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JOSEPH BUTLER ON SELF-REVERENCE AS A MORAL DUTY

by

RUBY TAMARIZ

Under the Direction of Eric Wilson, PhD

ABSTRACT

Joseph Butler characterizes his account of virtue as fulfilling the “true meaning” of the ancient precept that one ought to revere one’s self. The idea that self-reverence is important to moral conduct opposes a common view that moral conduct involves solely other-regarding attitudes and actions, and it also seems problematic for Butler’s theological commitments as an Anglican Bishop. In this thesis, I provide an interpretation of Butler’s sermons that makes sense of the role self-reverence plays in his moral thought. I argue 1) that self-reverence motivates obedience to conscience, which for Butler, secures virtue, and 2) that for Butler, self-reverence is a genuine *obligation* that we have. I close by considering reasons why Butler was not more explicit about the importance of self-reverence to virtue.

INDEX WORDS: Joseph Butler, Self-reverence, Self-respect, Moral obligation, Duties to self, Conscience, History of philosophy, History of ethics, History of the Church of England

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RUBY TAMARIZ

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

For my undergraduate tutors, Dr. Paul Carrese and Ambassador Roger Gran Harrison

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the preface to his influential *Fifteen Sermons*, Joseph Butler remarks that his account of moral virtue fulfills “the true meaning of that ancient precept, *Reverence thyself*” (P 25). Given the Stoic influence on his thought, it is unsurprising that Butler resurrects an injunction from the ancients, but why does he emphasize the one commanding us to revere ourselves, and does it help us to better understand his views on morality? He does not further explain his remark here or anywhere else in his works, and it has yet to serve as the focus of any scholarly commentary. Further, Butler’s emphasis on reverence of one’s *self* may strike modern readers as counterproductive to the acquisition of virtue, as well as puzzling given his theological commitments as a high-ranking leader of the Anglican church. The purpose of my paper, thus, is to make explicit and coherent the role that self-reverence plays in Butler’s moral thought. I do this by arguing two claims: 1) self-reverence motivates us to obey our conscience, which for Butler, secures our virtue, and 2) for Butler, self-reverence is a genuine *obligation* we have. Beyond the interpretive aim of this paper, reflecting on the nature of self-reverence is important insofar as it can make Butler’s specific proposals for why and how we should live virtuously more convincing.

Before detailing the structure of my argument, I want to be clear on what “reverence” means and why a concept of self-reverence is philosophically interesting, especially for a thinker like Butler. To revere something is to deeply respect or honor it. Like the concept of respect, which indicates “a relation between a subject and an object in which the subject responds to the object from a certain perspective in some appropriate way,” the concept of reverence also entails an appropriate response from a subject toward its object (Dillon).¹ I take the appropriate response

¹ This paper refers to self-reverence as both an attitude and an act, unless otherwise specified.

of a revering subject as involving things like an acknowledgment of the important status of the revered object, a careful attention paid to its interests, and a willingness to fulfil its desires. Of course, reverence takes on a tone of much greater intensity than mere respect. Revering something or someone is often reserved for those exceptional entities that we judge to deserve the profoundest adoration; one might respect a professional colleague, but it would seem odd to say that one *reveres* their colleague. Historically, it is common to encounter the term in religious contexts.

Asserting that a self-regarding attitude or act plays an important role in Butler's moral thought may seem suspicious. In contemporary culture, we don't often think of the morality of a person's conduct as depending on any attitudes or actions toward themselves, but rather those attitudes or actions they take toward others. To be clear, *certain* notions of self-respect and self-esteem do feature prominently in contemporary discourse. However, these notions are thought of as influencing psychological health, rather than as influencing the way we meet our *moral* obligations. Additionally, while we often take someone's *intention* into consideration when positively evaluating the merit of their action, we seem to do so only if the intention stems from an appropriate attitude taken toward an object that is *not* the agent themselves. For example, we evaluate a person's act of donating resources to a women's shelter positively because it reflects an attitude of genuine compassion toward women in need—not because it reflects an attitude the person has toward themselves. On the contrary, we often view people who excessively focus on themselves in their dealings with others to be viciously selfish. In those cases where we praise a person for a particular attitude they took towards themselves, we expect that attitude to be one of humility or sacrifice—a lowering of one's own interest or worth below that of others. Simply put, we tend to locate virtue in selfless, other-regarding attitudes and actions. Can a *self-*

regarding position, and one that is asserted to be a duty, no less, serve as an important aspect of a plausible account of virtue?

The other concern about giving weight to the importance of self-reverence in Butler's thought is that it seems problematic for his theological commitments. After all, it is not Christian scripture that he borrows the idea from; when Butler refers to self-reverence as an ancient precept, he is referring to the fact that it is a rule of conduct commonly encouraged by the ancient Greeks.² Setting the pagan origin of self-reverence aside, it may seem unorthodox for Butler to encourage Christians to take an attitude towards themselves that is akin to one they should take towards God. Elevating the worth of one's self to the level of being *owed* reverence raises a concern about whether such a duty competes with what we owe to God. More broadly, it's not immediately clear why the self is worthy of such an attitude. When speaking of reverence in a religious context, its association with fear and awe seems warranted—being afraid and in awe of an all-powerful God seems like a natural response to have. In what context could a Christian theologian plausibly argue that a person is owed a similar response?

Despite these apparent concerns, Butler insists that self-reverence plays some important role for securing our virtue. He introduces the notion after defending his emphasis on what is probably the most prominent feature of his moral thought—the importance of absolutely obeying our conscience. What is clear in Butler's account of virtue is that we ultimately secure our virtue when we obey our conscience, even in those instances when we'd rather be carried away by competing desires, or when other courses of action seem to be better aligned with our interests:

² The fifth-century scholar Stobaeus wrote that one of the 147 aphorisms inscribed into the sanctuary at Delphi was "Reverence Thyself" (Oikonomides 70); though the original authorship of these maxims is unknown, popular belief at the time held them to have been delivered by Apollo (Kurke 109). The maxim is also attributed to Pythagoras, who said "Above all things, respect thyself" (Firth 2). Similarly, Democritus taught "reverence thyself no less than thy neighbors, and be equally on thy guard against wrong-doing, whether all or none shall know it" (Mayor 22).

“to let [conscience] govern and guide only occasionally in common with the rest, as its turn happens to come, from the temper and circumstances one happens to be in; this is not to act conformably to the constitution of man” (P 24). He continues:

The practical reason of insisting so much upon this natural authority of the principle of reflection or conscience is, that it seems in great measure overlooked by many, who are by no means the worst sort of men. It is thought sufficient to abstain from gross wickedness, and to be humane and kind to such as happen come in their way. Whereas in reality the very constitution of our nature requires, that we bring our whole conduct before this superior faculty; wait its determination; enforce upon ourselves its authority, and make it the business of our lives, as it is absolutely the whole business of a moral agent, to conform ourselves to it. This is the true meaning of that ancient precept, *Reverence thyself*. (P 25)

My paper, therefore, must show how exactly self-reverence is involved in a person’s continuous obedience to their conscience, while alleviating the concerns such a notion raises.

1.1 Structure of Argument

The first part of my paper makes a case that, for Butler, self-reverence motivates us to obey our conscience. I first analyze Butler’s discussion of various vices and conclude that these vices involve a failure to hold one’s self in high regard, which shows the plausibility of a general connection between self-reverence and virtue. While this initial analysis provides only indirect evidence for my claim, it reveals the basic contours of what reverence, broadly construed, might mean for Butler. I sharpen our understanding of Butler’s notion of reverence by then examining his views on a person’s proper reverence of God. From this, I conclude that reverence entails two significant elements: trust and fear. Next, I demonstrate that our conscience can serve as a genuine object of trust and fear based on Butler’s description of the conscience as having the kind of authority that could plausibly inspire such trust and fear. I move on to explain the relationship between the conscience and the self, clarifying why I have singled out conscience (and not other aspects of our nature) as worth revering. At this point, my argument will have

made sense of how Butler can describe his account of virtue as the “true meaning” of a command to self-reverence: obedience to conscience secures virtue, and self-reverence motivates obedience to conscience.

The second part of my paper shows how Butler views self-reverence as a genuine *obligation* we have. I begin by establishing why, in the first place, the characterization of self-reverence as an obligation would have been meaningful to Butler and his contemporaries. I move on to show how a duty of self-reverence is derived from what Butler took to be our duty to God. I then explain how this derivation avoids the concern about whether self-reverence competes with our duty to God. Lastly, I consider the fact that an obligation to self-reverence implies that we *can* fulfill such an obligation; so, I strengthen the possibility of understanding self-reverence as an obligation by showing that Butler believes we have a genuine capacity for self-reverence.

Finally, I contend with the important question of why Butler was not more explicit about the importance of a duty of self-reverence, if it indeed played such an important role in his account of morality. I suggest two reasons that could explain Butler’s reticence before offering concluding thoughts on my overall research.

2 SELF-REVERENCE AS MOTIVATION FOR OBEYING CONSCIENCE

2.1 A Plausible Relationship between Self-Reverence and Virtue

Butler’s numerous remarks on the nature of vice provide substantial indirect evidence that self-reverence is important for Butler’s account of virtue. Namely, the specific vices Butler warns against in his sermons seem to involve a failure of self-reverence, on the most obvious understanding of what reverence requires. As I stated in my introduction, reverence indicates a deep respect for an object. Such deep respect intuitively entails certain attitudes and behaviors while prohibiting (or excluding) others. The vices of talkativeness and resentment, however, fail

to manifest these attitudes and behaviors with regard to ourselves. First, these vices directly or indirectly harm the agents who commit them. Second, these vices prevent agents from properly attending to themselves by excessively focusing attention on others. To be clear, my claim is not that Butler thinks vice is caused by a failure of self-reverence in every case. Butler acknowledges that vice can be caused by false beliefs about what is in one's genuine interest, or by the "superstitions" of false religion, or by the sheer overpowering of one's will by a strong-enough desire. I only claim that his discussion of these particular vices shows that vice is often the result of a failure to properly respect ourselves, and his focus on this failure might be due to his view that it is the source of vice which is most straightforwardly in our power to avoid.

When we engage in the vice of excessive talkativeness, Butler thinks we indirectly harm ourselves by restricting our access to benefits we could otherwise obtain. The mindless chatterbox cuts himself "from all advantage to conversation, except that of being entertained with [his] own talk" (S 4.10). The advantages of our capacity to converse are the natural opportunities they present "to be informed, to hear, to learn" (S 4.10) and to "carry on the affairs of the world; for business, and for our improvement in knowledge and learning" (S 4.7). Surely these practical advantages represent the primary purpose of our faculty of speech, but Butler isn't so industry-minded as to criticize any levity in conversation. Butler recognizes that a secondary capacity of our ability to converse is to "administer to delight" (S 4.7), which serves as "a diversion from the cares, the business, and the sorrows of life" (S 4.10). There is nothing inherently wrong with using conversation for these lighter purposes. It is only when we indulge this secondary function of our speech so excessively that it *undermines* its primary function that Butler sees our talkativeness as transforming into the vice of the "ungoverned" tongue. Getting carried away with the joy of *solely* entertaining talk (such as gossip) draws our attention away

from more important matters, and when we habituate ourselves to constantly prefer the more shallow joys of talking, we undermine our longer-term interests and the deeper benefits we could gain from conversation. Moreover, when the viciously talkative person habituates himself to saying anything for the sake of being in the spotlight (with little regard for the truth of his words), he undermines any trust his neighbors may place in him. Even if the person doesn't go so far as to lie for mere attention, Butler claims that they "render themselves [insignificant] by this excessive talkativeness: insomuch that, if they do chance to say any thing which deserves to be attended to and regarded, it is lost in the variety and abundance which they utter of another sort" (S 4.12).

What is astute about Butler's discussion here is the observation that a person can harm *himself*—not just other people—when he commits vice. And while this observation alone does not directly establish my main claim that self-reverence leads directly to virtue, it gives us a clue as to how virtue might importantly involve a self-regarding attitude or action. Of course, one could object that the case of vicious talkativeness *does* display a great deal of regard for one's self. After all, the entire motivation of talkativeness seems to be the pleasure of having one's ego boosted by attention from others, or the sheer pleasure of hearing one's self talk. However, that vice might result from a *kind* of self-regarding attitude or action does not negate the possibility that virtue requires a different kind of self-regarding attitude or action. A person's enchantment with their own capacity for being a figure of entertainment or amusement does not constitute proper *self-reverence* on Butler's view, which I will establish later in this paper. And an enamored regard for one's self as a source of entertainment for others should not be fully embraced if it leads to the indirect harms Butler points out here.

Butler highlights cases in which engaging in vice more directly inflicts harm on the agent. This is most clearly brought out in his discussion of resentment. For Butler, resentment has a positive purpose in that it can be utilized “to prevent and remedy...injury, and the miseries arising from it” (S 8.8). But when we dwell in this resentment for too long and let it consume our thinking, it ends up causing us *more* harm through mental suffering—we feel distress, misery, anguish, etc. He observes that even those who carry around resentment’s milder, passive form of “peevishness” are deeply “unhappy creatures” (S 8.10). In its extreme form, resentment “seizes [persons] upon the least occasion in the world...every day, every waking hour of their lives, liable and in danger of running into the most extravagant outrages” (S 8.10). Not only does such resentment cause us unrelenting mental pain, but it threatens our autonomy. Resentment takes “*possession of the temper and of the mind* [my emphasis], and will not quit its hold” (S 8.12). In a sense, the deeply resentful person loses control of his ability to move peacefully through the world.

Many tend to think that the main reason why we should avoid resentment is because it naturally leads us to wanting to harm others (i.e. seeking revenge), and that our inevitable violation of the rights of others (when we seek revenge) generates more harm in the world. While Butler certainly thinks that resentment is a vice, in part, because it leads to more harm in the world, his view of the matter cannot be entirely summed up by the fact that resentment undermines our duties to others. Part of the problem with resentment is that it can only be gratified when the person becomes “the author of misery” himself, thus undermining his natural tendencies to benefit others (S 9.10). In other words, we are corrupting a part of our nature when we excessively indulge resentment. Moreover, Butler emphasizes the fact that we are members of a community in which “we all stand in a relation to each other”, so that our treatment of others

have some kind of influence on ourselves (S 9.8). Of course, just because we stand in *some* relation to another does not necessarily mean that our actions on them affect us in the exact same way. Even if we are members of a community, it does not necessarily follow that our harming others necessarily harms ourselves, or vice versa. Yet Butler takes the nature of our relations to be so deeply intertwined that we really are a *part* of each other: “if we consider mankind, according to that fine allusion of St. Paul, as ‘one body, and every one members one of another’; it must be allowed that resentment is, with respect to society, a painful remedy” (S 9.6). In other words, because he takes the line between us and others to be so nebulous, Butler views the effects of our actions on others, good or bad, to affect us in very similar ways. When he explains that resentment may be indulged only with “some greater good” (S 9.6) in mind, it is because he takes it to be a “painful means” of protecting society, which we are a part of: “Considered in itself, [resentment] is very undesirable, and what society must very much wish to be without. It is in every instance absolutely an evil in itself; because it implies producing misery; and consequently must never be indulged or gratified for itself, by any one who considers mankind as a community or family, and himself as a member of it” (S 9.8). Similarly, Butler raises the concern that if we refuse to forgive those who have hurt us, and insist on holding onto our resentment for them, we’re undermining any expectation we have that God should forgive *us* for our own sins:

Suppose yourselves under the apprehensions of approaching death; that you were just going to appear naked and without disguise before the Judge of all the earth, to give an account of your behavior towards your fellow-creatures: could any thing raise more dreadful apprehensions of that judgement, than the reflection that you had been implacable, and without mercy towards those who had offended you, which that it may not be exercised towards yourselves, is your only hope? (S 9.28)

The vice of excessive resentment, then, involves a lack of concern for our own basic interests, in this life and in the afterlife.

Beyond having a concern for its safety and security, we would also expect that a person pays an appropriate amount of attention to the object of reverence. So, self-reverence must involve a kind of attention paid to ourselves. Yet the vices Butler discusses seem to distort our ability to pay attention to certain things about ourselves. In the case of the talkative person, he aims “to engage your attention; to take you up wholly for the present time” (S 4.3). Note that when engaging in this vice, the person is solely focused on a state of mind he can produce in *another*. Moreover, the talkative person inevitably gossips, because gossip provide endless entertainment in conversation due to our natural desire to be better than others: “there is perpetually, and often is not attended to, a rivalship amongst people of one kind of another, in respect to wit, beauty, learning, fortune; and that one thing will insensibly influence them to speak to the disadvantage of others, even where there is no formed malice or design” (S 4.16). This leads the talkative person to narrowly focus on the business of *others* without considering what he needs to deal with in his own situation. As Butler writes, one should not use conversation “to the neglect of those duties and offices of life which belong to their station and condition in the world” (S 4.14). Excessive talkativeness prevents one from taking care of their practical duties, but more importantly, it prevents us from attending to our own moral situations by excessively redirecting our attention to the moral faults of others. No one has gone through life without failing in virtue at least a few times, and when we hold on to resentment, we’re ignoring this fact about ourselves. Insisting on our resentment is essentially the “monstrous” assertion that one ought to be “indulgent to many faults in himself...and yet...implacable” regarding the faults of others (S 9.26).

One might concede that vice sometimes involves a lack of a kind of attention paid towards ourselves, and a harming of certain aspects of ourselves. But why should we care about

those aspects of ourselves that seem to be at risk with talkativeness and resentment, and moreover, does any of this prove that we must treat ourselves with *reverence* as opposed to a more basic kind of respect?

To answer the first question, we should first note that the larger claim I am laying the groundwork for is that it is coherent to think of self-reverence as important for *virtue*. Surely the first step to living virtuously is to honestly review our motivations and conduct. Doing so gives us greater knowledge of our weaknesses and provides us clues to how we might better manage our attitudes and behavior. But such an honest review of our character requires a sufficient amount of attention paid toward ourselves. The vices that Butler highlights undermine our ability to properly reflect on our characters, because they redirect our attention to other people or to other aspects of ourselves that aren't relevant to the question of our moral status.

Another consideration is that the vices Butler refers to distort our natural capacity to know truth, which he explicitly claims is due reverence. In the opening of the preface to his sermons, Butler writes “it is too obvious to be mentioned, how much that *religious and sacred attention* [my emphasis], which is due to truth...is lost out of the world” (P 1). The vice of talkativeness involves a “great indifference of truth and falsity” (S 4.5). And while we should desire “that things may be considered and judged of as they are in themselves...[even if] virtues and morals were out of the case”, resentment clouds our judgment of such things (S 9.25). Resentment places us “in such a peculiar situation, with respect to harms done to ourselves, that we can scarce any more see them as they really are, than our eye can see itself” (S 9.22). The most straightforward case of disrespecting our capacity for knowing truth is found in the vice of self-deception, where persons “find that the survey of themselves, their own heart and temper, their own life and behavior, doth not afford them satisfaction: things are not as they should be:

therefore they turn away, will not go over particulars, or look deeper, lest they should find more amiss” (S 10.11). Such a turning-away amounts to a deliberate closing of “the eyes of the mind” to the truth of matters at hand, including the truth of our own vicious conduct (S 10.11).

While these considerations strengthen the plausibility that virtue often requires a kind of respect paid to certain aspects of ourselves, they do not entirely prove that such respect should be elevated to the level of *reverence*. While I strengthen my case for this in the next two sections of the paper, I suggest that there is a sense in Butler’s writing that we must be sensitive to more than a mere neglect of ourselves. Butler characterizes the vices he discusses not as products of mere neglect, but as *abuses* of our natural principles. He writes that “the due and proper use of any natural faculty or power, is to be judged of by the end and design for which it was given us” (S 4.7). When we viciously talk, it’s not merely the case that we are neglecting the intended function of our capacity for speech, but that we engage in an “abuse of speech” (S 4.8)—we transform the capacity into a “sword in the hand of a madman” (S 4.5). Our resentment becomes vicious only when participate in “the excess and the *abuse* [my emphasis] of this natural feeling” (S 9.2). The biblical character of Balaam engaged in self-deception because of “a *prostitution* [my emphasis] of the sacred character with which he was invested” (S 7.6). Again, while these characterizations do not entirely prove that we owe reverence to ourselves, they do suggest that Butler believed we needed to be especially concerned with how our conduct affects ourselves, and that we are frequently vulnerable to self-abuse.

The analysis above has established a plausible relationship between self-reverence and virtue. The vicious agents of talkativeness, resentment, and self-deception, all seem to fail in showing themselves a concern for their basic interests and an appropriate amount of attention to their characters. While such concern and attention are clearly necessary conditions for obtaining

reverence, they are likely not sufficient conditions for obtaining reverence. What I have captured so far is a general sense of how reverence might be related to virtue, but I will need a fuller understanding of Butler's conception of reverence before I can forcefully argue that it plays an important role in securing virtue.

2.2 Sharpening Butler's Conception of Reverence

A fuller understanding of Butler's conception of reverence can be derived from his ideas about how a person should revere God. From these ideas, it's clear that Butler's conception of reverence requires two key elements: trust and fear. At the core of both sentiments is the presupposition that the revered object (i.e. God) is perfectly good.

For Butler, showing God the respect he is due requires that we maintain a deep and unwavering trust in his will: "Resignation to the will of God is the whole of piety" (S 14.3). Resignation to the will of God means that we come to accept whatever God decides for us—a giving up of our own expectations for what should occur. When Butler writes "our resignation to the will of god may be said to be perfect, when our will is lost and resolved up into his," he means that we have to find a way to acknowledge the true facts of our situation and to commit to trusting that God knows what is for the best (S 14.5). Such a commitment requires humility in one's own ability to know what is for the best—we should not take ourselves to be better judges than God of what goodness requires. This commitment also requires a deep trust in God's ultimate benevolence. It's not merely the case that God is wiser than us and has foresight into how the myriad of events that occur will connect to each other in the future. More importantly, we trust in God's will if we sincerely believe that he is perfectly good; we have faith that he wills things for good reasons and that all events occur for some ultimate good in the long term. A perfectly good God is one whose commandments and decisions *could not be but good*. To be

clear, Butler does not think God's commandments must be good because the very act of him commanding them makes them so—Butler is not a theological voluntarist. Instead, he believes that we should trust God's commandments because a perfectly good God could only will things in accordance with a goodness that exists prior to his will.³ God naturally elicits our trust, and for Butler, such trust is fundamental to our proper reverence of God.

Butler thinks that the perfect goodness of God also establishes specific grounds for fearing him. To be clear, Butler doesn't mean to emphasize that our reverence of God requires a hysterical or "servile" fear of God (S 13.2). We should not fear God because we believe him to be a cruel and arbitrary master, nor should we fear God because we view ourselves to be so wicked that we are "deserving of eternal hell-fire" (Heydt 95). Butler was, in fact, opposed to the "highly emotional behavior" of evangelical Calvinists who insisted that a person's relationship to God should be deeply "enthusiastic and passionate" (Heydt 94-95). Instead, Butler thinks that reverence of God requires us to fear God because we believe him to be perfectly just. We implicitly believe that God is perfectly just if we take him to be perfectly good. God's justness means that we expect him to administer justice fairly—those who truly do wrong and deserve to be punished, *will* be punished, because this is what the notion of perfect justice calls for. While in some sense, we are afraid of a cruel and irrational boss who we expect to harm the interests of his employees, it does not represent a source of fear that Butler thinks is significant. He makes this point explicit when he opposes the claim (made by Shaftesbury) that "it is malice only, and not goodness, which can make us afraid" (*Characteristics*, Vol. 1, p. 39). Butler corrects this view, pointing out that malice's natural *opposition* to justice means that it can be easily

³ Butler writes "...suppose that [men] had a real view...of that conformity of the divine will to the *law of truth*, in which the moral attributes of God consist; of that goodness in the Sovereign Mind, which gave birth to the universe" (S 14.4).

“appeased or satiated” by the vicious man (P 30). For example, a malicious boss, because he is corrupt, is not committed to the fair administration of punishments. An employee could do an objective wrong, and easily pay off the malicious boss (or, perhaps, the malicious boss would be pleased by his employee’s viciousness and reward it). The malicious boss’ lack of integrity and consistency removes the profound fear we would hold if we were to do wrong. Instead, it is only the “fixed, steady, immovable principle of action” which is *goodness* that lays a ground for true fear (P 30). Proper reverence of God, then, if we sincerely come to terms with his perfection, naturally requires a fear of him.⁴

Additionally, reverence of God entails fear of God because we don’t want to incur his disapprobation. Reverence of God is linked with “ambition of his love and approbation, delight in the hope or consciousness of it”, and to earn his displeasure “is itself the natural proper object of fear” (S 13.2). Butler’s simple observation here matches our common understanding of reverence—most of us have experienced the fear of disappointing those we deeply respect or love. It doesn’t matter to us much when we disappoint those we dislike, and we criticize those who care too much about their social acceptance by bad characters, but we seem to sympathize with a person’s fear of losing the good opinion of someone who is genuinely admirable. The existence of a perfectly good God, then, should mean that we are *most* afraid of his disapproval. We may have this fear because we are aware of God’s perfect administration of justice, or we

⁴ Such fear of God is not servile because it does not entail the agent’s degradation, but rather gives us a kind of freedom. If we believe in a perfectly good God whose commands cannot be but good, then when we obey these commands we do not act slavishly, but as agents who have the kind of freedom to do what our nature moves us to want to do. For Butler, it is in our nature to act in accordance with God’s laws, and to fulfill our nature is to realize freedom. Of course, such a conception of freedom is opposed to a purely negative conception of liberty. But Butler takes a negative conception of liberty to be somewhat incoherent: “For does not all this kind of talk [that we should prefer the freedom to pursue our appetites over our obligation to virtue] go upon supposition...that it is the privilege of vice to be without restraint or confinement?...but our very nature, exclusive of conscience, and our condition lays us under an absolute necessity of [restraint or confinement]. We cannot gain any end whatever *without being confined to the proper means* [my emphasis], which is often the most painful and uneasy confinement” (S 3.7).

may fear his disapproval because we take his judgment of us to be perfectly accurate. That is, we may fear God's disapproval not just because we want to please him, but because his disapprobation means we have genuinely done wrong. What we are really avoiding, then, is the reality of us lacking goodness in our character. This way of thinking about our fear of God's disapprobation is consistent with Butler's view that it is natural for us to want to be good. Within our nature, "there is no such thing as self-hatred" and "no such thing as love of injustice, oppression, treachery, ingratitude" (S 1.11-12).

I have attempted to sharpen Butler's conception of reverence by bringing to view the roles that trust and fear play in the way we properly revere God. If it is the case that Butler thinks we should revere ourselves, then there should be evidence that the self is capable of eliciting the kind of trust and fear that God does. In the following section, I will begin to provide this evidence by showing how for Butler, our conscience is an appropriate object for this kind of trust and fear.

2.3 The Conscience as Appropriate Object of Reverence

For Butler, the conscience serves as an appropriate object of trust and fear. Because the conscience is the authoritative element of a person's nature, we have good reason to trust its judgments, and because the conscience can levy guilt, we have reason to fear our defiance of it. Because the conscience has been given to us by a perfectly good God, we should expect the function of our conscience to be similarly benevolent.

Butler views the conscience as the ultimate authority over our conduct. He writes that if we reflect on the various elements of our nature, we will find that the conscience is "manifestly superior and chief" (S 2.13). It "plainly bears upon it marks of authority over all" of our other motivating principles (P 24). To be clear, Butler acknowledges that our passions and appetites

can overwhelm our will with their brute strength; in these moments, they may appear to us as if they are the greatest forces within our nature. But he thinks that we need to distinguish “mere power” from true “authority”—the conscience maintains the latter (S 2.14). This means that when our passions and appetites do overwhelm our ability to obey our conscience, they do so because of their power, but not with any rightful claim to determining our conduct. The conscience is what has the rightful claim to our conduct; through its authority, a hierarchical relationship is established between it and all the other elements of our nature. Any instance of one of these other elements of our nature overpowering the conscience is “mere *usurpation*” (S 2.13).

Understanding how the conscience exercises its authority over us gives us some clues as to why we might trust and fear it. First, the conscience “distinguishes between the internal principles of [every person’s] heart, as well as his external actions” (S 2.8). So, the conscience discerns what our various motives are, in addition to making clear to our understanding what exactly it is we have just done (or might do in the near future). Such clarity is the first step to obtaining the kind of self-knowledge we would need for virtue. Second, the conscience “passes judgement” on these motives and actions, pronouncing “determinately” which are good and while evil (S 2.8). Note Butler’s emphasis on the precision of such judgements, which leaves little defense of any proclaimed confusion about them. Third, the conscience makes such pronouncements “without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially [exerting] itself” (S 2.9). In other words, conscience’s final judgment does not draw upon the reflections or aims of our other natural principles (such as self-love or compassion). Further, the conscience does not seek, nor does it permit, input from other rational faculties. Finally, the conscience “naturally and always of course goes to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence,

which...second and affirm its own” (S 2.8). In other words, the conscience exerts its own condemnation when its judgments are violated, and this condemnation points toward the inevitability of divine sanctions, whether in this life or in the next.

The conscience inspires trust in us because of how it exercises its authority, and because of its divine origin. As stated above, the conscience makes clear to us both our actions and motives. This clarity, combined with the precision of the conscience’s judgments, and the refusal of the conscience to consult any other source of judgment, gives us reason to think that it *might* be the true authority over our conduct. But how can we be sure that the authority it claims is true and benevolent? Like with all aspects of our nature, Butler believes God has given us our conscience for good reasons, and with our interest in mind. A perfectly good God would not have equipped us with faculties deliberately designed to thwart goodness. Butler sees the conscience as a benevolent guide: “Our understanding, and sense of good and evil, is the light and guide of life” (S 10.11). It is “our natural guide” through life and that “candle of the Lord within” (S 3.5, S 10.16). While Butler does not explicitly state that we should trust our conscience, the idea fits well with his optimistic view that our nature was designed by a perfect author and designed with good ends in mind. Given the theological commitments of the Anglican church during this time, it would also be safe to assume that Butler’s audience has a similarly optimistic view of God’s design for us.

That Butler thinks we must trust our conscience is made most apparent if we look to his sermon on the vice of self-deception. In this sermon, he uses the biblical story of Balaam, a diviner, to show how a lack of trust in God leads to moral demise. Balaam is tempted by the king of Moab to curse the Israelites, but God clearly commands Balaam not to do so. Instead of trusting the justness of God’s command, Balaam continues to press the question. When he

doesn't get the answer that he wants (i.e. the answer that will allow him to curse the Israelites and earn a reward from the king of Moab), he looks for "some other means of assisting [the king] against that very people whom he himself by the fear of God was retrained in cursing with words" (S 7.7). Butler's metaphor about self-deception here is rich. Balaam was given the gift of prophecy to know God's will, just as we are given the gift of conscience to know what is good and evil. Balaam was "for making a composition with the Almighty" so that "his commands...[would] not contradict his respective pursuit" (S 7.13), just as we often attempt to negotiate with the judgments of our conscience when it stands in the way of getting what we particularly desire. Balaam's faithful donkey refused to continue on the road to Moab to keep Balaam from certain sin, just as we feel the weight of our conscience trying to pull us away from the wrong course of action. And just as Balaam cruelly beat his donkey for trying to stop him, we look for anything to suppress the clear voice of our conscience when we finally commit to self-deception. At every step of the way towards this vice, we fail to properly trust the authority and judgments of conscience.

Butler also thinks we have good reason to fear our conscience because of its capacity to "punish" us through the feeling of guilt. Certainly, guilt is a negative psychic experience. When Butler exhorts us to "make that choice and prefer that course of life, which you can justify to yourselves, and which sits most easy upon your mind" he is reminding us that violating our conscience levies a painful emotional burden (S 7.16). Only when we deceive ourselves can we act viciously and still maintain "a sort of tranquility and quiet of mind" (S 7.13). But this sort of tranquility is shallow and fleeting. Butler writes that despite our best efforts at suppressing our conscience, "there *frequently appears* a suspicion, that all is not right, or as it should be; and perhaps there is *always* at bottom somewhat of this sort" (S 10.11). No matter how hard we try to

construct delusions about them, “truth, and real good sense, and thorough integrity, carry along with them a peculiar consciousness of their own genuineness: there is a feeling belonging to them, which does not accompany their counterfeits” (S 10.11). And the kind of pain that the violation of our conscience produces (i.e. guilt) is unique compared to the pain we experience from suppressing our other natural principles. For example, when we go on a special diet we suppress our hunger for certain kinds of foods, which causes us frustration and pain. But that underlying frustration and pain can be greatly alleviated by simply filling up on other foods. When we later recall that we had a particular craving, it doesn’t seem that we *literally* feel the pain of its frustration again. Our conscience, however, seems to be satisfied only by the right actions it demands. There are no true alternatives to alleviating the pain of a violated conscience, and the pain can endure in us for a lifetime. Even at a much older age, a person can look back on a crucial violation of his conscience and feel the exact pain he experienced before all over again. Like God’s perfect administration of justice, which we should fear because it cannot be appeased or satiated by a vicious man, we should fear conscience because it will always find a way to administer guilt where it is due. There is no hiding; we cannot “transgress [our conscience] without being self-condemned...without real self-dislike” (P 28).

It's worth noting that the fear that conscience inspires in us does not make us servile, because it motivates us only toward acting in a way that aligns us with what God’s will. Again, if we trust in a perfectly good God that gave us our conscience for a good reason, then there is no reason for us to believe that following our conscience puts us in an excessively subservient position. Instead, we are being *appropriately* submissive to God’s will if our conscience was designed by such a benevolent author.

For Butler, reverence involves the key elements of trust and fear, and the conscience is that aspect of ourselves that clearly elicits these two elements. Is conscience also an appropriate object of the kind of basic care and attention that I concluded was important for virtue from my analysis of talkativeness and resentment? While this section closely examined the vice of self-deception in order to bring out its failure to properly trust the conscience, it's worth pointing out that self-deception also involves a failure to show basic care and attention to our conscience. Self-deception fails to care about the inevitable punishments of our bad conduct, and it fails to properly attend to the clear voice of conscience. Moreover, conscience, unlike our other natural principles, seems to carry with it the capacity to strike fear in us. This is just one reason why it makes sense to single out conscience as the most important object of reverence within our nature. While I have proven the point that reverence of our conscience leads to our obedience of it, I now aim to solidify why revering the conscience can be meaningfully understood as revering the self. Solidifying this connection will also shed greater light on why we have good reason to elevate the conscience as the most important aspect of the self that is worth revering.

2.4 The Relationship between Conscience and the Self

Revering our conscience is properly *self*-regarding because of the authoritative role conscience plays within the self. Trusting and fearing the conscience enough to obey it allows the *system* that is the self to maintain its proper order. For Butler, if we are to think of ourselves as creatures capable of virtue, then we must consider ourselves as a holistic system of various elements and principles, all working together with the express *telos* of virtuous living. It would be inappropriate to reduce our nature to any one element, such as self-love, when simple observation shows us that our nature contains “various appetites, passions [and] affections” (S 2.12). Further, we have to acknowledge that the various elements within our nature have distinct

relationships with each other. These relationships are crucial to the concept of any system: “consider all the several parts of a tree without the natural respects they have to each other...you have not at all the idea of a tree” (S 3, Note 1). Because the conscience is the supreme authority of our nature, its hierarchical position must be preserved in order to protect the systemic essence of the self. Obedience to conscience is not tantamount to self-reverence because conscience is necessarily representative of the “truest” or “highest” part of the self. After all, “every bias, instinct, propension within, is a *real part* [my emphasis] of our nature” (S 3.1). Rather, obedience to conscience is tantamount to self-reverence because it fundamentally preserves the self and enables it to exist as it was designed to. It’s not the case that Butler directly equates conscience with the self, but that obeying conscience is an act of honoring the self in its ideal, ordered form.

It is important to single out conscience as the element of the self that must be revered when understanding self-reverence because revering other aspects of our nature would place them above the conscience, necessarily undermining the most important relational aspect of the system of the self. So Butler writes: “...*the very constitution of our nature requires* [my emphasis], that we bring our whole conduct before this superior faculty [the conscience]; wait its determination; enforce upon ourselves its authority...this is the true meaning of that ancient precept, *Reverence thyself*” (P 25). Allowing ourselves to go against our conscience in favor of some other motivating principle is “contrary to the whole constitution of the nature” (P 15); it is a “breaking in upon our own nature” (P 12). Butler’s discussion of various vices, as analyzed in an earlier section of this paper, raised some initial questions about what exactly is worth revering in the self. Vice can certainly be interpreted as involving the reverence of certain aspects of our self—our natural vanity, our desire to be happy, our particular appetites, etc. But it should be

clear now that Butler does not mean for *these* aspects of our nature to be the grounds of our self-reverence. It is the systemic nature of the self as a moral being that must be protected if we hope to secure virtue. We can accomplish this by continuously obeying our conscience, and we are led to obeying our conscience when we revere ourselves.

3 SELF-REVERENCE AS MORAL DUTY

Butler's emphasis on self-reverence is more than just a simple resurrection of Aristotelian ethics; he is not merely asserting that acting virtuously conforms to reason and to our interest, but also that we have a genuine *obligation* to revere ourselves. This stronger claim is in line with a distinction that philosophers of his era believed was important to make. Clear-cut laws helped make obvious "precisely what justice [required]" in an ever-diversifying public realm where many wanted to avoid violent disputes over questions of religion and of the highest good (Heydt 33). Such an approach contrasted with classical and scholastic moral frameworks that primarily discussed ethics in terms of "our *summum bonum*, the passions, and virtue" (Heydt 22). The new approach was thought preferable, because it made clear what actions are genuinely "obliged, by an authoritative lawgiver...not those actions that are appropriate in the sense of 'a good idea' or 'prudent'" (Heydt 27). Butler believes we have a real *obligation* to living virtuously, and this belief harmonizes with his deep religious commitments.⁵

3.1 A Duty Regarding Self from our Duty to God

For Butler, self-reverence is a moral duty that we derive from our duty to God. As is expected for someone of his religiosity, Butler thinks that "**reverence**, ambition of [God's] love and approbation, [and] delight in the hope or consciousness of it" make up "those affections of

⁵ To be clear, I don't mean to overstate Butler's rejection of the classical and scholastic moral frameworks. He obviously shared those frameworks' emphasis on "virtue and character" as "objects of moral judgement" (Heydt 34).

mind, *which are due immediately to him* [my emphasis] from such a creature as man” (S 13.2).⁶ Operating again in the background of this belief is the idea that God is perfectly good, and that “the particular affection to good characters, **reverence** and moral love of them, is natural to all those who have any degree of real goodness in themselves” (S 13.3). He writes “goodness, accidentally viewed any where, would inspire **reverence**”, and so the supreme goodness of God must inspire the greatest possible reverence (S 13.10). Our devotion to God hinges on our ability “to yield ourselves up to the influence of the divine presence, and to give full scope of the affections of gratitude, love, **reverence**, trust, and dependence” (S 14.6). Reverence as something we owe to God is in line with the conventional account of our duties to God from this time period. Pufendorf’s account exemplifies the conventional account of such duties: “So far as man’s duty to God can be traced out on the basis of natural reason, it has no more than two articles: first, to have right notions of God, and secondly, to conform our actions to His will” (Pufendorf 39). These articles entail that we “honor Him...the human mind should naturally conceive the highest possible reverence for God in consideration of His power and goodness” (Pufendorf 42).

Butler thinks that God manifests himself in us through our nature as moral beings. If we are created in the image of a perfectly good God, then our nature must be “considered as the divine workmanship” and “treated as sacred” (S 8.17). He similarly claims that “our nature” is “the voice of God within us” (S 6.7). If we have a duty to revere God, and God is in some way represented within us, then it should follow that we have a duty to revere those elements of God within ourselves. And as I have already argued in the first part of this paper, revering our nature depends, most importantly, on obeying our conscience. Obeying our conscience is required for

⁶ Bolded words in this paragraph are my own emphases.

the proper reverence of our nature because obeying conscience preserves the very constitution of the self.

Interestingly, we have this duty to revere ourselves perpetually—our obligation is not fulfilled once and forever, but persists through our lives. For as long as we have a duty to revere God, we have a duty to revere ourselves. Of course, Butler’s God is omnipotent, and his very existence does not depend on our fulfilling our duties to him. But our existence as humans, at least in any meaningful sense, does depend on our revering ourselves. As I alluded to in my analysis of Butler’s discussions of vice, the self is a particularly delicate system that is vulnerable to disruption. This is why Butler writes that it is not enough “to abstain from gross wickedness, and to be humane and kind to such as happen to come in [our] way” (P 25). Instead, we must constantly be protective of the authority of our conscience: “...the very constitution of our nature requires, that we bring our *whole* [my emphasis] conduct before this superior faculty” (P 25). Even those situations that we would normally see as too insignificant or minor to have any serious impact on our character must be offered to the judgment of our conscience. For Butler, a system can survive a temporary disruption, but to let that disruption go unchecked is to “let the disorder increase” which, eventually, “will totally destroy it” (P 14).⁷ This makes sense of Butler’s remark that we must make self-reverence “the business of our lives” (P 25).

In the introduction of my paper, I acknowledged an issue with Butler endorsing a duty to life self-reverence—that it seems to compete with a duty we have towards God. But based on the simple deduction I have expressed above, Butler’s duty of self-reverence avoids this concern, because the source of our very self-reverence is God himself. In other words, our duty to God is

⁷ The “destruction” here, of course, is metaphorical. If we let our moral constitution persist in disorder, we might still have the physical frame of a person. But for Butler, our self would have become so far detached from its true identity, that it no longer exists in any meaningful sense.

prior to our duty to self-reverence. And because God manifests himself in our nature, our self-reverence is not so distinct from our duty to God as to compete or undermine our duty to God. Heydt thinks of this idea as a basic acknowledgement of our dependence on God, which can be conceived of in different ways: “God has sent us to a post; God has entrusted us with our lives; God has a maker’s rights over us; God is *dominus*/master/owner of our lives and we have restricted use or ownership of it” (Heydt 135).

3.2 The Ability to Fulfill a Duty of Self-Reverence

Butler’s duty of self-reverence implies that obedience to conscience and virtue are possible to begin with. Butler writes: “a disposition in our nature to be influenced by right motives is as absolutely necessary to render us moral agents, as a capacity to discern right motives is. These two are...quite distinct perceptions, the former proceeding from a conscious being of its own happiness, the latter being only our understanding, or faculty of seeing truth” (*Some remains* 11).

It’s clear that we have this “faculty of seeing truth”. For Butler, this faculty is the conscience. And when we are rational and properly reflective about what would be in our true happiness, we are motivated to obey the judgments of our conscience. Of course, this assumes a certain optimism about these two features of our nature. Yet Butler wouldn’t have taken up the pastoral project of teaching about virtue if thought self-cultivation was impossible. He writes that there is “much left for us to do upon our own heart and temper; to cultivate, to improve, to call it force, to exercise it in a steady, uniform manner. This is our work: this is virtue and religion” (S 1, Note 3). This is not to say that he is overly demanding in his expectations of our capacities: “perfection, though plainly intelligible and supposable, was never attained by any man. If the higher principle of reflection maintains its place, and as much as it can corrects that disorder, and

hinders it from breaking out into action, this is all that can be expected in such a creature as man” (S 3, Note 1).

It’s clear from Butler’s writings that he thinks we have moral agency. He writes that “a machine [that is in disorder] is inanimate and passive: but we are agents. Our constitution is put in our own power” (P 14). This statement aligns well with his view that vice is a product of our own abuse, or our failure to act in appropriate ways towards our real interests. Because we have this agency, we can be blamed when we fail. As might be expected by his Stoic influence, Butler emphasizes that we can’t control what happens to us, but we can control our response to the world. He writes in one correspondence “be more afraid of myself than the world”, and in another “Instead of deluding oneself in imagining one should behave well in times and circumstances other than those in which one is placed, to take care and be faithful and behave well in those one is placed in” (*Some remains* 11).

4 TWO REASONS TO NOT EMPHASIZE SELF-REVERENCE

If there are good reasons to believe that self-reverence played an important part in Butler’s account of virtue because it motivates obedience to our conscience, then why wasn’t he more explicit about this fact? Why limit his reference to self-reverence to his brief remarks in the preface to his sermons? I suggest that Butler might have had two good reasons for not emphasizing self-reverence in his sermons. The first reason is a practical one. The idea of self-reverence could have been too easily confused by his audience by common notions of self-*love*; such a confusion would have surely undermined his teaching on what virtue requires of our everyday actions. A second reason is related to more philosophical implications of self-reverence. Simply put, there’s a chance that emphasizing self-reverence could have

unnecessarily drawn Butler into a theological debate (and could have inaccurately placed him within that debate) that he did not find to be relevant to his broader pastoral aims.

Self-reverence is a concept that can be easily misconstrued with a notion of self-love that commonly validates vicious conduct. In its most general form, self-love is the natural principle in our nature that leads us to seek anything we take to be in our own interest or happiness (independent of whether such objects really do serve our own good, either in the short or long term). An idea that had significant philosophic influence in Butler's time was that human nature could be reduced to the single principle of self-love. On this view (Hume called it "the Selfish Hypothesis"), all the other-regarding motivating principles that one might identify in our nature (as Butler did), like compassion and pity, only *apparently* exist—in reality, they are merely deceptive versions of self-love. All our actions, in other words, are motivated by love for ourselves—we cannot act in a genuinely other-regarding way. Butler, of course, rejects this view of human action and motivation, but it did have widespread social influence during his era. He sees how problematic self-love is as a guide to our actions: "self-love is a medium of a peculiar kind; in these cases it magnifies every thing which is amiss in others, at the same time that it lessens every thing amiss in ourselves" (S 9.22). At first glance, it can be easy to confuse self-reverence with the common notion of self-love. They are both attitudes that put the self squarely at the center of one's decision-making, and they both are concerned with furthering *some* notion of one's own interest. As my paper has attempted to argue, however, self-reverence and the common notion of self-love come apart when determining what is worth regarding in one's self, and how that regard is manifested (for reverence, it's trust and fear of the conscience). But the layperson would likely not recognize this distinction offhand. And if a person confuses self-reverence for an attitude that places *any* of his immediate desires above all other considerations

(especially the needs of others and the judgments of his conscience) then he might think it is acceptable to indulge in various actions we would normally consider vicious. For example, one could so love their status in a certain social group that when they hear gossip being spread about a good friend, they decide not to intervene on behalf of their friend. Loving one's self in such a way would not count as genuine self-reverence for Butler, but it could easily lead one to think that it could. Given Butler's likely desire to combat the viability of the Selfish Hypothesis, and his desire for his audience to take seriously his specific teachings about virtuous conduct, I suggest that it would have been imprudent and unnecessarily risky for Butler explicitly emphasize the notion of self-reverence in his sermons.

I offer a second reason why Butler would have avoided emphasizing self-reverence in his sermons: that it lends itself to misinterpretation not just by the average churchgoer, but also by the theologians of his time, on more philosophical grounds. Simply put, emphasizing a concept of self-reverence may have influenced people's perception that he was claiming a side in the split between Latitudinarians and High Churchmen within the Anglican Church. For example, championing self-reverence might have made it seem like Butler had more extensive Latitudinarian commitments than he really did. Such a misperception wouldn't have been problematic for his official status within the church (on the contrary, it could have helped, because there were quite serious concerns about the ideas of High Churchmen during time). I only make the very broad suggestion that self-reverence would have implications for Butler's position within this split that were unnecessary and distracting for his larger pastoral aims.

In order to make my suggestion here clearer, I will briefly sketch some key features of the theological landscape during Butler's time. While the eighteenth-century English church avoided the volatile "throes of the Reformation" of the preceding two centuries, and so was not

an era marked by “ardent feeling or energetic movement,” it was still an era of intense intellectual inquiry into all things religious (Abbey, Introduction). This energetic inquiry produced a rich array of schools of thought and theological debates within Protestantism. The debate most relevant to my present purpose is that between the Latitudinarians and the High Churchmen. Put in the most general terms, Latitudinarians emphasized “the goodness of both divine and human natures” (Herdt 253) and the “irenic potential of morality and rationality” to peacefully reconcile different sects within the church (Blosser 147). Importantly, Latitudinarians “rejected divisive confessionalism,” which opposed the accommodation of differing interpretations of church doctrine (Blosser 148). In contrast, the High Churchmen were conservative in their interpretation of doctrine, and resisted efforts to bring differing sects into the fold. High Churchmen cared about maintaining the authority of traditional governing structures and hierarchies of the church, emphasizing the need for reliance on “episcopacy, divine right monarchy, the sacraments, and the authority of the Church Fathers” (Hammond 175). On the whole, it seems that the influence of the Anglican Archbishop from the previous century, John Tillotson, established a broad Latitudinarian framework within which the eighteenth-century church officially operated, but it was still the case that “the Episcopal bench numbered among its occupants many men, both of High and Low Church views” (Abbey Intro).

Where exactly Butler fell within this split is unclear. In one sense, the heart of Butler’s sermons grounds itself in the Latitudinarian tradition. Like the views of the influential Latitudinarian Tillotson, Butler’s sermons seem to indicate that the Christian faith is “rationally confirmed in the world around him” and place an “emphasis upon moral living as the highest form of Christian practice” (Blosser 148-149). This basic orientation requires a kind of optimism about the ability of all to improve their way of life, and his writings display this kind of

inclusiveness: “throughout Butler’s ministry one of his main concerns had been to bridge the gap between church and laity, learned and unlearned, philosophical and vulgar—and, above all, rich and poor” (Price 758). This may be why Butler is still described today as “the model of the latitudinarian preacher” (Old 545). And yet, one British historian asserts Butler “was not a latitudinarian at all” (Hutton 105). This impression of Butler is likely caused by the general themes found in two of Butler’s other works—“A Charge to the Clergy of Durham” and his celebrated *Analogy of Religion*. In the first work, Butler defends his emphasis on the importance of external religious practices and rituals, which some took to be overly reminiscent of Catholic culture. In the second work, broadly speaking, Butler argues against the Deists’ dismissal of orthodox Christianity and rejection of revelation as a legitimate source of knowledge. While these views, on the surface, paint Butler in a less than liberal light, he could have taken himself to be merely moderating what he perceived to be a deficiency in contemporary Protestant culture. Even if this were the case, some clearly perceived Butler as having “‘high’ church sensibilities” and suspected him of being one of multiple “crypto-catholics” in the Anglican church (Clayton and McBride 116-117).

Regardless of where Butler would have placed himself in this debate, the concept of self-reverence could have unnecessarily invited misunderstanding and criticism from theologians on both sides. On one hand, the High Churchmen could have criticized any emphasis of the individual’s ability to access truth about morality. After all, if we should revere ourselves because of the capacity of our conscience, then why do we need God, let alone the episcopate? Without really taking the time to understand Butler’s concept of self-reverence, High Churchmen could have accused him of unorthodoxy, or at least of an inconsistency in his position on Deism. That is, Butler’s defense of revelation as a true source of knowledge might be undermined, if one

assumes Butler's conception of conscience to be a merely rational faculty. On the other hand, if Butler was genuinely concerned about embracing too many features of Latitudinarian thought, then he might have wanted to withhold a strong emphasis on a self-regarding duty like self-reverence. Either way, it's possible that touting his account of virtue as requiring self-reverence could have created more problems than it was worth.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to make sense of Butler's remark about self-reverence in the preface to his sermons. By now it should be clear that self-reverence is a rule of conduct that helps us fulfill the key tenant of Butler's account of virtue, which is the importance of obeying one's conscience. This is because self-reverence motivates us to obey our conscience. And by examining Butler's theological commitments, I've shown that self-reverence is more than a matter of prudence, but rather a genuine obligation we all have. To strengthen my interpretation of self-reverence, I offered a major objection to my interpretations and responded with two historically grounded considerations.

In my introduction, I claimed that reflecting on what self-reverence means for Butler is important insofar as it makes his specific proposals on how to live virtuously more convincing. The interpretation that I offer gestures heavily toward the significance of Butler's grounding of our duty to virtuous living on our duty to God. Such a grounding not only requires a person to accept the existence of God, but it requires a person to accept the existence of a particular kind of God—one who is perfect in his rationality and benevolence towards humans insofar as he would equip them with the necessary capacities to flourish as moral beings. Obviously, these beliefs present quite the task for convincing someone who has no (or differing) theological commitments. The view that the core of Butler's account rests on a duty we have to God also

opposes scholars who read Butler's ethics (such as his argument for the authority of conscience) as not inherently resting on matters of faith. However, my interpretation of self-reverence derives much of its understanding of reverence from considerations about what is practically in our interest in *this* world, and not necessarily in a Christian afterlife. One doesn't have to take seriously the existence of God to see that Butler makes incisive observations about how vice harms many of our genuine interests, or inversely, that virtue furthers many of our genuine interests. Nor does one have to take seriously the inevitability of divine sanctions to see that the guilt that comes from violating our conscience is something that we should want to avoid. Moreover, a secular humanist might be easily convinced that the continuous suppression of our sense of right and wrong leads to the effective destruction of a precious part of our humanity. With these possibilities in mind, the reflection of self-reverence in Butler's thought illuminates what he can contribute to a convincing case for virtuous living.

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