



EMPIRICISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

by

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The purpose of this paper is to explore what the tradition of Christian Empiricism might contribute to contemporary discussions of human values. By Christian Empiricism I refer to the ethical theory set out by Bishop Joseph Butler in his Fifteen Sermons of 1726 preached in the Rolls Chapel to a congregation of students of law, lawyers and judges. Butler recognised that there are two ways in which moral issues can be approached. One way is based on first principles and starts from assumptions about the "abstract relations of things," from which one can proceed to argue that "vice is contrary to the nature and reason of things". In our day this way of approaching moral issues would seem typified by Pope John Paul II's Veritatis Splendor. The other way of doing morality is to try and root it in empirical matters of fact, "namely from what the particular nature of man is" and what course of life corresponds best to this nature.¹ This is the approach that Butler favours.

On this latter approach an ethical thinker will not be committed to any particular theory about human nature but will seek to discover what patterns of behaviour actually do lead to human fulfilment and satisfaction, both as individuals and as members of society. Butler believes that this second

approach is "in a peculiar manner adapted to satisfy a fair mind; and is more easily applicable to the several particular relations and circumstances in life".²

Butler's essential argument is that Christian ethical theory must always be informed by factual knowledge of what actually is the case: "Nothing can be more useful than to see things as they really are." This is not to say that Christian Empiricism stands on its own. As a Bishop of the Anglican Church Butler clearly recognised the importance of Scripture, Tradition, Conscience and Reason in helping us to think on moral matters. What is important however is the way he showed that these things cannot stand in isolation from the knowledge that can additionally come from detached and informed investigation into all the facts available to us concerning the human condition. Professor D.M. Mackinnon characterises Butler's empiricism as "The appeal to fact, to what we know of ourselves, and more generally, in the sense of readiness always to sacrifice the nicety of theoretical construction to the actuality of human behaviour."³

In looking at Butler's theory of ethics one is not engaged in an antiquarian inquiry into the thought of two hundred years ago but into a living tradition of ethical thinking. It can be argued that Christian empiricism had its greatest influence in

Britain in the 1960's across a whole range of moral issues. The "permissive" legislation of that decades on issues of Suicide, Homosexuality, Capital Punishment, Divorce, and Abortion was strongly influenced by Reports from the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility and speeches by Bishops in the House of Lords setting out an empirically argued case for change which then formed the basis for the legislation which followed.⁴

This liberal tradition continues to influence many Anglican writers and is exemplified in the latest report of the Board for Social Responsibility, Something to Celebrate, Valuing Families in Church and Society. This report attaches immense importance to the family as a God given reality: "God created people to live in community: with one another in families which are rooted in society."⁵ But the report argues that Christian teaching on the importance of the family must start from the realities of present day life. One such reality is that "By the year 2000 it is likely that four out of five couples will cohabit before marriage". Other realities are births outside marriage, single parent-families, divorce and remarriage, and the existence of lesbian and gay relationships. What is therefore needed is an approach which recognises the complexities of modern life, which accepts that for many cohabitation may be a stage on the way to a

subsequent marriage, which accepts that people are made differently, and which therefore recognises that a simple attitude of condemnation of all sexual relationships outside a life-long marriage does not do justice to human experience. Consequently what the report seeks to do is to relate moral insights from the Bible and the Christian tradition to the realities of present day life.

It is clear from the chorus of disapproval with which Something to Celebrate has been greeted that the tradition of Christian Empiricism is less influential within the Anglican Church now than a decade ago. The Christian voices heard most often nowadays come from strident evangelical fundamentalism, or from a conservative papacy, both of which assert a deontological (or command ethic) based on authoritative appeal to the Bible or the Church as the sole source for an authentically Christian morality. This is unfortunate because it means that among secular thinkers the insights and experiences of the Christian centuries will go unheard, because they will not be perceived to be relevant to the complexities of a changing world. It is also unfortunate that other religious traditions which equally face the challenges of modernity will be denied the opportunity of seeing an example of how it can be possible to draw on the resources of one's religious past while not being so restricted by them

that one cannot adapt to new occasions which may demand new duties.

Butler's opening thesis sets out with total clarity just why it is that one cannot base one's ethical principles simply by reference to Biblical or Ecclesiastical tradition:

"The Epistles in the New Testament have all of them a particular reference to the condition and usages of the Christian world at the time they were written. Therefore as they cannot be thoroughly understood, unless that condition and those usages are known and attended to: so further, though they be known, yet if they be discontinued or changed; exhortations, precepts, and illustrations of things, which refer to such circumstances now ceased or altered, cannot at this time be urged in that manner, and with that force which they were to the primitive Christians."⁶

The point here is that moral judgments always arise out of particular contexts and cannot necessarily be applied in the same way when circumstances change. Butler's insight has become even more important now than it was in 1726, for many factors in the human situation have arguably changed more between his day and ours than it had between the days of the New Testament and the early eighteenth century. We shall have to explore this implication later. For the present however let

us not that even by 1726 it had become apparent that social change made it impossible simply to base an ethical code on New Testament teaching.

Butler's alternative premise for starting his ethical inquiry is the doctrine of Creation. For him this is far more important either than simply taking over the ethical commands of the New Testament or from considerations which arise from distinctively Christian doctrines.

"It cannot possibly be denied, that our being God's creatures, and virtue being the natural law we are born under, and the whole constitution of man being plainly adapted to it, are prior considerations to piety and virtue, than the consideration that God sent his Son into the world to save it." ⁷

The primacy of the doctrine of Creation is particularly helpful in a religiously plural world where this doctrine is shared among several other faiths. It is also an approach which a secularist or a member of a religion which does not teach divine creation are in practice also able to share since starting from Creation involves careful consideration of the way the world is, and making moral judgments on the basis of what one discovers. This method will lead to comparable results whether one looks at the world because one believes it to be a divine creation or because in the absence of a belief

in God one can see no other starting point than to seek to derive moral principles from the study of human society and culture. A secular thinker might of course challenge Butler's view that the human constitution is naturally adapted to virtue, but it is important to note that this was not a premise for Butler, but rather a conclusion towards which he believed observation of human society pointed. Hence whether or not Butler's view of human nature is justified is an empirical claim to be tested by empirical observation rather than a religious claim which supposes itself immune to such verification. If one were to arrive at the view that certain kinds of behaviour were in fact conducive to human wellbeing then one might accept Butler's linkage of what is natural to humanity with what in fact required for virtuous living.

For any theist who accepts ethical monotheism it is of course religiously important that ethical teaching should accord with the realities of life. This belief necessarily follows from supposing both that God has created the world and pronounced it "very good"⁸, and also that God has revealed to humanity how men and women should live in such a world to their mutual fulfilment. To suppose that a proposed course of action was simultaneously a divine command and also not good would be a profound contradiction. But this gives rise to the famous dilemma in Greek Philosophy: "Is a deed good because God

commands it, or does God command it because it is good?"⁹ It seems to me that a believer in God has no choice but to affirm that this must be a false dichotomy since what God truly requires of us and what is independently recognisable as in our best interests must always coincide. This view has classically been expressed by Grotius in his definition of natural law in which he insists that true moral judgment is in principle deducible by reason, "etsi deus non daretur" (even if God did not exist).¹⁰

In no ecclesiastical tradition has this point of view been affirmed more strongly than in the classic Anglican tradition of moral theology. In some cases, as for example in the writings of John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1691-4, this takes the form of seeking to show by reasoned argument the usefulness of such Biblical commands as the Ten Commandments. John Tillotson's most famous sermon was based on 1 John 5:3, "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" ¹¹ The idea behind this is the view that divine commandments are essentially given for human benefit and can therefore be defended on grounds of their utility. Provided one focuses on what one might regard as key principles this project can work. Consider those of the Ten Commandments which relate to the love of the neighbour. It would seem possible to argue

empirically that as a general rule killing, stealing, lying, and committing adultery, are destabilising in any society, while the seven deadly sins: pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth, indicate attitudes towards life which are unlikely to be conducive to human happiness.

This kind of approach remains popular among many Christians and there is clearly much that can be said for it in that it is only because the Ten Commandments and other biblical precepts have been recognised as relevant to human behaviour that they have been seen as important. But defending a command ethic on empirical grounds has its defects. It is an approach which only really works at a simplistic level. When one starts probing as to whether the command not to kill can be extended to include capital punishment, warfare, euthanasia or abortion its limitations become apparent. And when one explores the different consequences of adultery in societies without contraception from its impact in societies where contraception is freely available one recognises that the situations are not wholly parallel. Likewise although one may seek to defend the commandment about not working on the sabbath by reference to the negative experience of the consequences of instituting a ten day week in France after the French Revolution or of abolishing Sunday after the Soviet Revolution, this only suggests that perhaps a cycle of one day

off in seven seems better suited to human well-being than either continuous labour or a ten day cycle. It actually says little about explicit sabbatarianism.

Joseph Butler does not engage in this discussion because as Mackinnon points out, "Butler did not conceive morality as obedience to divine commands. Men were laws to themselves; the secret of their proper order was in their own nature."¹² For Butler, as for Kant later, talk of living in accordance with the moral law refers to the primacy of the practical reason and the moral law within. Genuine morality does not consist in obeying externally given laws but in being true to oneself, and living in accordance with one's own nature. This does not in anyway imply a non-religious approach to life. Butler's ethics were after all delivered as sermons by a man who subsequently became one of the greatest Bishops of the Church of England. And all the way through these sermons he speaks of the wonder and glory of God, the creator and giver of all life. But Butler constantly insists that we simply do not have the kind of knowledge of God's will for us that many Christians suppose to have been given. "Other orders of creatures may perhaps be let into the secret counsels of heaven; and have the designs and methods of Providence, in the creation and government of the world communicated to them: but this does not belong to our rank or condition."¹³ The starting

point for authentic morality has to be empirical inquiry into what kind of behaviour leads to the fulfilment of the individual and the well-being of society.

One of Butler's initial premises is that happiness is the goal that almost all humans seek. Given this premise we should seek to inquire what kind of behaviour is most conducive to us achieving this goal. It is popularly assumed that the path to happiness is through selfish concern for pleasure, riches, and professional success without bothering to consider others at all. But Butler believes that this popular view is false to all the facts of the human situation. The true facts are that the rich "are no happier than such as have only a competency; that the cares and disappointments of ambition for the most part exceed the satisfactions of it"¹⁴, and that to pursue any pleasure immoderately leads to unhappiness. Butler points out that, "that character we call selfish is not the most promising for happiness" and that "immoderate self-love doth very ill consult its own interests."¹⁵

Butler argues that it is an observable fact of life that if one really wants to be happy it is fatal to have that end constantly in view. The happiest people are in fact those who are fully occupied with some activity they feel honourable and useful and the most wretched are those who have nothing to do

but to think of their own happiness and scheme for it.¹⁶ Those who are outgoing and concerned for others are in practice happier than those who are all wrapped up in themselves. This Butler points out becomes increasingly true when old age or infirmity rule out the more hedonistic pleasures, but do not in any way diminish the pleasures that come from a real interest in others.¹⁷

The essence of Butler's ethic is that "it is as manifest that we were made for society, and to promote the happiness of it; as that we were intended to take care of our own life, and health and private good."¹⁸ Cool reflective self-love will therefore lead us to be concerned for others and to take their interests into account in making our own ethical decisions. As to how we proceed to make our ethical judgements, Butler urges an approach which in part foreshadows that of utilitarianism, in part that of Kant's categorical imperative, and in part derives from the rational and aesthetic intuitionism of his predecessors. We should behave in such a way as to maximise the happiness of ourselves and others, and in practice this will require us to seek principles of behaviour that can be universalisable. In practice Butler believes that conscience, understood as derived from what our cool disengaged reflection tells us is right will be a useful guide. The role of religion is not to tell us how to behave but to provide a teleological

framework for making sense of human life in this world. For Butler as for Kant practical reason sees morality as a ground for belief in God rather than vice versa.

The importance of the tradition of Christian Empiricism is that it offers a way of helping religiously minded people to prioritise their understanding of human values in ways which can be reconciled with a scientifically objective view of the world. A deontological (or command ethic) supposes that ethics derive from what God has revealed (in the past) or what a particular tradition has historically taught. Such an ethic finds it very hard to accept challenges which come about through new circumstances. Hence we find today that in virtually all ethical issues where there is a clash between religious authority and secular thought, the root cause of the clash is that the human situation has changed while the ethical teaching of the religion has not. By contrast Bishop Butler's ethical theory presupposes that where circumstances profoundly change so will the ethical response change. And because the doctrine of Creation is given priority over any doctrine of scriptural revelation or ecclesiastical tradition Butler can come to terms with what is new because the divine Creator is author of the new as of the old.

Butler was of course a profoundly religious person. His

greatest work The Analogy of Religion helped show how a cumulative rational case could be presented for belief in a Creator God and this approach, though not the particulars of the argument, continues in Richard Swinburne's books, The Coherence of Theism and The Existence of God to provide the most philosophically serious case for theism today.¹⁹ In Butler's ethical thinking too he shows how ethical thinking can adapt to new data.

But can a readiness to adapt one's moral thinking to new circumstances remain faithful to religious values? The case for thinking that it can is to ask what is the heart of the moral insight? For the Hebrew Bible, for Jesus, and for St. Paul, the heart of religious law was that "You shall love your neighbour as yourself",²⁰ and this text was the starting point for Butler's Sermons, "Upon the love of our Neighbour". If one adopts Jesus' suggestion that on moral issues one follows the rule, "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you"²¹ one can then have a yardstick to apply in new circumstances.

Moreover when one talks of changing circumstances one is very frequently talking in terms of how one balances the relative good or evil of two situations. Moral issues do not arise in choosing between good or evil but in choosing the lesser of

two evils or the greater of two goods. Consider divorce for example. In one sense almost everyone agrees that divorce is an evil in that almost all people would have preferred their marriage to have been a success and to have endured rather than broken down. The choice is then between accepting that it has indeed broken down or of insisting that despite its troubles the marriage cannot be ended. The way circumstances affect one's judgement on this is that divorces have different consequences in different societies. In first century Palestine a divorced woman would be abandoned to extreme poverty and very frequently would have to resort to a life of prostitution to keep body and soul together.²² In such circumstances a truly compassionate approach would take a hard line against divorce. In twentieth century Britain women on divorcing have legal rights to financial support from the father of their children and/or from the state as well as access to the job market. In such circumstances divorce is much more likely to seem a worthwhile alternative to a failing marriage. The new circumstances might not effect one's judgement that divorce is in itself an evil but it should affect one's assessment of whether or not it is the greater evil in a given circumstance. For such reasons the Church of England Board of Social Responsibility urged the State to make divorce easier in its report Putting Asunder²³ of 1966 and its advice was followed in the Divorce Law of 1969.

This is simply one example of where changing factual circumstances have changed the balance of moral judgment. Another instance would include reliable contraception which has changed the potential consequences of extra-marital intercourse, as well as giving married women the chance to control their fertility and hence to combine marriage with careers. More controversial examples would be the relative medical safety of modern abortion, or, in the case of the euthanasia debate, the problems caused by increasing modern ability to prolong the dying process. These changes will not affect everyone's judgment though they may well do so when people are changing their assessment of the balance between two evils.

In a more historical perspective one might well argue that in settings where loans were sought primarily to tide a family or an individual through a time of crisis the charging of interest was exploiting human distress and therefore evil. By contrast in circumstances where loans are primarily sought to enable a person to buy rather than rent a home, or to set up a new business one might regard the charging of interest as a reasonable recompense for the usage of one's savings by another and therefore as acceptable.

The value of Butler's empirical approach to ethics is that

it enables a religious person to take on board new information and in some cases to adjust his or her moral thinking in the light of new consequences following from particular deeds. The underlying principles of one's ethical code may well remain unchanged but for any ethical system in which outcomes, consequences, or utility form part of the moral calculus an ability to take on board new empirical facts is of profound assistance in reconciling scientific objectivity with human values.

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4. For documentation of this see the articles by Christie Davies in my edited works, Religion, State and Society in Modern Britain Mellen, Lampeter 1989 Ethics on the Frontiers of Human Existence Paragon, New York, 1992.
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6. Butler, Sermons p. 30
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21. Matthew 7:12
22. See commentaries on Matthew 5:32
23. Church of England Board for Social Responsibility Putting Asunder London, SPCK 1966