Five Sermons

Joseph Butler

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—This text consists of the Preface and numbers 1, 2, 3, 11, 12 from Butler's *Fifteen Sermons*.

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Glossary

abstruse: 'Difficult to conceive of or apprehend' (OED).

affection: A state of mind that is directly relevant to behaviour: what a person likes, hungers for, is drawn to by curiosity, etc. It includes what he is fond of, but only as one in a longish list. Butler sometimes calls self-love 'the contracted affection', simply meaning that it is an affection concerning just one object, oneself.

competent: On page 41, but not elsewhere in this text, Butler is using 'competent' in an old sense in which it means something like 'adequate and no more than adequate'.

curiosity: In Butler's day this meant 'inquiringness', typically serious rather than trivial.

disinterested: In Butler's day this meant—and when used by literate people it still means—'not *self*-interested'.

economy: The economy of a complex thing is the set of facts about the regular interplay amongst its parts.

faculty: This can refer to an ability or to the machinery (as it were) that creates the ability—a vexatious ambiguity. When on pages 20 and 22 Butler says that the 'faculty' of conscience is different from certain 'principles' (see below) that he has listed, he pretty clearly implies that it *is* nevertheless a principle. So in that passage, at least, 'faculty' refers not to an ability but to whatever creates it.

lead: When Butler says that some aspect of our nature 'leads us to' behave in a certain way, he often doesn't mean that we *do* behave in that way. Think of 'leading us to behave virtuously' as on a par with 'leading a horse to water'.

movement: On pages 8 and 19 Butler uses this word in its old sense of 'a mental impulse, an act of the will' (OED).

occasion: The occasion of an event is something that triggers it, sets it going; but it's not its real cause. When you and I find that we went in different decades to the same high school, that starts a friendship; but the same-school discovery is just a trigger or release mechanism for a drawing-together that is *caused* by a principle [see below] deep in our human nature. Thus Butler on page 16.

present: Like many other writers, Butler often uses 'present' to mean 'before the life after death'.

principle: Butler's 140 uses of this word in the present text *all* give it a sense, once common but now obsolete, in which 'principle' means 'source', 'cause', 'energizer', or the like. (Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is, as he explicitly tells us, an enquiry into the *sources in human nature* of our moral thinking and feeling.) For example, 'principles of action' (page 5) means 'whatever it is in someone's make-up that cause him to act'.

reflection: conscience.

regards to: Several times on page 27 Butler speaks of our having or lacking 'regards to' other people. At first this seems to mean *concern for* other people's welfare, happiness, etc.; but a little later it seems also to cover *caring about what others think about us*. You might care to consider whether Butler is here illegitimately exploiting an ambiguity.

selfish: In Butler's day this meant merely 'self-interested'; it didn't have the extra implication, as it does today, of '. . . with a disregard (or worse) of the interests of others'.

temporal: The present [see above] world was often called 'temporal'—meaning 'in time'—because it was thought that our life after death will be 'eternal' in some sense that involves not being in time at all.

vice: Morally wrong conduct, not necessarily of the special kind that we reserve 'vice' for these days. Similarly **vicious**.

2–3: The Natural Supremacy of Conscience

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves. (*Romans* 2:14) ·Let us call this The Text·.

Truths about things other than morality can be proved in various different ways, and so can ·truths about· moral obligations. If the real nature of any creature leads [see Glossary] him to act in a certain way and is fitted for that kind of behaviour, this is a reason to believe that that's what the Author of •that nature intended •it for. Thus there's no doubt the eye was intended for us to see with. And the more complex any constitution is, and the greater variety of parts of it that tend to some one end, the stronger is the evidence that the thing in question was *designed* to produce that end. But when we are looking at man's inner constitution as a guide in morals, we must be extremely careful

- •not to regard as common to our species features of ourselves as individuals, or features that many people have but that are the effects of particular customs; and
- •not to overlook or exclude the highest principle [see Glossary], the one whose job is to adjust and correct of all the other inward movements [see Glossary] and affections; ·I am talking, of course, about conscience·.

This highest principle will as a matter of course have *some* influence, but *ought to* preside over and govern all the rest, because it is in nature supreme, as I shall now show. There's less agreement about what the internal nature is that all men have than about their common external form, and there seem to be three reasons for this. •The two warnings I have just given are hard to attend to adequately; •it appears that men do differ from one another a little with respect to their natural sense of moral good and evil, ·i.e. with respect to conscience·; and •it is difficult for us to get an exact picture of what goes on in our minds. ·But let's not make too much of this·. We don't have a precise account of what shape is possessed by all and only human *bodies*, either, and yet we understand one another when we speak of 'the ·**external**· shape of a human body'; and so we do when we speak of 'the heart and **inner** principles of a human being', however far the standard is from being exact or precisely fixed. So it isn't unreasonable to try to show men to themselves, show them what course of life and behaviour their real nature points out and would lead them to. [The next bit is expanded in ways that the ·small dots· convention can't easily indicate. Its first sentence is a sheer addition. The paragraph gets back to being close to Butler's words at 'A man can no more. . . '.] It is sometimes said that morality is just a matter of individual feelings and attitudes, and that there's no absolute right or wrong about it; let us get that error out of the way at the outset. This is indeed true:

> When we show that men have obligations to behave virtuously, and try to reinforce their motives for doing so, doing all this on the basis of a review of the nature of man, we are appealing to **(a)** each individual person's heart and natural conscience.

But then so is this:

> When we offer support for non-moral propositions such as scientific theses, we are appealing to **(b)** each individual person's external senses.

Now, our **(a)** inward feelings are every bit as real as **(b)** the perceptions we get through our external senses; so there can't be any more objection to drawing conclusions about life

and conduct from **(a)** than there is to arguing for non-moral truths from **(b)**. A man can no more doubt whether his eyes were given him to see with than he can doubt the truth of the science of optics that is derived from ocular experiments. And he can no more doubt that the inward feeling of shame was given him to prevent him from doing shameful actions than he can doubt that his eyes were given him to guide his steps. . . . Neither his •inward feelings nor his •external senses can be wholly mistaken, though •the former are to some extent liable to greater mistakes than •the latter.

There can be no doubt about this:

> The heart of man contains a number of propensities or instincts—a number of principles—that take him into •society and lead him to contribute to •its happiness. The way in which this happens isn't matched by any inward principle leading man to do evil.

These principles, propensities, or instincts that lead him to do good are approved of by a certain inner faculty [see Glossary] that is quite distinct from these propensities themselves. I have fully defended all this in the first sermon.

·The Objection·

An objector may say this: 'Even if all this is true, what help does it give to virtue and religion? These require not only that

> We do good to others when we are led to by the fact that at that moment benevolence or reflection [see Glossary] happens to be stronger than ·our· other principles, passions, or appetites,

but also that

> Our whole character is based on thought and reflection; everything we do is directed by some determinate rule—some other rule than the strength and prevalence of any principle or passion.

What evidence is there in •our nature (for that's where we are looking for evidence) that this was intended by •its Author? How does the various and flighty temperament of man seem to be adapted to it? It may indeed be absurd and unnatural for men to act without any reflection—indeed, to act without consulting the particular kind of reflection that you call 'conscience', because this does belong to our nature. . . . Anyone would approve of a humane action more than a cruel one, if ·self·-interest and passion didn't come into it. But ·self·-interest and passion *do* come into it; they are often too strong for reflection and conscience, and prevail over it. Now, just as the lower animals have various instincts that carry them on to the end the Author of their nature intended them for, isn't man in the same condition except for the one difference that in addition to his instincts (i.e. appetites and passions) he has the principle of reflection or conscience? And just as lower animals act in conformity with their nature, following whatever principle or particular instinct is strongest in them at that moment, doesn't man similarly act in conformity with *his* nature—or obey the law of his creation—by following the principle, whether a passion or conscience, that happens to be strongest in him at that moment? And so we have

- •men whose particular nature bustles them along in the pursuit of honour, or riches, or pleasure;
- •men whose temperament leads them to an unusual degree of kindness, compassion, doing good to their fellow-creatures; and
- •men who are given to suspending their judgment, weighing and considering things, and acting on ·the basis of· thought and reflection.

Let everyone then quietly follow his own nature, according to which parts of it—passion, reflection, appetite—happen to the strongest; but let the virtuous man not take it upon himself to blame the ambitious, the greedy, the dissolute;

because these are obeying and following *their* natures, as he follows *his*. In some cases we follow our nature in doing the works contained in the law, and in others we follow nature in doing contrary.'

·END OF THE OBJECTION·

All this licentious [= 'super-permissive'] talk depends entirely on the supposition that when someone

> follows his nature in violating the known rules of justice and honesty for the sake of a present gratification,

and someone else

> follows his nature in abiding by the rules of justice when he isn't tempted to do otherwise,

this involves 'following his nature' *in the same sense* [Butler's phrase]. And if that were true, St Paul couldn't be right in asserting that men are 'by nature a law to themselves.' If 'following nature' merely meant 'acting as we please', there would be. . . . no distinction between following one's nature and not following it; for no-one ever acts otherwise than as he pleases!. . . . Language itself should teach people another sense to the words 'following nature' than merely 'acting as we please'. Now, we do have to get straight about the meaning of the phrase 'human nature', but my real purpose in this sermon is not to explain the meanings of any words except insofar as I have to do that in order to understand and explain the assertion that 'every man is naturally a law to himself'; that 'everyone can find within himself the rule of right, and obligations to follow it'. St Paul affirms this in the words of The Text ·on page 19·, and The Objection above really denies it by seeming to accept it. The Objection will be fully answered, and The Text explained, by •pointing out that nature is considered from different viewpoints, and 'nature' is used in different senses; and by •showing what viewpoint is being adopted, and in what sense the word 'nature' is used, when it is meant to intended to stand for that which is the guide of life, that by which men are a law to themselves. The explanation of the word will be enough, because it will enable you to see that in some senses of the word nature *can't* be a law to us while in another sense it obviously *is* so.

(1) The word 'nature' is often used to mean no more than '*some* principle in man', with no regard for its kind or its degree. Thus, the passion of anger and the affection of parents to their children would be called equally 'natural'. And because one person often has contrary principles pulling him in opposite directions, he can by a single action both •follow his nature and •contradict his nature, in this sense of the word; he may follow one passion and contradict another.

(2) Nature is often spoken of as consisting in the strongest passions, the ones that most influence the ·person's· actions; and because the strongest are the vicious ones, mankind is in this sense 'naturally vicious' or 'vicious by nature' [see Glossary]. Thus St Paul says of the Gentiles, who were dead in trespasses and sins and walked according to the spirit of disobedience that they were 'by nature the children of wrath' [*Ephesians* 2:3]. The only way they could be children of wrath by nature is by being vicious by nature.

Here, then, are two different senses of the word 'nature', in neither of which men can at all be said to be ·by their nature· a law to themselves. I mention them only to set them aside, so as to prevent their being mixed up—as **(2)** is in The Objection—with another sense of it, which I shall now inquire into and explain.

(3) ·In The Text· [page 19] the apostle says that the Gentiles 'do *by nature* the things contained in the law'. He puts 'nature' in here to distinguish this from revelation, ·i.e. from the thesis that revelation leads them to do the things contained in the law·; but it isn't a mere negative. St Paul is not only saying what *didn't* lead them to conform to the law but also saying what *did*, namely nature. The word 'nature'

clearly doesn't mean the same in this passage as it did in the earlier one from *Ephesians*, where nature is spoken of as evil; for in this *Romans* passage it is spoken of as good, i.e. as something that did or could have led them to act virtuously. What that is in man by which he is naturally a law to himself is explained in the following words:

> . . . which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another. [*Romans* 2:15, just after The Text]

If there's any distinction to be made between **(i)** the 'works written in their hearts' and **(ii)** the witness of 'conscience' it will have to be this:

(i) What is written in their hearts must be the natural disposition to kindness and compassion, to do what is respected and praised, to which this apostle often refers; the part of the nature of man. . . .that leads him—with very little reflection and as a matter of course—into society, and by means of which he naturally acts rightly and well in it except when other passions or ·self·-interest lead him astray. But other passions and concerns for our own interests, which lead us. . . .astray, are themselves in a degree equally natural and often most prevalent; and we have no way of discovering the particular degrees in which one or the other is placed in us by nature; so the naturally kind content of our hearts can't be *a law* to us, any more than the other passions and concerns can be. But there is a superior principle of reflection or

(ii) conscience in every man, •which distinguishes amongst the internal principles of his heart as well as amongst his external actions; •which passes judgment upon himself and them, crisply pronouncing some actions to be in themselves just, right, good and others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust; •which without being consulted or asked for advice magisterially exerts itself, and approves or condemns the person whose actions they are. (And •which if it isn't forcibly stopped will naturally and as a matter of course always go on to anticipate a higher and more effective sentence that will at a later time confirm and affirm its own. But dealing explicitly with this ·last· part of the task of conscience—·the part of looking ahead to God's eventual confirming judgment·—is beyond my present design.) It is through this natural faculty that man is a moral agent, a law to himself. Through this faculty, I repeat, not considered merely as one principle in man's heart that is to have some influence along with the others; but considered as a faculty that •is in kind and in nature [Butler's phrase] supreme over all the others, and •bears its own authority of being so.

This. . . .natural supremacy of the faculty that surveys and approves or disapproves the various affections of our mind and actions of our lives. . . .deserves to be further explained to you; and I hope you will find it explained if you attend to the following reflections.

A man can act according to the principle or inclination that is currently the strongest and yet act in a way that. . . .violates his real personal nature. Suppose a ·fox or some other· lower animal is lured into a snare by some bait, and is then destroyed: he clearly follows the bent of his nature, leading him to satisfy his appetite. His action is natural, because it entirely corresponds to his whole nature. Now suppose that a man *who foresees that same danger of certain ruin* nevertheless rushes into it for the sake of a present gratification; he is following his strongest desire, as did the fox; but there's a conspicuous disproportion [= 'mis-match', 'failure of fit'] between this action and the man's nature—as conspicuous as that between a random scribble by me and a masterpiece by Leonardo. I am not talking about •the action in itself, or about •its consequences, but

only about •its relation to the man's nature. And since such an action is utterly disproportionate to the nature of man, it is *unnatural*, in the strictest and most proper sense of that word. So now we can replace the phrase 'disproportionate to his nature' by the more familiar term 'unnatural', but do bear in mind that those mean the exactly same thing.

Now, what makes such a rash action unnatural? That he went against the principle of reasonable cool self-love, considered *merely* as a part of his nature? No: for if he had acted differently he would equally have gone against a principle or part of his nature, namely passion or appetite—·the passion or appetite that did in fact lead to the action we are discussing·. But there's nothing unnatural about

(a) denying **a present appetite** because one sees that satisfying it would immediate lead to ruin or extreme misery.

Whereas in the case we are discussing it *is* unnatural to

(b) contradict or go against **cool self-love** for the sake of satisfying a present appetite.

So the unnaturalness of the action in **(b)** doesn't come from •the man's going against some principle or desire, or from •his going against the principle or desire that happens to be currently the strongest; because each of those is equally true of **(a)**. So passions and appetites must differ from cool self-love in some way that I haven't yet mentioned. It's not a difference in strength or degree; I call it a difference in nature and in kind. In our present cases, if **(b)** passion prevails over self-love, the action is unnatural; but if **(a)** self-love prevails over passion, the action is natural; so it's clear that self-love is in human nature a superior principle to passion. A passion can, whereas self-love can't, be contradicted without violating the man's nature; so if we want to act in a way that fits, goes with, harmonizes with the economy [see Glossary] of man's nature, reasonable self-love must govern. So we can have a clear conception of one inward principle's superiority to another; we see that this is a natural superiority, quite distinct from degrees of strength; and we have reached this result without saying anything about conscience.

Let us now look at human nature as consisting partly of •appetites, passions, affections, and partly of •the principle of reflection or conscience; leaving out all consideration of the different degrees of strength they need in order to prevail; and we'll see again that there is this natural superiority of one inner principle over another, or that this superiority is even part of the idea of reflection or conscience.

Passion or appetite implies a direct simple tendency towards such-and-such objects, with no thought of the means by which they are to be obtained. So there will often be a desire for some particular objects, in a situation where they can't be had without obvious harm to others. Reflection—i.e. conscience—comes in, and disapproves the pursuit of them in these circumstances; but the desire remains. Which is to be obeyed, appetite or reflection? Can't this question be answered just on the basis of the economy and constitution of human nature, without saying which is strongest? Wouldn't the question be intelligibly and fully answered by saying this?—

> The principle of reflection or conscience is obviously superior to men's various appetites, passions, and affections, independently of how they may differ in strength. However often the passions etc. happen to prevail, when they do that is mere usurpation, ·i.e. seizing power that you aren't entitled to·. Conscience is still in nature and in kind its superior; and every case of such prevalence of passion etc. is a case of breaking in upon and violating the constitution of man.

All this is just the distinction between mere **(i)** power

and **(ii)** authority. Everyone is familiar with this distinction, though usually to mark the difference between what is **(i)** possible and what is **(ii)** permitted by the law of the land; whereas I have been applying it to the various principles in the mind of man. Thus, the principle that leads us to survey our own heart, temperament, and actions and either approve or disapprove of them, is to be considered not only as **(i)** having some influence (you can say *that* much about every passion and appetite, even the lowest), but also as **(ii)** being superior—as from its very nature plainly claiming superiority over all others. You can't form a notion of this faculty, conscience, without bringing in the notions of judgment, direction, supervision. This is a constituent part of the idea, i.e. of the faculty itself; the very economy and constitution of man requires that conscience presides and governs; if it had strength to match its right, if it had power to match its obvious authority, conscience would absolutely govern the world!

This tells us more about the nature of man. It shows us what course of life we were made for; not only that

- our real nature leads us to be influenced in some degree by reflection and conscience,

but similarly

- to what extent we are to be influenced by it if we are willing to go along with the constitution of our nature and act agreeably to it,

and also that

- this faculty was placed within us to be our personal governor—to direct and regulate all our under-principles, passions and motives of action.

This is its right and its assigned task; so its authority is sacred. And however often men violate it and rebelliously refuse to submit to it, for the sake of supposed personal interests that they can't otherwise pursue, or for the sake of a passion that they can't otherwise satisfy, this makes no difference to the natural right and the assigned task of conscience.

Let us now view the whole matter from a different angle. ·For purposes of inquiry·, suppose that this is true;

> There is no such thing as this supremacy of conscience. The only difference between one inner principle and another is a difference ·not in authority but· in strength.

What would be the consequence of this?

·Exploring the consequences of a falsehood·

·For example·: How far can man go in his actions with regard to •himself, •his fellow-creatures, and •the Supreme Being? What limits are there other than those set by the limits on our natural power? With respect to the first two, the only further limits are these:

> No man **(c)** seeks misery as such for himself, and no-one who hasn't been provoked **(b)** does harm to someone else for the sake of doing it.

Within those bounds, men knowingly (from passion or wantonness) **(a)** bring ruin and misery upon themselves and **(b)** upon others; and **(c)** impiety and profaneness (I mean what would be counted as impiety and profaneness by everyone who believes that God exists) have absolutely no bounds at all. Men openly blaspheme against the Author of nature, renouncing in words their allegiance to their Creator. Now consider any concrete example of any one of these three (·I shall take just two of them·). **(c)** Even if we suppose that men don't actually *mean* anything by it, their routinely profane swearing etc. implies wanton disregard and irreverence towards an infinite Being, our Creator. Is this as suitable to the nature of man as reverence and dutiful submission of heart towards that Almighty Being? **(b)** Or take the case of someone who murders his father in an utterly cruel way:

he will have done this because its principle [see Glossary] was at that moment the strongest; and if inner principles differ from one another only in strength, that's all there is to be said about this man's inner nature at the time of his crime. So his action clearly corresponds to the principle which at that moment had such-and-such a degree of strength, so it corresponds to the whole nature of the man. We set the action alongside the whole nature, and we see no disproportion, no unsuitableness between them, any more than there is a disproportion between an act of filial duty and the nature at that time of the man who performs it. We can't distinguish the murder from the action of filial duty, considered as the actions of the men who perform them, and must in our coolest hours approve or disapprove them equally. Nothing could come down to a greater absurdity than that.

That ends sermon 2. Sermon 3 now flows straight on, under the same title and with no new Biblical text.

Having established the natural supremacy of reflection or conscience, we can use this to get a clear notion of what is meant by 'human nature' when virtue is said to consist in following human nature and vice in deviating from it.

·For purposes of comparison, let us start with· the idea of a civil constitution, ·i.e. an organised political entity of some kind·. This involves

- •united strength, and
- •various subordinations (·downward-sloping lines of authority·)
- •under the sole direction of the supreme authority.

The different strengths of each particular member of the society doesn't come into the idea of it; but if you leave out •the subordination, •the union, and •the one direction, nothing is left of the idea of a civil constitution. Similarly, the idea or notion of human nature doesn't involve the different strengths of the various appetites, passions, and affections; but ·the idea of· human nature *does* involve •these principles considered as naturally related to each other, and the various passions' being naturally •subordinate to the one superior principle of reflection or conscience. Every inner bias, instinct, and propensity is a real part of our nature, but ·the totality of those is· not the whole of human nature; add to them the *naturally* superior faculty whose role it is to adjust, manage, and preside over them, and you complete the idea of human nature. Just as

> in civil government the constitution is broken in upon and violated when power and strength prevail over authority,

so also

> the constitution of man is broken in upon and violated when the lower faculties or principles within prevail over the one that is naturally supreme over them all.

Thus, when the ancient writers said that torture and death are not as contrary to human nature as injustice is, they certainly didn't mean that mankind are less averse to torture and death than to injustice! What they meant was that torture and death are contrary to our nature only on a *partial* view of it, a view that takes in only the lowest part of our nature, the part that we have in common with the lower animals; whereas injustice is contrary to our nature considered as a system and constitution, i.e. contrary to the whole economy of man. [The next paragraph is a footnote in the original.]

·A FOOTNOTE ABOUT 'SYSTEM OR CONSTITUTION·'

Every man in his physical nature is one individual single agent. It's also true that he has ·inner· properties and principles each of which can be considered separately, setting aside its relations to the others. Neither of these—·the physical

unity or the jumble of inner principles·—is the *nature* that we are considering. What makes human nature is the inner frame of man considered as a system or constitution, whose various parts are united not physically but by the relations they have to each other. And the chief relation is the subordination of •the appetites, passions, and particular affections to •the one supreme principle of reflection or conscience. These relations and this subordination create the system or constitution; they *are* the system or constitution. Thus, the ·human· body is a system or constitution; so is a tree; so is every machine. If you think about all the parts of a tree without bringing in their natural relations to one another, that won't give you the idea of a tree; but if you add these relations, you *do* have that idea. The body can be impaired by sickness, a tree can decay, a machine can be out of order, without their system and constitution being totally dissolved. And there's clearly something analogous to all this in the moral constitution of man. Consider your own nature and you'll see that the various appetites, passions, and particular affections have different relations amongst themselves: they restrain one another, and are proportional to one another. This proportion is just and perfect when all the under-principles perfectly coincide with conscience as far as their nature permits, and are always under its absolute and entire direction. If any of the under-principles is out of proportion to others or in any way fails to square with conscience, even if this doesn't generate any action it is still a degree of disorder [roughly = 'sickness'] in the moral constitution. But perfection, though plainly intelligible and supposable, has never been achieved by any man. If the higher principle of reflection ·or conscience· keeps its place, and does what it can to correct any disorder, and hinders it from breaking out into action, that's the most that can be expected in a creature such as man. And though the appetites and passions don't have exactly the proportions to each other that they should—though they often try to overcome judgment or reflection ·or conscience·—as long as they fail in this, i.e. as long as conscience retains its superiority, the character, the man, is good and worthy and virtuous.

·END OF FOOTNOTE·

From all these things put together, nothing can be more obvious than that—quite apart from anything we know from revelation—man can't be regarded as a creature left by his Maker to act at random, throwing himself around (to the extent of his natural power) in whatever direction he happens to be taken by passion, mood or wilfulness. . . ., but that from his constitution or nature he is the strictest and most proper sense 'a law to himself'. He has the rule of right within him; all that's needed is for him honestly to attend to it.

Some men of leisure have searched for a general rule in terms of which to characterise our actions as good or bad—·according to whether they conform to it or clash with it·—and this work of theirs has been useful in many ways. [Why 'men of leisure'? Perhaps this was a crack at Shaftesbury, who was wealthy and an earl. Butler was a hard-working clergyman.] ·But we don't *need* any such rule·. Let any plain honest man ask himself 'Is this thing that I am about to do right or is it wrong? Is it good or is it evil?' I haven't the slightest doubt that this question would be answered correctly—agreeably to truth and virtue—by almost any **fair**-minded man in almost any circumstances. The only apparent exceptions to this involve •superstition or •partiality to ourselves [= 'letting ourselves down lightly']. Perhaps superstition is something of an exception: ·an honest man might have some superstitious belief that leads him to think *wrongly* that what he is about to do is right—e.g. the belief that God had just told him to cut his son's throat [*Genesis* 22:1–12]·. But partiality to ourselves is

not an exception ·to my generalisation about how an **honest** man would answer the right/wrong question·, because such partiality is itself **dishonesty**. For a man to think 'What I am about to do is fair, moderate, right' when it is an action that he would regard as hard, unjust, oppressive if someone else performed it—that is just plain bad behaviour and can only come from great **unfairness** of mind.

Granting that every man has the rule of right within himself, you may want to ask: 'What obligations are we under to attend to this rule and to obey it?' My answer comes from something I have already proved:

> Man is by his nature a law unto himself, ·a law that he is aware of· without thinking explicitly about the rewards and punishments that we •feel to be associated with it or the ones that we are led by the light of •reason to believe are associated with it.

[Butler calls these rewards and punishments 'positive sanctions' of the law in question, where 'positive' means 'decided by *someone*'; in the present context the thought is 'rewards/punishments' associated with right/wrong behaviour by the decision of humans or of God.]

The question then carries its own answer along with it. What obliges you to obey this law?—its being *the law of your nature*. That your conscience approves of such a course of action is, just in itself, an obligation. Conscience doesn't merely offer to show us the path we should take but also carries its own authority with it, that it is our natural guide. [In that sentence, the last bit—'carries. . . . guide'—is verbatim Butler.] It is the guide assigned to us by the Author of our nature; so it belongs to our condition of being [Butler's phrase]; it is our duty to walk that path and follow this guide, without looking to see whether we might get away with straying from the path.

Still, we should hear what is to he said *against* obeying this law of our nature. It boils down to merely this:

> 'Why should we be concerned about anything but ourselves? If we do find within ourselves •regards to [see Glossary] others and •all sorts of different restraints, these are just obstacles the hinder us from going the shortest way to our own good; so why shouldn't we try to suppress and get rid of them?'

That's the sort of thing that some people *say*; but when we apply it to human nature and the condition it is placed in, these words are really meaningless. It all presupposes •that our happiness in this world consists in something other than regards to others, and •that vice has the privilege of not being restrained or confined. The truth is quite the opposite: our enjoyments—in a way, *all* the common enjoyments of life including the pleasures of vice!—involve one or another kind of regards to our fellow-creatures. If we threw off all regards to others, we would be quite indifferent to disgrace and honour; there could be no such thing as ambition, and hardly any such thing as the desire for wealth. Why not? Because we wouldn't care about •the disgrace of poverty, the various neglects and kinds of contempt that come with poverty, or about •the reputation of riches, the attention and respect they usually procure. ·And don't think of 'restraint' as a purely moral affair·. Far from its being a special feature of one course of life, restraint is made absolutely necessary by our very nature and our situation. We can't achieve *anything* without restraining ourselves to the use of the proper means ·to our goal·, and that confinement is often painful and distressing. And in countless cases a present appetite can't be satisfied without such obvious and immediate ruin and misery that the most dissolute man in the world chooses to forego the pleasure rather than endure the pain.

·So the people I am opposing *can't* mean what their words mean·! Perhaps they really mean:

> We should •indulge the regards to our fellow-creatures, and submit to the restraints, which on the whole bring more satisfaction than unpleasantness, and get rid of only the ones which bring more unpleasantness and inconvenience than satisfaction.

'Doubtless this was our meaning', ·they may say·. Well, then, you have changed sides! Keep to this—be consistent with yourselves—and your *general* position will be exactly the same as that of the men of virtue. But let's be careful to avoid mistakes. Don't take it for granted that a temperament of envy, rage, resentment, produces more delight than comes from meekness, forgiveness, compassion, and good-will, especially given that, as everyone admits,

- •rage, envy, resentment, are in themselves mere misery; and the satisfaction you can get from a bout of rage or the like doesn't amount to much more than the pleasure of having it come to an end; whereas
- •the temperament of compassion and benevolence is in itself delightful; and when you indulge it by doing good you'll get new positive delight and enjoyment.

Don't take it for granted that your satisfaction in the reputation and respect you can get from being rich and powerful (however your wealth and power were obtained) is greater than the satisfaction you can get from a reputation for justice, honesty, charity, and from the esteem that everyone agrees to be their due. And if it's doubtful which of these satisfactions is the greater (and some people think that neither of them amounts to much), there can't be any doubt concerning •ambition and greed as contrasted with •virtue and a good mind, considered in themselves and as leading to different courses of life. There can be no doubt, I repeat, which of these two temperaments and courses of life is accompanied by more peace and tranquility of mind, and which by more perplexity, vexation, and inconvenience. And both the virtues and the vices that I have mentioned equally involve one or another sort of regards to our fellow-creatures. As for restraint and confinement: if you think about the restraints that come with almost every kind of vice you'll soon be convinced that the man of virtue is by no means at a disadvantage in this respect! I mean such restraints as go with:

- •fear and shame,
- •dissimulation [= 'faking'],
- •low-down tricks of concealment,
- •servile compliances [= 'feebly going along with what someone else wants you to do'].

How often does it happen that men feel the chains of vice that grip them, admit that they are there, and cry aloud against them, yet won't shake them off? How often does someone obviously suffer more pain and self-denial to •satisfy a vicious passion than would have been needed to •conquer it? And there's also this point: when virtue has become habitual, when a virtuous temperament is acquired, ways of behaving that used to be *confining* stop being so because they come to be chosen and to give delight. . . . It is obvious that in everyday life there is rarely any inconsistency between our duty and what is •called ·self·-interest. It is even rarer for there to be an inconsistency between duty and what is •really our present interest; meaning by 'interest' happiness and satisfaction. Thus, even when we think of •self-love only in relation to our interests in the present [see Glossary] world, we still find that •it does in general perfectly coincide with virtue, so that self-love and virtue lead us to the very same course of life. Whatever exceptions there are to this (and there are nowhere near as many as is often thought), they'll be set right at the final distribution of things. To think that in a world administered by a perfect mind, evil will finally prevail over good—what an absurd idea!

The whole argument that I have been pressing can be summed up and given to you in one view, as follows. The nature of man is adapted to some course action or other. Some actions appear to be suitable to this nature, and to correspond to it; other actions show up as unsuitable to man's nature, or disproportionate to it. The former set of actions are natural; the other set are unnatural. An action's corresponding to the nature of the agent doesn't come from its being agreeable to the currently strongest principle [see Glossary]; an action may be quite in tune with the strongest principle while also being quite disproportionate to the nature of the agent. So the correspondence or disproportion has some other source. What it must be is a difference in nature and kind between the inner principles ·that cause the actions in question·—and I don't mean a difference in how strong they are. Therefore, some ·principles· are •superior in nature and kind to others. And the correspondence comes from the action's being conformable to the •higher principle; and the unsuitableness from its being contrary to it. •Reasonable self-love and •conscience are the chief or superior principles in human nature, because an action can be suitable to this nature while violating every other principle, but an action by which either of those two is violated is unsuitable. Conscience and self-love, if we understand our true happiness, always lead us the same way. Duty and ·self·-interest are coincide—

- •usually, in this world, and
- •entirely and always if we take into account everything, including our life after death

because this is implied in the notion of a good and perfect administration of things. Thus, anyone who has been so worldly-wise as to be concerned only with his own supposed ·self·-interest, at the expense of others, will eventually discover that he hasn't provided for his own ·self·-interest and happiness anything like as well as has someone who has given up all the advantages of the present [see Glossary] world, rather than violate his conscience and the relations of life.