

Module 409: Joseph Butler's *Analogy*

Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature by Joseph Butler. Edited for the web and introduced by Dan Graves.

“If the husbandman lets his seed-time pass without sowing, the whole year is lost to him beyond recovery.”

Joseph Butler had many doubts about Christianity. These uncertainties were a strong inconvenience for him, because his father insisted he train as a clergyman. Now Butler could have taken a couple courses: he could have shrugged and become a clergyman in violation of his conscience, or he could have rejected his father's demands and gone into law or some other convenient profession.

Instead, he decided to face his tormenting uncertainties head on, to search them to the bottom to see if they were justified.

Butler questioned and thought until he was sure of the grounds of his faith. Then he was ordained in the Church of England, an outcome somewhat disappointing to his father, for the elder Butler, a Presbyterian, had wanted his son to become a Dissenter pastor.

The result of Butler's doubts was his famous *Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature*. Quite simply, he hoped to spare others the agony of uncertainty he had gone through.

Through the influence of a friend, Butler was eventually assigned to the parish of Stanhope. Eighty years later another rector asked around in order to see what was remembered of his predecessor, but learned only that “Rector Butler rode a black pony, and always rode very fast; that he was loved and respected by all his parishioners: that he lived very retired, was very kind, and could not resist the importunities of common beggars who, knowing his infirmity, pursued him so earnestly as sometimes to drive him back into his own house as his only escape.”

It was at Stanhope that Butler wrote his *Analogy*. He was 44 at its publication. It was essentially an answer to the Deists, who acknowledged that God made the universe, but derided the Bible's affirmations that God governs and cares for those whom He created. Butler's approach was to show that nature actually confirms, at least by analogy, the teachings of the Bible on eternal life, God's discipline, and so forth.

His treatise was influential and often used as a textbook for theological students. In the selection below, Butler shows that what the scriptures say about Divine displeasure against sinful courses is bourn out by what we see in nature.

But as divine punishment is what men chiefly object against, and are most unwilling to allow, it may be proper to mention some circumstances in the natural course of

punishments at present which are analogous to what religion teaches us concerning a future state of punishment; indeed so analogous that as they add a further credibility to it, so they cannot but raise a most serious apprehension of it in those who will attend to them.

It has been now observed that such and such miseries naturally follow such and such actions of imprudence and wilfulness, as well as actions more commonly and more distinctly considered as vicious; and that these consequences when they may be foreseen are properly natural punishments annexed to such actions. For the general thing here insisted upon is, not that we see a great deal of misery in the world, but a great deal which men bring upon themselves by their own behavior, which they might have foreseen and avoided.

Now the circumstances of these natural punishments particularly deserving our attention are such as these; that oftentimes they follow, or are inflicted in consequence of, actions which procure many present advantages, and are accompanied with much present pleasure: for instance, sickness and untimely death is the consequence of intemperance, though accompanied with the highest mirth and jollity: that these punishments are often much greater than the advantages or pleasures obtained by the actions of which they are the punishments or consequences: that though we may imagine a constitution of nature in which these natural punishments which are in fact to follow would follow immediately upon such actions being done, or very soon after, we find, on the contrary, in our world, that they are often delayed a great while, sometimes even till long after the actions occasioning them are forgot; so that the constitution of nature is such, that delay of punishment is no sort or degree of presumption of final impunity: that after such delay, these natural punishments or miseries often come, not by degrees, but suddenly, with violence, and at once; however, the chief misery often does: that as certainty of such distant misery following such actions is never afforded persons, so perhaps during the actions they have seldom a distinct full expectation of its following: and many times the case is only thus, that they see in general, or may see, the credibility that intemperance, suppose, will bring after it diseases, civil crimes, civil punishments, when yet the real probability often is that they shall escape; but things notwithstanding take their destined course, and the misery inevitably follows at its appointed time in very many of these cases. Thus also though youth may be alleged as an excuse for rashness and folly, as being naturally thoughtless, and not clearly foreseeing all the consequences of being untractable and profligate, this does not hinder; but that these consequences follow, and are grievously felt throughout the whole course of mature life. Habits contracted even in that age are often utter ruin; and men's success in the world, not only in the common sense of worldly success, but their real happiness and misery, depends, in a great degree and in various ways, upon the manner in which they pass their youth; which consequences they for the most part neglect to consider, and perhaps seldom can properly be said to believe, beforehand.

It requires also to be mentioned that in numberless cases the natural course of things affords us opportunities for procuring advantages to ourselves at certain times which we cannot procure when we will, nor ever recall the opportunities if we have neglected them.

Indeed, the general course of nature is an example of this. If, during the opportunity of youth, persons are indocile and self-willed, they inevitably suffer in their future life for want of those acquirements which they neglected the natural season of attaining. If the husbandman lets his seed-time pass without sowing, the whole year is lost to him beyond recovery. In like manner, though after men have been guilty of folly and extravagance up to a certain degree, it is often in their power, for instance, to retrieve their affairs, to recover their health and character, at least in good measure; yet real reformation is, in many cases, of no avail at all towards preventing the miseries, poverty, sickness, infamy, naturally annexed to folly and extravagance exceeding that degree. There is a certain bound of imprudence and misbehaviour, which being transgressed, there remains no place for repentance in the natural course of things. It is further very much to be remarked, that neglects from inconsiderateness, want of attention, not looking about us to see what we have to do, are often attended with consequences altogether as dreadful as any active misbehaviour from the most extravagant passion. And, lastly, civil government being natural, the punishments of it are so too; and some of these punishments are capital, as the effects of a dissolute course of pleasure are often mortal. So that many natural punishments are final to him who incurs them, if considered only in his temporal capacity, and seem inflicted by natural appointment, either to remove the offender out of the way of being further mischievous, or as an example, though frequently a disregarded one, to those who are left behind.

These things are not what we call accidental, or to be met with only now and then, but they are things of every-day experience. They proceed from general laws, very general ones, by which God governs the world in the natural course of His providence. And they are so analogous to what religion teaches us concerning the future punishment of the wicked, so much of a piece with it, that both would naturally be expressed in the very same words and manner of description. In the Book of Proverbs, for instance, wisdom is introduced as frequenting the most public places of resort, and as rejected when she offers herself as the natural appointed guide of human life. "How long," speaking to those who are passing through it, "how long, ye simple ones, will ye love folly, and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn ye at my reproof. Behold, I will pour out my spirit upon you, I will make known my words unto you." But upon being neglected, "Because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded. But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me." This passage, every one sees, is poetical, and some parts of it are highly figurative; but their meaning is obvious. And the thing intended is expressed more literally in the following words: "For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord, therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the security of the simple shall stay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them." And the whole passage is so equally applicable to what we experience in the present world concerning the consequences of man's actions, and to what religion teaches us is to be expected in another, that it may be questioned which of the two was principally intended.

Indeed, when one has been recollecting the proper proofs of a future state of rewards and punishments, nothing, methinks, can give one so sensible an apprehension of the latter, or representation of it to the mind, as observing that after the many disregarded checks, admonitions and warnings, which people meet with in the ways of vice and folly and extravagance, warnings from their very nature, from the examples of others, from the lesser inconveniences which they bring upon themselves, from the instructions of wise and virtuous men; after these have been long despised, scorned, ridiculed; after the chief bad consequences, temporal consequences, of their follies have been delayed for a great while, at length they break in irresistibly, like an armed force; repentance is too late to relieve, and can serve only to aggravate their distress. The case is become desperate, and poverty and sickness, remorse and anguish, infamy and death, the effects of their own doings, overwhelm them beyond possibility of remedy or escape. This is an account of what is in fact the general constitution of nature.

It is not in any sort meant that according to what appears at present of the natural course of things men are always uniformly punished in proportion to their misbehavior; but that there are very many instances of misbehavior punished in the several ways now mentioned, and very dreadful instances too, sufficient to show what the laws of the universe may admit, and if thoroughly considered, sufficient fully to answer all objections against the credibility of a future state of punishments from any imaginations that the frailty of our nature and external temptations almost annihilate the guilt of human vices, as well as objections of another sort from necessity, from suppositions that the will of an infinite Being cannot be contradicted, or that He must be incapable of offence and provocation.

Reflections of this kind are not without their terrors to serious persons, the most free from enthusiasm and of the greatest strength of mind. But it is fit things be stated and considered as they really are. And there is in the present age a certain fearlessness with regard to what may be hereafter under the government of God, which nothing but an universally acknowledged demonstration on the side of atheism can justify, and which makes it quite necessary that men be reminded, and if possible made to feel, that there is no sort of ground for being thus presumptuous, even upon the most sceptical principles. For, may it not be said of any person upon his being born into the world, he may behave so as to be of no service to it, but by being made an example of the woeful effects of vice and folly? That he may, as any one may if he will, incur an infamous execution from the hands of civil justice, or in some other course of extravagance shorten his days, or bring upon himself infamy and diseases worse than death? So that it had been better for him, even with regard to the present world, that he had never been born. And is there any pretence of reason for people to think themselves secure, and talk as if they had certain proof, that let them act as licentiously as they will, there can be nothing analogous to this with regard to a future and more general interest, under the providence and government of the same God?

Discussion Starters

What is an analogy? What is Butler trying to do by establishing analogies between what we see in this world and what we are taught by scripture?

What is Butler referring to when he speaks of the “natural course of punishments?”

If we behave foolishly when young, do consequences still follow?

Butler shows two ways of bringing disaster on ourselves: doing what we ought not do; and not doing what we ought to do when we should. What kinds of consequences follow from each?

What does Butler mean when he says that “these things [consequences] are not accidental.”

Does Butler teach that everyone gets what they deserve in this life?

Does there come a point of no return in our lives?

In his last paragraph Butler acknowledges that what he has written is frightening. What justification does he give for stating bluntly how things really are?

Do you believe, with Butler, that there are some people whose lives are lived so uselessly that their only value to the world is as object lessons of God’s wrath?

Bible Verses

Proverbs 1:20-33