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But Did You Not Read My Title?
The Pastoral Purpose of Joseph Butler's Fifteen Sermons

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Honors Thesis

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Introduction

But did you not read my title? I wrote philosophically, not religiously, because I had chosen the consolations of philosophy, not those of religion, as my subject.

– C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*¹

In the preface to *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) observes that often people “habituate themselves to let things pass through their minds, as one may speak, rather than to think of them” (Preface 4).² On the subject of morality, Butler insists this will not do. It demands “a very peculiar attention” (Preface 4). Joseph Butler’s *Fifteen Sermons* demands of us that same quality. Bearing in mind Butler’s own council that we are not to “look for any particular reason for the choice of the greatest part [of the sermons]” nor expect “any other connection between them, than the uniformity of thought and design, which will always be found in the writings of the same person, when he writes with simplicity and in earnest” (Preface 15), I contend that a peculiar attention applied to Butler’s sermons reveals a striking unity: namely, a unity of *pastoral* purpose. Butler’s chief task in *Fifteen Sermons* is to exhort his audience to cultivate virtue and avoid vice in their actual lives, not merely to present a novel moral theory or make clever psychological observations. With this view in mind, even the most theoretical portions of the sermons are clearly animated by an earnest pastoral concern that shouldn’t be ignored.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 89

² I cite Butler according to the standard scholarly practice of parenthetically referencing first the sermon and then the paragraph that the quotation originates from. All quotations are taken from: Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel: And Other Writings on Ethics*. Ed. David McNaughton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Butler literature

Commentators have historically, to varying degrees, treated Butler's *Fifteen Sermons* as they would any other piece of philosophical writing. And for good reason. There is immense philosophical insight to be gleaned from doing so. Despite this, most commentators also recognize that *Fifteen Sermons* is peculiar as a work of philosophy. C.D. Broad's well-known treatment of Butler in his *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, for instance, concludes by saying "Butler leaves undiscussed many questions with which any complete treatise on Ethics ought to deal ...but though the system is incomplete, it does seem to contain the prolegomena to any system of ethics that can claim to do justice to the fact of moral experience."³ On this view, Butler's sermons are more of an introduction or taste of something larger that's just waiting to be developed. Terrence Penelhum, in his similarly acclaimed book on Butler, acknowledges at some length Butler's profound disinterest in system building for its own sake and aim of "bring[ing] his hearers and readers to the acceptance, and above all to the *practice*, of 'virtue and religion,'" However, Penelhum then proceeds to analyze Butler's sermons with very little reference to this fact.⁴ David McNaughton articulates a similar caveat, writing that "[Butler] wished to bring people to a sense of their duty... nevertheless, to achieve his practical goals, he was often required to engage in theory...in interpreting Butler we should heed this self-imposed limitation...it is not his aim to produce a complete ethical theory."⁵

These scholars are generally representative of the larger conversation around Butler in the literature. It is noteworthy that all three recognize the limitations of Butler's project in *Fifteen*

³ C.D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1950), 82-83.

⁴ Terrence Penelhum, *Arguments of the Philosophers: Butler* (Ed. Ted Honderich. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 4-5.

⁵ David McNaughton, *Butler's Ethics*, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 2013).

Sermons and continue to embark on philosophical treatments of his work. Consequently, they all display a special interest in Butler's more theoretical arguments on the authority of the conscience, his decisive refutation of psychological egoism, his powerful defense of the role of benevolence, and his apologetic arguments. Again, there is good reason for their focus on these points, and their work is immensely valuable and clarifying for any student of Butler. But they all concede that Butler's project isn't a philosophical system. Why did he limit his theoretical scope and choose sermons to deliver his philosophy? Does that choice of genre matter in interpreting Butler's arguments? I think it does. I say this without intending the stronger claim that prior scholarship is generally misguided. I mean instead to explore what such treatments may be insensitive to.⁶ But before we can discuss how Butler uses the genre of a sermon, a survey of the genre is in order.

⁶ Jonathan Lavery's work on philosophical genre makes a compelling case for the need for more sensitivity to genre in philosophical scholarship. See Jonathan Allen Lavery, *Literary Form, Philosophical Content: Historical Studies of Philosophical Genres* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010). Late in the process of writing this thesis, I came across a piece by Lavery on reading Butler with sensitivity to his genre. While it was too late to incorporate it into this thesis, my thoughts, for the most part, chime in harmony with Lavery's, and I highly commend it. Jonathan Lavery, "Reflection and Exhortation in Butler's Sermons: Practical Deliberation, Psychological Health and the Philosophical Sermon," *The European Legacy* 10, no. 4 (2005): 329–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770500116465>.

Genre and Audience

And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge...the preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.

– Ecclesiastes 12:9-10, KJV

Anglican Sermons

In Butler’s day, sermons were preached on a variety of occasions and concerned themselves with a diverse array of subject matters. Efforts to present general categories of sermons have, consequently, achieved limited success. Still, a loose taxonomy will prove useful in getting our bearings. David Lewis, in his thesis on the topic, divides the corpus of 18th century Anglican Sermons into five categories: “biblical/doctrinal, ethical/practical...apologetical, political, and social.”⁷ Regardless of category, Lewis thinks all sermons have “practical divinity.”⁸ By this Lewis means that sermons are concerned with prompting practical application in the audience, not *merely* theoretical assent; and doing so by means of arguments or appeals that are amenable to and grounded in Christianity.

Lewis goes on to use Butler’s sermons as his main example in illustrating how an “ethical/practical” sermon works. I think he’s right in categorizing most (but not all) of Butler’s sermons in this way, so we’ll focus our present discussion on that category. The “ethical/practical” sermon’s distinguishing feature is that it serves to instruct the audience in their duties to God and man⁹. “Ethical/practical” sermons are different in emphasis from “biblical/doctrinal” sermons in that the latter category is focused on instilling assent to Christian doctrines and is more strictly bound by exegeting a given text. By contrast, the “ethical/practical”

⁷ Douglas E. Lewis, *Anglican Sermons, 1700-1750* (Edmonton, University of Alberta, 2001), 58.

⁸ Lewis, *Anglican Sermons*, 58.

⁹ Lewis, *Anglican Sermons*, 39.

sermon is more directly focused on applied practice (though practice that is grounded in orthodoxy). In adopting this distinction, I doubt Lewis means to say that the two categories are always mutually exclusive. Still, the distinction is useful when approaching something like Butler's sermons. One benefit is that it will shepherd our analysis away from a tempting criticism of Butler's style, namely, that his sermons often depart from the biblical texts he structures them around. Such a criticism is guilty, should we adopt Lewis's framework, of holding an ethical sermon to the standard of a biblical one. The text serves as the foundation of the discourse, in keeping with Lewis's point on all sermons being preached in light of Christian belief, but does not define the limit.

Bearing this distinction between "biblical/doctrinal" and "ethical/practical" sermons in mind, it's worth noting that Butler's sermons are diverse. The first three, for instance, are more philosophically theoretical insofar as they concern themselves with developing Butler's teleological framework for human nature and the conscience's place in it. They are still *practical* sermons in that they are aimed at exhorting the audience to fulfill their obligation to follow their conscience, but less applied (and pastoral) in that they give no clear, immediately actionable council to their audience. This sub-emphasis, between *generally* practical, though speculative, sermons and more *specifically* pastoral points within sermons plays out constantly in Butler's sermons. Sermon four, for instance, after establishing the teleological basis for our obligation to govern our tongues, gives three immediately actionable rules to follow in carrying out that obligation. He reflects in sermon fifteen that "the only knowledge which is of any avail to us, is that which teaches us our duty, or assists us in the discharge of it" (15.16). The practical sermon always does the former, but in doing the latter application, Butler demonstrates a pastoral

emphasis. Now, in calling Butler pastoral, and in emphasizing his office of pastor, I presume an audience, a congregation, he is concerned about. To whom is Butler preaching?

Audience

The fifteen sermons that are included in the book were “taken from amongst many others, preached in the same place, through a course of eight years” (Preface 44). This, and more obviously the title of the book, tells us that the original audience of the sermons was Butler’s congregation at the Rolls Chapel in London. And who were they? Firstly, they were Anglicans. Consequently, at least ostensibly, they had some commitment to the core doctrines of Christianity and the authority of scripture. Butler, then, needn’t structure his sermons evangelistically. He nowhere doubts the Christianity of his audience, nor makes the sorts of arguments present in his *Analogy of Religion* (though he touches on similar argument in his last three sermons). Butler is exhorting his congregation to pursue obligations they already assent to having, even if they lack clarity or precision in the exact nature of those obligations. The Rolls Chapel’s congregation was made up of the lawyers and clerks of the Court of Chancery and served as a repository for legal documents recorded on rolls of parchment (hence its name). So, Butler’s congregation was well-educated. That historical fact is illuminating in contextualizing the content of *Fifteen Sermons*. The capacity of his audience permits him to explore more *sophisticated* arguments and demands of his responses to more *sophisticated* hinderances to virtue. The psychological egoism of Hobbes, for instance, may have posed no great risk to an uneducated congregation, but a significant one to his. His emphasis in decisively refuting Hobbes (a strand of the *Sermons* I will refrain from tugging on in this paper), then, is a *pastoral* one. I say pastoral here to contrast it with a *theoretical* emphasis. His refutation is fueled by a concern for his congregation and their practice of virtue, not an intellectual rivalry with Hobbes

or as an intellectual exercise. His theoretical points, while being insightful and foundational to his arguments, always call the audience to practice. Of course, that we have the pleasure of reading and discussing these sermons means the audience expanded past its original congregation. We must remember that he chose these fifteen sermons among many with the expanded audience of readers in mind, including the more philosophically minded. Being among them, we have the benefit of a preface in the published version of the sermons that the congregation did not, and it contains numerous points of interest in shepherding our reading of the sermons as a published textual unit. Let's attend to those now.

Method

A life devoted to solving crossword puzzles has little to *commend* it
– and certainly does not deserve public subsidy.

– David McNaughton,
*Why is so Much Philosophy So Tedious?*¹⁰

In the preface to *Fifteen Sermons*, Butler details his argumentative method and where it fits in the larger philosophical conversation. As Butler sees it, there are two methods for moral inquiry. The first begins by examining the “abstract relations of things” and from there derives the ethical obligations humans have. The second method is empirical, relying on observations of human nature directly. The former style was common in Butler’s period, and here Butler seems to expect the audience to be not only familiar with it, but also curious as to his deviation from it. In explaining his choice, Butler is quick to emphasize that both methods are mutually reinforcing. That comment is useful in signifying to the audience that his project is not a polemic against other philosophers that employ the first method, nor an attempt to replace such works. Rather, each method is suited to different argumentative ends. The first is by nature more concrete and demonstrable, but the second is “in a peculiar manner adapted to satisfy a fair mind: and is more easily applicable to the several particular relations and circumstances in life.” (Preface 12). The first method is a useful tool in metaphysical debates, but is less useful in application.

Butler’s choice of the second method for his sermons is an important clue as to his aim. He does not say the chief advantage of his method is theoretical acuity. He cites the ease of application and its unique capacity to satisfy “a fair mind.” His motivation for choosing the

¹⁰ David McNaughton, “Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?,” no. 1 (2009).

method, then, is for the *sake of his audience*. As Penelhum observes, Butler isn't content to leave people to their vice in cases where *a priori* arguments that *should* be good enough to convince them are likely to fail in producing practice.¹¹ In fact, he seems to think human nature is made for alternative methods. In sermon six Butler observes that time is a tool that cools down our passions, though such a cooling "ought to have been produced by a better cause" (6.5). Likewise, he notes in sermons five that "reason alone, whatever anyone may wish, is not in reality a sufficient motive of virtue in such a creature as man" (5.3). For human beings, virtue is the product of "reason joined with those affections which God has impressed upon his heart" (5.3). God has made us such that our passions, governed by reason, aid in prompting moral activity. If the theoretically definitive proof appeals just to our reason, then it isn't the right tool for prompting people to practice virtue, however good it may be in satisfying the philosophers in their squabbles. Our duty isn't rational assent. If God uses time or passions to produce in us the actions that our reason indicates we ought to perform, Butler is comfortable to appeal to alternative means too. We are *made* to respond to such appeals.

Butler's last and fifteenth sermon, *Upon the Ignorance of Man*, is a neglected resource in clarifying the project laid out in the preface. It's the conclusion of a trilogy of sermons that turn heavenward, considering man's relationship to God and what duties man owes to Him. In sermons thirteen and fourteen, Butler reflects on the love we owe to an infinite God, and why such love is the only thing that can ultimately satisfy us. From there, in sermon fifteen, Butler elaborates on the dichotomy between that infinite God and finite men.¹² As he turns from the reality of God's magnitude and un-searchability to our incapacity to grasp it, Butler contends that

¹¹ Penelhum, *Butler*, 25.

¹² Butler's observations can be summarized in the words of Boethius when he writes: "This then is the outstanding wonder of the order of fate; a knowing God acts and ignorant men look on with wonder at his actions." Anicus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 107.

we ought to reorient ourselves. We should “turn our thoughts 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” (15.16). And what is our real business and concern? Well, Butler argues it can’t be having knowledge. Why? Well, because our ignorance makes it obvious that we are ill-equipped to obtain knowledge. The more knowledge we obtain the clearer it should be to us how little we know. Perhaps then it is the process of learning more that constitutes our purpose? Butler thinks this is closer to the truth, but still holds that knowledge for its own sake “is not our proper happiness” (15.16). After all, what good is it to know things that are ultimately trivial?¹³ Rather, “the only knowledge which is of any avail to us, is that which teaches us our duty, or assists us in the discharge of it” (15.16). If the business of men is to live virtuously, then the pursuit of knowledge with no relevance to that business is a diversion. So, we ought to pursue knowledge, but specifically the kind of knowledge that enables us to practice virtue.¹⁴ He concludes this section powerfully, saying that “he, who should find out one rule to assist us in this work, would deserve infinitely better of mankind, than all the improvers of other knowledge put together” (15.16).

Sermon fifteen’s emphasis on the subservience of knowledge to the practice of virtue is clarifying in discerning his larger project. Recall that Butler’s choice in method is grounded in its

¹³ The dichotomy between Aristotle’s high view of “contemplation” (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b1-4) and Butler’s skepticism of knowledge for its own sake is interesting. Aristotle suggests “we ought not to listen to those who warn us that ‘man should think the thoughts of man’” (*NE*, 1177b34). Butler seems to be among those people. Recall his saying that we ought to “turn our thoughts from that which is above and beyond us” (15.16). There’s no evidence that Butler was particularly familiar with Aristotle’s work, so I’m cautious to assert any dialogue between the two in this tension.

¹⁴ On this point, Butler cites numerous passages of scripture that cohere into a powerful scriptural witness to his argument. It’s worth listing them here. “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us, and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of the law” (Deut 29:29). “God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof. And unto man he said, behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding” (Job 28:23, 28). “The conclusion of the whole matter, Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole concern of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it *are* the issues of life” (Prov 4:23).

ease of application and capacity to appeal to ‘fair minds.’ If Butler really believes that knowledge is only valuable insofar as it aids men in fulfilling their obligations to virtue, it shouldn’t surprise us that his project is so intensely focused on the *nitty gritty* application of the principles of virtue to the moral life. His last comment on rules to assist in our work is also compelling given how frequently rules come up in his other sermons. For instance, in the oft neglected fourth Sermon, *Upon the Government of the Tongue*, Butler explores the vice of talkativeness and the virtue of due government of one’s speech.¹⁵ He concludes the sermon with practical advice as to how to avoid the vice and pursue the virtue – with “rule[s] to assist us in this work” (15.16).

To briefly summarize, he firstly suggests we reflect upon “the various interests, competitions, and little misunderstandings which arise amongst men” (4.16). Given how apt we are towards self-preference and unconscious bias against others, Butler first rule is that we ought to learn to resist our tendency to speak of the “concerns and behavior” of our neighbors. Obviously, it is impossible to always refrain from speaking of others. Butler’s exhortation is that when we do, we should pay especially close attention. If the tongue is a fire, we, like any other fire, ought not leave it alone, and even more so when it nears dry kindling. Our neighbors and their affairs can be explosive fuel, and we ought to be very suspicious of our impulse to speak of them.

Butler’s second rule is that we should aim for nothing *more* or *less* than the truth in our speech. To guide our truth-speaking, he notes that the stakes are much higher in falsely speaking ill of people than well. So, we should be comfortable speaking well of others with less scrutiny. Additionally, Butler observes that were we to reflect on good men we know, we would find that

¹⁵ In reference to the scholarly neglect of this sermon, Alan Brinton writes “and [sermon] 4, about which no commentator has ever said a word.” Brinton is guilty of only a minor exaggeration here. See Alan Brinton, “The Homiletical Context of Butler’s Moral Philosophy,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (September 1993), 87

they are disposed to speak well of their fellows, and exceptionally hesitant to speak ill. He suggests we do likewise. Sermon four is a useful example of Butler's commitment to equipping his audience with practical steps to pursue virtue. Nor is it the only example. Conservatively, at least sermons six, seven, eight, nine, and ten have clear rules or guiding principles of application stated. All this to say, Butler is committed to finding rules to assist his audience, and that commitment flows from his choice of the second method.

Sermon Analysis

This Self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind, is the source of half the disorders of human life. If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would generally be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight.

– Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*¹⁶

Armed now with a solid grasp of Butler’s genre and method, we can now consider the sermons themselves. Due to space limitations, I have selected just two sermons to analyze in detail: the seventh and tenth sermons. I’ve chosen these two because, as we will see, Butler’s pastoral concern for his audience is particularly evident in them. Both are concerned with the same subject: “self-partiality, self-flattery, and self-deceit” (preface.31). They approach the subject, however, in different ways. Butler’s seventh sermon, *Upon the Character of Balaam*, considers how the Prophet Balaam can coolly attempt to circumvent clear instructions from God without remorse. His path to evil is winding, and Butler is convinced that retracing Balaam’s steps is instructional. The tenth sermon, while also centering around a character analysis (this time King David), is more general and explicitly application oriented. It’s worth noting that David Lewis considers sermon seven to be an example of a “Biblical” sermon on account of its emphasis on textual analysis, and ten an ethical sermon for its emphasis on application. Seven features no concrete application points, whereas ten contains explicit rules to combat self-deceit. Still, both are focused on the audience identifying themselves with the discussed sinner and guarding themselves against his sin. Because of that, ten’s rules are equally relevant to sermon seven. I doubt that’s coincidental.

¹⁶ Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie. Carmel (Liberty Fund, 1982)

Butler's grouping of both sermons together in the preface give cause to the reader to consider them as a textual unit. Doing so yields some compelling connections. One phrase that appears in both sermons and the prefatory passage on them is "unfairness of mind" (preface.31). Retentive readers will recall that Butler first uses the phrase in saying that his choice in method is uniquely equipped to satisfy "fair minds" (preface.12). In sermon seven, he uses it twice to refer to those that engage in subtle acts of self-deception and self-partiality. In sermon ten, Butler uses it to express that if religion is true, it requires of us a real "fairness of mind and honesty of heart" (10.16). Notice the dichotomy here. Self-deception is characteristic of an unfair mind, and reception to Butler's exhortations and subsequent adherence to "religion" (i.e. virtue) is characteristic of a fair mind. Again, in sermon fourteen Butler writes that resignation to the will of God (again, another way of talking about virtue) requires nothing more than "faith, and honesty, and fairness of mind" (14.5).

In sermons wherein self-partiality is also centrally discussed, it's interesting that Butler chooses to structure his arguments rhetorically around characters. His strategy seems to be to bring his audience out of themselves first, and then guide them into seeing themselves without the distorting lens of self-partiality. The preface does not explicitly highlight this connection in the thematic grouping of the two sermons, but I believe their unity is profoundly expressed in it. The audience's identification with Balaam, and then David, prepare them for the rules at the end of ten, and enable them to, like David, condemn sins they will be later convicted of.

As a preliminary note, I quote Butler's own words extensively in the following analysis. I do so firstly in recognition that his carefully qualified and painstakingly precise sentence level writing can speak for itself. Additionally, reading more of it only aids in our purpose of better hearing Butler's *pastoral* voice.

Sermon Seven

Because sermon seven is itself focused on the Balaam narrative in the book of Numbers and Butler's character analysis, some summarizing of the biblical text is necessary here.¹⁷ The story goes that the king of Moab, fearing the Israelites would prevail over the Moabites in battle, calls on Balaam, a well-known prophet with some mysterious access to God, to curse the people of Israel. When the envoys of the king arrive, God tells Balaam that he can't go along with them. Balaam, citing God's forbiddance, refuses to curse Israel and declines the envoys' offer. However, after being offered a greater reward, he asks the messengers to stay the night with him and he inquires of God again what he ought to do. Contra the first petition, at this point God grants Balaam his request to go with them. Butler takes this 'change of mind' to be God permitting Balaam to sin as a kind of judgement in light of his unbelief in asking a second time.¹⁸ Still, Balaam regards the command of God as a serious one, and resolves to obey His prohibition against cursing Israel until God says otherwise. Butler observes that "the state of Balaam's mind was this: he wants to do what he knew to be very wicked, and contrary to the express command of God; he had inward checks and restraints, which he could not entirely get over; he therefore casts about for ways to reconcile this wickedness with his duty" (7.6). Ultimately, Balaam does devise a plan to make the Israelites sin by leading them to inter-marry with Moabite women and consequently worship Moabite idols. He supposes that they would be worthy of the curse he was attempting to summon when they succumb to the temptation.

Referring to this story, Butler describes the character of Balaam as this:

¹⁷ Butler begins sermon seven with Numbers 23:10: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his." The sermon itself is primarily based around Numbers chapters 22-24.

¹⁸ This is similar to a point in Paul's epistle to the Romans, wherein he describes God as allowing idolatrous gentiles to sin by "[giving] them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts" (Rom 1:24, ESV). God, in Butler's read, is giving Balaam up to his sinful desire to go with the Moabites.

a very wicked man, under a deep sense of God and religion, persisting still in his wickedness...even when he had before him a likely view of death...and likewise a prospect, whether certain or uncertain, of a future state of retribution: all this joined with an explicit ardent wish, that, when he was to leave this world, he might be in the condition of a righteous man. Good God, what inconsistency, what perplexity is here! (7.9)

Balaam's vice here isn't accidental or impassioned. It is cold, calculated, and aware of the demands of religion (at least the *letter* of religious law). Sitting back in their pews, the congregation (and we, the readers) may at this point have been wondering, "what has this to do with us?" Why has Butler spent so much time reflecting on a seemingly random narrative from the Old Testament? Butler hinges his illustrative exposition of the story of Balaam with a striking accusation that "thou," audience, "art the man." Or, in Butler's words, "strange as it may appear, [the character of Balaam] is not altogether an uncommon one." (6.9). Balaam's sin, seeing the reasonable choice and yet making the unreasonable one (i.e. seeing the demands of virtue and yet disobeying them), is not a sin confined to the annals of the Old Testament. In fact, it may well be present among the audience.

At this point one may object that Butler's comparison here seems unfair. After all, very few people report having heard the actual voice of God giving them clear instructions. To this, of course, Butler would say that in fact *everyone* has access to the "voice of God within us" (6.7) – everyone has a conscience whereby "[they] hath the rule of right within: what is wanting is only that [they] honestly attend to it" (3.3). Our problem isn't that we've no access to God's voice, our problem is inattention to it. And what accounts for our inattention? Firstly, Butler observes that people tend to vastly over-value worldly things, both independent of considerations of the world

to come and, to a greater extent, in light of it. When people act in such a way as to value something they desire immediately as more important as things of actual value, they may be doing so because of passion. But this clearly isn't the only means. People may also justify the pursuit by avoiding reflection altogether or reflecting in such a way as to obfuscate the vice or justify it in round-about, palliating ways so as to go about the evil with less torment from the conscience. Consider Balaam's sin, wherein he contradicts the whole end of God's commandment (i.e. blessing and not cursing Israel) while nevertheless obeying its letter precisely (at least ostensibly). He deceives himself in thinking that he can avoid God's wrath while ignoring the spirit of his commands. As do we.

Butler exhorts his congregation to bring these character observations home to themselves. As we discussed earlier, his congregation is made up of well-educated, professing Anglicans. He here is appealing to them that they do not confuse their automatic adherence, and even obedience, to the tenants of Christianity as sufficient to excuse them from reflection on their actual moral character. Of course, few religious people would admit to total disregard. They, like Balaam, go about things far more subtly.

No, they are for making a composition with the Almighty. These of his commands they will obey: but as to others – why they will make all the atonements in their power...each in a way which shall not contradict his respective pursuit....atonements before...or atonements afterwards, are all the same. And here perhaps come in faint hope that they may, and half resolves that they will, one time or another, make a change (7.13)

Butler's tone in the above passage is biting. That harshness may well come from a place of pastoral frustration, recognizing that half-obedience is perhaps especially common among people

like his congregants (and readers). He continues in the exercise of application by highlighting the danger of “doubts and deliberation.” (7.14). Unlike Balaam, we ought to respond immediately to a commandment with obedience. Were we to attend to our conscience at the first, we would be enabled to discern the truth of the command. It is in doubt and extended consideration that we open the door to self-deceit. As in his latter sermon on self-deceit, Butler thinks that we are apt to raise “great difficulties...about fixing bound and degrees: and thus every moral obligation whatever may be evaded” (7.14).

Finally, Butler notes that all people, regardless of their desert, want to “die the death of the righteous.” That is, all people want to be free of guilt, regardless of their sin. It’s that idea, specifically in the character of Balaam, that actually begins the sermon. In his identification of the congregation with Balaam, he expects the audience to recognize that they share Balaam’s desire. They want to be free of guilt. Now, Balaam attempts to free himself by way of self-deceit. That strategy is ultimately foolish. Butler asks, “things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be: why then should we desire to be deceived?” (7.16). The psychological process of self-deceit is motivated by a suspicion that all is not well. There is an innate dissatisfaction in vice. Anyone who has ever done something wrong knows the pain of guilt. We all want to be free of its condemnation. Notice the deft argumentative movements here. Throughout the sermon he has been building the case for the audience’s identification with Balaam. After doing so, the identification naturally entails this dissatisfaction, this ultimate desire to die the death of the righteous. He writes that “superstitious observances, self-deceit though of a more refined sort, will not in reality at all amend matters with us” (10.16). If we honestly attend to the voice of conscience, we cannot help but feel condemned. Butler admonishes us to avoid self-deception and consider our characters honestly. Upon-so-doing, we

will recognize that the subtle subterfuge of self-deception we engage in to justify our hypocrisy and numb the sting of conscience will be ultimately insufficient in securing our happiness and saving us from the punishment our vice deserves, both in this life and much more so in the one to come. “And the result of the whole can be nothing else, but that with simplicity and fairness we ‘keep innocency and take heed unto the thing that is right; for this alone shall bring a man peace at the last’”¹⁹ (7.16).

With attention to Butler’s purpose in writing, it should be clear now that sermon seven is far from a work of pure theoretical moral philosophy, though it is laden with astute theoretical insights. It is a punchy exhortation to a specific audience that is in danger of a subtle and destructive moral failing. Despite his frequent use of third-person language in describing participants in the character of Balaam, Butler’s tone in the sermon is in the *second-person*. *You*, comfortable and educated Anglican, are tempted to this peculiar kind of self-deceit. *You*, sophisticated congregant, want to die the death of the righteous without living his life. Sermon seven is much more pastoral than it seems at first blush. A proper reading of sermon ten reveals its fundamentally pastoral character as well.

¹⁹ Psalm 37:37, although Butler’s translation seems to deviate from the King James Version here.

Sermon 10

Butler begins his tenth sermon, *Upon Self-Deceit*, by exegeting the famous story of King David's adultery with Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan's condemnation of it by way of a clever parable.²⁰ To summarize, Nathan tells a parable to David that describes a character guilty of actions that are analogous to David's own vicious murder and adultery. David, upon hearing the parable, harshly condemns the antagonist to four-fold repayment and capital punishment. At that point, Nathan replied, "thou art the man,"²¹ indicating that David has just unknowingly condemned himself. For Butler's purposes, the story serves to illustrate how men, exemplified in David, "seem perfect strangers to their own characters. They think, and reason, and judge quite differently upon any matter relating to themselves, from what they do in cases of others where they are not interested" (10.2).

For Butler, the primary obstacle to accurate self-knowledge is self-partiality. Like David, our partiality blinds us to the clear instances of vice in our lives. He suggests that "there is plainly, in the generality of mankind, an absence of doubt or distrust...as to their moral character and behavior; and likewise a disposition to take for granted, that all is right and well with them in these respects" (10.3). He goes on to suggest that the absence of doubt is due chiefly to a lack of reflection and self-judgement, and the dispositional bias towards self-love. He hastens to add that what he is not describing here are those that have never recognized fault in themselves. They are, for Butler, too far gone.²² He probably mentions this also to quickly parry a potential dismissal of

²⁰ The story is recorded in 2 Samuel 12:1-15. This sermon of Butler's begins with: "And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man" (2 Sam 12:7).

²¹ 2 Sam 12:7

²² C.S. Lewis remarks on awareness of our sinful character that "Christ takes it for granted that men are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of His to be true, though we are part of the world He came to save, we are not part of the audience to whom His words are addressed." Butler is making a similar argument here. If you are under the impression that you are perfect, you don't have the "fair mind" necessary to respond to Butler's method. See C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 50.

his sermon the audience could employ that might go something like “I’ve never been so blind as to excuse murder like David, so I must not be subject to self-deception as Butler is describing.” He clarifies that he is describing a more mundane, ordinary, “lower degree” of confidence that we almost all participate in, not just the king Davids of the world. This disposition can be recognized by its fruits. Chiefly, it produces a careless tendency to disregard the kinds of moral instruction or reproof that would address the actual moral faults of someone. In Butler’s insistence that the subject of his discourse is more mundane and ordinary than we may think, there is a detectable pastoral impulse. Again, he doesn’t want his audience to disregard his exhortations as applying only to the ‘vicious others.’ His congregation ought to hear themselves being described. Note here the connection to sermon seven.

Butler goes on to make a compelling and intuitive observation: we only come to know what we attend to. Thus, one means of self-deception is to only attend to what is favorable to oneself, and to ignore all else. We may attend so chiefly to justifying our actions we fail to undergo any evaluation of them. As Butler puts it, “Though a man hath the best eyes in the world, he cannot see any way but that which he turns them” (10.4). Often, this partiality isn’t general in someone’s life, but applies only to a specific vice. So, someone may have accurate self-knowledge about much of their character, excepting their pride, for which they attend only to justifying it. They, to return to Butler’s illustration, avert their eyes from that specific patch of vice in the garden of their moral life. Recall his earlier discussion on the half-obedience of Balaam in sermon seven. Here again we see a connection.

Butler goes on to talk of vice more generally, defining it as “in general consist[ing] in having an unreasonable and too great regard to ourselves, in comparison to others” (10.6). In common vice, like the act of adultery, Butler sees this over-fondness as expressed merely in our

passions. We, for example, commit adultery when we see another person as an object of sexual interest and gratify our desire for them. Despite the disastrous consequences of this sort of vice, Butler is less worried about it compared to the more subtle expression of self-partiality. After all, it's simple. Adultery is a choice to violate the dictates of conscience, but on its own cannot drown the conscience out. Self-deception goes further. It reaches the understanding and our judgement, and in so doing it *darkens the understanding*. Self-deception, motivated by overfondness of self and the influence of particular passions or desires, aims to numb our sensitivity to the voice of conscience, to "palliate [our] vices and follies to [ourselves]" and evade correction (10.7). This is almost exactly the same language Butler used back in sermon seven, when he writes that people deceive themselves by "avoiding reflection, or (if they do reflect) by religious equivocation, subterfuges, and palliating matters to themselves" (7.10).

One interesting observation of Butler's is that, while "determinate acts of wickedness" (e.g. David's murder and adultery) certainly involve self-deception, self-deception's natural habitat is more subtle. It thrives where our obligations have no fixed "bounds and degrees" (10.9). The forked tongue of self-deceit loves to ask "for what commandment is there broken? Is there a transgression where there is no law? A vice which cannot be defined?" (10.9). Within the grey area of moral life, self-deception is a compelling rhetorician. When thinking clearly, of course, we can see that all of the moral life "cannot be reduced to fixed determinate rules" (10.10). Butler uses the examples of charity and oppression to show that there are clear virtues and vices that retain their moral status despite no clear boundaries. Butler also makes this same point in sermon seven, writing that "great difficulties are raised about fixing bounds and degrees: and thus every moral obligation whatever may be evaded" (7.14).

Butler moves on to talk about self-deceit's chief character. Namely, "it is a corruption of the whole moral character in its principles. Our understanding, and sense of good and evil, is the light and guide of life: if therefore this light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness" (10.11). This is a powerful passage, with a clear message: self-deception, despite its subtly, is not something to ignore. It is *a wholly corrupting force*.²³ If our obligations to virtue are revealed by our conscience, and Butler thinks they are, then numbing our sensitivity to the conviction of the conscience is by far the most dangerous thing we can do. He goes on to observe that despite our best efforts it is impossible become completely desensitized. There is some implicit suspicion remaining that, if ignorant of the state of things, we at least know enough to look away. Butler offers the illustration of a spendthrift to clarify what he means here. "These extravagant people" (10.11) may refrain from attending to their debt, but they do so only because they know generally that their financial situation is not all well. They forsake knowledge of the particulars only because of their implicit knowledge of the generality. If I may offer an example of my own, I have met people hesitant to take a covid test while exhibiting symptoms precisely because they fear the results. They have some suspicion that prompts their aversion. Butler suggests the same is true of our character. When our we detect the prick of conscience, we avert our eyes.

So, what can we do to avoid "that fatal self-deceit" and become "acquainted with [ourselves]" (10.13)? Butler offers three rules. Recall, these rules are important for Butler's project, and his choice to conclude the textual unit on self-deception with practical steps to combat isn't incidental. The first rule is that (1) we ought to consider ourselves under the spell of self-partiality unless proven otherwise. This kind of "over-correction" can be seen all over the

²³ Butler makes a similar argument in his fourth sermon, *Upon the Government of the Tongue*, on the vice of talkativeness.

sermons.²⁴ For example, in sermon four, Butler observes that since we are so apt to speak ill of our neighbors when we speak of them, it is better to avoid the subject all together when possible. When not possible, we ought to be much more comfortable speaking well than poorly of others (4.16-17). Another example is in sermon six when Butler suggests “that general rules and exhortations must always be” in support of more and not less compassion and charity because its absence is near ubiquitous and its excess exceptionally rare. His second rule is that (2) we ought to keep a close eye on potential moral weakness in ourselves. To identify such things, Butler suggests we imagine what an enemy might draw attention to in order to defame us. It is that very thing in our character that we ought to critically reflect on. Such a rule is powerfully capable of overcoming our self-partiality by forcing us out of ourselves and into the perspective of someone with an opposite bias regarding our character. Finally, (3) we ought to follow Christ’s golden rule: ‘whatever you would have others to do you, so you should do to them.’ Though Butler admits this rule may be dishonestly applied, he suggests that following it is, in essence, the whole of his strategy to avoid self-deceit. All of Butler’s rules are united in reinforcing our attention to the voice of conscience and bringing us out of ourselves through the perspectives of others. Recall, vice is “in general consist[ing] in having an unreasonable and too great regard to ourselves, in comparison to others” (10.6). Self-partiality and self-deceit are closely linked, and the rules are about giving them no quarter.

²⁴ Aristotle, in Book II of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, gives similar ‘over-corrective’ rules for finding the mean. He suggests that we ought to (1) keep away from the extremes that are more contrary to the mean, (2) notice the errors which we ourselves are liable to fall, and drag ourselves in the contrary direction, and (3) guard especially against pleasure despite the fact that it is not always problematic. These points are prudential, one might even say pastoral, insofar as they are, like Butler’s, mentioned as an attempt to equip his students with tools for hitting the mean. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans J.A.K Thomson (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 48-49

What have we learned?

As should be clear now, Butler's seventh and tenth sermons are united by more than subject matter. As a textual unit they build on one another's arguments and mutually reinforce a habit of mind, honest reflection, wherein the audience, should they have a 'fair mind,' cannot help but recognize and condemn the self-deception they themselves are likely to be guilty of. Further, both uniquely equip the audience to apply practical means of combating self-deception and pursuing virtue. By reading these sermons with sensitivity to their method and genre, we are able to appreciate fully this end. There are many valuable theoretical insights to take away from these sermons, but Butler isn't at all interested in his audience only taking away those insights. We ought not read him only as the philosophers do. The reader is encouraged to come outside themselves and reflect on their subtle and destructive deviations from the path of virtue. To repent with David so as to avoid the fate of Balaam. To carefully attend to the voice of conscience and not to numb its prick.

Conclusion

Avoid vice, therefore, and cultivate virtue... a great necessity is laid upon you, if you will be honest with yourself, a great necessity to be good...

– Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*²⁵

Butler is a philosophical preacher. In reading sermons seven and ten with sensitivity to their genre and method, the unity of their purpose is glaring. As a textual unit they are powerfully pastoral, a united exhortation to abide by the voice of conscience and flee from self-deceit. Nor are they anomalous in *Fifteen Sermons*. The remainder of the collection bears witness to a project that is about more than “solving crossword puzzles.”²⁶ A project about cultivating the practice of virtue. Should we read *Fifteen Sermons* as a systematic treatise on moral philosophy, our efforts are destined to be frustrated. I suspect Butler would ask us “but did you not read my title? I wrote fifteen sermons, not treatises.” Butler’s theoretical points are profoundly insightful, but always in service of his larger purpose.

Undoubtedly his genre and method are both unfashionable today in philosophy. Even so, his goal is evergreen. Perhaps the discipline of philosophy would be better served by more pastoral philosophers, exhorting students, peers, and the larger world to truly love wisdom. As readers of his sermons, we are among his audience, and we would do well to read him with a view towards our own cultivation of virtue. Should we be bettered for it, should we find within Butler’s council “one rule to assist in this work” (15.16), I think Butler would be satisfied.

²⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 137

²⁶ David McNaughton, “Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?” 5.

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