What about self-love? Benevolence? All of the above-- or something else?

Perhaps the closest Butler comes to answering this question involves his theological commitments. For him, the ultimate motivation appears to be an *external* command of God, yet one that every person, regardless of their religious convictions (if any), has access to *internally* via conscience: to love our neighbor as our self (Romans 13:9). But this does not mean we jettison our reason and discernment—far from it. We must consider carefully what exactly will most benefit our neighbors, paying close attention to them as individuals as well as to particular contexts that we and they are placed in. In one situation, it may indeed be most helpful to my neighbor to loan her money: her car, which she needs to get to work, has broken down and she needs a loan to have repairs done. In another setting, my loan would be foolhardy and destructive to her happiness: I know she is a compulsive internet gambler, which is why she is now in debt. While other aid might certainly be appropriate (such as paying for her to receive counseling for her addiction), lending money certainly isn't. Only after this kind of assessment can we hope to do others the utmost good (Raphael, 374-76).

It would be unfair to say that it is only an external moral command that animates Butler's views on motivation. He appears to hint at more than this, that ethics involves learning to *love* the good-- and we do so as we fall in love with the highest good: God himself.

That which we more strictly call piety, or the love of God, and which is an essential part of a right temper, some may perhaps imagine no way connected with benevolence: yet surely they must be connected, if there be indeed in being an object infinitely good. Human nature is so constituted, that every good affection implies the love of itself; i.e. becomes the object of a new affection in the same person. Thus, to be righteous implies in it the love of righteousness; to be benevolent the love of benevolence; to be good the love of goodness; whether this righteousness, benevolence, or goodness, be viewed as in our mind, or in another's: and the love of God as a Being perfectly good, is the love of perfect goodness contemplated in a Being or Person. Thus morality and religion, virtue and piety, will at last necessarily coincide, run up into one and the same point, and *love* will be in all senses *the end of the commandment*. (Raphael, 377)

## **Conclusion**

While moderns may find some of Butler's ethical system unsatisfying, involving as it does his theistic world view, we need to judge Butler by his own time and place-- not ours. Appealing to divine love would not satisfy a skeptic like Hume, but it would appeal to the vast majority of Butler's intended audience: both Christian and Deist. Butler's primary purpose was to reach *these* people, in a manner they could understand-- not to convince skeptics to convert, though indeed Butler hoped that they would

through his writings perhaps see what he perceived as the logical and satisfying unity of Christian ethics. When judged in this light, his efforts appear more credible, though not always as lucid and comprehensive as we could wish.

For those who still object that Butler offers no final reason, for example, for the authority of conscience other than the “merely” theological, (though we have explored a few others above), we might reply that this objection can be raised against any number of other ethical systems. We might ask the pure Aristotelian, for example, *why* happiness is the highest good, or the utilitarian *why* virtue consists in the “greatest good for the greatest number.” Sooner or later, any system will reach its first principles, which will be offered to the inquirer as self-evident, as things which cannot be explained in a final sense, but only described. Butler’s great merit is that he recognized this and attempted to inductively and practically *represent* the moral life and how its various parts fit together into an organic whole.

While there will probably be no great rush to read or apply Butler’s moral system in the current cultural climate, history has a way of repeating itself, and there may come an age

which may regard a wholesome reason as the main foundation of all creative thinking, [and] there will not be wanting those who will pause to admire the sweet reasonableness of the old bishop who declined to rack his mind on the Procrustes bed of metaphysical systems. Modern philosophers and historians may not be entirely unwilling to look back to the Age of Reason for guidance as well as for warning, and may find something of both in the “philosopher of Anglicanism.” They may even come to understand that in the history of eighteenth century English culture, what Locke is to philosophy, what Newton is to science, what Burke is to politics, Butler is to theology. For all alike seek to derive their basic principles from the observed facts of nature and of society. All alike might sincerely and modestly have said with Butler, “I design the search after truth as the business of my life.” And the spokesman is by no means unworthy of his distinguished associates. (Mossner, 239-40)

Indeed, some recent political theorists and theologians, such as Hadley Arkes (1986), J. Budziszewski (1997, 1999), and Alister McGrath (2001) among others, have argued persuasively for the need to ground our current ethics, political economy, and even our science, more firmly in the natural law (or “common grace”) tradition(s), and wherever their reasoning is deemed credible, we may find Bishop Butler again becoming both influential and helpful as we chart our course into a new millennium.

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