

# Three Essays

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[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 three items from Butler’s *The Analogy of Religion*:

- chapter 5 of Book 1;
- an appendix discussing personal identity;
- a second appendix discussing virtue.

First launched: December 2010

## Contents

<b>1: Moral Discipline and Improvement</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2: Personal Identity</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3: The Nature of Virtue</b>	<b>18</b>

## Glossary

**compare:** Butler several times uses ‘compare’ and ‘comparison’ in a sense that is now obsolete, a sense in which to ‘compare’ two items is just to put them side by side in your thought to see how they are related; there needn’t be any question of their being in any way alike.

**faculty:** This can refer to an ability or to the machinery (as it were) that creates the ability—a vexatious ambiguity. The few occurrences of the word in Butler’s discussions of habit and of personal identity have nearly all been rewritten in the present version; but its many occurrences in the discussion of virtue have been allowed to stand.

**future:** In this work, ‘future’ always refers to the after-life, life after death.

**ill desert:** To speak of someone’s ‘desert’ is to speak of what he deserves. Ill desert is just someone’s deserving to have something bad happen to him—basically his deserving to be punished. In this sense of the word, incidentally, ‘desert’ is pronounced in the same way as ‘dessert’ (e.g. plum pudding) and not as ‘desert’ (e.g. the Sahara).

**materially virtuous:** An action is ‘materially virtuous’ if it consists in doing something that a virtuous person would do in those circumstances; but whether it is actually *virtuous* depends also on what its motive was.

**patience:** The passive virtue of uncomplainingly putting up with hardship.

**personality:** Butler often uses this to mean ‘personhood’, the quality or property or status of being-a-person, ‘personhood’ has been substituted as far as possible. But sometimes, e.g. on page 16, Butler seems to use ‘personality’ with a stronger meaning, in which something’s retaining its personality is not merely its continuing to be *a person* but its

continuing to be *the same person*. In those context, ‘personality’ is retained; it doesn’t work very well, but ‘personhood’ would be worse.

**present:** In Butler as in many other writers, ‘present’ is used to mean ‘before the life after death’.

**principle:** Butler frequently uses this word in 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.) In this present work Butler is much concerned with ‘the moral principle’ that you and I have built into our natures: it is not a moral *proposition*, and is nearer to being a moral *push*. In the fourth chapter of the *Analogy of Nature* Butler writes: ‘Besides these common passions and affections, there is another principle that men have and other animals don’t, namely conscience, moral sense, reflection—call it what you please—which enables them to review their whole conduct, to approve of some actions in themselves, and to disapprove of others.’ When on page 8 he speaks of ‘*following* the moral principle’ he is talking not about applying a proposition but rather about giving full play to a source of energy; compare ‘following an inclination’ on page 9. See the reference on page 9 to ‘exercising the virtuous principle’.

**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.

## 2: Personal Identity

[This was the first appendix to Butler's *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*.]

'Are we going to live in a future state?'—this is the most important question that can possibly be asked, and also the most intelligible one that can be expressed in language. Yet strange puzzles have been raised about the meaning of the *identity or sameness of person* that is implied in the notion of our living now and hereafter, or living now and (a second later) *now*. And the solution of these difficulties has been even stranger than the difficulties: the account of personal identity given by some philosophers has implied that the question about a future life is of no importance at all to us who are asking it. There can't be many men who would be misled by such subtleties; still, it may be worthwhile to consider them a little.

When someone asks 'What does personal identity consist in?', he should be answered in the same way as anyone who asked 'What does similarity consist in?' or 'What does equality consist in? The answer should be: 'Any attempt to define it would merely create confusions.' In each case, there's no difficulty about getting a firm hold on the idea. [In what is to come, Butler is thinking of *any* two triangles as being similar just because they have triangularity in common.] Compare or view together two triangles, and the idea of **similarity** comes to mind; set twice two alongside four in your thought, and up comes the idea of **equality**; so also when you put side by side in your thought •your consciousness of yourself or of your own existence at one moment and •your consciousness of yourself at any other moment, there immediately arises in your mind the idea of **personal identity**. And just as the two

former comparisons [see Glossary] not only give us the ideas of similarity and equality, but also show us that two triangles are alike, and that twice two and four are equal: so also the third comparison doesn't just give us the idea of personal identity but also shows us the identity of ourselves in those two moments—now and a moment ago, now and a month ago, and a year ago, and twenty years ago. In other words, by reflecting upon •that which is myself now and •that which was myself twenty years ago, I see they are not two but one and the same self.

But although consciousness of what is past does thus assure us of our personal identity, to say that it *makes* personal identity, or is necessary for our being the same person, is to say that a person hasn't existed for a single moment or performed a single action that he can't remember. . . . It really ought to be self-evident that consciousness of personal identity presupposes personal identity and therefore can't constitute it; just as knowledge presupposes truth and therefore can't constitute it.

Here's a possible source for this amazing mistake:

- (1) A truth: The idea of a person, or thinking being, is inseparably tied to the idea of consciousness.
- (2) An inaccurate re-statement of (1) : Consciousness makes personhood.
- (3) The amazing mistake, supposedly following from (2): Consciousness makes personal identity.

But although present consciousness of what we are now doing and feeling is necessary to our being the persons we now are, present consciousness of past actions or feelings is not necessary to our being the persons who performed those actions or had those feelings.

The question ‘What makes *plants* the same in the ordinary sense of “same” doesn’t seem to have any relation to this question about personal identity: the word ‘same’ when applied to plants and to persons is not only applied to different things but is also used in different senses. When a man insists that ‘the same tree’ has stood for fifty years in the same place, he means only ‘the same’ for all purposes of property and affairs of everyday life, but not that the tree has been all that time ‘the same’ in the strict philosophical sense of the word. He doesn’t know whether any one particle of the present tree is ‘the same’ as any one particle of the tree that stood there fifty years ago. If they don’t have a single particle of matter in common, they *can’t* be ‘the same tree’ in the proper philosophical sense of ‘same’; because it’s obviously a contradiction in terms to say they are ‘the same’ when no part of their substance is the same (that being the stipulation of this discussion), and no one of their properties is the same either (because it is agreed that the same property can’t be transferred from one substance to another). And therefore when we say that

the identity or sameness of a plant consists in a continuation of the same life, communicated under the same organization, to a number of particles of matter, whether the same or not, [which is what Locke said, *Essay on Human Understanding* II.xxvii.4]

the word ‘same’, when applied to life and to organization, cannot possibly be understood to mean what it means, in this very sentence, when applied to matter. In a loose and popular sense then, the life and the organization and the plant are rightly said to be ‘the same’, despite the perpetual change of the parts. But in a strict and philosophical way of speaking manner no man, no being, no way of being, no *anything* can be ‘the same’ as something with which it has indeed nothing the same! Now ‘same’ is used in this

latter ·strict and philosophical· sense when it is applied to persons. So the identity of persons can’t survive the diversity of substance.

The question that I have considered here and (I think) demonstratively answered is proposed by Locke in the words ‘Is the same self or person the same identical substance?’ And he has suggested a much better answer to this question than his official one. He defines ‘person’ as ‘a thinking intelligent being. . .’ etc., and defines ‘personal identity’ as ‘the sameness of a rational being’. The question then becomes ‘Is the same rational being the same substance?’, and that needs no answer because in this context ‘being’ and ‘substance’ stand for the same idea [= ‘have the same meaning’]. The basis for doubt about whether the same person is the same substance is said to be this: the consciousness of our own existence, in youth and in old age. . . is not the same individual action, i.e. not the same consciousness, but different successive consciousnesses. Now it’s strange that this should have given rise to such puzzlement. Surely it is conceivable that a person can be able to know some object or other to be the same now that it was when he contemplated it earlier, yet in this case where we are supposing that the object is perceived to be the same, the perception of it at any two moments can’t be one and the same perception. And thus, though the successive consciousnesses that we have of our own existence are not the same, they are consciousnesses of one and the same thing or object—i.e. of the same person, self, or living agent. The person of whose existence the consciousness is felt now, and was felt an hour or a year ago, is seen to be not two persons but one and the same person; and therefore is one and the same.

Locke’s remarks about this appear hasty; and he seems to admit that he is dissatisfied with the suppositions he has made concerning it. But some of those hasty observations

have been carried to a strange length by others. *Their* view, when tracked back and examined to the bottom, amounts (I think) to this:

Personality [see Glossary] is not a permanent thing, but something transient; it lives and dies, begins and ends, continually; it's no more possible for someone to remain the same person for two moments together than it is for two successive moments to be one and the same moment; our substance is indeed continually changing but whether this is so or not is beside the point, because personhood is constituted not by substance but solely by consciousness; and because consciousness is successive, it can't be the same in any two moments, so the personality constituted by it can't be the same in any two moments either.

From this it follows that we can't rightly accuse our present selves of doing anything yesterday, or think that our present selves have any concern with anything that happened to us yesterday, or think that anything that happens to us tomorrow is of any concern to our present self. Why not? Because our present self is not actually the same as the self of yesterday; it is a different though similar self replacing the earlier one and being mistaken for it; and tomorrow yet another self will take over from that one. . . ., and if today's self or person is not the same as tomorrow's but only similar to it, today's person has no more reason to care about what happens to tomorrow's than he has to care about what happens to anyone else. You may think that this isn't a fair statement of the opinion I am speaking of, because those who maintain it allow that a person *is* the same as far back as his memory reaches; and they do indeed do use the words 'identity' and 'same person'. . . . But they can't—consistently with themselves—mean that the person is really the same; because it's self-evident that •the person can't be really the

same if (as they explicitly assert) •what it consists in isn't the same. . . . I don't think they mean that the person is really the same, •using 'the same' in its true meaning, but only that he is 'the same' in a fictitious sense; the same fictitious sense that is involved when they say—and they *do* say—that any number of persons whatever may be 'the same person'. The best way to refute this thesis seems to be to lay it open, naked and unadorned, as I have done. But since great stress is said to be put upon it, I add three further points.

(1) This notion is absolutely contradictory to a confident belief which necessarily and every moment arises within us when we think about ourselves, reflecting on what is past and looking forward to what is to come. •I mean the conviction each of us has that it is *his* past and future he is thinking about, not the past and future of someone like him. Any fantasy that the living agent that each man calls *himself* is daily swapped for a different one—or of any such switch throughout our whole present life—is crushed and flattened by our natural sense of things. As for this—

Someone alters his conduct relating to his health or his business because he suspects that even if he lives through to tomorrow he won't then be the same person that he is today

—no-one in his right mind could act like that! And yet if it's reasonable to act with respect to a future life on the basis that personality is transient, then it's reasonable to act on it with respect to the present.

[Up to here in this paragraph, Butler seems to be talking about

(a) acting with respect to •tomorrow or next week versus acting with respect to •today,

though the phrase 'a future life' suggests something different, namely

(b) acting with respect to •the after-life, our life after death, versus acting with respect to •our ordinary life this side of death.

And we immediately find Butler pretty clearly discussing (b), as though it had been his topic all along.]

Here then is a notion equally applicable to religion and to our temporal concerns; and everyone sees and feels the utter absurdity of it in the latter case; so if anyone takes it up in the former case—i.e. as relevant to whether the person who is born and lives and dies will then, that very same person, confront God on the day of judgment—he can't be basing this on the reason of the thing. His position must reflect something bad in him, some secret corruption of his heart.

(2) What is capable of life and action, of happiness and misery, is not an idea or abstract notion or quality, but only a being, ·a thing·. Now, everyone agrees that all beings continue the same during the whole time of their existence. Consider then a living being that exists now and has existed and lived for some time in the past; facts about this living being's past actions and undergoings and enjoyments are just as much *facts* as ones about what it does and undergoes and enjoys right now. All these successive actions, enjoyments and undergoings are actions, enjoyments and undergoings of *the same* living being. And this is the case independently of facts about what the being remembers or forgets, because remembering and forgetting can't make any difference to the truth of past matters of fact. And if this being has only limited powers of knowledge and memory, there's no more difficulty in conceiving it to have a power of knowing itself to be the same living being that it was some time ago—of remembering some of its actions, undergoings and enjoyments, and forgetting others—than in conceiving it to know or remember or forget anything else.

(3) Every person is conscious of now being the same person or self as he was as far back as his memory reaches; because when someone thinks back to a past action of his own he is just as certain about who performed that action—namely himself, the person who now thinks about it—as he

is certain that the action was performed at all. Indeed, very often a person's absolute confidence that a certain action has been performed arises *wholly* from his consciousness that he himself performed it. And this he, this person, this self, must be either •a substance or •a property of some substance. If he is a something, then his consciousness of being the same person is his consciousness that he is the same substance. If he is a property of a substance, his consciousness of being the same property is as certain a proof that his substance remains the same as would be his consciousness of remaining the same substance, because the same property can't be transferred from one substance to another.

But although we are thus certain that we are the same agents etc. as we were as far back as our memory reaches, mightn't we—some people ask—be *wrong* about this? Well, this question can be asked at the end of any demonstration whatever, because it's a question about the reliability of perception-by-memory. And anyone who can doubt whether perception-by-memory can be depended on in this case can also doubt whether perception-by-deduction-and-reasoning, which also includes memory, can be depended on, or indeed whether intuitive perception can be depended on. We can't take that any further. Trying

to prove the truth of perceptions whose truth we can't prove except on the basis of other perceptions that are of exactly the same kind and are therefore under suspicion in the same way,

or, to put it in other words,

trying to prove the reliability of our faculties, which can't be proved without using those very suspected faculties,

is ridiculous!