

# 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.

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## 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.

### 3: The Nature of Virtue

[The second appendix to *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*.]

What makes beings capable of moral government is their having •a moral nature and •moral faculties [see Glossary] of perception and of action. The lower animals are actuated by various instincts and propensities, and so are we. But we *also* have a capacity to bring our thought to bear on actions and characters, and when we do this we naturally and unavoidably •approve some actions just because they are virtuous and deserving of reward, and •disapprove others as vicious and blameworthy. That we have this faculty for moral approval and disapproval is certain from our experiencing it in ourselves and recognizing it in each other. It shows up in

- our exercising it unavoidably, in approval and disapproval even of fictional people or actions; in
- the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘odious’ and ‘lovable’, ‘base’ and ‘worthy’, and many others with similar meanings in all languages that say anything about actions and characters; in
- the many written systems of morals that presuppose it (for it *can’t* be that all these authors in all these books meant absolutely nothing by their words, or gave them a merely chimerical meaning); in
- our natural sense of gratitude, which implies a distinction between merely •being the instrument of good and •intending it; in
- the similar distinction everyone makes between injury and mere harm. . . .; and in
- the distinction between injury and just punishment, a distinction that is plainly natural and doesn’t depend on any consideration of human laws.

It’s obvious that a great part of common language and common behaviour all over the world is based on the supposition of such a moral faculty—whether called ‘conscience’, ‘moral reason’, ‘moral sense’, or ‘divine reason’, and whether considered as •a judgment of the understanding, or as •a feeling of the heart, or as including both (which seems to be right). [That rendering assumes that when Butler wrote ‘a sentiment of the understanding, or a perception of the heart’ this was a slip for ‘a perception of the understanding or a sentiment of the heart’.] What kinds of action does this faculty—this power we have to make practical distinctions—approve and what kinds does it disapprove? There’s no doubt about the main outlines of the answer to this. There may be reasons for doubt in particular cases, and there is indeed much dispute about what virtue *is*; but there’s a *general* standard of virtue that

- has been proclaimed in public in all countries at all times,
- is at least pretended to by every man you meet,
- is what the basic laws of all civil constitutions over the face of the earth make it their business to force mankind to practice;

namely **justice, veracity, and regard for common good**. So the general situation is clear: we do have such a faculty or distinguishing power as this; and now it may be useful to say some things more clearly about it.

(1) The object of this faculty is *actions*, taking that word to cover active or practical principles [see Glossary]. The principles from which a man would act if circumstances enabled him to, and which are fixed and habitual in him, are what we call *his character*. The lower animals seem not to have the faintest sense of •actions as distinct from •events;

and seem not to take in any facts about •will and •design, which constitute the very nature of actions as such. But we do take such facts in: will and design are the object, the only object, of our approving and disapproving faculty. The natural object of moral discernment is acting, conduct, behaviour, considered without reference to what does in fact result from it; just as the natural object of speculative [here = 'non-moral'] reason is speculative truth and falsehood. While the •actual consequences of an action don't come into the moral evaluation of it, the •intended consequences do. The intention from which someone acts is part of the action itself; and even if the intended good or bad consequences don't actually follow, we have exactly the same sense of the action as if they did. Similarly we think well or ill of *characters* without reference to the good or the evil that people with such characters are actually able to do. We don't ever morally applaud or blame ourselves or anyone else for. . . facts about us that we regard as entirely out of our power: but only for

- (a) what we do, though we could have left it undone, and
- (b) what we would have done if we hadn't been prevented, and for
- (c) what we leave undone though we could have done it, and for
- (d) what we would have left undone if we hadn't been forced to do it.

[Some of those displayed items expand what Butler wrote, and the second half of (d) corrects a muddle that he got caught in.]

**(2)** Our sense or discernment of an action as morally good or bad includes a sense or discernment of it as involving good or ill desert [see Glossary]. It may be difficult to explain this thought about *desert* in a way that answers all the questions that may be asked about it: but everyone speaks of such and such actions as 'deserving' punishment, and I don't think it

would be said that this has absolutely no meaning. Now, the meaning of 'x deserves to be punished' is clearly *not* 'It is for the good of society that people who act as x did should be made to suffer'. Consider this case:

A man has through some innocent action come to be infected with the plague; and he should be left to die, because if other people come near him the infection may spread.

In this sad case, no-one would say that he *deserved* this treatment. Innocence and ill desert are inconsistent ideas. Ill desert always presupposes guilt; and even if •guilt isn't a part of •ill desert, the two are obviously and naturally connected in our minds. The sight of a man in misery arouses our compassion towards him; and if this misery has been inflicted on him by someone else, our indignation against the author of it is also aroused. But when we learn that the sufferer is a villain, and is punished only for his treachery or cruelty, our level of compassion goes a long way down and in many instances our indignation disappears entirely. Now what produces this double change in our feelings is our conception of the sufferer as having what we call 'ill desert'. Thus, putting together in our mind our notions of vice and of misery there results a third notion, that of ill desert. So there is in human creatures an association of the two ideas—

moral evil and natural evil  
wickedness and punishment

If this association were merely artificial or accidental, it would be negligible; but because it is unquestionably natural, we have powerful reasons to attend to it rather than trying to explain it away.

Ordinary run-of-the-mill cases of virtue don't arouse in us any strong sense of good desert. Perhaps this is because

a spectator can't tell •to what extent such instances of virtue are powered by a virtuous principle [see Glossary], or •how large a role this principle plays ·in the conduct of the person in question·, since a very weak regard for virtue may be enough to make men act well in many ordinary everyday cases. And on the other side, our sense of ill desert in a vicious action lessens in proportion to the temptation to vice that the person in question is thought to have been subjected to. That's because vice in human creatures consists mainly in the person's not having the virtuous principle or having only a very weak version of it; and if a man ·performs a materially [see Glossary] bad action because he has been· overcome by torture (for example), that doesn't tell us how weak his virtuous principle was. All we know is that it wasn't strong enough to prevail over *that* temptation; but it might still have been strong enough to make him proof against common temptations.

**(3)** Our perception of vice and ill desert results from a comparison [see Glossary] of •actions with •the nature and capacities of the agent. Someone's merely neglecting to do something he ought to have done will in many cases be thought by everyone to be utterly wicked; and this judgment must result from such a comparison, because such neglect would not be wicked in creatures with different natures and capacities, e.g. lower animals. And it's the same with positive vices, i.e. doing what we ought not to do. For a given amount of harm that is done, everyone's moral response to this is affected by whether the harm was done •by an idiot or madman or child or rather •by someone with ordinary mature mental powers. And this •difference in moral response needn't have anything to do with the intention with which the harm was done, for the intention could be the same in both cases. (Idiots and madmen, as well as children, are capable not only of doing harm but also

of intending it.) So the •difference must arise from something that is

- seen in the nature or capacities of the mature normal person, making his action vicious; and
- seen to be absent from the idiot or madman or child, making that same action innocent or less vicious.

It's clear that in advance of our judging whether an action is vicious we make a comparison [see Glossary]—whether or not we are conscious of doing so—between the action and capacities of the agent. That is the source of some of the adjectives we apply to actions that our moral faculty determines to be vicious: 'incongruous', 'unsuitable', 'disproportionate', 'unfit'—all of which convey the idea of an action that *doesn't fit*.

**(4)** Is it, morally speaking, more all right for men to •make themselves miserable without reason than to •make other people so? More all right for them to •neglect their own greater good for the sake of a present lesser pleasure than to •neglect the good of others whom nature has committed to their care? It would seem that an appropriate concern about our own interest or happiness and a reasonable attempt to secure and promote it (which I think is what 'prudence' means in English) is virtuous, and the contrary behaviour faulty and blameworthy; because when we are calmly thinking about these matters we approve of prudence and condemn its opposite, both in ourselves and others. This approval and disapproval are altogether different from a mere desire for our own or others' happiness, and from sorrow at missing it. [Butler offers two short but inscrutable reasons for distinguishing moral approval of prudence from a desire for one's own welfare. Then:] Nature has not indeed given us as strong a sense of disapproval of imprudence and folly. . . .as of falsehood, injustice, and cruelty; but that is presumably because there's less need for it. The constant

habitual sense of our personal interests and welfare that we always carry around with us is enough to keep us from imprudently neglecting our own happiness and foolishly injuring ourselves, while it isn't enough to keep us from injuring others, to whose good we can't have so strong and constant a regard. It is also relevant that imprudence seems to bring its own punishment more immediately and constantly than does behaviour that is injurious to others; so there's less need for the additional punishment that would be inflicted on it by others if it made them as indignant as do injustice, fraud, and cruelty. Also, unhappiness is in itself the natural object of compassion; so the unhappiness that people bring upon themselves, even if they do it willfully, arouses in us some •pity for them; and this naturally lessens our •displeasure against them. Still, our experience shows us that we are naturally apt to reflect very severely on serious cases of imprudent neglect and foolish rashness, both in ourselves and others. In cases of this sort men often say about themselves (with remorse) and about others (with some indignation) that they 'deserved' to suffer such calamities because they brought them on themselves and wouldn't listen to warnings. When someone comes to poverty and distress through a long course of extravagance and after many warnings. . . ., we clearly don't regard him as an object of compassion on a par with someone who came to poverty and distress through unavoidable accidents. All this shows that prudence is one kind of virtue and that folly is one kind of vice. . . .

If you disagree with this, I shan't insist that 'virtue' and 'vice' are the right words for prudence and folly respectively; but I do insist that the faculty [see Glossary] within us that judges actions approves of prudent actions and disapproves imprudent ones—that being a reaction to prudent and imprudent actions as such, quite apart from any happiness

or misery that comes from them. And, by the way, this observation may help to settle the question of how fair it is to object against religion that it teaches us to be self-interested and selfish.

**(5)** To what extent is virtue resolvable into benevolence [i.e. to what extent does virtue come down to, ultimately amount to, benevolence] and to what extent is vice resolvable into lack of benevolence? I shan't go into those questions, but I say this: •benevolence and •the lack of it, considered in themselves, are in no way the whole of virtue and vice. If they were, the *only* things we would take into account in our judgments on our own and others' behaviour, in our moral understanding and moral sense, would be the *extent* to which benevolence prevailed, and the *extent* to which it was lacking. So we wouldn't approve of benevolence towards some persons rather than towards others; and our whole reason for disapproving of injustice and falsehood would be merely that one was likely to produce more happiness than misery and the other vice versa. Here are three cases that show how far we are from coming at moral questions in that way. **(a)** Two men are competitors for something or other, something that would be equally advantageous for each of them. For a •stranger to try to affect which of them got the benefit would be merely impertinent; but it wouldn't be so if a •friend of one of them took a hand in the matter, or someone to whom one of the two men had been a benefactor. And our moral attitude to such an expression of friendship or gratitude does *not* come from the thought that in the long run expressions of friendship and gratitude are generally good for the world. **(b)** One man *x* uses fraud or violence to take from another man *y* the fruit of *y*'s labour, intending to pass it on to a third man *z*, who *x* thinks will have enough pleasure from it to outweigh the pleasure that *y* loses through not having it and his vexation

about losing it; and no bad consequences follow from x's action—the over-all amount-of-satisfaction scale really is at 50-50. But such an action as x's would surely be vicious. Indeed, if treachery, violence and injustice were vicious *only* because they are likely to produce an overbalance of misery to society, then we get this: **(c)** A man can perform an unjust act by which he'll get an advantage that is big enough to counterbalance all the foreseen troubles that his action is likely to be bring upon others; and this piece of injustice is not faulty or vicious at all (·according to the thesis I am now examining·) because it would be on a par with any other case in which a man prefers his own satisfaction to an equal satisfaction for someone else.

So it seems to be just a fact that we are so constituted that we—independently of any facts about what distribution of happiness and of misery would result—•condemn falsehood, unprovoked violence and injustice, and •approve of benevolence to some rather than others. Even if God's sole purpose is to produce happiness, and even if his moral character is that of benevolence, ours is *not* so! On that supposition about God, indeed, his reason for giving us the character I have described would have to be his foreseeing that this constitution of our nature would produce more happiness than there would be if we went in for general benevolence! . . .

Now, if human creatures have a moral nature such as I have been describing—i.e. a moral faculty that attends to *actions*—moral government must consist in making them happy or unhappy, in rewarding or punishing them, according to whether they follow, neglect, or depart from the moral rule of *action* that is interwoven in their nature, i.e. suggested and enforced by this moral faculty. . . .

So far as I know, this fifth point of mine doesn't contradict anything that any author has meant to assert. But some writers of great and distinguished merit seem to have

expressed themselves in a way that might lead careless readers to imagine that •the whole of virtue consists in simply doing one's best to promote the happiness of mankind in the present [see Glossary] state; and •the whole of vice consists in doing what is foreseeably likely to produce an overbalance of unhappiness in it.

Nothing can be conceived more terrible than those two mistakes. It is perfectly on the cards that some of the most shocking instances of injustice, adultery, murder, perjury—and even of persecution—don't produce an overbalance of misery in the present state; and some may even go the other way. I could develop this line of thought further, but I won't. The world's happiness is the concern of him who is its lord and proprietor; when *we* try to promote the good of mankind in any ways other than those laid down by God—i.e. in any ways that are contrary to veracity and justice—*we don't know what we are doing*. I'm saying this about people who really are trying in some way to *do good* without regard to veracity and justice. But nearly all endeavours that might look like that seem really to be motivated ·not by a desire to make mankind happier, but· by ambition, partisanship, or some indirect tricky source of energy that may be mostly concealed from the person who has it. It is indeed our business and our duty to try—subject to the limits set by veracity and justice—to contribute to the ease, convenience, and even cheerfulness and amusement of our fellow creatures; but our short-sightedness into the future must leave us very unsure whether in any given particular case these efforts really will produce an overbalance of happiness in the world, because so many and such distant things must be taken into account. Then what makes this our duty? The fact that there's some evidence that it will have that consequence and not as much evidence that it won't, and the further fact that such benevolent activities develop that most excellent of all sources of virtue, the active drive towards benevolence. . . .