David McNaughton, ed., JOSEPH BUTLER: THE ANALOGY OF RELIGION

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BOOK REVIEWS


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In the work under review, David McNaughton now completes his two-volume edition of the eighteenth-century churchman and philosopher, Joseph Butler. Whereas the first volume dealt with Butler’s still widely read ethical theory as presented in his Sermons and elsewhere, this volume tackles his other main work, The Analogy of Religion (1736), or, to give the book its full title, The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature. Until a little over half a century ago, the Sermons would have been the most common introduction to moral philosophy in the English-speaking world, not least because of the way in which the prominence given to the notion of conscience still reflected values in the wider society. The Analogy had also once been a basic set text, but its steep decline had already begun a century earlier. Partly this was because, just as Freud put difficulties in the way of defending conscience, so also at that earlier stage Darwin had complicated questions of teleology. But partly the problem also stemmed from the specific context that Butler addressed: not the rejection of religious belief as such, but rather the rise of deism with its claim that natural theology had no need of the alleged further benefits of revelation, which was seen, in any case, as muddled and scarcely credible. Those complexities, together with Butler’s style, makes it not altogether surprising that the last major edition dates from 1900 (by J. H. Bernard). McNaughton has done a sterling job in simplifying presentation of the text and in providing a range of explanatory aids, including an introduction, synopsis, and helpful footnotes (with all classical allusions freshly translated). Although its marginal relevance to Butler’s thought can scarcely be doubted, the only extensive note I was sorry to see go was Bernard’s learned account of thinking at the time on “A Future Existence for the Brute Creation.” So, in short, McNaughton’s new edition is very much to be commended.

But does there remain any good reason to read this part of Butler’s corpus, apart obviously for the intellectual historian? Clearly, much has
changed in the interim, for example in respect of the arguments Butler gives in defense of topics such as miracle, prophecy, or propitiatory atonement. In his book about Butler’s philosophy (in the Arguments of the Philosophers series), Terence Penelhum (Butler, Oxford University Press, 1985) suggests that the best solution was to test the arguments in their own right against skepticism in general, rather than specifically of the deist kind (89). However, as he himself notes, there is a clear tension in Butler’s various types of appeal to analogy. Sometimes, Butler wants to argue for a certain continuity between this world and the next; sometimes, that fluctuation and change here below lead us to expect something different. An example of the former is immortality defended as continuous with our awareness in the present life of consciousness as constant and undivided (134–135). Yet, what then becomes of Paul’s own stress on difference in the next life (I Corinthians 15:35–41), itself based on the latter type of analogy? One possible response is to talk of the slippery character of Butler’s analogies, but another would be to acknowledge that he has set a challenge that is with us still.

In one of his best-known remarks, Butler observed that, though the creator might be a utilitarian, humans may not be, the point being that the ordering of the universe is not at all the same thing as the kind of duties that might be expected from human beings of limited perceptions and sympathies. And, of course, that is one way of approaching theodicy as well: that, though pain in creation has the potential to work in general for the benefit of humanity, the revealed Christ is best seen as addressing the particular individual as he stands alongside them in their pain. Expanding the point more generally, one might say that there are some areas where input from revelation is best seen as reflecting the twists and turns in nature itself and so as discontinuous, whereas in others the situation seems quite different. But how do we tell where one answer is right and not the other? Is revelation, or religious experience more generally, best seen as arising out of continuity with the way in which human beings have evolved, or would we want to say that it is precisely the marked otherness of divinity that most attracts? Is that perhaps also how ethics and aesthetics should be approached, as values that in the main go beyond the natural?

McNaughton has made it known that his current project is a monograph on Butler. Some differences from Penelhum he has already made known, but like him he has already expressed dissatisfaction with the Analogy, in particular its second part on revelation. It would be a pity, though, if he stopped there. The precise form of Butler’s questions are no longer ours. Nonetheless, he continues to repay study in the various challenges he raises. Only one have I illustrated here: where to place the analogy between nature and revelation (in continuity with nature, or as a reflection of nature’s own capacity to change, or in some combination), and why. Numerous philosophers have developed Butler’s assertion in his Introduction of probability as the very guide to life. It would be good if Butler now prompted new reflections in other areas as well.