

On the Moral Worth of Natural Benevolence

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

Emmanuel Kant's system of morals is fundamentally not dissimilar to that of **Joseph Butler**¹, although it may seem to be in regard to one important factor. That factor is conscience, considered as a guide implanted in man by God. Kant's conception of the morally good man is an idealized one; he imagines a creature standing alone (i.e. without divine guidance) and regulating its actions by the employment of its immaculate Will, a thing forged out of its own reason, which does not obtrude itself upon the doing of an action, but waits in the intellect to be consulted and only when consulted gives its decision as to whether the action is right or wrong. This concept really means that man was thrust into existence by his creator to fend for himself without divine assistance, except possibly from revelation. Bishop Butler, as a churchman, naturally repudiates this view. He believes in conscience as the divine guide 'carrying its own authority' and instantly ready (except in the most corrupt natures) to thrust a moral ruling upon man as he acts. Thus, virtue is said by Butler to lie in obeying conscience. So we see that the different concepts of conscience and good will are only superficially at variance: virtue consists in following conscience, or the good will, and there can never be any virtue in acting against it. In spite of such surface distinctions as these, Kant and Butler had much in common in their ethical theories.

Butler's view of man was essentially a practical one. He was concerned with getting the best out of a set of very imperfect creatures, and developed his moral theory accordingly. The foundation of Butler's concept of morality is the idea of self-love (considered as 'the desire for happiness') as the prime impulse of human life. In order to achieve happiness mankind must gratify his various affections, appetites and passions in such a manner that no one of them harmfully affects another or the whole constitution, and without in any way going against the dictates of conscience. Butler holds that love of one's neighbour is one of the affections that man must gratify in order to attain happiness, and introduces a dichotomy in the concept of benevolence which is most important to our present subject. This dichotomy lies in classifying benevolence into the type which is of a kind with all the natural affections and appetites of man and the type which conforms to a virtuous principle. If a man is benevolent in the former sense and his benevolence fails in its object then that man will be unhappy in the same way as an ambitious man who is a failure will be. If, on the other hand, a man is benevolent because he believes he is acting virtuously, *and for no other reason*, then he will not be unhappy in failure, but will be consoled by the fact of virtue being its own reward. The direct moral value of the first type of benevolence is nil, although incidentally there would be moral worth in having satisfied self-love, if, indeed, this had been done. (Exaggerated benevolence of the first type may, however, be harmful to self-love.) On the other hand benevolence of the second type would have high moral worth.

An example from life may assist the understanding of this theory of Butler. Suppose a swimmer to have a passion for life-saving. He seeks to gratify his passion, so as to promote his self-love, but incidentally cannot help promoting public good while doing so. (In the same way a man whose object in life is to be held in high esteem must perforce promote the public good in order to attain his object.) The swimmer then goes about looking for drowning persons so that he may save their lives. Clearly this is benevolence of the first type. If he does not injure his self-love in pursuing his object, and obeys his conscience, he is being

¹ Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) was the author of *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*.

virtuous to that extent. If, however, he carries his passion for life-saving to such a degree that he jumps in the sea on the slightest pretext with the result that he catches pneumonia, or neglects his job or even interferes with the enjoyment of other swimmers, then all virtue has gone from his action and he is as much to be condemned as any man who indulges his passions to an extreme.

Kant argues that virtue reposes wholly in the Good Will. This Good Will is not good because of what it performs or effects but simply because of itself. Even if 'step-motherly nature' has made it so weak in a man that, in spite of all striving, it fails to have any effect 'then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light'. Clearly Kant holds that moral worth exists only when a man acts from a sense of duty; it is not enough that the act is such as duty *might* have required. As Bertrand Russell expresses it, 'The tradesman who is honest from self-interest, or the man who is kind from benevolent impulse is not virtuous'.

To sum up: both Kant and Butler agree that an act performed purely with the object of following a virtuous principle has moral worth. With regard to *natural* benevolence (the subject of our enquiry), Butler says it has moral worth in so far as it promotes self-love (i.e. moral worth is incidental to the concept of benevolence), while Kant denies it any worth whatever. Our conclusion must be, therefore, that, *in its essence*, natural benevolence has no moral worth.