

Dr. Joseph Butler : bishop of Durham

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DR. JOSEPH BUTLER, BISHOP OF DURHAM.

Bishop Butler stands first among English writers as a Moralist and as an Apologist. His system of Morals was given to the world in an unusual form, in a volume of fifteen Sermons, "Upon Human Nature, or Man considered as a Moral Agent". The Sermons were delivered at "the Rolls chapel", which means that he had before him not a mixed congregation, like most preachers, but an educated body of lawyers, capable of following and appreciating his argument. When Professor Max Müller came first to Oxford, being comparatively unacquainted as yet with English literature, he asked me what books he should read. One of the first that I mentioned was Butler's Sermons. "Sermons" he said; "probably they consist of only ephemeral matter and I wish for books of permanent value, which have made their mark in literature or history." I assured him that he would not find ephemeral matter in Butler's Sermons and accordingly he took down the name as a book to be read. It was selected by the University of Oxford as one of the philosophical works to be studied by young men who wished for a First Class, in conjunction with Plato and Aristotle; and it was a saying of E. A. Freeman, Professor of Modern History at Oxford and the historian of the Norman Conquest of England, that there was no one like Butler "to tell you what manner of man you were", by which he meant, what was the mental constitution of man. Mr Gladstone always professed himself a disciple of Butler, and one of his last acts was to bring out an edition of his works.

Butler's first three Sermons are on Human Nature and contain his Psychology. He shows that there are a number of

constituent parts of the mind. Affections, passions, feelings, appetites, principles. But we have no idea of the constitution of the mind until we know the relation in which these parts stand to each other. He then depicts the mind (this is not his own illustration) as forming a sort of pyramid. In the base line lie the appetites, such as hunger; next above them the affections or passions, such as compassion and resentment; above them, about midway between the bottom and the top, the intermediate principles of Self-love and Benevolence; at the apex Conscience or Reflexion. Each of these classes is superior in authority to that which lies beneath it, so that, if an appetite and an affection clash, the appetite should give way and allow itself to be controlled by the affection; if the appetite or the affection clashes with the intermediate principle, the appetite or the affection must give way; and if appetite, affection or intermediate principle clash, or seem to clash, with the highest principle Conscience, they must each and all give way to it as the ruling power of the mind.

But what right has Butler to assign this authoritative position to Conscience? Granted that there exist the above named principles, passions and appetites in man, why should one class have a right to control another? Above all why should Conscience or Reflexion be the monarch of the mind? Is not a man acting according to the dictates of his nature if he follows whichever impulse is the strongest at the moment, letting Conscience, Benevolence, Self-love, Compassion, Anger each have their turn, but not insisting on the submission of all the rest to Conscience?

Butler appeals to the human consciousness. To show that some parts of the mind are subordinate to other parts he contrasts the cases of a man who acts from self-love and a man who follows an appetite. A brute may be acting in accordance with his nature if actuated by hunger or blind rage, he gratifies his appetite or his fury in spite of bringing on himself his own destruction by that gratification. But suppose a man foreseeing the danger of certain ruin should rush into it for the sake of a present gratification, he would be following his strongest desire like the brute concerned, but he would be acting unreasonably and therefore unnaturally. But what renders his act unnatural? Not that he goes against the prin-

ciple of Self-love considered *merely* as part of his nature, for if he had acted otherwise he would equally have gone against a part of his nature, namely a passion or an appetite, which was at the moment stronger than Self-love; but because the principle of Self-love differs in kind from an appetite or passion and is a superior principle in human nature to appetite or passion, so that we say that in such a case a man who listens to the dictates of Self-love acts conformably with the economy of his nature, while the man who follows the appetite or passion violates it. So far, it is proved that there is a natural superiority of one inward principle to another, without taking into consideration the degree of strength in which each prevails. But as yet we have not touched the question of the Supremacy of Conscience.

Butler again appeals to our consciousness. We have only to look into our minds to see that we have some faculty which distinguishes between our various inward principles as well as our outward acts, and passes judgment upon them, pronounces some purposes and acts to be in themselves just, right and good, and others to be evil, wrong, unjust, and without our asking its advice magisterially approves or condemns our conduct according as we carry into action those purposes that are good or those that are bad. Sometimes a strong passion or desire will come into conflict with this faculty. The passion will desire to gratify itself without regard to the means by which this may be effected. But if the means involve injury to others, Reflexion or Conscience comes in and declares its disapproval. The desire still remains. Which is to be obeyed—the desire urging us to the act or conscience forbidding it? It is not a question of which is the strongest. Though the strong passion carries the day against a weak conscience, yet we recognise that in such a case it is a mere usurpation; power has prevailed over authority, and in every such instance the constitution of man has been violated.

The superiority of Conscience to Self-love and to Benevolence—the two principles which preside over the affections that have regard respectively to ourselves and to others—may be demonstrated in the same manner; but Butler does not labour that point because *real* Self-love and *real* Benevolence, each limiting the other—never do conflict with Conscience,

however much Selfishness or an unreasonable Altruism may do so.

Thus we have the mental pyramid formed—at the apex Conscience governing on the right hand the principle of Self-love, which in its turn and under the superintendence of Conscience rules the affections, passions and appetites that have to do with ourselves; and on the left hand governing Benevolence, which under the like superintendence of Conscience rules the affections, passions and appetites that have to do with others.

Having made his sketch of the human mind and pointed out the relation of part to part, Butler proceeds to the consideration in detail of two of the affections or passions, Compassion and Resentment. The final cause of Compassion is two-fold (1) to prevent misery, which it does by restraining resentment, envy, and whatever else makes us do evil to our neighbour; (2) to relieve distress, by inducing us to consider the sufferings of others and our duty to give assistance in cases of pain and sorrow. On examining our nature we find compassion to be as much one of our affections as any of the rest; whence it follows that the Author of our nature intended us to exercise it, as He intends us to exercise other affections. And on examination we find that more misery is annihilated by compassion than by any other way. It is true that compassion may be carried too far, like every other affection, and then great discomforts follow, but we are not in general tempted on this side.

The affection which appears to be the most opposed to compassion is Resentment; and when indulged immoderately this passion leads to the gravest evils. Yet resentment is necessary for the perfection of a man's character and for the protection of society. It is of two kinds (1) Sudden anger, which is an instinctive feeling arising from sudden hurt or pain or harm done to us, and the reason or end for which the passion is implanted in us is self-defence; (2) Deliberate resentment. This is occasioned not by hurt or mere harm unwittingly inflicted, but by wilful injury or moral evil. The object of it is not one who appears to be only the innocent occasion of pain or loss, but one who has been in a moral sense injurious to ourselves or others. The end or purpose of it is to prevent

injury, injustice, or cruelty. Each of these forms of resentment may be carried into excess. The abuse of the first, sudden anger, is passionateness or peevishness; and deliberate resentment is carried into excess when we imagine an injury that has not been done, or represent it to ourselves as greater than it really is, or allow the feeling to be disproportionate to the offence, or seek to gratify the passion for its own sake without any good end in view. But when kept within proper limits it enables us to punish injury, injustice and cruelty without feeling in an excessive degree that uneasiness which we should otherwise experience from the demands made by compassion. When an injury has been done and there is need for the offender to be brought to justice, the cool consideration of Reason that the peace and security of society require that examples of justice should be made, which has procured laws to be enacted, would not be sufficient to bring the offender to punishment, were it not backed up by a resentment and indignation against the injury and the author of it. Resentment is an element in every noble character, and in itself proves the reality of virtue by its spontaneous condemnation of vicious and criminal conduct.

If this is the account to be given of resentment, what are we to say to the precept which bids us forgive injuries and love those who do us wrong? Does not that precept require us to put aside resentment altogether and root it out of our nature? No, says Butler, for the precept does not relate to the general indignation against injustice and injury and the authors of that injustice and injury which is right, but to that feeling when it has been raised too high by private or personal injury. It is only the excess or abuse of the natural feeling that is condemned, which generally takes the form of retaliation. The precept however draws attention to a peculiarity which belongs to resentment, which is that it is a "secondary passion", that is, that it is absolutely and in itself an evil and only good under certain circumstances. For this reason it must be rarely indulged, and never, except when it conduces to its end of preventing or punishing injury. Other passions may be indulged indifferently, but resentment cannot be gratified for its own sake.

Suppose a person who has been injured to have a proper sense of the injury done and no more, he would be affected

towards the person who has done the injury as any good man, uninterested in the case, would be.

This may be a test to ourselves whether we are carrying our resentment too far; and injury to ourselves should never be allowed to annihilate the natural love which ought to exist between man and man.

As soon as ever resentment destroys natural Benevolence, it becomes vicious; but Benevolence can co-exist with the grave disapproval and condemnation to which Resentment ministers.

Passing onwards, Butler deals with the duty of the Love of our neighbour and the Love of God from a moralist's point of view, and shows their reasonableness. It is not reasonable, says the selfish man, that I should give up the search after my own happiness in order to benefit other people. But we have seen that Benevolence is a part of the constitution of the human mind; and this Benevolence is at once an affection for the good of others, and a principle which guides us in finding the means whereby we shall best do good to others. Now happiness mainly consists in the affections, passions and appetites natural to us, finding and enjoying the objects natural to them. Therefore, regarding Benevolence merely as one of our affections which has for its object the good of our neighbour, we see that we cannot obtain our own full happiness if we neglect or ignore it. But further, it has been shown that Benevolence is not only one of our affections but a principle of our mental constitution (that is, one of our affections and that principle, dealing with the same subject matter, both bear the same name), and if we would find our happiness or act conformably to our nature we must recognise that principle and obey its dictates within its own sphere. As a principle, Benevolence stands on a level with Self-love, directing us what to do to our neighbour, as Self-love directs us as to our own welfare, each under the superintendence of Conscience. And a virtuous man is one whose inward temper and outward acts are governed by both these principles, still under the direction of Conscience. It is plain therefore that no one can be happy himself or can carry out the purpose of the Author of his nature unless he have love for his neighbour, for which the Moralists name is Benevolence.

The doctrine of the Love of God is philosophically justified by the argument that God is the highest object of our affections (of which love is queen) and the noblest subject on which our intellectual faculties can occupy themselves. Therefore, our greatest happiness (resulting from an affection obtaining a worthy object) and our greatest intellectual well being (resulting from the contemplation of the highest perfection) will come to us from the Love of God.

A final sermon serves as a sort of appendix to Butler's system of morals, which has thus run up into and identified itself with religion. It is on the Ignorance of Man, which is urged as a reason why we should not demand a perfect knowledge of God and the ways of God. It is most interesting to see how the Bishop contemplated all the grounds alleged for modern Agnosticism and put then aside as unphilosophical. We are ignorant, he reminds us, of all causes and essences in the external world; of our own creation, preservation, and even the faculties of our minds; of the government and administration of the universe. For knowledge is not the end of man's existence and our ignorance serves as a part of our trial and discipline. From our state of ignorance Butler, instead of making our own minds the measure of all things, draws the following conclusions, with which I will end the present paper, leaving the consideration of his "Analogy of Religion" for the future.

"First, we may learn from it with what temper of mind a man ought to enquire into the subject of religion; namely with expectation of finding difficulties and with a disposition to take up and rest satisfied with any evidence whatever which is real.

"Secondly, our ignorance is the proper answer to many things which are called objections against religion; particularly to those which arise from evil and irregularity in the constitution of nature and the government of the world.

"Thirdly, since the constitution of nature and the methods and designs of Providence in the government of the world are above our comprehension, we should acquiesce in and rest satisfied with our ignorance, turn our thought from that which is above and beyond us, and apply ourselves to that which is

level to our capacities and which is our real business and concern.

“The conclusion is, that in all lowliness of mind we set lightly by ourselves; that we form our temper to an implicit submission to the divine Majesty; beget within ourselves an absolute resignation to all the methods of His Providence in His dealings with the children of men; that in the deepest humility of our souls we prostrate ourselves before Him and join in that celestial song: ‘Great and marvellous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Thy ways than King of Saints! Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name?’”

In this Sermon Butler passes from the rôle of the Moral Philosopher to that of the Apologist, as though preparing the way for his great work on the Analogy of Religion.

F. MEYRICK.
