

**ESSAY ON THE
SCEPTICAL TENDENCY
OF BUTLER'S "ANALOGY"**

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Essay on the Sceptical Tendency of Butler's "Analogy" by S. S. Hennell

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BY

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ESSAY

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SINCE its first appearance before the world, nearly a century and a quarter ago, the "Analogy" of Bishop Butler has been acknowledged by general consent as the established orthodox bulwark of Revealed Religion; being held so perfect in its construction, and so impregnable in its position, that not even any outer-works of supplementary comment have been deemed necessary to add to its strength by his reverential followers. During the last sixty years, it has indeed shared the honour of being the standard defence of Christianity with Paley's "Evidences," which takes up a range of argument untouched by Butler; but while the later writer, incomparably more attractive to the generality of readers from the interest of historic treatment, from the exquisite perspicuity and fascinating simplicity of his style, and from the finely well-mannered liberality of his tone, has stood for one generation at least decidedly first in popularity: still there has always been an immense support to the Christian controversialist, during the vexatious skirmish-

ing with critical objections, in the consciousness of the great Natural argument of Butler in the background to fall back upon. And since the younger champion has had his polished forensic weapon turned by the keener edge of German *Gelahrte*,—since the profounder spirit of modern investigation, both German and English, has convicted his plausibility of superficiality,—the advocates of revelation have recurred with the more eager solicitude to the Author of the “Analogy” to repair their shaken confidence. Notwithstanding the alien demand for a more “spiritual” sort of faith than that maintained by Butler which has lately ripened within the Church, causing him to be left behind amongst the beggarly elements of carnal reason, in the *practical* estimation of both Tractarian and Evangelical, by the main body of Christian believers he is still considered unanswered and unanswerable, strong as a giant against all the puny attacks of Infidelity.

Yet, whatever may be the confidence with which the “Analogy” is regarded on the arena of controversy, a very different sort of feeling attends the conscientious study of it in the closet. There seems little risk of denial, when, appealing to the experience of all the thoughtful out of the number of the readers of this great work, the assertion be made, that the strongest impression resulting from its perusal, is the deep spirit of Scepticism which it engenders, and the absence in it of any principle capable of effectually combating that scepticism. William Pitt is reported to have said that it was Butler’s “Analogy” that first put it into his head to doubt of the truth of

Christianity, and probably multitudes of its readers have undergone the same experience ; but the fact now alluded to is, not only that it has stirred up the first serious thought upon the subject, which is necessarily attended by doubt, but that it has finished by leaving a permanent feeling of unsatisfactoriness rankling in the mind. There is a pervading tone on every page that seems to transfuse, as from the mind of the Author, a sympathetic gloom of suspicion into that of the reader, a secret consciousness of something terrible lying beyond, with which he dare not meddle. And the great *power* of the work, intellectual and moral, heightens this mysterious dread into even a kind of paralysing awe. The book is laid down with a sense of chilling silence in the mind. Objections are quelled, but there is nothing to satisfy ; and no provision is made for ever kindling up again the genial warmth of cordial faith.

In attending to this influence and seeking to trace it to its source,—not at all in the spirit of disputatious cavilling, still less of flippant disrespect to a great book, and the memory of a Great Man,—we may perhaps find ourselves on the road to a real benefit : such a re-adjustment of the whole question treated by Butler, as may enable us, by the guiding warning of his experience, to avoid the soul-discomfiture of the weary and thorny path which he has tried before us. At all events, if we see that it necessarily led into such discomfiture, we have a moral argument against its doctrine stronger than any logic ; and the applying of this test to check the latter in all its stages, may, by a reverse process, in exposing its

weak points, lead us to see how the direct reasoning may be rectified.

Let us place ourselves in the state of mind of a reader of ordinary Christian prepossessions, to whom the ascertaining of the truth of Christianity is a matter of anxious personal concern; who, perchance, has become aware of the vast amount of learning and study required to deal competently with the questions of external evidence, and who has betaken himself to the safer course within every man's reach, of judging from the effect made upon his own mind by the Scriptures whether they indeed contain a divine revelation for him. He has found doctrines that his reason is incapable of comprehending; for that he was prepared,—divine mysteries, he knows, must be expected to be out of the reach of human knowledge: but he has also come to representations of the actions of Deity that shock his moral sense:—here he must make a stand; and he has recourse to Butler to help him. He feels with an inexpressible sense of comfort, a glow of anticipation at expected relief, that here is a *strong mind in earnest* to rest upon; a man who has experienced and groaned over his own perplexities, and who has worked out a solution to satisfy himself before he offered it to others. The ground he takes is certainly the best he could find, for he is building upon it for his own dwelling; if disappointingly limited, it is all that he felt he could claim, and we may be sure he has neglected nothing that could further him in the drawing up of that claim: if perhaps it is a case that he is getting up, it is at least his own cause that he is pleading:—how will he bring it out?—He fairly

acknowledges the moral discrepancies in Scripture: that is well to begin with; he has no intention of blinking the difficulty. But he shows that in the ordinary government of Divine Providence there occur in daily experience similar infractions of what in human estimation is counted just and right; and he argues, If we believe that there is a God both good and righteous, notwithstanding these infractions, ruling in Nature, why should we deny it on the same account in Revelation?—But in Revelation these infractions are directly sanctioned, marked as it were by special Divine approbation.—And is there anything that takes place in nature without the ordination and approbation of the Creator and Governor? Except upon the principle of Manicheism, that God is striving against an antagonistic rival Power of Evil, He is himself the cause to whom all evil is attributable. If this difficulty have been already surmounted by natural religion, there is no new one in this respect in Revelation.—This, our inquirer feels, is a hard demand upon his faith. He had hoped that Revelation was designed expressly to clear up the difficulties found in Nature, instead of repeating them in magnified proportion.—But how, Butler asks him, except by this very similarity of style, should he be able to recognize the identity of the Divine Author of both? whose works, moreover, he ought not to expect to comprehend fully in either case. Here is the salutary trial of faith and patience; under the new dispensation of grace, as under the old of Nature, we are the subjects of probation, Divine Wisdom having ordained this as the present condition that is proper for us:—thus recurring