

Joseph Butler (1692-1752)

The youngest of eight children, Joseph Butler was born 18 May 1692 at Wantage, Berkshire. His father, Thomas Butler, had been a successful and respected linen draper but was retired at the time of Joseph's birth. A Presbyterian, Thomas Butler decided early to educate his youngest son for the Presbyterian ministry. He first attended the free grammar school at Wantage, where he received a basic classical education under the direction of the Reverend Philip Barton, an Anglican clergyman. He then was sent to a Dissenting academy operated by Samuel Jones, first at Gloucester and then at Tewkesbury. The academy enjoyed a high reputation, and among Butler's contemporaries were several individuals who later distinguished themselves in public and religious life, both Anglican and Dissenting. The close friendship Butler established with Thomas Secker, who later became archbishop of Canterbury, is especially notable.

Butler's progress at the academy was remarkable, and he demonstrated a natural affinity for philosophy and metaphysics, as evidenced by his earliest writings. In 1713, while at Tewkesbury, he began corresponding with Dr. Samuel Clarke, author of *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), the third edition of which had been published two years earlier. For reasons that are not totally clear, Butler carried on his correspondence anonymously, identifying himself only as "a gentleman from Gloucester" and prevailing upon his friend Secker to deliver the letters to the post office in Gloucester and bring back Clarke's replies. Over the next several years Butler and Clarke corresponded with each other, Butler admitting his desire to seek out truth but acknowledging his dissatisfaction with the explanations Clarke had provided as demonstrative proof of the existence of God. Butler was never completely pleased with Clarke's responses to the objections, but Clarke was so impressed with the candor and sincerity of the inquiries that he included the correspondence in the fourth (1716) and subsequent editions of his

work. The Butler-Clarke correspondence is included in J. H. Bernard's edition of Butler's works (1900).

Near the end of his time at Tewkesbury, Butler decided to leave the Presbyterians and join the Church of England. Few specifics are known, but some reports indicate that his father enlisted the aid of several Presbyterian ministers in an effort to dissuade him. However, when it became clear that Butler's resolve was firm, his father consented and allowed him to enter Oriel College, Oxford, as a commoner on 17 March 1714. He was not particularly impressed or stimulated by the intellectual life of Oxford, and he expressed his dissatisfaction in letters to Dr. Clarke, who was becoming his confidant and friend. Having come from a progressive Dissenting academy with a distinguished academic reputation, it is no wonder Butler found little to excite him at Oxford, where the main intellectual activity seemed to be a defense of the thought of Aristotle against the criticisms of John Locke. At one point in 1717 Butler even considered transferring to Cambridge, but he stayed at Oxford after learning he would lose academic credit for the terms he had already completed.

On 16 October 1718 Butler took his B.A. degree. Edward Talbot, a close friend and Oriel Fellow, had helped persuade Butler to embark on an ecclesiastical career in the Anglican church, and ten days after graduating from Oxford he was ordained a deacon by Bishop William Talbot of Salisbury, his friend's father, who also ordained him a priest on 21 December 1718. Bishop Talbot appointed Butler preacher at the Rolls Chapel in London in 1719, a position he held until 1726.

Edward Talbot died of smallpox in December 1720, but he had recommended Butler to his father. Through the patronage of Bishop Talbot and with the support of Dr. Clarke, Butler became prebendary of Salisbury in 1721, and in 1722 he was appointed rector of Haughton le Skerne in Durham, after Talbot became bishop of Durham in October 1721. Secker, Butler's close friend from

their days at Tewkesbury, had followed Butler in taking Anglican orders, being ordained by Bishop Talbot in 1723. Secker married Catherine Becker, sister of the bishop of Gloucester, in 1725, and after his marriage Edward Talbot's widow, Mary, and daughter, Catherine, came to live with the couple. That same year Secker prevailed upon the bishop to transfer Butler to the wealthy benefice of Stanhope in Durham. In accepting this appointment Butler retired from London life to country living, resigning his appointment at the Rolls Chapel the following year.

Upon resigning, Butler published a collection of sermons selected from the many he had delivered during his eight years at the chapel. His *Fifteen Sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1726) has come to be regarded as his most important contribution to ethics. In the preface he wrote for the second edition of the collection in 1729, Butler suggests that the sermons were chosen randomly as typical representatives of his work. While that may be technically accurate, the selection and arrangement also indicate a more focused effort:

"Upon Human Nature" (Sermons I, II, and III)

"Upon the Government of the Tongue" (Sermon IV)

"Upon Compassion" (Sermons V and VI)

"Upon the Character of Balaam" (Sermon VII)

"Upon Resentment" (Sermon VIII)

"Upon Forgiveness of Injuries" (Sermon IX)

"Upon Self-Deceit" (Sermon X)

"Upon the Love of our Neighbour" (Sermons XI and XII)

"Upon the Love of God" (Sermons XIII and XIV)

"Upon the Ignorance of Man" (Sermon XV)

As these titles indicate, the first three sermons lay the foundation of Butler's theory of human nature, and the remaining sermons illustrate and apply his principles. That Butler recognized such a relationship among the sermons is borne out by his comments near the beginning of the preface, where he acknowledges two approaches to the study of morals: "One begins from inquiring into the abstract relations of things: the other from a matter of fact, namely, what the particular nature of man is, its several parts, their economy or constitution; from whence it proceeds to determine what course of life it is, which is correspondent to this whole nature." Some have assumed that Butler thought of Clarke as representing the first approach and Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury as representing the second. In any case, he recognizes that both approaches lead to the same conclusion, that man is to practice virtue. Nevertheless, he notes that the second is "adapted to satisfy a fair mind" and "is more easily applicable to the several particular relations and circumstances in life." With those comments the reader finds the basic justification for Butler's ethical philosophy and discovers that Butler stands in conflict with the self-preservation philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Butler's interest was in applying the principles of human nature to an individual's own life and to the relationships that exist between individuals.

Butler then notes that his discourses follow the latter method. His examination of human nature begins with the recognition that, as he states in the preface, "virtue consists in following, and vice in deviating from" the nature of man. Shaftesbury had expressed the same idea in his *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue: In Two Discourses, Viz., I. of Virtue and the Belief of a Deity, II. Of the Obligations to Virtue* (1699). With that foundation, then, the first three sermons explore human nature. In the first sermon Butler acknowledges the existence of various "appetites, passions, and particular affections" that are distinct from the two other

principles of self-love and benevolence. A third component of human nature is "the principle of reflection or conscience." The second and third sermons argue for the supremacy of conscience. In his preface to the sermons Butler asserts that failing to consider a claim for the supremacy of conscience is a deficiency in Shaftesbury's work. According to Butler, the mere existence of these components does not identify man's moral nature. The whole of natural, moral life cannot be glimpsed or determined unless all the passions are related and subordinated, and the conscience is the faculty by which the relationship can be illustrated and by which man learns virtue. Conscience has its own authority because it is "the guide assigned us by the Author of our nature." The importance of this last claim lies in the fact that it clearly reveals Butler's ethics to be firmly grounded in theism, and, of course, those who cannot accept a theistic position will have difficulty accepting Butler's complete scheme.

As he attempts to illustrate his theory of ethics in the remaining twelve sermons, he re-emphasizes the position of self-love and benevolence as separate principles that regulate the particular passions in human nature. Furthermore, because to Butler man's purpose is virtue, following nature cannot mean acting as one pleases or following one's strongest passions. To follow nature means to follow conscience, and to follow conscience is virtue, which is more than an inner faculty. If an individual has virtue he will act accordingly. As Butler says in his fifteenth sermon, "Upon the Ignorance of Man," virtue "consists in good actions, proceeding from a good principle, temper, or heart." In addition, these actions can be observed in the two spheres of self-love and benevolence, which are not opposed to but merely distinguished from one another in the focus of their attention. Self-love does not mean selfishness or self-centeredness, but it concerns the effort to control and manage passions so that the individual can live happily--in virtue rather than in vice. Benevolence, on the other hand, focuses on the individual's relationship to society. A person who is benevolent will assist others to

live happily. Whether they are private actions arising from self-love or public actions arising from benevolence, virtuous actions are the result of man's constitution.

At times it seems as though Butler refers to benevolence in the sermons not as the general principle he identified in the first sermon but as a particular appetite or passion. The confusion over this seeming contradiction can be resolved easily, however, by recognizing that benevolence occupies a dual position in Butler's hierarchy. The challenge is to recognize when he refers to it as a general principle and when he refers to it as a particular passion. The potential for argument and discussion of this matter as well as discussion of the relationship between conscience, self-love, benevolence, and the various appetites and passions is great. Nevertheless, when all the evidence is considered, it seems that Butler establishes a hierarchy that subordinates the particular appetites and passions to the principles of self-love and benevolence, which in turn become subordinated to conscience. Indeed, the supremacy of conscience is central to Butler's ethical philosophy.

Butler's life at Stanhope can be characterized as solitary but by no means unproductive. He had ample time for his own studies, and he conscientiously performed the duties of a parish priest. There he planned and wrote his most famous work, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature. To Which Are Added Two Brief Dissertations: I. Of Personal Identity II. Of the Nature of Virtue* (1736). Nevertheless, while he kept busy, it is almost certain that he missed the association with friends and the more active life he had led before retiring to Stanhope. In any case, through the influence of his old friend Secker, Butler was appointed chaplain to Lord Chancellor Charles Talbot, first Baron Talbot of Hensol, when Talbot became lord chancellor in 1733. On 8 December of that same year Butler took his Doctor of Law degree at Oxford. The elder brother of Butler's friend Edward Talbot, Charles Talbot appointed Butler

to a prebendary of Rochester Cathedral in July 1736. Despite his new appointments, Butler divided his time and, by agreement with Talbot, resided in Stanhope for one half of the year.

In July 1732 Secker had become chaplain to King George II. While in conversation with Queen Caroline he mentioned his friend Butler, and she remarked that she thought he was dead. When she repeated her comment to Lancelot Blackburne, the archbishop of York, he is supposed to have remarked that "he is not *dead*, but he is *buried*." Taking an interest in Butler, the queen appointed him her clerk of the closet in 1736. The queen was a deeply intellectual woman who took great pleasure discussing philosophy and theology, and by her command Butler attended her every evening from seven to nine. *The Analogy of Religion* was published the same year as his appointment, and it became a prominent part of the queen's studies.

The Analogy of Religion was written to counteract the claims of the Deists and other rationalists who argued that the deity who created the world was separated from man and therefore had no interest in human affairs. Revelation occupied no place in the Deist scheme, and a concern with morals and spirituality was strictly a matter of rational interpretation derived from what one could make out by observing the natural world. Butler objected to such thinking, but the defensive posture he adopts in the "Advertisement" and the "Introduction" to *The Analogy of Religion* goes beyond merely pleading the case of traditional Christianity. As the full title indicates, his approach is to meet the Deists on their own ground and demonstrate that his revealed religion and their natural religion both conform to nature. Such conformity means that "the system of religion, both natural and revealed, considered only as a system, . . . is not a subject of ridicule, unless that of nature be so too." Thus, Butler approaches the matter rationally, attempting to defuse the Deist attack on traditional Christianity by turning the basis of the attack on itself. In other words, for many of the problems Deists find in

their criticism of traditional theology, an analogy can be found in their natural religion.

Obviously, such an argument from analogy depends upon a shared belief in a natural governor of the universe. The next step is to evaluate the viability of the analogy. To do so, Butler invokes the concept of probability, which, though imperfect, is the only means available to human beings. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to guide their actions as they live the virtuous life outlined in the sermons. For Butler the important point is that the mere presence of any degree of probability is sufficient to establish any principle of practical or revealed religion. As he notes in the introduction to *The Analogy of Religion*, even though there may be "the lowest presumption on one side" of an issue "and none on the other," individuals are still in matters of practice bound by prudence "to act upon that presumption or low probability."

As the title indicates, the work is divided into two halves, the first focusing on the analogy of natural religion to human knowledge and understanding of nature, and the second focusing on the analogy of revealed religion to nature. Part 1 begins with a chapter arguing the probability of a future life, followed by a chapter on rewards and punishments and a chapter on the moral government of God. The next two chapters focus on the probationary state as a time of trials and challenges to promote moral discipline and improvement. A chapter arguing that the doctrine of necessity does not hinder belief, a chapter explaining the imperfect human understanding of God's scheme of government, and a final chapter summarizing the entire argument complete part 1.

In part 2 Butler turns to revealed religion, and, following his procedure in part 1, he begins with an assumption and proceeds to explain its credibility. In this instance the assumption is that revelation has been given. Chapter 1, therefore, examines the importance of revelation in its Christian context. In Butler's work revealed religion means Christianity. Chapter 2 examines

the argument against revelation because it is miraculous. The next two chapters focus on the ability of people to judge the morality of revelation, asserting that apparent inconsistencies are the result of limited human abilities to comprehend the entire scheme of revealed religion. Chapter 5 explains the concept of redemption by means of a mediator and acknowledges Jesus Christ as the Redeemer. Chapter 6 invokes the principle of probability as a guide because of the supposed lack of demonstrable proof for revelation, and chapter 7 cites particular evidence for Christianity from miracles and prophecy. The next chapter offers a final apology for the argument from analogy, and a brief concluding chapter brings part 2 to an end.

As indicated by the full title, Butler appended two dissertations to *The Analogy of Religion*: "Of Personal Identity" and "Of the Nature of Virtue." As its title hints, the first of these is in part a criticism of Locke. The second is a development of the ethical scheme outlined in Butler's sermons and should be read in conjunction with them. *The Analogy of Religion* is often cited as the source for Butler's natural theology, and the sermons are cited as the source for his ethical theory and moral philosophy. While such an appropriation is true, the presence of the dissertations at the end of *The Analogy of Religion* suggests the two categories need not be as distinct as might be supposed. Indeed, both parts of *The Analogy of Religion* emphasize the morality of both natural and revealed religion; correlating moral philosophy and traditional Christianity is ultimately a large part of Butler's rational defense of Christianity.

Two examples from *The Analogy of Religion* illustrate the nature of the correlation. In part 1 Butler argues for a future life: as the physical states of this life change from one's existence in the womb to infancy and on to maturity, so may one presume a continuance of life after death. The probability of life after death rests in the individual's observation and experience of this life. In part 2 he argues that all living creatures are brought into the world and are nurtured,

protected, and preserved by the instrumentality and mediation of others. Thus, there should be no objection to the notion of a mediator between God and man: Christ as Redeemer. In both instances, accepting the existence of a future life and the existence of a mediator is an incentive to live virtuously, to regulate passions and desires to principles of self-love and benevolence with conscience reigning supreme. Of course, such arguments are not likely to help those who do not believe; they will only strengthen the convictions of believers and perhaps assist those who are uncertain or wavering in their faith. Thus, it is fair to say that even though Butler meets the Deists head-on, in reality one of his main purposes in *The Analogy of Religion* was to strengthen the converted. True, in both examples probability is limited to a temporal world, not an eternal one, but the fact that Butler makes the leap from a temporal to a transcendental realm reveals him to be one who can balance religious faith and reason. In so doing he anticipates the Romantic theological tradition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Henry Newman, both of whom knew and admired Butler's works.

Butler served only a short time under Queen Caroline, for she died in 1737, one year after Butler's appointment as clerk of the closet. As she lay dying, however, the queen requested that Butler be taken care of, and in 1738 George II appointed Butler bishop of Bristol. As the poorest bishopric in England, the appointment to Bristol was a disappointment to Butler, who openly expressed his dissatisfaction. Thus, he was allowed to keep the rectory at Stanhope. Two years later he was appointed dean of St. Paul's in London by the king. At that time he resigned his living at Stanhope, but he retained his position at Bristol. It would be easy to assume that Butler was worldly because of his concern over the income attached to the appointment at Bristol and his occupation of two positions simultaneously. However, that seems not to be the case. Butler lived at a time when plural appointments were the norm rather than the exception, and evidence suggests that he gave away most of his wealth. In

fact, while at Stanhope he was noted for never being able to turn away beggars, and it is said that at times he had to stay at home to avoid them. In his 1839 memoir of Butler, Thomas Bartlett records a tradition that on one occasion Butler had to ride away on a black pony to flee from a group of beggars following him. In 1746 Butler added to his preferments when George II made him his clerk of the closet. When John Potter, the archbishop of Canterbury, died in 1747, the position was offered to Butler after it had been offered to Thomas Sherlock, Bishop of London, who refused. Butler also refused the appointment, but not because it had not been offered to him first. Bartlett reports a tradition that Butler's explanation for his refusal was "it was too late for him to try to support a falling Church." If accurate, that comment is interesting in light of his efforts in *The Analogy of Religion* to defend revealed religion, and thus the Church, against the Deists.

While he was bishop of Bristol, he preached several public sermons; six that he preached in London were published separately between 1739 and 1748 and then collected as *Six Sermons Preached on Publick Occasions* (1749). Four of these sermons reveal his interest in missionary work, poor relief, charity schools, and hospitals. The other two were preached before the House of Lords, one on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Charles I and the other on the anniversary of the accession of George II. Clearly the public mission of the church was on Butler's mind.

On 16 October 1750 Butler was translated to the See of Durham (his friend Secker replacing him as dean of St. Paul's), and there he delivered and published in 1751 his famous charge to the clergy of Durham, in which he emphasized the use and importance of external religion. He began by lamenting the decline of religion in England and reminding the clergy of their duty to revive the religious spirit. That task, he says, can be accomplished best by emphasizing the form of religious worship, which includes focusing not only on what is done in the service but also on

how the service is conducted in terms of adherence to established patterns and ritual. Butler also encouraged an emphasis on frequent worship services throughout the week and the practice of other forms of worship such as teaching the catechism to children at home and conducting family prayer.

This charge to the clergy led to the revival of a strange claim that had been made against him a few years earlier at Bristol. After becoming bishop of Bristol, Butler restored the episcopal palace and chapel there, erecting in the chapel an altarpiece of black marble with an inlaid cross of white marble. The introduction of that cross was taken by some to be a sign of Butler's inclination toward Catholicism. Thus, when he delivered the charge at Durham and emphasized the use and importance of external religion, his remarks became connected to the erection of the cross and resulted in a renewed claim of "popish" tendencies against him, most notably in an anonymous pamphlet, attributed to Francis Blackburne, *A Serious Enquiry into the Use and Importance of External Religion: Occasioned by some passages in the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Durham's Charge to the clergy of that diocese in the year MDCCLI* (1752). While it is true that Butler urged dignity and careful attention in conducting church services, his emphasis was on awakening personal spirituality by encouraging appropriate worship both in the church and in individual homes, and that emphasis was far removed from any claims of Roman Catholic tendencies.

Butler's health began to decline soon after becoming bishop of Durham. He suffered from stomach and intestinal disorders and was first taken to Bristol to recover. The change did not produce the desired remedy, so he was then taken to Bath, where he died on 16 June 1752. He was interred in the cathedral at Bristol. Butler never married, but he divided his estate among relatives and left a modest sum each to the Newcastle Infirmary and to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. One of his last requests was that all his letters, sermons, and

papers locked in a wooden box in a room within his library at Hampstead be burned at his death without being read. Apparently his survivors honored his request, for the only known manuscripts in his writing today are two account books, some letters, and a few other fragments.

By the end of his life Butler's emphasis had changed. He began with abstract reasoning concerning a priori arguments for the existence of God in his letters to Clarke and ended with public sermons and a charge to the clergy of Durham emphasizing ecclesiastical privilege and responsibility. In the middle are the two works upon which his reputation rests, his sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel and *The Analogy of Religion*. That his renown continued into the twentieth century speaks well of the impact of a decidedly small body of work.

His modern reputation is most certainly not as strong as it was in his own lifetime and in the century following his death. For example, in his own lifetime four editions each of his *Fifteen Sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel* and *The Analogy of Religion* appeared in England. Later in the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century the depth of his influence can be gauged by the fact that his two main works were used as texts in courses of study at universities. Scores of editions of his works appeared in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the United States, with at least eighty editions of *The Analogy of Religion* published during the nineteenth century in the United States alone. In the nineteenth century prominent figures such as Coleridge, John Keble, Cardinal Newman, Hurrell Froude, and Edward Pusey provided more measured but deeply praiseworthy responses. Interestingly, most of these individuals were connected to or participated directly in the Oxford Movement, and one must only remember the focus of Butler's charge to the Durham clergy and its analogous goal with the objectives of the Oxford Movement to understand why he would appeal to its members. While detractors existed in his own time, the intellectual climate of the nineteenth

century provided a ready-made situation for detractors as the rise of science brought new challenges to religion. Among those of an actual or supposed scientific bent who found fault with either Butler's theology or his ethical system are James Martineau, John Stuart Mill, Walter Bagehot, Thomas Henry Huxley, Leslie Stephen, and Matthew Arnold. The overwhelming and dominant strategy of these individuals was to point out that Butler's views were unsatisfactory, but a few are not totally negative. For example, in his essay "Bishop Butler and the Zeit-Geist," first collected in *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877), Arnold praises Butler for his profound religious sense, but Arnold cannot accept the basic assumptions upon which Butler's arguments rest. Butler was willing to use reason in matters of faith, but he still accepted a spiritual, otherworldly realm for religion. Arnold simply could not accept such a balance of reason and religious faith.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century Butler's position was declining but still relatively strong. At this time two editions of his works by the statesman W. E. Gladstone and by J. H. Bernard were published in 1896 and 1900, respectively. Since then there have been no major modern editions of Butler's works published, so Bernard's and Gladstone's editions are still considered the best and the most authoritative (Gladstone's was republished, with a new introduction, in 1995). Butler's works are no longer included in courses of study at universities, but given his connection to several prominent figures such as Coleridge, Newman, and Arnold, Butler certainly will not be entirely forgotten. Furthermore, his ethical theory is still attractive to philosophers who continue to wrestle with the meanings of and the relationships among conscience, self-love, benevolence, and individual passions. Book-length studies are few, but articles assessing his ideas continue to appear regularly. To paraphrase the response given by the archbishop of York when Queen Caroline remarked that she thought Butler was dead, as a subject of investigation

today he is not dead, nor is he buried, though admittedly his reputation and fame are modest in comparison to what they were during his life and in the century and a half immediately following his death.

Papers: Because Joseph Butler directed that the papers he kept be burned at his death, few items have survived: the British Library, London, has a collection of several letters, including two addressed to Samuel Clarke, along with miscellaneous extracts and papers, and his will and codicil; two of Butler's account books are at Oriel College, Cambridge University; and the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, has a manuscript index of subjects in *The Analogy of Religion*, made by Edward Bentham, with three pages of corrections and additions by Butler.

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