

**THE OPTIMISM OF
BUTLER'S
"ANALOGY"; THE
ROMANES LECTURE 1908**

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The Optimism of Butler's "Analogy"; The Romanes Lecture 1908 by Henry Scott Holland

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B.

THE ROMANES LECTURE

1908

*The Optimism of Butler's
'Analogy'*

BY

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M.A., HON. D.LITT.

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THE OPTIMISM OF BUTLER'S 'ANALOGY'

THE great and memorable statesman who devoted the overflowing energies of his leisure hours to the delivery of the first Romanes Lecture consecrated all the force of his last years of life, after his public career was closed, to an effort at recalling the attention of the world of thought to the significance of Bishop Butler.

He had grown to intellectual stature in the days when the influence of Butler had been for Oxford a sacred and inspiring inheritance. It stood for all that was manly, massive, and profound. It entered into the character and the life, as an abiding possession. 'About this time,' says J. H. Newman in the *Apologia*, 'I read Bishop Butler's *Analogy*, the study of which has been to so many, as it was to me, an era in their religious opinions.' That is a judgement characteristic of the time—a judgement which Mr. Gladstone would have adopted with whole-hearted ardour. And it was to him a deep and inexplicable wonder that such a judgement should have become strange and obsolete in the intellectual atmosphere of his own University. He could not tolerate or forgive the dismissal of Butler from his place of honour in the Philosophical School: nor could he understand how the younger generation could have suffered him to lapse out of their intellectual horizons. Indignantly, he toiled to repair the wrong. The weight of eighty years could not hold him back. To the very last moment of his working life, before he passed under the bitter discipline of pain in the very antechamber of death itself, he nursed the unconquerable hope, and brooded over the cause to which

his soul was committed. He gave us an edition of Bishop Butler which for the first time made his works presentable and attractive. He edited ; he assorted ; he prefaced ; he added subsidiary studies. He offered us the opportunity of reconsideration. He challenged us to say whether we were prepared to let the great tradition die.

That challenge has been made, as yet, in vain. It has roused no concern ; it has evoked no new examination of Butler's claims to philosophical importance. His work remains still outside the current of living speculation.

Is it worth while, then, to go back on an issue that has been decided ? The case has been made with incomparable force, under unique conditions of power and pathos ; and the verdict has been adverse. Who can be presumptuous enough to repeat an experiment which has received already such an august and final dismissal ?

No one, indeed, would dare it, if it was a matter which depended on personal qualifications. But that is, mercifully, not the case. The conditions which determine the doctrine and the concentration of the intellectual interests of an Age lie far beyond the range of personal influence. They lie back in the secret motions of organic growth ; in the subtle processes of mental transformation ; in the massed and manifold experiences which go to the creation of a social speculative temperament. There is a structure of living thought for ever in making, through infinite reaction on its environment, and in touch with a special atmosphere. To it, individuals are but accidental. It holds in itself its own principle of advance, and grows by the law of its own growth. Our highest function is to co-operate with its movement ; to do our minute contributory work within its encompassing influence. We cannot force it. We know but dimly the springs on which it draws ; the hidden source from which it derives its momentum. We can but lend ourselves to become the instruments through which it achieves its own peculiar process of intellectual assimilation.

And it is because there is so much in our immediate

situation which appears to me to be in sympathetic touch with the peculiar qualities of Butler's mind, that I am emboldened to believe that, by the ordinary and natural movement of thought, and not through any individual plea raised on his behalf, the moment is arrived in which he may, once again, be drawn into the central currents of our intellectual life.

But, if this is to happen, it can only be done through a bold and drastic abandonment of much that stands in the way of his recognition as a modern constructive force.

First, as we all know, the particular Controversy, in which he was mainly engaged, is wholly dead and done with. The Deist, with whom he was concerned, was the special product of a certain temporary stage of scientific development. He was the normal intellectual deposit of the great mechanical Sciences. Under the infinite elasticity of mathematical categories, Physics and Astronomy had given to man's apprehension of the Universe an amazing expansion. For the first time, he had grasped something of its appalling scale. Yet, even in his minute insignificance, he had the faculty to recognize the reign of intelligent Law; and in this intelligibility of Law, in this rational Order and Design, governing every part with mechanical accuracy, directing the whole according to a preconceived scheme, he saw the evidence of a God who answered to his own rationality. The Religion of the living heart, of romance, of pathos, of tragedy, might have to vanish, in face of this absorbing and abstract mechanism. Christianity ceased to have a meaning; because man's emotional life in the flesh, here on earth, had ceased to have any value. Such a life with its passions and its desires, its laughter and its tears, would not fall into mathematical categories. And it fled away into ashamed nothingness before the hosts that peopled the enormous heavens. But the God of Design and Purpose, who responded to the demands of pure reason, remained on His throne. Religion survived in the form of Deism.

So it might succeed in doing, in that brief moment when

Science was mainly mathematical and abstract in type. But the development that followed took an entirely novel direction. The Sciences of Life took up the running. Interest passed from mechanism to biology. And, with this change of interest, a wholly new scientific ideal began to dominate our intellectual imagination. It was the ideal of growth. Life was in movement. That was its fascination. It evolved; it changed; it pushed its advance; it acted; it reacted; it acquired; it assimilated; it strove and strained; it knew no rest. The closer men drew to this wonderful and stirring secret, the less were they able to abide contented with the motionless fixities of the more abstract mechanical formularies. The immanent reality of the Universe is not to be found in the cold exhibition of changeless, mathematical law, but in the infinite diversities of a living and growing organism. The Universe is a vast, dramatic experiment. At its base is volcanic energy, holding in itself infinite potentialities, which storm their way into gradual realization, and under the terrible processes of unceasing strife, by efforts which are often effectual by the very blindness of their insistent stress, work out their fitness to survive. Such was the picture which Science unveiled.

And in such a Universe, the poor Deist found no footing. After all, his Christian opponent, with his passion for life, his gospel of growth, his romantic emotionalism, his central Tragedy, his bloody struggle through Death to Life, was more in touch and tune with this new gospel of evolution, than he, with his abstract intellectualism and 'bloodless categories'. The rational Deist was harder hit than any one by the scientific developments of the nineteenth century.

And, with his disappearance, we may suffer the whole method of the controversy to vanish too. Superficially, it wore, always, a most unfortunate and repellent air. It looked so meticulous and arid. It was apt to feel like a mere 'tu quoque', which irritated even if it silenced. It developed the dilemma, 'Either accept my position,

or abandon yours'; and nobody was ever convinced of anything by a dilemma. Its outward appearance wholly belied the real constructive grounds which lay behind it. And these can only be seen in their full worth by sweeping away the dialectical superstructure which hides them from view.

For, of course, the reading of Butler could never have made an epoch in anybody's life, such as Newman typically felt it to be, if he had actually rested his case on what W. H. Simcox named the 'argumentum ad horribile'. The Tractarians were the last people who would have been deeply moved by a logical acuteness which simply convicted the Deist of having as difficult a cause to justify as any Christian. So long as that is all that we see in the *Analogy*, we have failed to account for everything that the name of Butler stood for with those whom he most deeply swayed.

What, then, is the secret of the profound impression that he made? It is this which we would try to detach and to rehearse. And, first, as an index of the influence he wielded, what can be more noticeable than the passage in the familiar Preface prefixed to the *Analogy* by Bishop Halifax, in which he traces to the quotation from the Son of Sirach the germ of the entire work? 'All things are double one against another; and God hath made nothing imperfect.' 'On this single observation,' the Bishop writes, 'the whole fabric of our prelate's defence of Religion is based.'

We can recognize, in this assertion, the temper and companionship with which Butler was associated by his friends.

There is no idea of attributing to him the dialectical success of a cynical Pessimist, impaling opponents on the horns of some futile dilemma. The 'argumentum ad horribile' is utterly ignored. Rather, his admirers were led to recognize his close affinities with that intellectual companionship which, under the sanction of the Solomonic tradition, devoted itself to the high service of our Lady