

Butler, Five Sermons and A Dissertation Upon the Nature of Virtue

Reid Blackman

Basic premise: Studying a whole requires studying the relations among the parts of the whole (14, 41).

- Example: a watch.
- It is no different with human nature.

Question: What are the parts of man?

Answer: a) “particular” desires and passions, b) self-love (the desire for happiness), c) benevolence (the desire for the happiness of others, and d) conscience (“reflex approbation”)

As for (a): Particular desires and passions

“The object of every particular affection is equally somewhat external to ourselves” (55).

- Examples: appetites of sense, resentment, compassion, curiosity, desire for ambition, honor, power, the harm or good of another (19, 16).
- The passions are directed at the objects and not the pleasures arising from them.
 - Argument: a necessary condition of the pleasure that arises from it is that there is a “prior suitability between the object and the passion” (47).

As for (b): Self-love

“A general desire of his own happiness” (47).

- Self-love is a desire for oneself to be in a certain state; it is not a desire for some object “external” to oneself; that is the province of particular desires.

Evidence for Self-Love as Distinct from Particular Desires

- One can hate oneself (desire oneself to not be happy), but still feel the pain of hunger.
- A man “rushes upon certain ruin” to satisfy a particular desire; this cannot be self-love.
- A man works hard because he is promised a great reward, but he doesn’t know what it is (28, footnote 5).

Relations between particular desires and self-love

Question: What is happiness, and how does one attain it?

Answer: Happiness “consists in this that an appetite or affection enjoys its object” (20).

- If one did not have particular desires, happiness could never be achieved (20, 48).
- One cannot “have so steady and fixed an eye upon his own interest...as may hinder him from attending to many gratifications within his reach” (49).
 - “Thus it appears that private interest is so far from being likely to be promoted in proportion to the degree in which self-love engrosses us, and prevails over all other principles, that the contracted affection may be so prevalent as to disappoint itself, and even contradict its own end, private good” (49).

Question: Isn’t self-love a bad thing? Shouldn’t we encourage people to not be self-loving?

Answer: No – the problem is that people try to attain their happiness in the wrong way; they satisfy the wrong desires.

- Self-love isn’t as strong as people think (21).
 - Men lead ruinous lives when they only pursue their own pleasure.
- People think happiness consists “wholly in riches, honors, sensual gratifications” (32). But (32-3).

Important: Self-love has authority, even if not power, over particular desires.

- In defying self-love one does not defy the principle of reasonable or cool self-love considered *merely* as a part of one’s nature.
- The difference between self-love and particular desires is not a difference in strength, but “a difference in *nature* and in *kind*” (38).
- One acts wrongly and contrary to one’s nature when one defies self-love for a particular desire.

As for (c): Benevolence

Benevolence is the desire for the happiness of both other individuals and society in general.

- “There is the principle of benevolence in man, which is to society as self-love is to the individual” (26).

Evidence for Benevolence

- Attraction to people for apparently superficial reasons, *e.g.* having been to the same places.
 - These are not the “real principles of that union...[but] merely the occasions...upon which our nature carries us on according to its own previous bent and bias; which occasions therefore would be nothing at all were there not this prior disposition and bias of nature” (31).
- Our inclination to empathize and sympathize (31).

Relations among particular desires, self-love, and benevolence

The pursuit of happiness and the good of others (self-love and benevolence) “perfectly coincide” (26).

1. Any particular passion is “my own.”
2. One gets pleasure from satisfying one’s particular desires.
3. Satisfying particular desires with the happiness of someone else as its object is pleasing to oneself (50-51, 55).
4. Happiness consists in a pleasing state of mind.
5. Satisfying desires for others to be happy makes oneself happy (47, 51).

For the person who thinks satisfying self-love more important than satisfying benevolence: (52).

Question: Why the common confusion that there is a conflict between the two?

Answer: We only have so many resources or means for the pursuit of our ends, and allocating resources to the one excludes allocating to the other.

- “But though a man cannot possibly give [money] without lessening his fortune, yet there are multitudes who might give without lessening their own enjoyment, because they may have more than they can turn to any real use or advantage to themselves” (54).

As for (d): Conscience

“[A] principle of reflection in men by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove, their own actions” (29).

- Judges of actions, not consequences, though intentions concerning consequences are considered.
 - If the consequences do not come about, the action is still equally praised (70).
- “The fact then appears to be that we are constituted so as to condemn falsehood, unprovoked violence, injustice, and to approve of benevolence to some, preferably to others, abstracted from all consideration which conduct is likeliest to produce an overbalance of happiness or misery” (73).

Evidence for the conscience

- We do not approve of all actions equally (30).
- “[O]ur natural sense of gratitude, which implies a distinction between merely being the instrument of good and intending it; from the like distinction everyone makes between injury and mere harm...and between injury and just punishment, a distinction plainly natural, prior to the consideration of human laws” (69).
- Discernment of justified versus unjustified inflicted pain (70-1).
- We may feel an obligation to do something (30).

Conscience is Supreme over Self-Love and Benevolence

The conscience, or “reflex approbation” or “reflection” has authority, and this authority is revealed in the very idea of it.

- “You cannot form a notion of this faculty, conscience, without taking in judgment, direction, superintendency. This is a constituent part of the idea, that is, of the faculty itself” (39, 43).

- “[N]either can any human creature be said to act conformably to his constitution of nature unless he allows to that superior principle the absolute authority which is due to it” (17).
 - Thus, our nature is “adapted to virtue” as the watch is adapted to measure time (15).
 - Particular passions vs. the conscience: strength is irrelevant (39).
- “It is by this faculty, natural to man, that he is a moral agent, that he is a law to himself” (37).
 - “If there be no difference between inward principles but only that of strength, we can make no distinction between these two actions, considered as the actions of such a creature; but in our coolest hours must approve or disapprove them equally; than which nothing can be reduced to a greater absurdity” (41).

Relations Among the Conscience, Self-Love, and Benevolence

Conscience, self-love, and benevolence “perfectly coincide” (45).

- By breaching the obligation from conscience one would have to suffer from being “self-condemned”, and manifest a “real self-dislike. (17-8).
- Selfish emotions less enjoyable than virtuous ones (44, 63, 64).
- Two men, one with honor as his end, the other public good. If they both succeed, they delight equally. If they both fail, the benevolent man at least has engaged in a virtuous pursuit, and because it is approved of by his consciousness, has a reward.
- Acting contrary to one’s own interests is vice; it is disapproved by the moral faculty (72).

A Principle According to Which We Ought to Live: “Love thy neighbor as thyself”

Insofar as one develops benevolence, as the precept commands, one thereby develops the virtues, *e.g.* charity, generosity, patience, humility, etc.

Question: But what, exactly, does the precept ask of us?

Answer: We must analyze what is meant by “as thyself,” which admits of different readings.

1. We bear the *same kind* of affection to our neighbor as we do to ourselves.
 - This is a good reading (interpretation) of the precept.
 - “For in the degree we love another, his interest, his joys and sorrows, are our own...love of our neighbor would teach us thus to appropriate to ourselves his good and welfare, to consider ourselves as having a real share in his happiness (59).
2. The love we bear to our neighbor should have *some certain proportion or other* to self-love.
 - This reading is important because there must be some proper proportion, because equal amounts of compassion ≠ equally compassionate person, for one may have another particular passions that outweighs the compassion (60-1).
 - Thus, the love of our neighbor is not understood by the “absolute” strength of the love, but by its strength relative to self-love.
 - One must exhibit the right balance of benevolence to self-love.
3. It should bear the particular proportion of *equality*, that *it be in the same degree* (58).
 - This is not the right proportion; we should not work for other’s happiness as much as our own, nor have equal affection, because we are “intrusted with ourselves, and therefore care of our own interests, as well as of our conduct, particularly belongs to us.”
 - Also:
 - i. We cannot be morally obligated to do something that “extends” beyond our “natural possibilities.”
 - ii. “[W]e have a perception of our own interests, like consciousness of our own existence, which we always carry about with us; and which, in its continuation, kind, and degree, seems impossible to be felt in respect to the interest of others” (62).
 - iii. We cannot be morally obligated to care for others to the same extent we care for ourselves.